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

Buijs, C.C.M.; Buijs C.C.M.

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Cover Page



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Author: Buijs, Cunera

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Introduction

Arctic clothing

Today Arctic clothing is an important research topic. The first European researchers were fascinated by the Greenlander's sophisticated technology, and they brought clothing, kayaks and hunting equipment back to Europe. Researchers still admire the quality of the techniques used to produce a balanced material culture that was perfectly adapted to the Arctic environment. Fur clothing was much better suited to meet the Arctic challenges than the Europeans' woolen garments. Nevertheless, Inuit clothing changed rapidly under the influence of European culture. Nowadays, Greenlanders wear baseball caps, military jackets and Nike shoes. Compared to the excellent hand-made fur clothing of the Inuit, European mass-produced fabrics seem to represent a step backwards. Why did the East Greenlanders break with the traditions of their ancestors? Why did they abandon most of their perfectly adapted and beautiful fur clothing, and why did they adopt new styles of dress? This book discusses the social implications of the changes in the clothing of Tunumiit (East Greenlanders)¹ in relation to processes of social and cultural change in the East Greenlandic society.

The background to this research

When I became a curator at the National Museum of Ethnology in 1990, I was struck by the richness of the clothing collections of the museums in The Hague and Leiden. First it was the clothing details, showing evidence of many hidden techniques that captured my attention. The fur contrasts in natural colours, the minuscule stitching, and the aesthetic designs bear witness to a rich cultural tradition and a sophisticated civilization. Later on, I began to focus on the religious, social and economic implications of the clothing. What does clothing mean to East Greenlanders? What perceptions and variations are involved?

I was already familiar with East Greenland from several visits, the first to East Greenland being in the summer of 1982. In 1985, I lived among the Tiniteqilamiit for six months. My husband and I were kindly invited to stay with the family of my adoptive parents Lars and Asta Jonathansen, who became real friends and almost foster parents, to whom I owe immense gratitude for their warm hospitality over the years. Our aim was to study the consequences of the European sealskin boycott for the East Greenlanders of Tiniteqilaq, who still lived mainly from seal hunting.

In 1993 I prepared the exhibition 'Braving the Cold, Clothing of the Polar Inhabitants' in the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden. During the winter of 1993-94, examples of Arctic clothing from the entire polar region, from Greenland to Siberia, were on display. This exhibition focused on the technical aspects of clothing and its efficacy as protection against the cold. In March 1994, an Arctic clothing seminar was held at the National Museum of Ethnology and the contributions were published in 'Braving the Cold, Continuity and Change in Arctic Clothing' (Buijs and Oosten, 1997). The Arctic clothing exhibition of 1993/94 signalled the starting point of my PhD research on the social aspects of East Greenland clothing. I did my PhD fieldwork in the Ammassalik district in East Greenland in March and April 1997, June 1998, and June and July 2001.

In my research in East Greenland I could rely on the material-culture studies of Gerti Nooter (1930-1998), my father-in-law and predecessor as a curator at the National Museum of Ethnology. He visited East Greenland for the first time in 1965. In 1967-68, Nooter stayed for one year among the East Greenlanders, accompanied by his wife and their three young children. He frequently returned to East Greenland, and continued his research on continuity and change in material culture. Nooter was inspired by the work of Prof. Tinbergen (1907-1988), who lived with his wife in East Greenland for a year in 1932-33. Tinbergen conducted ornithological research and assembled a beautiful ethnographic collection for the Museum in The Hague. Thus there was already a long tradition of Dutch ethnographic research in Tiniteqilaaq and the Ammassalik district.



Map 1. Map of Tasiilaq (Ammassalik) district. Including the village Tiniteqilaaq.

Life in East Greenland changed rapidly during the twentieth century after East Greenland was 'discovered' by the Danish Lieutenant Gustav Holm in 1884. The trading post established in Ammassalik (Tasiilaq) in 1894 provided the Inuit with European goods. It was not long before rifles were incorporated into the hunters' equipment, while textiles, European food and tobacco also became available. Danish colonization gradually changed the political and economic structure. During the 1960s, the Danish G-60 policy provided for the centralization of the East Greenland population in eight permanent settlements, to make it possible to provide social services in the district. Tiniteqilaaq was established in 1953 at an occasionally inhabited place on the Sermilik Fjord. Wooden prefabricated houses were built, together with a school that also served as a church, a medical post, a

trading post (combined with postal services) and a small shop. In the 1980s, oil lamps were abandoned when electricity was installed in the villages of the Tasiilaq (Ammassalik) District. Motorboats were introduced and modern communication and transport facilities were established. During the 1990s, the water supply was improved and Tiniteqilaq was given a water tank, providing water (instead of ice) during the winter months. Nowadays, tourists from Europe travel to Ammassalik via the airport of Reykjavik, where tourist flights are organized.² The village of Tiniteqilaq at the Sermilik Fjord has about 150 inhabitants living in coloured wooden houses on the hills covered with snow. The Sermilik Fjord is said to be the most beautiful fjord of the district, with icebergs drifting slowly to the sea. It means an attraction to the tourists. Tasiilaq, the district's capital with c. 2000 inhabitants, functions as the economic and cultural center of the area. Here are a hospital, a primary and secondary school, a church, a museum, the trade center and the shopping center of the Pilersuisoq (Greenland trade company) and a harbour. The people of Tasiilaq live in wooden prefab houses, modern single-family dwellings and in flats. Some of the colonial buildings still exist and are situated in the center.

Social change led to new exchange relations. West Greenlanders and Danes became important exchange partners, and were conceptually integrated into East Greenland society. These new relationships were immediately expressed in new styles and materials in clothing, shaping the new relations and identities

Identities

My studies of East Greenland identity began with Barth (1969), Cohen (1988; 1994) and Dorais (1994). In 'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries' (1969), Barth was one of the first to emphasize the circumstantial or situational character of ethnicity. This attitude toward ethnicity contrasts with theories with a primordial emphasis relating ethnicity to race. In the circumstantial view, ethnic distinction is not maintained by isolation, rather by contacts between different groups; by crossing the boundaries.

"The critical focus of investigation becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group rather than the cultural stuff that it encloses. The boundaries to which we must give our attention are of course social boundaries, though they may have territorial counterparts. If a group maintains its identity when members interact with others, this entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signaling membership and exclusion." (Barth 1969:15)

This points in the direction of self-ascription and ascription by others, and defining relationships within a group and relationships between different groups. Processes of inclusion and exclusion are involved here. The relational concept of group identity balances between "being identical" and "being unique" (see Jenkins 2002; Oosten and Remie 1999:1; Vermeulen and Govers 1996:1). Which one gains the upper hand depends on the circumstances. Identity is dynamic, flexible and changes over time (Jenkins 2002:9-12). Circumstantialism is one of the main characteristics of Greenlandic society. In exploring Greenlandic identities I will apply this flexible, contextual and relational identity-concept, emphasizing relationships within groups and between groups. Social differences are

articulated in terms of exchange relations. The nature of the exchange relation informs us about the identities that are involved.

In his article 'À propos d'identité', Louis Jacques Dorais (1994) distinguishes between cultural identity and ethnic identity. Cultural identity is based on culture, is stable, durable and continuous, and can be identified in terms of language, lifestyles, norms and values. Ethnic identity is functional, based on classifications that are not cultural, such as physical appearance, race and origin. Ethnic identity has political connotations. Anthony Cohen argues that ethnicity can be seen as: "the politicization of culture: ethnic identity is a politicized cultural identity" (1993:199; see also Hobsbawm and Ranger 1989). Political strategies of intellectual and political elites come to the fore in defining ethnic identity. Yet the notion of ethnicity is problematic where Greenland is concerned. Greenlanders do not conceive of the contrast between distinct groups within Greenland (for example the contrast between West and East Greenland) as ethnic contrasts. Greenland identity at large (often contrasted with that of foreigners or foreign countries) is valued as a national identity. Local groups are more or less defined as regional identities. Jenkins (2002) emphasized the symbolic dimensions of identity as a construction of differences and similarities between communities: the concept of 'belonging' or 'community' is in his view symbolically constructed by people in response to "their social categorization by outsiders" (Jenkins 2002:112).

Regional identities in Greenland have a strong symbolic value, but cannot be interpreted as ethnic identities. However, relationships between Greenlanders and Danes may be labeled as ethnic relationships.

In 1999, inspired by the work of Dorais, the Dutch Research Group Circumpolar Cultures (RGCC) published a study on identity: 'Arctic Identities, Continuity in Inuit and Saami Societies', edited by Oosten and Remie. The contributors to this publication deal with arctic identities in a contextual way:

"As people can identify themselves in different ways, they have to make choices in presenting their identities. They have to assess which identity is relevant in a particular context and which particular aspect of an identity has to be emphasized in that context. (...) Identities are valorized and they relate to values. They are of utmost importance in social interaction as relative positions are determined in terms of perceptions of identities. Even though perceptions of identities may appear relatively stable, they are usually dynamic and negotiable and imply continuous processes of construction and deconstruction." (Oosten and Remie 1999:1-2.)

Oosten and Remie adopted the definition of identity formulated by Dorais as: "the specific way in which human collectivity perceives and represents its position in the universe in relation to other collectives of human beings (or at least beings endowed with sense)." (Dorais 1994:254). This definition encompasses both cosmological as well as social relationships (Oosten and Remie 1999:2). Inuit are not only related to each other, but also to their ancestors, whose names they bear (see Kublu and Oosten 1999; P. Robbe 1994b; Oosten 1999). Greenland Inuit define themselves as hunters in relation to the Arctic animal world that surrounds them. Today, this cultural identity is complemented by new

political identities. Inge Kleivan (1990;1991) analyzes Greenland identity topics in her articles on the development of Greenland's national flag and other national symbols. Discussion of identity began in Greenland as early as the 1930s to 1950s period, when the country was in the process of gaining independence. During the 1990s there was a renewed interest, not only among western scientists but also among Inuit themselves (see Petersen 1985,1995,2001; Lynge 1981; Kublu 1999).

“Greenlanders have changed their food habits, their traditional dress, and their conventions. Education and advanced schooling opportunities, residence, sense of community, and daily work have changed out of all recognition. Religion and faith, (world) view, reading and interests, contacts with the outside world, all have been revolutionized. And yet Greenlanders are in no doubt that they are, and remain, the same people who, according to Poul Egede in 1734, said that they could not understand that any other people besides themselves could have a claim on the property of Kalaallit Nunaat.” (Lynge 1981:58, translated from Danish by C. Buijs.)

Nowadays, Inuit deal with the question of how to valorize the traditional Inuit culture as hunters in a modern political context, and how to implement ‘being Greenlandic’ in a modern European-based society. (See Robert Petersen 1985;1990;1995;2001, on Greenland's identity, especially ‘Colonialism as seen from a former Colonized Area’ (1995).) Today cultural identities, regional identities which have not yet been politicized, and a new Greenlandic identity with strong political connotations, are all expressed through various forms of clothing.

Identities and clothing

This study explores categories and concepts of identity materialized and expressed in clothing of the end of the nineteenth century until modern times. It deals with the spiritual culture, material culture, naming and social behaviour that all contributed to cultural identities, as well as to the religious and political identities shaped in the interaction between Danes and Greenlanders.

In the past, studies on Arctic clothing focused on the technical and adaptation aspects. Researchers were fascinated by and admired the Inuit who made this excellent material culture. Little attention was paid however to the semantics of Greenlandic clothing. There was not much information available on social, symbolical and spiritual aspects of the clothing of East Greenland.

The relationship between clothing and identity has been an important topic of study in anthropology for more than twenty years (see Roach and Eicher 1965; Trevor-Roper 1983). Barnes and Eicher (1992) demonstrated the importance of clothing as a means of expressing norms and values connected with gender in ‘Dress and Gender, Making and Meaning’. In 1995, Joanne Eicher edited ‘Dress and Ethnicity, Change across Space and Time’, focusing on the relations between ethnic identity and clothing in several parts of the world. Arctic clothing has been extensively studied by Betty Issenman (1997a, 1997b), Jill Oakes (1988,1995), Lydia Black (1991), Judy Hall, Jill Oakes and Sally Qimmiu’naaq Webster (1994). Emil Rosing’s East Greenland amulet-study (1994) is par-

ticularly relevant to the study of clothing, since amulets were sewn onto coats, armlets and breast ornaments. Several studies have devoted attention to clothing and the expression of native identities in the Arctic (Svenson 1992; Issenman 1997b; Zorgdrager 1997). In 2000, recent developments in Arctic clothing were discussed at the Inuit Clothing Conference organized by the British Museum in London (see Paukstadt, at press). The development of festive dress in the context of Christian celebrations, notably baptism and marriage, have been discussed (see Anne Bahnson, at press; Buijs and M. Petersen, at press). Birgitte Sonne (at press) has studied the contextual aspects of *kamiit*, the Greenland sealskin boots. These comprehensive studies of clothing items examine details that are deeply rooted in Greenland culture, and explore the identities that are relevant to Inuit themselves in specific contexts and periods.

Identities are fluid, flexible and connected to ever changing contexts. The studies of clothing mentioned above have demonstrated that clothing is an excellent medium to express visually different relationships and identities. A white anorak worn in church during a wedding may be suited as a garment worn during a rite of passage, but that same anorak worn during the celebrations of Greenland national day may express a Greenlandic (national) identity. Age, gender, status and region, may all be expressed in the same garment and different aspects become relevant in different contexts. Functional specialization and social distinctiveness are combined in a variety of ways in clothing.

In this book, I assume that differences in clothing inform us about the social differences that mattered to the East Greenlanders themselves.

The aim of this research is to explore which identities were important to the Tunumiit (East Greenlanders), how they were expressed in their dress and how the developments in clothing reflect new identities in East Greenland.

In order to chart the various identities expressed in clothing, and the interplay between them, we need to study in detail the differences in clothing and the contexts in which they are used.³

Methods of research

The development of clothing in East Greenland has been studied over a period of 120 years.⁴ Research on the nineteenth-century clothing of East Greenland has been carried out by examining the clothing collections in the Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allaga (National Museum and Archives) of Nuuk, in the Tasiilaq Museum, in the National Museum in Copenhagen, and in the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden. These collections are a rich and valuable source for studies of material culture. The monographs by Thalbitzer and Holm (1914) on the spiritual and material culture of East Greenlanders are a source of inestimable value. These studies provide descriptions of many aspects of East Greenland culture at the time of the first contacts with Danes.⁵

Clothing of the first half of the twentieth century is housed in the Museon in The Hague (Tinbergen collection), the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (Victor and Gessain collection) and in the Tasiilaq Museum. These collections date from the 1930s, the period in which Dutch and French researchers were working in Tasiilaq. The Dutch meteorological expedition, of which Tinbergen was a supernumary member, was launched in 1932-33, the

International Polar year.⁶ Tinbergen and his co-member Van Lohuizen, collected ethnographical objects for the Museon in The Hague. Both Tinbergen and Van Zuylen, the leader of the meteorological expedition, took many photographs depicting clothing worn by the East Greenlanders. Jette Bang's photographs of the 1930s have been studied at the Arctic Institute in Copenhagen. Since these photograph collections reveal many clothing details, they have proved to be of great value for this research. The photographs from the 1930s show a remarkable discrepancy with the museum collections of the same period. Whereas garments collected by the museums were made of sealskin, the East Greenlanders on the photographs were already wearing many textiles in their dresses, skirts, anoraks, shirts and trousers. Clothing collections dating from the period 1965 to 1986 have been studied in the Museon in The Hague and in the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden.

Photographs of garments in these collections and of nineteenth-century garments from East Greenland have been shown to East Greenland informants in Tasiilaq and in Tiniteqilaq. Additional information was collected in open interviews, during my field-work. Modern clothing was studied by means of open interviews, participant observation, and by collecting new garments for the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden. Modern mail-order catalogues and catalogues issued by the Greenland firm 'Great Greenland', which produces 'designer' sealskin fashion, were a useful aid in conversations with East Greenland informants during my field research in East Greenland. The sewing workshop Skæven, the Tasiilaq Museum, the Tasiilaq Municipality, the Tourist Agency, local and regional shops and the Trading Company, all contributed to the research.

Although research methods were combined to gain as much as possible information, it was not always possible to collect sufficient information on many details of nineteenth-century clothing. The oldest women and men I interviewed were between 65 and 85 years old. They could not always provide many details, especially where religious and spiritual ideas connected with clothing were involved. According to Mariane Petersen of the Nunatta Katersugaasivia in Nuuk, who had the same experience, the people were educated and indoctrinated by Danish, and later on by West Greenland ministers.

"They simply wanted to forget. They wanted to be good Christians and to be modern and Danish, therefore they hesitated to talk about the old ways.

Only now is interest in the culture of the past increasing, when so much knowledge has been lost." (M. Petersen, personal communication 2002.)

It seems that the women anthropologists, who began their research on clothing in the last decades, asking for detailed information on clothing, came too late. Fortunately the ethnographic data collected by Holm and Thalbitzer provides a great deal of valuable information on pre-Christian ideas and values.

The museum collections and the photograph collections do not provide an even coverage of the period under study.⁷ There are gaps, especially in the periods 1910-1930 and 1940-1965. Clothing garments from these periods were missing from the museum collections, and were insufficiently represented in photographs. It was therefore difficult to trace, in any detail, changes in clothing during these periods. However, the available ethnographic collections and photograph collections were sufficiently rich to provide a

good grasp of the development of clothing in East Greenland in the twentieth century.

The organization of the book

In the first chapter, the traditional clothing dating from the period when Holm arrived at Ammassalik, is studied synchronically. The garments stem from one period in time. By analyzing and interpreting the clothing details mentioned and explained by older East Greenlanders, I discovered the identities that were relevant to the Tunumiit at the end of the nineteenth century. The data in this chapter are mainly structured in terms of the various stages of human life, from birth to death.

The second chapter deals with clothing of the first half of the twentieth century. The majority of the data stem from the 1930s, a period in which many foreigners, amongst them French, Dutch and Danish researchers, were conducting research in Ammassalik. Data on the clothing of the period 1900 to 1930 is almost completely lacking. In this period, textiles began to dominate the wardrobes of men, women and children. West Greenlandic clothing and European clothing were adopted, resulting in the partial disappearance of East Greenlandic clothing. New religious contexts connected with the Lutheran faith required new clothing habits in church. This chapter deals with the question of how traditional identities changed, and of which new identities developed. This chapter is structured according to the major changes in the society caused by the development of trade, Christianization, and new political structures.

The third chapter presents clothing developments in the second half of the twentieth century. Festive dress developed. Professional dress for workers in firms and institutions was introduced. New identities required new forms of clothing. Social identities from the past were reshaped, and gained new significance. Rites of passage are still important in East Greenland society. New political identities, nation building and the process of 'Greenlandization', have produced developments in Greenland national costume. The third chapter is structured according to major changes in East Greenland during this period.

In the final chapter the results of this research are presented.

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