

Racist Dutch tradition comes under fire

Written by

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Nov. 19 (GIN) – When Santa Claus comes to town in Amsterdam, it's not a cluster of elves leaping around the robust figure in red waving at cheering children and adults.

The dancing figures are "Black Petes" – white Netherlanders in blackface wearing Afro wigs. Servants of St. Nick, they are variously Black Pete playing music or singing; Black Pete on horseback; Black Pete on stilts and Black Pete climbing up the façade of department stores or cavorting atop six-story buildings.

This year, members of the country's black community demanded an end to the century-old tradition of "Zwarte Pieten," or Black Pete and the racist imagery.

At a rally of several hundred over the weekend, protestors carried signs saying "Free Pete" and "Let Me Love You Again, Netherlands." One sign with a picture of President Obama read, in English, "Leave Our Face Out of It!"

"Black Pete anywhere in the world would not be accepted," said activist Quincy Gario of St. Maarten, a Dutch territory in the Caribbean. Gario was arrested in 2011 for wearing a t-shirt that read "Zwarte Piet is Racisme" at a Sinterklaas (Santa Claus) parade.

"We here in the Netherlands have a blind spot towards our colonial history, towards racism, towards structural inequality," he told the German news agency Deutsche Welle.

Gario believes he speaks for many other citizens with roots in the former Dutch empire.

Still, the majority of the country supports Black Pete. Last month a Facebook petition received two million "likes" - that's in a nation of just under 17 million residents. And a recent poll revealed that more than 90 percent of the country would not change Black Pete's appearance.

The debate over Black Pete reached a new level this year when Verene Shepherd, who chairs

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the U.N.'s Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, denounced the character on Dutch radio, calling Black Pete a "throwback to slavery." She said: "If I were living in The Netherlands, I would object to it."

Her comments irritated many in the Netherlands who felt she was uninformed.

"There is racism in Holland no doubt - in any country," said Erik van Muiswinkel, who played Black Pete on national TV for 16 years.... But I don't have the feeling that getting rid of him would solve any of our racist issues."