

## **Zwarte Piet and the Afrocentric Discourse on the Diabolic Trinity.**

In the nineties I lived in New York and covered the racial tensions in Brooklyn. There were riots in Flatbush, Bed Stuy, Crown Heights and Bensonhurst. It was the stuff Public Enemy was rapping about, the material Spike Lee used for his movies. Somewhere I read an intriguing statement – “ Being accused of racism is the Third Rail in political discourse. It is a charge impossible to shake off.”

In the Netherlands, traditionally, we have every year the ‘Black Pete’ discussion. And every year accusations of racism are flying around. Unclear, vague accusations. The exact mechanism of racism is never explained. Does the cult of Zwarte Piet confirm or reinforce already existing prejudices? And how exactly? Are racist seeds planted in delicate children's souls ? Clear causal relationships are never shown. Only a lot of circumstantial evidence. It's like the accusation of witchcraft. Nobody can explain exactly how witchcraft works. But the prosecutors are absolutely convinced that the accused are indeed witches. Witches themselves cannot prove their innocence as a matter of principle. And if they can, well, that's the ultimate proof of their witchcraft.

People are biologically programmed to be racist. According to evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, we are survival machines for our genes. The instinct to take care of family, village and tribe, that warm fuzzy family feeling, these are all innocent forms of racism. The next stage is finding strangers a bit funny. Like the way of Dutch people behave on a campsite in France. They rather stick together with their compatriots because deep down inside, they think the French are weird. Foolish and petty, but still innocent. Ultimately, this behavior degenerates in its most extreme form: The ideology that some races are inferior and should be treated as such. Between the two extremes is a gray area with a lot of confusion and emotion.

### **Afrocentric discourse**

The argument about the racist character of Zwarte Piet seems progressive and emancipatory, but in fact it is an old, boring repetitive tune, and worse, a purely Afrocentric discourse. Preferably, besides racism, colonialism and slavery are also thrown into the mix. A three-headed monster, white and western. But let us take a look at this Diabolic Trinity from a global historical perspective .

1 - Colonialism is as old as mankind. Every nation on earth that had the necessity and means to obtain raw materials and labor forces from other countries has done so. The world history is a parade of nations who plundered and murdered each other, who invaded and occupied each others' territory. The fact that Sub-Saharan Africans did not engage in overseas raids, was not because of the moral superiority of the *locals* compared to the predatory instinct of white Europeans, but had to do with climatic and geographical reasons.

2 - Slavery is not a Western invention. See the books from David Van Reybroeck and Adam Hochschild on the Congo. Before the arrival of the whites, Arab slave traders worked together with local African rulers who provided the merchandise. With the arrival of the Europeans, this system was perfected. The international slave trade functioned by the grace of a fruitful cooperation of Arabs, Africans and Westerners. A little know fact is that from the 16th to the 19th century, almost a million Europeans were captured and traded by North African slave traders known as the *Corsaire* pirates.

3 - Racism is also a global disease. The genocide in Rwanda was a bloody orgy of racial hatred. In spring 1994 half a million people were slaughtered in three months - more efficient than the Nazi Holocaust. In 2008, tens of thousands of Zimbabweans were fleeing the brutal regime of Mugabe (a leader who interprets any criticism as racist) and went to South Africa.

There, they were accused by their black brothers of stealing jobs and were clubbed or stabbed to death. The recent civil war in the Ivory Coast, the same story. Yes, also in Africa there is hatred, envy and distrust of foreign workers, immigrants and economic refugees.

According to Afrocentric discourse, the above is all the fault of Western imperialism. But of course this is a circular argument. Nobody can deny that in the colonial era, enormous crimes against humanity were committed in Africa. But every nation has experienced, at least once in its history, a dark chapter, a period of intense suffering. Africa is not unique, and more as a century after the facts, Africa should stop to claim its monopoly on victimhood and stop exploiting its 'exploitedness'.

### **Multipurpose Piet .**

Back to Black Pete. Obviously, Piet is a multisided character, with many interpretations as we have seen in the ongoing discussions in the Dutch media. Anthropologists call this the 'multivocality of a symbol'. Piet has elements of a chimney sweeper, a court jester, a personal assistant, an acrobat, an elf, the Germanic *Krampus*, the Persian *Hadji Firouz*. And yes, also of a 19th century child slave child as art historian Elmer Kolfin argued. But it shows tunnel vision to only look at this aspect. Should we eliminate a symbol of dark days so we can pretend that everything is *hunky - dory* in our little manicured low lands polder country? Rather, let us keep Zwarte Piet as a memento that physical slavery - let alone mental - is still alive. In addition to weapons and drugs, it is the most profitable industry in the world economy. Impoverished Central American migrants perform hard labor for Mexican drug cartels. In the Arab Gulf states, Thai maids are exploited and abused. In the Netherlands, illegal Colombian women are being forced into prostitution. In Balkan brothels, girls are gang raped into submission. In Africa, children are recruited as child soldiers and they perform slave labor in the gold and diamond mines. Needless to say, the list is long.

Let Netherlands keep its quirky and silly custom with Zwarte Piet just for the kids. And for adults: Let Netherlands as an enlightened country proclaim December 5 the International Day for the Abolition of Modern Slavery .