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Santa's Black Ride

A Glimpse at Race Relations in Holland

By Allison Blakely

The American traditional Santa Claus is mainly an amalgamation of Father Christmas, brought here by 17th-century British settlers, and *Sinterklaas*, brought by the Dutch to their New Amsterdam. Both of these figures were, in turn, just two of the myriad offspring of a centuries-old St. Nicholas tradition. *Sinterklaas* as practiced in the Netherlands has an intriguing component omitted in the New World adaptation.

Sinterklaas in Holland has a Black companion on his rounds, whose variant names have eventually melded into *Zwarte Piet* (Black Peter). Unlike the American tradition, *Sinterklaas* is not observed at Christmas, but rather on the fifth of December, the eve of the day on which St. Nicholas is said to have died.

At the end of each November, *Sinterklaas* appears in Holland in preparation for his treasured visits; *Zwarte Piet* is at his side. It is not certain whether *Zwarte Piet's* color was originally intended as a racial characteristic, but in contemporary Dutch society, this fabulous pair provides an interesting backdrop for a discussion of race relations in Holland.

Since the *Sinterklaas* tradition may have possible bearing on Dutch racial attitudes, regardless of its specific relation to racial questions, a brief review of the genesis of this tradition is in order.

Its inspiration was the legendary medieval Saint Nicholas, the most popular of all the Christian saints. He was a bishop of Myra, in Asia Minor, in the first half of the 4th century. In the Greek Orthodox Church, he was believed to have miraculous powers to protect those threatened by catastrophe.

In later centuries, after the Christian faith split into its two main factions — Eastern and Western — the Roman Catholic Church retained Nicholas (in its calendar of saints) and was responsible for his popularity as Northern and West-

ern Europe became the center of Western civilization. There he became the patron saint of sailors, which explains his importance in the area which became the Netherlands. He also became associated with benevolence to children; by the late Middle Ages, he annually commemorated the date of his "birth into heaven" by bearing gifts to all deserving children and punishing the rest with birch switches left for parental use.

In different countries, the St. Nicholas figure had different names but served the same purpose. He also absorbed pagan influences. For some, the Scandinavian god Odin (in Anglo-Saxon, Wodan), an all-powerful deity who was believed to fly through the air on a magic horse each December on the winter solstice, came to be fused with the Saint.

Zwarte Piet in Dutch folklore is the name for the devil. When he first joined *Sinterklaas*, it was as a servant — caught and chained for the celebration each year. The two would ride over the rooftops and the good Saint would make *Piet* drop candy and presents down the chimneys and into children's shoes left out for the occasion. *Piet* now wielded the switches. Even worse, he carried a sack in which he would take bad children away. Over the centuries, *Zwarte Piet* has become a more positive figure of a partner.

Another part of the Dutch tradition is that *Sinterklaas* resides in Spain most of the year, just as Santa Claus lives at the North Pole. By some accounts, *Zwarte Piet* was a Moorish orphan boy whom *Sinterklaas* adopted and trained as his assistant. In keeping with this scenario, *Sinterklaas* arrives by ship in Dutch harbors. In other towns, he comes in a horsedrawn carriage or mounted upon a white horse, accompanied by marching bands and local dignitaries. *Zwarte Piet*, a Dutchman in blackface and dressed in the fashion of 16th-century Spain, walks alongside holding the reins so that the Saint, resplendent in his bishop's head-dress and holding his staff in one hand, will be able to wave to all the faithful,

which in this case includes Protestants and Jews as well as Catholics. In some instances, the parade will have numerous *Zwarte Piets* who distribute sweets to children along the way. Some of the children may also be made up as *Piets*.

The typical Dutch attitude toward *Zwarte Piet* is highly positive. Just the mention of him will bring a smile and a twinkle to the eye of even the most sombre adult. There are invariably memories from childhood of being warned that *Zwarte Piet* would come and carry them away if they did not behave.

On the other hand, imbued with the charity and understanding for which his saintly master is famous, *Piet* also is respected for his fairness and ability to reward good deeds. Such a responsible and admired figure should not be identified with the pure buffoon image projected by American minstrel shows, of which his blackface visage is reminiscent. However, at the same time, it seems quite apparent that the Dutch feeling toward *Zwarte Piet* has to be somewhat ambivalent: respect is tinged with apprehension. However dubious the validity of this psychoanalytical observation may be, it seems to be consistent with attitudes shown in the Dutch historical experience with dark-skinned peoples.

The Race Issue

Since its very beginnings, the Netherlands has enjoyed a reputation as one of the most tolerant societies in the world. In the 17th century, at the zenith of its stature as a world power, it could boast of two of the leading cultural figures in Western civilization: Rembrandt and Spinoza, both Jews. Spinoza's parents had moved to the Netherlands to escape persecution in Spain. It was also from Holland that the Pilgrim Fathers who founded the Plymouth colony in 1620 sailed after years of refuge there from their English king.

More recently, with respect to tolerance for ethnic minorities, the Dutch assimilated around 400,000 Eurasians

28 from the former Dutch East Indies, after it became independent Indonesia. The Dutch colonists had obviously mixed freely with the natives and now in the mother country had no difficulty living with them. Only those who have spent time in Holland can fully appreciate the measure of this achievement.

This small country has one of the most diverse and cosmopolitan of all the world's societies, but at the same time one of the most provincial. Even a Dutchman who moves from one town or community into another can expect to wait years before he is accepted as a part of the neighborhood.

One segment of the population from Indonesia, about 40,000 Moluccans, deliberately attempts to isolate itself from its Dutch neighbors. The Moluccans claim to be awaiting fulfillment of Dutch promises to secure an independent homeland for them in Indonesia.

The first of the group to come to Holland were soldiers from the Dutch Royal Army. It is their sons and daughters who are now pressing the issue—sometimes by violent means. Terrorist attacks by young Moluccans have done more to heighten ethnic awareness than any other recent development, although the issues involved are not racial in the usual sense and Moluccan complaints are not directed against conditions in the Netherlands.

With the influx in the past decade of approximately 175,000 more colored citizens from other areas of the old Dutch empire, the established reputation for tolerance seems to be in ever greater danger. The largest group, numbering about 150,000, came from Surinam. Another group, 25,000, came from the Netherlands Antilles (Dutch West Indies). Most of the Surinamers are Black and most of the Antilleans are Creole.

Along with the Eurasian and Black population, there are about 240,000 foreign workers and their families, mainly Turks and Moroccans. There are also some 5,000 Chinese from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. The total nonwhite

population is about 6 percent of the country's population of 14 million. Further, there are several thousand illegal immigrants in Holland with Surinamers accounting for the largest number.

It may be that some of the emerging difficulties in coping with this nonwhite population stem from the suddenness of its arrival.

In order to better understand possible explanations, it is necessary to refer once again to Dutch history. *Apartheid* is a Dutch word, and the associated attitudes and practices which have become infamous in South Africa, where the Cape Colony was originally Dutch, do also have a place in the Dutch tradition.

From the earliest period of Dutch colonization abroad, the policies adopted toward the colored peoples showed an ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, the Dutch believed they should stand above and apart from the colored peoples. But at the same time, it was surmised that intermarriage with indigenous women would promote stability and loyalty to the Dutch. Concomitant to this was legislation prohibiting the entry of colored wives or children into the Netherlands, although there were some exceptions made.

Slavery was also not allowed in the Netherlands, even after the Dutch overcame earlier moral scruples and plunged deeply into the slave trade in the later 17th century. In the colonies, the Dutch practice of slavery came to be equally as brutal as that of their colonial rivals. Incidentally, it was in Surinam that the Dutch slavemasters were the most severe.

The current Dutch channeling of substantial contributions toward the costs of establishing the new nation of Surinam attests to acknowledgement of these past wrongs, as does a policy which temporarily allowed free movement of Surinamers to the Netherlands.

The Bovenkerk Report

Notwithstanding such good intentions, the Surinamers and other ethnic minorities appear to be confronted with mounting evidence of racism. A recent study by cultural anthropologist Frank Bovenkerk of the University of Utrecht concludes that the idea that the Netherlands is a tolerant country with regard to ethnic minorities is no longer accurate.

Bovenkerk's research group found that there is unquestionable racial discrimination against Surinamers and foreign laborers, as shown by experiences concerning housing, work, and law enforcement. The volume of discrimination seems to have grown apace with the increase in number of ethnic minorities — with a radical change noticeable since the 1950s. At that time, the Netherlands had such a strong reputation for having no "Negro problem" that some Americans fled there to escape racism at home. But the atmosphere supporting that has changed with the great increase in the number of colored peoples and the realization that they will remain — creating for the first time a multi-racial society in Holland.

Cognizant of the difficulty of getting people to admit that they have racist attitudes, the research group proceeded by having Moroccans, Tunisians and Surinamers go and apply for jobs and housing and then sending a Dutchman of comparable age, experience and dress to make the same request. They found discrimination to be obvious and systematic.

Another experiment was aimed at determining whether Dutchmen would sit next to Surinamers on a public bus. Inconclusive evidence showed at least an inclination to avoid sitting by a Surinamer.

Discrimination in newspaper reporting was also surveyed. The researchers found that in all the Dutch dailies, reports on misdeeds in which ethnic minorities were involved comprised a proportion of their crime reports which was at least twice as great as the share in crimes

actually attributed to these groups in official records. In one newspaper, for example, a third of all the crimes reported were those involving Surinamers, Turks, and Moroccans. This amounted to six times as high a percentage as their share in overall Dutch crime statistics. Their actual involvement in crime is about the same as their percentage of the total population.

The survey also noted that the words Surinamer, Moroccan, Turk and Tunisian were more often mentioned in the headline than was the case with Dutchmen's affairs. Contributing to the exaggerated perception of the involvement of ethnic minorities in crime is the widely held belief that Chinese and Surinamer elements are mainly responsible for the recent surge in illegal drug traffic in Holland.

Investigation of the Amsterdam police's treatment of Surinamers found demonstrable injustices, just as an earlier Ministry of Justice review had. An incident in September 1978, after Bovenkerk's study, showed that his findings were correct and, moreover, that the situation had not improved. In this case, the Surinamer Rights Committee protested against a police raid which resulted in the arrest of 48 Blacks. Taken from cafes and from the streets, they were held as suspects after a street fight involving a white student and some youths alleged to be Surinamers. The only thing all the suspects had in common was their color.

The arrests were conducted violently, and one injured Surinamer received no medical attention at the police station, despite repeated appeals. He claimed that he had been beaten by several men at the instigation of an officer, although he never resisted arrest.

With respect to the labor movement, the Bovenkerk group showed that the unions had manifested little support for foreign-born workers, and, in fact, seem to favor their departure. In recommendations concluding his study, Bovenkerk advises that discrimination has to be fought through full enforcement of the

new anti-discrimination law, by giving more attention to foreigners in the schools, and by sponsoring more neighborhood activities which foster positive contacts between variant ethnic groups. And, most importantly, he urges that it be made more widely known that there is racial discrimination in the Netherlands, since most Dutchmen seem not to be aware of it.

A Black visitor to the Netherlands will find that all of Bovenkerk's findings and conclusions are instructive. Perhaps what is most striking is that most of the Dutch are not ready to admit that racism is present in their society. Since most of the recently-arrived ethnic minorities tend to be concentrated in certain locales, it is quite possible that in some areas there is still no racial consciousness—just as there are some Dutchmen who never see a Black face except for *Zwarte Piet*. It is not uncommon for a Dutch child to shout to his parents and point upon seeing a Black person.

The problem, it is worth noting, is partly based on color. Although a wealthy society, the Netherlands has a chronic, acute shortage of housing and jobs. The equitable distribution of these scarce essentials, which is required by the country's socialistic system, has to be greatly complicated by the influx of what most Dutchmen view as outsiders. Resentment of the groups in question might follow regardless of their color.

Ten years ago a Black American could almost certainly expect to receive more favorable treatment after a Dutchman discovered that he was not a Surinamer. However, with the explosion in the number of Blacks in Holland, such distinctions have become increasingly blurred; color alone has become more of a definitive factor, and racist thought seems to be overshadowing non-racist factors as the cause of friction.

This pattern of development is all too familiar to Americans. It has also now become pronounced in the homelands of all the former European colonial powers and in other European societies that

in the past have relied heavily upon foreign laborers for menial chores.

The situation between the races in the Netherlands has not yet reached crisis proportions. Except for some Surinamer women's groups, the ethnic minorities are still divided among themselves. In addition to the diversions along national origins, the Blacks and the Creole still reflect the contours of the past slave societies to which they belonged.

Unless the types of discrimination mentioned here are checked, their common plight may eventually forge the oppressed into a militant whole. □

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