

The tradition of Sinterklaas

What's going on from November till the 6th of December?

From November till the 6th of December Sinterklaas resides in Holland. The old man comes by boat from Spain and brings hundreds of black servants, looking like a kind of black clowns, called Zwarte Pieten. In reality they are white men or women who dress up and paint their faces black. At the port of arrival thousands of children are waiting for them. Zwarte Pieten play the fool, they knock on windows, and give children candy and presents. At night they supposedly come through the chimney, and put presents and pepernoten (tiny spiced biscuits) in children's shoes. This happens all because of Sinterklaas's birthday which takes place the 5th of December.

Feelings of fear and happiness

An inherent feeling of the tradition of Sinterklaas is fear. This anxiety comes from the fact that you never know when Zwarte Piet and Sinterklaas will come. The knowledge that they pass by houses during dark nights, makes children feel scared. There is an important rule: who has been good will get presents, who has been bad will get the stick. Being nice in order to get presents, and the fear of getting the stick are going hand in hand. So there's a thin line between fear and happiness connected to Sinterklaas.

Sint, a movie by Dick Maas

Sint, a new movie by Dick Maas, tells us a story about a bishop in disgrace in the Middle Ages. Sinterklaas and his servants plundering cross the countryside. The villagers kill Sinterklaas and his servants. From then on, every year on the 5th of December they wake up from the death to play an astringent battle. The movie of Dick Maas combines horror with amusement, just as the tradition of Sinterklaas does to children. The movie plays with the story of Sinterklaas, bishop of Myra (Turkey) who died December the 6th 343. After his death he became the saint of sailors, children, thieves and prostitutes. The first time Sinterklaas was celebrated in Holland, it was a religious feast. From then on the tradition became more and more commercial and secular to what it is today. Dick Maas's 'Sint' is arguably closer to the primal source than the manner in which Sinterklaas is represented nowadays.

Zwarte Piet, the Black Peter

Where does Zwarte Piet come from?

There are different points of view on what the origins of Zwarte Piet are. He could be an Ethiopian orphan who was saved from slavery by Sinterklaas, a transformed Satan with Sinterklaas as the Christian Archbishop, the French harlequin or one of the black raves from the German God Wodan. The consensus about Zwarte Piet's origin is either that he is a chimney sweep and he is black because of the soot or that Zwarte Piet is a Moorish assistant. For many people the dichotomy of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet is based on the colonial area, when the white man was the master of the black slave.

What does Zwarte Piet represent?

What do Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet represent? Sinterklaas is old, wise, good, Christian, master, generous, leader and in control, he represents the civil world. Zwarte Piet on the other hand is young, dumb, childish, not religious, servant, suppressed and humble, he represents the racial minority. The opposite colors of skin represent opposite meanings. This establishes a discriminating view on black and white people, which is being repeated every year.

Annual discussion about Zwarte Piet

This is also a reason why every year at Sinterklaas the discussion heats up about the representation of Zwarte Piet. Some people argue that Zwarte Piet is politically incorrect and that we should change his skincolour. When we keep having the tradition the way it is now, we keep on confirming that black is bad and white is good. Other people argue that Sinterklaas is mainly a children's festivity and that the children don't see the tradition as being discriminating. These people argue that the critics make Sinterklaas about discrimination. One thing is for sure: Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet are a sacred subject within Dutch culture and talking about changing the tradition will lead to a lot of resistance.

Six to Eight Black Men

For outsiders the Dutch Sinterklaas tradition may seem very strange and odd, especially the element of Zwarte Piet. David Sedaris has written a story about Sinterklaas called 'Six to Eight Black Men'. He writes about the Dutch tradition and especially the Zwarte Piet from an outsiders perspective. This gives an interesting and new view on the tradition and points out why the tradition is so odd and awkward.

Sinterklaas and Nationalism

A typically Dutch tradition?

Like nothing else, the Sinterklaas tradition represents Dutch culture. Even people who moved to other countries continue to celebrate Sinterklaas to underline and remember their roots. In 2001, an article in the NRC Handelsblad newspaper stated that Sinterklaas should be nominated for the UNESCO list as significant immaterial cultural heritage. However, what is often forgotten is that Sinterklaas is anything but typically Dutch, for he is in fact a Turkish catholic saint, living in Spain and accompanied by African looking helpers. Above that, the Sinterklaas tradition can also be found in other countries. Germany, for example, knows Sankt Nikolaus, accompanied by either his Knecht Ruprecht or an angel and some devils.

Sinterklaas versus Santa Claus

From the eighties on, action committees have been set up to protect the Sinterklaas tradition from foreign influences. Their main target was Santa Clause, who in their view represented globalization, European unification and commercialization – all of which threaten 'real' Dutchness. Especially the fact that Christmas jingles, Christmas shop-windows and Christmas products appeared way before the 5th of December was a critical point. Many nationalist Dutch people felt, and still feel, that if one touches their Sinterklaas tradition, one touches their nation.

Sinterklaas and politics

Nationalist Dutch politicians also want to hold onto this, in essence, very un-Dutch tradition. This is especially paradoxical given the current political atmosphere and cabinet policies around immigration. In 2008 Rita Verdonk, the leader of the Trots Op Nederland ("Proud Of Holland") party, basically had only two clear political plans. One was a tightened immigration policy, for immigrants were a threat to Dutch identity. The other was her emphasis on keeping the Sinterklaas tradition alive. This is not only an ironic paradox but also a clear proof of the fact that Sinterklaas has entirely been cut loose from his history. At this moment, Sinterklaas is completely commercialized and brings out the national identity in many ways. We even have our own daily Sinterklaas news on television, that enforces the Dutch tradition and identity.