Rafael Torra, Achieving Acoustic Hegemony: David Cranz's "Historie von Grönland" as a Source for the Sound History of Early Modern Missions, in: Daniela Hacke, Luc Wodzicki (Hg.), NEMoS. Network of Early Modern Senses (01.10.2024). URL: https://nemos.hypotheses.org/2114.

In recent times, the historical field of sound history has increasingly focussed on the ways in which the production and reception of sounds are historically linked to the formation of social and political orders.[1] Building on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, musicologist Jutta Toelle has argued that achieving the missionary goal of cultural hegemony always involved the attainment of "acoustic hegemony" in the respective areas of influence; nevertheless, in the research on colonisation and mission, the role of sounds still plays a rather subordinate role.[2]

As I will try to demonstrate in this article, the *Historie von Grönland* by the Moravian David Cranz (1723-1777), published in 1765, can be a highly fruitful source for this subject.[3] In large parts written as a history of the Moravian mission in Greenland, it contains the most detailed description of the encounter between Moravians and Greenlandic Inuit in the 18th century and is based on both written missionary reports and personal observations. In what follows, I will attempt to outline a—by no means exclusive or definitive—way to read the *Historie* from a sound history perspective, both suggesting a new research approach to the much-received work and contributing to the emerging sound history of Christian missions.[4]

As the *Historie* shows in a plethora of ways, a central tool as well as object of conflict in the Moravian mission was singing. On a basic level, the missionaries used their singing to supplement their sermon,[5] preferring to sing songs that repeated or deepened on a sentimental level what had already been covered in the speech or conversation.[6] Initially, however, this seems to have proven unsuccessful. At the singing hour, a Moravian liturgic ritual, Greenlandic visitors were present from the beginning of the mission; nevertheless, they were only prepared to listen if they received food or shelter in return.[7]

Apparently, the Inuit often perceived the foreign songs as disturbing. This becomes especially clear, as Cranz describes how the Moravians had to put up with mocking songs when the Inuit "sometimes because of their work, sometimes because of the dancing-festivals" did not want to listen to the missionaries.[8] It is recorded from 1736 that the Inuit mimicked the singing of the missionaries and accompanied it with "their drums and terrible shouting" if they stayed with them too long.[9] This is likely to be a defamatory description for the traditional Greenlandic

---

[1] Jan-Friedrich Missfelder, 'Perspektiven einer Klanggeschichte der Neuzeit', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 38, no. 1 (2012): 21-47 (42).
[2] Jutta Toelle, 'Mission Soundscapes: Demons, Jesuits, and Sounds in Antonio Ruiz de Montoya's Conquista Espiritual (1639)', in *Empire of the Senses. Sensory Practices of Colonialism in Early America*, ed. Daniela Hacke and Paul Musselwhite (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018), 67-87 (68).
[3] David Cranz, *Historie von Grönland enthaltend Die Beschreibung des Landes und der Einwohner etc. insbesondere die Geschichte der dortigen Mission der Evangelischen Brüder zu Neu-Herrnhut und Lichtenfels*, (Barby/Leipzig: Heinrich Detlef Ebers/Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1765).
[4] For other recent perspectives on the *Historie* see *Legacies of David Cranz's 'Historie von Grönland'*, ed. Felicity Jensz and Christina Petterson (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).
[5] Cranz*, Historie von Grönland*, 764.
[6] Matthäus Stach, 'Extract aus dem Grönländischen letzten Diario', in *Büdingische Sammlung Einiger In die Kirchen-Historie Einschlagender Sonderlich neuerer Schrifften...: Nebst darzu gehörigen Registern*, ed. Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (Leipzig: D. Korte, 1744), 346-402 (354).
[7] Cranz, *Historie von Grönland*, 440, 446-447.
[8] Ibid., 466 [transl. R.T.].
[9] Ibid., 467 [transl. R.T.].

drum singing;[10] interrupting and drowning out European songs with own singing appears to have been a form of acoustic resistance to the mission, which in some cases could even precede physical violence.[11] This was especially the case, when Christian singing seemed to stand in the way of practising Inuit music.

Nevertheless, the *Historie* also shows how Moravian singing did contribute to the eventual success of the mission. Cranz repeatedly reports that the first time Inuit learnt about Christianity was when their children memorised Moravian songs and later sang them to their parents.[12] In fact, in some cases there was "almost no need to say much to the parents", as the children had already done so.[13] The Moravians benefited greatly from the fact that the Inuit were often more moved by the songs of their children than by those of the missionaries themselves;[14] it is even recorded that in 1761 two Inuit were explicitly persuaded to stay with the Moravians power of the singing of small children.[15] Thus, the Christian seem to have found greater acceptance from the mouths of Greenlandic children, whose singing was generally connoted with harmless play among the Inuit[16] and not with attempts at re-education. Through this diversion, singing was involved to a considerable extent in spreading the Christian message beyond the immediate area around the Neuherrnhut settlement.[17]

As is obvious throughout the *Historie*, the traditional drum song of the Inuit manifested itself to the Moravians as highly opposed to their claim to hegemony. On the one hand, Greenlandic song was linked to spiritual authorities via their singing shamans, the *angakkuit*;[18] on the other hand, through its different uses at festivals, it was connected to the specific group identity of the Inuit.[19] To the missionaries, who strived to represent a new spiritual authority and at the same time change the group identity of the Inuit to a Moravian one, it was therefore necessary to challenge the drum song.[20] As the *Historie* shows, this initially had no effect: the first Inuit who spent the winter with the missionaries in 1738 were warned in vain not to go to their winter solstice festival.[21] However, warning the Inuit against singing seems to have borne fruit by the early 1760s at the latest—possibly also in combination with the generally progressing Christianisation of the area.[22] This served as a signal to the Moravians: the more the Moravian songs displaced the Greenlandic drum singing, the more successful Cranz and his associates considered the mission to be.[23]

From the early 1740s onwards, increasing numbers of Inuit took part in the daily routines of the Moravian Church. Some of them were Greenlandic converts, but most of them were unbaptised Inuit who simply accepted the offer to spend the winter in the houses of Neuherrnhut. The *Historie* provides detailed insights into everyday life in the settlement. Already early on, the missionaries endeavoured to exert as much influence as possible on the everyday lives of the

---

[10] Ibid., 573, 992.
[11] Ibid., 467.
[12] Ibid., 608-609, 747.
[13] Ibid., 619 [transl. R.T.].
[14] Ibid., 924.
[15] Ibid., 957.
[16] Ibid., 215.
[17] The same is pointed out in other cases by Walter W. Woodward, '"Incline Your Second Ear This Way": Song as a Cultural Mediator in Moravian Mission Towns', in *Ethnographies and Exchanges: Native Americans, Moravians, and Catholics in early North America*, ed. Anthony Gregg Roeber (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008), 125-144, (138-139).
[18] Michael Hauser, 'Traditional and Acculturated Greenlandic Music', in *Arctic Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (1986), 359-386 (360).
[19] Cranz, *Historie von Grönland*, 229-230.
[20] Michael Hauser, *Traditional Greenlandic Music* (Kopenhagen: Kragen/ULO, 1992), 117.
[21] Cranz, *Historie von Grönland*, 497.
[22] Ibid., 537, 990/991, 1064.
[23] Ibid., 820, 839, 996.

Inuit in order to bring them into "a proper order" on the path to Christianisation.[24] As in the original Moravian Church in Lusatia, singing seems to have played a key role here. It was one of the few ways of influencing the everyday life of the Inuit, which mainly took place outside of the settlement, standardising it and dividing it into sections.[25]

Cranz's descriptions reveal how in the song-dominant daily life of Neuherrnhut, it was noticeable and posed a problem to the missionaries that Inuit and Moravians were used to different singing practices.[26] Therefore, by the winter of 1743, a singing school had been introduced.[27] Here, the singing of the Greenlanders was to be brought "into order" or made "more pleasant" according to the standards of the Moravians.[28] However, the institution must have been abolished in Neuherrnhut between 1755 and 1762 because,[29] according to Cranz, by this time "most people could sing very well, know the usual songs by heart or learn them from the hymn book".[30] This specific timing could also be due to the aforementioned trend that by 1760 the presence of Greenlandic music in the area had already declined noticeably; special efforts put into singing were possibly no longer deemed as necessary as in the 1740s.

Due to the Moravian aspiration for cultural hegemony, some elements in the performance of Inuit songs, such as the dance or the spiritually connoted drum, could not exist openly in Neuherrnhut. Areas of application that would have challenged the social and spiritual authority of the Moravians too strongly, like all songs in which the old Inuit authorities, the *angakkuit*, played a role, also had to vanish. However, some things remained. As has been noted in research on continental North America, Moravian missionaries sometimes combined their songs with earlier uses of indigenous singing.[31] Through the *Historie*, this can also be observed in Greenland. I have already mentioned the intensive contact that the Greenlandic children had with the singing of the Moravians; although their singing was no longer allowed to be used as a game in Neuherrnhut, the singing itself was continued.[32] The Moravians also sang for example at farewells or when travelling—both uses for singing that were known and widespread among the Inuit.[33]

As in the outer mission, where pagan children spread the Christian songs, the singing in everyday life in Neuherrnhut was decoupled from the missionaries to a considerable extent: the singing lessons as well as the singing hours and song translations could be carried out by Inuit.[34] Walter Woodward has suspected that in the singing hours of the Moravians in Delaware, compromises between indigenous and Christian singing practices may have been made.[35] Syncretistic practices seem particularly possible in singing hours where many non- or barely Christianised Inuit and no missionaries were present; it cannot be assumed that non-converted Inuit adhered to all the rules imposed on them by their hosts.[36] Nonetheless, such practices—at least on the basis of Cranz's *Historie*—must remain speculative for Greenland.

---

[24] Ibid., 553, [transl. R.T.].
[25] With respect to the closely related mission in Labrador, see Tom Gordon, *Called Upstairs: Moravian Inuit Music in Labrador* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023), 56.
[26] Cranz, *Historie von Grönland*, 1065-1066.
[27] Ibid., 572-573.
[28] Ibid., 645, [transl. R.T.].
[29] Ibid., 826.
[30] Ibid., 1065-1066, [transl. R.T.].
[31] Sarah Justina Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes. A Sonic History of the Moravian Missions in Early Pennsylvania* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2020), 23, 25.
[32] Cranz, *Historie von Grönland*, 784, 1083.
[33] Ibid., 566, 582, 620-621, 875.
[34] Ibid., 573, 882, 996, 1005.
[35] Woodward, *Song as a Cultural Mediator*, 135.
[36] E.g. Cranz, *Historie von Grönland*, 572.

Still, in this context, Cranz's descriptions of festivals should not go unmentioned. At the beginning of the Greenlandic song-intensive winter solstice festivities, which were forbidden in Neuherrnhut, the missionaries didn't only issue warnings, but also placed particular emphasis on communal singing during meals.[37] Just two to three days after the start of the festivities, the Moravian Christmas began, with meal and song again taking centre stage. It is likely that this singing was seen as a direct substitute and possibly included syncretistic elements. Cranz writes of one Christmas celebration that "many [Inuit] stayed up all night and sang Christmas songs in their houses"[38]—it is no coincidence that Cranz's reader is reminded here of his descriptions of the winter solstice festival that took place at the same time.[39]

This brief report on song as thematised in the *Historie* reveals the rich, but as yet untapped, potential the work holds for a sound history of the Moravian mission in Greenland; as I demonstrated, the endeavour for acoustic hegemony played an important role in this context. The drum songs of the Inuit were sinful in the eyes of the missionaries and had to be fought against accordingly; the Moravians offered an alternative with their own rich singing tradition. As the *Historie* documents, this did not go unchallenged and initially caused great tension, which could manifest itself in acoustic and even physical resistance on the part of the Inuit. However, as unbaptised Inuit children increasingly spread the Christian hymns from the 1740s onwards, singing as a missionary tool seems to have borne fruit and resistance diminished. Cranz's descriptions of the community emerging in Neuherrnhut shed light on a different dimension. Here, singing functioned as a marker in the clearly structured everyday life of the Moravians, offered a way to create a common, possibly hybrid, identity and played an important role in replacing, or at least reforming, Greenlandic singing and festival culture.

[37] Ibid., 1064.
[38] Ibid., 648, [transl. R.T.].
[39] Ibid., 229-230.