

*Arctic Life Stories – Conceptualizing the Indigenous “self” in missionary writing from Greenland*

This paper draws on the digital humanities project Arctic Life Stories, which focuses on Moravian and Indigenous intangible cultural heritage. It examines how the concept of the Indigenous “self” was constructed in Moravian missionary writing from Greenland in the eighteenth century. Focusing on Indigenous memoirs written by missionaries, it explores how notions of individuality and identity were articulated through religion, culture, and place-based experience.

For many deceased Inuit converts, missionaries composed short life stories that followed the structure and general religious ideas known from the life stories of European members of the Moravian Church. As with other members of the Unity of Brethren, these narratives followed individuals across their lifetimes, referencing origin, family networks, mobility, health, and spiritual development, while documenting ongoing negotiations between Indigenous identity and Christianity.

Moravian Indigenous memoirs reflected a theological understanding of humanity based on voluntary conversion, piety, and cultural rather than racial difference. Through these narratives, Indigenous individuals were integrated into the global Moravian community and presented as equal members within it.

Through close readings of a few examples of Greenlandic life stories, the paper demonstrates how these narratives reveal Indigenous individuality shaped by religious discipline, mobility, emotional experience, and communal belonging. At the same time, they reflect a ritualised form of Moravian piety in which personal differences between Europeans and Indigenous people were levelled out in favour of spiritual equality.

The paper argues that research on Indigenous life stories is significant not only for understanding historical Indigenous experiences but also for contemporary discussions of mental health and cultural resilience in Greenland. Studying such narratives within a postcolonial framework contributes to maintaining historical continuity and strengthening Indigenous identity.