

THE NATIVE GREENLANDER — A BLENDING OF OLD AND NEW

Aage Bugge

Introduction

The impact of modern technology and economics and the influence of new social and educational standards on the native peoples of the far north have increased greatly during the present century. Improved transport, particularly in the air, the needs of defence, and the search for valuable natural resources, have brought many Eskimo in Alaska and Canada and natives of Greenland into direct contact with strong outside influences. Native peoples in the north as elsewhere have often shown astonishing adaptability and a facility for learning quickly. Yet persons most familiar with the peoples themselves are aware of a strange *mélange* of powerful, long-established traditions and the recently acquired culture and techniques.

Dean Aage Bugge, who is the specialist in Eskimo language for the Danish Administration and advisor on Greenland church affairs in Denmark, writes from long experience of the native people of the Colony. His father was a Danish administrator in Greenland, and he himself was for more than twenty-five years a senior official of the education and church affairs department there. He pioneered the use of modern methods in teaching Danish in the higher schools of the Colony.

The survival of old modes of thought in west Greenland is all the more remarkable when it is recalled that Danish influence has been strong there since 1721 when Hans Egede founded a mission at Godthaab. One reason may have been the Danish policy of limiting outside contacts with the Greenlanders, through the government trading monopoly and the closing of the territory to most non-residents. This long-established isolation is now being broken and it was to throw light on the possible consequences of greatly increased European intercourse that Dean Bugge originally prepared his paper for a meeting of the Greenland Society in Copenhagen. Although he deals particularly with Greenland, his conclusions have applications throughout the Arctic regions and even beyond.¹

TREVOR LLOYD

“ONCE primitive man has met the so-called ‘civilized world’, there is no way back.” This comment by Knud Rasmussen is undoubtedly true of the native of Greenland, whose path inevitably lies forward. Yet it is important to try to understand his cultural background rather than to ignore it. The Greenlanders² themselves should respect its best features, without becoming too dependent on them. He has no alternative if he really wishes to overcome his isolation and take an active part in the development of his own country.

No people can suddenly break away from traits acquired through centuries, and many early characteristics and ways of thought of the Greenlanders may still be found either on or just below the surface even in the larger settlements. They thrive in the outlying places and will remain at the back of the Greenlanders’ mind for a long time to come. They are woven into his ways of thinking and are often the hidden cause of actions, even by educated Greenlanders, which may appear unexpected or puzzling to outsiders. The reforms

¹The text has been translated from a paper in *Det Grønlandske Selskabs Aarskrift* (1950, pp. 136-44) in Danish and modified slightly for a wider public.

²Most Greenlanders are of mixed European and Eskimo origin.

now being carried out in Greenland¹ demand from the Danish people not only an acute awareness of the pressing economic and social needs of today, but also a sympathetic understanding of the Greenlander's basic psychology. This should be kept in mind when government personnel are being trained for work in Greenland.

Now that the old social and economic system is passing and may even disappear, the Greenlanders' mentality will also change, although more slowly. Meanwhile, whether we are aware of it or not, the old and the new—sometimes both naïve and startling grotesque—are interwoven in the present period of transition. The isolation of Greenland and of the minds of its people have now been broken, but even though the most alert and intelligent of them are anxious for closer cultural ties with Denmark and the outer world, the old ways will not be obliterated immediately.

On a recent visit I observed with interest how improved transportation is breaking down some of the distinctions between Greenlanders in the larger settlements and those in the outposts which were once so isolated. Yet we must remember that in spite of modern harbours, new electric power plants, and better houses, places remain where there is still time to repeat the old legends and where traces of the old superstitions may yet be found. An example of one such survival of old traditions is the belief, still held in many places, in the power of "name-giving"—through which a dead person returns in a newly named child. A strong campaign has been waged against this belief in the Greenlandic newspaper *Atuagagdluutit*, yet quite recently I came across an instance of it. Coming back from a funeral, I met a man who said happily, as he pulled along a little boy at his side, "Don't mourn over our dead friend, he is here in front of you—we have just got him back again."

There are two types of Greenlanders, the so-called "open" and "closed" types, with of course many gradations between them. Naturally the "open" one is the most popular for he greets the visitor spontaneously and smilingly. We are attracted by his genuine charm and heart-warming hospitality. The "closed" type is less popular, and from the first days of the Mission has been apt to be misunderstood. Because Hans Egede reacted against these "closed", heavy, apparently cautious Greenlanders, he always characterized them as "cold" people without deeper emotions. He overlooked and underestimated their strong, rather peculiar emotional life. It requires time, patience, and the right spirit to pierce the shell of assertiveness which is part of the typical Greenlander's self-reliance, and which has been a characteristic of some of the best native leaders in the country. The shyness and modesty of many Greenlanders is combined with a deep-seated fear of being laughed at.² This may explain in part why some Greenlanders find it so difficult to begin speaking Danish. We meet a similar touchiness among Greenlanders about ill-informed or unsympathetic references to the old Greenland in articles, lectures, or films. When judging his efforts to adapt himself to new conditions, the educated Greenlander expects us to be fair and honest. We must do what we can to

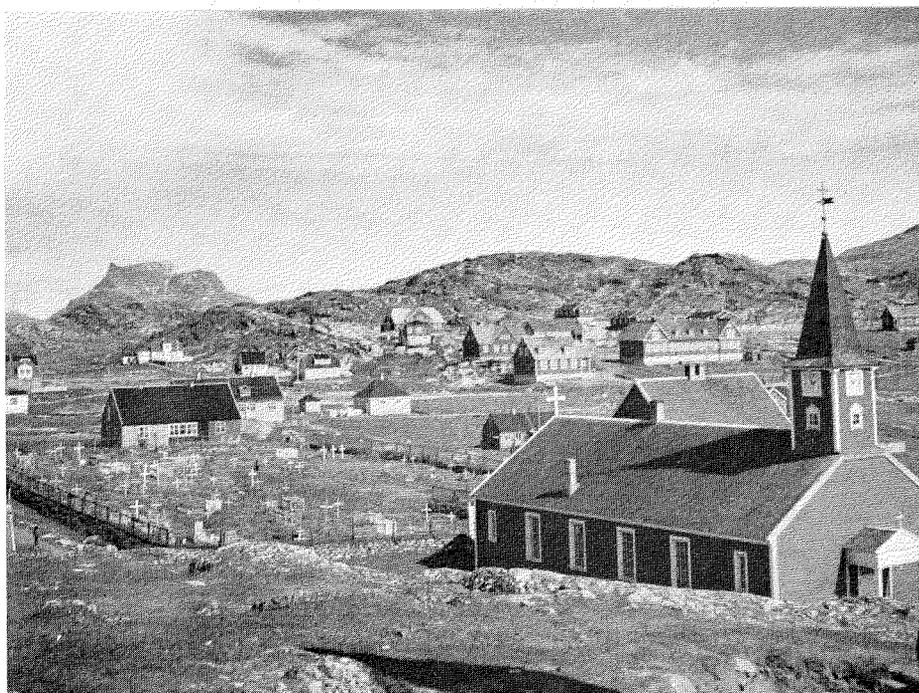
¹Nielsen, Finn, "Planned reforms in Greenland". *Arctic*, Vol. 4 (1951) pp. 12-7.

²In the old days quarrels were settled by trying to make the crowd laugh at an opponent during the so-called "drum-singing".



Old style Greenland turf house.

PHOTO: I. LAUGE



Godthaab.

Photo: Greenland Administration

help his people to reconcile the old and the new, encouraging them to do so by adapting the new ways to their special needs, rather than by merely imitating a Danish or foreign pattern.

One mental characteristic of the Greenlanders is a sometimes almost violent fluctuation between behaviour that is highly emotional and the practical or matter-of-fact. This instability may be traced in part to the old days when the people lived in small isolated groups and close inter-marriage was common. The Greenlander's hazardous life and harsh living conditions necessarily led to a practical or matter-of-fact way of thinking. As a reaction to this we find an emotional life which is really very rich but which often expresses itself in a manner so violent as to border on hysteria or ecstasy. This is as true of their sorrow as of their joy. Their depressions can be very deep and may at times even lead to their becoming lonely wanderers¹ in the mountains. I have seen among them outbursts of grief at deathbeds, which were so violent as almost to leave me breathless.

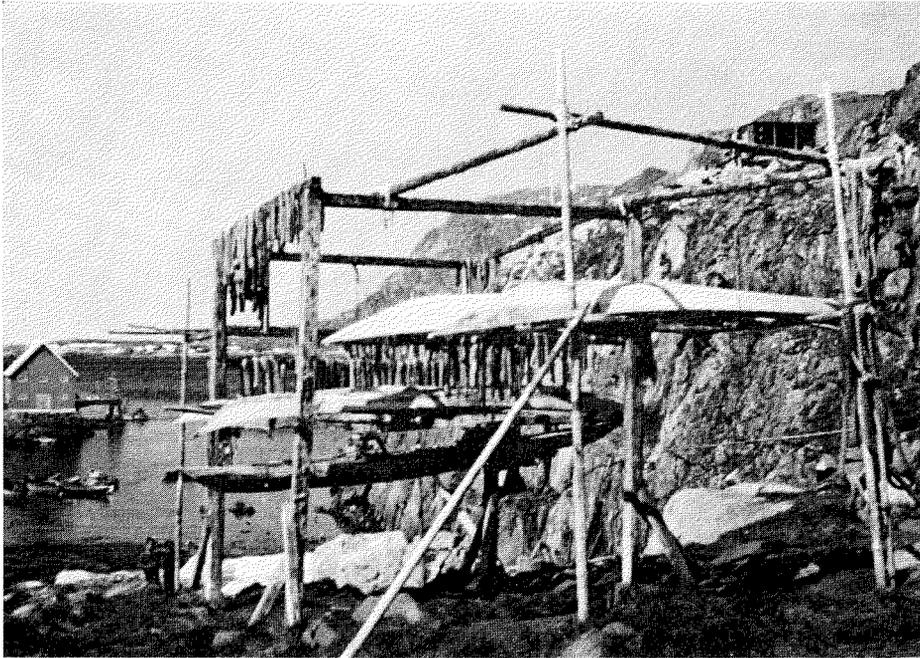
They also have a reputation for exuberant celebrations. The monotony of their existence seems to create a craving for festivity and gaiety, and if liquor is available, a whole community may be seized by a common psychosis. The attraction of drinking is apparently mainly the common ecstatic experience that it produces. But even without liquor they have 'The gift of festivity'.² Among the old folk, one often finds a delightful surge of vitality, which finds expression in dancing and in singing their festival hymns. I recall a day at Taseralik, at one time an important fishing place. All day long there had been a highly festive atmosphere. After the outdoor church service with its vigorous hymn-singing came a wonderful coffee party and we finished up with a football match between teams from the North and South. Then suddenly an old woman appeared. She was dancing on the football field, whirling around among the players with her hands lifted high above her head and with her grey hair-knot swaying.

I also recall a beautiful summer day when, in glorious weather, Umanaq Mountain and the settlement of Umanaq were welcoming the new ship *Umanaq* on her first voyage from Denmark. Towards evening, we were sitting quietly talking together in a Greenlander's home, when we were interrupted by the appearance of a most delightful old woman. She danced and sang as she came in, her song being interrupted now and then by whoops of joy at the sight of the magnificent new ship, their *aterssuaq* (name-sake) which had been called after their own dear Umanaq.

This alteration between the matter-of-fact and the highly emotional may also be met with in the records of the Greenland Mission and Church. We find the desire for the factual in the determination with which the Greenlander clings to the exact wording of the Ten Commandments. Even where his Christianity is at its best, it carries the stamp of Old Testament regard for the exact letter of the text. This, according to the late Dean Knud Balle, may be traced back to an earlier adherence to a long list of taboos. Yet on the other hand we find through the various stages of Christianization of the Greenlanders

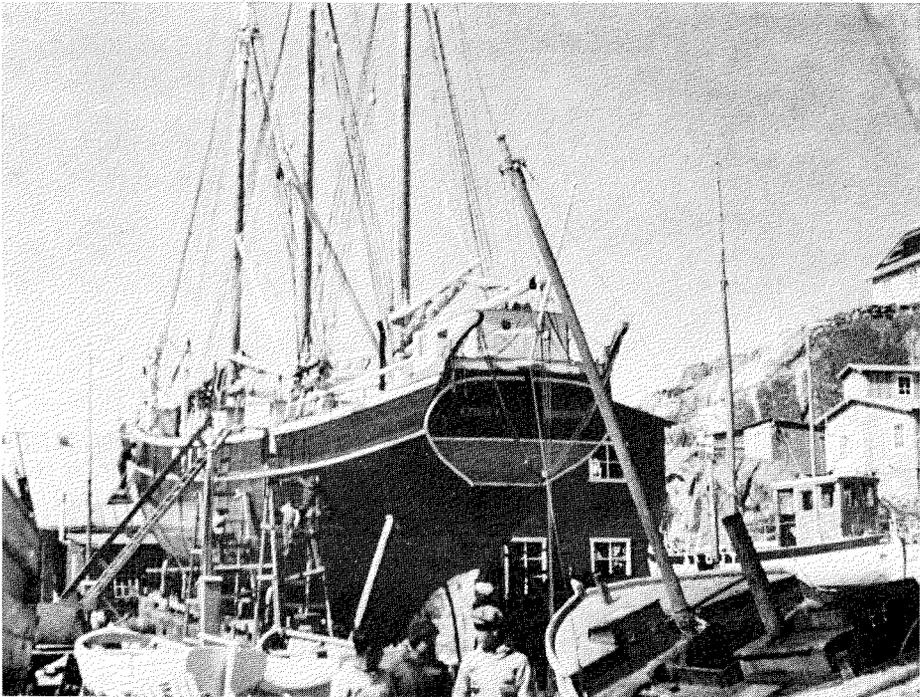
¹So-called *qivitut*.

²Title of a book about the Alaskan Eskimo by Knud Rasmussen.



Old Greenland kayaks at Holsteinsborg.

Photo: T. Lloyd



Holsteinsborg shipyard.

Photo: T. Lloyd



Greenlander
cleaning
skin.
Photograph
taken
about
1910.

Photo: Lars Møller

a craving for ecstasy stemming from the old belief in *angakut* (the medicine men of old) and seances, something which also shows itself in the long, drawn-out hymn-singing of the modern Greenlanders. Viewed from a purely Christian point of view these so-called “cold” people, have surely not shown themselves to be entirely free from emotion. This was obvious during the first century of missionary work when the Moravians, with their highly emotional tendencies, exerted such a strong influence in south Greenland.

In spite of the present lull in church life, we need not conclude that either the Greenlander’s inherent materialism, or his new-found technology, will necessarily overcome his natural faith in providence and the Christian spiritual life. The highly emotional, even sometimes visionary, side of his spiritual life, (which has its parallels among the Laestadian sect in Lapland) may still find expression in ways that are deeply moving. An old Greenlander influenced by the vast loneliness of the long winter night, narrated the following:—
“My soul was heavy and sad while I stood fishing on the fjord ice one dark winter night. But behold, the fog and the darkness were lit by a radiant glow and Christ came, walking across the ice towards me, and behold, he stood at my side.”

One of the most important characteristics of the Greenlander is his conservatism, carrying with it an immovable and deeply-rooted tenaciousness. In *The Greenland Society Yearbook* for 1918 Schultz-Lorentzen¹ calls attention to the remarkable absorbing power of this conservatism. It is interesting as well as important to observe this in the struggle of the Greenlandic language over a period of more than 200 years, to delimit, adjust, and absorb imported ideas and expressions. The language has shown enormous elasticity, although in compiling dictionaries and making translations, one is of course constantly running into words which can be transcribed only imperfectly. The Green-

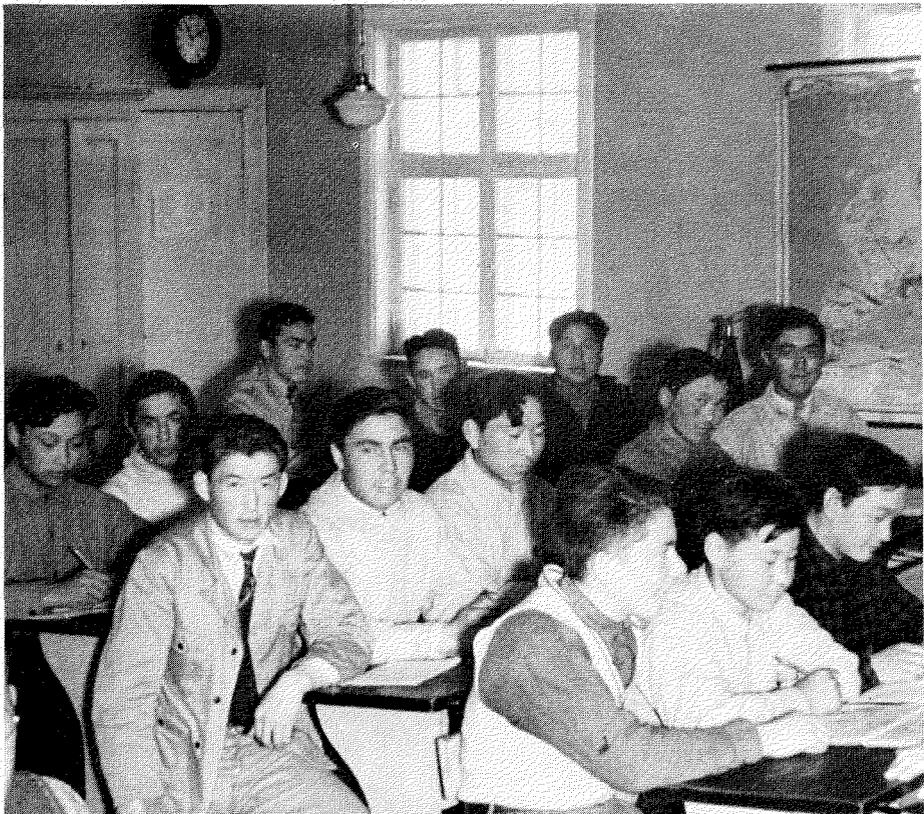
¹Schultz-Lorentzen, C. W., “Folkeoplysningen i Grønland, dens Midler og Maal”. *Det Grønlandske Selskabs Aarsskrift* (1918) pp. 86-100.

landic language has in many ways reached the limit of its capacity, and among Greenlanders in the larger settlements it is practically bursting with foreign words. Yet, in the opinion of a leading Greenlandic, the language shows no signs of dying out. In home and in church, in legends and in songs, in hymns and in literature, it will continue to speak to the Greenlandic of something in his innermost being and thus justify its claim to exist side by side with Danish, which is now being increasingly taught in the Greenland schools.

Mention should be made, if only briefly, of a more serious aspect of this conservatism. That is the completely passive side of the Greenlandic's character, which may prove to be a great barrier to progress. It stems perhaps from the fatalistic attitude of the Greenlandic of old, who believed that "What shall be will be." This philosophy armed him to meet adversity, but it may prove a real handicap in the modern community. It may lead not only to a rather pathetic optimism, but also to a constantly recurring inclination to let things slide. It may lead to recklessness, laziness, and irresponsibility in economic as well as in moral, sexual, and other matters. It may prevent the development of the independent initiative and enterprise which are so badly needed among the Greenlanders.

It must not be forgotten that the Greenlandic has a strong and deep feeling for nature. In this, too, one can detect an alternation between an attitude that is robustly practical and one too often highly emotional. Once, when I jumped ashore after a magnificent boat trip on the lovely lake that leads into the Kingua valley, a pearl of great beauty among the woodlands in the Julianehaab district, a Greenlandic exclaimed: "Oh! what a fine lot of firewood". Another time when I was reindeer hunting with a Dane and a

Photo: T. Lloyd



High
School
at
Godthaab.

Greenlander, the former wanted to pick some flowers. "Why are you doing that?" asked the Greenlander. "Are they good to eat?" When the answer came in the negative, he shook his head with an indulgent smile, and concentrated on the reindeer tracks.

Yet on the other hand, native legends include many expressions of emotion at the sight of beautiful country. To mention only the classical example—"The great hunter from Aluk",¹ whose heart burst from joy when, after long absence he again saw the sunrise from his own home and watched the rays of the morning sun shatter themselves against the icebergs. This legend is of such beauty and magnificence that it is worthy of being a part of world literature.

Even today this sensitiveness to the beauty of scenery may be met with in speech as well as in writing. I recall some letters from the late Jacob Rosing, who was a thoughtful hunter living in Kangâmiut. He wrote of the impression that had been made on him late one calm and beautiful night when he was returning from hunting. The mountains stood out sharply, silhouetted against the starlit sky above his head and he wrote, "At this sight my thoughts turned in thankfulness towards Him who created all these wonders".

Glancing over the latest edition of the *Greenlandic Songbook*, I found a remarkably beautiful poem by Pavia Petersen. In it he pictures vividly the frozen breath of the coming winter sweeping down from the inland ice through gaps in the mountains. One can almost see a Greenlander rejoicing in the return of the cold weather heralded by the autumn aurora.

To the hunter, the thrill of the chase and the surroundings in which it takes place merge into one. Abel Kristiansen, a senior catechist,² told me how a mutual friend, an old hunter, had recently been on a last trip to his old hunting grounds at the head of the fjord. The account ended with these words: "Returning as an old man to my former hunting grounds, I was almost overwhelmed. As we left the fjord early in the morning in glorious weather, with the ice sparkling in the rays of the rising sun, and the water lying dead calm, smooth as a mirror, and dotted with ice-pans, I could not help being deeply stirred at the sight. It seemed as if the whole world was showing me its beauty in a last farewell."

A younger hunter from Frederikshaab wrote: "This morning, as usual, I climbed a hill behind our village to get a good look out. When I saw the ice-filled sea, it took my breath away. As I pictured in my mind's eye the game I should find there, I behaved like a little child gasping for breath from sheer joy. Then I ran headlong down the hill to my kayak."

Perhaps the native Greenlander's well known love of children will, in the long run, leave the deepest impression on his literature. When translating foreign literature for their use, or preparing broadcast programs for them, we should bear in mind that this is something that the Greenlanders readily understand. I remember one evening a large group of us listening to a Greenlandic broadcast of Hans Andersen's "The story of a mother". The native audience heard something of the very best in Danish literature, which because of its subject met a response in their own hearts. It appealed to something primitive and yet beautiful, which the Greenlanders understand—

¹Rasmussen, Knud, 'Myter og sagn fra Grønland'. 1924, Vol. 2, pp. 23-5.

²An unordained native teacher and preacher.

the mother's love for her baby. The audience, made up of all ages, listened quietly to the rather long program. I noticed a child trying intently to catch every word. One young fellow with a troubled look on his face smoked cigarettes while listening, and now and then crushed one with his foot. The greatest tribute and deepest understanding came, however, from a mother who asked me to give her personal thanks to the translator and to the Godthaab radio station. She had herself just lost her son.

In ending, I would like to mention a few *aqautit* or "name-songs" which are sung to most Greenland babies. They are miniature folk songs, primitive and simple, almost crudely simple, and yet they express (most prettily in the native tongue) the Greenlanders' love of children. The girls sometimes come in for rather rough treatment, but it is apparently only intended as heavy humour, as for example:

"Oh, these wretched women, they are good for nothing.
They add no meat to the broth
They don't become famous.
Toss them out—throw them away!
Bury these useless women under old chewed bones."

But in my small collection I also find the most touching expression of joy in a new-born baby girl.

"Ane Malia, you dear little Priscilla!
We are so happy about this lovely little baby girl,
We are all so wonderfully happy about her."

And again:

"To think that we poor folk happened
to get this wonderful baby girl.
She should certainly not be looked down on
She really is a sweet little thing."

These fragments of songs are another reminder of that old Greenland, much of which is bound to give way before the rather harsh and practical ways of a new era. Yet the old ways form an indelible part of the Greenlanders' character. There is no way back for primitive man once he has met the modern world, yet we must have sympathy and understanding for all that is best in the Greenlanders' heritage from the past. We should encourage him to study it and be proud of it.

Let me end by quoting a Greenlandic "name-verse" about a baby boy—hope and pride of the family, looked to as the "Great hunter of tomorrow". Those in Denmark and Greenland who share responsibility for the new nation in the making may see in the words "Great hunter" not only the Greenlanders of old, but also the pioneers and leaders of the new tomorrow. We should also remember the mothers of Greenland, who, faced with the pressing claims of a new generation, and with great and new responsibilities, must still find the time to sing their quiet lullabies:—

"Dear little Kâlêraq,
You sweet little thing,
Precious little one,
Who brings my lost one back to me.
You lovely little thing.
Why do I kiss you?
I kiss you because I love you, sweet child.
You darling little baby boy, the great hunter of tomorrow."