

Racism or Tradition?: the Dutch 'Golliwog' Row (Sinterklaas)

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Italian chimney sweep or racist?

I am in Utrecht for a conference on how the media can help people from different places understand each other. So I was interested to see my edition of that excellent serious, liberal, intelligent Netherlands broadsheet *De Volkskrant* with a photo of a white Dutch child 'blacked up' to look like some kind of Golliwog.

Imagine that in *The Guardian*. But this is the Netherlands 2010 and it is Sinterklaas. Or St Nicholas Day. Or Santa, to you.

All over this very multi-cultural country children are dressing up as music-hall Al Jolson's and getting presents for doing so. This mini Black and White Minstrel look is supposed to be 'Zwarte Piet' or Black Peter, Santa's little helper.

Some assert that the root of this tradition is actually Italian chimney sweeps and the black is soot. But in practice there are lots of jokes about immigrants and people from tropical countries.

Dutch people are weary of this annual debate, but it is getting more intense not less. Different shops will have different Sinterklas displays according to their politics. Some will only have the Bishop while others

sympathetic to the growing anti-immigration parties will deliberately only have 'Zwarte Piet'.

bishop But although there is a debate, the practice continues. This is partly because the Dutch (majority population) can be pretty straight-forwardly racist. I found this out when I was the first non Dutch journalist to interview Pim Fortuyn, the Gay Ultra-Liberal anti-immigration politician who rose suddenly to prominence here ten years ago.

He was a symbol of the way that most of the Netherland outside Amsterdam is actually rather conservative and deeply worried about the significant minority of Muslims in some of its cities. Back then they did a very bad job of assimilating into a state that refuses to compromise on its admirable principles of women's rights, gay rights, tolerance , making money and playing free-flowing football.

There's been a dual reaction since then. The political establishment has tightened up immigration laws while pumping money into social cohesion programmes.

I don't sense that race relations are much better now. And the evidence of Sinterklaas suggests that things here are nearer to France where they insist on upholding majority population cultural values, for example, by rejecting religious symbols like the Muslim scarves in schools.

I am someone who has long campaigned against racism but my first instinct on Sinterklaas was with the Dutch sense of tradition and fun. I distrust that silly anachronistic business of tidying up our past or disinfecting the present of any history or cultural heft. I am happy to see a non-racist version of Enid Blyton (although why anyone would want to read any of those dreadful books that I was brought up on I don't know) but that doesn't mean we have to burn all the versions with the Golliwog in it.

But talk to people from the Netherlands 'ethnic' groups and it feels different. One young woman whose roots go back to guest workers who came to the Netherlands from Portugal in the 1960s told me that she hated the whole Sinterklaas weekend:

"I know they say that Zwarte Piet is supposed to be a chimney sweep but that it's not true. Look at what he looks like, it's horrid. I much prefer Christmas"

We Brits hardly have a pristine record on racism, but it does make you think that perhaps the Dutch need to think about Liberalism as a two-way street. In return for the freedoms they cherish perhaps they ought to accept a little limitation on their right to cause offence?

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