

The Nooter photo collection and the Roots2Share project of museums in Greenland and the Netherlands

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Résumé de l'article

En 2008 deux musées hollandais et deux musées groenlandais ont entamé un partenariat pour partager des collections photographiques conservées dans des musées des Pays-Bas. Ces photographies avaient été prises entre 1965 et 1986 par les époux Gerti et Noortje Nooter à Tiniteqilaq, village situé dans le fjord de Sermilik, dans l'est du Groenland. Gerti Nooter, qui était alors conservateur du Musée de La Haye et du Musée National d'Ethnologie de Leiden, avait mené une recherche anthropologique dans cette communauté de chasseurs en pleine transformation. Il y avait pris des photographies et collecté des objets pour les deux musées des Pays-Bas. Le Musée national d'Ethnologie avait entretenu une longue collaboration avec les musées du Groenland ainsi qu'avec la communauté tunumiit locale. Le projet de rapatriement visuel Roots2Share fut lancé pour restituer ces photographies à leurs communautés d'origine et permettre à ces dernières d'y avoir accès. Ces photographies sont l'aboutissement d'interactions interculturelles; elles représentent les ancêtres des Tunumiit et véhiculent des sens multiples, à caractère ethnologique ou exotique pour un public hollandais, historique ou ancestral pour les gens de Diilerilaq. Ces photographies ont suscité de multiples récits. Cet article explore la relation entre les photographies et le savoir des Tunumiit, ainsi que les questions de patrimoine culturel, de la propriété et du partage de ces images.

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En 2008 deux musées hollandais et deux musées groenlandais ont entamé un partenariat pour partager des collections photographiques conservées dans des musées des Pays-Bas. Ces photographies avaient été prises entre 1965 et 1986 par les époux Gerti et Noortje Nooter à Tiniteqilaaq, village situé dans le fjord de Sermilik, dans l'est du Groenland. Gerti Nooter, qui était alors conservateur du Musée de La Haye et du Musée National d'Ethnologie de Leiden, avait mené une recherche anthropologique dans cette communauté de chasseurs en pleine transformation. Il y avait pris des photographies et collecté des objets pour les deux musées des Pays-Bas. Le Musée national d'Ethnologie avait entretenu une longue collaboration avec les musées du Groenland ainsi qu'avec la communauté tunumiit locale. Le projet de rapatriement visuel Roots2Share fut lancé pour restituer ces photographies à leurs communautés d'origine et permettre à ces dernières d'y avoir accès. Ces photographies sont l'aboutissement d'interactions interculturelles; elles représentent les ancêtres des Tunumiit et véhiculent des sens multiples, à caractère ethnologique ou exotique pour un public hollandais, historique ou ancestral pour les gens de Diilerilaaq. Ces photographies ont suscité de multiples récits. Cet article explore la relation entre les photographies et le savoir des Tunumiit, ainsi que les questions de patrimoine culturel, de la propriété et du partage de ces images.

Abstract: The Nooter photo collection and the Roots2Share project of museums in Greenland and the Netherlands

In 2008 two Dutch museums and two Greenland museums started a cooperative venture to share the photo collections of museums in the Netherlands. The photographs were taken from 1965 to 1986 by husband and wife Gerti and Noortje Nooter in Diilerilaaq, a village in the Sermilik Fjord (East Greenland). Gerti Nooter, then curator at the Museon in The Hague and at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, was doing fieldwork in that changing hunting community and, as part of that research, took photographs and collected museum objects for both Dutch museums. The National Museum of Ethnology in particular has long had a working relationship with Greenland museums and the local Tunumiit community. Through the visual

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repatriation project Roots2Share, these photographs have been scanned and returned to the communities where they originated and where they can now be accessed locally. As a product of cross-cultural interactions, they depict ancestors of present-day Tunumiit and carry multiple meanings: ethnological or exotic ones for a Dutch public and historical or ancestral ones for the people of Diilerilaaq. Many stories have been told about them. This article explores the relationship between the photographs and Tunumiit knowledge, as well as issues of cultural heritage, ownership, and sharing of these images.

Introduction

Most of the world's great museums and universities have built up magnificent collections of artifacts from Indigenous peoples around the world. An increasing number of Indigenous peoples are now calling upon these institutions to return at least part of their collections or information about these collections. They want access to the artifacts and knowledge their ancestors shared with the original collectors. In 1970, the UNESCO ratified the *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* (UNESCO 1970). This was a turning point in policies on the purchase of cultural heritage. Museums have since become increasingly aware of their responsibility in preventing illegal trade of ancient artifacts on the world market. Debate began with concerns over looting and led to the *UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects* (UNIDROIT 1995). Unfortunately, it has yet to be ratified by several European countries, the United States, and the Netherlands in particular.¹ This convention does not apply to legal and fair trade, although the distinction between illegal and legal trade has not always been clear-cut. Cultural heritage can be legally acquired and still subject to disputed claims of ownership:

On account of this lack of legislation, repatriation is sometimes denied with arguments about the legality of its appropriation, or claims have been complied with on an entirely voluntary basis. Consequently repatriation is a complex phenomenon, which touches upon a lot of different approaches. Since most of the disputes relate to material appropriated within a colonial or otherwise occupational context, repatriation is not restricted to museological implications, but is connected with a wide variety of political, legal, ethical, and cultural issues, including international policy, human rights, identity, and cultural matters (Thorleifsen 2010: 83).

¹ In 1995 the Netherlands signed the 1970 UNESCO Convention and ratified it in 2009. In 2005 the Netherlands signed the Unidroit Convention but that country has not ratified it yet since it requires a change to the Dutch legal system.

In the original colonial context, there may have been respect for principles of fairness and legality that were considered appropriate at the time but no longer are. In recent times, the Indigenous peoples of Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia have been forerunners in re-examining scientific research on the basis of political and ethical principles. Their efforts have resulted in dialogue with Indigenous peoples around the world, interaction of academic institutions with source² communities, and development of collaboration by those parties. In the United States, protection of ancient burial grounds led to passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, which has resulted in repatriation of many Aboriginal human remains and associated artifacts, as well as sacred objects (e.g., Sullivan et al. 2000). Yet relatively few cultural heritage objects have been affected, since most fall outside the purview of this legislation.

Strong, sustained, and mutually beneficial relationships with source communities are critical to universities and museums with collections from Third and Fourth World peoples. These relationships are forged through a complex process that requires mutual input. At the international level, many such institutions are now looking for ways to work with source communities in order to repatriate or provide access to knowledge (e.g., ICOM 2004). To return museum objects to their places of origin is legally complicated. The collections are often state-owned, and permission is needed from the government or from a regional authority. An alternative is knowledge repatriation, which can roughly be defined as returning information to the source community in the form of pictures, statistics, documents, and archival material. As Krupnik explains:

Native people keep saying that “when a knowledgeable old person dies a whole library disappears”. In fact, we anthropologists, have also built massive libraries on knowledge of native societies [...]. This knowledge once generously shared with us, has to be shared once again, this time with the communities we work with. This is a new ethical aspect to our work, which I elsewhere called “knowledge repatriation” (Krupnik 2005: 72).

The originals—or their copies—are repatriated for use by the source community. When scanned images are repatriated, the terms “visual repatriation” or “virtual repatriation” are used.

For a while, European academics tried to steer clear of the debate on repatriation and heritage protection. Today, they acknowledge that they must become involved in these debates (e.g., Gabriel and Dahl 2008; Renfrew 2000; Scholten 2010). Denmark, England, and France (to some degree) have led the way. Denmark, as a former colonial power, and Greenland, as a former colony, have shared a political relationship for several hundred years (since 1721). In the last few decades, this relationship has developed into a more equal and respectful one of cooperation. As a result, Denmark returned 35,000 objects to Greenland during the 1980s and 1990s; the last ones were returned in 2001 (Bouchenaki 2004: II; Rosing and Pentz 2004: 29).

² The “source community” is where the material originated (see Peers and Brown 2003).

In this respect, Dutch museums of ethnography have lagged behind, and some university departments have only recently entered the debates on research ethics and repatriation. The Faculty of Humanities, the Faculty of Archaeology, and the Faculty of Social Sciences at Leiden University, and the National Museum of Ethnology in the same city have decided to share the knowledge they have accumulated on their American collections with Indigenous peoples. New ways of working with source communities to share collections and cultural heritage were explored during an expert meeting in Leiden in 2007 (Broekhoven and Buijs 2010). Earlier that year, the Greenland National Museum and Archives in Nuuk hosted an international conference on repatriation of cultural heritage. The conference was aimed at researchers and museum curators, representatives of Western governments, Third and Fourth World communities, UN agencies, and other inter- and non-governmental organizations. It stimulated multicultural dialogue and increased mutual respect among all parties (Thorleifsen 2010: 84).

This article describes the East Greenland photo collections in Dutch museums and presents new ways of cooperating with Greenlandic source communities to provide access to the collections through visual repatriation. It also explores how the Tunumiit of East Greenland interpret the items of their cultural heritage that are housed in the Netherlands.

An overview of East Greenland collections in the Netherlands

In Dutch museums, the Arctic is not very well represented. There are only three major collections from that region. These small but important collections are at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden (4,000 objects from the circumpolar area, including 2,000 from East Greenland), the Museon in The Hague (1,800 objects mainly from East Greenland), and the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam (ca. 600 Canadian Inuit objects). There are also 11,000 Tunumiit photographs in the Netherlands: 1,500 from the 1960s at the Museon (copies in Leiden), and 4,000 photographs and 8,000 slides at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden.

During the first half of the 20th century, museum directors in the Netherlands often exchanged collections with one another. The early Arctic collections acquired by the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden exemplify this practice, having been exchanged with the National Museum of Copenhagen in 1926. These objects were usually collected by civil servants in the Danish colonies during the 19th century. Documentation is limited, usually consisting of a static description of the culture in question. Evolutionary theories inspired by the German *Kulturkreise* ('cultural field') still dominated museum studies in Europe. Cultures were thought to evolve from "primitive" to complex industrial societies, a theory that ignored the unique way in which each Indigenous people perceives its culture.

The 1930s: Collections gathered by Tinbergen and Van Zuylen

The Tunumiit artifacts at the Museon in The Hague were collected by Niko Tinbergen, a Dutch biologist and Nobel Prize laureate, and by De Bruïne and Van Lohuizen. They originated in the Tasiilaq (Ammassalik) area of East Greenland and were collected during the International Polar Year (IPY) of 1932-33. Tinbergen wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on his ornithological research, but also amassed biological and ethnographic collections for the Museon in The Hague. Jacob van Zuylen, the leader of the 1932 IPY expedition, stayed one year longer than the other members to continue his meteorological research. During this extra year he took 250 black-and-white photographs in Tasiilaq, Kuummiit, and Diilerilaaq dating from 1932-1934.³

After World War II, Dutch museums were enriched by several Arctic collections purchased from art dealers or donated by private individuals. A few university professors donated small collections to the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden. One of these donations was a minor but interesting collection of Canadian Inuit objects that the Dutch anthropologist Van den Steenhoven gave in 1957 after a year-long stay among the Inuit in Canada while studying Inuit law (Marcus 1998: 192ff; Steenhoven 1959, 1962). After 1960, Dutch anthropologists became actively involved in fieldwork, combining research and collecting. They grew increasingly interested in Inuit artists as individuals with personal styles at a time when the dominant paradigm was the general category of primitive art (e.g., Gerbrands 1990; Nooter 1972).

1960-1990: Photographs taken by Gerti and Noortje Nooter

From 1960 to 1970, Gerti Nooter was a curator at the Museon in The Hague and a curator for the Native American and Arctic collections of the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden from 1970 to 1990. He conducted fieldwork in East Greenland between 1965 and 1990. Nooter combined anthropological research with collecting, the result being the rich Inuit collections of objects and photographs in The Hague and Leiden.

Nooter began to focus on the hunting village of Diiderilaaq in East Greenland, where he made eight field trips,⁴ including a one-year stay in 1967-1968 with his wife Noortje and their three children. At that time, the Diilerilaamiit still had a subsistence economy of sealing and fishing. Life was in many ways still traditional and based on mutual and kinship interactions between men and women, and among families.

The Nooter family lived and shared their lives with the Diilerilaamiit. The two oldest children went to the local school in Diilerilaaq and learned Danish and Greenlandic. Gerti and Noortje paid visits to the people in the village and shared their

³ First displayed in Leiden in 2001 and first published in 2004 (Buijs 2004).

⁴ In 1965, 1967-1968, 1970, 1973, 1975 (in Upernavik, West Greenland), 1977, 1979, 1982, 1986, 1987 (on the west coast), and 1990 (in Nuuk, West Greenland).

lives as much as possible. In winter, Gerti studied kayak building and Inuit hunting techniques while accompanying the hunters. He also collected items for the museums. Most of the slides were taken by Gerti Nooter's wife, Noortje Nooter, who almost always accompanied her husband. The couple photographed a culture in transition, including its hunting and fishing activities, equipment manufacture, traveling, and village life: women with their children, school activities, the church, Holy Days, such as Christmas and Easter, *Mitaarnek* or *Uaajeerneq*,⁵ sailing on the Sermilik fjord, dog-sledding, sewing of clothes, and preparation of sealskins. The images are surprisingly free of stereotypes of the noble savage or a vanishing culture (Figures 1 to 5). During their first few visits, they photo-documented the making and use of indigenous material culture. Staged poses were usually absent. The Nooters recorded life as it was, depicting "real people" and their lives.

Nooter conducted research on continuity and change in material culture. East Greenlandic Inuit society was changing rapidly due to Danish colonization, modernization, centralization, the cash economy, and industrialization. Western influence and modernization were leaving their traces in the material culture. Nooter was not motivated by "salvage anthropology" nor did he describe the Greenlanders as a disappearing culture. In his view, a culture was an ever changing, adapting, and transforming phenomenon. He thus collected plastic household utensils and modern rifles next to wooden meat containers, blubber lamps, harpoons, and sealskin kayaks.

Nooter recorded his experiences in a diary, later using his notes for articles and books about the Tunumiit (Buijs 2006). His documentation and photographs are a valuable source of information. It is along these same lines that National Museum of Ethnology curators have carried out fieldwork to document social and material change. Their work also focuses on intangible aspects of heritage (e.g., oral history, social practices, identity symbols) that relate to material culture. The Leiden artifacts from the 1970s to 2010 combined with the 1930s and 1960s objects from the Museon constitute a unique East Greenland collection in Europe. The museum's older East and West Greenland collections have intrinsic value, yet these later historical collections hold even greater interest because 20th century "modern" objects have been incorporated, thus providing a diachronic and comparative perspective.

Repatriating photographs to East Greenland

The photographs taken by Gerti and Noortje Nooter were ordered and financed by his employers at the two Dutch museums, which also paid for his travel expenses (excluding Noortje's). Nooter's work was ethnographic in nature, and thus partly based on knowledge from the Tunumiit. Yet this people's contribution is not legally recognised, since no formal agreements were made during Nooter's fieldwork. Furthermore, under Dutch law, photographs are the photographer's intellectual property for 50 years. The names of Gerti and Noortje Nooter are intrinsically related to the

⁵ The last two events are midwinter activities with disguised performers (see Buijs 2004: 74-78, 210).

collection and will continue to be so. In the 1990s the couple donated Noortje's slides to the museum in Leiden, which is now the legal owner.



Figure 1. Noortje Nooter and Kornelia Kajammat in amautit, Diilerilaaq, 1967. Photo: G. Nooter, Museon 67-02-19-37.



Figure 2. Lars and Asta Jonathansen eating cooked fish from a plate, Diilerilaaq, 1967. Photo: G. Nooter, Museon 67-03-58-10.



Figure 3. People preparing salmon near the shore, Diilerilaaq, 1967. Rowboats came into use in the early 1960s. Photo: G. Nooter, Museon 67-03-58-05.

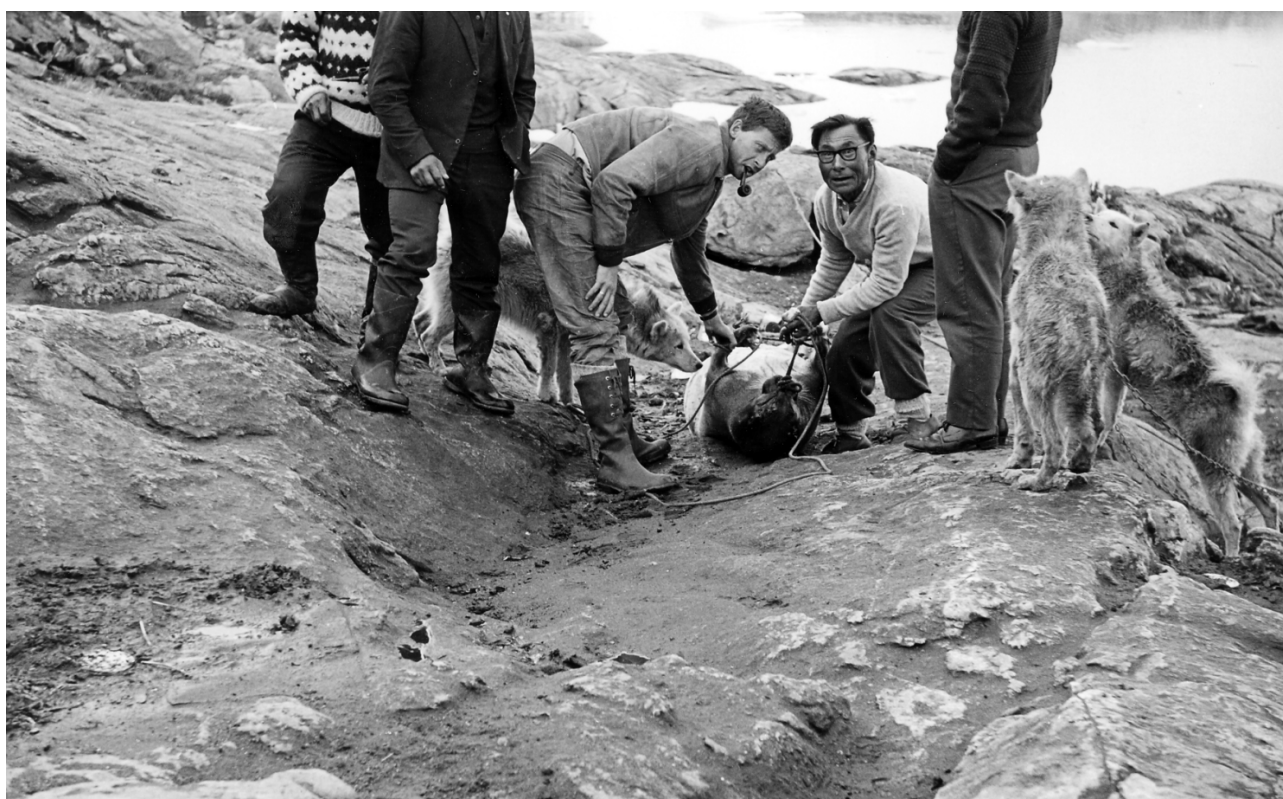


Figure 4. Gerti Nooter and Moses Akipi transporting a bearded seal. Nooter was invited to appear on this photograph, Diilerilaaq, 1967. Photo: N. Nooter, Museon 67-03-58-14.



Figure 5. Elisa Sivertsen, her daughters Thomasine and Melina, and her granddaughters after leaving the church on Sunday. They asked Gerti Nooter to photograph them because they looked beautiful in their Sunday best, Diilerilaaq, 1967. Photo: G. Nooter, Museon 67-03-58-26.

In 2001, one of us (Cunera Buijs) visited Tasiilaq (Ammassalik) and Diilerilaaq (Tiniteqilaaq) in East Greenland during her Ph.D. research on clothing and identity. She brought old photographs from the collections of the National Museum and Dansk Polar Center (both in Copenhagen), the National Museum of Ethnology (Leiden), and the Museon (The Hague). She showed them to the Tunumiit in order to elicit information on changes and developments in dress. It turned out that many East Greenlanders were interested in the photo collection. They recognized ancestors and provided names and other information connected to the people involved. As she received too many requests for copies of the photographs to provide them on the spot, she sent them afterwards from the Netherlands.

That same year, Cunera Buijs and her colleague Herman de Boer organized a small exhibit of 20 printed photographs taken during the 1930s in East Greenland by the Dutch scientist Jacob van Zuylen. The exhibit later opened at Det Grønlandske Hus ('The Greenlandic House') in Copenhagen and Odense, the National Museum in Nuuk, and the Tasiilaq Museum in East Greenland. In 2008, it returned to Greenland for display at museums in Narsaq, Qaqortoq, Asiaat, and Sisimiut. In 2011 it toured some of the villages in East Greenland. The small 2001 Van Zuylen exhibit generated considerable attention, and so did the later KIAANA exhibit, based on the photographs that Danish photographer Jette Bang took from 1936 to 1962 (see Johnsen 2010). Such interest drew reactions from Daniel Thorleifsen and Aviâja Rosing Jakobsen,

respectively director and curator at the Greenland National Museum and Archives in Nuuk, who recognised that these old archival photographs in the Netherlands were a shared heritage and belonged to Greenland as well. Thus arose the idea of a joint endeavour between museums in Greenland and the Netherlands.

In October 2007, the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden and the Greenland National Museum and Archives in Nuuk signed a memorandum of understanding to share knowledge on the collections. In 2009, this agreement was extended to the Museon in The Hague and the Ammassalik Museum in Tasiilaq. All four museums had East Greenland cultural heritage in their collections and thus joined the visual repatriation project Roots2Share. The project was developed to give the Tunumiit access to their cultural heritage by various means. The Dutch curators, in cooperation with their Greenlandic counterparts, organized travelling exhibitions. Together they developed the website Roots2Share to give Greenlanders, and the general public, an opportunity to see and print the old photographs, to read the old texts, and to add their own information and comments in their own language.⁶

Tunumiit knowledge about the Nooter photographs

In 2009, Tunumiit were interviewed by Jeroen Toirkens, Petra Sjouwerman, and Julius Nielsen in Tasiilaq and Diilerilaaq about the Nooter photo collection.⁷ The interviews provided a wide range of responses on many points: landscape, ice, snow, and climate change; hunting and fishing techniques; aspects of material culture such as kayaks, preparation of skins and sewing of clothes; individual life events; family histories, rituals and feasts, village life, history of a colonial town, building of the first trading post, etc.

The photographs and slides depict landscapes, hunting grounds, and fishing grounds with Tunumiit families camping at different places along the Sermilik Fjord in summer, and people from Diilerilaaq kayaking or travelling by motorboat. The photographs prompted the Tunumiit to recount traditional knowledge about travel routes and places for catching *ammassat* ('capelin'), gathering eggs, or hunting seals. Several men studied the photographs of material culture, explaining Tunumiit names for harpoon heads, fishing equipment, and details of kayaks. The men were more interested in the landscapes than were the women, and they added the names of hunting grounds and other old places of importance, relating them again to specific individuals.

Knowledge about ice, snow, and glaciers was offered about winter landscapes in the photo collection. Hunters told us about seal hunting in winter, narwhal hunting in summer, and associated dangers. In the Sermilik area, they noted rapid changes in the

⁶ The project is headed by Aviâja Rosing Jakobsen, Cunera Buijs, Diederik Veerman and Carl-Erik Holm. The website is hosted by the Museon in The Hague.

⁷ These interviews are part of an exhibit at the Museon in The Hague and will be featured in Greenland as part of a travelling exhibit in 2012.

environment when comparing photographs from the 1960s with those from the 1980s or later. The photographs triggered observations about retreating glaciers, melting ice, new travel routes due to climate change, changes in animal migrations, and pollution. Krupnik (2005: 72) calls this phenomenon “greening of local knowledge”:

In old days, hunters’ success and the availability of game animals was always viewed as an outcome of proper human behaviour, of abiding to established guidelines, spiritual rites, ritual conjunctions, and beliefs. Hunters of today, even the elders, speak increasingly in terms of stock “health”, pollution, and climate change [...]. this is a global process, as schooling, modern media, and game management regimes advance the “green” component of local knowledge, to the demise of traditional paradigms (Krupnik 2005: 72).

The photo collection provides ample opportunity for discussion. Photographs with identifiable places and landscapes are available over a time span of more than 40 years. Similarities and differences connect contemporary people to their past and allow them to reflect on change and continuity in their lives. The information shared about the photographs contributes to recording of more Tunumiit knowledge. Old photographs are connected to today’s stories, and will become future knowledge (Edwards 2001; Krupnik and Kaneshiro 2011; Krupnik and Mikhailova 2006; Thisted 2002; Van Broekhoven and Buijs 2010).

Some Tunumiit women and men spent much time looking at the photographs of people. They recalled personal names and explained the relationships between these people and themselves. The older generation recognized relatives and earlier generations of their families, and they explained the different kinship terms to us. At these moments they freely showed emotion, sometimes sadness, and often great joy on seeing images of their (deceased) relatives. Furthermore, the use of their own language (Tunumiisut) was important in these discussions since it strengthened their identity and created feelings of well-being (*cf.* Fienup-Riordan 2005; Krupnik 2005).

The photos evoked personal memories about East Greenland’s cultural and community history. One story told by Tunumiit informants sheds light on the culture in transition and the way European culture was perceived at first contact. Manes Larsen chose a photograph of Paulus Larsen with his young son Lars (Figure 6), who died in early childhood, to tell this story:

I was working at the KGH [Royal Greenland Trading Company, now Pilersuisoq] [...]. I was on a flight for the first time [of my life]. We landed in Kangerlussuaq and I saw for the first time a taxi, very strange and low. It was difficult to choose [European] food. I took the same as a Dane who was before me, since I had no idea how it would taste. [...] It tasted awful. I almost threw it up. [...] The next day we sailed with the *Kunuunnguaq* to Nuuk. Everybody on board would start working in the factory and Tsuulugai Andreassen became [...] my best friend. He fell out of the upper bunk and got stuck between the cupboards, so I helped him to free himself. We could not laugh, we had to be silent! After arrival [...] we received an advance payment, we had no money and would have to buy blankets. [...] In 1967 my brother’s son was born during Christmastime. I wanted to travel home to see him and I got permission from my boss to go home (Manes Larsen, Tasiilaq, 2009).



Figure 6. Paulus Larsen with his young son Lars, who died in early childhood, Diilerilaaq, 1968. Photo: G. Nooter, Museon 68-01-32-23a.

Thomasine Jonathansen saw a photo of herself as a child catching fish (Figure 7) and she remembered:

We caught arctic char (*kaporniarngaq*) with our hands. Efraim chased them away from under the stones with a stick and I caught them. I bit them in the head to kill them. [...] I did not notice that Gerti took a photograph of me. I heard I [my portrait] hang in a museum. Later on I asked if I could have that picture. He said it was not possible, because the photograph was in the museum in Holland. He would give it later to me, but I never received it. Maybe he wanted to keep it to himself (Thomasine Jonathansen, Diilerilaaq, 2009)?

For museums, photo collections are archival material to be described and documented. For Indigenous people, these photographs are eyewitnesses to beloved relatives and historical events. The viewer's experiences imbue the images with multiple interpretations.

For us, this is our daily life. It is just the way we are used to do things. The way we talk, the way we make our clothing, prepare sealskins, go out by motorboat. It is just our life. We do not see it as special. But for you it is special. You make me think and reflect on my culture. Now I understand all this is our culture, our identity, our cultural heritage. I think it is valuable now, although for us it is just the way we live. It is good to keep our culture alive (Martha Jonathansen, Tasiilaq, 2010).



Figure 7. Thomasine and her brother Efraim (Epa) Kristiansen catching Arctic char, at Kiliilaainni near Diilerilaaq, 1967. Photo: G. Nooter, Museon 67-03-59-08.

Tunumiit consultations in Dutch museums

In November 2010, a group of five Tunumiit were invited to travel to the Netherlands to study the Tunumiit collections in Leiden and The Hague (Figure 8). There, they found their cultural heritage from as long ago as the early 20th century and up till the present day. The Dutch collections include traditional and transitional material culture and show how new materials such as plastics, glass, and aluminum have been incorporated into a long tradition of creating material culture from indigenous materials. Textiles, for instance, have been rapidly adopted into the Tunumiit wardrobe, with skin garments disappearing and being replaced by Western clothing.

The collections have been properly inventoried and the names of the Tunumiit who made and used the objects have been recorded. Åge Kristiansen, one of the Tunumiit visitors, found a toy, a small wooden boat he himself had made for his younger brother Isak in 1967. He remembered the way he had made the boat and remembered how his 10-year-old younger brother had played with it all day along the shore in front of the village of Diilerilaaq. Isak would pull the toy through the water while making the sound of a motorboat or cotter, which he definitely wished to have later as a grown-up (Åge Kristiansen, Leiden, 2010).



Figure 8. Thomasine Tarkissimat, Thomasine Umerineq, Gideon Qeqe, Paulus Larsen, and Åge Kristiansen visited the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden in November 2010 and discussed with curator Cunera Buijs their cultural heritage in the Netherlands. Photo: Jeroen Nooter, National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden.

The Tunumiit visitors asked about ownership of the collections and the way they are stored, preserved, and exhibited. They added extra information on specific objects, and told their own related personal stories. They stated that Tunumiit objects and photographs abroad belong to their Tunumiit culture and are theirs although they realised that without the Dutch museums their cultural heritage would have been forgotten and probably thrown away.

We cannot keep this unique collection today as you do here in museum storage. We do not have the equipment and facilities. We are very glad you take the time and energy to take care of our cultural heritage [which is] being kept so well in modern storage rooms in the Netherlands. We believe these objects are ours. But we are glad they are here in Holland. We enjoy tremendously that we now have access to these collections and photographs and that we know now what is left of our cultural heritage. Maybe in the future we can have part of the objects returned to our local museum and [could] keep it in Tasiilaq. Being here in the Netherlands provides good opportunities to work with you together and have a shared project. This collection of our past is our partnership for the future (Åge Kristiansen, Leiden, 2010).

The web site Roots2Share

The project Roots2Share went online officially in 2010 with the aim of visual repatriation of Tunumiit images housed in the Netherlands. Yet it is not about “real” repatriation. In the future, the Tunumiit may request the return of these unique photographs and objects to Greenland. Often such claims become part of a politicized process, as we know from the experiences of world museums (Pentz 2004; Sullivan et al. 2000; Rosing Jakobsen 2010; Thorleifsen 2010). In a sense, visual repatriation is easier than real physical repatriation.

A Roots2Share website was built to give access to more than 8,000 photographs and slides from East Greenland. Internet connections are very limited and technical problems in the municipality are considerable. Often the schools and villages are disconnected from the Internet for weeks. Yet many Greenlanders have their own websites and are active on Facebook. Because there are so many photographs in Dutch institutions, a website is the most appropriate way of delivering them to the public. On the website, Greenlanders can decide which information is the most important for them to add to the photographs in their own language and reflect on each other’s comments.

The Tunumiit can enter comments or information into the database in their regional language (Tunumiisut). The decision to add Tunumiisut as a website language was made by the East Greenlandic consultants during their visit to the Netherlands in 2009. Initially, some of them wished to opt only for Greenland’s official languages, i.e., West Greenlandic and Danish. They discussed the status of the East Greenlandic language and its continuing lack of fixed spelling but decided that the opportunity to use their own language was very important: “Now we have the chance to use our own language, since it is a Dutch initiative. If we wait, we will never have the website translated into Tunumiisut. The photographs are from our region, it is our own culture, then we should also use our own language” (Gideon Qeqe, Amsterdam, 2010). It was decided to allow the following languages on the site: East Greenlandic, West Greenlandic, English, and Danish.

In May 2011, Diederik Veerman, curator at the Museon in The Hague, and Cunera Buijs introduced the website Roots2Share to East Greenland. Stand-alone versions of the website and laptops for Internet access were transported to Tasiilaq and Diilerilaaq. Community meetings and local school workshops were organized. The local people reacted positively and asked to see more of the photographs, as many as possible. We therefore organized a total of four meetings at the local community centre in Diiderlilaaq. Paulus Larsen, a youth worker, led the meetings and the Diiderilaamiit told their stories about the photographs to the village audience (Buijs 2010: 33-34). Greenland museums have taken an active role in the project by featuring the exhibits on the website Roots2Share. This will be a way to share the scanned photographs and slides with the Tunumiit source community. Since Dutch and international audiences will add their own comments, there will be a broader-based dialogue on cultural heritage.

In the future the project aims to extend the social tagging facilities to collections from other source communities in the world. There is a mutual advantage to sharing: “our archival institution is certainly benefiting from the information that’s been given by the Elders because without their knowledge we would never know who these individuals are” (Smith 2008: 5).

Conclusion

Museum collections in Europe, including the Netherlands, usually developed within a colonial context. There is no colonial relationship between East Greenland and the Netherlands, but there are still differences in control of and access to Tunumiit collections. The East Greenland photographs from the Nooter collection, together with related knowledge, form the core of a visual repatriation project, which two Dutch and two Greenland museums have initiated in cooperation with representatives of the local source communities. Photographs and objects embody information that is revealed in interaction with people who want to share their knowledge about them. Their responses have much to teach us. The photographs provide evidence from cross-cultural encounters, depicting members of the Nooter family in contact with Diilerilaaq villagers. They are therefore part of the cultural heritage of the Nooter family as well as the inhabitants of Diilerilaaq.

For museums, the collections not only preserve important cultural items but also imply great responsibility. Often heritage issues become politicized and contested. For the local community, the people whose ancestors are depicted on the photographs, it is difficult and sometimes impossible to express what the collections mean to them and to claim control or access when the photos are owned by respected museums in another country. The legal owners often claim the collection as part of their own history or the history of their country. The development of trade, whaling, and so forth may be considered part of European history and may thus give that country ownership rights to the collections.

One could argue that by choosing virtual repatriation and not an actual transfer of photographs, the Dutch museums have made no real changes to proprietary rights. Nonetheless, through the website Roots2Share Tunumiit communities have gained some “ownership” of their cultural heritage, since they can now decide what information they wish to add in their own language. Peers (2010) states that some major shifts in the thinking of ethnographical museums are necessary to overcome the gap between them and local communities:

The shift from the assumption that museums exist to house relics of dying cultures to seeing museums as material archives, resources for living cultures; the shift from museum staff being authorities on Indigenous cultures to acknowledging that Indigenous people are the authorities on their own cultures; the shift from thinking about museum objects as things, to thinking of them as potentially animate, and as embodying sets of relationships; the shift from museums working in isolation from source communities to working in partnership

with them. [...] relationships [are] becoming central to work between museums and Indigenous peoples (Peers 2010: 184).

To a Dutch public and to East Greenlanders, the photographs differ considerably in their meaning, importance, and possibilities for development. The Tunumiit see them as their cultural heritage and not as “ethnographic” artifacts. For East Greenlanders, seeing and reacting to the photographs, recognizing their relatives and deceased ancestors, all this includes much stronger, intrinsic, and personal meanings than for a Dutch public. For Indigenous communities a photo collection has powerful symbolic value that can strengthen their identity (Brown and Peers 2006: 200; King and Lidchi 1998; Kingston 2003: 134; Pinney and Petersen 2003). The legal right of ownership of the museums and the moral right of descendants carry weight on different levels. Obviously, different values are at stake. Competition and contested ownership rights “push people apart instead of bringing them closer together” (Scholten 2010: 10).

To avoid such a situation, cultural heritage is sometimes presented as part of “world culture” and as belonging to an international forum, the premise being that culture from all over the world is for everybody. This premise ignores, however, the intrinsic claims of local communities and individuals who recognize their village members and their forefathers. Local communities often lack the means to protect their own heritage and the expertise to put forward their ownership claims. Source communities often have no access to the collections and have insufficient knowledge about the nature and size of their heritage abroad. Different approaches, layers of meaning, and values are involved. In the documentary *Inuit Piqutingit (What Belongs to Inuit)*, Inuit elders visited five museums in Canada and the United States. Commenting on the collections they saw, Madeline Ivalu said: “I felt sorry for the people that gave away their only possessions. The clothes that they gave are worn but they are well preserved. I thank the people that preserved the clothing and also the people that gave away their only clothing. I’m sure they didn’t want to part with them” (in Kunuk and Dean 2006: 41:58-44:22). It is important to recognize the value of different approaches to ownership and the sensitivity of the issues involved. An open and respectful approach leaves room for different interpretations and for claims by the local community. Such an attitude provides ample opportunity for new ways of cooperation and partnership. Sharing of collections can benefit all parties involved and will help to create relationships of mutual respect.

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