

Zwarte Piet: Racism or An Innocent Tradition?

The 2021 winning essay, by Sheffield University student Rebecca Nelsey

Zwarte Piet is a Dutch, Flemish and Northern French cultural figure who, especially in recent years, has proven to be a cause of passionate debate every festive season. The character's critics argue that the tradition is a racist, colonial caricature of a Black person; meanwhile, its proponents defend it as an integral part of their cultural heritage.¹ In this essay, I will explore the tradition of Zwarte Piet, examining its historical context. I will then analyse the arguments for and against the preservation of Zwarte Pieten in their current form before evaluating what I believe to be the root cause of the debate.

Every Mid-November, a magical elderly bishop known as Sinterklaas is said to arrive in a Dutch city (or, in Belgium, at the port of Antwerp) from Spain with his helpers, Zwarte Pieten. These characters have black skin, dark curly hair, thick red lips, gold earrings, and a colourful pageboy ensemble, and they distribute sweet treats such as *pepernoten* among the children who await them. The arrival of Sinterklaas has been broadcast on Dutch television since 1952. Between their arrival and the night of 5-6 December, they visit children in shopping centres, schools and other such venues. Children prepare for the special night by filling their shoes with a wish list, drawings for Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet, and treats for Sinterklaas' white horse; and on the evening of 5 December (Netherlands) or the morning of 6 December (Belgium), children will find gifts left for them by Sinterklaas. In response to allegations of racism, Antwerp's Zwarte Pieten have had a slightly different appearance since 2015: Belgian children instead meet 'Roetpieten' or 'Sooty Petes' who bear black smudges of 'soot' on their faces instead of a full covering of black paint, and some cities and schools host 'Kleurenpieten' with faces painted not just black but a whole array of colours.² Such action to ban black-faced Zwarte Pieten did not take place in the Netherlands, however, until 2019.³

To fully understand the arguments for and against the notion that Zwarte Piet is racist, it is important to investigate historical context and explore the figure's possible origins. One theory is that Zwarte Piet originated from fifteenth-century tales of demons and other dark creatures who roamed other European countries by Saint Nicholas' side, disciplining children with rods. One such figure was Ruprecht who, in a book published in 1803, was portrayed as the Black valet of Sinterklaas who wore a turban.⁴ Nevertheless, these figures bear little resemblance to Zwarte Piet and the evidence to support this theory is limited at best.⁵ What we can be sure of, though, is that Zwarte Piet's first appearance that we know of in literature

¹ As per the most recent AP Stylebook guidance, I have elected to capitalise the term 'Black' in the context of race and ethnicity in this essay. Reference: Associated Press, 'Race-related Coverage', *AP Stylebook*, 2021 <<https://www.apstylebook.com/race-related-coverage>> [accessed 30 January 2021].

² Koen Lemmens, 'The Dark Side Of "Zwarte Piet": A Misunderstood Tradition or Racism in Disguise? A Legal Analysis', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 21.2 (2017), 120-41 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2016.1276448>> (pp. 121).

³ Petra Vissers, "'Een historische dag": geen zwarte Pieten meer bij de landelijke intocht', *Trouw*, 2019 <<https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/een-historische-dag-geen-zwarte-pieten-meer-bij-de-landelijke-intocht~b48d482ff/>> [accessed 2 July 2021].

⁴ Lemmens, *The Dark Side Of 'Zwarte Piet'*, pp. 122-23.

⁵ Eugenie Boer-Dirks, 'Nieuw licht op Zwarte Piet: Een kunsthistorisch antwoord op de vraag naar de herkomst van Zwarte Piet', *Volkskundig Bulletin*, 19.3 (1993), 1-35 <https://www.meertens.knaw.nl/meertenspublicaties/pdf/vb/203_VB_1993_19.1.pdf> (p. 1).

occurred in the book ‘Sint Nicolaas en Zijn Knecht’ by Jan Schenkman, published c. 1850. Schenkman introduced—or perhaps solidified—the idea that Sinterklaas was accompanied by Zwarte Piet, a servant character based on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tradition of Moorish pageboys who themselves acted as servants.⁶ In the book, his prescribed role was one of discipline: he carried a rod and a sack of gifts which, once empty, was used to take children away to Spain if they had misbehaved that year.⁷ While Zwarte Piet is indeed depicted as Moorish in the first print of the book, in the second print he is portrayed as Black.⁸ It is also important to note that the tradition of Moorish pageboys itself is rooted in the ‘tradition’ of slavery.⁹ Given that Zwarte Piet is depicted wearing clothing and accessories typical of child ‘household helps’ of the time, the time of publishing is also historically significant: slavery was not abolished in Suriname, the Dutch Antilles or Indonesia until 13 years after publication, and ‘minstrel’ shows peaked in the USA only one to two decades prior.¹⁰ In the 1950s, Zwarte Piet was released from his punitive disciplinary role and became a bumbling, foolish, poorly-spoken helper to Sinterklaas. The following decade, he evolved once again into a quick-witted entertainer figure regarded by children as ‘smart, hardworking and brave’.¹¹ It is also at this time that the idea of being sooty from chimneys began to be emphasised concerning Zwarte Piet’s colour.¹² Perhaps not by chance, these two events coincided with the beginnings of protests and disputes about Zwarte Piet. The conversation transformed into a full-scale political issue from 2008, and in 2011 the abuse of activists protesting at Dordrecht’s Sinterklaasparade by Dutch police intensified discussion.¹³ Since then, slogans such as ‘Zwarte Piet is Racisme’ and ‘Zwarte Piet Niet’ have gained traction online and fierce debates have taken place everywhere from social media to the courtroom.¹⁴

Those who take issue with Zwarte Piet primarily object to the character’s appearance and voice (Zwarte Pieten frequently have, as described by Wekker, an ‘unabashedly quasi-Surinamese accent’).¹⁵ It is not difficult to understand how his dark skin, thick curls and big lips could be interpreted as a colonial, racist caricature of a Black person and a remnant of the racial hierarchy of the past¹⁶. This is especially the case when examining the context of which he was borne, during a time of legal slavery, minstrel shows, golliwogs, and other traditions of blackface that are generally understood to be racist and unacceptable today. Seeing a Black

⁶ Lemmens, *The Dark Side Of ‘Zwarte Piet’*, p. 123.

⁷ Ibid., p. 123.

⁸ Jerome Rodenberg and Pieter Wagenaar, ‘Essentializing “Black Pete”: Competing Narratives Surrounding the Sinterklaas Tradition in the Netherlands’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 22.9 (2016), 716-28 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2016.1193039>> (p. 722).

⁹ Lemmens, *The Dark Side Of ‘Zwarte Piet’*, p. 123.

¹⁰ Christiaan De Beukelaer, ‘Ordinary Culture in a World of Strangers: Toward Cosmopolitan Cultural Policy’, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 25.6 (2019), 792-805 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2017.1389913>> (p. 794-95).

¹¹ Judi Mesman, Sofie Janssen and Lenny van Rosmalen, ‘Black Pete Through the Eyes of Dutch Children’, *PLoS ONE*, 11.6 (2016), 1-14 <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0157511>> (p. 10).

¹² Lemmens, *The Dark Side Of ‘Zwarte Piet’*, p. 124.

¹³ Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 144.

¹⁴ Lemmens, *The Dark Side Of ‘Zwarte Piet’*, p. 125.

¹⁵ Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 140.

¹⁶ De Beukelaer, *Ordinary Culture in a World of Strangers*, p. 798.

character depicted as a servant to the white man and even dressed in court servants' clothing is unsurprisingly a source of racial trauma for many Black Dutch people, reflecting the centuries-old colonial stereotype that the white man is superior to the Black man. Many critics of Zwarte Piet acknowledge that the tradition's roots are unclear; however, they contend that its origins don't matter so much as its actual interpretation. The message conveyed is that Blackness exists to serve whiteness, whether as an assistant to Sinterklaas or as an entertainer to the majority-white Dutch population as a whole. As noted by activist Mireille-Tsheushi Robert, 'the subordinate function of Zwarte Piet is the message we give to Black children'; In other words, the impact of Zwarte Piet, despite all innocent intentions, is harmful.¹⁷

Around the festive season, Dutch children of colour report intensified racial discrimination in relation to Zwarte Piet which, according to De Kinderombudsman, constitutes a violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention states that children's interests should be prioritised in all matters relevant to them; it is, therefore, the responsibility of adults to ensure that children of all races and ethnicities can participate in Sinterklaas celebrations in a safe and respectful environment free of harassment or exclusion.¹⁸ In addition, issues of human rights are called into question regarding Zwarte Piet. Firstly, the right to freedom from discrimination and stereotyping is protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the latter also protects against the stereotyping of dark-skinned peoples. Secondly, ethnic origin forms a part of one's identity and that identity constitutes a part of one's private life. Therefore, if a negative stereotype about a racial or ethnic group has a serious enough effect to impact self-image, their identity is affected and so is their right to protection of private life. Supporters of the Zwarte Piet tradition also reference human rights to defend their stance, citing their right to participate in cultural life to maintain that they are entitled to the preservation of Zwarte Piet as part of a long-standing cultural tradition. While they indeed possess the right to participate in Sinterklaas traditions, this does not mean that cultural traditions must not change over time.¹⁹ In fact, as shown by the changes Zwarte Piet as a character has already undergone throughout history, the opposite is an integral part of the development of cultural traditions.

This, of course, is not the only argument offered by proponents of Zwarte Piet. Their main defence is that the tradition is misinterpreted by its critics. Many cite the fact that many of the possible origins of the character have very little to do with race. For example, if there is a link between Zwarte Piet and nonhuman mediaeval creatures such as Ruprecht, Piet's Blackness is attributed not to race but species.²⁰ Others argue, as previously mentioned, that Zwarte Piet's face is black not to indicate race but to represent chimney soot from his present delivery duties. Critics argue that this is not a plausible explanation due to the lack of soot on

¹⁷ Debeuckelaere, *Volgens de Belg woonde zwarte piet in de hemel*.

¹⁸ De Kinderombudsman, 'Kinderombudsman: Zwarte Piet vraagt om aanpassing', *De Kinderombudsman*, 2016 <<https://www.dekinderombudsman.nl/nieuws/kinderombudsman-zwarte-piet-vraagt-om-aanpassing>> [accessed 28 January 2021].

¹⁹ College voor de Rechten van de Mens, 'Toegelicht: Zwarte Piet', *Mensrechten in Nederland*, 2016 <<https://mensenrechten.nl/nl/toegelicht/zwarte-piet>> [accessed 28 January 2021].

²⁰ Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 155.

Piet's clothes; however, there are plenty of other parts of the Sinterklaas tradition that also go unexplained, not least how presents are delivered to every Dutch and Belgian child in a single night. The fact that Zwarte Piet was originally a Moorish figure is also brought up in debates²¹; however, given that Muslims are also considered by a considerable proportion of the Dutch population to be a 'hostile outsider', this defence does little to argue against the discriminatory nature of the tradition.²²

The fact that Dutch Muslims and anti-Piet protesters are often grouped together is telling of the sentiment among defenders of Zwarte Piet. Many 'Native' Netherlanders feel that they are being stripped of their right to celebrate their cultural identity at the hands of immigrants; as described by former politician Rita Verdonk, there is a sense that "“they” want to get rid of “our” culture’.²³ If they were truly Dutch, it is argued, they would understand the tradition and their criticism would cease.²⁴ Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte has previously expressed a similar sentiment: 'if you so fundamentally reject our country, [we] prefer that you leave.'²⁵ This narrative is perhaps legitimised by the fact that only a minority of Black Dutch people seem to take offence at the tradition. A 2012 study indicated that in Amsterdam, only 27% of Surinamese people, 18% of Antilleans, and 14% of Ghanaians felt personally discriminated against by the appearance and/or speech of Zwarte Piet.²⁶ However, it is important to bear in mind that over eight years have passed since that report was published and public opinion may well have changed over the years, as Rutte's own opinion indeed has.²⁷

Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of the current public debate surrounding Zwarte Piet has taken place on social media. Famously, an online 'Pietitie' calling for the preservation of the tradition in its current form was signed by over two million people in just a few days after its launch in 2013. The petition was started in response to the Chair-Rapporteur of the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, Verene Shepherd, declaring on Dutch television that Zwarte Piet was a 'return to slavery'.²⁸ Impartiality and expertise were expected of Shepherd due to her key role in the Working Group; nevertheless, she indicated a level of bias towards a specific verdict before the Working Group's investigation into the situation of Black Netherlanders had even begun, and she demonstrated a lack of cultural

²¹ Ibid., p. 154.

²² Sacha Hilhorst and Joke Hermes, "“We Have Given Up So Much”: Passion and Denial in the Dutch Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) Controversy", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19.3 (2016), 218-33 <<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1367549415603381>> (p. 225).

²³ John Helsloot, 'Zwarte Piet and Cultural Aphasia in the Netherlands', *Quotidian*, 3.1 (2012), 1-20 <<http://www.quotidian.nl/www.quotidian.nl/vol03/nr01/a01.html>> [accessed 29 January 2021] (p. 13).

²⁴ De Beukelaer, *Ordinary Culture in a World of Strangers*, p. 797.

²⁵ Mark Rutte, 'Lees hier de brief van Mark', *VVD*, 22 January 2017 <<https://www.vvd.nl/nieuws/lees-hier-de-brief-van-mark>> [accessed 30 January 2021].

²⁶ Jessica Greven and Willem Bosveld, *Hoe denken Amsterdammers over Zwarte Piet?*, 12321 (Amsterdam: Gemeente Amsterdam: Bureau Onderzoek en Statistiek, 2012) p. 3 <https://www.academia.edu/31170827/_Re_articulating_critical_awareness_about_racism_in_public_discourse_changing_ones_mind_on_the_Black_Pete_debates_in_the_Netherlands_pdf> [accessed 30 January 2021].

²⁷ BBC, 'Dutch PM Rutte sceptical about Black Pete tradition', *BBC News*, 2020 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-52937623>> [accessed 2 July 2021].

²⁸ Just Fontein, 'Hoofd VN-onderzoek: Zwarte Piet is terugkeer slavernij', *Trouw*, 2013 <<https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/hoofd-vn-onderzoek-zwarte-piet-is-terugkeer-slavernij~b57360c0/>> [accessed 30 January 2021].

awareness by stating her confusion over the need for two ‘Santa Clauses’.²⁹ This caused extreme discontent among defenders of Zwarte Piet, and the ‘Pete-ition’ was born. The same two sentiments of innocence and loss are continually expressed in comments on the Pietitie’s Facebook page. Notions of innocence appear, of course, in the context of the innocence of children: the celebration is simply a children’s festivity, and it would be categorically unjust to label children racist. Categorical imperatives support the notion of innocence by declaring that if Zwarte Piet is racist, then so must be snowmen, white chocolate, and countless other objects. There are also echoes of innocence in the argument that foreigners just don’t understand the tradition and, more specifically, its harmlessness. It could be argued that these ideas amount to the concepts of Dutch exceptionalism and ‘white innocence’ (Wekker 2016). Meanwhile, the idea of loss is felt in fears of the domino theory, i.e., the idea that allowing changes in Zwarte Piet tradition will result in systematic outlawing of all other widely enjoyed Dutch traditions and festivities. A sense of loss is also harboured in the ideas that the Zwarte Piet debate diverts from more important issues such as healthcare and street crime and that Black immigrants are being ungrateful for the hospitality of the Dutch.³⁰ From these two overarching notions, it could be argued that the main reasons for defending the Zwarte Piet tradition may all stem from insecurity. On one hand, Pro-Piet protesters appear to be hurt that they could be accused of something so virulent as racism and feel the need to prove that they are innocent to avoid public scrutiny. On the other, they are nostalgic for the fond memories they hold of Sinterklaas festivities and they fear that they will not be able to adapt if the tradition in its current form is taken away from them.

From here, we can begin to uncover the core of the debate around Zwarte Piet. The two sides do not disagree that racism or tradition is important; the debate is rather about which is of greater importance and what constitutes each of them.³¹ In other words, what one person considers an act of racism may not be perceived as such to another, and what one sees as a minor detail in a tradition may be of high importance to another. The debate surrounding Zwarte Piet is ultimately a question of interpretation of words, acts and symbols. Indeed, if the Zwarte Piet tradition were to be interpreted as racist, it would be not because of malicious intent but because of denial of the harm it perpetuates.

As observed by Wekker (2016), racism in the Netherlands wears a mask of innocence. Nevertheless, for as long as Black people are racially profiled by police, discriminated against in employment, and disproportionately harassed, arrested and imprisoned, the Dutch cannot claim to live in a post-racial society free of racism and discrimination.³² Disputes surrounding Zwarte Piet’s origins, intentions and impact have been ongoing for decades; unless the public is to engage in constructive discourse to find a solution, these debates are sure to continue. Zwarte Piet’s critics and proponents can both harness historical context in favour of their arguments, with the history of racial oppression in Europe and the long-

²⁹ Lemmens, *The Dark Side Of ‘Zwarte Piet’*, p. 126.

³⁰ Hilhorst and Hermes, *We Have Given Up So Much*, p. 223-29.

³¹ De Beukelaer, *Ordinary Culture in a World of Strangers*, p. 798; Lemmens, *The Dark Side Of ‘Zwarte Piet’*, p. 132.

³² United Nations’ Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, ‘Statement by the United Nations’ Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, on the conclusion of its official visit to the Kingdom of the Netherlands, 26 June-4 July 2014’, *OHCHR*, 2014
<<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14840&LangID=E>> [accessed 24 January 2021].

established cultural tradition of Sinterklaas festivities both holding significance. The debate is perhaps so fierce and passionate because neither side acts with malicious intent; both seek to defend an important aspect of group identity that they perceive to be under threat, be it racial identity or cultural identity. Given the historical context, it seems unlikely that the tradition of Zwarte Piet would bear absolutely no historical links to racial oppression; I therefore believe it is important to address and resolve the racial trauma that the character brings up in a significant portion of the Black Dutch population, perhaps with an approach similar to the introduction of Belgian 'Roetpieten'. Nevertheless, I also believe that the most important voices to listen to in this debate are those who are most affected by the tradition, and I therefore reserve my views and judgements in favour of continued public discourse in the Netherlands with an end goal of a degree of consensus about the way forward.

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