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Furs and fabrics : transformations, clothing and identity in East Greenland

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Furs and Fabrics is a book about the Tunumiit of East Greenland and their perspective on dress and identity. It examines and discusses the relationship between dress and identity in local society over a period of more than one hundred years. The time frame has been divided into three periods, namely the nineteenth century, early twentieth century and late twentieth century to the present day. More specifically, the book discusses the various levels of identity of the Tunumiit, and considers how these identities are reflected in their dress. Emphasis is placed on the effect of new forms of identity on East Greenland clothing and accessories.

Garments of the nineteenth century were almost exclusively made of fur and leather. These garments are now only preserved in museums, notably in Greenland, Denmark and Northern Europe. The study contains a discussion of the production and decoration of these early garments and places them in the context of the complex relationships between the social and religious aspects of Tunumiit culture on the one hand and the people's harsh natural environment on the other.

In the first decades of the twentieth century Western clothing became available at the trading posts. These garments were rapidly integrated into the Tunumiit clothing system. At the same time the Tunumiit adopted clothing traditions from West Greenland. The Lutheran Church subsequently influenced the development of these West Greenland forms into Tunumiit festive dress. The book also discusses the role of various economic and political changes that also contributed to transformations in Tunumiit dress.

During the second half of the twentieth century, traditional fur and leather clothing almost disappeared, and outside influences on East Greenland clothing increased, due to the growing political and economic links between Greenlanders and Danes and the modernization of Greenland in general. The Tunumiit adopted Euro-American fashion and dress concepts. However, this recent development is not the end of the story. The present book also looks at the impact of increasing social and economic differences between East Greenlanders, West Greenlanders and Danes, stimulating the Tunumiit to consciously express their cultural identity in their clothing and the way they dress. Groups supporting self government and those interested in reviving regional culture now actively stimulate the use of local garments as symbols and emblems of their own Tunumiit identity.

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