



The Best Colony in the World

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The purpose of this paper is to provide thoughts for discussion; it will not be a discussion of definitions or academic judgments. It is based on my Masters thesis, however, it is important for me not to use the academic approach only. Here, I would like to speak as a Greenlander with feelings.

I wish to ask fundamental questions about our history and hope that the younger generation will be interested in searching for more questions and answers. As I do not have time to go through the theories, definitions and the whole of our history, generalisations about Greenlandic identity and history must be made. Also, the presentation is not an expression of racism against Danes; it is based on a wish to see the other side of the coin.

For many of you, some of the things I will go into will not be new. But for a broader discussion, we need to review things and sometimes do so from new angles.

We have always been taught that we were one of the best colonies in the world. No slavery, no killings. We learned it through Danish history books and from Danish teachers. With the books telling us how fantastic a colony we were – books about the primitive Eskimos, books written from Eurocentric, economic or self-justifying angles – we have not looked beyond this historical oppression.

We, in Greenland, did not know about the response of other colonies, which had far worse actions inflicted upon them than us. Where they responded angrily and worked to de-colonize themselves mentally. We went directly from being a colony into becoming a part of Denmark. We learned to be Danish and to be thankful. Why, then, should we have had a reason to de-colonize? And why should we have a reason to ask questions about the 250 years of colonial presence?

Today, when trying to discuss problems regarding the relationship between Greenland and Denmark, discussions often end in arguments about being racist or romantic nationalists and that we can't become independent because we have a bad economy.

However, let us regard this as the right time to try and see if the everlasting discussions about equality and nationalism, which have been raised since the introduction of Home Rule, in reality could be symptoms of a lack of mental de-colonization.

Equality between Greenlanders and Danes has been a primary focus since the colonial period, particularly with regards to the labour market. An interesting point is how identity comes into this picture.

It is my proposition that ethnic identity plays an important role in completing this picture. Greenland did not go through a process of de-colonization, as did many postcolonial countries. Although Greenland has achieved greater self-determination with the Home Rule, we should never forget the fact that the country was under colonial influence for more than 250 years. In this connection, it is striking that one cannot find studies that examine the colonial influence on Greenlandic identity.

Even after many years with Home Rule, resulting in more equality between Danes and Greenlanders, discussions on issues such as "Kinaassuseq" (identity) and "Tatiginerulertariaqarpugut" (we need a stronger sense of self-worth, confidence) are ongoing.

By looking at the issue of ethnic identity, there are important factors that have to be accounted for in trying to understand that the colonial influence on Greenlandic identity still has implications after the achievement of greater self-determination.

In the beginning of colonialism, Greenlanders saw their society as consisting of two distinctive ethnic groups: Inuit/Kalaallit and the Qallunaat/the Danes. The relationship between them was characterised by Danes as the dominant group and the Greenlanders as the colonized group.

With the decrease in hunting and before the arrival of fishing, it became important for Greenlanders to learn from the Danes in order to reach the Danish stage of economic evolution. It was an important principle for the Danish administration to

advance the Greenlanders' civilisation to get them "over their condition of childhood". The means to reach this goal was to link Greenland and Denmark as closely as possible and to bring in Danish cultural civilisation.

In the early stages of the colonial era, ethnic stratification was silently accepted, and organised wishes for change of Greenland's political status did not exist. There can be different reasons for the latter. First, the Greenlanders accepted the colonial conditions (the main instrument being Christianization), second, they exerted their authority over the Naalakkat (the leaders, rulers) and third (as some scholars say) they were raised into a behaviour that Danes could control.

These things might seem hard to believe for many Greenlanders today. However, it is important to remember that there even existed a colonial instruct that implied that Greenlanders could be punished if they did not follow the rules of the colonial administrators. These factors have unavoidably had an effect on what we may see as the self-perception of the Greenlandic ethnic group as a subordinate and inferior group.

The Greenlanders were thankful to the colonizers, who had imposed the idea that they were there to help them. There is no doubt that they adopted an identity that was strongly influenced by the colonial period. An identity, in which they saw themselves as inferior to Danes. To quote Robert Petersen: "...if an idea is adopted by the colonized people themselves, it would create a people who had lost belief in their own capacity, a people that were thankful to be colonized."

With the official end of colonialism in 1953, the Greenlanders thought they no longer would be the ones to hold the subordinate positions. As a means to becoming equal with the Danes, they wanted to strive for the same skills and positions as Danes had.

The post-war period up to the introduction of Home Rule was characterised by the creation of a modern economic society. Rather than becoming more independent from Danish conditions, they became even more dependent with a colossal adaptation of Danish cultural items and institutions – in the name of equality. This is the period, which one would assume could have been the time for mental de-colonization. It did not happen. It is obvious that the colonial influence on ethnic identity, namely that they had to be as good as Danes, continued in this period. An example of this is the way in which, during this period, tendencies to emphasise the distinctiveness of their own ethnicity resulted in a forced search for a suitable identity to represent themselves.

The Danes and, increasingly, Greenlanders with higher wages were perceived as better than others. Thus, in terms of ethnic identity, it can be argued that the colonial thought that Danes were better than the Greenlanders was maintained, albeit in a different way. The difference was now that it was the Greenlanders themselves, who began to strengthen this perception of self.

As the number of people, who felt themselves as subordinate and still dominated by representatives of the Danes, was growing, it created a strong wish for greater self-determination. Ethnical distinctiveness, which became an issue more than ever right before Home Rule, has been referred to as a growing nationalism. I believe that the wish for greater self-determination was symptomatic of the fact that the Greenlandic identity was influenced by the perception that they were inferior to the Danes.

In the 1970s, the growing ethnic consciousness made Greenlanders search for pride, self-consciousness and initiative, which were all broken during the colonial rule. The search for a stronger feeling of self-worth and a need to feel accepted as an equal ethnic group dominated the period just before the introduction of Home Rule.

Ethnic identity was initially a very important factor in the development of the elite that created Home Rule. However, as the elite working force behind the introduction of Home Rule worked with de-colonization as a defensive means for upholding economic control – and de-colonization therefore more than ever becoming an instrument for controlling economic conditions and equality between Danes and Greenlanders in the labour market – the issue of ethnic identity was undermined.

Contrary to the idea of distinctiveness, it can be maintained that Home Rule is the outcome of Danish presence in Greenland since 1721, and that it has not fulfilled the original wishes for greater self-determination and acceptance as an ethnic group. Therefore, I believe that the new sense of nationalism is caused by the still present old colonial influence on Greenlandic identity and the subsequent disappointment with Home Rule.

Greenlanders still feel ruled by Danes, and the unequal conditions serve as an example of this fact. Despite the fact that the members of the Home Rule Government are native Greenlanders, most leading positions are still in the hands of Danes who have strong influences on decision-making processes.

However, if the Greenlanders still feel less worth than the Danes, it could explain why they have such a strong need to emphasize their ethnic distinctiveness and the official and unofficial discourses around the need to strengthen the self-confidence.

To date, critiques of the Home Rule – that the Greenlandization has not worked, along with the establishment of grass roots organizations – indicate symptoms of a strong dissatisfaction and disappointment with the Home Rule. After twenty-seven years with Home Rule, people seem to search for Greenlandic values and acceptance. The talk about lack of identity and need for more self-confidence again show that Greenlandic identity in reality is still influenced by colonialism; a mentality that revealed a self-consciousness and a sense of inferiority to others ethnic groups. The efforts to gain more equality between Greenlanders and Danes continue, however, the Home Rule Government is busy trying to reach Danish economic standards and concentrates on debating the replacement of Danes with Greenlanders. But this does not change the fact that the people still feel inferior to Danes and that mental de-colonization is not necessarily about becoming as good as Danes. We need to look beyond our history, look deep into ourselves and take responsibility for ourselves – instead of continuing to believe that copying the Danish economic welfare system will be a solution to our problems today.

The rise of current nationalism and the Greenlanders' search for a stronger acceptance of their identity and self-worth are closely connected. However, this acceptance has to come from the Greenlanders themselves, instead of them continuing to feel subordinate years and years after colonialism stopped. A self-consciousness based on feelings of inferiority cannot be changed only by striving towards the same economic conditions as Denmark has or by replacing Danes with Greenlanders in the labour market.

However, the continuing dominance of Danish systems and the disappointment with the Home Rule is strengthening the feeling of not being accepted as an ethnic group. In connection to this, identity and the desire for self-determination and independence are issues that illustrate how the rise of nationalism is symptomatic of a need for mental de-colonization, since the greater self-determination since 1979 has not had the effect of mental de-colonization. Danish presence is not the cause of nationalism itself – it is only a strengthening factor.

We have to end the continuing invisible colonial way of thinking and understand that the whole idea of becoming independent is not a question of becoming as good as the Danes, economically or materially.

How good Danes do we have to become before we feel good enough? When the mission of the Danish Kingdom – of letting us believe that we are the best colony in the world – has been fulfilled? Or has the mission already been completed long ago?

The step now must be to take responsibility for our own history, our own lives as a people. But first, we have to look into our colonial and postcolonial history and stop blaming not only other people, but to a high degree also ourselves – and understand that there is a link between our past and our feelings today.

And in that process, we should allow ourselves to be misunderstood and judged as nationalists or racists, because we finally want to talk about the dark taboos of history. Here, we have to be better and not be too defensive towards other people, and others should remember that we have the right to discuss our own feelings and past without necessarily being racists or nationalists.

In South Africa, one of the strategies of apartheid was to keep the self-worth among the people low; a basic element in any colonial process. The colonization of Greenland might have happened in a so-called humane way helping the poor Eskimos. We do not know if the Danish state consciously used a low self-worth strategy. That is not for this presentation to judge. However, the question remains if one can discuss colonization in such terms as “good” and “bad”.

Is it better to take bodies or to take souls?

It is about time that we define our own history, our own feelings, and our own view of how we have been affected by 250 years of colonization – if we are to become mentally independent.