

BEHIND THE MASK

Counternarratives in John Møller's Photographs from Greenland, 1889-1922.

By:

Nanna V. H. Emtoft

History



ABSTRACT: The first Greenlandic photographer, John Møller, produced over 3000 images in the period 1889-1922. This article seeks to analyse and contextualise selected images from Møller's practice. In doing so, the article explores the photographer's agency on composition choices, power dynamics and colonial hierarchies. Furthermore, the article suggests that Møller, through counternarratives in his visual representations, unveils nuanced reflections of power dynamics and a subtle critique and resistance that served to undermine the Danish colonial authority in Greenland.

KEYWORDS: colonial photography, photographic event, colonial hierarchies, resistance, Nuuk, carnival, Denmark



Introduction

Photography held a key role in the 19th and 20th centuries in producing colonial knowledge about Greenland to the metropole in Denmark and the rest of the world (Sandbye 2016: 66). Stereotypical images of the Greenlandic landscape and people captivated by European explorers thus forged and expanded the colonial project in the Arctic colony. John Møller, who was born in 1867 in Nuuk, became the first Greenlandic photographer and created over 3000 images in the period 1889-1922 (Høvik 2021: 81). But what did the first Greenlandic photographer, John Møller, see when he pointed the lens back at the Danish colonisers in this transformative period? As part of a Greenlandic elite in Nuuk, questions of how Møller's role in the colonial hierarchy was reflected in these images arise. Was he merely a loyal colonial agent as the historian Jørgen Viemose defined the Greenlandic elite (Viemose 1977: 47)? Or did he use his photographic practice to act out resistance?

In the following article I seek to answer these questions by analysing photographs taken by John Møller — recently published by the contemporary Greenlandic photographer Inuuteq Storch. By contextualising the images and considering the specific *photographic events* in which these visual representations of life in Nuuk were captivated, I argue that Møller's photographs, situated in and around a Danish carnival tradition, provided both strong and subtle counternarratives to the Danish colonial project. The last two images dealt with in this article are captured by Møller in other parts of Greenland. By analysing these images, I argue that Møller exposes a more violent reality of the Danish colonial project in his broader practice. I furthermore argue that Møller reveals ambiguous feelings towards his own role in the Greenlandic elite, as he was forced to navigate between European ideals of western modernity and Greenlandic traditions.

Historiography

Photography in colonial settings served varied purposes, documenting everything from extreme violence to daily life, portraying both colonisers, colonised people and landscapes. This has led to many different and diverse scholarly approaches, across multiple fields. While anthropologists, art historians and historians alike slowly found new interests in colonial photography in the 1980s, a visual turn in the

1990s generated new work and approaches (Edwards 2022: 1). Edward Said's theories in his groundbreaking book *Orientalism* from 1978 involving the (mis)representation of the "other" and the shaping of European identity, sparked new interest in looking at photos of colonised people, not just as remains of a colonial past but as discursive objects of colonial knowledge and identity (Poole 1997: 218). With the growing field of postcolonial studies and digitalisation of images at the turn of the millennium, new scholarly interests grew in colonial photography. Elizabeth Edwards, among others, ascribes this interest as the visual turn (Edwards 1997: 1). Now, scholars of colonial photography started to question the Saidan approach of understanding colonial images exclusively as a reflection of the coloniser's agency and identity. With the visual turn scholars allowed themselves to view colonial images as a result of what anthropologist Christopher Pinney calls a *photographic event* where negotiation between the subject and the photographer takes place (Pinney 2003: 10). The focus on the colonised's agency through the negotiations in the specific *photographic event* has created important alternative methods of analysing counternarratives in colonial photographs – shifting focus from the colonisers' narratives to the colonised counternarratives of agency and resistance.

The unique position of John Møller as a colonial subject producing images in a colonial time and space, is especially interesting as most colonial photographs were produced by Europeans. Despite this unique perspective in colonial photography, in-depth academic interests in John Møller's photographs and life are scarce. Until recently the sole scholar who dealt with Møller's life and photography was the Danish anthropologist Inge Kleivan, who primarily focused on a biographical account of his life and practice (Kleivan 1996). In more recent years art historian Ingeborg Høvik has extended the scholarly interest in Møller by including an analytical approach to his images. Høvik argues that a subtle reclaiming and formation of Greenlandic identity was created in Møller's work (Høvik 2016: 166). She furthermore argues that his work contributed to a modern understanding of Greenlandic culture in Scandinavia (Høvik 2021: 97).

The work of John Møller has recently sparked new interest outside of the academic world. In 2021, Greenlandic artist Inuuteq Storch released *Mirrored*, a book featuring photographs by Møller that were previously unseen by the public. Despite Storch's intentions of stressing Møller's agency in the art history

of Greenland, the book *Mirrored* has been criticised for its lack of context in its depiction of Danish colonisers. Anna M. Geilas argues that “Møller’s Photographs run the risk of resembling colonial constructions of personal national identities” (Geilas 2021: 313). These images thus calls for both a contextualisation and an analysis of the visual representation and counternarratives presented in *Mirrored*. This will be attempted in this article by including a broader understanding of the colonial project in Greenland that historians like Søren Rud so thoroughly describes. Lastly, a more concrete contextualisation of John Møller’s life will be based on G.N. Bugge’s accounts of life in Nuuk in “Koloniliv i Godthåb 1902-1914” from 1970. As a child of the colonial manager in Nuuk, Bugge grew up in the Danish administrative elite and both lived close to and knew John Møller personally, which is described in his account.

Sources and the *Photographic Event*

A special category of Møller’s photographs caught my eye when first looking through his black and white images. These photographs were primarily taken of Danish families and couples, who were dressed in costumes. Besides being different from the 19th century and early 20th century’s more formal portraits, which were also a part of Møller’s practice, these images are interesting because they reveal hints of special events and traditions for the Danish society in Nuuk. These images are rarely dated and details of the event in which the photographs were captured are scarce. The costumes thus become indications of events more easily pinpointed in time and space.

When studying this category of Møller’s photographs, questions of the potential dialogue between photographer and subject – and thus questions of the specific *photographic event* – occur (Pinney, 2003, 10). Why were these costume parties so important for the Danish colonisers, that they had Møller take several photographs of them through time? What narratives did the Danes in Nuuk wish to portray? And lastly, were these the same narratives that Møller wished to portray, or did he push for counternarratives challenging the peaceful portrayal of Danish colonialism in Greenland that was inherent during and following this period (Høvik 2016: 168)?

These questions revolve around the notion that the photograph should be seen as an event. I see the photographs as the results of a *photographic event*, where the photographer and the models negotiate power and agency over the constructed image and what they wish to portray. In some instances, the agency of model and photographer align, whereas in other instances they differentiate. I argue that these points of dissonance between the different agencies can create a potential for Møller to subtly criticise and mock the Danish colonisers – which could create a counternarrative of indigenous reality that has the possibility to undermine the inherent colonial power relations.¹

Lastly, two photographs have been chosen that depict both Greenlanders and Danes but without any costumes. This makes it hard to tell exactly why or where the photographs were taken, but by investigating these specific *photographic events* I seek to show that Møller's resistance, through counternarratives of Greenlandic identity, is not just applicable at these costume parties but was a broader theme in Møller's photographic practice.

John Møller's Life and the Colonial Landscape

By the second half of the 19th century new colonial reforms were implemented in Greenland to ensure fundamental changes in colonial society (Rud 2017: 33). These reforms were created due to a critique created in the metropole of the colonial administration (Thisted 2021: 12). By giving certain Greenlanders local administrative influence, a new social landscape was created, which constituted a shift from the previous colonial administration's focus on profit-making to a new political rationale, that sought to change the "character of individual Greenlanders" (Rud 2017: 34). To use Foucauldian phrasing; a growing interest in creating self-governing colonial individuals raised the question of the education of Greenlanders in the 19th century (Ibid., 61). By educating certain Greenlandic men, a new Greenlandic elite in Nuuk was formed. These men who were chosen to be educated in both Greenland and Denmark were based on the category "Blandinger" or mixtures – this referencing their mixed

¹ The notion of agency is understood based on Henry John Dewal's definition of the term, neatly described in his article "Mami Wata and Santa Marta: Imag(in)ing Selves and Others in Africa and Americas" from 2002: "By 'agency' I mean the instrumentality of creating one's reality – the process of turning aspirations into practices and product." (Drewal 2002: 193) The discussion of Møller's agency will therefore be seen as a reflection of his reality created in the presented images.

ethnicity of both Greenlandic and Danish heritage (Ibid., 57). The education of this particular group was focused on western epistemology and what the colonial administration deemed to be important ideals of traditional Greenlandic culture, such as seal hunting and kayaking (Marquardt et. al. 2019: 176). The new education was thus heavily influenced by an ethnographic discourse that sought to impose limitations within a project of assimilation between the Greenlandic men in the newly formed social group and the Danish elite (Rud 2017: 55).

John Møller was born into this newly transformed social landscape in Nuuk in 1867 (Kleivan 1996:1). His father Lars Møller was the editor of the first Greenlandic newspaper *Atuagagdlitutit* and known amongst the Danes and the Greenlanders as a man who eagerly debated cultural and political aspects of Greenland (Ibid., 3). John Møller was thus born into a well-regarded and respected Greenlandic family. In Bugge's written memories of Nuuk, a description of the homes of Nuuk shows that the Danish elite lived among themselves separated from where the Greenlanders lived. Interestingly, the home of the Møller family was located close to the colonial manager's house, which informs us that John Møller grew up in the Danish part of Nuuk, close to the Danish elite (Bugge 1970: 2). Growing up in the cultural Greenlandic elite allowed John Møller to travel to Denmark to acquire an education in typography to become editor of *Atuagagdlitutit* (Kleivan 1996: 4). While living in Copenhagen for almost one and a half years, Møller found a growing interest in photography which led him to become the first Greenlandic photographer (Ibid.).

Upon his return to Greenland in 1889, Møller started working for his father while also opening Nuuk's first photography studio *Godthaabs fotografiske Anstalt* (Ibid., 5). In 1901, Møller was chosen as a member of local and national councils thus being placed both in the cultural and political elite of Nuuk (Høvik 2016: 167). From Bugge's account, John Møller often visited the colonial manager's home with his father and brother. In the description of Møller, he is both mentioned as a good photographer with good skills of the Danish language and a good hunter (Bugge 1970: 22). This account shows what aspects of Møller's personality were deemed important by the Danes, such as Bugge – “civilised” with knowledge of the Danish language made him agreeable to the Danes, while also being good at more traditional

Greenlandic skills like hunting. As a member of the Greenlandic elite, he was measured on his assimilated skills and his more traditional skills.

The photographs that Møller took were primarily in Nuuk. The costume parties that Møller photographed, and which are given great attention in this article, are described by Bugge in his account of the colonial life in Nuuk. The costume parties were part of the Carnival celebrations that became a tradition in Nuuk around the turn of the 20th century (Ibid., 16). The Carnival celebration was attended by the five Danish families that lived in Nuuk at the time, and a few chosen men from this newly formed Greenlandic elite (Ibid.). The first photograph in Figure 1, is an image of one of these events depicting both Greenlanders and Danes who took part in the carnival.



Figure 1: Carnival ²

² John, Møller 2021: *Mirrored – John Møller*. Inuuteq Storch (ed.), Roulette Russe, Copenhagen, p. 44-45.

Carnival: An event of performativity and ambiguity

The Greenlandic and Danish models in the image appear to be equal and participate in the same kind of fun play or dress-up game. The image depicts a majority of Danes and a minority of Greenlandic men. When looking closer, details of a less harmonious setting tend to reveal themselves. First, it is important to highlight how most of the people in the frame glance in different directions. There are only three men who look directly into the lens. The fact that the majority of the people are looking at more or less the same points either to the left or right of the frame suggests that John Møller had a clear artistic vision and control over the composition. The three men who are looking at the camera are firstly, a man dressed up as the clown *Pierrot* who is situated directly in the middle of the photograph. Secondly, there is a Danish man on the left whose head and body are slightly tilted. Lastly, a Greenlandic man on the right is looking directly into the lens, and like *Pierrot*, his body is also facing the camera. Observing the posture of the Danish man, mentioned above, who aside from his gaze is slightly turned to the right, the onlooker senses that he too was meant to look away like most of the other models —thereby setting him apart from the Greenlandic man and *Pierrot*, both of whom face forward. When focusing on this Greenlandic man and *Pierrot* the onlooker gets a sense that the man from Greenland is standing behind the clown to mimic his pose. The Greenlandic man could thus be interpreted as some sort of reflection or shadow of the clown who is placed centrally in the photograph.

By centralising *Pierrot* in the frame surrounded by people, it is tempting to draw parallels to the 18th century French rococo artist Jean-Antoine Watteau who painted several paintings depicting *Pierrot*. Watteau's paintings usually put *Pierrot* in the centre of the painting, looking directly at the viewer. The clown in the paintings is often surrounded by people who, like Møller's photographs, are glancing in all other directions. In the article "Why so sad? Watteau's Pierrots" from 2016 the art historian Judy Sund argues that Watteau's placement of *Pierrot* in the centre looking directly at the viewer makes *Pierrot* "[...]both physically and psychologically distanced from his fellow actors, who continue to act and emote as *Pierrot* turns away from the performance to look out of the fiction and into the viewer's world." (Sund 2016: 331). Placing *Pierrot* at the centre and having him gaze directly into the camera punctures the illusion of the constructed image. This seemingly deliberate act by the clown breaks the fourth wall,

drawing the onlooker's attention to the artificial and staged nature of what appears to be a harmonious group scene. By psychologically separating the clown from the rest of the image, Møller potentially conveys a suggestion: the deliberate distance may serve to signify that the depiction of equality between Greenlanders and Danes in a harmonious setting is, in fact, a performative and fictitious portrayal.

I would argue that there is a likelihood of Møller knowing and referencing Watteau's paintings. First of all, the posing in Møller's photograph, as discussed above, is very similar to the poses in the many paintings of *Pierrot* by Watteau. Secondly, Møller's educated background in Denmark in photography makes it more than plausible that he had an understanding and interest in European art history. His brother was furthermore a painter which could indicate that Møller came from a background and upbringing where art was a big component of his life.

When looking at Møller's photograph it is evident that *Pierrot* is not only psychologically distant from the group, but also physically distant from the other adults. *Pierrot* is surrounded by a cluster of children who depict various degrees of emotion. To his right, a girl closes her eyes and covers her ears seeking to block out the scene. Similarly, on the left side of the clown, a boy shuts his eyes. These innocent children seem to be attempting to shut off their sight and block out sound from what then appears as an unsettling scene. One could argue that Møller aims to dismantle the notion of harmony and equality within the event. This is hinted at by the discomfort evident in the children's emotions and *Pierrot*'s disruption of the fourth wall, suggesting the performative nature, and perhaps even absurdity, of the carnival depicted.

As a child growing up in Nuuk, Bugge enthusiastically describes the carnival that became a tradition in colonial town. In contrast to the rigid class society in Nuuk, the carnival was one of the few days a year, when the Greenlanders and Danes came together to celebrate the passing of the long winter (Bugge 1970: 16). But what we also know from Bugge's account is that the Greenlanders who were allowed to partake in these carnival celebrations were carefully chosen from the higher-educated population of Greenlanders (Ibid.). It was therefore the Danish settlers who had the power to create the rules of who was allowed to be in these seemingly innocent festivities. This social gathering could be interpreted as a means for the Danes to establish and navigate social hierarchies. In doing so, they define the indigenous elite while simultaneously excluding and creating distance between the majority of the Greenlandic population and

the Danish elite. As Ann Laura Stoler and Fredrick Cooper calls *Grammar of difference* in the anthology *Tensions of Empire* from 1997 in which; “[...] The otherness of colonised persons was neither inherent nor stable; his or her difference had to be defined and maintained.” (Cooper & Stoler 1997: 7). At its core, the carnival embodies a space of cultural expression and performance. However, within the colonial framework, it takes on new layers of meaning. It becomes an event where colonisers can assert a sense of dominance over the indigenous population as the mark of a difference between the Danish elite and the Greenlandic people. The photograph is evidence of Møller documenting and co-producing images of harmony and equality between the indigenous elite and the Danish settlers. However, by depicting the event as both tense and performative, Møller’s image suggests a deeper, critical perspective on the complexities and tensions inherent in the relationship between these two groups.



Figure 2: Mortensen and Bang-Jensen in carnival costumes³

³ Møller, *Mirrored – John Møller*, p. 29.



Figure 3: Hedvig Bugge with her two daughters⁴

⁴ Møller, *Mirrored – John Møller*, p. 222.



Figure 4: Konrad Olsen Bugge and Hedvig Bugge in carnival costumes⁵

⁵ Møller, *Mirrored – John Møller*, p. 207.

Outside the Frame

Like figure 1, the models in the following images (figure 2-4) are also dressed in costumes. In contrast to figure 1, these images feature exclusively Danish models in their homes. The photographs thus function as family portraits rather than as communal group images.

What is striking in all three photographs is the likeness of composition. Not only are the three images of Danes dressed up in their homes, but a mirror is also present in all three photographs. The composition in figure 2 is rather strange compared to a classic family portrait. One would usually expect the models to be in the centre of the image showing what is most important – the people being photographed. In the image, the couple is slightly posing to the right of the frame giving way to a mirror hanging on the left in the frame. This composition indicates that Møller carefully made sure that the mirror was included in the photograph, while also diminishing the importance of the models as they are not directly centred in the image. In figure 3 and 4, the mirror is also present, acting as part of the background.

The placement of the mirror has the ability to show what is outside of the frame such as the photographer. I would argue that the mirror functions in the same way as *Pierrot* does in figure 1; both serve as means to draw the viewer's attention from the performance of the image to the onlooker's and the photographer's world. The mirror's lack of reflection implies that Møller deliberately chose to leave himself out of the photograph. The mirror thus functions as a way of both distancing himself from the image and, at the same time, spreading awareness of his presence in the room.

A deliberate withdrawal from the image could be read as Møller's way of exercising what Homi Bhabha calls *Sly Civility*. The Indian cultural theorist Bhabha introduces *Sly Civility* as a term in his book *The Location of Culture* from 1994 to explain a subtle defiance by colonial subjects that challenges and undermines the colonial authority's hegemony of power (Bhabha 2004: 141). By placing himself outside of the frame, but including the possibility of his presence, Møller implies that he could be in the image but that he chooses not to. This suggests an act of *Sly Civility* of him withdrawing from the Danish models

and their picturesque home, and hereby undermining the agency of the models and what they wished to portray.⁶

If Møller were reflected in the mirror, a strong contrast between the photographer and the performativity of the dressed-up Danes would reveal itself. But instead of showing a clear dichotomy between himself and the Danes, Møller alludes to a more ambiguous relationship with the Danish colonisers. Bugge's account informs us that Møller lived close to the Danish elite and that he was friendly with them. But the Danes were also extremely critical of the Greenlandic elite, seeing them not as truly civilised people, but merely colonial subjects attempting to mimic European culture (Rud 2017: 177). Being part of the Greenlandic elite, Møller has the opportunity of being led into the homes of the Danes, but the lack of his own reflection in the mirror refers to the fact that he does not see himself there. Møller, seemingly within the frame of their world, also dwells just outside it. He is both an insider and an outsider, constantly navigating societal perceptions, personal identity, and the colonial dynamics in the Nuuk society.

Costumes of Dominance

As already argued, the carnival celebrations had the possibility of strengthening the colonial dominance over the colonised and also drawing up lines between who was worthy and who was not in partaking in the celebrations. The event could therefore be seen as a way for the Danish elite to define themselves by defining *the others*. Some of the costumes worn in the photographs and to the carnival events are very interesting. I will argue that costumes were worn as displays and emblems of colonial power and racial authority.

Figure 4 shows Konrad Olsen Bugge and Hedvig Bugge – the parents of G.N Bugge. Konrad Olsen Bugge worked as the colonial manager of Nuuk from 1903-1922 (Bugge 1970: 1). Wearing costumes and masks, the couple is photographed in what seems to be their home in Nuuk. From G.N Bugge's

⁶ Using the phrase picturesque homes, I am referencing Gary D. Sampson and his article "Unmasking the colonial Picturesque: Samuel Bourne's Photographs of Barrackpore Park." from 2002. He argues that colonisers created picturesque images to (re)produce colonial authority. The agency of the danish coloniser's could thus be read as an attempt to portray a danish picturesque home as a way to enforce danish dominance and control in the colony.

written memory of life in Nuuk, a communal photograph, with Konrad Olsen Bugge in the same costume, tells us that this photograph was possibly taken in February 1909 (Bugge 1970:16). The peculiar costume worn by Bugge is described by his son as “Den Store Bastian” (The Great Bastian), a character from the 19th century popular tale by the same name. “Den store Bastian” is a man who dipped naughty boys in ink to make their skin black (Weinrich 2020). As seen in the photograph Bugge is holding a large inkwell with a quill to show the character's way of sentencing children to what could be described as a racialised punishment. This costume is especially interesting within this article's framework of regarding the carnival event as a subtle but significant act, by the Danish colonisers, of excluding and defining Greenlandic identity. As argued, the deliberate inclusion of the Greenlandic elite in such an event can be interpreted as a strategic move by the colonisers to reinforce the newly established class hierarchy. However, this inclusion of the Greenlandic elite also creates potential challenges as the complete assimilation of the Greenlandic elite into the Danish elite could pose a threat to the Danish colonial dominance in Greenland. The interconnectedness of these elites might dilute the inherent power dynamics, blurring the *Grammar of difference* between the Danes and Greenlanders – thus risking a loss of control over the colonised. The choice of the costume worn by Bugge, depicting The Great Bastian and his ability to alter the skin colour of young boys, could thus serve as a potent reminder to the Greenlandic elite of the colonisers' authority and their ability to use racialisation as a tool of domination. This costume could thus function as a way of reinforcing the underlying power dynamics, reminding the Greenlandic elite of their boundaries within the colonial structure and the colonisers' ultimate control.



Figure 5: Peter Rosing with his fiancé in carnival costumes⁷

Bugge's costume was not the only one worn by the Danes to a carnival that could be interpreted as a display of power and authority. Figure 5 is a photograph of Peter Rosing and his fiancé dressed as native Americans. This costume can be read as a different strategy in portraying colonial power than Bugge's

⁷ Møller, *Mirrored*—John Møller, p. 96.

costume. Through the deliberate choice of dressing as native Americans, these costumes redirect the viewer's focus towards a broader picture of colonial dominance and representation. This act of assuming the attire of another indigenous culture could therefore be read as an attempt to exoticise and homogenise non-Western cultures. In doing so the costumes, shown in both figure 4 and 5, can be seen as attempts by the Danes to create a dichotomy of coloniser and colonised. In the context of the carnival, this could function as a way of reinforcing colonial domination by creating a contrast between Danes and 'the other', a larger non-Western category, in a space where this dichotomy was not at its most obvious state.

By adopting the clothes associated with another indigenous culture, the Danes emphasise the divide between those who hold power and those subjected to that power. By considering such a reading, Møller's photographs could thus function as a testimony to the unsteady relations of colonial power. These visual representations can therefore be read as Møller's own attempt to expose ways in which the Danes wished to reinforce their colonial authority, thus making it clear that the colonial authority is neither stable nor static. Through his lens, these photographs serve as a portrayal of the instability and the vulnerability of the colonisers' authority, thus creating a subtle counternarrative to the Danish self-portrayal of stable and harmonious colonial dominance.



Figure 6: Rasmussen, carpenter, and Marie Kreutzmann (née Lyberth) in Maniitsoq.⁸

Intimacy and Respectability

Figure 6 is an image of the Greenlandic woman Marie Kreutzmann and the Danish carpenter whose last name was Rasmussen. The models are placed on a bed sitting close together. Kreutzmann is in a traditional Greenlandic suit facing her front to the camera with her hands in her lap. Rasmussen is tilted towards her, while also looking into the camera. He is wearing a European suit and traditional Greenlandic boots.

What especially catches the onlooker's eye is the body language of the two models combined with the intimacy of the bed underneath them. As mentioned before, the man is tilted towards the woman. His head is blurry indicating that he was in motion when the photograph was taken. This gives the impression that he is closing in on her – indicating that he has control over the proximity to her body and even control over her body itself. Marie Kreutzmann's body language and composure are very different from

⁸ Møller, *Mirrored – John Møller*, p. 263.

his. Her hands are joined together in her lap suggesting a more passive composure as Rasmussen moves closer to her. They are both smiling but in very different ways. Her smile combined with her passive body language makes her look awkward while Rasmussen's confident smile amplifies his control over her and the specific scene.

The intimate event between the Greenlandic woman and the Danish man could be interpreted as a portrayal of the man's sexual domination and a metaphor for colonial power and authority. But where it gets interesting is when considering the relation between the two. Marie Kreutzmann's maiden name was Marie Lyberth which tells us that she was married but not to Rasmussen. The intimate space that is created and controlled by Rasmussen can be seen as an inappropriate situation, as intimacy between two people not married to each other was far from respectable at the time. As Stoler writes; "The regulation of sexual relations was central to the development of particular kinds of colonial settlements [...] Who bedded and wedded with whom in the colonies [...] were never left to chance:" (Stoler 1989: 636-637). This was also the case in Greenland, where interracial marriages were both debated and regulated. Stoler furthermore writes how white prestige amongst the European colonisers was defined by the concept of respectability (Ibid., 652). Portraying this intimate event between two who were not allowed to have this kind of relationship could suggest that Møller was seeking to undermine Rasmussen's apparent sexual dominance by making him appear unrespectable thus undermining his white privilege and authority.



Figure 7: Two brothers from Ivigtut and the great hunter and motorman, Abia Frederiksen⁹

⁹ Møller, *Mirrored – John Møller*, p. 264.

Intimacy and violence¹⁰

In figure 7, the Greenlandic landscape serves as the backdrop of an image featuring three men. Positioned at the centre is Abia Frederiksen, a Greenlandic hunter, flanked by two brothers, each locking arms with him on either side. The composition of this image, with its powerful stance and interwoven arms, makes this photograph especially interesting.

At a glance, this closeness and their intertwined arms could be interpreted as a representation of equality and comradeship among the three men. It suggests a shared bond and mutual respect between Abia Frederiksen and the brothers. However, when looking deeper, an alternative perspective arises – one that suggests a level of restriction imposed upon Abia Frederiksen. The interlocked arms, while signifying unity, could also symbolise a limitation on his agency or freedom of movement. It implies a constraint, almost as if this Greenlandic man is unable to change his position, even if he wants to do so. The presence of the two Danish men flanking Abia Frederiksen adds another level to this visual narrative. Their positioning and demeanour could be perceived as an imitation of guards, ready to assert control or exert power over him. A sense emerges that these Danish men symbolise a potential threat, capable of exerting dominance and potentially pulling Abia Frederiksen away at any given moment.

This photograph therefore encapsulates a duality – simultaneously suggesting notions of equality and the threat of Danish dominance. It echoes the ambivalence and ambiguity that Møller portrayed in figure 1. However, unlike the Carnival celebration in figure 1, figure 7 presents a strong potential of violence and danger associated with the Danish presence.

In the broader scope of colonial photography, a great importance for colonisers to portray dominance through violence can be identified in many images in the colonial archive. However, the specific Danish colonial project in this period of time stood out as it was important for the Danes and their own identity to create a narrative of harmony between the Greenlanders and themselves – hence the political rationale

¹⁰ This title is inspired by my lecturer and scholar Daniel Steinbach and his article “Between intimacy and violence: Imperial encounters in East Africa during the First World War” from 2021. The article explores encounters between British and colonial soldiers during the First World War, which he argues were heavily influenced by colonial power and authority.

to create self-governing subjects rather than enforcing disciplinary dominance in this period. I will therefore argue that the potential violence depicted both in figure 6 and 7 reflects Møller's own agency and his wishes to show a more violent reality of colonial Greenland. Following Ingeborg Høvik's argument that Møller's studio photographs held the potential of creating a Greenlandic identity, these images captured away from his studio in Nuuk could do the same. I would argue that Møller's counternarrative of violence, depicted in these images, held immense potential of creating an indigenous identity of resistance, challenging the Danish narrative of peaceful colonial dominance.

The more naturalistic setting of the Greenlandic nature contrasts the portraiture style shown in figures 1-5. When comparing these photographs with the ones in figure 6 and 7, it could be argued that the conventions of family portraiture and therefore the agency of the models could have had a restrictive effect on Møller's agency and what he wished to portray. In contrast, the nature of figures 6 and 7 depicts both more intimate relations but also a more powerful and violent colonial dominance and authority. Furthermore, figure 6 of Kreutzmann and Rasmussen is taken on John Møller's journey to Maniitsoq north of Nuuk. The two brothers in figure 7 are from Ivittuut south of Nuuk, indicating that the image could have been taken there.

While the strict conventions of the portraiture style reflect the wishes of the Danish elite in Nuuk, the freer style of the last photographs could thus indicate that Møller had more power over the shaping of the images. Away from the restrictions of the Danish elite in Nuuk, where he was affected by an ethnographic discourse in his everyday life, it is compelling to view the last two photographs as a reflection of a more free and courageous style which allowed Møller to portray a more critical view of the colonial encounter between the Greenlander and the Danes.

The photographs in figure 1-5 present the colonial authority in Nuuk allowing Møller to only present a subtle and ambiguous critique of the colonial project, whereas the geographical distance to the small Danish elite in Nuuk enables him to provide a stronger critical portrayal of the colonial project in which he suggests an impending sexual and physical violence.

Conclusion

This article has sought to explore and contextualise a selection of John Møller's photographs from the period 1889-1922. By doing so, I have suggested that the tradition of Carnival served as a space for the Danish colonial elite in Nuuk to assert and define their colonial dominance. However, John Møller provides a subtle yet critical view of the colonisers, in this event, by producing counternarratives through images filled with tension and complexity. Exposing the unstable colonial authority which the Danes wished to assert through costumes, Møller simultaneously found himself in the Danish homes as both an insider and outsider. In different *photographic events* Møller shows great agency implemented through compositional choices. By distancing himself away from mirrors and the Danish homes, an action of *Sly Civility* came to undermine the colonial project through his visual representation. This in-between place, that he so often found himself in, is also reflected in Møller's work showing an ambivalence towards the colonial expectations of him as both "civilised" and "traditionalised". When traveling away from the small society of Nuuk, Møller shows a free and courageous style in his photography, allowing him to expose a more violent and poignant reality of colonial Greenland in which a counternarrative to the colonial story of harmony is created.



Bibliography

- Bhabha, Homi 2004: *Location of culture*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551>.
- Bugge, G.N 1970: "Koloniliv i Godthåb 1903-1914." *Tidsskriftet Grønland*, special edition, 1970: August-September, p. 1-32.
- Cooper, Frederick and Stoler, Ann Laura 1997: "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," Anna Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper (red.): *Tensions of Empire*. Berkely: University of California Press, p. 1-58. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520918085>.
- Drewal, Henry John 2002: "Mami Wata and Santa Marta: Imag(in)ing Selves and Others in Africa and Americas." Paul S. Landau and Deborah K. Kaspin (red.): *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 193-211. <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520229488.001.0001>.
- Edwards, Elizabeth 2022: *Photographs and the Practice of History: A Short Primer*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-9585/2021/v47a12>.
- Høvik Ingeborg 2016: "Reproducing the indigenous: John Møller's studio portraits of Greenlanders in context". *Acta Borealia* 33:2, p. 166-188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08003831.2016.1238175>.
- Høvik, Ingeborg 2021: "Negotiating Meaning: John Møller's photograph in Early Twentieth-Century Scandinavian Literature." Sigrid Lien and Hilde Wallem Nielsen (red.): *Adjusting the Lens: Indigenous Activism, Colonial Legacies, and Photographic Heritage*. Vancouver: UBC Press, p. 81- 100. <https://doi.org/10.59962/9780774866620>.
- Kleivan, Inge 1996: *John Møller: kalaaleq assiliisoq : ukiuni 1889-1935 assilisat : fotografier fra perioden 1889-1935*, Copenhagen: Nationalmuseet, Grønlandssekretariatet.
- Marquardt, Ole, Inge Seiding, Inge, Niels H. Fransdsen and Søren Thuesen 2017: "Koloniale Strategier i en ny samfundsorden 1845-1904," Hans Christian Gulløv (red.): *Grønland Den Arktiske Koloni*. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, p. 172-234.
- Møller, John 2021: *Mirrored - John Møller*. Inuuteq Storch (red.), Roulette Russe, Copenhagen.
- Pinney, Christopher 2003: "Introduction: How the Other Half..." , Christopher Pinney, Nicolas Peterson and Nicholas Thomas (red.): *Photography's Other Histories*. Durham: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822384717>.
- Poole, Deborah 1997: *Vision, Race, and Modernity*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691234649>.
- Rud, Søren 2017: *Colonialism in Greenland: Tradition, Governance and Legacy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46158-8>.
- Rud, Søren 2017: *Den Rette blanding: Oprindelighed og ledelse i 1800-tallets Grønland*. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag.
- Sampson, Gary D 2002: "Unmasking the colonial Picturesque: Samuel Bourne's Photographs of Barrackpore Park." Eleanore M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson (red.): *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*. London: Routledge, p. 84-106. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315015262>.

- Sandbye, Mette 2016: “Blasting the Language of Colonialism: Three Contemporary Photo-Books on Greenland”. *KULT. Postkolonial Temaserie* 2016:14, p. 66-89.
- Steinbach, Daniel 2021: “Between intimacy and violence: Imperial encounters in East Africa during the First World War.” Santanu Das, Anna Maguire, Daniel Steinbach (red.): *Colonial Encounters in a Time of Global Conflict 1914-1918*. London: Routledge, p. 98-122. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhac175>.
- Stoler, Ann Laura 1989: “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th Century Colonial Cultures”. *American Ethnologist*, 16:4, p. 634-660. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1989.16.4.02a00030>.
- Thisted, Kirsten 2021: *Stemmer fra Grønland: Den Danske Koloni i 1920'erne*. Copenhagen: Kristeligt Dagblads Forlag.
- Viemose, Jørgen 1977: *Dansk Kolonipolitik i Grønland*. Viborg: Demos.

Online Resources

- Geilas, Anna M. 2021: “Review of ‘John Møller: mirrored, portraits of Good Hope’ by Inuuteq Storch”. *Polar Research*, 2021:41, p. 312-313. <https://doi.org/10.33265/polar.v41.8845>.
- Weinreich, Torben 2020: “Den Store Bastian.” *Lex*. Last Modified June 3, 2020 https://bornelitteratur.lex.dk/Den_store_Bastian?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiA4smsBhAEEiwAO6DEjcsxsQi5fe-VJxhjDTCXfq7boUjAFVDzR2gekChRtW53l3w6qE1ohoCxc0QAvD_BwE.