

ZWARTE PIET, THE NETHERLANDS AND THE POLITICS OF “BLACKFACE”



The origin of the character of Zwarte Piet, or Black Pete in English, is the folklore of the Low Countries (Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands). A figure from Dutch oral history, the character was part of the feast of St. Nicholas, celebrated on the 5th of December. In some representations, particularly those in the 19th century, the character was black and he represented the devil, who had been captured by St. Nicholas.

Since that time, Zwarte Piet has been a central figure of Dutch celebrations leading up to Christmas. The great controversy about this is that the character has grown to represent what many consider racist stereotypes, including large curly hair, golden ear-rings and bright red lips (Rodenberg & Wagenaar 2016). Most problematically, the character is played by white men who don black make-up - a widely-condemned tradition known as ‘blackface’.

For many years, the cultural politics of Zwarte Piet have been fairly marginal—with the defence being that the tradition is a harmless one, and that Piet’s colouration comes from the soot inside chimneys rather than pertaining to his race. Yet the debate has grown increasingly central to Dutch politics in recent years, not least when a poet and activist was arrested for wearing a shirt that stated ‘Zwarte Piet is racism’ (Hilhorst & Hermes 2016). Indeed, the colonial history of the Netherlands (see Chapter 7, page 222) suggests that arguments about tradition seek to erase how the country is implicated in the slave trade (like many other European countries) and lend weight to the view that racist stereotypes underpin the history of these stories.

Hilorst and Hermes (2016) highlight how polarised the debate has become, where “the mere posing of the question of whether and how [Black Pete] can be considered to be racist, is to take up a position in the debate and to declare one’s sympathies” (p. 229). They attribute this in part to the adoption of Zwarte Piet by Dutch nationalist groups that seek to stoke racism in the country.

The issue of blackface and the racist caricaturing of black people is not restricted to the Netherlands. In the UK, a popular television show *The Black and White Minstrel Show* aired in the 1960s and 1970s and featured white actors playing black characters. Hugely popular at the time, a petition saw the show taken off air in 1978 (see Bourne 2005). As Malik (cited in Bourne) argued, “Many felt that a large part of ‘minstrel humour’ was based on caricaturing black people and depicting them as being both stupid and credulous. This image was felt to be insensitive and inappropriate in an increasingly multi-racial and multi-cultural Britain”.

As the sociological imagination tells us, in order to understand contemporary experiences, we have to investigate the historical and cultural contexts in which such events occur. Doing this yields important questions beyond whether individuals who enjoy Zwarte Piet or blackface more generally are racist. We can investigate, instead, whether these cultural practices perpetuate a history of racism that is oppressive and damaging to values of equality and diversity. Similarly, we might look to

understand why certain (normally white) people experience diversity as a threat to national or cultural identity. What other questions might emerge from thinking about personal identity and cultural context regarding Zwarte Piet?

References

Bourne, S. (2005) *Black in the British Frame: The Black Experience in British Film and Television*. London: A&C Black.

Hilhorst, S. & Hermes, J. (2016). 'We have given up so much': Passion and denial in the Dutch Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) controversy. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19(3), 218-233.

Rodenberg, J. & Wagenaar, P. (2016). Essentializing 'Black Pete': Competing narratives surrounding the Sinterklaas tradition in the Netherlands. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. 22(9), 716-728.