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John Møller's  
'Photographic Memory'  
– Professional  
Photography of  
Greenlandic Inuit and  
Danish Administrators at  
the Turn of the Twentieth  
Century

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Anna M. Gielas

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Anna M. Gielas

The photograph depicts an indigenous Greenlandic seal hunter and member of the Inuit people. The picture was taken by a fellow Inuk named John Møller (1867–1935). With the photographic practices that he had learned from the Danish and the technology provided by the Danish colonial administration of Greenland, Møller created a 'photographic memory' of the Greenlandic Inuit – and a rare insight into the lives of an Arctic indigenous people at the turn of the twentieth century.

In the course of his career as a professional photographer, Møller produced more than 3,000 glass plate negatives. Most of the photographer's work was shaped by assignment of the Danish colonial administration. On its behest, Møller also accompanied explorers and scientists from foreign countries during their visits to Greenland, including the Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Fridtjof Nansen and the Swiss geologist Arnold Heim. Because Møller carried out the majority of his photographs on commission, they mirror the 'colonial gaze' of the Danish agents.

On some occasion, however, Møller also took images of his fellow Greenlanders without commission. These photographs memorialized central everyday life activities of the Inuit, particularly kayaking, hunting and fishing. Møller documented moments such as the unloading of caught fish, thereby ascribing these routines meaning as well as aesthetic value. In so doing, Møller fostered a novel sense of the Inuit Self.

The Danish colonization of Greenland started in the 1720s. Since the beginning of the colonial era, the Danish authorities had primarily been interested in the exchange of goods and converting the Greenlanders to Christianity. The first known photographs of Greenlanders appear to have been taken by the British captain Edward Augustus Inglefield in 1854. In the following decades explorers, scientists and Danish colonial employees produced photographs of the Greenlandic Inuit. Godthåb (today: Nuuk) was the administrative center of Greenland and Møller's hometown. Because some of his ancestors were Danish, Møller was not only socially accepted by

the Danish administrators but also made an apprenticeship in Copenhagen, with the printer A. Rosenberg and the artist Gustav Pauli. Upon his return to Greenland in 1889, Møller opened his photographic studio in Godthåb.

Møller's took mainly portraits. He shot commissioned group portraits right outside his studio, against the white exterior of the stone building and, on rare occasion, also on ships and boats. Inside his studio, he produced mainly portraits of individuals, against the light-colored wall and a bare wooden floor. Strategically foregoing any kinds of adornment, Møller generally made notably prosaic and unembellished photographs, whether inside his atelier or outside. His sitters assumed dignified poses with serious, stern facial expressions. These visual compositions appear crucially shaped by the bureaucratic demands of simplification, legibility, accuracy and precision on part of the Danish administration. However, each of these works can also be interpreted as a symbolical inversion of colonial power: during the act of taking a photograph, it was Møller who gave directions and orders when to move and

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when to hold still, which gestures and facial expressions were acceptable and which were wrong, while the Danish followed his lead. More generally speaking, Møller's work is characterized by a complex interplay between Western culture and technology on the one hand and indigenous interpretation and practice on the other. Møller's photographs supported and affirmed the Danish administration – but Møller's photographic choreographing can be viewed as a subtle subversion of colonial hierarchies and roles.

The seal hunter pictured in the photograph above – caught in profile, looking out at the land and sea – is a notable contrast to Møller's studio and group photographs. The young man holds a kayak. Møller took several photographs of kayakers, preparing to go to sea or returning with their catch. Since some of the indigenous Greenlanders who worked for the Danish missionaries or were employed by the Royal Greenland Trading Company stopped teaching their children to kayak, Møller's images were visually preserving an Inuit tradition. Indirectly, his work also documented a divide between the Greenlanders who worked for the

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Danish and those who continued their traditional way of living. Thus, these photographs can be considered as deeply layered observations, if not visual commentary, on Møller's part.

Møller's work assumed another meaning and, thus, was further complicated when Europeans such as the above-mentioned geologist Heim selected several of Møller's photographs of the Greenlandic Inuit and turned them into commercially available postcards in their home countries. Heim took the image of the seal hunter presented here to Switzerland where it appeared as a white-frame postcard around 1910. While the postcard was explicitly protected by Swiss copyright, it stands to reason that this copyright rested with Heim and the printer rather than Møller. Colonial power was omnipresent in and

beyond his work. Møller's photographs travelled to Switzerland and other European countries where their materiality was reconfigured and their meaning recontextualized: from a potential meditation on the effects of Danish colonialism on the Greenlandic Inuit to commercial Arctic ephemera at a time when the Far North was the object of public curiosity and popularity.

A few of Møller's photographs also found their way into research books and the published journals of Arctic explorers including Nansen's 1890 narrative *Paa ski over Grønland*. Geologist Heim and his colleague, the botanist Martin Rikli, also used Møller's photographs in their book *Sommerfahrten in Grønland* that appeared in 1911. Møller, in other words, also became an agent of colonial knowledge production. The

photographer was one of numerous indigenous sources on which explorers and scientists relied for relevant and sometimes vital information and who went largely unmentioned or remained anonymous in the actual printed works of these Westerners.

In 1921, Møller received Den Kongelige Belønningsmedalje (The Royal Medal of Recompense) from the Danish King, followed by a knighthood in 1931. Møller's life as a member of both colonial and Inuit communities in Greenland suggests tensions and challenges to define and maintain his individual as well as social identities. If nothing else, Møller's photographic work complicated the asymmetrical power relations between the colonial agents and the indigenous. But arguably more noteworthy is the fact that he created the first photographic Self of the Greenlandic Inuit which nourishes Greenlandic photography until present day: today, Inuit photographers such as Inuuteq Storch and Minik Bidstrup include Møller's work in their art, using the latter's oeuvre in a

comparative way to emphasize and comment on current developments in Greenlandic society.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Note

Møller's photographs are held at the Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allagaateqarfialu (Greenland National Museum & Archives) in Greenland's capital Nuuk.

Dr Anna Gielas is a historian of science and investigates past scientific discourses on the Arctic. Currently, she is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Individual Fellow at the Scott Polar Research Institute (University of Cambridge).