

White and Black, Rich and Poor For 700 Years

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Thomas A. Burns, PhD.

Chiloquin, Oregon

The Aarsheim extended family of the Aarsheim area of the Stadlandet region in Western Norway are the descendants of the “black” or poor division of the two clans that took over the land of the area's previous monastery in the mid-1200's. Interestingly, it was not until after World War II that the tradition was broken of the female descendants of the original “poor” clan — including the Aarsheim girls — being confirmed in black dresses while the descendants of the rich family were confirmed in white dresses. That is 700 years of announcing one's coming of age while displaying the emblems of lesser status, long after all vestiges of any legitimate rich and poor division had disappeared among the residents of the area!

When I suspected from various bits and pieces of information gleaned during the Aarsheim Family reunion of 2005 that this tradition had persisted in this manner, I shared this possibility with Inger Marie Aarsheim, who supervises the historical museum of the larger Stadlandet region and who is now one of the middle aged Aarsheim family members living in the Aarsheim enclave of the area. Initially, Inger Marie was reluctant to think it could be so. But subsequent inquiries with the 70 and 80 year-old women of the Aarsheim family, together with pictures from family albums, confirmed the persistence of the black and white discriminatory tradition into the modern era. It seems that it was only in the liberating aftermath of WW II that the Aarsheim family threw off the black “veil” and began wearing white confirmation dresses, the new tradition that Inger Marie has come to assume as the norm.

Astonishing, how long traditions, even negatively associated ones, can remain active even when they have no basis in fact and no source for enforcement. After 700 years, wearing black became “just the way things are.” And yet, the women of the area were sensitive enough to this discriminatory practice that they elected to “discard” following it in the late 1940's.

Interesting that this example of a sustained negative and discriminatory tradition should be found among the otherwise much celebrated, egalitarian Norwegians, with their long history of strong women.