Who are the Peoples of the Earth?

– Greenlandic Inuit Heritage at the National Museum of Denmark and the Future of Ethnographic Collections

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Introduction

In late December 2024, Europe was shaken by a statement of newly elected President Donald Trump declaring his aspiration yet again to acquire Greenland from Denmark.[1] Although problematic, President Trump's statements brought the question of Greenlandic independence back to the surface. In 2009 Greenland gained some independence through self-government, the island however remains a part of the Danish kingdom whose main heritage institutions still owns the largest collections of Greenlandic cultural heritage.[2]

The state-owned ethnographic collections of Europe trail back to the 19th century, created to stimulate westerners with depictions of the "strange" natives of "newly discovered" lands. Such an agenda also founded the Ethnographic Collection of the National Museum of Denmark, which houses a large collection of Greenlandic Inuit cultural heritage and curates the permanent exhibition called *Peoples of the Earth*. The portrayal and framing of non-European peoples in the exhibition reveal that contemporary ethnographic collections in many ways remain entrenched with a Eurocentric worldview. The colonial history and current relations between Denmark and Greenland are often downplayed or presented as benevolent or even positive, a case of Nordic exceptionalism.[3] Whereas colonialism used to be written out of the histories of Nordic nations, cases and processes of colonialism have gained more attention within current historical research.[4]

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[1] Ray Siladtiya, "Trump Says US Should Take Ownership Of Greenland And Threatens Panama Canal Takeover", *Forbes*, 23/12 2024.
[2] Marie Maegaard & Kristine Køhler Mortensen, "Colonial Labels and the Imagined Innocence of Past Times: Debating Language and Spatial Representations of the Danish/Greenlandic Relation", *Language in Society* 51(5), 2022, p. 775.
[3] Maegaard & Køhler Mortensen (2022), p. 776.
[4] See: *Historisk tidskrift* 140:3 published in 2020 themed Swedish Colonialism, Johan Höglund, and Linda Andersson Burnett, "Introduction: Nordic Colonialisms and Scandinavian Studies", *Scandinavian Studies* 91, no. 1–2 (2019), p. 1–12, a decade earlier *Itinerario* also published an issue themed Scandinavian Colonialism, vol 33:2, 2009.

Similarly, the growing field of critical cultural heritage studies have put more attention to the entrenched history of heritage and colonialism.[5] In this essay, the fundamental conflict between Western cultural heritage discourses, the role of ethnographic collections and the cultural representation of Greenlandic heritage is investigated.

The Colonization of Greenland and the Ethnographic Museum

Norse colonizers were present in Greenland during most of the Middle Ages up until the latter half of the 15th century. Modern day colonization originated in the 18th century with the expedition of Dano-Norwegian missionary Hans Egedes in 1721.[6] During the first half of the 19th century, Danish authorities engaged in processes aimed to civilize Greenlanders according to Western European standards and ideals of sophistication, primarily through educating groups and individuals in Copenhagen before returning them to Greenland as influencing agents.[7]

The civilizing project took on a different shape a couple of decades later, as it became clear that Inuit educated according to Danish customs had lost what the Danes deemed authentically Greenlandic upon their return. This resulted in a restructuring where the Danish authorities administered the Inuit in ways where they could manufacture and control what they deemed to be suitable Greenlandic cultural characteristics and aesthetic.[8] As the 19th century Europeans exotified and romanticized Inuit customs and aesthetics, they interpreted cultural change and mixing as loss of ideal Greenlandicness. The emphasis on preserving difference between Greenlandic and Danes was based upon assertions of European cultural superiority.[9] The history of Danish colonization policies reveal how discourses of indigeneity for long have been entrenched with ideas of otherness, European supremacy, exotification, authenticity, preservation and threats of eradication.

European fascination of ”exotic savages” was according to Danish heritage researcher Mille Gabriel the foundational basis of the creation of Ethnographic museums. These sites could offer a platform where European people could fantasize about the Other. Gabriel means that ”What, from a European perspective, characterized the Other was primitivism – a complete lack of civilization. They were perceived as curios, savages or less than human, as articulated within the

[5] See: Helaine Silverman, *Contested Cultural Heritage Religion, Nationalism, Erasure, and Exclusion in a Global World* (New York 2011); Jonas Monié Nordin & Carl-Gösta Ojala, “Kolonialt samlande i Sápmi”, *Historisk tidskrift* vol.140, no.3, 2020; Vivien Golding, *Learning at the Museum Frontiers: Identity, Race and Power* (Farnham 2009).
[6] Robert W. Rix, *The Vanished Settlers of Greenland: In Search of a Legend and Its Legacy* (Cambridge 2023), p. 1, 16, 20.
[7] Søren Rud, “A Correct Admixture: The Ambiguous Project of Civilising in Nineteenth-Century Greenland”, *Itinerario*, 33(2) (2009), p. 33.
[8] Rud 2009, p. 34.
[9] Rud 2009, p. 36, 21.

discourse of modernity".[10] The trend to exhibit and imagine exotic Others endorsed collecting as an intrinsic part of colonization all over the world. Much material culture of former colonies today remains at the various Ethnographic Museums of Europe. One such actor is The National Museum of Denmark, which was founded from the royal decree Royal Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities in 1807.[11] Originally, the purpose of the commission was to record and care for archeological findings. Historically and to this day a large portion of the museum's permanent exhibitions covers the chronological history of Denmark.[12]

Heritage and Identity

The Australian archaeologist Laurajane Smith defines heritage as a cultural and social process. This process produces acts of remembering the past to engage with the present. Heritage is not a thing with inherent or essential values or qualities, but a social construct.[13] Smith further defines heritage as a discourse where meaning, knowledge, ideologies and power relations are embedded within various uses of language and different mediums of storytelling. Heritage discourses are foundational regarding how we situate ourselves in space and time, and how we understand our world. These discourses usually entail and uphold certain naturalizing narratives containing contemporary presumptions and positions about culture and society. Smith argues that a Western discourse dominates heritage, which she calls the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD). She states that the AHD carries the legitimacy and power to define, select and put certain values upon heritage, as well as determine how it should be managed.[14]

Another aspect which Smith stresses is that heritage is used to construct, define, legitimize, maintain or negotiate identity.[15] As such, the AHD can be used as political and cultural tools of power. The public perception and understanding of Indigenous communities can to a large degree be constructed through the various narratives perpetuated at heritage sites, through the temporal and material authority of the AHD. Heritage thus forms a certain knowledge which regulates and governs identity. [16] Therefore, Indigenous Peoples have a lot at stake regarding the narrative surrounding and the presentation of their heritage.[17] When Indigenous Peoples are removed from control over their identity, symbols and cultural world, heritage can even work to delegitimize their

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[10] Mille Gabriel, "New Futures for Old Collections – Contemporary Collecting and Community Involvement at the National Museum of Denmark", *Museum & Society* 14(2) (2016), p. 275.
[11] Peter Rowley-Conwy, "The National Museum of Denmark 1807–2007", *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology* 17:2 (2007), p. 49. Danish name of the decree: *Kongelige Commission for Oldsagers Opbevaring.*
[12] Rowley-Conwy (2007), p. 51.
[13] Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Abingdon 2006), p. 3.
[14] Smith (2006), p. 4, 6.
[15] Smith (2006), p. 3, 52.
[16] Smith (2006), p. 52.
[17] Smith (2006), p. 277.

political struggles and territorial demands. Without self-definition, the struggle for self-determination is threatened.[18] This facet is crucial when approaching the exhibition in question; what identities are produced in it?

Who are the Peoples of the Earth?

Peoples of the Earth is a large exhibition owned and curated by the Ethnographic Collection of the National Museum of Denmark. It showcases a variety of non-European and Arctic objects divided into multiple rooms. *Peoples of the Earth* is the main site where this collection is presented to the public and is probably the largest ethnographic exhibition actor in Denmark.[19] The Arctic region has especially been a major field of study for the institution. Consequently, the exhibition is highly influential regarding the representation, narrative, identity construction and current political opinion of Arctic cultures, history and peoples.

But what does the title *Peoples of the Earth* mean? What is the purpose of the exhibition and what knowledge is it trying to convey? Although the museum offers no explanations as to why they have selected the specific regions, cultures and materials presented in the exhibition, all show-cased objects share two facets: 1. They are not perceived as being of European cultural origin in the mainstream understanding of what European heritage entails, 2. They have the look of being untouched by, and as such are not understood as being part of, a modern and Western material world. One part of the exhibition is designated to Arctic cultures, specifically Sami, Greenlandic Inuit and Siberian Indigenous Peoples. To analyze and problematize this part of the exhibition, I will take use of five of the nine general attributes of modern modes of ordering as described by the British sociologist John Law: materials, dualisms, boundary relations, agency and representation.[20]

Five Modes of Ordering

British heritage researcher Rodney Harrison defines materials as a mode of ordering which characterizes, compares or relates and evaluates things.[21] The selected Inuit objects are primarily objects of wood, stone, steel, skins, furs, bone and ivory. Most of them are objects which are not commonly seen as mainstream European historical objects, such as wooden snow-goggles or shamanistic drums. From a European perspective the chosen objects are exotic, different and archaic. As such, the visitor is given the idea that especially these objects represent Inuit culture, thus enhancing its otherness. Such a selection demonstrates what kind of Inuit culture is considered

[18] Smith (2006), p. 288.
[19] All info taken from the official website of the Ethnographic Collection.
[20] Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (Abingdon 2013), p. 30.
[21] Harrison (2013), p. 30.

valuable and representative of the Inuit from a European perspective. As these objects are placed within a larger exhibition of non-European artefacts, it also demonstrates that these are considered distinctively separate from European cultures.

Dualisms is a mode which suggests what distinctions, definitions and differences are introduced in the ordering of things.[22] The parts of Inuit culture which are highlighted are primarily animism, shamanism, magic, hunting and fishing. When entering one of the rooms, the first object we meet is a stuffed wolverine. The division between natural history and cultural history are often blurred considering Indigenous heritage, through portrayals of a primitive society more closely tied to nature than culture. Through framing Inuit within this chosen and idealized aesthetic, it upholds long-lived exotifying Western illusions and portrayals of Indigenous Peoples as magical, archaic and pure. Such portrayals are linked to archetypes of the *Noble Savage* or what the American anthropologist William Balée calls *Homo ecologicus*, "the idealized human species that is inherently custodial and nurturing of nonhuman nature".[23]

Boundary relations is a mode of ordering referring to how different sets of boundaries maintain a wider structure. A stark division is the boundary drawn in between the various permanent exhibitions of the museum. The other exhibitions represent the history of the West whereas *Peoples of the Earth* represent the rest. Such a worldview is a remnant from the Enlightenment, where other cultures and especially Indigenous Peoples are of the earth –nature and primitive – whereas Europeans are above the earth – culture and civilized. [24] The incorporation and mixing of different cultures create blurry boundary relations in between them. Focusing upon the Arctic rooms, the mixing of Siberian, Sami and Inuit cultures highlights how differences between Indigenous groups – ethnic, linguistic, geographic and cultural – are bypassed through communicating sameness. Although Greenlandic Inuit and Sami peoples surely share similar experiences regarding historical experiences and current political struggles, the structure of the exhibition diminishes individuality, differences and agency.

Harrison means that Western discourses of modernity normalize structuring according to linear timeframes, where history is a story bound by progress and development. The other permanent exhibitions of the museum present Danish cultural history through such a lineal timeframe of development. *Peoples of the Earth* is not given such a historical narrative. These cultures are presented through geographical and cultural divides, not temporal. It thus remains unclear whether the exhibition describes historical or contemporary phenomenon. They neither were nor are. As such, Indigenous cultures are communicated as something outside of time. European history is one of

[22] Harrison (2013), p. 30.
[23] William Balee & Clark Erickson, *Time, Complexity, and Historical Ecology* (New York 2006), p. 10.
[24] Smith (2006), p. 282.

continuously evolving civilization, where Indigenous history is entrenched within nature, passive and unchanging. Such ordering of presentation could be called *temporal exclusion*, something neither past nor present. Furthermore, Indigenous cultures are presented as something existing outside of context or influences. They don't form or can be formed by historical events and transformations and is thus not part of modernity. Smith calls this the essentialization of Indigenous culture, something statically traditional and unchanging.[25]

Inuit individuals are largely absent within the exhibition whilst many Danes are presented and named. In one portrait named *Inuit portrait* the Danish kidnapper, king and probable artist are named, whilst the four portrayed Inuit remain nameless. The mode of agency points to what asymmetrical models of power relationships are generated within certain modes of ordering. The exhibited artworks are Danish, such as photographs and videos shot, or paintings drawn by Danes. Inuit are portrayed within the exhibition, whilst Danes are represented, the former being a presentation of an esthetique picture, the latter an exhibition of individuals with agency. Another example is the many instances of Inuit clothing displayed with the hood up, creating a black hole where a face would normally be. The lack of names, faces and voices imagines an Inuit who is elusive and mystical, a European fantasy rather than an actual human being.

Western presentations of native culture presume certain roles and perspectives. The curator assumes the role of being other to that which is exhibited, a position they presumably share with the visitor. Such framing excludes the exhibited; they become neither the storyteller nor the listener, the two subjects within the act. Indigenous People can easily become objectified and othered or even alienated through these presumed and constructed perspectives.[26] The alienation is evident through the lack of Inuit subjects, further expressed through the facelessness and namelessness of the presented Inuit. Such problematic features fall under the mode of representation.[27] Although Indigenous culture is presented, the people primarily represented are the Danish experts and explorers, not the former owners and users of the objects exhibited. There are major political repercussions to consider when the Dane is framed as the authority of Greenlandic Inuit things. The Inuit become just another object of material culture, of which the expert Danes are the primary mediators and communicators. When the exhibition presents the Dane as most fitting to communicate culture, the museum legitimizes the idea that the Danish rather than the Inuit are more suitable to manage their cultural heritage and furthermore, their nation.

[25] Smith (2006), p. 294.
[26] Smith (2006), p. 284.
[27] Harrison (2013), p. 30.

Indigenous Heritage

Harrison defines heritage as something which appoints value to the past and its remnants through marking a distance to the present. When time is understood as progress, the past and its relics become threatened by modernity and at risk of oblivion and destruction. [28] A similar kind of thinking is produced in the exhibition *Peoples of the Earth*. As Indigenous cultures are influenced by the expanding industrialization, globalized capitalism and cultural homogenization, they are understood as disappearing. The Australian historian Tim Rowse holds that the category of indigeneity itself is a grouping generated through perceptions of vulnerability and risk.[29] The Australian anthropologist Francesca Merlan further states that perceived threats underscore the desire to preserve and conserve Indigenous culture.[30] The idea serves what Smith calls the *fossilization of culture*, the idea that culture can be frozen in time and promotes selected Indigenous heritage which Western actors deem to be authentic.[31] Indigenous Peoples are thus denied the prospect of cultural change. The criteria of tradition which is applied to Indigenous cultures makes it essentialized.[32] Such essentialization is upheld through heritage selection and presentation by European actors; they choose what they determine to be authentic. Such criteria limit different, fleeting and changing interpretations and modes of representation for Indigenous heritage, and hinders agency in terms of free identity expression.

On the other hand, the extermination and limitation of cultural expression has been and is to this day a reality for Indigenous communities. Indigenous groups have lost a great deal of cultural inheritance and collective memories due to European cultural hegemonization. The need and desire to "save what is left" is understandable in terms of such realities. As is the case of European guilt, the will to preserve and manage Indigenous heritage could be interpreted as ways to salvage and make up for historical atrocities. Where once Europeans took it upon themselves the authority to destroy, they now preserve and manage, instead of simply leaving handing over the authority to the Indigenous communities themselves.

The European need to essentialize and fossilize Indigenous culture could be a result of feelings of alienation within modern societies, and nostalgic dreams or escapist illusions of a simpler, pastoral past. The American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai means that especially modern societies experience a sense of nostalgia to a past they never experienced, due to experiences of societal crisis or turmoil.[33] The sense of nostalgia relates to Hobsbawm's concept of invented

[28] Harrison (2013), p. 26.
[29] Harrison (2013), p. 30–31.
[30] Harrison (2013), p. 30–31.
[31] Smith (2006) p. 295, 284.
[32] Smith (2006), p. 294.
[33] Silverman (2011) p. 112.

tradition, which he also places as a phenomenon within modernity. Rapid social and cultural transformations such as industrialization, ripped the connection between generations. Constructing seemingly ”old” traditions became a means to resolve such feelings of loss.[34] According to Appadurai, nostalgic illusions are individual but can easily take on a collective life, which he calls the collective imaginary, a landscape created by the collective through symbolism.[35] I argue that collective nostalgia born out of alienation could be the foundational basis of the European constructed image of Indigenous culture as seen in *Peoples of the Earth*. The modern European life is understood as desperately individualistic, without enchantment and alienated from nature. Consequently, a culture of magic, nature and collectiveness symbolizes a lost past. Indigenous culture becomes a sort of escapism for the European, but also a solace, a reassurance that not all magic has been lost to modernity.

The Future of Ethnographic Museums

Ethnographic exhibitions like *Peoples of the Earth* are today in a state of conflict. The colonial past and present, unjust ways of collecting or stealing objects and Eurocentric perspectives make up the foundational structures of these institutions. Do they still have a place in contemporary society? The National Museum of Denmark has taken steps to try to remedy these problematic foundations, usually motivated through outside pressures. Greenlandic communities first demand of repatriation occurred over a century ago. Since the 1980s, the Ethnographic Collection have been involved in the creation of a Greenlandic archive, National Museum (*Nunatta Katersugaasivia*) and the repatriation of 35 000 archeological and ethnographic artefacts. This process is known as *Utimut*.[36] According to Gabriel, ”the two national museums today possess collections of equal importance”, although 100, 000 items still remain in Denmark, an amount considerably larger than the one in Greenland.[37] As heritage institutions already are at place, it is surprising that Greenlandic cultural actors are not in charge over the greatest bulk of Greenlandic material heritage. Gabriel states that the *Utimut*-process is known worldwide as an example of successful cooperation.[38] The Ethnographic Collection holds that the repatriation-process was so ”amicable” largely due to the Greenlandic side agreeing as to how heritage should be managed and conserved due to having been influenced by Danish customs and values. One considered contributing factor to the success was that the Greenlandic Museum curators were mostly of Danish origin or had been educated in

[34] Eric Hobsbawm & Terrance Ranger (eds.), *The invention of tradition*, Canto ed., (Cambridge 1992), p. 13.
[35] Silverman (2011), p. 112.
[36] *Utimut* means ”return” or ”come home” in Greenlandic; Gabriel (2016), p. 277; Gabriel (2009), p. 30–31; The repatriation process was conducted between 1982–2001.
[37] Gabriel (2009), p. 33.
[38] Gabriel (2009), p. 34.

Danish universities.[39] Such perspectives reveal how the Ethnographic Collection still hold a paternalistic attitude towards Greenlandic communities. They are willing to share the management of Greenlandic heritage when it is kept according to their preferred AHD.

The downplaying of Danish colonialism within the exhibition is concerning and reveals ignorance regarding the museum's position towards Greenlandic heritage. The presentation of Greenlandic culture as devoid of political conflict and colonized relationships serves to mute and hide Danish imperialism and Greenlandic struggles of independence. Smith states that through the regulation of the cultural legitimacy regarding Indigenous identity, knowledge and meaning is generated which are intricately tied to claims of sovereignty, land and resources.[40] In the current situation, Greenlandic heritage is thus both a potential resource for struggles of independence and a tool of colonial rule.[41]

Many of the objects sold, given to or stolen by the Europeans were not considered heritage before they came into their new owner's possession. The selection process attaches new symbolism, meaning and value to its selected vessel.[42] Europeans selected certain Inuit objects due to multiple different attributes which in their eyes made them eligible to become heritage, or be heritagized.[43] Heritage was and is a category of thing of European origin and carries certain values within that context. If the heritagization is inherently European, and as such part of a colonization process, must then the things be unheritagized when repatriated, and if not, how autonomous or free from European grasp can they really become?

Lastly, ethnographic museums today were first founded to enable Europeans to have a glimpse of other cultures. Today, we see and interact with cultures across the globe in multiple ways: through movies, photographs, art, the internet and traveling to name a few. We have a much more detailed and complex grasp of the different peoples of the earth, which we can gain outside the walls of a museum. Could such transformations mean that ethnographic collections and museums have played out their role? And if not, could such institutions transform into sites where cultural exchange, collaboration and conflict are expressed and debated? Maybe the museum shouldn't own the peoples of the earth, but the peoples of the earth should own the museum.

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[39] Gabriel (2009), p. 34.
[40] Smith (2006), p. 50.
[41] Smith (2006), p. 296.
[42] Smith (2006), p. 3.
[43] Helena Wangefelt Ström, *Lighting candles before a headless Jesus: sacred heritage, heritagized sacredness, and the many journeys between categories* (Umeå 2022), p. 23.

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