

Where Dutch racism lurks

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ROTTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

When I was a child in the Netherlands, the festival of Sinterklaas was magic. Through the month of November, leading up to Dec. 5, I would slip out of bed at night, my sister asleep in our top bunk, and tiptoe to the living room. Sinterklaas, our version of Saint Nicholas, had arrived via steamboat from Spain, but I was really looking for Zwarte Piet, or Black Pete, his comical blackface assistant. Maybe Black Pete would tumble through the chimney, as we were told he did every year, and leave us presents.

As a brown girl of Surinamese descent, I was fascinated by Zwarte Piet. I imagined that he was an important Surinamese man, maybe a prince.

In the years leading up to Suriname's independence from the Netherlands in 1975, a mass migration occurred. Because they wanted to retain their Dutch citizenship, almost half of the Surinamese population, many of them of African ancestry, moved to the Netherlands. Their adjustment was far from smooth. They lived on the periphery — in anonymous gray suburbs and overcrowded apartment complexes. Our family had immigrated a decade earlier, though the white Dutch looked at us all with suspicion. But Black Pete they loved to pieces. So did I.

The tale is that Black Pete is not meant to be a black man at all, but looks the way he does because he's been crawling through chimney soot. I like this version of the story. But, the thing is, he sometimes speaks with a Caribbean accent and looks just like a caricature of a 17th-century house slave. I didn't think much about this growing up. Being a brown girl with a light complexion, I painted my face countless times to dress up like Black Pete. Some of my

classmates with darker complexions didn't have to do that. They were Black Petes instantly; all they had to do was put on the costume, and I was envious.

My unease crept in slowly. In our Surinamese church, slavery was a heritage that was hidden, shameful. No one wanted to talk about it. And in school, the slavery history we learned was basically limited to "Uncle Tom's Cabin," but did not touch on our own Dutch colonial past. I wouldn't learn about the larger African diaspora in

In the Netherlands, Black Pete is meant to be dark with chimney soot, but he looks like the caricature of a slave.

Pete's Surinamese accent started bothering me. And then there was the fact that every foreigner I met, black or white, would ask me why on earth black people agreed to this.

I stopped celebrating Sinterklaas. It is, after all, a children's holiday. But three and a half years ago, I became a mom. Now I have a little boy and Black Pete is impossible to avoid because every preschool celebrates Sinterklaas.

Over the past few years, things finally started shifting in the Netherlands. The Dutch artist and activist Quinsy Gario, who is of Afro-Antillean descent, began speaking out about the blackface tradition, making one very memorable appearance on national television. Black Pete ridicules our heritage, he said. This is a slave caricature; why are we teaching it to our children?

Many people in the Netherlands were shocked. They never thought that Pete was racist. The tradition may not have

school, but from artists like Alice Walker, Bob Marley and Grandmaster Flash.

I remember when I painted my face for the last time. I was 15. An uncle had just told me that our surname was a typical slave name. Around the same time Black

been developed to deliberately belittle black people, like American blackface, but it has that effect. The problem is that few Dutch know their own history. It's what you could call unintended racism.

Some seek a middle ground, a modified Black Pete. I saw one version presented on a recent talk show that looked much like the traditional Pete, but with one minor change: His Afro had been replaced by a weave.

The city of Amsterdam is developing its own updated Black Pete that is light brown, not jet black, and doesn't wear the typical garish golden earrings or have the stereotypical big red lips. Still, it seems almost unimaginable that the tradition will change. People dressed in Black Pete costumes are on every street corner.

Recently, when Mark Rutte, our prime minister, was asked his opinion on Black Pete during a visit from Barack Obama, he said: "My friends from the Dutch Antilles are actually happy they don't have to paint their faces. When I play Zwarte Piet, it takes me days to wash that stuff off my face."

But things have to shift eventually. My country is a mixture of shades and races, each with their own histories. Where my son goes to school, in Rotterdam, you'll find the diversity of our country: Surinamese, Antilleans, Somalis, Moroccans, Poles, Hungarians.

Today, Sinterklaas sets sail back to Spain. I wonder what the festival will look like next year. I'd like to see a Black Pete with actual chimney soot on his face, not made up to look like a black servant. I do want the celebrations, but I won't ridicule my enslaved ancestors. I also want my son to wake up to presents in front of the chimney, left by Pete. Just Pete, not Black Pete.

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