

# **FEAR AND GOSSIP ABOUT VIOLENCE IN GREENLAND**

**Peter Sigsgaard**



# **Fear and Gossip About Violence in Greenland**

**A Study of Attitude Formation and the Creation of Rumours**

**Ψ PSI Forlag 2021**

## **Contents**

Introduction.....	3
Fear and Gossip about Violence in Greenland .....	5
Rumours and Other Opinion-forming Stories .....	10
The Functions and Effects of Rumours.....	18
Methodological, Political, and Ethical Problems Related to Creation of Rumours .....	21
Conclusion .....	26
Bibliography .....	28
Notes .....	30

## Introduction

*The concern with violence is mere sensationalism when it is not understood in terms of the fabric of the social order which generates violence and its onlookers. For we should not overlook that we are the consumers of violence as much as its producers ... with the result that there is a certain order in the variety of concerns with violence.*

John O'Neill: Sociology as a Skin Trade, London 1972

The subject of this book is our conception of violence in Greenland. My main point of view is that things are not as we imagine at first sight. Imagination and wishful thinking play tricks on the observers in Greenland as well as in Denmark. And there are probably good reasons for it.

This small essay emanates from an extensive research project on violence in Greenland. It was carried out during the period 1971 to 1976.

Since the beginning of the 1960s, Greenland has undergone technical, social, and cultural *radical changes*.

The society has developed as it usually does in many other countries where it is recast. Several serious social problems are created. Poverty is made visible and is now important to its victims. Differences between people are intensified or created.

We find, for instance, a widened gap between generations and that class barriers become of more importance. We also hear of an increasing antagonism between Danes and Greenlanders.

Today, the young Greenlanders, about to make an independent existence, has far more options than his parents. Decolonization brings about greater freedom.

But at the same time, the society is made more complicated and many cannot qualify to master the works that are called for its extension. They must remain passive onlookers while privileged Danes posted to Greenland build, organize, manufacture, administer, and debate. Simultaneously, the citizen is constantly met with appeals to the effect that she or he should play a role in the development of the homeland. Expectations targeting the individual are heavy.

As a result, many may feel left out.

The social problems appear in all sorts of ways. One symptom is an increase in violent crime. Prior to 1960, physical aggression was something almost abnormal and unknown in Greenland. It was something one heard about and something one remembered. Today, violence is *visible* all over society. In settlement and town.

In recent years, this development has resulted in an apparent popular demand for securing law and order by means of more severe sentences and a more effective police force. The special criminal code, that is in effect in Greenland, has often been under fire in this connection. It is rumoured that the law is unrealistic, soft-hearted, and nonsensical.

The criminal law of Greenland differs from that of Denmark by exercising a high regard for the perpetrator rather than for the deed committed. The concept of punishment is not part of the law. However, "precautionary measures" are imposed to prevent a repetition of the deed. For instance, if a man commits violence because his social conditions are intolerable, the court can sentence him to training and work, combined with an injunction to abstain from alcohol and undergo treatment with Antabuse. The important thing is his re-establishment in society - not that he expiates for his sins.

In my opinion, criticism of the state of things is misdirected if it targets the conceptual framework of the criminal code. There is little evidence that violent acts committed under emotional strain can be prevented by punishment and drastic measures<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, the critics target precisely one of the few areas where a societal system was developed in close harmony with Greenlandic tradition and conditions.

But, even if the criticism seems unwise, it is understandable if it is looked on as an expression of fear on the part of the critics. Fear creates violence.

About the interviews mentioned in the book:

Conversations were invariably carried out without the use of a tape recorder, and I rarely wrote anything down during a session.

I wrote a thorough report of each conversation immediately afterwards. By long practice, a high degree of accuracy can be attained by this method.

Direct quotes are shown in italics in the text. They were also recorded as remembered immediately after the conversation.

In some instances, it has been necessary to protect and disguise my sources. This explains why sources and dates are not invariably cited with respect to the collection of the material.

Background information may, of course, be obtained by direct contact with me. However, I will require documentation to prove that a serious, research-oriented interest lies behind such an elaboration.

The research project was made possible by a grant from the Danish Social Science Research Council. The Greenland Country Council and the Ministry for Greenland have provided valuable, practical support during travels in Greenland.

I would like to thank the many institutions and individuals who have supported my work through criticism, ideas, cooperation, and patient helpfulness. I would especially like to thank Professor, dr. of laws Verner Goldschmidt for his active and inspiring support through all phases of the research, and the author Else Kappel, who has been of invaluable assistance in the preparation of the manuscript of this book.

Responsibility for the contents of this book is, of course, exclusively my own.

Peter Sigsgaard  
Copenhagen 1977

The present version of the book is translated and slightly adapted made by me. As English is not my mother tongue, the reader may find errors and clumsy formulations in the text. I would be grateful to receive information about such instances (psigsgaa@gmail.com).



Birkerød, Denmark 2021

## Fear and Gossip about Violence in Greenland

When a Dane arrives in Greenland, he very soon discovers that he finds himself in a society that is particularly marked by fear of and interest in violence. And it may often be difficult to get over these first impressions.

In the larger towns he observes how many people feel they must take a taxi 200 or 300 meters to visit each other - even on midnight-sunny nights and in good weather. Almost daily he sees many drunks staggering around in the street (and even if he rarely sees fights, there is nevertheless something disturbing at the sight of an unpredictable drunk). And, above all, he hears about different kinds of violent acts during endless Greenland-discussions amongst the Danes of the coast.

Many have something to tell and must be assumed to know what is going on through their position as daily administrators of the society: The policeman, the doctor, the employee at the social service office. And many others have (almost) experienced something themselves.

The mass media - the local papers, the AG (Gronlandsposten - a newspaper with national coverage), the radio, and the local TV - are strikingly silent. The ordinarily so sensational news material does not get through to the media which maintain a becoming regard for discretion. On the other hand, one sees now and again that they publicize campaigns dealing with violence and abuse of alcohol in a general way. This means that one rarely gets any sober and comprehensive information about occurrence of criminal activity round the clock in the large-sized country.

In contrast, the Danish press coverage is particularly sensationally oriented and, as a rule, provides extremely distorted information. A content analysis of the Danish mass media's presentation of Greenland would probably show a highly disproportionate number of topics like violence, murder, misuse of alcohol, and demoralizing misery.

It is not solely amongst Danes posted to Greenland that one finds fear of violence. In a survey at the Central Trade School in the capital of Greenland, Godthaab, in 1972<sup>2</sup>, I asked the students about what their family, friends and acquaintances had told them about the school and about the town prior to their going there.

Of 92 pupils only 48 indicated that they had been told anything at all. 17 of the 48 had been specifically warned against violence in this nasty town. 5 had received more general cautions about the prevalence of trouble and drinking, and that it was a "bad" place.

*Family, friends, and acquaintances said:*

"Take good care of yourself, because there is a lot of talk of violence."

"One must be very careful when one goes out alone in the evenings."

"Friends have said that it is not a nice place, that lots of fighting takes place there."

"... that I should not be out alone because the inhabitants of Godthaab are dangerous. It is said that they attack anyone who is out on his own."

"It is said to be a bad place where you get attacked, or is bruised all over, and some people get their teeth broken."

The "kamik-mail", an informal type of communication<sup>3</sup>, is of great importance in Greenland. Very few channels of information are otherwise available to the individual. Since few people ever receive any positive information before they leave home, except for warnings and quite general, neutral advice, these admonitions acquire even greater weight.

One might well imagine that Godthaab's reputation as a dangerous big city is being fostered particularly amongst young people who come from a settlement background. But this proved not to be the case<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, expectations of a stay at the school in town were not exactly that it would be an entirely quiet and enriching experience. The reputation of the town was firmly established all along the whole coast. It resembles strikingly the reputation of the administrative town of Frobisher Bay in Canada<sup>5</sup>.

Several pupils of the Trade School told me that they were being persecuted in town *because* they were strangers and, in particular, *because* they belonged to the Trade School. It was customary for them to go out in groups because, among other things, they were afraid of the young people of Godthaab.

Contrasting with this fear is the fact that skirmishes between the local youth and the students (or other newcomers, generally strangers) could only rarely be proven. By far most violence affecting students occurred at the school residence during weekend drinking parties. But this does not, of course, exclude the possibility that the basis of such violence and its consequences are related to a fear of what can be expected to happen in town:

During a previous stay at the school, a young apprentice from another town was mixed up in a fight at a dance restaurant in Godthaab. As a result, when again going to the town for a short course, he brought with him a weapon: a "totenschlager", consisting of a piece of snow-chain attached to a length of rope.  
 During a minor fight in a room at the school residence one night, he runs amok being drunk, and uses the weapon.  
 By accident he happens to put out an eye of his good friend and cousin who, moreover, had been on his side in the fight. (1972)

But fear amongst the posted Danes is rather more apparent. In a questionnaire survey carried out in 1972 by the local weekly, *SermitsiaK*, I was able to have the question below included.

The questionnaire was answered by 301 Danes posted to Greenland<sup>6</sup>, and of these 41% answered affirmatively.

TABLE 1. Response of posted Danes to Question 21: "*Do you feel insecure at times when getting about town?*" (Godthaab)  
 Distribution by sex and category of response in percentage.

Response	Men	Women	Total
Yes (insecure)	37	47	42
No (not insecure)	52	33	43
Never thought about it	11	18	14
No answer	1	3	2
<b>Total</b>	100 %	100 %	100 %
<b>N (number of respondents)</b>	(158)	(143)	(301)

The percentages are given in round numbers. So, a summing up does not add up to precisely 100 %

The local paper's survey was conducted in such a way that the respondents are not representative of the whole group of Danes posted to Godthaab. Therefore, there is no merit in relating these answers to other partial results of the questionnaire.

What can be claimed, however, is that the number of frightened persons in the group seems unduly large, with a view to the fact that the town is well laid-out and not excessively big, being similar in size to one of the smaller Copenhagen residential districts (about 8000 inhabitants in 1972).

In conversations with Danes posted from Denmark (not restricted only to Godthaab) I also frequently recorded evidence supporting the survey result: people consider themselves to be situated in a dangerous world.

Following are some Godthaab quotations (1972-75).

A. is a physician. He says there are many cases of "eyes bruised and broken to pieces", and people are "constantly being shot or stabbed". One cannot safely walk about outside after nine o'clock in the evening without the risk of being raped. A. does not want to stay here more than the two years that entitle one to tax exemption. It is just too wild here.

B. is a civil servant in the regional administration. He always carries a big knife in his briefcase for possible use in self-defence. (However, one does not know whether he always, and in other countries, carries the same knife).

Mrs. C. became completely "hysterical with fear" the other day. She and her husband walked by the "Apartment block P" and saw a couple of young fellows at a distance in front of them, shouting and probably drunk. They did not seem aggressive, but she told her husband that she did not want to proceed for fear of being attacked.

Mrs. D. is married to a Greenlander and has lived in the town for three years. She has always been fearful, even in Denmark. Here she does not go out alone in the evening for fear of being raped.

One evening Mrs. E. walked towards "Block P" with her husband, and in the distance saw three young men approaching from the opposite direction. She grabbed hold of her husband and would not walk on, thinking that the young men without doubt would attack them.

She explains her reaction by saying that she had heard about a seemingly unprovoked violence against a person carried out by three young men precisely near Block P. She believed that she now saw the very same three men.

Chief Police Officer F. thinks that all this talk about violence against innocent people is exaggerated and far away from reality. *I have often intentionally tried to behave provocatively, and nothing has happened to me*, he says.

When, somewhat baffled, I asked him how a Chief Police Officer manages to act intentionally provocative, he replies: *Often in the evening I walk up to the hot dog stand - when, for instance, I have run out of cigarettes or something like that*. The hot dog stand is three minutes' walk from the Chief Police Officer's house.

Doctor G. has been in town for several months. He says that he and his wife never go out in the evening, and the reason is a deep fear that they may be attacked. If they visit somebody, they take a cab.

I contradict this point of view - try to convince him that the risk is ridiculously small.

A couple of months later he unsolicited tells me that *after all there is nothing*



*to be afraid of here in Godthaab. He had now been around town on several evenings and has not seen anything untoward ....*

*... why must one's ears be filled with tales of violence, just as soon as one arrives. For instance, I was told that I could not go out to the neighbourhood 'Myggedalen' - even in broad daylight. That is certainly untrue. But many people believe it.*

This is what a Norwegian woman, married to a posted Dane, writes in the local weekly, *SermitsiaK*<sup>7</sup>.

The two concepts of anxiety and fear are both used about the reactions observed amongst many Danes in Greenland. Their reactions may either relate to tangible phenomena one might have reason to *fear*, or to a rather undefined, vague, non-objective *anxiety* based on a quite irrational foundation.

It is very understandable that a Dane might experience fear when (s)he lands in Greenland. In most places the Dane faces long-lasting periods of darkness, fierce and unstable climatic conditions, towns in shambles because of intensive building activity, poor lighting and, especially, people whose behaviour seems unfamiliar.

In Denmark drunkenness has been put away; public intoxication is concentrated in certain streets and joints. A drunk person will try to hide his condition there or within the four walls of his own home. Otherwise, he will soon be picked up by the police. In Greenland it is no shame to exhibit one's intoxication, and one must be almost blind drunk before being "carted off".

In Greenland, the Dane does not understand what people are saying. He does not know if the shouts he hears on the road are meant for him or for someone else, if they are aggressive or friendly. Neither is it easy for him to interpret people's feelings based on their behaviour or their facial expressions. The special Greenlandic way of controlling emotions is strange and unknown. It takes a long time before one learns to interpret the many small behavioural signals providing clues to a person's temper, state of mind, sympathy, or antipathy. Some people never learn.

*They are crass, many of them ... once we fired one of our workers. Do you know what he did? He just stood and laughed like mad when one workmate fell into the water and was close to drowning: He was fired at once. This we could not tolerate. (Danish employer, 1975)<sup>8</sup>*

It is probably a common experience that when travelling we react with fear to anything that is unfamiliar, unpredictable, or difficult to interpret<sup>9</sup>. And it is a common observation that anxiety caused by *culture shock* frequently results in one having exaggerated fears for being subject to attack<sup>10</sup>.

The minor culture shock of the tourist, that may add a bit of spice to the experiences of an expensive journey, is negligible compared with what hits a person who *unexpectedly* and enduringly is exposed to it. Not only does this unstructured situation engender a fear of the people that one must live together with, but also gives rise to a kind of *cultural fatigue*. It is primarily manifested by one isolating oneself along with one's fellow countrymen in a shared rejection of the society in which one has been placed<sup>11</sup>.

The fear manifested by many Danes must likely be seen against that background – even if I do not intend to reduce their fear entirely to imagination or socio-culturally conditioned hysteria.

One *may* witness violent incidents in Greenlandic society, and they occur with greater frequency than the ordinary Dane is accustomed to. Moreover, this applies to the older Greenlanders as well. Violence was a rare event when they were young.

But, on the other hand, much of the fear is exaggerated and appears quite unrealistic. For instance, many Danish women dread being raped by Greenlandic men. In fact, such occurrences have taken place extremely rarely - so rarely that the risk must be considered virtually non-existent. Many fear unprovoked attacks in the street - yet the fact is that such incidents are very infrequent, and especially rare involving Danes.

But such statistical knowledge may be of no help when the fear is engendered by stories and warnings spread by peers? Perhaps the Danes posted to Greenland need to share a common fear. It promotes a sense of belonging, social cohesion,<sup>12</sup> and establishes a background for a responsive and interesting fellow-feeling. Neither must its entertainment qualities not be overlooked. The society offers few opportunities for entertainment and unusual happenings.

And finally, there *may* be something in the view that by labelling Greenlandic society a failed, a hopeless, and alarming monument to the Danish endeavours in the country, the posted Dane may bolster his own self-esteem as a participant in that process. In other words, if it is difficult for someone to live up to own and others' expectations related to the job that (s)he went to Greenland to do, it might well serve as an excuse for any shortcomings that the country and its population have gone to pieces. The task is described as an impossible one<sup>13</sup>.

Defeat is inherent in the difficult and unstable job conditions. It may be possible to explain it away if one can make oneself or others believe that general conditions are chaotic and strange, or that one encounters concerted resistance (hatred of Danes) in one's work.

If there is any truth to this line of reasoning, it might be revealed in some of the rumours that are hawked around. One must particularly consider which aspects that are stressed in the story and the changes the stories undergo in their transition from a true account into an aim-directed rumour.

## Rumours and Other Opinion-forming Stories

First let me describe an ordinary rumour, based on a kernel of truth. The rumour particularly aims at showing that a great deal of violence is *covered up*, that the special Greenland Penal Code *functions strangely* in terms of the Danish perception of justice, and that, in addition, it operates in an *unfair* manner. Furthermore, the rumour has been developed in such a way that it vividly illustrates the hopeless social (especially educational) conditions prevailing in Greenland.

The kernel of truth to the rumour is as follows:

### *Two boys in a boat*

In a boat during a hunting trip, a 13-year-old boy, G., from a settlement kills an 8-year-old companion.

There is no evidence of enmity between the two, and it is unclear whether the slaying was intentional or whether it was the result of an accidental shot.

This was not an issue of great consequence during the detection work because G. is under the age of criminal responsibility. The case does not go to court but is transferred to the Child Welfare Service.

Following the slaying, G. hid the body by tying a rock to it before sinking it into the water. When he returns to the settlement, he keeps silent about what has happened. The story comes out during a police investigation the following day.

The Child Welfare Service sends G. to a supervised home in Denmark. He stays in different schools and youth residences until he reaches the age of 18. Then he is sent home under probation to his parents in Greenland.

When G. was about 16 years old, it was considered to secure an apprentice job for him in Denmark. However, the plan did not materialize.

Almost as soon as the boy returned to Greenland, one could hear the story transmitted in several versions amongst the Danes of Godthaab. One of the Danes later wrote down this version:

### *The story of how to obtain the right to an education in Greenland.*

“Two boys went sailing in a dinghy belonging to the father of one of them. The boy who had borrowed his father's dinghy had also borrowed his hunting rifle.

On the water's edge they noticed a third boy, who was invited to join them. They rowed in to pick him up and he got into the boat.

However, a quarrel developed between the third boy and the one whose father owned the dinghy, and the third boy was shot with the rifle.

The second boy, who had originally taken part in the sailing trip, became frightened and wanted to go ashore. As soon as he was put ashore, he ran home, but he kept secret about what he had experienced.

The boy with the dinghy rowed out again with the body of the third boy on board, and to get rid of the body he tied some rocks to it and threw it overboard. Then he sailed home, also not mentioning the event to anyone.

During the evening, the parents missed the murdered boy, and a search was initiated, but without result. The police were then called in to clear up the

case. They discovered that the two boys had been together with the missing one, but both boys denied knowing anything about what might have happened to their friend. After several days of searching, the body of the murdered boy was found washed ashore. After several interrogations now at last the one boy broke down – not the one who had fired the gun. Then also the other confessed.

The boy who had been privy to the murder was sentenced to banishment from his home with a warning not to show up again in the settlement, while the boy who had murdered his friend was sent to Denmark. Here he was given technical training as a craftsman.

Moral: The lack of educational facilities is so huge in Greenland that one must have special qualifications to obtain training.” (1972)

Another version of the story has undergone changes during two instances of party gossip in the town:

*Three boys in a dinghy*

[Summary: In contrast to the first version, the boy with the dinghy is now “the person who is in the secret”. He sails out with a friend, and a third boy “asks to join them”.]

“The two friends of the boy with the dinghy are on bad terms. However, the third boy is ultimately allowed to accompany them. A fight arises, and one of the two enemies shoots the other. The body of the slain boy is tipped overboard.

Meanwhile, the boy in charge of the dinghy, who all along has just been an onlooker, becomes frightened and refuses to sail any more. He is put ashore and sets off for the settlement on foot.

The boy who did the shooting sails home. To the best of his ability, he cleans the dinghy of blood and then he seeks out his friend and threatens him to keep quiet about what happened.

[The case is cleared up bit by bit and] the boy who did the shooting was forced to go to Denmark to undergo a craftsman training. Meanwhile, the boy with the dinghy was removed from his home and forbidden to return to the settlement for a period, I believe, of 40 years.” (1972)

Several changes are due to the need to construct a more convincing inner logic of the story. Since the story depends on an intentional killing caused by a quarrel it becomes necessary to build in an element that explains why the two were quarrelling or were out sailing together in the first place.

In the original version this is explained by “a quarrel developed”. In the subsequent version much is made of the fact that a (made up) third person was “on bad terms” with one of the original participants in the trip. This third person is ultimately allowed to join.

The original version allows the invented third person to be *invited* to come aboard.

Changes such as these are quite common when a story passes from one version to another. Illogical holes in the account are filled in with the help of the imagination<sup>14</sup>.

But there are changes that cannot be explained in terms of the inner dynamics of the narrative process. Such changes occur in order to make the story more meaningful in accordance with the “interests and experiences” of the storytellers.<sup>15</sup>

“The person who is in the secret” is injected into the story to indicate something which is maintained as a particularly characteristic of Greenland: “Greenlandic society is permeated

with hidden violence, violence that is obscured and covered up, and nothing is done about it.”<sup>16</sup>

By introducing someone privy to the murder, the story can then go on to indicate that he is threatened into silence.

But first and foremost, the fate of the person who is in the secret shows how unfair the system of justice is. This “*accessory*” is sentenced to leave his home and settlement, while the *killer* has a stroke of luck, namely, an education in Denmark<sup>17</sup>.

An order of banishment is one of the sentences that can be handed down according to the Penal Code of Greenland. This is a measure that is alien to a Dane and may explain why banishment is one of the elements of the rumour.

In fact, the case was never tried in court. There is also nothing whatever in the real story about anyone banished from the settlement. On the contrary, during the period when G. was a permanent resident of Denmark, he several times returned to spend his holiday at home.

Rumours may explain the inexplicable and may contain features that reflect the daily “experiences and interests” of the people who generate them. The following rumour is used in that way. Its kernel of truth can be narrowed down like this:

A man, A., residing in a town, has over a long period exhibited an increasing tendency towards violent behaviour. He becomes the object of taunt and a rumour campaign to the effect that he had killed a hunting companion. Thorough investigations do not substantiate such rumours.

But one day, A. turns rumour into reality. He kills an older man.

A few months prior to the murder he was involved in a discussion on the topic of abortion. On religious grounds he said that if a doctor performed an abortion (“took a life”) then he would kill the doctor.

After his arrest and conviction, all kinds of rumours spring up about A.'s deeds. Principally, A. is said to be responsible for the disappearance of several people who were last heard of on sailing or hunting trips. The rumours are thoroughly investigated by the police and found to be groundless and without foundation. Quite the contrary.

*First version*, heard in Copenhagen:

A young Greenlandic woman tells me that a few years ago there was a “mass murderer” in her hometown. He had managed to kill eight people before they found out who the murderer was.

*Second version* told to a Greenlandic police constable while he took a course in Copenhagen:

An interpreter employed by the Ministry of Greenland had related the tale to a Greenlandic patient in the University Hospital of Copenhagen. The patient later told the story to a Greenlandic woman employed at another hospital in town. She subsequently told it to the policeman.

This second version appoints only three victims: two were fishermen who had disappeared several years prior to the time of the real murder. The reason for the murders was allegedly that the fishermen had been cruel to A. when he was young.

In addition, A. was said to have killed a Danish physician who disappeared during a sailing trip some two years before the real murder. In this case, the reason given for the murder was that the doctor had reprimanded A. who had contracted gonorrhoea.

*Third version*, as related by a Greenlandic woman from A.'s hometown:

In this version, two victims are mentioned, one of whom was said to be a previous hunting companion of A. Besides, there is the Danish doctor who disappeared during a sailing trip in poor weather. The rumour spells out in detail how A. met the doctor at sea during a threatening storm. A. asks to be towed back to harbour “so that he might get back quickly in case the weather deteriorated”. The doctor refuses, and A. shoots him in a rage.

*Fourth version* was heard by a Danish physician far from A.'s hometown:

The doctor heard this version several years after the proper murder, while he was undertaking a tour of duty in Godthaab. The story was told at a small party during which the Penal Code of Greenland was under discussion by a Dane posted to Greenland.

The storyteller gave as his source “the police in Godthaab”. This fourth version indicated that A. was arrested after killing the Danish doctor, and that he had planned yet another murder. Moreover, he had already killed a total of four or five people.

The motive for shooting the doctor: *A. was crazy. He shot people who overtook him when he was sailing. Such was the case with respect to the doctor who sailed past him in a speedboat, following which A. shot him from behind.* [I heard the same version from another Danish doctor about four years later in an entirely different town on the coast.]

These rumours are primarily developed to explain the disappearance of several people. It must yet again be stressed that they are pure invention, and that they have been the subject to detailed investigation<sup>18</sup>.

Several of the versions are characterised by the fact that the reason for A.'s agitation is considered understandable and plausible. When anyone in Greenland speculates as to the reason why one person behaves violently towards another, an explanation is often sought in childhood events: X must certainly have been tormented by Y when they were children. In a local context such an explanation is “natural” enough.

Neither does it seem incomprehensible that a fisherman in need of assistance might become furious at being denied towing aid in bad weather. It might also be possible to imagine such a reaction to being admonished by the doctor who is treating one for venereal disease.

In the Danish version of the rumour, A. is turned into someone with a mental disease, an abnormal person who reacts quite unreasonably. He does not want to be overtaken by a *speedboat*. In the story, his rage is a factor that is unpredictable and impossible to guard against - and A. is even turned into someone who shoots people “from behind”.

Here the rumour does not explain the fate of the people who have disappeared. The narrators have apparently no interest in them. But the rumour exemplifies one's experience of apparently unpredictable, incomprehensible conditions, and creates an attitude towards them. And it is certainly no coincidence that the fourth version is embedded in a discussion about Greenlandic judicial practices.

The Greenlander is not only made to appear unpredictable in a negative way. The following version of a murder story appears to have been altered with the help of imagination to better tally with the stereotyped, and perhaps more romantic, conception of the Greenlander as a primitive hunter acting in close interdependence with nature:

A high-ranking Danish policeman describes a case, the files of which he has seen:

*It was something that took place on the East Coast, where a man killed his wife. He took her out with him on a dog sledge, far out on the ice and at a great distance from the settlement.*

*At one time when the wife is rather far from the sleigh, he lets loose the dogs. He points to his wife and cries out the signal for a bear. They attack her, and he tries to make it appear like an accidental onslaught by dogs.*

When we made a concerted effort to locate the files of this case, it proved impossible to trace them. The story is probably modelled on the following real case:

A labourer in a town in Western Greenland kills his wife with a rock during a quarrel. He subsequently tries to camouflage the murder by making it appear as though she had been attacked by dogs. None of the people involved had ever seen a bear. (1975)

It is no coincidence that this rumour sets the scene on the East coast. The civil servant probably knows nothing of the conditions prevailing there, but he assumes that traces of the original "Eskimo culture" are still to be found.

Although the manner of the killing is cruel, it is nevertheless portrayed with images that fairly well illustrate an idea of the Greenlander as the vigorous hunter who, operating within nature in the raw, makes use of the options he has always known - even for murder.

The tale does not include the slightest trace of the poverty, misery, alcoholism, and oppressive despondency which is inherent in the original case. A rather wretched labourer has been transformed into a sort of mythical, but cruel hunter in bearskin trousers.

In a society where precise information is hard to come by, and where certain new forms of criminality, commonplace elsewhere, crop up, the accuracy of stories becomes blurred and they are then interpreted in a way that makes them more understandable.

Moreover, various aspects of a story are stressed in accordance with whoever is passing it on:

*Robbery with violence?*

A young man has committed many petty thefts. He cannot be characterized a violent person.

One evening he is approached in a restaurant by an older, holidaying Dane who wishes to establish a homosexual relationship. They leave together to the Dane's dwelling.

In court the young man explains that the two had drinks together. After a partially fulfilled relationship the Dane will not give the young man his clothes back. A quarrel ensues and the young man hits the older one on the head with a heavy object.

The blow is serious, and the older man suffers a fractured skull. Before the young man leaves the apartment, he takes the victim's chequebook.

*First version, as related by a Greenlandic clergyman.*

In town the clergyman heard of a "very ruthless" act of violence committed by a young man. He had broken into the apartment of an older Dane who was in town on holiday.

The young man had knocked down the older one to rob him of his chequebook.

*We haven't seen that kind of thing happen here before*, says the clergyman, *homicidal home robbery*.

*Second version* published in a Danish newspaper.

About a month after the attack, the story appears in a Danish daily. A journalist in town for the summer was contacted by a Dane posted to Greenland who “telephoned” the following message:

*My uncle has just been attacked. Fractured skull, hovers between life and death. His assailant has committed violence for the thirtieth time and has only been sentenced to pay small fines in a few cases. What is the idea of having such soft legislation when life and limb are at stake?*

The same question is raised by the journalist in his article<sup>19</sup>.

The Danish press often adds new aspects to stories about violence in Greenland. Much too often the changes emphasize that the background to the violence is *hatred towards Danes* - an interpretation rarely heard in Greenland.

Such an interpretation gives meaning to the stories in Denmark, just as it also attributes a distinct political function to them.

The further away from the scene of the crime the story is told, the larger the role played by the alleged conflicting ethnic relationships. And it is no use for Greenlandic spokespersons denying the interpretation of the media.

A broadcast about home rule in Greenland.

The broadcast in Radio Denmark “About criminals and home rule politicians in Greenland” is introduced as follows by a journalist who is quite familiar with Greenland:

*And outside in the streets (in Godthaab) it is not good to walk about after dark. Newcomers are warned. There is a growing wave of violence, attacks - Danes are being beaten up. One was robbed of 5,000 kroner. One hears whisperings about hatred towards the Danes.*

*It was bound to happen, don't you think?*

*One recalls the Asians exiled from Uganda, the murdered missionaries in the Congo, and all the “yellow peril”.*

*And then, of course, there is Iceland that suddenly gives notice, and the angry Faroese who forget who is paying the bills.*<sup>20</sup>

The broadcast consists of an interview with Lars Emil Johansen, then a member of the Government of Greenland, who talks about the possibilities of an extended home rule for Greenland. His explicit rejection of the idea that violence in Greenland is directed against the Danes does not result in the journalist changing the title of his program or rewrite the introduction.

Hatred of the Danes apparently is *a must*. After a television programme about Greenlanders in Denmark, a Danish daily followed up the story with an interview. Its central theme was that Danes certainly were being discriminated against in Greenland:

“The three TV programs about Greenlanders in Denmark might intend to reveal the discrimination that takes place in Denmark against Greenlanders. But one could also produce television series on how Danes are being discriminated against in Greenland. It is a difficult task to be a Dane in Greenland - because Greenlanders are so savage in their hatred of the Danes that attacks on Danes occur there in just the same manner as the TV showed befalls upon Greenlanders in Denmark.”<sup>21</sup>



To be fair it must be said that these undocumented, and to all appearances extremely exaggerated remarks were partly made up by the journalist who wrote the article.<sup>22</sup>

And this kind of distortion can appear in a varying form:

Ekstrabladet (Copenhagen daily) reports on an unrest in a settlement, where the topic of liquor distribution caused conflicts.

In the same article a story about two young people who threw stones at a government ship that had two Danes on board is tightened up:

*Local residents throw large rocks at Danes and at a government ship.*

And the headline of the article hammers out the message: *Riot in Greenlandic settlement: Danes stoned.*<sup>23</sup>

In this article one can check up on the message by reading beyond the headline. But it is not always possible to verify the alleged personal experiences of the journalist:

BT (a Copenhagen daily) heralds with big headlines a series of articles on Greenland, their main theme being: *This is how much we are hated in Greenland.*

Among other things, the writer describes the fear that grips Danish seasonal workmen in Godthaab after a murder had been committed in the town. Nobody knows whether the murderer was a Greenlander or a Dane.

“... most workmen stay at home in the accommodation hutment due to fear ...Some remember the murder case in which a Dane raped a Greenlandic woman and then stoned her to death. After appearing in court, the man had to be spirited away through a back door, wearing a police uniform, to keep him from being lynched.”<sup>24</sup>

What really happened is the following: During a quarrel, a *Greenlandic* man killed a Greenlandic woman. When he is apprehended the case is reported on the radio and, contrary to common practice, his name is mentioned as well as the date when he will be brought to court.

This led to a gathering in front of the courthouse. The crowd consisted of a small number of children, older women, and young people motivated by curiosity only. Such curiosity is however not at all common, and to protect the perpetrator from the humiliating attention, he was indeed led through by the back door wearing a uniform jacket.

By changing the killer's ethnic background, by introducing a sexual motive for the murder, by making the deed a brutal one, and transforming the curious onlookers to an aggressive mob ready for a lynching, the daily newspaper BT managed to substantiate its main theme by means of quite a story<sup>25</sup>.

However, the Danish press is at its best when, in dealing with the everyday violence of Greenland, it reports the journalists' *own* experiences. I as a sociologist can become quite envious of the visiting journalist who, in an amazingly short space of time, encounters all such incidents that I hardly has seen a shadow of in the country.

The correspondent from Politiken (Copenhagen daily) spends one Saturday afternoon dance at the Hotel Godthaab. As a result, she can produce “a story of hatred of the Danes, of beatings, and of linguistic misunderstandings”.

“We are not Greenlanders. We are Eskimos. Do you understand?” So says the girl just behind me in the queue. There is a congestion around the sink in the ladies' restroom. It is a long wait. For the toilet is, as we can hear, good enough for an unpretentious Saturday afternoon session of lovemaking. We who are waiting outside.

The other girls in the queue repeat: “Do you understand? That we are Eskimos. And that you are a stupid Dane.” They emphasize their point by knocking my head against the tiles. Spitting, kicking, and pulling my hair. “Go home!”<sup>26</sup>.

Some of the quotations that I cite above come from the more serious part of the opinion-forming Danish press. Still, the examples with respect to failing source criticism and communication of obvious errors differ little from articles found in cheap yellow papers:

Ugens Rapport (weekly magazine) also had a “Summer correspondent” visiting Greenland, and he proceeds to put together an article based on “his personal experiences, eye-witness reports, and conversations with the authorities.”

The article states that Greenland's scenery is ravishing, “*but beneath the beautiful surface lies hatred in wait.*” The country “*provides the framework for violence, shooting sprees and racial unrest.*” It is a place where Danes “*sleep with a rifle within reach and keep a rubber truncheon ready at the entrance door.*” There is a police force, but it does not function. The constables are fear-stricken “*when the terrorists smell blood in the Greenlandic night.*”

“... the racial struggle between Greenlanders and Danes has changed into fights and shootings ... and: To understand the situation one must know of the local legislation which is utterly queer. Greenlanders are considered as fundamentally unfit for punishment ... Prisons are unknown. There is, however, a prefabricated hut in Godthaab that is fenced in with chicken wire”.<sup>27</sup>

Here is nothing to be wrong about. The journalist describes a situation of people being constantly poised for battle. A situation characterised by fear and a dominant racial struggle. Yet only a few people in Greenland would adopt such a description. And it is also contradicted by the fact that violent confrontations between persons of Danish and Greenlandic “nationality” are quite rare. Indeed, confrontations brought about by xenophobia are practically non-existent.

Moreover, the journalist links the violence to the underlying ideas of the Greenland Penal Code and the system of justice. Insofar as his “personal experiences” and “eye-witness reports” are concerned, they have certainly failed him on at least one point: the institution for convicts in Godthab is not fenced in with chicken wire, and neither is it a hut. It is an impractical, modern two-storey prison building, constructed to serve as a minimum-security institution.

## The Functions and Effects of Rumours

The creation of rumours can serve several functions. Some call it a form of *collective problem solving*: a means of communication between people who, finding themselves in ambiguous crisis situations, pool their knowledge, experiences, and emotions to create a meaningful interpretation of their surroundings. Such interpretations are maintained to serve the interests of the people concerned, especially if the uncertain situation tends to be rather permanent.<sup>28</sup>

This collectively developed definition of the surrounding world<sup>29</sup> will increasingly shape up as stereotyp and rigid, making it increasingly difficult for sceptics to change it. Both in sociology and in social psychology one finds examples that prove that such shared, objectively seen erroneous convictions will be shielded against the critique raised by outsiders<sup>30</sup>.

There are strong indications that individuals from abroad are more receptive to influences altering their normal basis of valuation if the new surroundings appear unstructured and threatening<sup>31</sup>.

We are often willing under group pressure to modify the critical faculties that we normally employ. It is then no longer necessary to challenge one's good judgment and what one sees with one's own eyes. Instead, we can alter the criteria for assessing a situation, and thus make our perceptions conform with those that are locally predominant:

A Danish head of a police station in a town tells this story:

*One can experience strange things up here. These people have a completely different kind of mentality.*

*Just listen to what happened to me:*

*We had arrested a young man who attempted to have intercourse with a two-year old girl. While questioning him, I said: "Surely you know what this is going to cost you?"*

*"No", he replied. He did not know.*

*"Well, we're going to cut it off:" I said, taking out my knife and starting to open it.*

*Then surely it was my turn to be surprised. Do you know what he did? He unbuttoned himself just like that and was ready to take it out so that I could cut it off.*

I asked if the young man was mentally retarded, and got this response:

*Yes, well, actually - he was almost mentally deficient.*

If the policeman experienced the same in a Danish town, he would probably account for the young man's reaction with him being mentally handicapped. Now this fact had no place in the story which was offered as an illustration of the peculiar work conditions confronting a policeman in Greenland.

The collective - probably mainly Danish-dominant - mapping by rumours of violence in Greenland is not unimportant, not least because the Greenlandic society is controlled by Danes in numerous ways. That goes after all also for the institutions of law enforcement.

If there is a widespread view that violence is a major problem, then this opinion will be communicated to the police, the judicial system, and the legislative authorities. And these institutions are (and certainly should be) to some extent receptive to pressure<sup>32</sup>. This communication will perhaps be even easier absorbed if crime-fighting people themselves are co-creators of the prevalent definitions of reality.

If policemen in senior positions in Greenland increasingly listen to and spread stories about violence, then it is likely that they will try to do something about the problem. And this perhaps explains why an "anti-violence campaign" was initiated at the end of the 1960s. The police tightened measures against violence by more frequently charging perpetrators under

the Penal Code and to some degree by demanding the court to mete out more thorough and severe “punishments” than before.

This, of course, causes the statistics to show a sharp rise, which can then be referred to as the wave of violence that one is attempting to put a stop to. The further development of the situation is imaginable ....

Meanwhile, no one have had a stake in trying to stem the wave of rumour. Several policemen in Greenland told me that much of the criminal violence was of a rather petty nature. But I may doubt their wish to promote this impression generally.

This has a lot to do with the fact that violence has been regarded as a problem in the European-American part of the world during the last decade. To point out that the same problem exists in Greenland provides a useful argument when dealing with the authorities “at home in Denmark”. This is true when grants are needed for more staff or police lockups, as well as when some call for amendments to the extremely liberal penal code<sup>33</sup>.

It is not, of course, the Greenland police that have invented the violence in the society and made it into a problem. The crimes that people have been charged with and the ones that enter the statistics are not drawn from thin air.

On the other hand, it is safe to assume that the Greenland police are also affected by the pressures of fear and rumours, and that this exerts an influence on their responses to observed cases of aggression – and thereby the statistics that others react to.

Fear of violence and the expectation that one might easily be attacked may also be a factor generating violence. In the first place, the atmosphere itself may create several potential victims who do not react appropriately to provocation. They defend themselves too soon, and in so doing may initiate a fight or become unnecessarily aggressive to impress an opponent of whom they are afraid.

In the second place, some of the participants in public brawls may be influenced by sheer expectation. If the customers of an ill-famed hot-dog stand expect that “something may happen” and they crowd round a quarrelling couple, then it is likely that the antagonists will not disappoint their public. Perhaps the hotheads would have abstained from fighting if they just struck the bystanders with amazement at their breach of etiquette.

Finally, it is quite possible that the number of notifications about violent incidents increases on account of the widespread interest in violence. It might well be that one sees and experiences more violence in everyday life and that one “calls for the police” more often.

It is, of course, hard to prove that the numerous stories about violence themselves take part in creating specific incidents that nourish the stories. All one can do is to point out that a focused interest in violence may determine the public’s and the authorities’ preparedness and reaction to it.

It might, perhaps, balance the picture a bit to indicate that there are also examples that belie exaggerated expectations:

*A naval visit*

A French naval ship was expected to visit Godthaab. Before its arrival, some Danes said that this visit would bring about violence. *When the girls show a bit too much interest in the Frenchmen, their friends will take revenge.*

The visit passed off peacefully. The only incident that took place was when the police had to disperse a crowd of French sailors who besieged a home for single mothers.

After the ship had left, a doctor told me that *all* the assistant nurse students at the hospital had bruises all over. He believed this was due to the Frenchmen's shore leave and the local, young men's revenge.

It turned out that only one of the students referred to had one single black mark on her arm. She had gotten that from the door man at a restaurant because she had grabbed another girl by the hair and lashed out at the said bouncer.

The incident had no French dimension whatsoever. (1972)

## Methodological, Political, and Ethical Problems Related to Creation of Rumours

My material depicts primarily the fear and the stories affecting the world of the Danes in Greenland. This may be because I have easy access to this community. But it is also certain that Danes temporarily posted to Greenland are strongly characterized by gossip and the generation of rumours about violence.

This is not so strange. The more isolated a group is from the society around it, the stronger it tends to being marked by gossip, that serve to fashion and preserve the group's own internal structure, ideology, and other values<sup>34</sup>. Through thrilling news transmitted face to face, the group is welded together, and newcomers get an opportunity to become part of it. Perhaps the most important is that such communication fills in the many gaps that exist in the largely *unprepared* expatriate's knowledge about the host country.

The situation is ambiguous and confused. Clear and effectively promoted dissemination of local news is lacking. Thus, the groundwork has been prepared for the creation of rumours.

The situation is not unique for Greenland. In a study of teachers posted to Frobisher Bay, Canada, the same tendencies were noted, and that gossip particularly flourish at the beginning of the school year, when many new teachers are introduced to their surroundings<sup>35</sup>.

In Canada, just as in Greenland, the "expatriate" is unable to investigate the truth of some of the stories that concern the acts and the temper of the local population. (S)he only picks up bits and pieces.

The same cannot be said about the Greenlanders. There is also the lively creation of rumours amongst them, but stories about a particular person or situation are more individualized, more plausible, and they are rarely used to characterise general conditions. The consequences of such gossip are perhaps not so serious in either a political or an ethical sense.

The researcher (and journalist) from Denmark has in Greenland no option but to work without accessible and precisely recorded documentation of many societal topics. Only in recent years have various departments begun to systematically gather information about their subject areas. In such a situation one is very dependent upon information given by professionals working in the institutions. One must rely on the impressions of key Danish people.

The stranger in Greenland, as in other developing countries, must thus base his or her knowledge on data provided by other foreigners who have been placed in a world that to them is unstructured and strange. Therefore, is it difficult to obtain correct and locally valid information.

When knowledge so obtained is not only characterised by inaccuracy and ignorance but also dramatized for internal reasons, the problem is aggravated. Even when one is concerned with quite tangible information, one must be on one's guard:

B., a technical school inspector, said at a meeting that 98% of the students at the school had a personal weapon.

This information had been obtained by a survey conducted at the school.

When I expressed doubt about it, he rectified his statement to be about only the students that he taught himself.

Later, in a questionnaire survey where students answered anonymously, I asked a heavily leading question. It urged students to indicate whether they owned such a weapon. The question was answered in the affirmative by only a few students, and of these, some clearly had said *yes* to make fun of the study. (1972)

Professor T. visited Greenland. He was told by a doctor in Godthaab that *patients with fractured jaws are at Sana [the hospital] in rows.*

The doctor indicated that 23 patients, mainly women, were at that time hospitalized suffering from fractured jaws. They had been heavily slapped in their faces.

Subsequent checking showed that 23 was the *annual* number of patients at Sana with broken jaws, coming from all over Greenland. And most of these patients were men who had been kicked. (1971)

A Danish lady who had lived near a youth hostel talks vividly about the youngsters' behaviour: *They barely had moved in before they tore all the sinks out of the walls and wrenched them off the piping system. Then they threw the sinks out of the windows so that they were spread over the front area of the building.*

Actually, all the sinks remained where they had always been. Good, orderly conditions prevailed, and virtually no vandalism had taken place. (1971)

The country doctor calls the weekend watch at the emergency ward *the butcher's duty* and says it is hard to get doctors to take this job. There are too many cases of violence.

From a study of the emergency ward in Godthaab, carried out over an eight-month period, it appears that the doctors had to treat between zero and five cases of violence per weekend (Friday night to Monday morning). Usually, three such cases occurred per weekend. Moreover, by far most of the injuries were of a very minor nature<sup>36</sup>. (1971-72)

The chief constable in Greenland states in a radio broadcast that violent crimes are on the increase.

When his statement is questioned, he admits that the rate may not be increasing in relation to the size of the population and other relevant factors. But one thing is certain: there is an increase in severity.

It can be proved that he does not hold any sound basis for comparisons, and it is questionable whether his claim can hold water. (1971-72)

An employee of the social security office, B, tells a study group about a personally experienced case: A girl wanted an abortion, and it transpired that a taxi driver had raped her one evening when she was a passenger in his car. From B's own notes in the case file, it appears that there was no clear question of rape. The taxi driver had "accosted" the girl who voluntarily had joined him for a ride.

The problem of relying on statements provided from apparently well-placed informants does not only have methodological significance in terms of a research project. What is perhaps more serious is that the picture projected to the surroundings is affected by such over-dramatized statements. Journalistic reporting is the first type of communication that comes to mind. It is by this that how most Danes acquire a vivid impression of Greenlandic conditions.

On the other hand, it is by no means certain that a better balanced, less dramatic, and more precise supply of information would alter much in the *journalistic* presentations. As is abundantly clear from the excerpts of articles quoted in this book, several of the scribbling explorers could hardly have written them in good faith.

Instead, the tenor of their articles may rather be determined by the demands of their editorial head offices for marketable material. Indeed, in certain instances it might even be that those that disseminate misleading and false information justify it by a belief that they perform an idealistic, critical service<sup>37</sup>.

As for reports of violence and criminality in Greenland, this critical activity seems to bolster a plain old-fashioned law-and-order point of view. In a broader sense it may further a frequently proposed populist idea to get it over quickly: sell Greenland or move the population to a warmer climate.

One can also fear that the exaggerated description of the societal situation has an influence on administrative and political decisions. Often such decisions are still made far from Greenland, and often by persons who have only a vague knowledge of the realities. A more sober presentation of the situation would provide a better basis for decision-making.

Internally, within the Greenlandic society, the somewhat exited atmosphere of course contributes to the difficulties of everyday life. More long-term consequences, personal and family-related, also stem from all the idle talk and rumour-mongering.

In Greenland it is also a criminal offence to breach the rules of professional secrecy (The Greenland Criminal Code § 29). It is no exaggeration to say that this paragraph is violated in full measure and nearly daily in the towns of Greenland.

It has been my experience, for instance, that after cosy evenings of chatting in many private homes, one may take home a mass of information about specific persons. One might learn who has syphilis now, who recently beat his wife, who is not paying alimony, who does not send his children to school, who is being charged with what, etc., etc.

A person sentenced for many impulsive thefts is in transit through the airport of Sondre Stromfjord. A social worker who knows of this person's case file specifically points him out and warns several fellow travellers. *Hold on to your handbags and wallets. Now, just listen to me ...*

The narrator who related the tale about how to obtain an education (page 10) is a public servant and the case and its records are under his field of responsibility. He did not think twice about writing down the story and submit it when I approach him and say that I have heard him tell it in town.

Two individuals employed as police superintendents narrate stories citing case files.

It takes place in a merry company on board a police vessel with members of the crew coming and going and with the door to the galley open.

During the conversation the names of several criminals are mentioned, as well as their colourfully described criminal deeds.

I wonder whether the cook in the galley could possibly be related to any of those mentioned.

One could go on citing examples of information leaks originating with the police, the health authorities, and social welfare offices; indeed, from all institutions in society. Had those



officials been working in Denmark, they would probably have paid a good deal more attention to the professional secrecy.

It is no wonder that civil servants posted in Greenland take such things a bit more lightly. First, many of them certainly feel that their gossip will not be met with serious consequences: There is no control, and the chatter within Danish circles is very unlikely to leak out to the surrounding society. Furthermore, there is a common feeling amongst those occupying administrative positions that they are stationed in a shared and odd situation. They feel like badly integrated guests in an unfamiliar world that they are required to administer.

“The others” - that is, the Greenlanders - are the *objects* of one's well-meaning, and at times self-sacrificing, efforts. Psychologically, they may have a need to discuss the population professionally, just as teachers discuss a class of children in the staff room.

Finally, many Danes refer to their perception of Greenland as a special, local community, where “everyone knows everything about everyone else”. In such a situation one need not be cautious:

A Danish teacher came into conflict with the local police in a matter relating to a lost boat.

The boat had been found by a man who now asked for salvage money which the police considered to be reasonable. Except for that, the matter had nothing to do with the police.

The teacher thought that the man might have stolen the boat when it was adrift. Or that he had possibly concealed lost property illegally, by hiding the boat so well that the teacher could not find it even by following the man's directions. He wants the police to step in. The police refuse to do so.

In discussing the matter with a policeman, the teacher wants to know whether he might speak directly to the finder:

*Does... he speak Danish?*

*Yes, fluently. He served time both in Vordingborg and in Herstedvester, answers the policeman. He refers to a mental hospital and a prison in Denmark. The irritated policeman then advises the teacher against trying to seek out the finder. He mentions in this connection that the man “has killed before” and describes an old murder case.*

The teacher is frightened and spreads the story as an example of how Greenland is like the Wild West, with dangerous persons being at large. He says that the police are “scared to death” and do not dare to charge the boat-finder with theft or theft by finding. He passes on the name of the boat-finder and declares that he did not know that he was “a killer”.

In fact, the finder can certainly not be described as dangerous, and the policeman only wanted to tease the teacher and protect the finder against an unjust accusation.

The policeman subsequently admits that he *maybe should not have told the tale about the case and about Herstedvester, etc.*, but he defends himself by saying that *it is common knowledge here.*

Even if “everyone knows everything” in the local communities, it is still no excuse for breaching the professional secrecy. Especially not when untruths are told, as in several of the quoted stories which emanate from official sources.

But the idea of local society as being a place where nobody has a private life and where everyone knows everything, contrasts also glaringly with fundamental Greenlandic cultural standards that attach great importance to discretion, personal integrity and not to meddle with the affairs of others.

For example, a recurring minor cultural clash happens whenever the Dane tries, as he usually does, to establish contact with the Greenlander by means of questions about his family background, where he grew up, his education, whether he is married or not, and about his job and where he lives. Often such attempts at communication end in silence, and a feeling that the Greenlander feels a bit embarrassed on behalf of the enquirer.

There are many well-preserved secrets in Greenlandic families, even in the smaller settlements. And there are still more occurrences that people try to disregard and forget about by just not talking about them.

In one of the smaller towns a homicide was committed. No one had ever experienced a thing like that before.

On the day of the murder there was some talk about what had happened, but from then on, for years, the event was practically unmentioned.

The killer no longer lives in the town. Nevertheless, nobody wants to talk about the matter when they are together with others. This is explained by the fact that almost always, even in a small group, a relative of either the murderer or of the victim will be present. The subject is therefore taboo. One does not want to make the people concerned feel sad. (1971)

Such silence may be a requirement, perhaps a necessary one, for the rehabilitation of people sentenced for criminality.<sup>38</sup>

In the example cited above, both parties to the case were generally well-liked in town, and this may have played a part. One often gets the feeling that less care is exercised to protect individuals and their families if they are already regarded as “black sheep” in the social environment. In such cases there may be an even greater need for public servants to strictly adhere to the rules of professional secrecy.

A young man has formerly committed a couple of violent crimes. He now lives with his parents. He has been admitted to the local hospital a few times and is now being treated as an out-patient for a mental disturbance.

In the past year, since he was last in hospital, he has isolated himself and seldom leaves home. Clearly, he has had the experience of being teased by people who say that he is crazy (and such teasing have been verified by others). He believes that personnel of the hospital told people in the town about his condition.

In another connection, the doctor at the said hospital confirms that it has been necessary to hide psychiatric records because he discovered that some of the employees showed a great interest in them. (1975)

## Conclusion

Anxiety and fear of violence do not emerge in Greenland for no reason at all, but the fear seems exaggerated and is marked by misconceptions. An explanation for this can be found in the normally unstructured environment within which the entire population lives.

The conditions are marked by a lively rumour-mongering that takes the form of a need to create a social reality. Furthermore, this is aggravated by the lack of information about essential conditions and, insofar as Danes are concerned, by extensive social isolation as well.

Based on several rumours and the way they spread through different groups of the population, I have shown how fear of violence and the preoccupation with it serve various purposes for the different groups concerned. Perceptions and memories are conditioned by the special interests and experiences of each group.

Danes in Greenland use the stories to convey a “moral” which illustrates the depressing social and human situation brought about by modernization. To some degree the stories serve to criticize the special Greenlandic criminal code and its predisposition to not meting out traditional punishment. Moreover, these tales help to create a stereotyped picture of the Greenlander as a primitive, unpredictable, brawny child of nature.

In their Greenlandic versions the stories are characterized by a greater degree of detail and realism in their attempts to provide explanations, even in those cases where the rumours seriously distort the truth.

When the Danish mass media transfer the stories to Denmark, they are altered to serve a clear political function. They are twisted to support the view that there exists a serious and ever-growing conflict of ethnic interests. Thus, the violence is now seen as a manifestation of hatred of Danes and of severance of Greenland from Denmark. Such an interpretation is seldom encountered in Greenland, where it is clearly contradicted by reality.

The lively creation of rumours and the widespread fear may in several ways exert an influence on the general level of violence. Though it would be difficult to prove, it seems likely that the anticipation of violence might be a factor leading to the creation of violence (in statistical terms as well).

Precise information about violent incidents is difficult to come by, except when it is provided by key persons in the administration. This leads to methodological and political problems, not least because the source of the more fantastic tales may be found amongst these very key people who are considered knowledgeable about the conditions they talk about.

Finally, great ethical problems relate to this phenomenon. Here I particularly refer to the fact that some administrative personnel do not honour their professional confidentiality as they would have done in Denmark. This failure to maintain confidentiality contradicts important Greenlandic cultural standards which protect private life in local society.

Since part of the problem derives from the inability of Danes posted to Greenland to interpret their surroundings and their isolation within the society, remedies like the following might be used to alter the situation:

Those posted could be offered better training prior to being sent overseas to make them particularly aware of the socio-psychological aspects of their own situation, which encourage fear, rumour-mongering and a tendency towards stereotyping. Then, after they have arrived in the country, more could be done to provide them with information that is straightforward, undramatized and, not least important, factual with respect to any violence that occurs<sup>39</sup>.

Perhaps various arrangements could also be introduced aiming at minimizing the isolation of the Danes. Such steps would be advisable for many other reasons than just to prevent rumour-mongering and stereotyping.

Finally, there is nothing to prevent the authorities to strongly emphasizing the rules of professional secrecy. The population should be informed of its right to have this measure enforced.

It might not be possible to do much about improving the informational role of the Danish press, and this is sad because the worst segment of the Danish press is read diligently in Greenland.

## Bibliography

- 1) Allport, Gordon W. & Postman, Leo J.: The Basic Psychology of Rumor.  
in: Maccoby, E. E. et al. (eds.):  
*Readings in Social Psychology*  
3rd. ed., London 1966
- 2) Asch, S.E.: Effects of Group Pressure upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgments.  
article in 1)
- 3) Bartlett, Frederick C.: Social Factors in Recall.  
article in 1)
- 4) Berlyne, D.E.: Laughter, Humor, and Play.  
Chap. 27 in Lindzey, G. & Aronson, E. (eds.):  
*The Handbook of Social Psychology*  
2nd edition, volume III  
Reading, Massachusetts 1969.
- 5) Brody, Hugh: The People's Land. Eskimos and Whites in the Eastern Arctic  
Penguin Books, Great Britain 1975.
- 6) Dahlerup, Ulla: "Ulla Dahlerup fra Gronland" (Ulla Dahlerup from Greenland)  
BT (Copenhagen afternoon daily), 3rd August 1974, p.4.
- 7) Ekstrabladet (Copenhagen afternoon daily), 22 July 1974.
- 8) Festinger, Leon et al.: When Prophecy Fails  
New York, 1955.
- 9) From, Franz: Om oplevelsen of andres adfaerd (About the perception of other peoples' behaviour) Copenhagen 1963.
- 10) Fugl, Mette: Lordag eftermiddag paa Hotel Godthaab (Saturday afternoon at the Hotel Godthaab). Politiken (daily), 28 July 1973, p.9.
- 11) Gluckman, Max: Gossip and Scandal  
Current Anthropology, vol. 4, No. 3, June 1963.
- 12) Goldschmidt, Verner & Chemnitz, Guldborg: Samfund og kriminalitet i gronlandske byomraader (Society and Crime in Greenlandic towns)  
Nyt fra samfundsvidenskaberne, n.d., (Copenhagen 1975)
- 13) Hansen Thorkild: Sommer i Angmassalik (Summer in Angmassalik)  
Billedbladet (Copenhagen weekly), No. 45, 9. November 1973.
- 14) Jacobsen, Claus: De domte er de heldige og velkladte  
(Those sentenced are the lucky and well-dressed ones.)  
Politiken (daily), Copenhagen, 25. June 1972.

- 15) Janis, Irving L.: Anxiety Indices Related to Susceptibility to Persuasion  
The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology  
vol. 51, November 1955.
- 16) Janos, Howard: Crime in a changing Society  
Penguin Books, rev. ed., Great Britain 1969.
- 17) Koster, Ditte A.: Frobisher Bay: Ambiguity and Gossip in a Colonial Situation  
MA Thesis, Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, 1973.
- 18) La Barre W.: The cultural bases of emotions and gestures  
Journal of Personality  
16, 1947, pp.49-68.
- 19) Nielsen, Bent:
  - a) Om voldsmand og hjemmestyremænd i Gronland  
(On assailants and home-rule men in Greenland)  
Radio broadcast, Radio Denmark, P2, 10. November 1972
  - b) Du skal skyde din hund (You must shoot your dog)  
Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1972.
- 20) Oberg, Kalervo: *Culture Shock*  
*Paper presented to the Women's Club of Rio de Janeiro,*  
Brazil, August 3, 1954.
- 21) O'Neill, John: *Sociology as a Skin Trade*  
London 1972.
- 22) Petersen, Palle: Gronlanderne diskriminerer ogsaa danskerne  
(Greenlanders also discriminate against the Danes)  
Interview in Aktuelt (daily) 6. May 1973.
- 23) Randrup, Max: "Men bag den smukke overflade lurer hadet ..."  
(But under the beautiful surface lurks the hatred ...)  
Ugens Rapport (weekly magazine), No. 40, 1973.
- 24) SermitsiaK, Godthaabs avis (Godthaab's newspaper)  
vol. 16, no. 49, 6. December 1974.
- 25) Shibutani, Tamotsu: *Improvised News. A sociological study of rumor*  
New York 1966.
- 26) Sigsgaard, Peter: Voldsskader og skjult vold i en arktisk by  
(Harm done by violence and dark figures in an Arctic town)  
Nordisk Tidsskrift for Kriminalvidenskab (Nordic Criminology Periodical)  
III-IV, pp. 266-277, Copenhagen 1974
- 27) Tagiuri, Renato: Person Perception  
Chap. 23 in 4)
- 28) Textor, Robert B.: Cultural Frontiers of the Peace Corps M.I.T. Press, USA, 1966.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Goldschmidt & Chemnitz, 1975, p. 74 f.

<sup>2</sup> The town was at the time known under its Danish name. The Danish name is kept throughout in the present translation from Danish. The town's name was later changed into its Greenlandic name: *Nuuk*.

The school in question was by 1977 named Technical School.

<sup>3</sup> "kamik-mail": News informally communicated from person to person. "Kamik" is the name of the traditional boots made of sealskin.

<sup>4</sup> Half of the respondents answering in the affirmative came from bigger towns, half of them came from settlements.

<sup>5</sup> See Brody, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Questionnaires were distributed to the homes of Danes posted to Godthaab in one late afternoon, by distributors who themselves made the selection of residences from within certain specified parts of town. The forms were collected the same day. Only those at home took part in the survey.

The sample selected is thus clearly not representative. Among other things, there is an under-representation of unmarried men and an over-representation of married women.

Since the study indicates that a somewhat higher proportion of unmarried people express fear of moving about town, one would have expected a rather higher proportion of positive answers to question 21 if the selection had been a representative one. However, nothing can be stated with certainty. Among other things, one could, *very hypothetically*, assume that the unmarried persons not found at home might have been found in the pubs of the town. Only the fearful were found at home in the study.

<sup>7</sup> SermitsiaK 1974-2-1. "Myggedalen" is a residential area in Godthaab.

<sup>8</sup> Laughter may serve very different purposes from one culture to another. The limits for when and where this form of emotional expression may be employed also varies from people to people. A smile or a laugh is, therefore, not particularly easy for a foreigner to interpret.

Re this, see: La Barre, 1947, Tagiuri 1969, Berlyne 1969.

<sup>9</sup> See From, 1963.

<sup>10</sup> See Oberg, 1954.

<sup>11</sup> See Textor 1966

<sup>12</sup> See Sarnoff & Zimbardo 1961

---

<sup>13</sup> Some new Danish teachers arrived at a district in North Greenland, they were very eager to "get started".

It turned out that one had been placed in a settlement where he was supposed to work on his own without any possibility of being able to communicate with the inhabitants.

In Denmark he was told something quite different, such as that there were Danish-speaking teachers in the locality.

Immediately declaring that the task was an impossible one, off he went to the settlement in the best of spirits.

Someone who was knowledgeable about the circumstances thought that *"he was the right sort of person to be sent up there. It is better to start in a realistic frame of mind. Thus we do not end up with a lot of disappointed people. This person will really be able to accomplish something"*. (1971)

<sup>14</sup> See Bartlett, 1966.

<sup>15</sup> See Allport & Postman, 1966.

<sup>16</sup> Commentary provided by the source in a letter accompanying the written account of the story.

<sup>17</sup> The source of this tale told me that the comparison precisely illustrated the absence of justice.

The special Criminal Code of Greenland differs from that of Denmark in allowing for the handing down of sentences that are adapted to best serve rehabilitation of the person being sentenced. This means that the same offence may result in different sentences.

Furthermore, penalties are different from those meted out in Denmark: Prison terms are unknown, and there is the possibility of being sentenced, to such things as training, banishment, and paid employment.

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that the threatening remarks said to have been directed at the doctor occurred about two years *after* the said doctor had disappeared (compare with the kernel of truth of the story).

The vanished doctor is missing from a trip on a sailboat on the same day that A. returns from a rather long trip abroad. It is unlikely that A. would stand out to sea on such a day.

Furthermore, it is quite improbable that the storyteller would know of A.'s feelings and his comments. A. is supposed to have sailed alone.

<sup>19</sup> Jacobsen. 1972

<sup>20</sup> Nielsen, 1972 a.

<sup>21</sup> Petersen, 1973

<sup>22</sup> Personal communication from Palle Petersen, who was interviewed.

<sup>23</sup> Ekstrabladet, 1974

<sup>24</sup> Dahlerup, 1974



---

<sup>25</sup> Ulla Dahlerup described conditions as she saw them in a whole series of articles that might well serve as a template for a good deal of the information on Greenland that the Danish press provides.

In this connection it is quite significant that many of the articles are concerned with life in pubs and with undocumented accounts of violence. Conflicts Danes and Greenlanders provide the main theme of the series.

A few examples:

1) "In Godthaab a drunken Danish taxi-driver drives down the street between the apartment blocks trying to hit the Greenlandic children playing there. - *Then there will be one black less of that kind to sponge on the Danish taxpayers*, he mumbles angrily."

2) "*There is a smell of hatred of the Danes. If one day oil is found, they will shoot us dead and throw us into the sea*, says a craftsman from Jutland."

3) "Danish racism has made us so hated that many Danes - even policemen - do not dare go out after midnight" (BT, August 7th, 1974, front page).

<sup>26</sup> Fugl, 1974

<sup>27</sup> Randrup, 1973

<sup>28</sup> See Shibutani 1966

<sup>29</sup> One could also call it: *the definition of the situation*

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. Asch 1966, Festinger 1955

<sup>31</sup> See Janis 1955

<sup>32</sup> See Jones 1969, p. 12 f

<sup>33</sup> In a local newspaper interview (SermitsiaK 1974) I expressed the view that the situation regarding violence in Greenland was not quite as bad *as imagined*. My remarks were met with very critical comments from among others the chief constable of the Greenland police force.

In a subsequent discussion he explained that though he agreed with me, he had *reacted rather strongly*. One reason being that at precisely that moment there was some danger that a grant for the construction of county gaols might be postponed.

He thought that the content of the interview might be used to argue in favour of a cutback (however, this did not transpire).

<sup>34</sup> Gluckmann 1963

<sup>35</sup> See Koster 1973

<sup>36</sup> See Sigsgaard 1974

<sup>37</sup> This is evident as far as Ulla Dahlerup is concerned. She has defended her articles in the daily BT with such arguments (BT, 15<sup>th</sup> August 1974).

---

<sup>38</sup> Against that background. It is worrying that a police report can serve as the basis of a novel, as has recently happened (Nielsen 1972 b).

In the novel, a real murder is the starting point of the plot of the book, and the author is clearly inspired by the original police report. Material from it is used, and the description of the case makes it an easily recognizable one in Greenland.

However, the background to the murder is treated very loosely, and the characters appear in a symbolic, beautified, idealized form.

The novel was published in a serial, translated form in *Gronlandsposten* (The Greenland Post, a local Greenlandic newspaper). It has therefore guaranteed been read by most people of the settlement where the main character in the case (and his family) lives.

For another example of the poetic use of documentary material, one might study an article by Thorkild Hansen in *Billedbladet* (Danish pictorial weekly). See Hansen, 1973.

The suicide of a 19-year old man is unravelled in some detail with his name being mentioned, and with help provided by doctors, police, school authorities (both in Greenland and in Denmark), and the local telegraph service. His girlfriend, mentioned by name, is among others mentioned as the reason for the sad event. The story is eleven pages long.

<sup>39</sup> This enjoin a special secrecy on radio and press editors in Greenland: Sacrificing people by mentioning their names and dwelling in detail on their incredible deeds should be avoided. More emphasis needs to be put on the motives for the acts in question.

A rare, and in my opinion positive, example is to be found in the newspaper *Gronlandsposten* that published a series on the theme "criminality" at the beginning of 1976.

One should also not uncritically accept the reports of local correspondents. It has been seen that these contain erroneous information about what has taken place, about the backgrounds of the people involved, and about their feelings regarding what they have done. Often these correspondents obtain their material exclusively from the police, who must be considered parties to the case. The police might not, for instance, for tactical reasons describe a fight as "an attempted murder" in the preliminary charge - and then subsequently play down the incident to a correspondent.

---

This book was published in Danish in 1977 by Gyldendal, Copenhagen, Denmark. ISBN 87-01-56331-9. Its title: *Angst og dagligsnak om vold i Grønland*  
It was republished as a Danish language e-book in 2019 by Lindhardt & Ringhof, Copenhagen, Denmark. - ISBN: 9788711944103

The author translated the present pdf-book into English from the original.  
2021 ©Peter Sigsgaard – [www.petersigsgaard.dk](http://www.petersigsgaard.dk)  
Front cover illustration by Ole Sporning

ISBN 978-87-972836-1-5