Zwarte Piet, demonized and unrecognized symbol of the Dutch abolitionist movement

Voxullus 2013

Draft version 4

Uit : St. Nicolaas en zijn knecht p.17 (schenkman 1850)
The annual backlash against the traditional character *Black Peet* (*Zwarte Piet*), claiming that this fictional character is inherently racist and has no place in the modern day festival of *Sinterklaas*, generally takes on two forms.

A visual comparison between traits of the figure and black people or caricatures of black people is the first. Most notably, the connection to the 1930's American black-face figure is a common argument used against the appearance of Zwarte Piet.[source] The second argument, on which I will focus this paper, is the claim that Zwarte Piet is somehow connected, to some degree, to the Dutch slave trade, rendering him a slave or a symbol for the inherent racism of that time.

As it turns out, Zwarte Piet does have a tie with slavery, but surprisingly not the negative connotation that the Piet-is-racism movement wants us to believe. In fact, a short study of the historical context of the origins of the popularized versions makes it clear that (the popular image of) Zwarte Piet isn't anything like this movement makes him out to be.

The movement claims it wants to "wake up" people to see the truth about Zwarte Piet and his history. I will show that this movement’s historical contextual analysis is amateurish and omits crucial details that, if omitted knowingly, would constitute blatant dishonesty and historical distortion.

First I will touch briefly on some counter arguments defending the Piet tradition which I myself do not find very compelling. Then I'll examine the historical argument and why it is flawed and finally I'll provide more detail to the general context in which the historical argument itself failed.
The argument from tradition

First let me make clear that I don't support the notion that because "it's tradition", it isn't open to scrutiny. Many traditions have been changed, abolished or are generally frowned upon for arguably good reasons. If Zwarte Piet turns out to be racist to the core (even if not intentionally), I'd have no issue with his deletion from the Sinterklaas canon or his alteration into something less discriminatory, although I have trouble seeing how this can be done without the removal of the figure itself.

The chimney soot hypothesis

A common explanation for Zwarte Piets appearance is the notion that he contracted his black skin from going down chimneys. With every passing he would stain his skin a little, cumulatively resulting in a black appearance. This seems like a convoluted argument with the sole purpose of detaching Piet from the concept of a naturally black skinned helper. The 19th century origins also do not support this notion as they do not mention chimney soot and the helper is depicted with recognizable characteristics of a dark skinned person.

Arguments from artwork analysis

Much of the criticism has to do with appearance and often early depictions of the character Piet is used to link him to house slaves or caricatures of dark skinned people. Many Attributes of the figure have been bolted on throughout the evolution of the tradition and each separate attribute could have it's own paragraph, if not chapter. This, however, is beyond the scope of this paper so we need only to concern ourselves with the Schenkman illustrations from the original works. The original painter isn't known, nor is the extent to which Schenkman himself was involved with the illustrations. These images have been much discussed in the Zwarte Piet Debate and there seems to be some agreement on the racist nature of the images. However, it seems to more likely that the analyzed artwork was chosen very selectively. Consider the artwork from Schenkman's first Sinterklaas publication which adorns the title page of this very paper. Oddly it is never used in any historical art analysis that tries to link Piet to slavery and racism. This is probably due to it not conforming to the stereotype image that is necessary to conclude this from. Piet, in the image, is portrayed higher in the picture and has an active powerful role. Sinterklaas himself is much more passive.

Taking the entire body of illustrations from Schenkman's work, it seems that this route to proof there is an existing racist element in the original work by Schenkman leans a lot on biased cherry-picking of the material.
Correlating Piet to slavery

The historical argument against Zwarte Piet is the accusation that he is a slave or a depiction of a inferior person. This is derived mostly from his appearance and the fact that he was created in a time when slavery wasn't outlawed by the Dutch state and prejudice towards black people was arguably prevalent throughout Dutch society.

Mostly cited as the creator of the origin of the modern day Piet is Jan Schenkman, a poet, writer and teacher from Amsterdam, who in 1850 wrote about Sinterklaas and his helper, describing the helper as a black man. [Schenkman 1, p.11]

Proponents of the concept that Piet in this story is purposefully set as racially inferior can only derive this from equating being a 'knecht' (helper) to inferiority, or other superficial comparisons such as appearance, clothing or behavior.

The argument hinges on the concept that society, not denouncing slavery must therefore still adhere to the notions of slavery and it's justification that ultimately leads to the conclusion that black people are inferior. As the Piet character was created in this time, he must have been seen as inferior, a fact supported by his role and appearance.

Jan Schenkman himself also gets his fair share of accusations, ranging from "meaning well, but naive" to being rampantly racist. It is naturally only fair to examine the role of the author in the debate, as he is responsible for the genuine context or the lack thereof. Analyzing in which light Schenkman created his version of Piet may provide a richer context in which to weigh the character of Zwarte Piet.

Context matters

Using a generalized context, such as the assumed mentality of Dutch society around the 1850's, and projecting this on products of the time perhaps isn't the most fair line of reasoning.

Consider the Dutch constitution of 1814, still in spirit the foundation for the modern day Dutch constitution. To this day, this constitution says nothing about slavery. As a product of its time, using a generalized context, not promoting or denouncing slavery, how must this document be considered today? As a document which at its core justifies slavery?

Within a generalized context, nuances can be made when examining elements in detail. Choosing in which context one analyses something is one of the harder parts of the historical disciplines. Considering concepts like Zeitgeist, ever on the lookout, trying to prevent projecting contemporary views and notions on historical events, ideas and people. Determining how great or small the context needs to be to get to the core of the matter. It is a hard act to master and it is therefore not surprising that not only the movement make mistakes in this regard, but also researchers like Helsloot [Helsloot, 2012] are blindsided by ethnological generalizations and fail to nuance details using legitimate historical sources of which one clearly must be aware to accurately weigh these topics.

Returning briefly to the 1814 constitution, the nuance could lie in the fact that slavery in the Netherlands itself wasn't an everyday topic in society or in politics and however bad this may sound, nobody really thought about it as it was of little relevance to people's day-to-day lives (a ver van mijn bed show in Dutch). Terrible as it may be, not recognizing such a, for us glaring and obvious, social problem does result in a constitution that is mainly ambivalent on the subject. It does not deal with it one way or the other. The
abolition of slavery in 1868 was completed through criminal law and not the constitution, explaining why to this day it does not mention slavery either way.

But then my argument isn't that the role of Piet regarding slavery is ambivalent like the 1814 constitution. When looked at in the proper context, it will be clear that the role of Zwarte Piet as a character and what he represents isn't ambivalent at all.

The context for Piet

For a proper context in which to analyze Piet, we could look at the origins and the intentions of the possibly various iterations of the figure. I won't be looking at pagan origins that resemble, superficially, features of contemporary or 19th century Piet. However tempting it is to equate Piet to these earlier companions of Sinterklaas, it would be a similar contextual fallacy as the proponents of the racist Piet hypothesis make when they project a generalized Zeitgeist on what Piet represents.

The proper context in which to analyze what would become modern day Piet, the obvious source is the Piet character by Schenkman.[Schenkman 1] This publication undeniably is the source for the Piet tradition from then on.

Whether Zwarte Piet is meant as a racist stereotype, ambivalent on the whole issue or something else must, for the greater part, be a result of the authors plans, beliefs and ideologies.

Jan Schenkman

Jan Schenkman was a poet, a prolific writer of children's books and a teacher. He is credited with writing the first distinctive Sinterklaas story, published in 1850, that would give rise to the tradition as we know it. Part of his version was the helper of the Saint, who was Black. [Schenkman 1, p.11]

It is extremely likely that inspiration for this character came from other helper myths surrounding the Bishop in his many incarnations. Many earlier helpers were black and many had attributes similar or completely dissimilar to Schenkmans rendition. It was, however, the first series in which the helper was identified as Piet in 1859.

Schenkman was also affiliated with a society called "Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen", roughly translated as "society for the benefit of the community"; an organization that exists to this day. There exist various sources that link him to this organization throughout the 50s of the 19th century, including a work of prose recited at the society, written by Schenkman in 1850, about a ordinary man with a lot on his mind as his son turned sixteen.[Schenkman 2] It reflects Schenkman's concern with social issues such as poverty and education. It is his link to this organization that firmly tilts the balance from ambivalence regarding slavery and racial stereotyping towards a positively abolitionist ideology in essence.
Though the abolitionism movement in the Netherlands came relatively late, if not last, there did exist such a movement. Its presence only really established after 1840 in political circles, it has to be admitted it was a late arrival on the international anti-slavery scene.

The 50's of the 19th centuries saw more and more members joining the abolition movement. One reason was the emergence of anti-slavery literature from England and the US. Notably Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe did a lot to influence the mindset and create awareness about slavery [Kuitenbrouwer, p.82].

Amongst the new supporters to affiliate themselves with the society for abolishment of slavery were organizations like the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (de Synode van de Hervormde Kerk), the Indonesian Society (het Indisch Genootschap) and this odd organization that had, as it's one goal, to provide beneficial things for the general community, which coincidentally Schenkman was affiliated to. Other members of the abolition movement included members of parliament, artists, writers and entrepreneurs.

The Maatschappij tot Nut van't Algemeen, or 't Nut for short was amongst the most progressive voices calling for complete emancipation and abolishment of slavery. It voiced it's opinions on the matter through it's publications and letters to the King and the senate. [Kuitenbrouwer, p.82] Not the gradual transition to freedom with white supervision as some politicians and plantation owner would have liked.

Within this context, Zwarte Piet being a rendition of a character who is black and a helper, how likely would it be that a prominent member of a progressive anti-slavery/pro abolition society would intend for this, his, figure to be a unmentioned symbol for slavery and a racial stereotype to underline his inferiority to the white man throughout the entire decade in which the Sinterklaas stories were published and during which the abolition movement gained ground? Is it not far more likely that the figure of Piet is deliberately given a socially emancipated role by Schenkman despite the obvious colour of his skin, granting him equality as a human, responsibility as an individual and visibility as a popular character.

If the abolition movement in the Netherlands, which has perhaps been downplayed and forgotten as much as once the role of the Dutch in the international slave trade was, needed a figure, a symbol, perhaps its own Uncle Tom figure, would it not be the popular emancipated Zwarte Piet, tasked with many responsibilities, amongst them being a dispenser of justice (de roe en de zak), an entertainer for the masses including the young and the poor and helper of a living saint? Quite a résumé.
Possible Zeitgeist reply to my argument

I suspect a counter argument to my thesis that Piet could be a symbol for the Dutch abolitionism movement could go along the following line: Perhaps the intention with which Piet was created was with anti-slavery ideologies in mind, but the rendition of Piet is still comparable to the mid 19th century and thus isn't suitable for our time.

Suggesting that raises two concerns. The first has to do with projection. The figure of Zwarte Piet is hereby judged in retrospect. The true intentions for the character in the historical context are not weighed in. It has been established that Piet is a black man with a number of traits and attributes.

Connecting any of those attributes, dancing, goofing, giving presents, being a helper or wearing a certain set of clothiers to a stereotype, begs the question: a stereotype of what? For all intents and purposes, it can only be a stereotype of Zwarte Piet, the emancipated, albeit fictional, helper of Sinterklaas.

My second concern has to do with it being a product of its time. I could touch again on the example of our constitution of 1814, but recent events have provided a better example. Around 2011 a commotion started around a reprint of Mark Twain’s famous The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Although not quite contemporary to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Twain’s novel, seen as one of the great American novels of all time, is highly critical of racial segregation, slavery, inequality laws and other racial topics. In this reprint the book underwent a re-edit replacing, amongst others, the word “nigger” with a less derogatory substitute. This rightfully attracted a lot of criticism from people who were of the opinion that the original context and language in which the work was written, was integral to its impact and meaning. “What would such a reedit do to Uncle Tom’s Cabin?” was asked.

The opposition to these re-edits is correct. The toning down of the text is changing the context and thereby providing a purposefully false rendition of the original work, only to suit the ever-changing sensibilities of people who could be offended by something that has nothing to do with them, their generation or their situation.

Ramifications

I find it hard to believe that the omission about Schenkmans affiliation with a known vocal progressive anti-slavery movement is purely unintentional and only debit to ignorance and amateurism regarding historical analysis, especially regarding the trivial ease with which this information is found - it being publicly available. If I did not give the benefit of the doubt to the Piet-is-racism movement, I'd be tempted to suggest this omission was purposefully upheld and that the context was artificially broadened with the sole purpose of painting the blackest picture possible surrounding the figure of Zwarte Piet. For to deliberately deny the historical existence of anti-slavery movements in the Netherlands and to frame one of its members as being guilty of introducing a racial stereotype is nothing less than malevolent historical distortion.

It is vitally important in the synthesis of the history of slavery that we do not overcompensate for the mistakes of the past. Slave trade denial luckily is a thing of the past, but let's not succumb to this odd Dutch protestant tendency to accept all the guilt and declare everything rotten and racist to the core. Do not falsely suppress the fact that there were heroes of the Dutch abolition movement and Zwarte Piet was possibly one of them.
Vindication of Schenkman and the Fictional character Zwarte Piet

Accusations at the address of the tradition of Zwarte Piet and the author of its genesis and the omission of the connection between Schenkman and the abolition movement caused by amateurish, superficial, incomplete and shoddy historical research has not only done damage to a part of history that has been carefully re-examined over the last decade to provide a balanced picture of this period in our history, it has also done a great injustice to Schenkman, the abolition movement and the figure and tradition of Zwarte Piet.

Whenever carelessness and sloppiness cause what is known as character assassination, there usually is some form of rectification. Would Schenkman and his fellow members of ‘t Nut be alive today, perhaps a slander suit would be in place to force this rectification if needs be.

Unfortunately the fictional Piet isn’t a legal person, an irony that does not elude me, and his intellectual father and his contemporaries are no more and seemingly are largely forgotten. It would nevertheless suit the Piet-is-racism movement to rectify their faulty synthesis based on their incomplete and generalized historical context by declaring it as such, underlining that at its core, the Piet figure is not only not racist, but the apparent product of an emancipation movement that led to the abolishment of slavery.

It also seems that any accusation by the Piet-is-racism movement, that Dutch society is ignorant of it’s own history and therefore blind to it’s true meaning, is actually a case of the pot calling the kettle black, no pun intended. The oversimplified generalizations, superficial assumptions and omission of detail show a extreme lack of knowledge and understanding of an important and seemingly overshadowed part of a shared history.

Even less black-and-white analysis of Zwarte Piet, like that of Helsloot, seem to bend over backwards to push the tradition from mere racial and cultural ambivalence towards probable racism, again using a generalized context, omitting historical details, using various complex anthropological methods and convoluted reasoning.

In an earlier publication by Helsloot from 2008, where Piet's role is described as ambiguous at most, the oversight is even more apparent. Not only does Helsloot recognize Schenkman as the Author from which the tradition evolved into its popular form[Helsloot, 2008, p.95], speculating wildly on his intentions, but he also shows that he is knowledgeable on the existence of the Maatschappij tot Nut van't Algemeen. t’Nut had in 1848 criticized the tradition of Sinterklaas as it was observed at that time.[Helsloot 2008, p. 97] only two years before Schenkman had revitalized the tradition.

It is curious, if not astonishing that Helsloot failed to make the link between t’Nut and Schenkman, assuming somehow that the criticism from 1848 included Schenkmans rendition of it.

This, of course, seems highly unlikely. Far more plausible seems to be that in light of t’Nut’s ideology on education, Schenkman authored a version in line with these ideals, not opposed to them. Only the omission of the connection between t’Nut and Schenkman could lead to such speculation.
Conclusion

I think it proven that the interpretation of Piet as a slave, racial stereotype being either true or none specified to be the result of a lacking and overly generalized context in which such “analysis” has been done. Zwarte Piet is the product of an author who had strong ties with the Abolition movement in the mid 19th century and upheld his character in writing throughout a decade in which this movement was very active. It is therefore highly unlikely that Zwarte Piet is intentionally pro slavery and anti-emancipation or unintentionally racist.

Any accusations made regarding an ignorance of history, be it 'cultural aphasia' or otherwise have been rendered moot due to glaring omissions in analysis of the proper context in which this subject should be viewed. From the crude generalization of the Piet-is-racism movement to the overanalyzed but severely lacking ethnological approach, the error in reasoning seems to have been the same: the crucial missing link between the author, his affiliations and subsequent attached ideologies.

Considering this context, it must be recognized that as an emancipated figure in Dutch literature, Zwarte Piet is arguable the first Dutch symbol for the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of slaves. Denying the movement intentionally falls nothing short of blatant historical distortion and deception.
Sources


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