

Black Pete and the negotiating of identities Dealing with controversial intangible cultural heritage¹

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Not just the Dutch children get excited when Saint Nicholas arrives each year. The Sinterklaas feast got tangled up in a controversy about his black helper Black Pete (Zwarte Piet), because his role is stereotypical for a slavish approach to blacks, that legitimizes the old colonial relationships between white and black people.² The Dutch Sinterklaas became controversial.

In this essay I propose to discuss the issue from a broader perspective, namely the perspective of controversial heritage in a multicultural society. How can you deal with controversial heritage? And can the UNESCO convention on Intangible Heritage be helpful in this topic?

Sensibilities in a multicultural society

The question where the politicization of Black Pete comes from, is easy to answer. In a multi-ethnic society, where many ethnic groups live together in a more and more globalizing world, a situation emerged where various groups attach different meaning to traditions, to their own and that from others. As the English heritage expert Laurajane Smith rightfully remarks, in an influential collection of essays on *Intangible heritage*, experiencing intangible heritage has become part and parcel of the dilemmas of modern multicultural society.³ In the nineteenth century, when Black Pete appeared for the first time, the situation was completely different. There were hardly any black people in Dutch society. Black Pete was simply an exotic figure, just like Saint Nicholas himself: no other bishop walking the streets was dressed in a striking red robe, a mitre and a staff. In other words, the exotic was part of the attractions of the tradition, like still there are children who think it is funny to dress like Saint Nicholas or Black Pete. That is all there is to it, it appears.

The problem of controversial heritage seems to be very closely connected to a globalizing society. But in fact the problems are not new at all. Traditions are never innocent, they always reflect social or religious tensions. This is shown in the history of the Saint Nicholas festivities in the Netherlands. During the Middle Ages, the festivities were predominantly a religious holiday, celebrating the feast of Saint Nicholas. This changed during the sixteenth-century with the rise of calvinism. According to the calvinist beliefs the Saint Nicholas festivities were no longer acceptable because they had to do with a saint and were part of the Catholic rummage. The protestant authorities tried to end the festivities, e.g. by prohibiting the popular Saint Nicholas markets. The feast of 'Sinterklaas' became a secular festivity, stripped from all its church based paraphernalia. It became a children's gift-giving celebration in the domestic environment.

But some of the elements of the controversy between catholic and protestant remained, even in the twentieth century. Protestant preferred appearances of Saint Nicholas without a cross. Nowadays the Amsterdam version of the saint has a mitre with the Amsterdam city arms, to make the festivities acceptable also for the Amsterdam muslims. This created a new controversy, which was even

¹ Slightly shortened and altered version of an article which originally was published in Dutch: 'Van boerka tot Zwarte Piet. Omgang met controversieel immaterieel erfgoed', in: *Immaterieel Erfgoed* 1 (2012) nr. 2, 17-21.

² For a general discussion, see, John Helsloot, 'Zwarte Piet and Cultural Aphasia in the Netherlands', in: *Quotidian* 3 (2012) 3. Helsloot earlier discussed the history of the debate about Black Peter in his article 'Het feest. De strijd om Zwarte Piet', in: Isabel Hoving (ed), *Cultuur en migratie in Nederland. Veranderingen in het alledaagse* (The Hague 2005) 249-271.

³ Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa, 'Introduction', in: idem (eds), *Intangible Heritage* (London 2009) 5. For a more extensive discussion see: Helaine Silverman (ed), *Contested cultural heritage. Religion, nationalism, erasure and exclusion in a global world* (New York 2011). Also see: Laurajane Smith, *The uses of heritage* (London 2006), on dissonant heritage: 80-82.

discussed in the national parliament. The question was: who should adopt to whom? Even now Sinterklaas reflects contemporary tensions. It makes Sinterklaas into *living* heritage in which people engage themselves, the advocates but also the adversaries.

UNESCO and the negotiating of identities

It cannot be denied that there is an area fraught with tensions in experiencing each other's traditions. In a way it is the essence of traditions because they are entangled with the politics of identity. So how can you deal with controversial heritage? In my view the UNESCO convention of the Intangible Heritage can possibly contribute to a solution, perhaps even to an equilibrium in which different opinions could be balanced.

The purpose of the intangible heritage convention is 'to ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned'. So the first thing is to respect each other's cultural traditions. One cannot emphasize this too much. You may not always agree with other men's traditions. But one should not put them aside too easily. We must try to understand and respect them.

At the same time the ICH convention is about giving a future to intangible heritage. For the nominations for the intangible heritage list UNESCO asks to map the element of intangible heritage in the context of the dynamics of history. So in the safeguarding process communities should always keep in mind the possible problems that other groups can have with their tradition, problems which might be in the way of giving through a tradition like Sinterklaas. A safeguarding plan that does not address the discussion about Black Pete is not a good safeguarding plan.

It is all a question of balancing and of 'negotiating identities', as scholars have called it. And this balancing should come from two sides. This 'negotiating identities' is inextricably intertwined with every society in general and the multicultural society especially, where so much ethnicities have to live with each other. As Laurajane Smith has indicated, intangible heritage is a process in which 'memories and experiences are mediated, evaluated and worked out.'⁴

Negotiating identities is not always easy. We have to be aware that there is always something which you could call 'the politics of intangible heritage', politics that always involve economic or political power. We shouldn't be naive in this. Often it is thought that the parties who want to safeguard, which their vested interests, have the advantage. But maybe the complaining party has the benefit, supported by the media, who are always focused on controversial issues. I find it always remarkable that the small group of opponents to Black Pete get access to the media so easily. At the same time, the advocates of Black Pete should realize that their intangible cultural heritage is experienced by other groups too.

Intangible heritage always reflects political tensions and unevenly distributed power relations. But perhaps the UNESCO Convention can bring some objectification or clarification in it, in the process of negotiating identities. Scholars and other experts can play a role in this process of objectification. Historians can help to document the history of Black Pete and the significance of the figure in the nineteenth century, when the exotic figure of the helper was first introduced. Why was a black figure chosen? What was the reason behind that? And: did racial motives really play a role, possibly unconsciously? Not just historians can contribute to this discussion, but also scholars from the 'colonial studies' tradition, who have written extensively about the stereotyping of black and white in different traditions and customs.

⁴ Laurajane Smith, 'Empty gestures? Heritage and the politics of recognition', in: Helaine Silvēman & D. Fairchild Ruggles (eds), *Cultural heritage and human rights* (New York 2007) 159-171, 165.

But in the end the communities have to fight it out by themselves, hopefully respecting each other's traditions and sensitivities.