

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Nuussuarmiut—hunting families on the big headland*. *Meddelelser om Grønland: Man & Society* 35, by Keld Hansen (2008). Copenhagen: The Commission for Scientific Research in Greenland. 239 pp. ISBN 978-87-635-1084-4.

Nuussuarmiut is based on research conducted by the author from 1966 to 1968 in the community of Nuussuaq, in the Upernavik District, West Greenland. As Hansen explains in a much appreciated Introduction cum prologue, his career interest at the time he began this fieldwork was in material culture. This is amply evidenced by the numerous, highly detailed sketches and scale drawings that, along with archival and the author's own photographs, are integral to almost every chapter.

Hansen declaims that the kind of study he presents, with its lack of explicit theoretical statement, may be considered an “old fashioned” ethnography, a feeling that is heightened by the deep (and deeper) description he provides of both traditional and modern artifacts used by the Nuussuarmiut. (Despite having first entered into northern research as an archaeologist, I must confess to feeling that there are places in this monograph when enough is more than enough.) But, there is, in fact, much more to this study than tool measurements and static descriptions of how they are used.

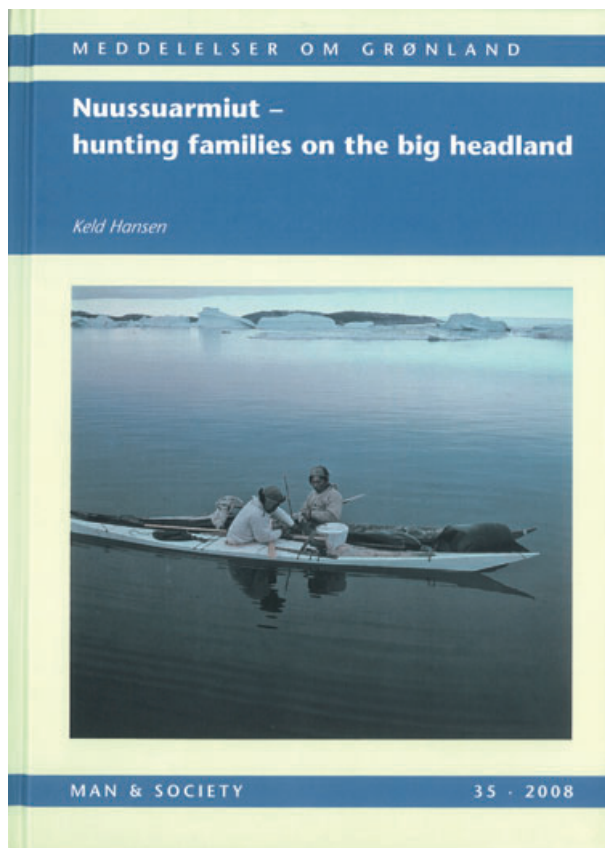
What Hansen presents is Inuit hunting in a multidimensional framework that includes time, ice texture, the shape of a bearded seal as it swims and much more. It does lack a theoretical cast, but is a study of a hunting community that has been performed in a way that is rare today, by “apprenticing” as a hunter and doing the work of making a *qamutiik*, stalking *uuttuq* and having the pleasure of hauling a seal net in January. It is the product of participant-observation before the technique became “experiential trips”.

This monograph offers two important things. First, it is a nicely detailed portrait of West Greenland Inuit life at a critical transitional time. In some respects, I felt that I was reading a micro-social history.

It is also a baseline for gaining insight into how and why introduced (often seemingly transformational) technologies are made to adaptively fit the traditional needs of Inuit. Hansen's observations, for instance, about the Nuussuarmiut modifying the sights on their rifles to make them more effective in seal hunting (and additions made

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to kayaks to accommodate rifle use) mirror what I saw Baffin Island Inuit do in the early 1970s. Reiterated repeatedly is the fact that adaptation is more than replacing a traditional tool with a seemingly superior one. Adaptation is often making the “superior item” more effective for what Inuit need it to do, or visualizing how “junk”, such as a sardine can turned into a skin scraper, has a “traditional” use.

I should close on the above positive notes, and do emphasize that this monograph is an important scholarly contribution on the Inuit, but there are certain things that are at least mildly distracting. The translation from Danish to English is difficult in places, there are sometimes tables that do not match (or seem to actually illustrate) a point being made in the text, and too frequently historical data from another district or community are inserted to make a point about Nuussuarmiut activity. This last point I found particularly disconcerting, as the relevance of this “borrowed” material to Nuussuaq was often unclear after repeated readings.