

IDENTIDAD LOCAL Y NACIONAL EN ST. JOHN:
PERSPECTIVAS DANESAS Y AMERICANAS

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RÉSUMÉ

Ce travail examine l'identité nationale et l'identité locale dans l'île de St. John, actuellement les "Iles Vierges" (Etats-Unis). Les différentes idées concernant le nationalisme depuis les temps de l'intervention européenne jusqu'à présent se retrouvent dans ce texte. On y analyse l'impact d'un nationalisme "d'en-haut", face à un nationalisme personnalisé ou individualisé, à partir d'une étude de terrain menée dans l'île St. John, autrefois colonie danoise. Cette étude des identités de St. John montre que parler de nationalisme est une affaire complexe et difficile à expliquer; toutefois, la capacité d'actes nationalistes de générer des sentiments d'appartenance culturelle est ce qui rend possible un projet de nation.

Cet article tente d'expliquer l'affiliation et l'identification changeantes des insulaires pendant la période coloniale, lors de l'émancipation et sous la juridiction des États-Unis. La note dominante de ce texte porte sur l'expression des identités nationales locales que l'on perçoit dans cette petite communauté caribéenne.

SAMENVATTING

Het artikel analyseert de nationale en lokale identiteit van St. John, een van de Virgin Islands (USA). De verschillende ideeën van nationalisme worden onderzocht, sinds de komst van de Europeanen tot in de actualiteit. De auteur beschrijft het nationalisme "van boven" tegenover de gepersonaliseerde of individuele nationalisme. De bronnen van deze studie zijn gebaseerd op direct veldwerk uitgevoerd op dit eiland dat eens een Deense kolonie was. Deze studie van de identiteiten op St. John concludeert dat het nationalisme een complexe zaak is dat niet eenvoudig verklaarbaar is. Het is wel een belangrijk gegeven aangezien zonder nationalistische gevoelens van toebehoren tot een collectiviteit "nationbuilding" onmogelijk wordt. Het artikel verklaart de verschillende identiteiten van de bewoners gedurende de verschillende fasen in hun koloniale geschiedenis. De auteur legt de nadruk op de uitdrukkingen van de nationale lokale identiteiten zoals gevonden in deze kleine Caraïbische gemeenschap.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL IDENTITY IN ST. JOHN:
DANISH AND AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses national and local identities in the islands of St. John, now, U.S Virgin Islands. The different notions of nationalism from the times of European intervention to the present, are explored in this work. The impact of top-down nationalism versus personalized nationalism is analyzed through field work carried out on the island of St John, a former Danish colony. This case study of national and local identities on St. John suggests that nationalism is a much messier affair than the clear-cut national ideologies may lead one to suspect. At the same time, it is the capacity of nationalist spectacles to generate feelings of cultural similarity, which makes a national project possible.

The article traces the changing affiliation and identification of the islanders during Danish Colonial rule, emancipation and under North American jurisdiction. The emphasis of this study is on the expression of local national identities at work in this small Caribbean community.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina las identidades nacional y local en la isla de St. John, actualmente, Islas Vírgenes (EEUU). Las distintas ideas de nacionalismo, desde tiempos de la intervención europea hasta el presente, son investigadas en este trabajo. Se analiza el impacto de un nacionalismo "impuesto desde arriba" *vis-a-vis*, un nacionalismo personalizado, o individual. Este estudio plantea que el nacionalismo es un asunto mucho más complejo de lo que las claras y definidas ideologías nacionales hacían suponer. A la vez, es la capacidad de los actos nacionalistas la que genera sentimientos de pertenencia cultural, lo que hace posible un proyecto de nación.

El artículo explica la cambiante afiliación e identificación de los isleños durante el periodo del gobierno colonial, la emancipación y la jurisdicción estadounidense.

INTRODUCTION

National identity, in a Caribbean context, is usually associated with the newly independent nation-states that have emerged since the 1960's. A primary concern in these countries has been the creation of a national culture which may put both the new nation-state on the map in the international community, and override potentially divisive forms of identification existing within the national community (Wilk, 1993, 294). From this point of view, national culture becomes, primarily, an important means of establishing, or perhaps even inventing, national rituals, spectacles, monuments and the like, which may publicly assert and gather general support for a common, national project. Studies of national identity in the Caribbean have therefore tended to focus on the stagings of national culture, such as cultural festivals, museum displays or the creation of official national accoutrements (coat-of-arms, national anthem and flag) in the recently independent, or semi-independent Caribbean nation-states (Nettleford, 1979, 1987; Wilk, 1993, 1995; Olwig, 1993a, 1993b; Cohen Colleen, 1996).

Nationalism, however, is not a recent phenomenon in the Caribbean. As early as the period of slavery, European national, liberal ideologies became known in the Caribbean, and they certainly had an impact on the process of emancipation in the Danish colonies (Hall, 1992). In the post-emancipation era, European cultural values associated with national ideologies were propagated through the schools, the churches and the colonial regimes in general; the Caribbean middle class which emerged in the post-emancipation period identified strongly with the national culture of the European empire (Smith, 1996; Olwig, 1993a). This nationalism has provided an important basis for present-day national thinking. Raymond Smith has suggested that,

...the current conception of nationalism in most West Indian territories is a projection of the status yearnings of the old colonial elite who [...] [h]aving succeeded the old colonial authorities [...] now seek to consolidate their position by replacing loyalty to the British by loyalty to a new ruling group (which is very closely modeled upon the old despite any appearance of radicalism), and to its own symbols of office (not markedly different from those that have passed on) [1996 (1966), 107].

This top-down approach to nationalism may lead to the conclusion that national identities are primarily forged by representatives of the

governments of the colonial regimes and later independent nation-states, who wish to assert their political position. Such a conclusion is not fully warranted, however, where national ideologies generate the support of the general population.

If they are to be of any consequence, national identities must evoke the notion of a national community, which a broad spectrum of the population can imagine as its own (Anderson, 1983). In complex societies, where such national communities may encompass widely different local communities, classes, ethnic, religious or linguistic groups, this means that individual members of the nation must be able to “personalize” the more generalized national identities in order to make them their own. As British social anthropologist Anthony Cohen has stated, when studying nationalist ritual we must therefore be careful to “distinguish adequately between the intentions of their producers and the readings made of them by their audiences” (Cohen, 1996, 804). The “political nationalist ‘collectivizes’ nationalism, while the individual personalizes it” (*Ibid.*, 805).

If national identities are personalized, we must expect that they may be evoked for quite different purposes from which they were originally intended, particularly in local communities, which are not in direct contact with the national centers that produce the official ideologies to which they are connected. National identities may, in other words, attain a “social life of their own” (cf. Appadurai, 1986), as they travel from national centers to peripheral areas, where the national community maybe more imagined than actually practiced. This means that we should not expect that national identities only develop in those places where local populations are heavily exposed to national ideologies and encouraged to become aroused by national feelings. Rather, even intermittent or relatively minor displays of national belonging may have an impact if the people exposed to them choose to attach cultural and personal significance to them in relation to local contexts of life. In the Caribbean, this can mean that personalized national identities may develop in far-away colonial outposts at historical times when these areas are of relatively minor significance on the national agenda of the governments which rule them. These personalized identities, furthermore, may make little sense in the national ideologies to which they are affiliated, but have a great deal of meaning in the local communities where they are generated and sustained. In the long run, however, such marginal, personalized, identities contribute to the broader spectrum of identities that are

mobilized by the post-colonial nation-state. I shall here explore this line of thinking by examining the relationship between national and local identities on St. John in the former Danish West Indies, present-day American Virgin Islands.

Inside and Outside the Danish National Community

Contemporary top-down nationalism has difficulty accounting for the growth of “bottom-up” personalized identities. My studies on St. John are pertinent to this issue because they suggest how such personalized identities could develop even in situations where the national presence of the colonial power was weak. To some extent, it may seem absurd to talk about any sort of nationalism or national identity on St. John during the Danish rule on the island, which lasted for 200 years beginning in 1717. Denmark was a rather insignificant colonial power that was not able to assert its presence culturally, socially, economically or politically in its West Indian possessions, to the same degree as major powers like the British. The Danes always constituted a small minority of the white population in the Danish West Indies, being only well represented in the colonial government and the militia. They were poorly represented among the planters, the merchants, the clergy and in the educational system, and Danish was never a commonly spoken language (Hall, 1992).

This non-Danish character of the Danish West Indies reflected, to a great extent, the general social and cultural conditions in the colonial mother country. From 1660 to the late eighteenth century the Danish absolute monarch ruled over a multi-lingual State, where Norwegian, Faeroese, Icelandic, high and low German, Frisian as well as Danish were spoken (Feldbæk, 1992, 81), and on his birthday, the King was known to receive “congratulatory poems not only in Latin and French, but also in Danish, German, Icelandic and Lappish.” In 1700, approximately 20% of the population in Copenhagen was German-speaking, and the army, the artisans’ guilds and the ranks of professionals were heavily dominated by Germans (Feldbæk, 1992, 82). The State was also economically both highly stratified and diverse, ranging from wealthy estate owners in Denmark to well-to-do merchants in Copenhagen, Bergen (Norway), Flensburg (in the Duchy of Sleswig), and to destitute, indentured peasants in Denmark. The fact that the country was so

divided linguistically, culturally and economically was not regarded as a problem, though, because it was seen to be united in the person of the King.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the cosmopolitan intelligentsia in Copenhagen showed some interest in the plight of the slaves in the Danish West Indies, inspired, in part, by German romantic thinking (Degn, 1974). This was instrumental in making Denmark the first country in the world to abolish the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Their concern with distant slaves waned, however, as the national liberal movement, spearheaded by the growing Danish bourgeoisie, gained force and began to protest against non-Danish elements in the upper levels of Danish society, more particularly in the centralist government of the absolute monarchy. In this political climate, the Danish West Indian colonial regime became associated with the absolute monarchy and, the Governor, Peter v. Scholten, who instituted laws to ameliorate the condition of the slaves and free colored, was severely criticized by the national liberals in Denmark because of his autocratic style (Lawaetz, 1940).

In March 1848 leading citizens in Copenhagen staged a march to the King, demanding the resignation of the government and the institution of democratic rights. They succeeded to the extent that the government was dissolved and a new constitution was adopted which granted democratic rights to certain segments of the population (Skovmand, 1964). When the slaves on St. Croix staged an uprising in July 1848, in the wake of revolutionary movements taking place in Europe during that year, they succeeded in gaining their freedom. But this was not because of the liberal climate of the time, but rather because Governor Peter v. Scholten took it upon himself to free the slaves, supposedly in order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. He was heavily criticized by the national liberals and ended up being dishonorably discharged from his position and losing his pension (Lawaetz, 1940; Hall, 1992; see also Olsen, 1987).

Danish politics during the latter part of the nineteenth century were characterized by a continued political struggle for a more broadly based democratic government. The Danish West Indies were no longer an important source of income and became identified with the imperial aspirations of the old socio-cultural order of the absolute monarchy. The national liberal proponents of Danish culture and democracy were keen to get rid of the islands, and the possibility of selling them was brought up in the Danish parliament as early as 1852, 4 years after the emancipation of the slaves in 1848 (Hornby, 1980, 293; see also Hall, 1992, 17-19).

The remainder of the Danish period was characterized by three efforts to sell the islands to the United States.¹ At the turn of the century, some members of the growing Danish middle class began to nourish nationalist feelings towards the West Indian colonies and became concerned about the lack of Danish influence in the islands. They began to support Lutheran missionary activities among slaves and efforts were made to teach the Danish language, history and culture in the colony. They also formed a society to promote Danish economic ventures in the islands, sparking some economic activity there. At this point, however, a third round of sales negotiations with the United States had been started by the Danish government which saw the islands as a poor house draining the Danish treasury, and in 1917 the islands were sold for \$25 million (Norregaard, 1967; Skrubbeltrang, 1967).

Throughout Danish West Indian history, the Danish presence in the colony was rather limited. This was particularly so in the period from the abolition of slavery to the islands' transfer to American rule, when the sale of the West Indian possessions seemed to be a primary concern of the Danish government. On St. John, the smallest island of 19 square miles, the Danish presence was even less visible than on St. Croix and St. Thomas, the two major islands in the Danish West Indian colony. During much of the Danish period there was only one Danish official to administer the island, and in 1853 it was even suggested that this post be abolished.² The few Danish families that had owned plantations on the island left when sugar cultivation ceased in 1867 following a hurricane that ruined the sugar plantations.³ Most of these planter families sold to colored men from the British Virgin Islands, who turned the plantations into cattle estates. The Danish colonial government had built two schools on the island during the latter part of the slave period, as part of Peter v. Scholten's program to improve the condition of the slaves.⁴ Due to lack of funds, these schools were never put to use, and the Danes left

¹ The difficulty of implementing the 1849 Danish constitution in the Danish West Indies is discussed in Olsen (1989).

² Landfogeden på St. Jan. Breve til Guvernementet, St. Thomas og rådet (Koncepter, 1824-56, 25 June 1853).

³ During the latter part of the Danish period two planter families of Scandinavian origin purchased plantations on St. John: the Castenschiold family, which owned Lamesure and the Lindqvist family which owned Cinnamon Bay.

⁴ Landfogeden på St. Jan. Breve til rådet, St. Thomas, og til (general) guvernementet, St. Croix (Koncepter, 1838-55, 6 February 1852).

education of the population entirely to the Moravian missionaries who operated two schools where they taught in Dutch Creole, the language spoken by most St. Johnians during the Danish period.⁵ The Moravians also owned the only two churches on the island in the late Danish period, the Danish Lutheran congregation being without a church of its own after the old church was blown down by the 1867 hurricane (Low and Valls, 1985, 48).

The most concrete physical manifestation of the Danish colonial power was found in the forts that had been built in Coral Bay and Cruz Bay in the seventeenth century. The one in Coral Bay had been in ruins since the 1733-slave uprising (17 years after the island's colonization), where slaves succeeded in taking over and holding most of the island for several months, until the Danes received help from French forces in Martinique. The other was a battery built in Cruz Bay, after the destruction of the Coral Bay Fort. This battery was so poorly equipped that it was not even able to return the salute of a French man-of-war that passed by, during the First World War, and saluted with cannons, thinking that this was a proper fort. When the French sent in a boat to ask whether Denmark was at war with France, since the fort had not saluted, the embarrassed Danish administrator had to explain that the battery was not much of a fort and that the old, rusty cannons lying around were not capable of shooting off anything (Low and Valls, 1985, 54).

From a Danish point of view, St. John was clearly beyond the bounds of the Danish nation-state. Indeed, when the Danish journalist Henrik Cavling visited the Danish administrator on St. John in the late nineteenth century, he likened the island society to a foreign country with an omnipotent head, this head being the lone Dane on the island, who ruled according to laws dating back to the seventeenth century.

The fort, which in olden times garrisoned a detachment of soldiers, now serves as a residence of the administrator, Mr. Schellerup, Master-of-law. This civil servant, who is at one and the same time District Court Judge, Chief of Police, Customs Inspector, Postmaster, Harbormaster, Chief Fire Brigade Officer, Veterinarian and Coroner, rules like an absolute monarch over the island's 900 Negroes. Only when the pastor and the doctor from St. Thomas pay him a visit once a month, is his illusion of being the only white man on earth disturbed.

⁵ During the latter part of the nineteenth century they changed to English, which was the dominant language in the Danish colony.

I was met on the grounds of the fort by a stately, uniformed “chancellor”, who with a warm, but reserved smile, and with half-outstretched left hand and dignified bearing, greeted us as would a sovereign monarch greeting an emissary from a foreign power. Well now! I played into the role and bowing deeply, greeted the King of St. John [Low and Valls, 1985, 39].⁶

Cavling may have been right that the Danish administrator appeared like an absolute monarch in his own little kingdom. This does not mean, however, that he ruled “like an absolute monarch” over the 900 people living on the island at the time. On the contrary, I shall argue that the office of the Danish administrator had become almost entirely appropriated by the community of small farmers that had become established after the collapse of the plantocracy. The Danish administrator, in other words, did not so much look after the interests of the Danish colonial regime —there were few Danish interests on St. John to look after— as serve the needs of the St. Johnian community. In this function his position, as a representative of the Danish colonial order was quite important.

INSIDE THE ST. JOHNIAN COMMUNITY

During the late Danish period, the Danish administrator handled a rather large amount of police cases every year, considering the small size of the St. Johnian community. Some of them involved petty crimes, such as the theft of fruit or crops, often, from the cattle estates on the island. Most cases, however, concerned minor conflicts between neighbors that were settled fairly easily by the administrator. Three examples from 1884 may illustrate the nature of the cases handled by the Danish administrator.⁷ In one case, Lucy Francis complained that Henriette Williams had abused her permission, to fetch water from Lucy Francis’ well by giving some of the well water to another person who was not a friend of Lucy Francis. This led to a quarrel between the two women, but they were reconciled by the administrator and promised to live in peace with one another. Another case from the same year concerns an argument where improper language was used. The offenders received a warning from the administrator. A third case is about loose animals that had trespassed

⁶ The Danish original was published in 1894 as *Det danske Vestindien*.

⁷ Landfogeden på St. Jan. 54. (Politiprotokol, 1883-85, 27. aug. 1884). Rigsarkivet.

on another person's land for which reason the plaintiff demanded compensation from the owner of the animals. The administrator saw to it that compensation was paid, according to the law on trespassing.

These cases may give the impression that St. Johnians were rather cantankerous people who had a hard time getting along with one another. While this impression may have something to it, I shall suggest that this is only part of the explanation for the many cases before the Danish police court. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, St. John had undergone an almost complete transformation from a plantation society producing sugar for export to a community of mainly subsistence-oriented small farmers. In earlier research (Olwig, 1985) I have argued that this community was based on networks of exchange relations involving access to land, labor, children, food and other material goods. The exchanges were underlined by an ethos of "givishness" as St. Johnians called it, which emphasized the importance of giving, while the giving was good, because there might be harder times when one might depend upon the generosity of others. This ethos was closely related to a concept of the St. Johnian community as one of generally "poor" people, excepting for the few estate owners who lived on the island. This concept was reinforced by the patterns of generalized exchange, which made it difficult for individuals to amass any amount of personal wealth within the local society. Therefore, those who wished to climb the social ladder usually left the island. Such moves were, of course, also a consequence of rather realistic appraisals of the limited economic opportunities on St. John.

The local community which had emerged on St. John by the end of the nineteenth century, can be characterized as an egalitarian and acephalous one with no internal mechanisms of social control beyond close family networks or, in some cases, even beyond the individual households. This created somewhat of a paradoxical problem for St. Johnians. On the one hand, the generalized exchange relations were so opened and fluid that they might easily lead to misunderstandings and conflicts; on the other hand, the community, and the exchange relations which sustained it, would break down if such conflicts were allowed to continue and escalate beyond the small-scale, inter-personal level. The Danish administrator became a central figure in the resolving of this paradox. He was present in the St. Johnian community, and therefore an accessible person, but he was not *of* the local community, but a colonial official who received his authority and power through his affiliation with a

distant colonial regime. His position of superiority, in other words, did not constitute any sort of threat to the St. Johnian community, and he could therefore be used to resolve local conflicts. The records of the office of the Danish administrator show that during the last decades of the Danish period, he basically spent his time serving as a mediator in local disputes about matters that were of little concern to the Danish colonial system but of vital importance to the local community on St. John (Olwig, 1988).

IMAGINING A NATIONAL COMMUNITY

All this points to the conclusion that St. Johnians had established their own, isolated community that existed according to its own social and economic conventions. They had incorporated the Danish colonial administrator into this community, indeed had given him a central position in it, but they may not otherwise have been concerned about the colonial regime or the Danish mother country affiliated with it. This may be a fair interpretation of the general situation on St. John as far as the majority of the people were concerned. There were times, however, when the Danish colonial mother country made its presence felt on the island. Every year, a Danish man-of-war visited the island, along with the two other Danish West Indian islands, and in 1896 the ship brought a royal visitor, Prince Carl of Denmark. One of the few photographs taken on St. John during the nineteenth century depicts schoolchildren with their teacher standing on the pier, dressed up in their best clothing, waiting for Prince Carl of Denmark to arrive. A rather detailed account of the prince's visit was brought in the local newspaper on St. Thomas, *St. Thomas Tidende*.⁸

The hoisting of the national ensign at Christianfort, on Friday 10th inst. announced to the inhabitants of Cruzbay the arrival of His Majesty's ship *Fyen*. [...]

The landing place, at the end of which floated gracefully a large Dannebrog [the Danish flag], was adorned with garlands made of flowers and green

⁸ The photograph is from Coral Bay, Whereas the newspaper account relates the arrival of Prince Carl in Cruz Bay. The newspaper article does not mention the Prince visiting Coral Bay, but it seems most likely that he did, given the many people awaiting him there.

leaves... Festoons forming an arch were erected across the street a couple of yards in front of the Pier. Suspended from the centre of his arch was a suitably covered board, having on one side the words: "Welcome to H.R.H. Prince Carl," and on the other, "God Bless Our Noble Prince." long before the appointed hour, as large a crowd as might be expected to be seen in Cruzbay assembled. The pupils of the Bethany school, headed by their teacher, marched with waving banners down to Cruzbay and were duly arranged in order [...]

When Prince Carl passed under the arch and read the words of welcome the children began to sing the National Anthem, at the conclusion of which three hearty cheers were given.

A riding party was subsequently formed. The party, accompanied by Messrs. Delenois and Steele, and under the guidance of Mr. Lindqvist, rode as far as Estate Rustenberg, from which quite a pleasant view is obtainable. [...]

More than 130 persons of both sexes, including children, went on board the ship, the band of which, through the kindness of the Commander, entertained them with charming music. The temptation to dance, being with few exceptions irresistible, the pleasure was largely indulged in by both visitors and sailors... [Low and Valls, 1985, 42].

According to this newspaper account, the small island community went all out to stage a grand welcome for the prince, the school taking a particularly active part. It is apparent that the event did not only involve school children and the island's officials, but also many St. Johnians who came to take part in the festivities in connection with the royal visit. Thus more than 130 went aboard the Danish ship, a fair number at a time when the village of Cruz Bay had a population of only 74, and the island's total population counted less than 1,000 souls (*Folketællingen* 1890, 1892). The newspaper article also gives the impression that the local community turned the royal visit into a general party.

It is difficult to know whether the St. Johnian population experienced any particular feelings of Danish national identity, as they took part in this event. The flag, the garlands, the festoons, the greetings to the royalty, as well as the marching of the school children with banners were common elements in the national spectacles which were popular in Europe at the time, staged in order to arouse such nationalist feelings (see for example: Hobsbawm, 1983). The one St. Johnian account I have of the event, related by 87-year-old Mr. Leopold Jacobs in 1974, indicates that St. Johnians may have interpreted this display of nationalism in their own way:

I know the King of Norway. He was here. I was a young fellow. The ship was the *Fyen*, it brought him, and it came into Cruz Bay [he smiles]. The first time I heard a band was when I came near, and the band was when I came near, and the band stuck up, and then I danced!

After he left here, he went up and they made him King of Norway.

Prince Valdemar also came down here, he was here before. It was Frederick, Valdemar, queen Alexandra, and King George of Greece. Prince George of Greece couldn't be the eldest one, because that must have been Frederik, who had to stay in Denmark and become King. George went to Greece, prince Valdemar married a French woman, Alexandra married to a British prince, named Albert Edwards. Now they have a lady in Denmark, a lady named Margaret. Once before they had a queen named Margaret. She was a big woman, she ruled over Norway, Sweden and Denmark.⁹

Mr. Jacobs' brief narrative of the event wastes no time on descriptions of the nationalistic and royalist staging of Prince Carl's visit, reported in such detail by the newspaper on St. Thomas. He merely notes the name of the boat that brought the Prince, the fact that he was a young lad at the time of the visit, which this was the first time that he heard band music, and that he had a great time dancing to it. Through these observations Leopold Jacobs essentially incorporates the event into his own life story as a St. Johnian. The account of the events themselves is perhaps less important, however, than the way in which Jacobs frames his story of the event. By introducing the story, "I know the King of Norway, he was here" and ending with a rather detailed genealogy of the Danish royal family, Leopold Jacobs places himself within the Danish royal scene, so to speak, and presents himself as virtually a friend of the Prince. Furthermore, he explains royal genealogy as he and other St. Johnians relate the genealogies of local people: Jacobs does not focus on linear family lines, but offers an overview of networks of relatives with emphasis on persons who were of particular significance at the time. Thus Leopold Jacob makes no account of Prince Carl's ancestors, such as his patriline of Danish kings. Indeed, he is rather vague about Carl's brother who became King in Denmark, noting only that he must have been a Frederik and that he had to stay in Denmark, because he was the eldest. Leopold Jacob, instead, elaborates on Carl's kinsmen who had played a significant role on the international scene. This includes George, who

⁹ Interview with Leopold Jacobs August (20, 1974).

became the King of Greece; Carl, who became King of Norway (as King Haakon), and Alexandra, who married the future British King. Leopold Jacobs therefore emphasizes the part of the genealogy that would have been of greatest significance in the cosmopolitan Danish West Indies. But he also connects this genealogy to the present-day by jumping, in a few sentences, from Princess Alexandra, who became the British Queen, to Queen Margaret the Second, who had become Queen of Denmark in 1972, two years before the interview took place, and then finally to Queen Margaret the first, who lived in the 14th century and was the only other ruling queen to precede the present-day queen on the Danish throne.

By presenting the royal family's genealogy very much in the style which St. Johnians used when they discussed family relationships among one another, Leopold Jacobs inscribes himself into a wider international context of life associated with the Danish colonial order. He does not appear to have been alone in doing this. On several occasions I heard St. Johnians talk about the family ties of outsiders who had lived on the island and therefore become known to the St. Johnian community. The family relations of the last Danish administrator, for example, were discussed on several occasions by St. Johnians. It seems likely that Leopold Jacobs' account of the royal genealogy was shaped in the course of such discussions among the islanders of families of significance to St. John. One may therefore argue that Leopold Jacobs, along with his fellow islanders, incorporated the Danish royal family within the extensive network of relations that constituted the St. Johnian community. Perhaps, one may further argue that by making the Danish royal family part of their network of relations, St. Johnians developed their own personalized national identity which made eminent sense in the St. Johnian community.

NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE AMERICAN SOCIETY

Such a personalized Danish-St. Johnian identity continued to play a role after the island's transfer to American rule in 1917, particularly among elderly people. When I did fieldwork on St. John during the 1970s, most elderly St. Johnians were very fond of mentioning their Danish past and they often made note of personal encounters with Danes and their experience with Danish language and culture. Their descriptions of the Danish past were usually rather positive and contrasted with the

more troublesome present-day American period. This rosy picture of the Danish period may be related to the fact that the St. Johnians were speaking to a Danish researcher and trying to establish some sort of bond with “the Dane Woman” as they often called me. It may also be associated with the common tendency to be nostalgic about childhood, and since the elderly people lived their childhood during “Dane Man Times” they would naturally tend to speak about this period of time in rather glorious terms. While these two factors undoubtedly are of some significance, I also suggest that the St. Johnians’ assertion of their Danish background constitutes, more importantly, a form of protest against conditions that they did not care for under the subsequent American rule. It thus becomes clear that “Dane Man times” does not refer to the period of time ending in 1917, when the island was transferred to American rule, but rather to the period of time when the island was dominated by a community of small farmers who lived on their own small plots of land and engaged in mutual relations of “caring and sharing.”

The extent of this period varies according to the particular point of view of the person interviewed about the Danish past. In some accounts the American New Deal programs, which were instituted during the 1930’s to alleviate poverty on the island, are seen to demarcate the end of “Dane Man Times.” In other accounts, the Second World War, which brought increasing economic opportunities on St. Thomas, is a cut-off point. And in some accounts, Danish times seem to extend virtually to the 1950’s, when most of the cattle estates on the island were purchased by agents of Laurence Rockefeller, who gave them to the United States Department of the Interior under the stipulation that they be turned into an American National Park. This presents a very dramatic turning point in St. Johnian history, because it meant that more than half of the island’s acreage became a nature park for tourists. The establishment of the park was the final death blow to small farming on the island, which had been declining throughout the American period, as St. Johnians migrated to the United States or took employment in the nearby city of Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas. The park also signaled the beginning of the American tourist industry which, in the course of a few years, was to wreak havoc on the St. Johnian system of exchange with its ideology of caring and sharing.

Tales of “Dane Man Times” are therefore not so much about the islanders’ love of Danes and the wonderful colonial order that they maintained on the island. Indeed, the very same person who speaks fondly

of “Dane Man Times” might, in the same breath, note the cruelty of colonial officials who meted out harsh physical punishment for the slightest offence. Nostalgia for “Dane Man Times”, rather, constitutes a subaltern critique of modern times, marked by an invasion of money-hungry people, crime, and where the island was being overrun by, on the one hand, rich Americans, who threw their money around and expected the natives to be their servants, and, on the other hand, poor people from the British islands who were willing to work hard for next to nothing. The critique, however, is also directed more specifically toward the particular role that St. John was given in the U.S. national project as an American national park.

The Virgin Islands National Park on St. John became part of the extensive and well established American Park System. Since the establishment of the first American national parks, park management has been guided by a notion of wilderness preservation whereby only “those structures, management practices, and uses necessary for management and preservation of the wilderness qualities of an area will be permitted” (Final Report of the National Parks Centennial Commission, 1973, 56). The park lands, which have been changed through human usage, will therefore be managed in such a way as “to restore the wilderness character of these areas by the removal of adverse uses” (Final Report..., 1973, 54). The notion of national parks as unspoiled wilderness where human beings are only brief visitors thus sees human use of the material resources as incompatible with park development; indeed such use is characterized as “adverse”. It is apparent that human use of material resources in the parks is perceived as a problem not only from a conservation but also from an ideological point of view. Administrative Policies from 1970 recommended that the “goal of managing the national parks and monuments should be to preserve, or where necessary to recreate the ecological scene as viewed by the first European visitor” or the first “white man” (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1970, 111, 101). Park lands, in other words, are supposed to represent the sort of frontier wilderness landscape that the Europeans are supposed to have encountered and conquered as they moved westward and helped extend the borders of what became the present United States of America. The kind of “nature” which the Virgin Islands National Park was intended to represent was, in other words, that which Columbus encountered on his journeys to the Caribbean.

It is quite apparent that the park lands were subject to such intensive and prolonged post-Columbian economic activities that recreating pre-Columbian wilderness in the park was no small task. There was no virgin forest on the island, and as many as half of the trees on the island were “species introduced after land clearing first began” (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1970, 42-43). Nevertheless, the Park Service went about developing pre-Columbian wilderness as best it could. It prohibited all economic practices on park lands, such as shifting agriculture, the cutting of wood for charcoal or basket making,¹⁰ or the grazing of animals, which had taken place on estate land by informal agreement between estate owners and small farmers.¹¹ The Park Service also contemplated taking measures to eradicate the island’s post-Columbian animal population of goats, wild boars, donkeys and mongooses.

The St. Johnian population of approximately 750 people who lived on the island during the early 1950’s had not expected that a pre-Columbian wilderness area would be recreated on the island when they welcomed the park to the island. Far from suspecting that the park would be a means of turning the island into a “pristine” nature area, they had the understanding that it would help bring economic development and the modern way of life to the impoverished island, while protecting the interests of the local people (Olwig, 1994a). For St. Johnians, the transformation that actually took place meant neglect and disregard for the land and the vital economic, social and cultural resources that it embodied. Neglect of the land usually occurs when the person using the land has died, as illustrated in the proverb, “Man die, bush grow ah he door mout” (man dies, bush grows to the threshold of his door). For St. Johnians, bush therefore symbolized death, whereas clearings for pasture and gardening as well as dwellings symbolized that care and nurture of the land that sustains life and community.

When the National Park Service came to St. John, the island was turned into an important icon of American national identity. The park did

¹⁰ The cutting of wood for basket weaving has been allowed again in recent years, as it became apparent that the vines used for basket making only continue to grow, if they are cut periodically (Burton, 1991).

¹¹ Those fields, which already exist on the former estates, could be cultivated until the farmer abandoned them. With the system of shifting agriculture practiced by St. Johnians, all agriculture on park lands ceased within a few years. The Park Service also placed restrictions on the sort of fishing which was allowed in the waters surrounding the park, when it became part of the National Park in 1961 (Robinson, 1974, 48).

not generate strong feelings of American national identity among St. Johnians, however, but rather made clear to them that their particular local community did not belong within the American nation. Only by representing wilderness could St. John find a place in the American national community. The many stories about the good old Danish times enabled St. Johnians to evoke a local identity, connected with the local community of small subsistence farmers, which countered a local American identity with which they did not feel particularly comfortable.

VIRGIN ISLANDS HERITAGE?

St. Johnians were not alone in evoking the Danish past as a basis for asserting the importance of local culture. Similar constructions of local identities drawing on the Danish past could be found, in varying versions, among the older population in St. Croix and St. Thomas. But the Danish past does not only figure in such personalized identities. During the late 1960's and the 1970's in particular, the upper levels of the local society on St. Thomas and St. Croix were quite active in cultivating their Danish heritage. Many joined "The Friends of Denmark", a cultural organization which, together with its sister organization in Denmark, "The Danish West Indian Society," sought to further the cultural ties between the American Virgin Islands and Denmark through exchanges and various local cultural events as well as social functions. The interest in the Danish past was used to generate a local cultural platform both against the many immigrants from the British West Indies who were seen to have flooded the American Virgin Islands with cheap labor and foreign ways, and against the Americans who dominated the tourist industry. This more public celebration of the islands' Danish heritage constituted a rather top-down form of national identity. It was spearheaded by the light colored descendants of the upper echelons of the old Danish colonial society, who tended to hold high positions in the local government. The activities revolved primarily around public ceremonies held in connection with Transfer Day, a public holiday on March 31, the day when the islands were transferred from Danish to American rule. Interestingly enough, this holiday has become a day to celebrate the heritage of the country that sold the islands, rather than a day to cherish the culture of the new country that acquired the islands. The cel-

celebration of the islands' Danish past coincided with efforts by the growing tourist industry to promote the particular "Old World Charm" of the American Virgin Islands. Thus the tourist brochures have been quick to point to the Danish street names and the old Danish buildings. Even the driving on the left side of the road has been described as part of the Danish heritage! This has been read by Danish tourists as evidence of the strong Danish influence on the American Virgin Islands and as proof of Denmark's importance as a colonial power. It has therefore generated a certain support for national chauvinist feelings among Danes (Olwig, 1994b). One may, therefore, speak of a certain collusion between bottom-up personalized national identities and top-down official national identities in the American Virgin Islanders' cultivation of their Danish heritage as well as between certain bottom-up personalized national identities in Denmark and official top-down national identities in the American Virgin Islands.

This collusion, however, has not gone unchallenged. Since the 1960's, American Virgin Islanders, who have traveled for further education in the United States, have been exposed to African-American environments that emphasize the achievements within Black culture and the importance of their African heritage. These educated Virgin Islanders, many of whom are not affiliated with the old light-skinned upper class, do not ground the islands' heritage in the Danish past or in the local community that emerged during "Dane Man Times." They rather emphasize the community of people of African background who made the island their home. The one event in the islands' history which they refer to most often, especially on St. Thomas and St. John, is the 1733 uprising on St. John which was master-minded by newly imported African slaves, intent on killing off the white population and taking over the entire island. The appeal of this slave uprising and the islanders' African background, however, is not only a result of the increasing Americanization of the Virgin Islanders as they become influenced by ethnic politics in the United States. It also reflects the fact that "African" identities that claim for the Virgin Islanders the right to control the islands may offer a much more relevant and powerful resource for the creation of a personalized "national" identity, given the social and economic climate of the present-day tourist society. The interest in the islands' Danish heritage, which characterized the 1970's, therefore has waned somewhat during the 1980's and 90's.

CONCLUSION

In a discussion of national (and ethnic) identities, Thomas Hylland Eriksen notes that nationalism as ideology stresses “the cultural similarity of their adherents” (1992, 51). So far, studies of nationalism have tended to examine the way in which public stagings of nationalism have been created in the form of cultural festivals, ceremonies or monuments that generate collective feelings of cultural similarity and belonging. As Anthony Cohen (1996) has pointed out, however, nationalism has little effect if it only exists at a collective, public level. Nationalist displays must be appropriated and personalized by individuals, who may have a rather different understanding of them from the intention of their creators. This case study of national and local identities on St. John suggests that nationalism is a much messier affair than the clear-cut national ideologies may lead one to suspect. At the same time, it is the capacity of nationalist spectacles to generate feelings of cultural similarity, which makes a national project possible.

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