

SATURDAY
APRIL 8, 2017

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History

The diary of Henriette Egede

Denmark's colonisation of Greenland was largely a man's job. But it wasn't until the women arrived that the process of Europeanisation could really begin



CULTURE Clearly lacking a woman's touch (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

December 8, 2016 - 7:05am - By Iben Bjørnsson

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There are some Danes who contend that Greenland was never a 'real' colony, which is weird, considering that Greenland had basic conditions in common with every other Western colony: the presence of a European nation led to a total alteration of society; the colonising powers created new fractures, divisions and ways of living. And that colonised people were described by the colonisers in ways which they probably wouldn't have chosen, had they been given the opportunity to represent themselves.

However, colonialism took on different forms, depending on whether it was performed by women or men, an aspect that many of us are

This is the seventh article in a series published in collaboration with [Arktisk Institut/The Danish Arctic Institute](#), which seeks to inform the public about Danish-Greenlandic history.

The articles are based on the institute's [Arctic Stories](#) podcast series, which is produced by the author.

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probably not aware of when thinking, talking and reading about colonialism.

Inge Høst Seiding, PhD in Arctic society and culture at **Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allagaateqarfialu/the Greenland National Museum & Archives**, explains: “There have been different degrees of focus on women in colonialism, and the role of European women. Some ask: ‘did the women play any role at all?’ My answer is, ‘yes, they did.’”

When the colonisation of Greenland took off, men were – one might say obviously – the driving force. From the clergy, kings and businessmen that planned it, to the traders, sailors, and craftsmen that built it. And, in the early colonising period in Greenland in the 1700s, it was not customary to bring wives along.

Ms Seiding: “It wasn’t banned as such. But very few Danish women found their way to Greenland because the facilities deemed necessary for a European woman to live there weren’t in place. Some senior tradesmen and missionaries brought their wives, but they were few and far between.”



The first Danish woman in Greenland: Gertrud Rask, wife of coloniser Hans Egede (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

However, it was permitted for working-class Danes – craftsmen, sailors, junior constables and the like – to marry Greenlandic women. And although not quite as often, it also happened that among the upper classes – senior officers and colonial directors – married Greenlanders. And in time, this arrangement was viewed favourably by the colonial authority, the Royal Greenland Trade Company (Kongelige Grønlandske Handel, or KGH).

Ms Seiding wrote her PhD on these ‘mixed marriages’ as they were called. “In the early

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colonial period, the Danish men in these mixed marriages were encouraged to live as Greenlandic as possible. It helped along co-operation with the Greenlanders and it was cheap. This was important as Denmark depended on Greenlandic hunting. It was an economic issue.”

And then, there was another issue: in those days, sexual contact outside of marriage was not accepted. If one wanted to uphold these standards, with all the bachelors coming to Greenland, one was better off letting people marry, instead of trying to prevent them getting together. The duties that accompanied marriage in Greenland are evident from a contract of ‘conditions and obligations’ from KGH in the archives of the Arktisk Insititut/the Danish Arctic Institute. KGH had a monopoly on trade and administration in Greenland, and therefore controlled just about everything that happened there, including licenses for Danish men to marry Greenlandic women. One example is this contract from 1757:

The persons entering marriage must not be inclined towards obvious rude and offensive sins such as fornication, theft, swearing and blaspheming, drunkenness, gambling and other similar vices.

In order to marry, then, these men would obviously have to have work and be able to provide for their family, live as Christians and the like, but they also made a commitment beyond that: the contracts states that they were not to leave Greenland after marrying.

If they tie themselves to a wife and family, they shall not entirely leave the country, nor roam back and forth, which will be entirely forbidden. In their lifetime they must stay in the country and by their own best effort seek to promote its and their own best.

That was another advantage to letting people marry in Greenland: KGH would have an employee for life. If you married in Greenland, you stayed in Greenland.

The contract also states that any children from the marriage should be raised to serve either the mission in Greenland or the trading company. It seems as if KGH hoped to make themselves self-sufficient in labour and workforce. Transporting people from Denmark and setting them up in Greenland cost money – money that could be saved by employing someone already born there. Especially as ‘hybrids’, as they were called, weren’t paid as much as Danes.



'Hybrids' was the term for children of Danish-Greenlandic marriages who would eventually make up a colonial middle class. Here are Pavia, Julius, Eli and Johan, all of mixed ancestry and all students at the teachers' college in Nuuk, 1860 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

In the early 1800s, some of the colonial policies on family started to change.

Ms Seiding: "There was a discussion about whether European women could help prevent casual sexual relations. It was primary lower-class workers who were permitted to marry Greenlandic women, whereas the mixed marriages were somewhat frowned upon when it came to more senior KGH officials. This posed a dilemma: should these men be allowed to marry Greenlandic women – which some of them did – or let them have a European wife? The result was that, over time, the colonial authorities took a less restrictive attitude towards bringing European wives to Greenland.

"An increase in the number of European women in Greenland can be viewed as a result of a shift in colonial policy that had several aspects: it was a time in which people started talking about reform and modernisation – if you can even use those words about this time – in Greenland."

In 1835 a commission was formed to discuss whether to uphold the trade monopoly. While the commission, perhaps not very surprisingly, arrived at the conclusion that the trade monopoly should be upheld (which indeed it was until 1950), it was a sign that change was on its way. The commission had also discussed housing and education.

"Even though the Danes still depended on Greenlandic hunting – which was generating a surplus at that time – they also started to talk about introducing more European culture in Greenland. That was new," Ms Seiding says.

With this, colonialism gained another layer, beyond Christianity and trade: the so-called *civilising mission*, which focused on bringing (European) culture and education to the colony.

Denmark was not the only place where thoughts like these were thriving. It was a trend in all Europe's colonies, which naturally affected Denmark. Most countries had abolished the trans-Atlantic slave trade and even slavery was increasingly unpopular and difficult to uphold. European powers found themselves with a presence in the rest of the world, which needed a new direction and purpose. Similarly, national romanticism was sweeping through the cultural and political elites of Europe, bringing about a new set of cultural ideals along that was also felt in the colonies, from India to Greenland.

Ms. Seiding: "The same tendencies could be observed in other colonies as well. In India, the colonisers had almost gone native, but the 19th century brings about a 're-civilisation', so to speak, which meant that European culture was promoted in a new way. That also meant a sharper division between the British and Indians."

Now, the European way of doing things would be the ideal, not just in Europe, but in the colonies as well. And in this, women had a role to play, as it was stated quite clearly in the case of Greenland.

"The colonial director for North Greenland in the 1830s sent out a circular in which he mentioned European women as ideals for housekeeping and European culture. It was new that European women could – and should – be role models," Ms Seiding says.



'Civilising mission': Greenlandic children in a Danish-style school. Holsteinsborg (present-day Sisimiut), 1900 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

The so-called civilising mission brought into focus that there was – or should be – a divide between what, and not least who, was civilised and who was not, and who belonged to which culture. Basically: who was Danish and who was Greenlandic. In this way, the arrival of Danish women in Greenland served to heighten the attention being paid to those differences. Ms Seiding has researched the mixed marriages of the earlier period extensively and says that in comparison, it is obvious that this feminine culture-carrying element brings about a more severe divide between 'European' and 'Greenlandic' and adds that this was very much the point, especially within in the class of colonial administrators.

One of the European women who settled in Greenland around this time was Henriette

Gjøe, the wife of Poul Egede, a great-grandson of Hans Egede, the coloniser of Greenland. Colonising Greenland ran in the family, so to speak, and in 1830 Poul Egede became administrator of the small settlement of Niaqornak (present-day Niaqornat), on the western coast. And this is where Henriette, now surnamed Egede, arrived after their wedding in 1832. During the journey to Greenland and her first year there, she kept a diary, which is now held by Arktisk Institut. In it, we get a glimpse of her experience and her living conditions.

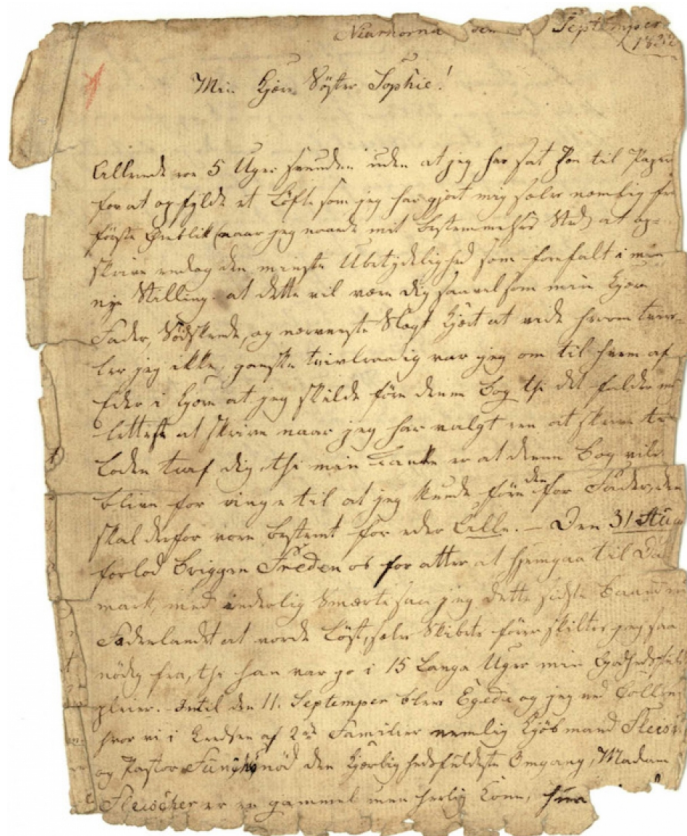


Niaqornat, 1909 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Ms Seiding hopes to publish the diary, given the picture it of this new colonial cultural encounter, which Henriette Egede was an example of. The diary serves as an introduction to the divides in race and class in Greenland at the time. Egede's focus, even her experience, is different from that of most male Danes in Greenland, which tend to be the sources of the historical record. This is a private diary, Ms Seiding notes, which means that it is a place where Egede felt safe to write her thoughts and feelings about the things she sees. "I haven't come across anything like it. Her view is entirely different. The written sources left by males are usually scientific or related to their official duties. This is about people and feelings and culture."

Before we dive into the contents of this diary, I have to warn the reader: Egede writes rude and offensive things about the people she encounters in Greenland. But even in its crassness, this, too, is informative because it gives us an insight into the way of thinking which justified colonialism in the first place: condescending towards colonised. Egede's diary is neither the first nor the last time a Dane described Greenlanders and their culture in a derogative way.

Ms Seiding: "These kinds of descriptions go back to the first Dane in Greenland. The first time Hans Egede entered a Greenlandic house, he was disgusted, and called it foul-smelling and dirty. In this particular area, Henriette Egede is not so different from other Danes by being disgusted by Greenlandic culture and way of living. Her diary contains all of the stereotypes which we know from other sources as well."



A page of Henriette Egede's diary, held by the Danish Arctic Institute. It is written in the form of letters to her sister (Photo: Arktisk Institut) ([Click to enlarge](#))

Ms Seiding explains further that this is not unique in the context of global colonialism either: "This is not just in Greenland. It is well-known that when European women travelled in the colonies they were equally fascinated and disgusted."

Nonetheless, it makes for a very one-sided description of Greenland and its inhabitants, and that is something one has to be aware of. More likely than not, to Greenlanders, Danes and their habits were at least as bizarre. Who walks around on the mountainsides in a dress? Unfortunately, we do not have written Greenlandic testimonies to these early colonial encounters, Ms Seiding laments. "I really wish they existed. But I haven't been able to find any."

This is, generally, important to remember when speaking and writing about early colonialism. The absence of written sources from many colonised peoples skews the picture and risks enforcing the European view because it often goes uncontested. Of course, this does not mean that we shouldn't write the history we are at least able to write. It just something to be aware of, as mentioned: what is familiar to one is unfamiliar to another – and that which seems strange has an inside and familiarity to someone else.



Greenlandic family in front of a peat house, Niaqornat 1920 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Henriette Gjøl starts her journey in 1832. It takes her to Uummannaq, where her future husband awaits her and where they marry before embarking on the last leg of the journey to Niaqornat. All in all it is a three-month trip with several stops along the way, so already before reaching her final destination, she gets many impressions of the land in which she is to live.

Ms Seiding: "She was from a small Danish town, she was very young and obviously not used to traveling. Imagine how she must have felt. It is obvious from the diary that she's overwhelmed and scared. She's scared of the monstrous icebergs; she's scared of the whales; she's both fascinated and terrified. At one point she has to turn her back and look away from the icebergs, because it is simply too much for her to take in."

Obviously, Gjøl arrived in Greenland with some presumptions: stories of the remote place were told in Denmark. But often, she expresses surprise that what she had heard wasn't true. At some points, she is even pleasantly surprised, as when she first lays eyes upon the land itself:

The first view of Greenland I found wondrous but far from hideous. True, I have not seen a single tree but many flowers, very beautiful.

Another pleasant surprise is the standard of living among the Danes (or at least the governor of North Greenland, Major Fasting and his Danish wife) and she also notes that Greenlanders were not as small as it is said in Denmark. She even sees several people that she finds beautiful.

Underway, the ship docks in Upernavik, which she finds to be a hideous and bleak outpost: there is no vicar and people are heathens! The colonial administrator there is married to a Greenlandic woman and this clearly puts a distance between them, which hadn't been the case with Mrs Fasting.

Madam Cortzen is a quite beautiful woman, although rather Greenlandic in her dress, with pants and anorak, long red boots and her hair done up in a top knot, with a red band. She served coffee, set the table and brought us supper, but didn't eat with us. Instead she went to her Greenlandic tent.

Henriette Egede is allowed to have a look inside the tent and notes that it is “quite proper”. But it is also clear that Greenlandic women are someone to be visited, as a stranger being shown around to look at the life of the ‘locals’, as an anthropologic study almost. They are not people to socialise with.

At another tent that she also finds “quite proper” she notes that it belongs to a Danish man, as if to explain its properness.

Ms Seiding: “She does not make these visits happily; she writes that very clearly. It’s rough, the coffee is too strong, it’s too hot and it smells. She obviously does not identify with the Greenlandic women. She exclusively identifies with the very few Danish women she meets.”



Summer tent on the beach. Niaqornat 1909 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

But there are also class differences at play: differences between the Danish men who have married a Greenlandic woman. There are the senior officials (the ones who belong to Henriette Egede’s own class) and there are the others (the ones she has no social contact with whatsoever). Hence she is not confronted with the ‘Greenlandicness’ of their wives.

“These are people she would not have any social relation to in any case, so she doesn’t have to relate or connect to them at all. Hence she doesn’t care as much about the details of how they are dressed and how they are living. She doesn’t really notice those wives, and that in itself speaks volumes: she views them as just ordinary Greenlanders among other Greenlanders. She doesn’t find that their marriage to a Danish man makes them different, because the men they are married to are not people she identifies with socially, they belong to a whole other class,” Ms Seiding says.

Her house, the inspector’s lodge, she also finds to be a surprise, albeit a pleasant one. Perhaps because it is a place that she can make her own in the midst of strange surroundings.

We arrived at Niaqornat on 11 September at seven in the evening. I found it better than expected, for I had been told that the place was something awful. I found a little house with a little kitchen and two little rooms, of which Egede [her husband] had painted one very neatly.

I find myself content and happy here, although we have been deprived of human contact.

Although, no, we have a Danish cook and cooper, very decent I think, and I dare say, the cooper might well have a screw loose.



The administrator's house (with the Danish flag) in Niaqornat, where Poul and Henriette Egede lived. Photographed in the early 1920s (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Note how 'human contact' means 'contact with Danes'. Because the little settlement was not uninhabited. Eight families lived there amounting to some 40 people. But the Egedes obviously did not socialise with Greenlanders. Their relationship was solely a working one, and it was one in which – one is tempted to once again say obviously – Greenlanders work *for*, not *with* them.

Still, Henriette Egede cannot avoid altogether being influenced by the country she now lives in. Even if she clearly distances herself from Greenlanders, there are some things that are plain necessities – things that she would have sworn off living in Denmark. For example, she is outfitted with an anorak made from reindeer hide and long over-knee boots made from dog pelts.

And then, there's the food. Even though she finds that it tastes good, she has a very hard time eating seal in the beginning, but this is just one of the things that she gets quite used to. Another is the Beluga whale:

From this fish, they eat the skin raw. Even Europeans eat it with great appetite, it is called muktuk. Seeing Egede eat it raw looked revolting and had I not seen more people do it, I would find it disgusting.

But just six months after first casting her eyes on this revolting sight, she is eating muktuk herself, finding that not only does it taste quite good, it also helps cure scurvy, of which she and her husband have suffered from.

Another thing that she now does out of necessity is cooking over the lamp in the living room where the quests are. Back in Denmark, this would have been unthinkable and even considered barbaric. But...

In this land, one does not concern oneself with this; one can't. For when the cold is harsh,

one's fingers would freeze off, if one had to this outside.

If Henriette Egede thus accepts that there are some protocols that cannot be kept due to circumstances, it doesn't seem as if this experience brings any nuance to her fundamental attitude towards Greenlanders. Her overall view of them is clear; she writes about a woman that "even if she is a Greenlander" she is all right. She finds people lazy. In Denmark, she and her family had been under the impression that money didn't exist in Greenland. So, when some men complain that their pay for a day's work of heavy lifting is too little, she writes:

There you see that the Greenlanders know about money. No, we think way too highly of Greenland back home.

Even if she has to admit that in some areas Greenlanders are quite skilled, her overall judgement is clear:

No, Greenlanders are not as good-natured as is believed back home. They are cowardly and fearful, but malicious, most of them.



Looking neither lazy nor cowardly: working man, Niaqornat 1909 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Ms Seiding: "That Henriette Egede, at the time of writing, finds everything revolting is to be expected. What is perhaps less predictable is that something actually happens. She has an older friend (Mrs Fasting in Uummannaq), to whom she becomes very attached, an older woman who has been married to three different trade managers and lived in the country for a very long time. It is clear that Mrs Fasting is more thick-skinned, and she tells Henriette to be quiet during a situation in which she loudly expresses her disgust. This tells me that these women probably evolved somewhat.

"Everything that is strange when Henriette Egede arrives is also scary and perhaps even repulsive, but I would like to give these women the credit of thinking that over time they changed. I would have really liked to follow Henriette Egede over a period of several years, but we only have one year in the diary."

As mentioned above: all of these thoughts and ideas – and prejudices – that Henriette Egede has about Greenland and its inhabitants are neither new nor very original. The view

of colonised people as stupid, lazy and uncultivated is a trait that was common in Denmark and all other European colonial powers of the past 500 years. And these were some of the very traits that were to be 'civilised' away. But even if KGH had an ulterior motive in bringing Danish women to Greenland for this purpose, the role as 'civiliser' is not one that Henriette Egede takes upon herself or is even aware of.

Ms Seiding: "Definitely not. Henriette Egede is only conscious of her role as a wife and what is expected of her as such. But on the other hand, I think that her diary shows very well how one could play that role without being aware of it, just by coming to such small communities with so few people and totally changing the cultural landscape. Imagine being 40 or 50 people in such a small settlement, and when she comes along, a European home is built in the middle of it."



Niaqornat beach, 1909 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

There is no doubt, then, that the increasing presence of Danish women in colonial Greenland changed the society and structure of the colony. Whether it makes sense to speak of it as civilisation is doubtful, especially as the whole premise of 'civilisation' in this context is bit bizarre. But something definitely happened, not least the emergence of a new colonial upper class which had consequences for the mixed marriages.

"The tradition, if you will, of marriage between Greenlandic women and Danish men in colonial Greenland very clearly undergoes a demographic change towards the mid-1800s. The colonial upper class consisting of senior KGH officials turns into entirely European families. It gives rise to a sharp division between the European upper class and the mixed upper class. Cultural, racial and class-based boundaries are drawn in a new way in these colonial societies. All of a sudden there are homes that are different and belong, both culturally and economically, to different sphere than the existing homes, which are more mixed and also inferior in quality. In time it happens that many of these mixed marriages create their own social endogamy [the custom of marrying within one's own group], in which people of mixed race would marry into other mixed families. The very hefty cultural encounters between a Danish man and a Greenlandic woman are a thing of the early colonial period. Later on, people pf mixed descent would mainly marry each other."

With this, we are approaching the end of the story about Henriette Egede and the first Danish women in Greenland. Poul Egede, her husband, died of tuberculosis in 1840, and,

after that, Henriette Egede and the three children she had had while in Greenland went back to Denmark.

But this story brings up more questions. What about those who didn't return to Denmark, and whose children grew up in Greenland? Were those children Danish or Greenlandic or something in between? We'll explore this in the next article, when we take a closer look at Signe Rink, an author born in Greenland to Danish parents of Henriette Egede's generation.

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