

# Emerging Native Voices in Greenland

*Editor's Note: The following article was originally published in the Danish periodical PEDAGOGIK of May, 1976. It was written by Ingmar Egede, Principal of the Teacher's Training College in Muuk, Greenland. Mr. Egede was a participant in last week's conference on cross-cultural education. Tundra Times would like to thank Mr. Egede and the Center for Northern Educational Research for facilitating publication of this article.*

Human being are not coins, which craftsmen can melt down and recast into new coins of the same value.  
(Knud Rasmussen)

Until the Second World War Greenland was a closed country. The war and the events that accompanied it resulted, among other things, in new viewpoints concerning this isolation.

In 1953, in the name of equal rights, Greenland's status as a colony was abolished. Now some years later, one might ask: "Equal rights to what and on what basis?"

In connection with the new political ideas and the consequent economic opportunities, a virtual migration from Denmark to Greenland was initiated. About 20 percent of Greenland's inhabitants are Danes born outside Greenland. The duration of the stay of the individual Dane is on an average 3 to 4 years. Thus one might note that the number of adult Danes, who have lived in Greenland during the last 20 years, is considerably higher than the number of Greenlanders who today are more than 15 years old. What the influence of this has been, one can only guess at.

The equal rights outlined in the constitution are based on democracy, a liberal economy, and the western educational system and administration.

During the last 30 years the original population has doubled. Today more people live in the urban communities alone than in the whole of Greenland in 1960.

The economic activities and the way of life have altered radically, and the Eskimo/Greenlandic cultural heritage has been considered restraining and hampering baggage on the way into the new age, both politically and administratively.

The premises, on which the planning and development rest are West European; and the pillars of the functions in the society are Danes, except for a few Greenlanders, who culturally have taken the plunge. The ordinary Greenlanders stand alienated and has become an economic, social and cultural minority in his own country.

In the long run this situation is unacceptable. However, the question is whether the Greenlanders has to adapt himself to the society as it is, or the structures of the society have to be adapted to him. Neither of these alternatives is possible. The development of the society cannot be stopped just like that; the Greenlanders cannot all of a sudden abandon his original culture—simply throw a veil over it.

The solution must be found through an analysis of what we want to retain, develop, or reject—from both cultures. The analysis cannot be made by foreigners, and the Greenlanders is pre-scientific in his way of thinking, i.e., the mode of thoughts developed in a static hunting society is concrete and rarely abstract.

Today the Greenlandic school is a product of circumstances that made legislators, educators, and parents disregard the fact that two cultures exist side by side in Greenland.

One of the cultures is dominant, because it has defined the political ideology of the development, and has controlled the means of production, the means of communications, the educational institutions, and the administrative machinery. The other culture has been neglected, dying and devaluated.

When an effort is made to describe the educational problems in Greenland in 1976, it becomes necessary to describe some aspect of the background of the other culture.

The original Greenlandic communities were small—in the literal sense of the word. A settlement of 3-4 families was nothing exceptional, and it was considered a large settlement if 20-30 families were living at the same place. Besides, because of the location of the animals, which constituted the sole basis for the Greenlanders' livelihood, the settlements were distant places scattered along a vast coastline.

For this reason they seldom saw people from outside. And when it happened, it was usually people from the nearest settlements.

Living in a small place not only meant that this home was shared ground to them, but also that they shared all their experiences. They knew each other's joys, sorrows, and modes of associating with other people; and they especially knew the capacities of each other. They were often related to each other, a fact which entailed both rights and obligations.

Any sign of undesirable behavior was noted by others and checked in the beginning stage, among other things by people's astonishment. It was seldom that unacceptable ways of behavior became habitual, the social control was too close and tangible for that to happen.

While growing up, the children were in constant contact with the grown-ups in the family. Apart from the children and the parents, the grandparents often lived in the house, too; and frequently there was also an aunt or an uncle, who had not married yet.

It is difficult to distinguish between play and training for adulthood. By taking part in the daily life of the family, the children learned the necessary skills as they gradually developed the ability to master them.

During the evenings and the periods of bad weather, when the men were at home, they spent their time making or repairing their hunting tools. On

these occasions the hunters told about their confrontations with weather, ice, sea, and especially with the game. Whereas all other experiences belonged to the collective world, the hunters experienced these confrontations in loneliness. Through the tales the hunters shared each others' experiences, and the boys were introduced to the kind of life that lay ahead of them.

In the static community, experience and age were important to a degree, which is about to be forgotten in a dynamic community. The older one grew, the more variations one had seen of the pattern which is followed by the different years and the lives of the individuals.

The daily life of the few people with the many common experiences, resulted in the development of a language which built on the familiarity of the experiences. To a great extent, the language became retrospective and reliant on implications, remote from the Western European languages, whose most distinguished function is to serve as tools of ideas and planning. A prerequisite for this is knowledge about cause and effect in a world which can be influenced.

If a brief description of the characteristics of the Eskimo/Greenlandic language is to be given, one will have to distinguish between the language used to describe the collective world and the language employed to describe the world of the individual hunter. The former is an implicit language, containing a rather small vocabulary and its function is to eliminate misunderstandings and to express wishes and feelings which are closely related to an actual situation. The language of the hunters' tales, on the other hand, is differently developed and varied; and its function is to introduce a world where even the smallest details are described to ensure that the listener fully understands the overall picture. However, the preponderance contents is common to the two varieties of the language.

The Eskimo culture is extremely advanced with regard to the tools. The kayak, the sledge, the harpoon, and the igloo are examples of a technology which

had been developed to the limits of what was possible with the available materials. The scarcity of materials and the very cold climate limited the Eskimos' possibilities of "controlling Nature." Instead they had to adapt themselves to it.

This is among other things reflected in the Eskimo concept of time. Greenland-Air's passengers will know how meaningless it is to operate in Greenland with times of arrival and departure which are based on fixed dates, hours, and minutes. There are periods when one is grateful to be a couple of days delayed. If one leaves the towns, such a measurement of time is still without meaning.

In the original Greenland, time passed as it does now. It could be observed in the changes from day to night, even though their characteristics differed during the periods of mid-night sun and those of polar night. The tides also showed the passing of time. The flood tide comes twice a day, not at the same times, but about half an hour later day by day.

The factors which determined when one went to work were these: the season, which determined the temperature, the light and the type of game that could be hunted; the tide, which determined where one could meet the animals—and finally the weather, which at any time either made it possible or impossible to go hunting. This was then an organic participation in the nature and the climate,

which made the western divisions of time meaningless.

I have dealt with the culture of the static community in the foregoing for several reasons. Partly because life in the settlements in the hunting districts has not been altered beyond recognition, when looked upon from the point-of-view of the past. Partly because I find that all forms of education are considerably more conservative than we are inclined to admit. The process of socialization enables children and grown-ups to live up to the expectations of the environment. The fundamental adaptation, which later on becomes significant for the child's self-concept and consequently for its prospects in relation to other people, takes place during the first years of the child's life. The parents' reaction to acceptable or unwanted behavior are repeated again and again and result in an overlearning which it is difficult to get rid of later in life.

In conflicts arising between children and parents, emotions will often dominate the situation. In the children's behavior the parents will often recognize actions which made their own parents react in a negative way. Only a few are so reflective, that they in all situations have made up their own minds about what they themselves accept or reject according to judgment based on the standards they actually hold as adults. Parents will often reproduce

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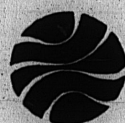


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