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## Contesting Ambiguity: The Black Peter Mask in Dutch Cultural Heritage

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# Contesting Ambiguity: The Black Peter Mask in Dutch Cultural Heritage

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**Abstract:** Taking as a case public outcry in the Netherlands in 2008 over criticism of a black mask as being racist, this paper argues for recognizing the ambiguity of this ritual symbol.

**Key words:** masquerading; racial imagery; interpretation of ritual; neo-nationalism; professional role of ethnologist.

From an international perspective, the Netherlands is not renowned for its masks or masking traditions. There is, however, at least one exception that is worth study: the Black Peter (*Zwarte Piet*) mask in the rituals of the annual St Nicholas festival, which has its apex on December 5th<sup>1</sup>. Again, a qualification is necessary. All over Middle and Eastern Europe, the St Nicholas character has or had his dark companions, his 'finstere Begleiter' as Werner Mezger<sup>2</sup> named them in his great book on European St Nicholas rituals. In villages in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and elsewhere, these characters often wear beautifully carved, frightening masks. Some companions of St Nicholas in the Netherlands may also have worn some kind of mask, possibly made of paper. Since about the 1870s, however, this generally was no longer the case.

This change resulted from the invention, unique to the Netherlands – although it later spread to nearby Belgium – in 1850 of a very special kind of dark companion to St Nicholas: a figure with the face and other outward characteristics of a black person, an African. He made his first appearance in an illustrated children's book by an Amsterdam schoolteacher that immediately caught on. It

<sup>1</sup> A summary description in English is in Wheeler & Rosenthal 2005:213-229.

<sup>2</sup> Mezger W. Sankt Nikolaus. Zwischen Kult und Klamauk. Zur Entstehung, Entwicklung und Veränderung der Brauchformen um einen populären Heiligen. Ostfildern, 1993. P. 151-174.

was innovative, because for the first time it, in a very lively way, depicted the arrival by boat, the solemn entry into town, and the house visit of St Nicholas (in the robes of a Catholic bishop) and of his 'black servant', as he was unmistakably named. The illustrations inspired people – as far as available means allowed – to dress up as Catholic bishops in order to impersonate St Nicholas<sup>3</sup>, dispensing gifts to children at home, and, since the last decades of the nineteenth century, also appearing in public and in schools. Equally, the black servant was impersonated. He (or she) – i.e. a white person – didn't wear a mask, but blackened his/her face with charcoal or by other means.

Therefore, the subject of this paper is not that of masking in the strict sense, using a material prop, but of masquerading in blackface. The problem I address is the various meanings nowadays ascribed by the Dutch to this character in blackface. As a researcher of African masks has stated, ambiguity is a defining characteristic of a mask<sup>4</sup>. This implies that masks are open to more than one interpretation. In fact, they theoretically offer a platform for a competition between various interpretations<sup>5</sup>. A peculiarity of the Dutch case of Black Peter, however, and indeed of other cases as well<sup>6</sup>, is that this interpretative openness or ambiguity is contested.

In presenting this case I will consider, following Victor Turner's elementary analytical scheme in his study of symbols in Ndembu ritual, Black Peter's 'external form and observable characteristics'; the 'interpretations offered by specialists and by laymen'; and the 'significant contexts largely worked out' by the ethnologist<sup>7</sup>.

## Black Peter's Characteristics

Apart from his external form as a blackface, the Black Peter figure is observably characterized by a particular role in the St Nicholas ritual. For centuries, the essence of St Nicholas's visit is that he gives presents to the good children and

<sup>3</sup> Boer-Dirks E. De Sint Nicolaas van Jan Schenkman. // *Ons Amsterdam* 47. 1995. P. 282-286.; Helsloot J. Sich verkleiden in der niederländischen Festkultur. Der Fall des 'Zwarte Piet'. // *Rheinisches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde* 36. 2005/6. P. 137-153

<sup>4</sup> Jong F. de. The Power of a Mask: a Contextual Analysis of the Senegalese Kumpo Mask Performance. // *Focaal* 29. 1997. P. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Wright S. The Politization of 'Culture'. // *Anthropology Today* 14:1. 1998. P. 9,13.

<sup>6</sup> e.g., Fournier L.S. The Claim for History in Contemporary Calendar Festivals: Legendary, Historical and Present Times // *The Ritual Year and History*. Strážnice, 2008. P. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Turner V. *The Forest of Symbols*. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual. Ithaca (NY), 1967.:P.20.

punishes the bad. Even after the introduction of Black Peter in 1850, it was St Nicholas himself that castigated the naughty children. But very soon afterwards, this task befell exclusively to Black Peter. Concomitantly, he was depicted in children's books as a gruesome, frightening figure, a pre-eminent representation of all the fears a child might hold. This imagery was also vividly enacted when Black Peter visited children at home or in schools. In contrast, the white, basically benevolent St Nicholas stood for goodness and children's hopes. Parallel to this role division, St Nicholas is considered to be always wise, whereas Piet is a bit stupid, cannot speak properly and is basically uncontrolled. This pairing of opposites has been only slightly attenuated since the 1960s, when Black Peter took on the role of a clownesque figure, less threatening and more friendly to children, up to the point that nowadays, because of his wit, he is usually the centre of attention during the festival, with St Nicholas's role decreased.



Black Peter castigating a child. From a 1938 newspaper

### Popular Interpretations of Black Peter

For more than a century, this combination of imagery and ritual practices depicting a blackface – by extension a black person – as the servant of a white person of authority, and simultaneously as the terror of children, gave no offence to the Dutch. This changed in the late 1960s when progressive white people objected to the racial stereotyping manifest in Black Peter. These objections have increased since the 1980s, when large numbers of black people from the former Dutch colony of Surinam took up residence in the Netherlands. Their claim that the Black Peter figure hurt their feelings and dignity, that he caused sorrow and perpetuated

attitudes previously associated with the endorsement of slavery, fell on deaf ears<sup>8</sup>. In 1998 a public opinion poll revealed that no less than 96% of the Dutch population didn't see any harm in this 'old tradition' and denied any connection whatsoever to racial discrimination and oppression.

The direct occasion for this paper is events that took place in August, 2007, in the provincial town of Eindhoven. As part of a long-term exhibition in the local art museum on 'Be(com)ing Dutch', two young female artists from Germany and Sweden created a project they called 'Read the Masks. Tradition Is Not Given' – the mask in question being that of Black Peter. On the assumption, as they stated, that Black Peter was 'a cultural tradition that has been depoliticized, neutralized and then incorporated into the collective memory and consciousness of present society', the public was invited to partake in an artistic 'performance' of a protest march meant to give 'voice to a critique against the phenomenon of Zwarte Piet'. At the museum, participants were to be provided with trenchers containing slogans such as 'Black Peter doesn't exist any more' and 'Black Peter – a white man's construction'.

As soon as the media and public opinion got news of the planned protest march, there was a public outcry condemning the initiative. The museum received hundreds of negative emails and thousands of similar comments were posted on the websites of local and national newspapers and in opinion forums. The hopes of the organizers that this performance in August 2008 – well before the actual festive occasion in December – would facilitate an open exchange of views were ruined. Moreover, the management of the museum decided that some of the messages received were of such a threatening nature that the safety of participants in the march was in jeopardy. Therefore, the march was ultimately cancelled.

It was made patently clear by this experiment that the two artists had struck a highly sensitive collective nerve. They considered it 'a sign of the times in the Netherlands that an issue that has been discussed many times before should produce' such 'levels of emotion' as 'we have seen expressed in emails and comments'. In anthropological terms, the Black Peter mask proved to be a key or master symbol in Dutch society, 'a way of talking about'<sup>9</sup> the Netherlands.

After frequently expressing their disgust at those who merely raised doubts about the legitimacy of Black Peter, his defenders stated their arguments basically along the following lines: Black Peter was definitely not a representation of a real

<sup>8</sup> cf. on such conflicts of interpretations in general, Reed 2006; for comparable cases, Van Ginkel 2004; Bronner 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Wolf E.R. The Virgin of Guadalupe: a Mexican National Symbol. // *Journal of American Folklore* 71. 1958. P. 34,38.

black person. He was merely an imaginary figure that had acquired his black skin because of the soot in the chimneys through which he had to pass while delivering from the roofs of houses the parcels from St Nicholas to the shoes of the children. Others did, however, acknowledge that Black Peter represented a black man. Whatever his connotations in the past, however, nowadays racial prejudice was completely absent or unintentional. Similarly, ignoring completely the possibility of ambiguity, some maintained that Black Peter belonged to Dutch national culture and tradition and that traditions were not amenable to discussion or change. These views were not entirely novel and had been stated before when defenders of Black Peter felt the need of justifying his existence against criticism.

### The Present Context and an Ethnologist's Interpretation

On this occasion, however, these notions gained an added force from the knowledge that it was *foreign* artists that had questioned Black Peter. This was seen as a symptom – Turner's significant context – of a widely felt attack on Dutch national identity by 'foreign' forces in general. The year before, in April 2007, right-wing populist politician Rita Verdonk, at that time representing one-sixth of the electorate in virtual polls, had publicly stated that an unspecified 'they' were intent upon abolishing the St Nicholas ritual. In this case, 'they' functioned as a code word that was understood to refer to black Dutchmen, and by extension to immigrants in general. In an indirect reference to Black Peter, she ridiculed the emerging memorialization in the Netherlands of slavery as a shameful part of Dutch history. In the discourse about the 2008 Eindhoven protest march, however, a link was established not to black Dutchmen but to Dutchmen of Muslim background, and by extension to left-wing, elitist politicians. Over and over again it was repeated that Islam and Muslims are taking over Dutch culture, that this is condoned by leftists, that 'we' are giving in endlessly by tolerating their strange ways, but now it's time to say 'enough is enough' and to draw the line: any attack on Black Peter is a death blow to Dutchness. In this neo-nationalist mind-set, essentializing 'national tradition' and denying ambiguity is the only option. It is, of course, a phenomenon only too well known to ethnologists<sup>10</sup>.

In fairness it must be said that reducing the Black Peter mask exclusively to a symbol of racial prejudice, as done by 'black' activists and the organizers of the

<sup>10</sup> Anttonen P.J. Tradition through Modernity. Postmodernism and the Nation-State in Folklore Scholarship. Helsinki, 2005. P. 86,103; Gingrich A. & M. Banks (eds.). Neo-nationalism in Europe and beyond. Perspectives from Social Anthropology. New York-Oxford, 2006.



A group of Black Peters. 2005. (Photo: John Helsloot)

protest march, displays a similar essentializing tendency. It deliberately forecloses an understanding of blackness and of a black mask as having more than one connotation. This tendency is unsatisfactory not only theoretically but also, I think, on empirical grounds. In my view, the people dressing up as Black Peter convey another, more complicated, message than of merely representing a black person. As their always happy faces show, they first and foremost relish their carnivalesque dressing up<sup>11</sup>. Their beautiful costumes combined with their blackface effectuate their 'ritual transformation (...) into a being of another order', as one definition of masking has it<sup>12</sup>. As in other cases<sup>13</sup>, it may well be that nowadays the blackface of the Black Peter mask is

<sup>11</sup> cf. Braun K. Karneval? Karnevaleske! Zur volkskundlich-ethnologischen Erforschung karnevalesker Ereignisse. // Zeitschrift für Volkskunde 98. 2002. P. 1-15.

<sup>12</sup> Crumrine N.R. Introduction. // N.R. Crumrine & Marjorie Halpin (eds.). The Power of Symbols. Masks and Masquerade in the Americas. Vancouver, 1983. P. 1.

<sup>13</sup> e.g., Arrnout K. Islam and its Others: Sakaraboutou as Masquerade in Bondoukou (Côte d'Ivoire). // Ethnofoor 14. 2001. P.30-49; Sussman R. The Carnivalizing of Race. // Ethnofoor 14. 2001. P. 79.

(equally) conveying this sense of 'otherness', emerging and being experienced during the performance of the ritual itself<sup>14</sup>. It may, in part, even have been at the origin of the creation of the Black Peter figure<sup>15</sup>.

This otherness is, of course, hard to articulate. There is a tension between 'reflexivity *in* ritual and reflexivity *on* ritual'<sup>16</sup>, which is at the heart of the issue at hand. Also, from an empirical point of view, it is very difficult to establish what mask-wearers actually experience while performing<sup>17</sup>. These experiences, both of performers and audiences, become fixed over time as memories 'are "sedimented in the body"<sup>18</sup>. The physical disgust often felt over criticism of Black Peter testifies to this. The low degree of reflexivity *in* ritual may explain the recourse taken by participants to the explanation that the soot in the chimneys causes the blackface, and in general, the testimony of the majority of Dutchmen that in their view, Black Peter has no racial or racist connotations.

### Conclusion

By denying ambiguity, both defenders and detractors of Black Peter engage in 'strategic essentialism'<sup>19</sup> in a wider battle for recognition – of black identity and Dutch cultural heritage respectively. This leaves the researcher, the present author in this case, still in a difficult position, especially when I was asked, as an 'expert', to comment publicly on the 'true' meaning of the Black Peter mask. On the one hand, I said, it was impossible to deny its close association with racial and racist stereotypes. Therefore, it is objectionable to anyone understanding the background. On the other hand, the mask seems to have acquired, through performance,

<sup>14</sup> Hughes-Freeland F. Introduction. // F. Hughes-Freeland (ed.). *Ritual, Performance, Media*. London-New York, 1998. P. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Helsloot J. Die ambivalente Botschaft des ersten 'Zwarte Piet' (1850). // W. Brückner, K. Vanja, D. Lorentz, A. Milano, S. Nagy (Hrsg.) *Arbeitskreis Bild Druck Papier. Tagungsband Amsterdam 2007*. Münster-New York-München-Berlin, 2008. P. 29-44.

<sup>16</sup> Köpping K.-P., B. Leistle & M. Rudolph. Introduction. // Idem (eds.). *Ritual and Identity. Performative Practices as Effective Transformations of Social Reality*. Berlin, 2006. P. 27; Lewis J.L. *Toward a Unified Theory of Cultural Performance: a Reconstructive Introduction to Victor Turner*. // G. St John (ed.). *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*. New York-Oxford, 2008. P.52.

<sup>17</sup> Napier A.D. *Masks and Metaphysics: an Empirical Dilemma*. // S.L. Kasfir (ed.). *West African Masks and Cultural Systems*. Tervuren, 1988. P. 231-240.

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell J.P. *Performance*. // Chr. Tilley [and others] (eds.). *Handbook of Material Culture*. London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi, 2006. P.389, quoting P. Connerton.

<sup>19</sup> Gayatri Spivak's term, cf. Moore-Gilbert B. *Postcolonial Theory. Contexts, Practices, Politics*. London-New York, 1997.:P. 88.

new emerging or 'operational' meanings, more or less disconnected from its origin, its 'exegetical' meaning<sup>20</sup>. In such a case, 'meaning would be found in temporalized "structures of experience" [...] rather than formal categories of thought'<sup>21</sup>. The plausibility of this line of interpretation of Black Peter – not in general, but as a possibility in specific contexts – should also be brought forward to the general public<sup>22</sup>. This stance sums up, I think, our task as professional ethnologists: not of contesting but of acknowledging ambiguity<sup>23</sup>.

See Author's note 2013 on p. 132

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<sup>20</sup> Turner V. Op. cit. P. 50-51.

<sup>21</sup> St John G. *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance: an Introduction*. // G. St John (ed.). *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*. New York-Oxford, 2008. P.4.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Bendix R. *Expressive Resources. Knowledge, Agency and European Ethnology*. // *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 17. 2008. P. 119.

<sup>23</sup> Kertzer D.I. *Ritual, Politics, and Power*. New Haven/London, 1988. P.69; Bauman Z. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge, 1991; Lewis J.L. Op. cit. P. 53.

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#### Author's note 2013 (inserted after publication)

Due to a publishing delay, this text, a congress paper presented in July 2009, appeared only in 2013. It is an English version of my 2009 article in Dutch 'Is Zwarte Piet uit te leggen?'. As I explained in 'Zwarte Piet and Cultural Aphasia in the Netherlands' (2012), events in 2011 and reading work of Ann Laura Stoler changed my conception of professional ethos. I now hold that it is legitimate to endorse the truth claim of one interpretation, in this case, that 'Zwarte Piet is racism', i.e. to 'take sides'.

## The Pucheroki guisers

### Bożena Gierek

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#### Abstract

In this article the author presents the tradition of *Pucheroki* – disguised boys aged 4-15, who on Palm Sunday go in small groups from house to house, collecting eggs, some food or money. They are paid for the orations they recite. The tradition is still alive in a few villages near Kraków.

The local tradition has it that the origin of the *Pucheroki* goes back to the Krakow students' circle in the 16th century. However, some customs with different names (e.g. *Koniarz*) and different countries of origin (such as the *Gregoriousfeast* in Germany) reveal a number of common elements. One of these is the date of the feast – around the beginning of spring.

Through detailed description of the *Pucheroki* custom the author traces its origin to old spring rituals which, at one time, were intended to ensure prosperity and to protect the homesteads against evil forces. As it is performed today, the custom may be regarded as a continuation, albeit on a subconscious level, of old traditions, of universal rituals. As an example outside the Polish culture, the author refers to some Irish customs that are still alive, or have been in the past, in Irish communities, underlining those elements they share with the custom of *Pucheroki*.

**Key words:** folk tradition, guisers, masks, Palm Sunday, students, rituals, customs, fertility.

The name *Pucheroki* (*Puchery*)<sup>1</sup> means 'boys'. It comes from the Latin word *puer* – a boy (*pueri* – boys). The Latin word was mispronounced in the folk tradition or rather was adjusted to the Polish language and became *Puchernik* and *Puherak*. Later, it took the form of *Pucherok* (in the singular) and *Pucheroki* (in the plural).

The *Pucheroki* guisers belong to an old local tradition, still continued in a few villages near Kraków. Each year on Palm Sunday the *Pucheroki* go in pairs or in threes from house to house collecting goods - mainly eggs, but also other food.

<sup>1</sup> Józef Konopka writes that the name *Puchery* (*pueri*) comes from the first words of the antiphony sung on Palm Sunday: *Pueri Hebraeorum*. See: Konopka J. *Pieśni ludu krakowskiego*. (Wydanie fototypiczne pierwodruku z 1840 r.). Wrocław, 1974. P. XXXVII.

THE RITUAL YEAR 5

THE POWER  
*of*  
THE MASK

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## Contents

Editorial .....	4
<i>Laurent Sébastien Fournier</i> . From Rites de Passage to Liminality: Changes regarding Theories and Practices within French and Scottish Public Festivals.....	7
<i>Emily Lyle</i> . The Summer/Winter and Decrease/Increase Transitions in the Year and their Life-Cycle Equivalents.....	18
<i>Marlene Hugoson</i> . Embracing a Virtual Reality: The Masking and Guising of <i>Star Trek</i> Enthusiasts .....	30
<i>Ekaterina Anastasova</i> . A Birthday Party with Masks in Latvia – Between Socialist Past and Democratic Present .....	41
<i>Arūnas Vaicekauskas</i> . Carnival Culture in the Baltic Region: New Tendencies .....	48
<i>Irina Sedakova</i> . Weddings and the Ritual Year in Modern Russia.....	55
<i>Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė</i> . Rites De Passage Of Contemporary Lithuanian Wedding .....	62
<i>Emilia Karjula</i> . Same-Sex Weddings as Rites of Passage.....	70
<i>Lina Gergova</i> . The High-school Graduation Ball in Bulgaria.....	79
<i>Carola Ekrem</i> . Baby showers – an innovation in the Finnish festival year .....	90
<i>Kamila Velkoborská</i> . Contemporary Slavic Paganism in the Czech Republic: “We are not a ‘living history’” .....	99
<i>Žilvytis Šaknys</i> . Ritual Year in Time and Space: Calendar Customs in North Poland and South Lithuania .....	108
<i>Tatiana Minniyakhmetova</i> . Functional Differences of Masks in Traditional Rituals .....	116
<i>John Helsloot</i> . Contesting Ambiguity: The Black Peter Mask in Dutch Cultural Heritage.....	124
<i>Bożena Gierek</i> . The Pucheroki guisers .....	133
<i>Aida Rancane</i> . The Renewal of Time - One of the Purposes of Masking in Rites of Passage.....	143