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*The “Utimut” Project for the Repatriation of Cultural Heritage
from Denmark to Greenland*

For the last couples of decades the world has witnessed an increasing number of disputes over cultural heritage ownership, and often these disputes result in claims for repatriation. Since 1982 Denmark and Greenland has been engaged in a successful partnership involving the return of 35.000 archaeological and ethnographical objects from the National Museum of Denmark to the Greenland National Museum & Archives. Rather than being a matter of claims being raised, this repatriation took place as a joint Danish-Greenlandic initiative, which following the introduction of the Greenlandic Home Rule in 1979, was part of the formation of a overall museum system in Greenland. With a point of departure in the colonial relationship between Denmark and Greenland, this paper will present the major principles on which the repatriation partnership was founded and carried out, principles which included ideas about on the one hand dividing collections equitably creating representative collections in both countries, but on the other hand acknowledging and complying with the fact that certain objects hold a special place in either Greenlandic or Danish society.

The repatriation process itself lasted until 2001, and since then the two national museums have been facing the challenge of managing a divided, or to put it in another way a ‘shared’ collection, which calls for continued collaboration efforts in relation to both administration and research. One of many positive outcomes of the repatriation process was the establishment of new research institution, SILA, the Greenland Research Centre, which facilitates continued collaboration between Danish and Greenlandic researchers on archaeological and culture historical topics. As the Utimut case often has been described as a successful partnership between a country and a former colonized territory, this paper will finally consider whether the Danish-Greenlandic museum cooperation and the principles on which it was built can serve as a general model with applicability to other parts of the world.

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1. Female figurine, Thule culture, north-eastern Greenland. Photo: Greenland National Museum & Archives.



2. Female dress, early 19th century, the Thule District, Northern Greenland. Photo: The National Museum of Denmark.



3. Grave of a wealthy woman, 16th century, eastern Greenland. Photo: Greenland National Museum & Archives.



4. Wooden snow goggles, 18th – 19th century, Greenland. Photo: The National Museum of Denmark.



5. Eye-shades, 19th century, Ammasalik District, Eastern Greenland. Photo: Greenland National Museum & Archives.