

Why the Dutch Love Black Pete

By ARNON GRUNBERG

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WHEN I was growing up in Amsterdam in the 1970s, the phenomenon of Santa Claus was relatively unknown. Christmas was celebrated without Santa and mostly without gifts. St. Nicholas — Sinterklaas in Dutch — was the man with the presents.

If one had the good fortune to be Jewish, one received presents not only on Dec. 5, the eve of Sinterklaas's name day, but also at Hanukkah. Only in recent years has Santa Claus, who comes on Dec. 25, made his rise to stardom in Holland, and today a Dutch child — or a Dutch adult for that matter — no longer has to be Jewish to cash in twice in December.

Sinterklaas arrives from Spain by steamboat in late November, travels farther on horseback, climbs onto roofs and on Dec. 5, known as “Pakjesavond,” drops presents through the chimney with the help of the Black Petes, a crew of dark-skinned helpers wearing large earrings who cavort and entertain and, as Dutch parents often tell their children, owe their blackness to chimney soot.



Black Pete and Sinterklaas also conspire to form a punitive team. In the traditional holiday songs, Sinterklaas brings gifts for good boys and girls; naughty children get a spanking with Black Pete's bundle of twigs.

I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood, and every November, whenever I would come across someone from Suriname — in those days, most black people in Amsterdam were from Suriname, a former Dutch colony in South America — I feared that I had run into a Black Pete in plain clothes.

Until recently, Black Pete was uncontroversial. Not because the Dutch are particularly racist, but because Sinterklaas, like the royal family, is sacred in the Netherlands, perhaps because of a dearth of other, specifically Dutch traditions. A matter, in other words, of conservatism.

Such traditions are even more important today, given the view that, in order to safeguard the Dutch national identity, homegrown culture and folklore must not be tampered with — a view expressed primarily, though not exclusively, by the extreme right wing Party for Freedom, run by Geert Wilders.

But just as the defense of traditions has grown stronger, so has the criticism that Black Pete is a racist holdover from the Netherlands's colonial past. In January the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights sent a letter to the Dutch government stating that Black Pete perpetuated the image of people of African descent as second-class citizens and constituted a “living trace of past slavery.”

The Dutch government responded by saying that it regarded the Sinterklaas tradition as a children's celebration, that it was aware of the differences of opinion concerning Black Pete, but that it was highly committed to combating discrimination in all forms.

Both letters received publicity only in October of this year, when the public debate over Black Pete resurfaced.

Emotions were running so high that a popular singer, Anouk, who is white and had called for the abolition of Black Pete, received numerous insults and threats via social media. A plan for a Sinterklaas parade with a proposed compromise, Green Petes, had to be canceled after threats were made against its planners.

In The Hague, the seat of government, a demonstration was organized for the preservation of Black Pete, while a pro-Black Pete Facebook page received two million likes almost immediately. Even the nation's highest-circulation newspaper, De Telegraaf, agreed that the United Nations letter constituted interference in the Netherlands's domestic affairs.

In a debate in Parliament, Mr. Wilders's party asked the minister of education, culture and science whether she shared the view held by some that "Dutch traditions" should be made subordinate to "multicultural drivel." Not to be outflanked, both Prime Minister Mark Rutte and the mayor of Amsterdam recently spoke up in defense of Black Pete, albeit with reservations. Sinterklaas, Mr. Rutte said, would not be Sinterklaas without Black Pete.

Of course, there were Dutch people who saw things differently, and there were many with no opinion either way. Yet the general tenor among the Dutch public was that "they" should keep their mitts off "our tradition," an opinion you can hear in any number of variations on any street corner. By "them" people mean the United Nations and "unnatural" Dutch citizens, by both birth and naturalization, who want to put an end to this admittedly dubious tradition.

The Black Pete debate underscores how deep within the Netherlands's prosperous and safe society lies the fear of losing identity, undoubtedly fueled by globalization, migration and the notion that the European Union is gradually doing away with the European nation state.

During the triumphal entry of St. Nicholas into the Netherlands this year, a national happening whereby a sort of street theater is performed on the children's behalf, the Black Petes were in attendance once again, albeit this time with less ostentatious golden earrings. For security's sake, the saint himself was accompanied by armed Petes in bulletproof vests.

The truly disturbing thing is the aggression conjured up by this public debate, the thinly disguised xenophobia that roiled to the surface when attempts were made to make Black Pete less black. A civilized person, after all, could say: "Personally, I don't have much of a problem with Black Pete, but if others do, well, then, why don't we make him Green Pete or Blue Pete?"

But no. To my utter amazement, at least two million Dutch people have taken the stance: "Black Pete, c'est moi."

Which once again goes to prove that national identity often boils down to distasteful folklore.

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