

Sample translation

***Thisted, Kirsten. Stemmer fra Grønland. Den danske koloni i 1920'erne
(Voices from Greenland. The Danish Colony in the 1920s)***

Translation by Solvej Todd

Preface

On Sunday morning, the 21st of June, 2020, on Greenland's National Day, the inhabitants of Nuuk woke to see the Hans Egede statue, high above on the cliff, like a beacon over the town, daubed with red paint. It had happened before, for example in 1977, as a part of the movement toward home rule. Nevertheless, this time was different. It wasn't just the red paint, Egede's staff had been turned into a whip, bringing to mind images of slavery and another former Danish colony: The Danish West Indies (the U.S. Virgin Islands). The word *Decolonize* was graffitied across the base. The act was clearly a reference to the Black Lives Matter movement, where statues linked to colonialism had recently been torn down by demonstrators the world over. Except this time there were much wider implications, and the local authorities conducted a poll. Should the statue remain or be taken down? The vast majority wanted it to stay.

One of the main arguments was that it was the Greenlanders themselves, who raised the money for the statue a hundred years ago and that Christianity is an important part of Greenland's cultural heritage. The old beliefs of the Inuit are too, however, which is why in 2007, they placed a statue of the Mother of the Sea in the bay at the foot of the cliff with the Egede statue. This way, they can both reign over their respective realms of sea and heaven, a compromise which many, but far from all the inhabitants of Nuuk are pleased with. In the meantime, there has been a general openness to addressing the issue, because not only the future, but also the past has become a pressing matter, due to the current challenges facing the relationship between Denmark and Greenland, both from within, with the push for independence, and from outside, with the world's superpowers suddenly rallying around Greenland.

This book is about the Danish-Greenlandic relations. Its main premise is that many of the present conflicts are rooted in the past, not least to that period, which is central to this book: the 1920s, where Denmark claimed sovereignty over *all* of Greenland, and where the Greenlanders, for the first time, began actively engaging in the politics of their country's future. In fact, many of the narratives and the thinking, which shaped the framework for the current relationship, were established already in the 1800s, although not officially articulated until the first half of the 1900 century, and still held sway over the country's development after 1953, a year, which marks the official end to Greenland's colonial period, from 1721-1953. It continues today, hidden in the underlying thread of the official rhetoric about equal partnership, as outlined in the Greenland Self-Government Act, which was passed in 2009. Hence, there are still a lot of questions never raised – and other than the occasional whistle when the kettle starts to boil – it forms the basis for the jumble of contradicting emotions: love, anger, hate, respect, disrespect, and intimacy, which characterizes the relationship between Greenland and Denmark.

While the subject of emotions is generally to be avoided, or at most a side note, in studies on Greenland's history, they are the focal point of this book. Theoretically, the work is inspired by Affect Theory, the study of how emotions actively shape the world. The book presents how emotionally-tied economies become connected to financial economies in the relations between Denmark and Greenland. In other words, money isn't just money, in the exchanges between Denmark and Greenland. The money is part of a continuing pattern of superiority and inferiority, the result of a system founded on colonial ideologies and practices.

Particularly within a Danish context, it isn't uncommon to refer to Denmark and Greenland's "shared history." Considering the texts presented in this book, it would make more sense to refer to Denmark and Greenland's *connected* histories. Denmark and Greenland have never shared the same reality, and the narratives and perspectives, from which the two parties have acted, are too different for the word "shared" to ever be adequate. Acknowledging this, first and foremost, is essential to understanding the relationship between Denmark and Greenland.

The ongoing discussion, ever since the end of WWII, has been in what sense Greenland could be considered a colony – although up to that point, it was still thought and implied as such. After the sale of the Danish West Indies in 1917 one still commonly referred to Denmark's "only" or "last" colony. When the newly founded UN, following the Second World War, turned their attention to the colonies, the Danes weren't particularly pleased about being grouped with the rest of the world's brutal colonial powers, because they didn't see themselves that way. On through much of the second half of the 19th century, a fixed narrative developed regarding the Denmark's engagement in Greenland: *For the benefit of Greenland, and glory of Denmark*. The narrative was a reaction to a growing internal criticism of Danish colonialism in Greenland. Lieutenant Emil Bluhme, who travelled throughout Greenland from 1863 to 1864, surveying the country, characterized the alternating paradigms, which had up until then, legitimized the Danes' presence: "In the past it was called: "In the name of Jesus Christ"; then it became "for Culture and Civilization," and now it is, "For the benefit of Greenland." It's all the same." To the already existing doctrine of "For the benefit of Greenland" he added another aspect, "and glory of Denmark," envisioning how the trade monopoly, instead of benefitting Denmark, could benefit Greenland, so the Greenlanders could "be witness to little Denmark's shining example of civilization and freedom." It was written shortly after the Danes' defeat to Germany in 1864, and the idea of little Denmark, developing special ties to the vulnerable little population of Greenland, fell in perfectly with the Danes' then burgeoning, national narrative.

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Denmark thus legitimized their superiority over Greenland with their intent to do more for the Greenlanders "than any other nation, had they governed over them," as C.Th. Zahle, the then political spokesman for Venstre (the Danish Conservative-Liberal Party), phrased it in the Danish Parliament during the yearly budget negotiations of 1905. As a lead up to the proposal for Greenland's municipal self-government, in accordance with the separation of the Trade Department from the from the civil administration in Greenland, Zahle pointed out the enormous authority Denmark held over the Greenlanders, maintaining a monopoly, which not only banned them from trade, other than with the Royal Greenland Trading Department, but from even leaving the country. Denmark had assumed a tremendous responsibility, and governing the Greenlanders was therefore a "matter of honor": "There mustn't be even a speck of self-interest in our relations with the Greenlanders," Zahle declared. His views won general support.

For the benefit of Greenland – and the glory of Denmark was the motto behind most of the initiatives adopted by Denmark regarding Greenland's governance, from the negotiations leading to Greenland's first governing law in 1908 to the new declaration concerning Greenland's governance in 1925, to the amendment of the Danish constitution in 1953 – and played a significant role in the implementation of home rule in 1979 and autonomy in 2009. For the Danes, having defined the parameters for Greenland's development, as a matter of honor, the financial aspect of the relationship to Greenland was made secondary to the moral aspect. The added moral value afforded by the relationship, became fundamental, at least rhetorically, but apparently also, to a greater extent, in practice. Decisions were made, without greater economic return at the time, but which were deemed to have greater moral capital for Denmark in the long run. Greenlanders were stuck in the unfortunate position of receiver in the relationship. At the same time, they fully understood how the narrative was at the core of the Danes' identity after 1864. It therefore also gave the Greenlanders a card to play in the political battle for decolonization: in regards to phasing out Danish rule and the Danes' conviction that their engagement in Greenland with was purely self-sacrificial. Plain and simple, it enabled the Greenlanders to hold the Danes to their beautiful words and demand they be put into practice. It was the Danes themselves who had proclaimed Greenland was for the Greenlanders, and they were only there to help. The turning point came in regards to exactly *how* the Danes intended to fulfil this promise – but in keeping with the dominant narrative, Denmark was ultimately unable to completely dismiss the Greenlander's views, because that in itself, would have contradicted the identity, which the Danes themselves constructed, as a benevolent, receptive colonial power.

The Greenlander's mission, as we will explore, was to dismantle the colonial emotional economy, where goods and services, including missionary and medical services, were a sign of Danish compassion, offered to the Greenlanders in expectation that they would be thankful, humble, and loyal in return. Yet as Greenlanders pointed out, in the bigger picture, the outgoing raw materials from Greenland had never been accounted for. Throughout the process, the Greenlander's have strived for a "reset to zero": a resetting of the Danish-Greenlandic relations, where superiority and inferiority could be replaced by equal status. With the focus being on words such as "equal partners" the Self-Governance Act signals this kind of new beginning, and the dream of a "zero setting" continues, now in the form of an independent Greenlandic state. Yet as the historian Uffe Østergaard writes, the discussion surrounding Greenland's status between 1721 and 1953 has become a matter of "endless scholarly debate."

The fact that it is even questioned, is because there still isn't any consensus on the definition of the word "colony." Following the accepted definition of colonialism as "the conquest and possession of land areas outside of one's own borders," then Greenland was a colony. Which it was, regardless of whether one refers to the earlier Scandinavians who died out – the Icelanders, who settled in the warmer valleys of southern Greenland – or the later complicated treaties between European states. From the Greenlander's point of view the earlier Scandinavians deserted the country and thereby lost their rights to Greenland – regardless of whether they were attacked by the Inuit people or left on their own accord. The idea that foreign overseas states could enter into agreements concerning far-off Greenland, only further supports the argument, that it was considered an area with a population that could be colonized at one's leisure.

Although the Danes were never actually settlers in Greenland, having always viewed themselves – and been viewed by the Greenlanders – as guests in the country, their presence left an indelible

mark. If one understands colony as being synonymous with violence and abuse, then once again, it depends on how those terms are defined, whether one views Greenland as a colony or not. That the Danes' treatment of the Greenlanders was different to how they treated the blacks on the plantations in the Danish West Indies, is evident. However, what is equally evident, as Uffe Østergaard writes, is the correlation between the management of Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland, and the administration of the tropical colonies. At the same time, Greenland stands out from Iceland and the Faroe Islands, by having a population that was considered racially different from the Scandinavians, and thus grouped with the other indigenous peoples in the colonies.

While there can hardly be any doubt about the fairness in defining Greenland as a colony, there isn't actually any consensus within Greenland itself, as to the *kind* of colony it was. While some would say colonialism is colonialism, and that there are no "gradations" of the term, others are more inclined to offer a picture of Denmark as a mild and humane colonial power. The question will undoubtedly remain unresolved, because the interpretation of the past changes as new goals are set for the future. In the end, it ultimately depends on politics, how far one will go at what time, and in what context, as to whether one interprets one's past as colonial or not. I touch upon this briefly in the post face.

Rather than heading into a longer theoretical discussion on the definition of colony, from here we hand the word over to the people who lived in Greenland during that time, in order to understand how it was to live in Greenland during the colonial era. How was the relationship between the Danes and the Greenlanders perceived by people back then and what influence did they have on each other? As its starting point, the book uses the personal account of the penniless fisherman Peter Gundel, who befriends the Danish doctor Jørgen Hvam and begins the letter exchange, which forms the book's narrative thread. The rest of the people are presented as described in Gundel's letters, introducing us to the entire colonial contact zone of Peter Gundel's circuit.

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Chapter 2

Peter Gundel: Diary entries from Illumiut

The name Peter Gundel is recognized within Greenlandic literary history, as the author of four little stories, considered Greenland's first literary novellas, which were published in the Northern Greenlandic newspaper, *Avangnâmiok* in 1918-27. Other than the name, no other information exists on the author – only rumors about some misconduct or other, which got him kicked out of Ilinnarfissuaq, Godthåb Seminary. Peter Gundel didn't particularly distinguish himself as a remarkable citizen in Ilulissat, either. He isn't hero, but then again, he never claims to be. His life offers an insight into how the Danish rule, with its talk of development and better times, probably created a sense of hope, but at the same time, a deep frustration, not least for the Greenlanders, who struggled to survive. Through his perpetual violation of the prevailing laws and his protests and writing, Gundel broke the silence that reigned over the Greenlandic every day, concerning the state of things, at least when there were Danes in the vicinity.

The reason we now know more about Peter Gundel, is because of the many years he wrote and sent letters to doctor Jørgen Hvam in Denmark. The two men originally met in 1919 in Ilulissat (Jakobshavn), where Gundel was helping out as a kind of handyman on the doctor boat. From there on Gundel joined Hvam as an interpreter on various sledding trips. There were very few doctors in

Greenland at the time, and every doctor oversaw an enormous district, which they reached by boat in the summer and by sled in the winter. Gundel and Hvam were both in their mid-twenties and clearly seemed to get on well together. Gundel lived in Illumiut, a settlement along the coast of Disko Bay, in a dell between Ilulissat Icefjord and the colony about a kilometer south of it. Today the area has expanded to encompass the city. As a poor fisherman, without his own boat or kayak and kayaking skills, Gundel was worse off than the rest of the town's residents. How was it that man like this spoke Danish fluently enough to manage as an interpreter? Peter Gundel's father was also a fisherman, living in equally impoverished conditions. Due to this, the son was never taught to hunt, but the local priest discovered that the boy was a gifted student, and after his confirmation, he was sent to Nuuk for further education at the seminary, where the country's elite were educated. There were two levels, the younger and the older, and the students attended each level for three years. The education took six years to complete. There was only one option: Continuing your education in Greenland, meant staying at the lectern, becoming a combination between school teacher and assistant priest. A selected few were sent to Denmark for a higher education. There was also the possibility of joining the governing administration as a secretary or interpreter for high-ranking Danish officers, but in general one stayed at the lectern. A few were ordained as priests. Gundel managed to complete the younger levels and enter the older levels, before he was dismissed in December 1912, due to "repeated thefts despite heavy-handed warnings," as entered in the protocols from the Teacher Council meeting the 28th November, 1912, when the case was handled. Shortly after he was caught in yet another misconduct, and this time, he was thrown out of the colony to the settlement in Kangeq for four months. Ever after to be excluded from good society. Back then everyone knew the story. Even Jørgen Hvam had heard of it before the two met, he mentions it in a letter to his mother dated the 18th of August, 1919. Gundel never tries to hide or deny the accusations, instead he openly admits his "fall" in his letters to Hvam. Peter Gundel had had no other choice than to return to his birthplace, a broken man, time and again suffering under the management and judgement of men far less educated or intelligent than himself. Due to his low economic and social status, there was little prospect of an elected position. If one received help, one wasn't considered an eligible candidate, and Gundel had to ask for help almost every winter. It wasn't an easy for a man who not only dreamed of having a career, but who deeply cared about the development of Greenland. Despite all, he still strived to aim higher, and therefore sought out the colonial *contact zone*. The concept of *contact zone*, introduced in the writings of Mary Louise Pratt, within the context of literary theory, is used to describe encounters between two or more languages and how they influence each other. Pratt uses the term to refer to "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power." The definition is well-suited to describe the Danish settlements in Greenland, which were primarily inhabited by Danes and their Greenlandic staff.

Gundel's writing skills enabled him to work for the municipal council and for various public house managers, by administrating their papers and helping with accounts. As Gundel's Danish language skills improved, there were more and more interpreting jobs. He could easily have achieved recognition as an author. The letters reveal Gundel's literary abilities. He also had a knack for photography, and if it hadn't been for the overriding Danish monopoly, he probably could have become a brilliant merchant. He would undoubtedly have succeeded at something, if an illness hadn't thrown up the last and final hurdle.

By the time Gundel and Hvam met, Peter Gundel was already sick with tuberculosis. It worsened and doctor Kirkebjerg, who replaced Jørgen Hvam, didn't want him along on his rounds out among the population. Gundel therefore lost both his job on the doctor boat and as interpreter, which

created an impossible economic situation for him, especially during the first winter, as he hadn't gone fishing that summer. Peter Gundel, Christened Niels Kristian Elias Peter Gundel, was born the 12th of February, 1895. He died the 8th of March, 1931, at thirty-six.

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School records from Godthåb Seminary have been preserved in Greenland's National archives. We see that both in 1910, 1911, and 1912, Peter Gundel's performance on his end of year tests was generally commendable. For the final exams in 1912, he received the following grades: Greenlandic: outstanding, Literacy: commendable, Geography: commendable, Earth Sciences: commendable, Drawing: less than satisfactory. In other words, Gundel did quite well, other than for drawing, which lowered his overall average. Although Greenlandic was his favorite, Gundel had many strengths. Peter Gundel later blamed much of his misfortune on his own obstinacy. He simply lacked – perhaps with the exception of Hvam – the social skills, which he called “hypocrisy,” for which he had nothing but contempt. The following episode serves as an example. In a letter dated, September 24th, 1928, Gundel confirms having heard that pastor Knud Balle passed away. The occasion leads to a poster being hung in the town store, where the residents are encouraged to donate to his gravestone, as a gift from the Greenlanders. Gundel wholly acknowledges the Balle family's work in Greenland – speaking highly of them in his letters – and Gundel probably would have doled out “a few pennies” for the collection – if it hadn't been for the episode back at the seminary. An episode, where Knud Balle left him completely “demoralized.” It all starts with “Old Balle (Frederik)” making a mistake on the board: *pujortaine* (his pipe). It should have said *pujortaune*. Gundel immediately catches the error, and so does another student – the class had been taught Greenlandic by the Greenlandic poet Jonathan Petersen himself, before he left to continue his studies in Denmark, and he knew how to make his students spell! The other classmate even tries to point it out, but the teacher silences him. Gundel, on the other hand, doesn't back down, and it ends in a huge discussion, which lasts the entire break. The situation exacerbates, as Knud Balle and the seminary superintendent Niels Lyngø enter the classroom to teach the following lesson. The discussion continues, where the two newly arrived support Frederik Lyngø, but Gundel doesn't give up, because he *knows* he is right. In the end Knud Balle shuts it down: He is there to teach them history – including the word *pujortaune*! Gundel sits there seething with anger throughout the lesson, determined not to open his mouth until the teachers admit their “serious mistake.” In the following break, Gundel throws himself into a written protest against the incompetent teachers. In the meantime, some of the other students have found a word with a similar root and a similar inflection from the New Testament, “written and approved” by the founder of orthography himself, Samuel Kleinschmidt. The teachers are confronted and admit defeat, with a long face. Once again, Peter Gundel has to take the lead, because the others don't dare and prefer to back down. Presumably with the foresight that the victory wasn't worth the cost. While Frederik Balle seems to have acknowledged the young man for his steadfastness, there is no longer any mutual trust and respect between Gundel and Knud Balle or Niels Lyngø – who as Gundel describes, grew “wary” around him, which meant he could hardly be “agreeable” toward them, either. Gundel thus found himself without two important sources of support, when he ran into trouble later, and for Peter Gundel, Knud Balle remained “one of those Danes who doesn't like to see a Greenlander defeat a Dane, even if the former “knew a thing more than him.” Gundel fully admits to being his own worst enemy. After a sleepless night on the 4th of June, 1928, in the morning he writes:

The sun is shining beautifully on the magnificent fishing grounds, and I see a couple of boats out there already. It is hard to be a fisherman and be sick and see the beautiful weather and not be able to earn my

daily bread. I struggled with some difficult memories last night. For I should not be a fisherman, if I hadn't so many times been so impertinent or insolent ...

The set of dots are offer pause for reflection, considering both what he did wrong, and how far he could have gone. At the same time, in retrospect, he seems to view his constant acts of defiance as a kind of struggle for independence.

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He continues in a similar manner throughout his life, accumulating an almost endless stream of enemies, with a seemingly complete disregard for the consequences. The dismissal from the seminary isn't the only time he oversteps the rules and is judged accordingly, while others who have dealt similarly, get off scot-free. He is tried and sentenced several times, for misdemeanors, many of which wouldn't ordinarily have led to an indictment, if he had kept a low profile and not been at odds with everything and everyone.

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