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History

Signe Rink and the white woman's burden

Many Danish women living in colonial Greenland were critical of the mind-set behind it. None of them could escape it



February 3, 2017 - 7:16am - By Iben Bjørnsson

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The [previous article](#) in this series was about the Danish women coming to Greenland, and the creation of a new colonial upper class there. This one takes a closer look at one of the women born into this class: Signe Rink. Born in 1836, she could have been the daughter of Henriette Egede, the protagonist of the previous article who came to Greenland in 1832. She wasn't. But she still provides an insight into the next generation of the colonial upper class in Greenland.

Whereas Henriette Egede had come to Greenland as a young

This is the eighth 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.

The original version of this podcast (in Danish only) can be heard below. All of the episodes in the series

frightened woman who found the whole experience overwhelming, Signe Rink was born and raised in Greenland. And she wrote books, many of which pondered the colonial relation between Greenlanders and Danes.

Kirsten Thisted, a professor of minority studies at Københavns Universitet/the University of Copenhagen says of Rink: "She wrote from the experience of being a Danish woman in colonial Greenland. One might think of her as a cultural translator. And some of the issues she described are relevant even to this day."

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08 Signe



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Signe Rink, 1875 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Rink, née Møller was born in 1836 in Paamiut, where her father was the colonial administrator. During her childhood, she also lived in Aasiat and Sisimiut. She grew up playing with Greenlandic children, and thus spoke Greenlandic fluently and was familiar with the culture.

As a teenager she spent a number of years in Denmark to attend Danish schools, but in 1853, aged 17, she married Hinrich Rink, a geologist and glaciologist who was on his way to Greenland, where he quickly rose up the colonial ladder: in 1858 he became colonial director of southern Greenland, the highest post in the colonial hierarchy.

From this position, she wrote novels and short stories about life in Greenland and translated Greenlandic folklore into Danish. Her familiarity with Greenlandic society and traditions made it possible for her to give her readers a glimpse into a strange world, but, in some ways, Rink was herself a stranger. If you were born in Greenland as part of the colonial rule, what where you? Danish? Greenlandic? I asked Ms Thisted.

"Danish," she answers promptly. "For someone like Signe Rink, the ethnic lines were so sharply drawn that, had you asked her, she would have said Danish. Her narrative voice is

always that of the Dane, which means that there is always a distance. Even when she takes us into the lives of Greenlandic families, the narrator's voice creates a distance, points out curiosities and oddities."

With the arrival of the Danish women, the distinction between Danish and Greenlandic had become more pronounced: "The Danes formed a clique that stuck together. It is obvious from Signe Rink's literary works, but also from letters, both from this period and later. It runs like a mantra through Danish texts; 'us Danes'. The ethnic distinction in Greenland grew stronger. Ethnicity became so important at this point, that it even broke down social barriers among Danes. In Denmark, a craftsman would never sit at the same table as a government official, but in Greenland, they came to do so, as long as they were both Danish: ethnicity outranked class."



Signe Rink, her husband and their three children, 1860 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

To understand why this happened, we need to take another tour of colonialism. It was basically a part of the theories about race which were prevalent and helped form both the basis and justification of colonialism. In the last article, we learned of the civilising mission, which came into its own in the 1800s. The civilising mission must necessarily rest upon the perception of someone else as uncivilised, as primitive, as inferior.

"In Europe," Ms Thisted says, "there was a world-view in which the white man was on top of the evolutionary ladder. Primates were at the bottom, and somewhere in between – rather far down – were the 'people of nature'. Obviously this is horrible from today's perspective, but that was the way in which the world was perceived among colonising nations."

Placing the white man on top of the evolution ladder leads to one of the central themes of the civilising mission: the idea of *the white man's burden*. It entails the idea that as a superior and developed people or race, Europeans had an obligation to bring the 'lower'

racess and cultures into the light, and share the progress. The idea of the white man's burden was perfectly formulated in the three C's of the renowned Dr Livingstone: Christianity, civilisation and commerce. Once the 'lower races' were brought these delights – in European form, obviously – everyone would be happy. Much like god, the Europeans would (re)create 'the others' in their own image.



Christianity: The church in Nuuk, photographed by Hinrich Rink, 1860 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Even if the Danish colonial administration in Greenland did not explicitly talk about the three C's and the white man's burden, it was this school of thought that applied here as well.

Ms Thisted: "There was a very clear ranking of the Danes as a 'culture people' and the Greenlanders as 'nature people', and the idea that it was the obligation of the Danes to slowly 'raise' the Greenlanders, so that also they could take part in the blessings of being a culture people. Without having them become exactly as the Danes, they should be recreated in the image of the Danes, and hence become better and higher developed human beings. This was the policy and the way everyone thought at this point."

This division of people also led to a contradiction that the colonisers weren't aware of: simultaneously to 'civilising' Greenland, the divide was upheld by the emphasis put on racial and ethnic differences.

Almost, but not white

But (because there is a 'but') even if the purpose was the recreation of the 'lower cultures' in one's own image, no one actually thought that colonised people could ever climb the evolution ladder as high as the Europeans. The most they could do was imitate. Because in this line of thought, the Europeans were also still evolving, making progress. Hence, the Europeans would always be a step ahead. They would always know better, Ms Thisted says.

“There was an idea that they Europeans would always be way ahead. The ‘the others’ might one day reach ‘our’ stage, but not fully. This phenomenon has been dubbed by internationally renowned intellectual and postcolonial critic, Homi Bhabha, ‘almost but not quite’. Which neatly rhymes with ‘almost, but not white’.”

When this fits so neatly together, it is, of course, because these ideas are founded on the basic notion of the supremacy of the white ‘race’. Today, most of us call this by its name – racism – but back then, it was a belief that was widely held and even thought of as scientifically based.

The idea that non-whites were inferior was often expressed in the characteristics they were said to possess – immature, ignorant, childish really – which enforced the idea that they had to be ‘raised’. And turning once again to Greenland, this view has been widely held, even after decolonisation. The Danish-Greenlandic relation has often been spoken of as similar to that of mother and child.

Ms Thisted: “The colonial project rests on the image that Denmark is the colonial mother and Greenland is a child that she has taken under her wing to raise.” Or father and child: “There is a famous painting of Stauning [the Danish PM from 1924-26 and 1929-42, often depicted as the founder of the welfare state, ed] from the 1930s where he is sitting talking to the people. It is from the era of industrial optimism, you see smoking chimneys in the background, and surrounding Stauning are people from all walks of life. The Faroese are represented by a young man and Greenland is there as well, in the form of a small boy on Stauning’s lap. This small boy does obviously not understand what the grown-ups are talking about, but he is safe and sound in father’s arms. That image is so ingrained in the way we think and so hard to get rid of and it is related to all the other colonial images.”



Study for 'Founding Father', painted by Wilfred Glud, 1939 (Copyright Arbejdersmuseet/ABA) [Click to enlarge](#)

This view of a fundamental, racially given difference between people, contributed to the line between Greenlandic and Danish being drawn as sharply as is the case in Rink's writing. Ms Thisted: “Danes and Greenlanders in Greenland are in the same place, but in different worlds.”

The white woman's (and the elephant's) burden

Even if Denmark is sometimes metaphorically described as the ‘mother’ of Greenland,

colonialism was mainly masculine: both rationale and practise was concocted by men; it was the white man's burden. But as mentioned in the [previous article](#) the women were given a role to play.

Gradually the Royal Greenland Trade Company came to look upon the presence of Danish women in Greenland as an advantage, because they were instrumental in the civilising mission. With that, colonialism also became the white *woman's* burden. Ms Thisted: "The idea was that Danish women would teach Greenlandic women homemaking the European way. By this, the Greenlandic women would be 'heightened' and they would bring this with them into the rest of society, thus also heightening the civilisation level of the population at large."

It is this white woman's burden that Rink describes in her literature. But she is often critical, noting that it doesn't work, and that these Danish women often mess up and make a fool of themselves in the process.

"She has a lot of very concise descriptions of the Danish woman continually wanting to correct and adjust Greenlanders' behaviour without ever understanding the Greenlandic context. One of them is a very poignant story about a Danish woman who really wants to enter Greenlandic society, but constantly and unwittingly puts herself on the outside looking in. At one point she enters the house of an old Greenlandic man she cares deeply about as he is lying on his deathbed. And the first thing she does is complain about all the people present, because they bung up the house in which he is supposed to get rest, as ordered by the doctor. But what she does not understand is that they are gathered to sing him into death."

The Danish woman in the story immediately assumes that Greenlanders do not know about hygiene and do not respect the words of the (Danish) doctor, when, in actuality, they are gathered to perform an old tradition of singing for the dying: "She has been carried away by the role as a bearer of culture to the extent that she can't just be present on their terms."



'Civilisation': Schoolchildren and their (Danish) teacher in Holsteinsborg (Sisimiut), 1900
(Photo: Arktisk Institut)

This is not the only time Rink criticised the actions of Danes in Greenland, Ms Thisted says. “She very openly writes about the exploitation of Greenlanders, how the trade monopoly underpays them. In one scene, two elderly women clean eiders for a small sum, not knowing the amounts of money the eiderdowns will be sold for in Europe.”

And Rink also has an eye for the global context in which the colonisation of Greenland takes place. “She does not flat out state that the Danes in Greenland are comparable to the British in India, but she hints at it when she writes that Greenlanders are loaded like elephants, carrying things around for the Danes. Obviously, we all know where those elephants come from. And it is not Greenland.”

The tale of two Elses

But even if Rink criticises elements of the Danish presence in Greenland, she cannot escape being part of it. The story that perhaps best illustrates her sentiment is the one about the two girls, both named Else: one Greenlandic, the other Danish. The girls grow up together, play together and are generally inseparable. As they enter adolescence, they each fall in love: Greenlandic Else in a Danish man and Danish Else in a Greenlandic man. Until the time they are both sent off to prepare them for adulthood: Danish Else has to go to a Danish school, and Greenlandic Else must prepare for the life as a hunters' wife.

When they meet again they are like strangers, which is partly due to the fact that Danish Else has studied and progressed, whereas Greenlandic Else is somehow stalled in her mental development. From the book (authors' translation):

This is the old tale of a Danish and Greenlandic friend, who, due to the suddenly halted development in one and the continuously developing progress of the other, must lose each other. For Else, this was a source of pain, whereas Elsérak, with the naturalness of the nature child [sic] had immediate release by running around to the huts, stating that the pastor's Else had become so strange and impossible to understand.

This passage tells us that Danish Else has evolved past her Greenlandic friend not just intellectually (which could be just a question of education) but emotionally. She feels pain because she is able to identify the situation. Greenlandic Else – Elsérak – reacts like a child. Her development is stunted.

However, their friendship is saved when Elsérak becomes a maid for Else's family. This makes their relationship 'given', as Rink writes, and with the roles thus sorted out, they can once again relax in each other's company and even regain confidence.



Danes having a picnic outside Nuuk. Greenlandic servants in the background, 1910 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

The story ends by each of them getting married, correcting the mistakes of adolescence: Else marries a Danish man, Elsérak a Greenlandic. Order is restored. They say goodbye, and the reader understands that they will never see each other again.

The ending is significant: separation remains. And, in Rink's words, it always does, according to Ms Thisted.

"The Danish and Greenlandic woman can live together as children, they can be like sisters, but when they reach young adulthood, they must go their separate ways, because they are racially different."

Hence, Rink ends up renouncing and supporting the colonial relation at the same time.

"She accepts it by taking for granted that that is the natural order of things. That Danes and Greenlanders cannot unite. At the same time she rejects it by letting them cross over. Before she ends the story, she has played around with their roles, letting them cross racial borders, mix and match, hinting that perhaps it needn't be so separated. But in the end, it is."

Rink then, acknowledges the schisms and problems of colonialism, but cannot ultimately free herself from its mind-set: "She sees all this and still she maintains and upholds the colonial narrative that Danish and Greenlandic cannot naturally come together. She can't really do anything else; her husband was colonial director, the highest position in the Danish system in Greenland. It is clear where she where she ultimately stands."



Signe Rink in front of the Rink residence in Nuuk, photographed by Hinrich Rink, 1860
(Photo: Arktisk Institut)

So even if Rink is familiar with Greenlandic culture and society, she acknowledges her own role in a sharply divided colonial society. In the end she is Danish, and her point of view is that of the colonial power. She might mourn it, but she sustains it.

Married, not integrated

But wait: didn't we read in the previous article about all the mixed marriages between Danish men and Greenlandic women? How can it be it's now all about separation? The answer is fairly simple.

As you might also remember from Henriette Egede's diary, the Greenlandic wives of Danish men were never let into to his world of Danishness and probably never wanted to. And Danish women weren't interested in socialising either. They belonged to another world. As we also learned, the children of these marriages came to constitute a class or societal group of their own. The intense cultural encounters were a thing of the early colonial period.

Rink even addresses the phenomenon of mixed marriages, and in her eyes they do not break down the barrier. Ms Thisted: "She describes Danish men who have married into Greenlandic families, but still choose to sit in their sheds with the other men, because they are strangers to the world of their wives."

Do you remember the Greenlandic woman who returned to her tent and family after serving food for her husband and the Egede couple? Same phenomenon here. Marriage did not equal integration. Especially not as the civilising mission of the 1800s became a central pillar of colonialism.

On the contrary, the civilising mission highlighted differences. For Rink, there was no such thing as being part-Danish, part-Greenlandic. She writes of a Danish man that he was married to a Greenlander, and that his children and grandchildren were all Greenlanders.



Commerce: The Royal Greenlandic Trade Company's buildings in Jakobshavn (Ilulissat), 1892 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Even if women had a role to play in colonisation, it was, as mentioned, mainly a masculine affair. Men colonised land and people. Danish men married Greenlandic women. The extent to which this was the case became clear when suddenly, one day a Danish woman married a Greenlandic man.

Ms Thisted has looked into one of the first instances of this happening, in the 1920s. "It turned everything around. In this relation, the Greenlandic man, by being a man, was superior to the Dane because she was a woman. It was unheard of. The gender hierarchy clashed with the racial hierarchy and totally messed up the colonial order of things. This Danish woman, Ingrid Chemnitz fell in love with a Greenlandic man who was in Denmark to attend a seminary. In her own circles in Denmark, it wasn't really a problem: no one thought that her marrying a Greenlandic man was a disaster. But as soon as the couple arrived in Greenland, this all changed. She has hardly set foot in Ilulissat before another Danish woman tells her, 'this is not going to be easy for you, my dear Mrs Chemnitz, because Danish you are no more, and Greenlandic you will never be'."

Hence, a Danish man marrying a Greenlandic woman could remain Danish, whereas a woman, courtesy of being the man's property, lost her Danishness. But in the racially divided Greenland, she can't become a Greenlandic with him either. She's stuck between the two worlds.

It is also interesting that while the marriage was not that problematic back in Denmark, Danes in Greenland very much frowned upon it. It tells us that in the colonies, the stakes were higher. Unlike in Denmark, there was a colonial order to uphold, and it didn't accept at Greenlandic being superior to a Dane.

Ms Thisted: "A woman like Ingrid Chemnitz had no platform. She does not speak Greenlandic, which means she becomes isolated, because she does not belong with the Danes either. 'Us Danes' does not apply to her or include her, because her husband is Greenlandic. At one point, she is sitting down for coffee, when a Danish man asks her if her Greenlandic husband isn't a burden to her – while her husband is sitting at the same coffee table! They both tell the man off, but, nonetheless, this is just the state of things."



'Us Danes': Socialising at the house of colonial director Bugge, Nuuk, 1921 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

One might ask if times have changed since then. And, in many respects, the answer is 'yes'. But according to Ms Thisted, many of the issues described by Rink are recurring in more recent literature by Danish authors who have spent parts of or all of their childhood in Greenland.

"An author like Iben Mondrup writes things about her childhood in Godhavn [present-day Qeqertarsuaq, ed] in the 1970s, which are exactly the same things one can read about in Signe Rink's books, written more than 100 years earlier. One of the passages reads: 'There is something about the Danes, something she sees more clearly now, something that she did not see before. They stick together, not only at the parties but everywhere. They gather in clusters, move around in clusters and when the clusters dissolve into smaller clusters, it is only to come together again in new similar bunches.'"

In this text by Mondrup, the colonial upper class from the time of Rink somehow lives on. According to Ms Thisted, this is due to colonialism also exporting an idea of the nation as being closely connected to ethnicity.

"A lot of the old colonial discourse about race is alive and well, only now we call it people and culture. The Danish concept of nationality is so hung up on ethnicity. It is a huge problem in our own current immigration and integration debate. It is this view that we have exported to Greenland since the 1800s, and it is the view which now hits Danes in Greenland like a boomerang. It is the view that thinks of a given ethnic group as being tied to a given geographical location."

So what do we do? Are we doomed to continue this way, or is there anything we can do about it? According to Ms Thisted, there is one thing we can do, and I wholeheartedly agree with her suggestion. Even if it is burdensome and sometimes painful, we can recognise history and tell its stories.

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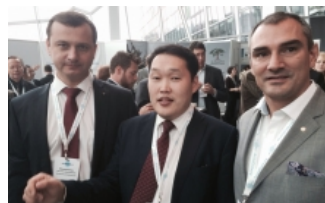
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