Museum collection decolonization and indigenous cultural heritage in an island community: East Greenland and the 'Roots 2 Share' Photo Project

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ABSTRACT: The Roots 2 Share project, a collaboration between two Dutch and two Greenlandic museums, was established to share museum collections and photographs housed in the Netherlands with the Tunumiit people of East Greenland. The Tunumiit regard the collections in the Netherlands as belonging to their cultural heritage, yet the Dutch maintain authority over the collections, leading to imbalanced power relations. This unequal relationship has its basis in museums' colonial pasts and hinders the sharing and exchange of cultural heritage. As an island, Greenland is often regarded as the periphery in contrast to mainland centres of Denmark. Physical and cultural distance, as well as a power imbalance, prevent the Tunumiit of East Greenland from reconnecting with museum collections containing their own indigenous cultural heritage. The Roots 2 Share project was set up using the internet to overcome this distance, exploring new possibilities and techniques for providing access and giving indigenous communities a voice. New means of open communication, sharing authority, cooperation and exchange, and providing space for alternative stories may facilitate a decolonization of museum collections in island communities.

Keywords: decolonization, East Greenland, indigenous cultural heritage, island community, museum collection

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Introduction

This article takes an island studies perspective to explore the decolonization of museum collections, and it problematizes the treatment of such collections as 'cultural heritage' by societies that can only indirectly be regarded as 'inheritors' of the objects in question. How can questions of ownership over cultural objects be negotiated in complex systems of centre-periphery, mainland-island, colonizer-colonized relationships? The East Greenland photo collections in Dutch museums, built up during a colonial period, serve as a case study. In light of these analyses, the paper presents new ways in which cooperating with the Tunumiit source community in East Greenland can make the collections available through visual repatriation.

Key to the decolonization of museum collections is an understanding of the phenomenon of colonialism. According to Chilisa (2012, p. 9),

Colonization, defined as the subjugation of one group by another … was a brutal process through which two thirds of the world experienced invasion and loss of territory accompanied by the destruction of political, social, and economic systems, leading to external political control and economic dependence on the West.

The colonial process created ideas about the west and the rest, and these othering ideologies work to "marginalize and suppress knowledge systems and ways of knowing of the historical colonized" (Chilisa, 2012, p. 9). Suppression (and repression) was intrinsic to colonialism and went hand in hand with cultural loss. During the nineteenth century, indigenous cultures were thought doomed to disappear due to genocide and assimilation, and so was their traditional material culture (Chilisa, 2012; Clifford, 1997, 2013; Lonetree, 2012, pp. 9-11; Sahlins, 1999).

Embedded in all this were conceptions of centre and periphery. Museums developed during the nation-building process and are firmly rooted in the colonial period, with their dedication to collecting in the centre vanishing material culture from the periphery. The majority of these museum collections stem from remote colonies. The museum collections we deal with in this paper derive from the island of Greenland, a former colony of Denmark. More specifically, they derive from the Tunumiit people living in the remote town of Tasiilaq, situated in East Greenland. For a detailed description of Tasiilaq, now part of Sermersooq Municipality, see Dzik (2015).

Peripheral cultural heritage in island communities

Isolated island communities are often associated with the periphery, and East Greenland is in some senses doubly peripheral. As Grydehøj (2014, p. 205) points out,

> Islands are regarded as somehow 'more real' and 'authentic' than other areas. Key here is the idea of the island as something peripheral to and different from the mainland, with the result that common island associations – even positive ones – have an othering effect.

Colonial conceptualizations of the Greenlander as a 'noble savage' serve both to flatter the colonizer's self-perceptions of benevolent paternalism and establish rigid dichotomies between colonizer and colonized (Grydehøj, 2016). Anthropologist James Clifford (2013, p. 52) reflects upon the relationships between what he calls 'edge' and 'center', wondering "how we should conceive of an expansive indigenous region: a 'Native Pacific'" before continuing,

> I always think of Black Elk, the Sioux Shaman and Catholic catechist travelling as a young man with Buffalo Bill in Paris. … Black Elk says something like: "Harney Peaks (in the North Dakota Badlands) is the center of the world. And wherever you are can be the centre of the world." (Clifford, 2013, p. 52; see also Sahlins, 1999, p. xviii.)

Although Greenlanders also address their country as remote and peripheral in contrast to Denmark (which is actually a small country compared to, for example, America), they typify Nuuk as Greenland's 'centre'. The question immediately arises as to whether notions of centre and periphery or mainland and island are not just a matter of scale, position, context and perception. It is even more problematic to emphasize Leiden, location of the Dutch museum collections at the centre of the present article, as the centre (making the Netherlands the mainland). Grydehøj (2014, p. 208) problematizes the concepts even more by stating that,

> Islandness is not a marker of peripherality when the land is close to impassible. In transport terms, the sea is easier to master than the inland ice … One is constantly being told, by both Greenlanders and Danes, that Nuuk … is not authentically Greenlandic. Nuuk, from this perspective, cannot be Greenland's centre, for it is hardly Greenlandic at all [being Danicized or modern].

These contrasting notions, such as island versus mainland and centre versus periphery, developed during the colonization process. As a result of this 'othering' attitude, western knowledge creates difference, setting itself as a norm and other knowledge systems as inferior. This occurred within Greenland, where Tunumiit (East Greenlanders), with whom we deal in this paper, are sometimes looked down upon by other Greenlanders.

The process of cultivating island status is sometimes related to cultivating one's cultural heritage. As Ronström (2008, p. 2) convincingly argues, "'islanding' is a process closely related to heritagization." All of this leads to museum collections that contain and frame cultural heritage and that thereby take the form of 'authenticating identity machines' that represent 'other' cultures. At the same time, the embrace of an 'other' culture as globalized world heritage can disempower and alienate the traditional inheritors of cultural objects (Ronström, 2008). Due to a power imbalance between museum institutions (the centres) and local communities (at the periphery, if one wishes to address them as such), access to and ownership over community cultural heritage is limited and problematic. Greenland's island status, the remoteness of its source community relative to this community's cultural heritage in the Netherlands, the differences in power, and the strong feelings of belonging and relatedness to ancestors depicted in the photographic museum objects make it highly relevant to find means of reconnecting museum collections to their communities through the internet.

In the postcolonial era, many former colonies are rethinking their history and reshaping their relationships with the former colonizing countries.[1] Greenlandic social anthropologist Aviâja Egede Lynge (2006) explains that it is crucial to re-envision colonial history within Greenland, in order to gain an understanding of Greenlandic identity and nationalism,

> We have always been taught we were one of the best colonies in the world. No slavery, no killings. We learned it through Danish history books, and from Danish teachers. With the books telling us how fantastic a colony we were – books about primitive Eskimos, books written from Euro-centric, economic, or self-justifying angles – we haven't really looked beyond this historical oppression ... We went directly from being a colony into becoming a part of Denmark. We learned to be Danish and we learned to be thankful. Why, then, should we have had a reason to decolonize? And why should we have a reason to ask questions about the 250 years of colonial presence?

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[1] The colonization of Greenland is beyond the scope of this article. For information on this topic see Jenness (1967), Thuesen (1988), Lyck (1992), Nutall (1992), Vaughan (1994), Petersen (1995), Jacobsen et al. (1996), Langgård (2010), Heinrich (2012), and Hendriksen (2013).

Furthermore, Naja Dyrendom Graugaard (2009, p. 2) reflects upon the colonial,

> From my experience, Danish national narratives ignore Denmark's history as a colonial power and its consequences. For example, when I was taught about colonialism in primary and secondary school, I mainly learned about the colonial empires of Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Spain. However, little was said about Denmark's role as a colonial exploiter in Greenland, Iceland, the Faeroe Islands, the West Indies, India and Africa.

This holds true for the Dutch situation related to Indonesia.[2] It turns out to be very difficult for countries to reflect on their role in the colonial process. From the colonial perspective, protection, (financial) support, development and modernization are stressed, whereas the (former) colony focuses on inequality, paternalism, dominance and control (Arke, 2010; Graugaard, 2009; Heinrich, 2012; Hendriksen, 2013; Lynge, 2008; Petersen, 1995). Greenland has many reasons to reflect on its past, including its connections to old museum collections housed in the Netherlands. In 2006, Terto Kreutzmann, a social scientist from Greenland, visited the archives in Leiden to study the Greenlandic clothing collection. She reminded us that,

> Our Inuit religion and cosmology became taboo since Christianity was introduced, and we are no longer talking about it. This means a loss of history and identity. However, our culture is a whole one. We Greenlanders today have too little knowledge about our history, about our lives, why it is like it is today … We are colonized, so we are Europeans now, but we are feeling that we miss part of our culture (Terto Kreutzmann, filmed interview, 2006.).

Within a museum context, representation is also a disputed issue. During Greenland's colonial period, for instance, photographs depicting Greenlandic life were mainly taken by outsiders (colonizers, administrators, photographers and anthropologists) in specific circumstances. In many cases, we do not know the conditions in which they were produced. A further issue is that stereotypical images are being reproduced repeatedly, thus repeating embodied colonial forms of representation. In present-day museum practice, however, photographs are often 'returned' to the source communities, to the people depicted or to their descendants. Experience with this practice reveals that photographs of deceased relatives are frequently more important to their descendants than to the museums in which they are stored. Furthermore, for most indigenous peoples, it appears that both the image as image and its availability − having access to the picture of a beloved relative or unknown ancestor − is more important than the precise way in which the person is depicted or the original material that was used (Buijs, 2013, p. 102; see also Banta & Hinsley, 1986; Edwards, 2001; Peers & Brown, 2006).

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[2] The Dutch military actions in Indonesia, for example, were first denied and later on softened as 'military actions' instead of addressing this period as a colonial war. In 2011, excuses were made by the Dutch prime minister to the widows of Indonesians killed by Dutch violence. Reconciliation or an overall reflection from the side of the government on the Dutch impact in Indonesia does not prevail. See also Smith (2012, pp. 1-10). The Rijksmuseum now has a tour focusing on colonial history with a very critical take on this period, and the Tropenmuseum is also working on decolonizing.

Repatriation and ownership of cultural heritage

Most museum collections of artifacts and photographs from indigenous peoples around the world were gathered during the colonial era, and the major museums in Europe were established in the nation-building period. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, evolutionary theories inspired by the German *Kulturkreise* ('cultural field') dominated museum studies in Europe. Cultures were thought to evolve from 'primitive' (also typified as peripheral) to 'complex' industrial societies (centre). This type of theory ignored the unique ways in which indigenous peoples perceive their own cultures. The paradigm of development is a western concept, which is projected onto cultural 'others'. Yet these ethnographic collections – kept in storage and photographic archives – remain difficult for the indigenous peoples themselves to access. In essence, this means that the people from whom the material culture originated and whose ancestors form the bulk of the portraits (the 'source community') have been alienated from their own heritage (Van Broekhoven & Buijs, 2010; Brown & Peers, 2006; Buijs & Rosing Jakobsen, 2011; Clifford, 2013; Glass, 2015, p. 20; Karp & Levin, p. 1992; Peers, 2010; Peers & Brown, 2003; Phillips, 2003; Smith, 2012, pp. 2-4, 23ff, 49ff). While access to and ownership of these cultural collections has been the focus of much debate, these collections predominantly continue to be held by museums on the basis of a range of arguments, varying from technical conditions to audience attractiveness. At the core of these arguments is the belief, as Smith (2012, p. 92) argues, that museum collections stem from "trading practices, which are framed by the western juridical system … The relationships involved are presumed two-way transactions." The problem though, as Smith goes on to argue, is that "from indigenous perspectives, their possessions were stolen" (ibid.).

Indigenous communities might feel that these objects were stolen, but that does not necessarily mean that they are able to prove theft. Not all claims for repatriation rest on theft and looting. Repatriation is also requested for honestly collected objects, sacred and religious objects, and "objects that matter" to the community's history and identity (Clifford, 2013; Golding & Modest, 2015; Onciul, 2015). That said, the means by which collectors and museums obtained sacred and religious objects remains a matter of special dispute (Sullivan et al., 2000). An increasing number of indigenous peoples are now calling upon external cultural institutions to return parts of their collections or information about these collections. At the very least, these communities want access to the artifacts and knowledge their ancestors shared with the original collectors.

Museums have become increasingly aware of their responsibility to prevent the illegal trade of ancient artifacts on the world market. In the 1960s and 1970s, the debate began with concerns over looting and led to several important UNESCO conventions on illegal trade in human remains, cultural property and intangible heritage.[3] The UNESCO convention does not

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[3] In 1970, UNESCO ratified the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (UNESCO 1970). This was a turning point in policies on the purchase of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage can be defined as "an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values. Cultural Heritage is often expressed as either Intangible or Tangible Cultural Heritage" (ICOMOS, 2002). I use the term 'intangibility' here for things that are not touchable or connected to material objects, such as storytelling, knowledge, native languages, songs, and indigenous norms and values (see Kurin, 2013). The UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects passed in 1995. Unfortunately, this has yet to be ratified by several European countries, the United States, and the Netherlands in particular. See also Thorleifsen, (2010, p. 83).

apply to legal and fair trade, and the distinction between illegal and legal trade has not always been clear-cut. Cultural heritage can be legally acquired and still subject to disputed claims of ownership. In the original colonial context, there may have been respect for principles of fairness and legality that were considered appropriate at the time but no longer are. In recent times, the indigenous peoples of Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia have been at the vanguard of re-examining scientific research on the basis of political and ethical principles. Their efforts have resulted in dialogue with indigenous peoples around the world, interaction between academic institutions and source communities, and development of collaboration by those parties. In the United States, protection of ancient burial grounds led to the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, which has resulted in repatriation of many Aboriginal human remains and associated artifacts as well as sacred objects (e.g. Clifford, 2013; Lonetree, 2012, p. 12; Phillips, 2003; Silverman, 2015, p. 7; Sullivan et al. 2000). Yet relatively few cultural heritage objects – including photographs – have been affected, since most fall outside the purview of this legislation.

Figure 1: Vitus Kajangmat tells his story of the polar bear hunt upon his arrival in Diilerilaaq in 1967. Paulus Jonathansen is on the right.

Source: Gerti Nooter, Museon no. 10229-33_2.

The originals of photographs – the negatives – are seldom repatriated for use by the source community. More often, scanned images return, and the terms 'visual repatriation' and 'virtual repatriation' are used, although the term 'digital transfer' may be more appropriate (Bohaker, Corbiere, & Phillips, 2015; Buijs & Rosing Jakobsen, 2011; Glass, 2015, p. 6; Morphy, 2015; Shannon, 2015; Veerman & Buijs, 2012).

For a long time, European academics sought to steer clear of the debate on repatriation and heritage protection in European countries, following the American examples.[4] Today, scholars are acknowledging that they must become involved in these debates (e.g. Gabriel & Dahl, 2008; Renfrew, 2000; Scholten, 2010). Denmark, as a former colonial power, and Greenland, as a former colony, have shared a political relationship since 1721. In the last few decades, this relationship has developed into a more equal and respectful one of cooperation. As a result, Denmark returned 35,000 objects to Greenland during the 1980s and 1990s; the last objects were returned in 2001 (Bouchenaki, 2004, p. II; Lynge, 2008; Rosing & Pentz, 2004, p. 29; Rosing Jakobsen, 2010, p. 78; Thorleifsen, 2010, pp. 87-88). In this respect, Dutch museums have lagged behind, although collections were repatriated to Indonesia in the 1990s and repatriation of human remains to Papua New Guinea has been realized.

Collections from Greenland in the Netherlands

Issues of access are perhaps especially acute for remote island communities. The costs of travelling from the island of Greenland prevent access to the collections abroad. Due to its island characteristics, Greenland can be seen as a localized periphery, whereas the cooperation project (Roots 2 Share) discussed in this article is managed from a (power) centre and in a sense represents a global phenomenon. The Roots 2 Share project was set up between the Netherlands and Greenland to provide local connectedness with cultural heritage in a context where it is difficult (expensive) to overcome distance. To whom does this heritage 'belong'? To the Dutch museum audience or to the inheritors of these collections in Greenland? What do these photo collections mean, and what kind of ethics are involved? As a product of cross-cultural interactions, the photographs depict the ancestors of present-day Tunumiit and carry multiple meanings: ethnological and/or exotic meanings for most of the audience outside of East Greenland (including a Dutch public) versus historical or ancestral meanings for the Tunumiit.

Because the old photograph collections in Leiden hold a special meaning to East Greenlandic people, the National Museum of Greenland in Nuuk, the Ammassalik Museum in Tasiilaq, the Museon in The Hague, and the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden started the Roots 2 Share project, a partnership to share the East Greenlandic photo collections housed in museums in the Netherlands. The project uses the internet to give a voice to the Tunumiit of East Greenland by connecting them to objects of their cultural heritage held far away in museums in the Netherlands. Forgotten knowledge has been re-membered, and fragments of the past have been given new life (Silverman, 2015, p. 5; Clifford, 2013, pp. 261ff.). Central to this project has been the process of sharing, not only of collections but also of authority in order to overcome the existing power imbalance and to create an atmosphere of openness, democracy and decolonization.

The Netherlands holds 11,000 images (photographs and color slides) from East Greenland, taken by the Dutch anthropologist Gerti Nooter and his wife Noortje.[5] Nooter was

[4] The Smithsonian Institution and the Museum of the American Indian in Washington are important frontrunners in working with source communities and developing a set of guidelines. The work of Ann Fienup-Riordan (2005) with museums, collections, and source communities in Alaska can be seen as an example of best practice.
[5] For detailed information on the Arctic collections in the Netherlands, see Buijs (2010; 2013) and Buijs and Jakobsen (2011). In 2015 the National Museum of Ethnology (Museum Volkenkunde) in Leiden, the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal merged. The new name of this institute is National Museum of World Cultures, which holds some 375,000 objects and a million photographic images.

a curator at the Museon (the former Museum of Education) in The Hague from 1960 to 1970 and was curator of the Native American and Arctic collections in the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden from 1970 to 1990. He conducted fieldwork in East Greenland between 1965 and 1990. Nooter combined anthropological research with collecting, resulting in the rich collections of Inuit objects and photographs in The Hague and Leiden.[6] Nooter focused on the hunting village of Diilerilaaq in East Greenland, to which he made eight field trips, including a one-year stay in 1967-1968 with his wife and their three children. At the time, the life and culture of the Diilerilaamiit was still based on a subsistence economy of seal hunting and fishing.

Nooter conducted research on continuity and changes in material culture (especially kayaks and hunting equipment), subsistence economy, authority patterns and changing social-political structures and published his results. At the time, East Greenlandic Inuit society was changing rapidly due to Danish colonization, modernization, centralization, the introduction of money, and industrialization. Western influence and modernization were influencing material culture. Nooter was neither motivated by 'salvage anthropology' nor did he describe East Greenland as a disappearing culture. In his view, culture was an ever-changing, adapting, and transforming phenomenon. Nooter's collections and the many photographs he took remain a valuable source of information and are now – together with the 1930 collections – considered as cultural heritage by the Tunumiit (Buijs, 2006; 2013; Buijs & Rosing Jakobsen, 2011; Veerman & Buijs, 2011).

Figure 2: **Gerti Nooter pulling a Greenlandic family at Sermilik Fjord, East Greenland.**

Source: Noortje Nooter 1967, National Museum of Ethnology, no. 67042045_2.

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[6] Part of the Nooter photograph collection, with focus on the 1960s and 1970s, as well as earlier collections from the 1930s by Jacob van Zuylen and the 1970s photographer Ko de Korte, can be retrieved from www.roots2share.gl.

Figure 3: Youngsters of the village of Diilerilaaq are playing the guitar, 1967. Among them are Paulus and Thomasine Larsen.

Source: Gerti Nooter, Museon no. 10233-52_2.

The Roots 2 Share project

In 2010, the Roots 2 Share visual repatriation project was officially launched, after a period of preparation in which the photographs taken in Greenland by the Nooters proved to be of great value for the Tunumiit. They considered them part of their personal, family and regional histories, as well as important documents of their culture and identity. To overcome the great distance between Greenland and the Netherlands, we decided to explore the possibilities of the internet. The website www.roots2share.gl was developed, hosted by the Museon in The Hague.[7] Many of the Nooter photographs have been scanned and given back virtually to the communities from which they originated and from which they can now be accessed.

The Roots 2 Share website was built to give access to more than 4,000 photographs and slides from East Greenland. Internet connections are very limited in East Greenland, and technical problems in the Tasiilaq area are considerable. Often the schools and villages are disconnected from the internet for weeks. Yet many Greenlanders have their own websites and are active on Facebook. Because there are so many photographs in Dutch institutions, a website is the most appropriate way of delivering them to the source community. The website is built according to the principles of the creative commons.

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[7] The Museon, former Museum of Education, The Hague, is a municipal museum. It is not exclusively specialized in anthropology but also holds historical, geological and biological collections. From East Greenland, the Tinbergen collection 1933-1934 and part of the Nooter collection 1965-1968 are housed here. See www.museon.nl.

Facilities for using four languages (Danish, English, West Greenlandic and East Greenlandic/ Tunumiisut as a regional language) were added. The descriptions from the museum archives are also translated into these languages, although there is still a lot of work to be done. People can log in, and it is possible to enter the website via a Facebook account. Greenlanders can decide which information or stories are the most important for them to add to the photographs in their own language, and people can reflect upon each other's comments (Buijs, 2010; 2013, pp. 127-128; Buijs & Rosing Jakobsen, 2011, p. 179; Veerman & Buijs, 2012). The decision to add Tunumiisut as a website language was made by five East Greenlandic consultants during their visit to the Netherlands in 2010. Initially, some of them wished to opt only for Greenland's official languages, i.e. West Greenlandic and Danish. They discussed the status of the East Greenlandic language and its continuing lack of fixed spelling but decided that the opportunity to use their own language was the most important issue, as is evident in the statement below,

> Now we have the chance to use our own language, since it is a Dutch initiative. If we wait, we will never have the website translated into Tunumiisut. The photographs are from our region, it is our own culture, then we should also use our own language. (Gideon Qeqe, Amsterdam, 2010.)

In May 2011, we introduced the website to the source communities in East Greenland. Carl-Erik Holm, director of the Ammassalik Museum, arranged for an introduction in the museum including coffee, tea, and lots of biscuits and sweets (based on the national tradition of *kaffemik*). Community consultation meetings were held in the *kaatersortapik* (community hall) in the village of Diilerilaaq. Using a laptop computer and a projector, we introduced a stand-alone version of the website and showed about 900 photographs. For research purposes, we filmed the feedback from the audience. Afterwards we visited some of the families at their homes to gather additional information on and stories about the photographs, with the local assistance of Kaaleeraq Larsen, a young hunter of 22 (with a Facebook account). The stories can be read (in East Greenlandic) on the website (Buijs & Rosing Jakobsen, 2011, p. 179; Veerman & Buijs, 2012). Responses from the community were largely positive. During one of the meetings, Paulus Larsen, a local youth coordinator and previously our guest in The Netherlands, took the lead. As a result, many of the older visitors stepped forward to tell their stories to their own people, thereby gradually taking their fair share of 'ownership' in the project. We left a laptop with a stand-alone version of the website in the village and left another one with the museum in Tasiilaq. The unreliable and expensive internet service in the village is still a challenge (Buijs & Rosing Jakobsen, 2011, p.179; Veerman & Buijs, 2012).

A school program was developed for the project by Diederik Veerman, curator at the Museon. In 2011, we paid inspiring visits to the higher classes (pupils aged 15-16) of the high school in the district capital of Tasiilaq. In January 2012, nine school children and two teachers visited the Netherlands and donated their handmade art objects to the museum in Leiden, where they made an exhibition with the children's art. The pupils were inspired by Tunumiit collections around the world, which they retrieved via the museum websites, following the lead of their art teacher Anne Mette Holm. In the winter of 2012/2013, the curator of the Leiden museum revisited the area for an update on the project and visited the school in Kulusuk. Again, Anne Mette Holm was the teacher in charge of Roots 2 Share.

Figure 4: Aartjan Nooter (left), Hans Jonathansen (middle), and Kaaleeraq Larsen (right), installing a Roots 2 Share laptop in Diilerilaaq, 2011.

Source: Cunera Buijs.

Figure 5: Pupils at Kulusuk School, making art and handicrafts.

Source: Anne Mette Holm, 2010.

Figure 6: Pupils and teacher Anne Mette Holm, showing their art at Kulusuk School, 2011.

Source: Kulusuk School.

Some of the pupils were amazed by what the pictures showed them ("Did they really butcher seals right there in the kitchen?"). For others, the sight of the photos produced unexpected and emotional experiences. For example, a pupil from Tasiilaq Alivarpik (School) chose one of our photographs to take home. Upon seeing this photograph, her mother told her that the girl's father, who had died when his daughter was four years old, was depicted in the photograph. The daughter had no memory of her father, since she was too young when he passed away. One can imagine that the family was delighted to have an image of this deceased ancestor. The pupils were instructed to interview their elders and record the narratives on easy-to-handle sound recorders. In addition, they were taught to transcribe the spoken words to paper, translate the texts into English and upload them to the website. Anna Kuitse Kuko, teacher and vice director of Tasiilaq's regional school, visited the elderly people in their homes together with her pupils. They interviewed their elders, some of whom were the pupils' grandparents, thus connecting the generations in a new way. Anne Kuitse Kuko incorporated use of photographs in storytelling and essay writing into the schools' curriculum. The way in which we deal with photographs today over the internet means that these images not only connect to the past but also fit into the present, and connection to Facebook may lead to participation from the younger generation (Buijs, 2013, p. 137; Veerman & Buijs, 2011).

Figure 7: Photo workshop with pupils from the high school in Tasiilaq during the Roots 2 Share project, 2011.

Source: Diederik Veerman, Museon.

The practice of visual repatriation in East Greenland

It is not easy to repatriate photographs to an isolated island community with limited internet facilities. According to Carl Erik Holm, director of the Ammassalik Museum,

> In the beginning, it was difficult getting access through the firewall of the municipality. The web-speed was too slow, so many features did not work properly and sometimes the photos appeared in a mosaic. In East Greenland the internet is not only slow, but also expensive. When we started [the project] the entire upload/down load rate was 8 Mbit for the entire municipality-employees in the Ammassalik District.[8] The registration with user accounts and passwords may be an obstacle. These technical difficulties may have reduced the interest in the Roots2Shasre website (Holm & Buijs, 2015).

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[8] Holm: "As a comparison, my father in Copenhagen has a standard connection of 20 Mbit."

Therefore, a laptop with a standalone version was donated to the Ammassalik Museum and to the local village of Diilerilaaq. Furthermore, at the Ammassalik Museum locals have access to the website for free. Carl Erik Holm explains further that digital repatriation is an advantage with respect to storage and conservation,

> It is not only the space, but also the storage qualities. In the Ammassalik Museum there are approximately 3000 photographs which are in envelopes, albums and on slides and it is a matter of [expensive] resources to do something with this material … One picture says more than a 1000 words, but we want 1000 words to a picture. The East Greenlandic population has developed a spoken culture based on oral history. Yet, it provides the opportunity for the East Greenlanders to decide what to write (or not to write) and this gives the people a voice. (Holm & Buijs, 2015.)

It is no longer the anthropologist who decides, selects, translates and reformulates the content. This creates multivocality, multiple interpretations and layered information. This method may stimulate self-reflection and be a learning process that creates new perspectives. Smith (2012, p. 115) stresses the importance of storytelling: "The storyteller rather than the researcher retains control. Storytelling invokes shared understanding of history." Holm also addresses privacy and other ethical aspects of the Roots 2 Share project and reminds us that,

> In East Greenland, many people do not have much money. And who would spend maybe 10 percent of the available income on internet? This means that we do not reach the poorest people of society (Holm & Buijs, 2015).

We also had to deal with the costs and the organization of translations into the different languages used on the website. The Museon in The Hague was responsible for the English translations (Diederik Veerman). Besides the Danish (Carl Erik Holm), it turned out to be very important to have a native speaker of West Greenlandic (Aviâja Rosing Jakobsen) connected to the project. One of the project organizers speaks the local Tunumiit language to some extent (Cunera Buijs). This facilitated communication with the local translator in East Greenland (Isak Kristiansen). In such a project, it is important for participants to use their native language since the knowledge is locally rooted, based on the local culture and connected to individuals and their families. The museums still have serious problems implementing into their organizations such a visual repatriation project on a structural basis and often need to work with volunteers. The participating museums have until now been unable to upload more than 780 photographs onto the project's website due to technical problems and management constraints.

Repatriating images in digital format or as paper copies is not the same as bringing back original negatives or the historical first-printed photographs, which remain in the Netherlands.[9] Nevertheless, the Tunumiit people reacted emotionally and positively to this initiative (Buijs & Rosing Jakobsen, 2011; Veerman & Buijs, 2011; see also Johnson, 2010; Smith, 2008; Sullivan, 2000). During the visit by the Greenland consultants to the Netherlands, Thomasine Tarkissimat found herself confronted by the image of her deceased

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[9] The question as to what 'originals' and 'physical photographs' mean relative to virtual images is beyond the scope of this article. See the work of Edwards and Hart (2004) for a discussion of images as objects.

twin sister. Thomasine was deeply moved, approached the image on the wall, and touched it lovingly, reminding herself of her dear sister. For her, it was the 'image' (of her sister) that made the difference, not the material medium of the photograph. Access to the images and the ability to print them on paper seems to be more important than owning or taking part in the conservation of the originals, although claims in that direction may develop in the future.

Since the start of our project, East Greenlanders have been able to add information to the collections of photographs taken in East Greenland and housed in Dutch museums. Because of the Roots 2 Share website, they are now less dependent on museum anthropologists for selections and contextual information related to the images. Greenlanders reflect upon life in the past, retrieving photographs of their ancestors or perhaps of their younger selves. Information that they might add is different from information narrated by the ancestors in the past and different from the academic discourse. Stories from Greenlanders and those from Europeans have different levels of connectedness. It is this connectedness that makes the newly added texts authentic on their own premises (Buijs, 2013; Thisted, 2002). Their responses can teach us many things. Over two decades of regularly showing 'old' photographs to the people in East Greenland, I have noticed that Tunumiit react strongly and often very emotionally to the sight of members of past generations, their deceased relatives. Looking at the images together often gave people immense joy. In 2009, Otto Larsen saw one of the Nooter photos depicting his father, and he began to narrate,

> I would like to talk about my ancestors. My great-grandfather was named Umeerineq. His Christian name was Lars, and his son was my grandfather, Otto. Otto had a son, my father Mikkel, and I am his son. My name is Otto, just as my grandfather. This photograph reminds me of a drum dance. But I have never heard my father sing or perform a drum dance. My father was excellent in telling stories, also funny ones. When we were young, he always took out jokes. Such good story tellers with whom we grew up, we miss them when they pass away. Therefore my father told his children: tell my stories when I am gone, so that these stories will remain. … When I start to narrate, I see my father before my eyes. And still every day we miss his stories. (Otto Larsen, Diilerilaaq, 2009).

For the Tunumiit, kinship relations and daily lives are neither accentuated nor valorized as 'special'. Even so, looking at photographs taken over forty years ago in their village is a unique experience.

Figure 8: Hunters transport a motor boat on a dog sledge during a hunting trip in East Greenland, 1982.

Source: Gerti Nooter, National Museum of Ethnology no. 10270-1.

Towards decolonization of museum collections

Greenland's island status and the high travel expenses involved in getting there and away cause a notion of remoteness, which is an oft-stressed characteristic of island communities. In a sense, Greenland is peripheral, and its relative isolation causes disconnectedness from objects of Greenlandic cultural heritage housed in faraway museums. Although there is no direct colonial relationship between East Greenland and the Netherlands, there is nonetheless a power imbalance regarding control of and access to the Tunumiit collections. Denmark and Greenland have a long history together and much experience in repatriation of museum collections. Not so long ago, the aim – from the Greenlandic side – was to repatriate globally as many collections as possible to Greenland. This was not an attempt to undo the colonization but rather a phase in the decolonization process (cf. Chilisa, 2012, pp. 15-17).

The legal owners of the photo collections are museums, which often claim the collection as part of their own institutional histories or part of the histories of their countries. The development of trade, whaling, and so forth may be considered part of European history and may thus give European countries 'ownership' over objects in the collections. One could argue that by choosing virtual repatriation and not an actual transfer of photographs, the Dutch museums have made no real changes to proprietary rights. Nonetheless, through the Roots 2 Share website, the Tunumiit community has gained real authority over and 'ownership' of its

cultural heritage, since a selection of 'its' photographs is now accessible, and the community can now decide what information it wishes to add in its own language.

Again, the contrast between centre and periphery, island and mainland (Smith, 2012, pp. 101ff) comes to the fore. According to Chilisa (2012, p. 56), however, "The [western] diffusionism ideology enabled the division of the world into binary opposites of inside/ outside, centre/ periphery, colonizer/ colonized and first world/ third world." These notions may sometimes be unfamiliar to indigenous peoples, yet they have influenced them. When the West takes over their possessions and relabels them as 'world culture', indigenous peoples feel the necessity of claiming and protecting their heritage. The process of globalization created a counter movement of localization. The open access of (digital) collections is today disputed by indigenous peoples, which often opt for a form of cultural protectionism (Chilisa, 2012; Morphy, 2015).

Ruth Phillips (2003, p. 155) argues that museums are very much rooted in their own society and must work with several and various stakeholders. This influences the museum process,

> The museum responds to political processes, like cultural pluralism, decolonization and globalization, but also to the changing relationship between museums and societies within which they operate. On the one hand, the communities to choose to partner with museums have often been marginalized and/or exoticized by the museum's traditional state and private sponsors. On the other hand, by validating knowledge produced according to diverse cultural traditions, museums contribute to the erosion of modernist universal values in which these sponsors have been invested. (also Coombes & Phillips, 2015, p. xxxiii, Karp et al., 1992)

Phillips (2003, p. 163, p. 166) continues that today's museum practice includes two models related to exhibition making. I am of the opinion that these models can also be applied to cooperation projects with source communities. (1) The multi-vocal exhibition model provides multiple perspectives and ensures that the voices of curators, scholars, and indigenous people are all present. (2) In community-based projects, the curator's role is that of a facilitator at the service of community members. Some of the museum's authority is transferred to the community. "Narratives, stories and performances are often the result of such processes" (Phillips, 2003, p. 166; also Lonetree, 2012, p. 21; Clifford, 2013, pp. 256ff).

In her evaluation of four American museums and their recent exhibitions based on community collaboration, Amy Lonetree (2012) argues that institutions such as the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC, the Smithsonian Institute, the Canadian Museum Association, and the Assembly of Fist Nations Task Force[10] are at the vanguard of community collaboration and that European museums are still lagging behind. This shows that the colonial past must be addressed properly and in a clear-cut manner in order to overcome the overwhelming trauma of colonialism, genocide, theft of land, looting of ancestral human remains from cemeteries, *etc.* New partnerships are crucial in this process (Clifford 2013, pp. 36ff, 46; Lonetree, 2012, pp. 10-17; Sahlins, 1999, p. ii.). As Phillips (2003, p. 162) notes,

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[10] There are several other excellent cases of community collaboration. See Brown and Peers (2006), Clifford (2013, pp. 9, 223, 225, 281; Crowell et al., 2001).

> The power of museum objects and archival photographs is that they can stimulate memories suppressed by assimilationism [often as part of colonialism], and modernization become ever more apparent.

According to Lonetree, during the preparation process at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), the focus shifted from a pan-tribal viewpoint to a more tribal philosophy. In 1999, Bruce Bernstein and Graig Howe (Lakota), respectively assistant director and deputy director for cultural resources at the NMAI at the time, developed guiding principles for the exhibitions to come and defined the following focus, which might be a good example for other decolonization projects,

> Community: Our Tribes Are Sovereign Nations
> Locality: This Is Indian Land
> Vitality: We Are Here Now
> Viewpoint: We Know The World Differently
> Voices: These Are Our Stories
> (qtd. in Lonetree 2012, pp. 92ff.)

And so, ancient objects and historical photographs gain a 'second life' (Clifford, 2013, pp. 261ff). The emphasis is shifting towards 'the museum as process' (and less as a product) (Silverman, 2015), and the arena in which the more egalitarian and decolonizing cooperation projects operate becomes a 'contact zone' (Clifford, 1997). Clifford has borrowed the term 'contact zone' from Mary Louise Pratt, who defines it as,

> the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relationships, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict (Pratt, qtd. in Clifford, 1997, p. 192).

These relationships are unequal, and authority still rests with the museums. Even the terms 'relationship' and 'reciprocity' are appreciated or translated differently; within different cultures they have different meanings. These encounters can address disputed matters, claims of ownership, disruptive histories, traumas of the past and examples of (cultural) loss. Onciul et al. (2015, p. 83) thus claim that 'contact zones' should instead be interpreted as 'engagement zones', which "emphasize the agency of participants and the potential of power fluctuations despite inequalities in power relations."

Let us return to the Roots 2 Share project. Indigenous peoples often protest against misinterpretations and mistakes by anthropologists, against stereotypical images of their culture, and against their continual reproduction (Smith, 2012, pp. 35ff). In order to gain greater understanding of the different interpretations, multivocalities, and contested meanings (instead of a single truth), the museums in Leiden and The Hague, in cooperation with local counterparts in Greenland, created the www.roots2share.gl platform for digital storytelling in the local languages. "Stories," as Chilisa (2012, p. 138) argues, "are central to the lives [and socialization] of the Colonized Other." By using the local language, which few westerners master, the people create their own local space on the internet. In a sense, on the internet, they have their own centre. Yet the website is still managed from outside of Greenland. This

reminds us of Ronström's statement: "New types of the past have been staged by new types of people, for new types of markets and consumers'" (Ronström, 2008, p. 5). At least, the people can now tell their own stories without intervention by foreign anthropologists, in their own words without being misinterpreted. In 2016, the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, as part of the merged National Museum of World Cultures, continues to invite young indigenous activists, scientists and artists to criticize the exhibitions and assist the curatorial and educational team in rewriting their own cultural histories presented in the museum. Their critical texts are now on display in uncensored form in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. This is another attempt towards decolonizing museum collections.

The Roots 2 Share project has characteristics of both models distinguished by Ruth Phillips (2003, p. 163, p. 166). Roots 2 Share is community-based and multivocal as it decenters photographs in favor of narratives, stories, and performances in the community hall and in the classroom. Roots 2 Share provides space for contrasting voices, opinions and perspectives in changing contexts. Some of the curators' authority has been transferred to the local community. The project (travelling exhibition, school workshops and website) provides access to forgotten cultural heritage, re-members and re-connects through e-patriation. Roots 2 Share is a contact zone – and perhaps an engagement zone – when conflicting values are discussed in the space it creates. It is co-produced with the community to certain limits, notably involving the fact that the technical arrangements and equipment are mainly in the hands of the museums in the Netherlands. Moreover, not all participating museums are equally aware of the importance of shared authority and decision-making with the local community. Nevertheless, the project may lead to a limited and modest decolonization process related to Tunumiit cultural heritage and may lead to increased democracy via multivocality. As Onciul (2015, p. 94) articulates, "Community engagement with museums holds the potential to gradually change the society that frames current power relations, enable cross-cultural understanding and move towards wider empowerment of Indigenous peoples."

If museums succeed in decolonizing their collections and exhibitions and transferring authority from the centre to the periphery, then they can, according to Lonetree (2012, p. 173), change themselves from sites of oppression to "sites of revitalization and autonomy" and to "places that matter." The sharing of collections and provision of indigenous peoples with a voice can benefit all parties involved and help create relationships of mutual respect. It will hopefully help to overcome the 'us and them' dichotomy and end the process of 'othering', bringing the centre and the periphery, the island and the mainland, a bit closer together. It is a first step in paving the way for indigenous peoples to represent themselves.

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