


# Blubber for Bibles: translating colonialism in Inuit missions, c. 1750–1850

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## Research Article

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### Abstract

Between 1750 and 1850, at least twenty versions of the Greenlandic Bible were published through the efforts of Greenlandic catechists, Danish Lutherans, German Moravians, the Danish Bible Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS). This article assesses the role of Greenlandic and other Inuit translators as they were engaged in the colonial project of devising a complete version of the scriptures in their own language. Using the relatively untapped correspondence of the BFBS, it considers how and why the status of Inuit translators changed over the course of the missionary translation project. In one response to the reception of new Bibles, Inuit people offered gifts of blubber to the BFBS to support translations for other mission communities. To understand the meaning of this exchange, this essay brings together the methodologies and perspectives of missionary linguistics. It uncovers the unique role played by Greenlandic and other Inuit translators and catechists, foregrounding their contribution to a successful national project, the creation of a national language for independent Greenland and the emergence of literate Christian communities. By reading along and against the grain of colonial archives, it seeks to recover something of the names and motivation of Inuit scripture translators.

## Blubber for Bibles: Translating colonialism in Arctic missions, c. 1750-1850

They now begged me to send this collection of blubber (yielding 30 gallons of oil) to those generous friends who printed the Bibles for them, that more heathen might be presented with that book (Kohlmeister, 1821).

This article examines the creation of the “Eskimo” or “Esquimaux” Bible and the conflict and collaboration between the missionary and Bible societies who sustained missions to Greenland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The creation of a complete translation of the Greenlandic Bible was a truly trans-national project. From records of their correspondence with the British and foreign Bible Society (BFBS), it was achieved at considerable intellectual and financial cost by Greenlandic catechists and converts, Lutheran and Moravian missionaries from Denmark-Norway and German-speaking lands, and financial support from the Danish Bible Society and the BFBS. Using the archival records of the latter, it seeks to illuminate the motivations of mission translators and the role assigned to Greenlanders in the translation project. It argues that the Greenlandic Bible that emerged in the nineteenth century reflects the political, intellectual and religious tensions that would precipitate the departure of the Moravians from Greenland in 1900. According to Mark Nuttall (1990, p.331), scripture translation was a political achievement led by Lutheran missionaries, that elevated the status of Greenlandic and facilitated conversion to Christianity and the assertion of a national identity for Greenland. In contrast, the Moravians in Labrador had a pragmatic, mercantilist approach to translation and conversion, encouraging the Inuit to exchange blubber literally and metaphorically for Bibles. Despite the differences between the two missions on issues such as the inclusion of the non-canonical books of the Bible, and the extent to which missions should accept oversight by colonial and trading powers, the need for high-quality translation of scripture was one thing on which they could all agree.

### Inuit and colonial religious archives

While the records of the mission and Bible societies who sought out the Inuit are historically important, like other colonial archives they were not created for the benefit of Inuit peoples, but rather to control, order and appropriate their economic resources and cultural assets, including their languages (Basu & De Jong, 2016). Lutherans and Moravians were financially dependent on royal patrons and other wealthy elites, supplemented with what profits could be made from mission-led trading companies, such as Hans Egede’s Bergen Greenland Company (Strøm Tejsen, 1977, p.451-474). Yet the process was not entirely in one direction nor were the Greenlanders passive in their response to missionary and other colonial agents. The earliest

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**Table 1.** Names of Inuit Translators discussed in the text. Inuit personal names are given in the form most commonly encountered in historical sources. European personal names are Anglicised, e.g. Paul not Poul, Peter not Peder. If available, modern forms of Inuit names have been taken from *Den Store Danske*, the Danish online encyclopaedia, or the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*

Received name in Europe	Christian forename(s)	Source	Modern spelling	Dates
Kalicho		Best 1578		d. 1577
Arnaq		Best 1578		d. 1577
Nutaaq		Best 1578		d. 1577
Jhiob		Etting 2009		fl. 1654
Gabelou		Etting 2009		fl. 1654
Gunelle		Etting 2009		fl. 1654
Sigio		Etting 2009		fl. 1654
Poek	Christian	Cranz 1767	Pooq	c. 1695-1729
Qiperok			Qiperoq	c. 1700-1729
Female companion of Poek	Christina			d. 1729
	Carl Daniel	Cranz 1767		d. 1729
	Sophia Magdalena	Cranz 1767		d. 1729
Pungiok	Hans	Egede 1788	Punnqujook	
Arnarsak		Egede 1788	Arnarsaq	c. 1716-c. 1790
Tullimak		Egede 1788		c. 1716-c. 1778
	Maria	Egede 1788		fl. 1747
	Benjamin	Kleinschmidt 1821		fl. 1821
	Shem	Kleinschmidt 1821		fl. 1821
20 Catechists		Kragh 1873a, b		fl. 1873

travellers and translators considered in this paper (Table 1) enjoyed moral and intellectual conversation with missionaries such as Paul Egede, who achieved fluency in their language. From at least 1800, letters to and from missionaries, and the existence of libraries, suggest high levels of literacy in Greenlandic and a thirst for religious books and other literature (Frandsen, 1999). Hence, the status and role of Greenlanders as scripture translators needs to be assessed from colonial mission archives by reading “against the grain,” looking for silences and elisions in the official record. At the same time, as explained by Laura Stoler (2009), mission records should be read “along the grain” to reveal the internal logic and motivation that allowed the voices of some Greenlanders to appear, while others were silenced. A reading “along the grain” should note the embrace of conversion by women and men from many Inuit communities, for whom the Bible was a gift and a treasure for which Inuit translators such as Armand Tagoona were prepared to devote extraordinary time and energy (Laugrand & Laneville, 2019). However, acculturation, literacy and conversion led by Inuit Christians with access to scripture in their own languages were a slow process, as Laugrand (2002), Rollmann (2020) and others (Laugrand & Oosten, 2015) have explored, and mostly come from the post-colonial era. Inuit translators from the earlier period are more elusive.

The Lutheran mission was begun by Hans Egede in 1721 and evolved into the Church of Greenland to which most Greenlanders now belong. The Moravian mission in Greenland began in 1733 and ended in 1900. Christian missions to Greenland, leading ultimately to the complete translation of the Bible, cannot be separated from imperialism, which was practised

by Denmark-Norway like other Atlantic powers, and using similar policies (Brimnes, 2021; Rud, 2017). Prior to 1814, Denmark-Norway acquired colonies in India, West Africa, the Caribbean, Greenland and other Arctic islands. These colonial possessions were secured using military, commercial and religious strategies, including the creation of missionary societies, the training and dispatch of missionaries from the Missionary College in Copenhagen and the establishment of missionary stations in the colonies. Simultaneously, Greenlanders took advantage of the opportunities created by contact with Europeans, including the creation of a new, literate culture which was intimately linked to scripture translation and the “fixing” of the language (Nielsen, 2015). In colonial linguistic terms, “fixing” or “reducing” a language without a previously written form meant identifying its constituents and encoding them in a regular orthography, always with the loss of the full range of spoken utterances and meaning across a typical dialect continuum.

Archival sources for Lutheran and Moravian missions to Greenland have been preserved, though with significant gaps, including losses by fire in the case of the Lutheran mission in Copenhagen. Fortunately, there are unique and extensive records of the negotiations with the BFBS for the publication of translations into what was called the “Eskimo language,” namely Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic) and Inuttut, the Labrador dialect of Inuktitut (Tables 2 & 3). Bible societies provide a relatively untapped resource for the history of contact between Indigenous peoples and Europeans. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Canstein Bible Society (1710) began publishing cheap bibles for distribution in German-speaking lands (Heidenreich, 2024). The creation of the

**Table 2.** Printed scripture translations into Greenlandic, 1744-1900. Source: “Eskimo (Greenland)” compared with the British Museum Catalogue (1892) and Pilling (1887), BFBS Archives, CUL. Full publication details for all the editions in this table are provided by Pilling (1887)

Date	Translator	Text	Nature of text	Publisher	Printed
1744	Paul Egede	Four Gospels	Translation		Copenhagen
1750	Paul Egede	Four Gospels & Acts	Translation		Copenhagen
1766	Paul Egede	New Testament	Translation		Copenhagen
1788	Paul Egede	Metrical Psalms	Translation		Copenhagen
1794	Otto Fabricius	New Testament	Revision		Copenhagen
1799	Otto Fabricius	New Testament	Reprint		Copenhagen
1801	Otto Fabricius	Metrical Psalms	Revision		Copenhagen
1804, repr. 1829	Moravian missionaries	Harmony of Gospels	Translation		Barby
1822	John Konrad Kleinschmidt	New Testament	Translation	British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS)	London
1822	Otto Fabricius	Genesis	Translation	Danish Bible Society (DBS)	Copenhagen
1824	Niels Gjessing Wolf	Psalms	Translation	DBS	Copenhagen
1825	Niels Gjessing Wolf	Isaiah	Translation	DBS	Copenhagen
1827	Niels Gjessing Wolf	Revision of Fabricius' New Testament	Revision	DBS	Copenhagen
1828	Niels Gjessing Wolf	Proverbs	Translation	DBS	Copenhagen
1829	Peter Kragh	Daniel and Minor Prophets	Translation	DBS	Copenhagen
1832	Peter Kragh	Exodus, Deuteronomy, Ezra-Esther & Job	Translation	DBS	Copenhagen
1836	Peter Kragh	Joshua to ii Kings	Translation	DBS	Copenhagen
1842	Valentin Müller	Psalms	Translation	BFBS	Bautzen
1851	Moravian brethren (Valentin Müller)	New Testament	Revision	BFBS	Bautzen
1900	Samuel Petrus Kleinschmidt	Bible	Translation	Danish Government	Copenhagen

BFBS in 1804 sparked a new, outward-looking, movement to translate the bible into all the languages of the world (Howsam, 1991). By the end of the century, the bible had been translated into more than a thousand languages (Nida, 1972). Since then, the pace of global bible translation has, if anything, gathered speed and ambition (Barnes, 2011; Gerner, 2017).

For Inuit languages, the BFBS catalogue of printed editions of scripture by Darlow and Moule (1903-1911) can be supplemented by the online working catalogue in Cambridge University Library. Gaps include the original incoming correspondence of the BFBS for much of the second half of the nineteenth century and the loss of most early records of the Lutheran mission in a series of Copenhagen fires. But much else has survived, including transcriptions of the missing incoming correspondence in the BFBS letter books, and well-preserved correspondence for the Danish Ministry of Culture for the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, from the time when the Greenland mission was taken over from the Royal Danish Missionary College (Hansen, 1980). Taken together with the extensive printed records of both Moravian and Lutheran missions to Greenland and Labrador, there are rich sources for the “Eskimo” Bible project in the colonial era. These provide critical additional resources for understanding the knowledge exchange leading to Inuit literacy in Moravian and Lutheran missions (Olsthoorn, 2018) and with it the emergence of new Indigenous textual communities (Ballantyne, Peterson, & Wanhalla, 2020).

Nevertheless, because of the fragmentary nature of these sources, it is challenging to establish what Inuit scripture translators themselves thought of their role or their personalities and philosophy of translation (Taft, 1981). They undoubtedly functioned throughout the colonial era as mediators with a heavy responsibility for cross-cultural translation (Katan, 2014). Within the limitations of the archive, this essay aims to recover names and link Inuit translators to particular scripture projects, while avoiding the colonialist speculation that have haunted other translator figures in the Americas, such as Pocahantas, or La Malinche (Bassnett, 2012, p.5)

### Arctic mission linguistics

Arctic missions have attracted intense fascination from the earliest times, with Cranz's (1767) account of the Moravians in Greenland among the most celebrated and impactful missionary narratives ever written (Jensz & Petterson, 2021). The earliest mission histories were concerned to progress the mission enterprise, name and glorify individual European missionaries and translators, and avoid or downplay instances of conflict, and evidence of complicity with commercial colonisation ventures. In the second phase of interpretation, post-colonial historians have challenged claims of the benign nature of Danish colonialism and the role of missionaries in facilitating it. In more recent times, statues of

**Table 3.** Printed scripture translations into Labrador Inuttut, 1810-1878. Source: “Eskimo (Labrador dialect)” compared with the British Museum Catalogue (1892), Pilling (1887) and Pell Platt, BFBS Editorial Correspondence and Minutes, BFBS Archives, CUL

Date	Translator	Text	Nature of text	Publisher	Printed
1810	Moravian missionaries	Harmony of the Gospels	Translation	BFBS	Pr. At Barby
1810	Moravian missionaries	John [extracted from the Harmony]	Translation	BFBS	London
1813	C.F. Burghardt	Matthew – Luke	Translation	BFBS	London
1816	C.T.L. Schreiber	Acts	Translation	BFBS	London
1819	Moravian missionaries	Rom. – Rev. iii	Translation	BFBS	London
1826	Moravian missionaries	Revelation	Translation	BFBS	London
1830	L. Morhardt	Psalms	Translation	BFBS	London
1834	L. Morhardt	Genesis	Translation	BFBS	London
1837	L. Morhardt	Isaiah	Translation	BFBS	London
1839	Moravian missionaries	Four Gospels	Revision	BFBS	London
1840	Moravian missionaries	Acts. – Rev.	Translation	BFBS	London
1841	L. Morhardt	Exod. – Deut.	Translation	BFBS	London
1849	L. Morhardt	Prov. Jer. – Mal.	Translation	BFBS	London
1869	F. Erdmann	Josh. – Esther	Translation	BFBS	Stolpen
1871	F. Erdmann	Job – Eccles. [revision of Psalms and Proverbs]	Translation	BFBS	Stolpen
1876	Theodor Bourquin	4 Gospels & Acts	Revision	BFBS	Stolpen
1878	Theodor Bourquin	Rom. – Rev.	Revision	BFBS	Stolpen

Hans Egede (1686-1758) in Nuuk Greenland and outside the Frederik’s Church in Copenhagen have been daubed with red paint and marked with graffiti in the wake of the global Black Lives Matter protests (BBC News, 2020).

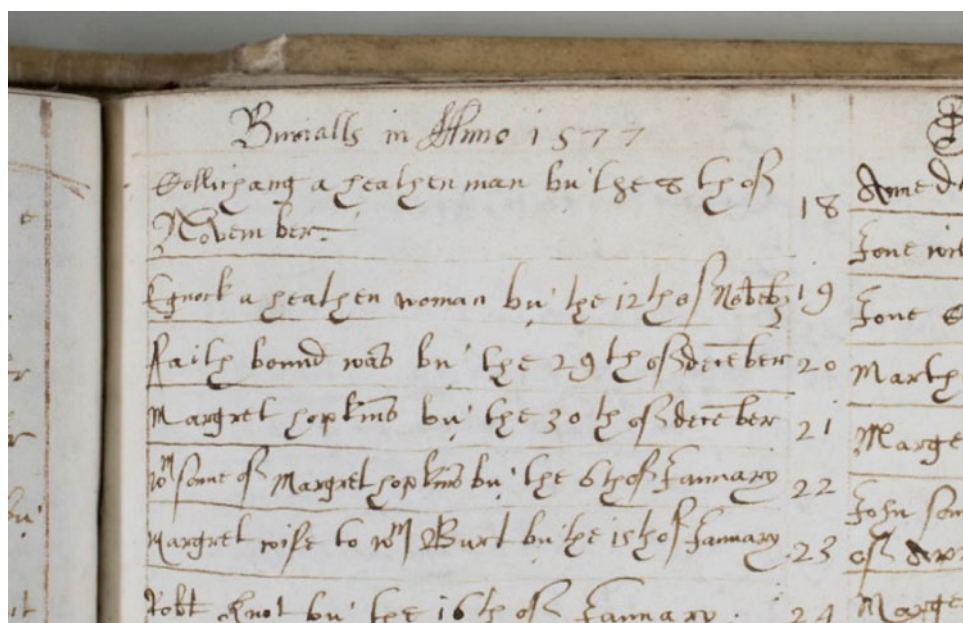
A separate, and largely independent framework of study has been provided through the lens of missionary linguistics and the related field of colonial linguistics (Errington, 2001; Stolz & Warnke, 2015). For the colonial implications of missionary translations, the leading study by Rafael (1988) has been reviewed in relation to Greenland by Petterson (2012, p.141). In general, early translations follow a common pattern of dependence on missionaries with limited understanding of local languages, followed by more accurate and idiomatic translations pioneered by Christian converts aided in many cases by the children of missionaries who had grown up alongside native speakers. This is the case with Samuel Kleinschmidt (1814-1886), who was born in Greenland to a Moravian missionary family and whose father, John Konrad Kleinschmidt (1768-1832), was the most important Greenlandic translator of his generation (Table 2). Sensitive studies of the language choices made by missionary linguists for the Greenlandic Bible have been made by Kleivan (1979, 1996), Nielsen (2012) and Petterson (2012), with a view to recovering both Greenlandic knowledge of their environment, as well as adaptation and acculturation to colonial impacts, the encounter with and conversion to Christianity and attainment of literacy. In this mode, Kahn and Valjarvi (2019, p.125-244) have examined the translation strategies pursued in naming Hebrew flora and fauna, unknown to northern latitudes, in the historical translation of North Sámi and West Greenlandic Bibles of around 1900. Nowak (1999, p.173-197) has examined the creation of the “Eskimo language” of Labrador (Inuttut) by Moravian missionaries. She notes that Greenlandic translations were superior to those for Labrador, mostly because they were based on a longer

period of residence by missionaries (see Table 3). The two languages are related, but not identical, and have been widening under the impact of Danish on Kalaallisut and English on Inuttut. Green (2022, p.59, n. 11) has considered the use of “ethnonyms,” or names used for ethnic groups, in historical Inuit Bibles, noting the challenge of identifying any but European translators in those from the colonial period. This article builds on these approaches to missionary linguistic records by examining the emergence of Inuit translators in historical scripture translations from the late eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century.

### Inuit captives and translators

The role of Greenlanders as scripture translators and knowledge agents in the exchange of their language with the Danish-Norwegian settler colonists, including missionaries, has to be seen within the wider context of the appropriation of Indigenous peoples and their culture in the course of colonialism. Following Greenland’s “discovery” in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there was a legacy of capture, exhibition and forced labour of Inuit peoples in Europe. These date from 1576 and 1577, when the privateer Martin Frobisher (c. 1535-1594) took Inuit captives from Baffin Island back to England. Within months, the man (“Kalicho”) and woman (“Arnaq”) fell ill and died in Bristol and received burial as “heathen” in St Stephen’s Church, where there have been community efforts to honour their memory (AUS, 2018). There is no memorial in the present church or churchyard, but there are entries for “Collichang, a heathen man” buried on 18 November 1577, and “Arnock, a heathen woman” buried on 19 November 1577 in the St Stephens General Register, 1559-1663, in Bristol archives (St Stephen Bristol, 1577) (Fig. 1). The child (“Nutaq”), lasted only a little longer and was buried in a London church (Vaughan, 2006, p.1-20).





**Figure 1.** Burials in Anno 1577 for “Kolicjang a heathen man” on 18 November and “Arnock a heathen woman” on 19 November (St Stephen Bristol, 1577). Source: Bristol Archives.



**Figure 2.** John White (fl. 1585-1593), An Eskimo Woman with Baby (Arnaq and Nutaaq); Eskimo Man (Kalicho), 1585-1593. Inuit from Frobisher Bay. Source: British Museum.

The captives were a sensation, and there are numerous images of them in British collections (Bleichmar & Mancall, 2011, p.198) (Fig. 2).

Inuit people were also captured and returned to Bergen in Norway with the Danish-Norwegian expedition sent by Frederick III to Greenland in 1654 (Etting, 2009, p.159). A painting, ordered by the king, dated Bergen, 28 September 1654, shows the four captives in their traditional dress and names the man as “Jhiob” and the three women as “Gabelou,” “Gunelle” and “Sigio” (Fig. 3). The king was allegedly planning to return them to Greenland, once they had learned the Danish language and converted to Christianity, to act as missionaries. Many Inuit captives died,

including Jhiob who never completed the journey, yet creating translators, converts and scriptures translations was often the justification for this practice.

The encounter between the Greenlanders and the missionaries was part of an exchange of knowledge, but a catastrophically unequal one. As missionaries and colonists removed Greenlanders to display and exhibit them in the capital, the Greenlanders acquired a knowledge of the city and its people – if they survived (Harbsmeier, 1997, p.33-72). While the Moravians frowned on the practice of enticing the Greenlanders to travel with them in order to use them for paid exhibitions, they were occasionally guilty of the same practice.



**Figure 3.** Jhiob, Gabelou, Gunelle and Sigio. Painting by unknown artist, after 1654. Source: National Museum of Denmark (Etting, 2009).

Like Collichang and Arnock, captive Inuit were the subject of intense curiosity and hundreds of images were taken of them in their traditional dress, hunting game or manoeuvring their kayaks. Swedish missionaries to the Saami, as well as both Lutheran and Moravian missionaries to the Greenlanders, perceived their activities as essential to the modernising of the native, providing them with pathways to education, civilisation and uplift and incorporation into the state (Harbsmeier, 1997, p.7). All these journeys were familiar strategies for drawing Indigenous people to the metropole and, as Stephen Greenblatt and Patricia Seed have argued, were fundamental to the ways that European conquest was marked and ceremonially facilitated (Greenblatt, 1991; Seed, 1995). Throughout the Arctic frontier, women were taken or “lent” as “wives” to whalers, and youngsters of both sexes were captured to act as translators or to identify hunting grounds and other resources. Others were seized to be displayed in human zoos and colonial exhibitions (Dreesbach, 2012; Meador, 2008). Where people could not be secured, traditional artefacts, grammars and even scripture translations might be displayed to represent colonial power over the exotic other in the great world fairs and exhibitions of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Carey, 2011). As with other Indigenous communities, the capture and relocation of children continued well into modern times, with the Danish government formally apologising for relocations which took place as recently as the 1950s (Guardian, 2021).

How much of this violent legacy was known about in Greenland is unclear, though missionaries provided a regular source of information from Europe. If even some of it was known, it is



**Figure 4.** Double portrait of Pooq and Qiperoq by Bernard Grodtschilling, 1724. Source: National Museum of Denmark.

unsurprising that Greenlanders showed little initial inclination to engage with missionaries in translating the Bible, learning to read or leaving Greenland. Hans Egede (1745) admitted that to initiate religious instruction, he used inducements ranging from presents to brute force. The transition from barbarian to Christian was one that was essential to the missionary project and that required some degree of literacy and an understanding of the Bible. While all captive Inuit were obliged to perform their primitivism to some degree, more respect was shown to Christian converts. The first Greenlanders to travel voluntarily to Copenhagen had accepted baptism and new Christian names. They were Poek (Pooq) and Qiperoq, who travelled to Denmark in 1724. Qiperoq died in Bergen a year later, but Poek made it safely home. In 1726, when Paul Egede returned to Copenhagen, Poek (baptised as Christian) and a female companion, Christina, accompanied the missionary, as well as two children, “who had just before made confession of their faith,” and received the names, Carl Daniel and Sophia Magdalena (Cranz, 1767, p.299, 307). They were welcomed at court, but all four died of smallpox in the Spring of 1729. As before, the visitors lived on in pictorial depictions (Pushaw, 2021), but even as Christians they were denied a voice in their own language and were invariably depicted in traditional hunting dress (Fig. 4). An 1857 edition of Hans Egede’s dialogue (discussed below) includes woodcut images of Poek and Qiperoq visiting the royal palace and riding in a carriage, looking rather bewildered (Harbsmeier, 1997, p.7). Other deaths followed, notwithstanding





Figure 5. *Evangelium Okausek* by Paul Egede (Egede, 1744). Title page (left) and Dedication (right). Image Source: CUL, BFBS, the author.

precautions which included a ban by Christian VI on any further visits by Greenlanders to the imperial capital.

Despite this doleful record, Greenlandic children who survived the repeated epidemics, as well as the children of the missionaries, were the foundation of a community who could read and correspond with each other and with missionaries in Denmark-Norway and for whom a number of texts began to circulate. Kleivan (1996) has examined the two dialogues which were printed in 1760 as an appendix to Paul Egede's *Greenlandic grammar*. She suggests that they may have been intended to form part of the corpus of teaching materials created by Paul Egede for the training of Danish Lutheran missionaries who were heading to Greenland. Egede himself refers to this in his journal. The "Dialogue between Poek, a Greenlander and his countryman after this return to Copenhagen" is lively and assertive. Poek was not awed by the tall buildings of the capital, or the crowds of people, "as many as mosquitoes" who thronged to see him and Qiperoq. He disapproved of the lack of the sharing of food and the disparity between rich and poor. Poek observed that the only thing the Long Beards (Europeans) seemed to value in Greenland was rendered blubber, which they used for lighting lamps (Egede, 1760, p.232-233). In the second dialogue, between a missionary and an *Angekok* (shaman), there is again a lively tussle, but the superiority of the Christian God is not in doubt. The *Angekok* suggests that it was the ancestor of the Europeans who sinned, not the Greenlanders, to which the missionary counters that all people have the same ancestor. Finally, the missionary promises that, next time they meet, he would teach him how, with God's help, all might be happy in the next world (Egede, 1760, p.232-233).

While the Lutherans made progress, it was not until 1756 that Cranz suggests that the German-speaking Moravians were able to make headway with the language, since the first generation could understand neither Danish nor Latin, the language of scholarship, and "they had no Greenlanders about them." Only by "indefatigable application" had they managed to translate several hymns and Bible passages: "and they continue still frequently to consult the most intelligent Greenlanders in point of the language, by which means their dictionary and grammar is daily improving (Cranz, 1767, vol.2, p.413)." Greenlanders were emerging as readers and consumers of scripture, and this would be a gateway to other texts and, for good or ill, the Atlantic world.

### Early Inuit translators

Over the course of the next century and a half, Lutheran and Moravians collaborated on the most prestigious of all missionary tasks, the translation of the gospel. This is a brief account of progress, based on the records of the BFBS (Darlow & Moule, 1903-1911) and Neilsen's major bibliographic study (Nielsen, 2012, 2015). Since neither Nielsen nor the BFBS catalogues refer to a single Greenlandic collaborator, the following account includes all those whose names can be discerned from other sources.

### *Arnarsak, Pungiok and the Egede Translations*

As noted above, the first "Esquimaux Bible" was begun by Hans Egede, who spent three years learning the language, but the work was completed by his son Paul (1708-1789), who also wrote the first Greenlandic grammar (Egede, 1744) and dictionary (1750). According to Cranz (1767, p.296), Egede had begun work on the language by translating, "as well as he could in this intricate language," short questions and answers on "the Creation, the Fall, Redemption, Resurrection of the body, and the Judgement-day, and also some prayers and hymns," to which the Greenlanders listened patiently at first, and then only under duress. He made better progress when his son Paul had mastered the language, "because he could make himself more agreeable to [the Greenlanders] and they could better understand him (Cranz, 1767, p.301)." In his journal, Paul Egede explains that, in 1722, in order to engage the interest of the Greenlanders, his father allowed him to prepare some lively Bible stories, including the Creation, the Flood, the life of Christ, his death and ascension, the judgement and resurrection, to create a body of teaching material in what he called, "this exceedingly difficult language (Egede, 1788: 10)." He tried to use some manuscript questions and answers which had been prepared by his father, but these were so faulty that he was not surprised that the Greenlanders laughed when he tried to catechise with them.

Paul Egede's translation of the four gospels was printed in Copenhagen in 1744 (Fig. 5) and carried a dedication to King Christian VII (Egede, 1744). By this date, Hans Egede had returned to Denmark where he had been installed as Director of the Missionary College in 1740, a post he continued to fill until his death in 1758. In the preface, Egede states that he devoted

his leisure hours to the holy scriptures and other godly books. He had completed the translation, diligently conferring with Father Superintendent Egede, so as to “make the mind of the Holy Spirit clear and understandable in Greenlandic” though he confessed to difficulties in finding equivalent words in Greenlandic to words such as *Hellig* (holy), *Retfaerdig* (righteous), *synod Dom* (sinful judgement), *dome* (judgement) and *fordoem* (foreknowledge) (Egede, 1744, p. Dedication). To deal with these issues, he consulted his father and resorted to footnotes to provide additional explanations. Paul Egede’s name appears on the cover of this edition, indicating his claim for priority of authorship. The Greenlanders are unnamed, other than as *disse vankundige Folk* (these ignorant people) who were the recipients of scripture truths. Yet it is evident from Paul Egede’s journals that he worked closely with a number of Greenlandic collaborators, including Arnarsak (c. 1716-f. 1778) (Lidegard, 2022), who had been converted and baptised in 1737, and Hans Pungiok, who came to Denmark in 1738. In 1740, Arnarsak and a ten-year old boy called Tullimak accompanied Egede on his return to Copenhagen where, like previous captives, they attended church services and testified to their status as new Christians.

For knowledge of the translation work of Arnarsak, Pungiok and a small number of other Greenlanders, we are reliant on Paul Egede’s journal, which was published in Danish in 1788 (P.H. Egede, 1788) and in a German translation in 1790 (P. H. Egede, 1790). Throughout the journal, Egede acts as the translator and ventriloquist for his Greenlandic friends and collaborators. To liven the narrative, he gifts them with varied and individual voices, delighting in their sense of humour and insight into their own changing world and language, and that of the Europeans. While never crediting the Greenlanders with a direct role in scripture translation, Egede showed respect for their insight into the challenge of translation and for the potential moral challenges of presenting newly converted people, with the violence, irrationality and immorality of some sections of the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. At the beginning of 1737, Egede states that when he attempted a translation of the Book of Genesis (which was never published), he anticipated many difficulties. For these, he blamed the inadequacies of the Greenlandic language and the Greenlanders themselves, “since the nation has no religious worship, government, science or crafts (P. H. Egede, 1790, p.102),” as well as their constant interruptions. Petterson (2014, p.78) observes that Egede’s comment reflects the complexity of Bible translation work, which necessarily took place in the space generated by European missionaries, new Greenlandic Christians and traditional hunters. By the end of the year, having completed his translation, Egede referred for the first time to the Greenlandic translators, Pungiok and Arnarsak, whom he calls *Consulenter* (consultants) in Danish and *Rathgeber* (assistants) in German. According to Egede, Pungiok and Arnarsak, who were sensible people, made objections to sharing the translation more widely, suggesting, “it would not be useful for their unbelieving compatriots to be made aware, for example, that Cain, one of God’s first rational creations, was so wicked, or of Jacob’s deception of his father and brother, the polygamy of the patriarchs, and the unprecedented wickedness of Simeon and Levi (P. H. Egede, 1790, p.146).” Instead, they recommended that selected excerpts be distributed which would filter out the more problematic parts of scripture.

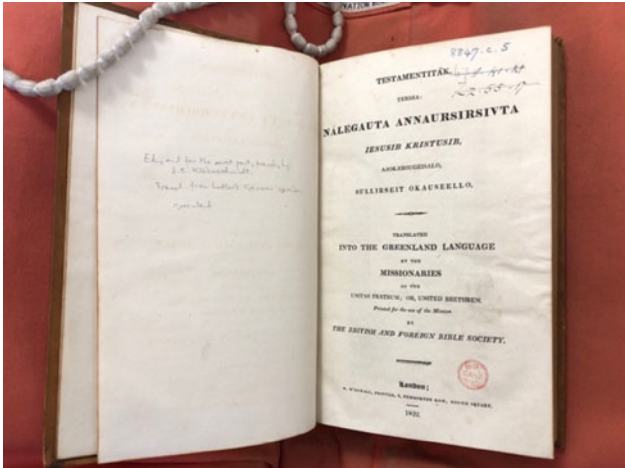
Four years later, in 1740, Egede returned to Denmark, taking Arnarsak and the boy Tullimak with him at the request of Jacob Severin, the merchant who in 1734 had taken over the Greenland

concession from Egede’s Greenland Company. When the Greenlanders fell ill, Egede represents them as exemplary Christians ready to face death. Arnarsak prayed that it was up to God whether she lived or died, but she wished to live in order to return to Greenland, “to teach my people to know your son Jesus Christ, so that many may be saved with me” (P. H. Egede, 1790, p.255). They also worshipped together at the church on Severin’s estate in Dronningland, northern Denmark, where they were said to be delighted to be able to join in the hymn in their own language. In his final reference to Arnarsak, Egede states that both Arnarsak and Tullimak returned to their homeland [in 1741], but only Arnarsak remained faithful to the Christian promises she had made while ill (P. H. Egede, 1790, p.256). She subsequently supported other missions in Greenland.

With the support of the Missionary College, Lutheran work on the Greenlandic Bible progressed. In 1758, Paul Egede published a revised edition of the four gospels, which now included the Acts, and in 1766 a translation of the whole New Testament. To ensure accuracy, Egede sent his working translations back to Greenland where they were checked by missionaries and catechists, a newly emerging group of literate teachers. Each year, the ships returning from Greenland brought letters for Egede from his Greenlandic friends. These included Paul the Greenlander, one of the first to be baptised by Hans Egede, who corresponded at length with Egede on topics such as the customs and beliefs of the Greenlanders, moral questions and the wiles of the *Angekoks* (P.H. Egede, 1790, p.261). It seems likely that at least some of this correspondence, including the topics to be addressed, were evoked by Egede to improve his knowledge of the language. They also gave him updates on the two Greenlanders who had visited Copenhagen and returned with accounts of the city and the Christian communities. When “Paul the Greenlander” wrote to Paul Egede in 1756, he confirmed that Arnarsak and Hans Pungiok had spoken of the “many pious and virtuous people” living in Denmark. This letter is one of the most remarkable pieces of colonial writing by any Greenlander (P.H. Egede, 1790, p.272-280). Unfortunately, the original Greenlandic is no longer extant, so we are reliant on Egede’s Danish (and German) translations. Egede frames this letter as evidence that the Greenlanders were not the “stupid people” some had taken them to be, that were capable of deep reflection on the natural world and questions of moral philosophy. Paul reminds Egede of the witty suggestion by Okakok, that just as the Danish king had sent priests to teach us that there was a God, so the Greenlanders might send *Angekoks* (shamans) to Egede’s country to help teach the ordinary people about the ethos of Greenlanders (P.H. Egede, 1790, p.276). The explorer and statesman, Fridtjof Nansen (1893, p.179-184), reproduced the letter, citing it as evidence of the highly developed morality of the Greenlanders, and marvelling that this “ideal Christianity” should have developed “among a people who have no religion.”

Besides maintaining a correspondence in Greenlandic with Christian friends, Egede accepted young Greenlanders sent by other missionaries to train with him, such as two boys called Andreas and Jorgen, and a young girl called Mary, who arrived in 1746 (P.H. Egede, 1790, p.262). Mary was to prove particularly useful to Egede, who refers to her good sense and natural curiosity: “She helped me a lot with the language during my meetings. If she noticed a mistake, she didn’t leave it unchanged, but instead looked for a better word (P.H. Egede, 1790, p.268).” Egede felt the loss of her assistance when she returned to Greenland in 1747, delighting in the way she revealed what he now called, “this well-established,





**Figure 6.** Testamentitäk Terssa (Kleinschmidt, 1822), the first BFBS edition of Greenlandic scripture. Source: CUL, the author.

regular language.” Egede also trained European candidates who wished to travel to Greenland as missionaries (P.H. Egede, 1790, p.280).

### *Greenlanders and the Fabricius Translations*

After the death of Paul Egede, work on the Greenlandic Bible continued with Otto Fabricius (1744-1822), who had been Egede’s student at the Greenland Mission Seminary where he was effectively his successor. Egede had established the seminary on his return to Copenhagen in 1736, principally to instruct missionaries in the Greenlandic language; however, the Missionary College retained control of the institution, which was a source of some friction (Kalkar, 1879, p.344). Besides important zoological studies (Kapel, 2005), Fabricius completed a translation of 178 hymns and a new translation of the New Testament.

The names of Fabricius’s Greenlandic collaborators are not known, though it seems likely he continued consulting with baptised Greenlanders following the example of the Egede family. One reason for this gap in knowledge is the tragic loss of almost all copies of existing Greenlandic scripture translations in the great Copenhagen fires of 1728 and 1795. The fires destroyed the library and archives of the Royal Orphanage and the Missionary College, the centre for German pietism, and its associated printing works. Despite these calamities, a new edition of the Fabricius translation was printed in 1799 and a revision, by Niels Giessing Wolf, in 1827. Wolf (1825) also translated the Psalms in 1824 and Isaiah in 1825. As revised by Kragh, the Fabricius edition achieved a certain authority and was distributed among sailors and travellers to the Arctic. However, it was eventually to be superseded by the work of the Moravian missionary linguists, funded partly through the relatively deep pockets of the BFBS.

### **Blubber for Bibles: BFBS Translations**

Between 1744 and 1900, the catalogue of the BFBS indicates that there were no less than 20 printed translations and revisions of scripture into various dialects of Greenlandic, from the first attempt by Paul Egede in 1744 until Samuel Kleinschmidt’s Bible was published in 1900 (Table 2). Many others languish in manuscript. Different individual efforts were supported financially

by the Danish state as well as the Danish Bible Society and the BFBS. Yet it was the intervention of the BFBS which was to prove essential to completing the project and also recognising Greenlandic collaborators in the translation enterprise.

Although not evident in its official history (Canton, 1904, p.1.446-447, 460), the correspondence of the BFBS reflects the tensions that arose when different scripture translations were published in competition with each other. One source of friction was whether or not to include the Apocrypha. In Denmark, the British Society found itself in conflict with the Danish Bible Society in relation to the inclusion of the Apocrypha, that is a number of non-canonical works that were included in Luther’s German Bible (1534). From 1826, the British Bible Society omitted the Apocrypha from their printed copies of the Bible. The Danish Bible Society, among others, disagreed with this leading to a split between the two Bible Societies. Despite this issue, the BFBS negotiated successfully to publish the work of a number of individual missionary translators, including the Moravians, John Konrad Kleinschmidt and Valentin Müller, and the Lutheran, Peter Kragh. In general, the Moravians produced translations which were more likely to name and foreground the work of Inuit translators.

The first Greenlandic scripture published by the BFBS was a New Testament, translated by John Konrad Kleinschmidt (1822) from Luther’s German version (Fig. 6). Unlike Hans Egede, neither Kleinschmidt nor his Greenlandic collaborators are named on the title page, but this was in accordance with the strict BFBS policy of creating bibles with no additional notes or commentary.

Fortunately, it is possible to recover the names of some of Kleinschmidt’s Inuit collaborators from the BFBS correspondence. In 1821, the Rev. C.J. Latrobe (1821) provided copies of Letters from Greenland and Labrador with news of the reception of the Bible Society’s publication. There were letters of thanks and appreciation from Moravian mission sites, namely Lichtenfels and Lichtenau in Greenland, and Okkak and Nain in Labrador. From Nain, there was a report of an even more practical and enthusiastic reception. Brother Benjamin Kohlmeister (1756-1844) wrote that “several of our Esquimaux” had decided to make a collection of seal blubber for the Society (Kohlmeister, 1821, p.103): “Some brought whole Seals, others half a Seal or pieces, as they could spare it. Some brought pieces of blubber in the name of their children, requesting that their poor gifts might be accepted.” The claim was that the Esquimaux wished to emulate the efforts of other people who had contributed to the publication of the Scriptures in their own languages:

We have indeed sometimes spoken together, and observed, that these many books, given to us without pay, must be very dear somewhere; but we never have known before now, that even poor people bring their money, out of pure love, that we may get these comfortable words of God. We are indeed poor, but we might bring now and then some blubber as a contribution . . . . They now begged me to send this collection of blubber (yielding 30 gallons of oil) to those generous friends who printed the Bibles for them, that more heathen might be presented with that book “so precious above all things.”

What is essential to note here is that the blubber was provided not to pay for Bible translations into Inuttut, the Labrador dialect of Inuktitut, which the BFBS had been supporting since at least 1810 (Table 3), but to advance translations for other language communities. “These many books” had been received by the Moravians, “without pay.” The blubber was intended to provide for all, even those beyond the Moravian Inuit missions, who had need of it.

From Greenland, there was more explicit information about the method used to obtain the translation. The Rev. John Gottfried Gorrke, missionary at Lichtenfels, explained that Brother Kleinschmidt, at Lichtenau, had made a fair copy of the whole New Testament in the Greenland language. The process was nevertheless a communal effort: “We all revised and corrected it, according to our best insights” and the request to print in was also the wish of the entire community: “All our Greenlanders join us in this petition (Gorcke, 1821, p.69).” From Lichtenau, Kleinschmidt provided testimonials from “four of our ablest Greenland assistants” who could testify that it was a literal translation of Luther’s German version and that it was intelligible to the Greenlanders (Kleinschmidt, 1821). To add additional verisimilitude, Kleinschmidt sent the letters in their own handwriting, with a German translation which Kleinschmidt urged to have translated into English and delivered to the Society. Unfortunately, the originals are no longer extant, only the English translations provided to the BFBS, probably by Latrobe.

After being virtually invisible in all previous Greenlandic scripture translations, the Moravian correspondence with the BFBS reveals readers, translators and co-producers. The first letter was written by the “Greenland assistants,” Benjamin and Shem:

Beloved and highly respected

We have this winter had an employ which has given us great pleasure, namely, the revision of the books of the New Testament, written with our own words (translated into Greenlandish), and as they are now made perfectly useful to all, we are very thankful, and have with earnestness considered well of it; and that they might be quite intelligible, we let our ears be always open to them (we listen to the reading of them very attentively).

And now we beg of your, that you would cause them to be printed, being well translated, that we may hereafter be able to read the very glorious word of God, which has administered so much joy and comfort to us. As our words, being those of us Greenlanders, are every way deficient in spiritual things, it was on that account very difficult especially to translate the epistles of St. Paul; we shall therefore very greatly rejoice when these books reach us, and whenever they appear in our country, we shall feel great gratitude. I, who am a Greenland assistant in the congregation here, have written this; my name is Benjamin. The Greenlanders, who love you very much, wish that it may be always well with you (Benjamin, 1821).

Shem’s letter shows expressions of deference and gratitude for completing the translation in words intelligible to them: “We therefore thank our teachers, that have made them so exact, because we could not have done so ourselves.” Shem also duly emphasised the size of the community who would benefit: “We, who live here together as a congregation, are a great number; and as often as we come together to hear the Gospel of our Saviour, our church is crowded, though it is large. . . . Every year some new people are added to us from among the heathen (Shem, 1821, p.70).” While heavily filtered through the genre of mission promotional literature, it is nevertheless possible to identify a literate Christian community with their own reasons for engaging with the translation project.

### *Greenlandic Readers of the BFBS Psalms*

The Moravian brethren produced further translations of the New Testament into Greenlandic in 1842 and 1851. The BFBS policy was to support individual translators so long as they were able to demonstrate that they had support from other qualified translators and that the work was intelligible to native missionary subjects. It is evident that the work of translation could also be an important act of spiritual reflection for both translator and the mission

community. This perspective is expressed by Brother Valentin Müller in a letter to the Society about his progress with translating the Book of Psalms. Müller (1840) explained that translations were first attempted by an individual but were then distributed to brethren at other missions for revision, so that the work of translation was part of a communal effort subject to advice and reflection among all members of the community.

Consultation with Greenlanders is less explicit – though was clearly also part of the process of perfecting the translation. Like Arnasak and Pungiok, the collaborators of Paul Egede, Müller was concerned that certain passages of scripture might not bring the Greenlanders to Christ and would instead give rise to inappropriate responses. This was a particular concern in the case of some of the books of the Old Testament which depict the wars and immorality of the people of Israel, but he was finally reassured that the Psalms were not a danger to either his own faith or that of the people. Müller expressed these doubts in a letter to Latrobe: “There was a time I will confess, when I entertained doubts, whether the Book of Psalms would approve itself to the Greenlanders, as the same awakening, edifying, instructive, and soul-searching portion of Holy Writ, which more enlightened and experienced Christians have found it to be.” He had at last dispelled those anxieties and sought publication (Müller, 1840).

### *Greenlandic Catechists and the BFBS Old Testament*

Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, the Danish Bible Society published Greenlandic translations of books of the Old Testament by Niels Gjessing Wolff and the Danish Lutheran priest, Peter Kragh (1794-1883) (Table 2). Kragh worked in relative isolation and had the additional challenge of being more familiar with the northern dialect of Greenlandic, rather than the western dialect (Kalaalisut) which would eventually emerge as the national language. For the first time however, Bible translations were developed in partnership with Inuit teachers and catechists who, from 1845, were graduating from the Lutheran seminaries in Godthåb (Nuuk) and Jakobshavn (Ilulissat). Literacy was required to complete the course, and it is from these catechists that a readable and accurate Bible for all Greenlanders finally emerged. Church schools, where children were taught in Kalaalisut by Greenlandic teachers, completed the formation of a fully literate community.

As a Lutheran, Kragh was affected by the clash over the inclusion of the Apocrypha which had divided the Danish Bible Society and the BFBS. These essentially political issues are reflected in Kragh’s correspondence with the BFBS about his wish to publish a complete version of the Old Testament in Greenlandic. Kragh turned to the BFBS having failed to win the support of the Danish Bible Society because of problems over his choice of dialect and orthography. Writing from Osby, on 27 December 1867, Kragh pleaded that his translations, completed while he was working as a missionary in North Greenland from 1818 to 1828, might be published by the British Society (Kragh, 1867, p.307-308). Despite his age and the length of time he had lived away from Greenland, Kragh did have continuing connections with Greenlandic people and their culture. He was largely responsible for the remarkable *Legends of Greenland* (1859-1865), the first “real” ethnographic collections made by asking his congregation to write down “old stories” for him from 1823-1828. The stories were published by Heinrich Johannes Rink (1819-1893), Director (and defender) of the Royal Greenland Trade Company, with translations by poet Vittus Steenholdt (1808-1862) (Thisted, 2001) (Rink, 1859-63).

The English translation by Rink (1875) is doubly appropriating as it refers neither to Kragh nor his Greenlandic sources. Fortunately, Kragh was more warmly appreciated by the Danish Missionary Society for his work with Inuit catechists who were directly responsible for evangelisation in Greenland.

The reasons for some hesitation by the BFBS are evident in Kragh's estimate of the costs. To print a revised edition of the Old Testament would cost £600. To print only those books yet unpublished would cost £200. Kragh assured the Society that they would be printed "without notes, & with the omission of all the apocryphal books," that is following the BFBS guidelines. The Society was typically anxious that if printed the books would be read. Hence Kragh provided assurance that not only were his translation from the original languages, rather than Luther's German translation (an improvement on the elder Kleinschmidt's New Testament), but that they had the approval of members of the mission: "My translations after the Hebrew text are in Greenlandic considered good & intelligible, and the natives are eager to get the remaining not yet published books from my hands (Kragh, 1867, p.308)." The Society wrote to seek assurances of Kragh's claims to the Rev. T.L. Badham, then living at Hatton Garden. In 1845, Badham replied to the Secretary that "here we know nothing more of Pastor Kragh and his translation" other than the recommendation by Br Herbrich. Herbrich stated that Kragh's translation was "the best, except perhaps Kleinschmidt's." Badham then stated his surprise at this view since "we had thought Kleinschmidt's beyond comparison the best (Badham, 1868, p. 317-318)."

Kragh nevertheless persisted and succeeded in getting the support of Kleinschmidt to argue his case. At the age of 78, Kragh wrote again to the BFBS that he be enabled to publish his Greenlandic–Danish dictionary, which had been his life's work over a period of 50 years. He commended his own knowledge of the language, stating that he knew it, "as well as the people of the land (Kragh, 1873a, p.292)." That Spring he had sent letters to twenty catechists in Greenland, liaising with Samuel Kleinschmidt, then serving as schoolmaster at Godthaab (Kragh, 1873a, p.292), the son of the venerable translator. Kragh begged the Society to print his work, and also for some money, "as I myself am quite indigent." This at last brought a response. Kragh wrote to the Society on 29 July 1873 in gratitude that the Society had granted him an honorarium of £80 "for my translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greenlandic . . . and my great joy is that you recognise my 54 years industry in translating the books of the Old Covenant from the original text into the difficult language of Greenland (Kragh, 1873b, p.354)."

Despite the engagement of the Greenlandic catechists, the BFBS did not publish the remaining books of Kragh's Old Testament. A complete translation of both Old and New Testaments would be achieved, not by Kragh, but largely through the linguistic advances of the young Moravian teacher and missionary, Samuel Kleinschmidt. The first complete Greenlandic Bible, including all canonical books of the New and Old Testaments, was published by Haldor Ferdinand Jørgensen and printed at Rosenberg's Bogtrykkeri in Copenhagen in 1900 (Atuagarssuit, 1900). This Greenlandic Bible was the result of collaboration between Inuit catechists for whom Greenlandic was their mother tongue, and the slow work of missionary linguists working in collaboration with native speakers. Like other nations, as Nielsen (2012) notes, the Greenlandic Bible reflects Adrian Hastings's (1992) observations regarding the profound connections between conversion, literacy and nation-building. He calls it: "something of a feat, a literary

masterpiece, and probably one of the best non-European Bible translations of the day (Nielsen, 2012, p.115)."

## Conclusion

This essay has been concerned chiefly with reflecting on the collaboration between Greenlanders and missionaries in the creation of a new cultural commodity, which the BFBS named as the "Eskimo Bible." It has tracked the achievement and collaboration of translators including Arnarsak and Pungiok with Hans and Paul Egede, Benjamin and Shem with Kleinschmidt, the Greenlandic catechists working with Peter Kragh along with many whose names have not been recovered. The arrival of the Moravian and Lutheran missionaries generated a social, economic and cultural crisis, which cannot be isolated, as the missionaries chose to do, from the work of scripture translation. As Brice-Bennett (1990) notes, the Moravians were traders and as closely implicated in the commercialisation of the Northern frontier as other missionaries, including the Lutherans and Anglicans, who were more burdened by the constraints of an established church and royal monopolies (Brice-Bennett, 2005). The Moravians were not supported financially by their Society but were expected to achieve self-sufficiency. In the Arctic, the only practicable means was through generating tradable commodities with the Inuit and the natural resources to which they had previously had a monopoly. In the Canadian Arctic, the Moravians created mission stations with an attached trade store, which allowed for the exchange of European items including weapons (though not initially), iron-ware, tobacco and other goods which were exchanged for seal oil, furs and Inuit artefacts, including carvings. For the Greenlanders, the principal tradable commodity was rendered fat from sea mammals, a product which formed a minor part of the traditional subsistence economy, but which increased enormously following the arrival of Europeans.

Missionaries in Greenland were supported by royal and government patronage, but they were vulnerable to the vicissitudes of war, diplomacy and the competing commercial interests of the porous Arctic frontier. In seeking the support of the BFBS, the Moravians adopted a new strategy of giving visibility to Greenlandic translators, who had previously been hidden behind the named missionary leaders. In the new diplomatic climate, the Inuit were presented to the BFBS as eager readers, prepared to exchange material goods for scripture, to literally give blubber not only for their own Bibles but to provide translations for other peoples who lacked them. The Moravians had more exclusive control in Labrador and effectively used their new Inuit converts to plead for ongoing support. In response, the BFBS published all their scripture translations in a busy stream from 1810 to 1878 (Table 3).

Through the lens of missionary linguistics, it is evident that the scripture translation enterprise provided a pathway to an independent Greenlandic literature, with a literate Inuit readership which emerged from missionary schooling by Greenlandic catechists. That so few named Inuit are identifiable in the colonial archive is unsurprising, but those that do emerge played vital roles as mediators between cultural and commercial new worlds. Missionaries are therefore essential to both the creation of northern trading networks and to contemporary Greenlandic identity and creative expression. Understanding the Bible translation movement is therefore one way to capture Inuit responses to Arctic settler colonialism.



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