

Black Claus is Black Pete

The Schenkman confusion

A majority of contemporary authors assume that the Dutch holiday season character of Black Pete has been created by the nineteenth century schoolmaster Jan Schenkman in his book “*Sint Nikolaas en zijn knecht*”¹, published in 1850. Followers of this line of reasoning usually also subscribe to the view that he and his illustrators were inspired by paintings of pages², black servants of noble families in Europe. Not only the “invention” of Black Pete but also many other rituals of the Saint Nicolas celebrations, like the entry tour of the Saint and his Spanish homeland, are attributed to Schenkman, portraying him and his book as the founders of the current tradition.

By blindly postulating such a recent and one-dimensional lineage for the Saint’s servant, without any critical discussion on the validity of the underlying assumptions and the historical facts, the mythical figure of Black Pete and his many incarnations in European folklore are frequently misinterpreted as racist.

Many new sources have surfaced over the last years that shed a completely different light on the origins of Black Pete and other elements of the tradition. According to extensive research neither the arrival procession of Saint Nicolas nor his companion Black Pete started with Schenkman. Similarly, Spain was mentioned as the homeland for Saint-Nicolas well before the publication of 1850. In the next paragraphs we will discuss the most important historical sources on this topic.

In a painting from Leiden born painter Matthijs Naiveu (1647 - 1726) from 1703, “*Feestelijkheden van Sint Nicolaas*” we already witness a procession celebrating the arrival of Saint-Nicolas.



This painting is discussed in a study by Adele-Marie Dzidzaria, in which she interprets the work of Matthijs Naiveu. This image depicts Saint-Nicolas on his horse with typical long beard and red hat. In the left bottom corner, we do notice a figure whose clothing reminds us of Black Pete. He seems to belong to the bunch of clowns in the foreground. Also, a boy in blue clothes, close to the Saints horse, evokes some reminiscences of the current Black Pete. It seems as if he waves his cap under the nose of the horse, maybe to frighten it? An upper-class rascal maybe? The Saint himself raises his rod in a intimidating way to the two boys fighting on the ground in front of him.

In the year 1800 the reverend Stephanus Hanewinckel (1766 - 1856) also recorded Saint-Nicolas festivities in which one or sometimes two grotesquely attired riders enter a village on a horse.⁴ These figures are even sometimes interpreted by children as being the “true” Saint Nicolas. A more recent example of such an entry can be found in a short movie from 1920: *“Hoe Sint-Nicolaas de Jordaan gelukkig maakt.”*⁵ The described parades very much resemble nowadays arrivals of Saint Nicolas. Such entry tours have obviously been part of the festivities for a very long time and existed well before the publication date of Schenkman’s book.

Next to gainsaying the notion that the 1850 book introduced so many of the Saint-Nicolas rituals, these sources also clearly contradict the widespread delusion that Saint-Nicolas was unaccompanied before the publication of Schenkman’s book.

The Spanish connection of the Saint was also not new in 1850, we can e.g. read about it in a text from 1849 by Van Schaick⁶.

“Ik heb ’t nog niet vergeten, dat hij mij, verleden jaar, in zijn zak wou stoppen en meê nemen naar Spanje.”

Which roughly translates into “I did not forget that he tried to put me in his sack and take me to Spain last year.”

Also, in a poem by the Genestet⁷ (equally dated 1849) the Spanish heritage is mentioned:

*“Schuift, jongens,”- zegt Mevrouw – “bij ’t vuur den zorgstoel aan,
Want de oude man heeft veel vermoeinis uitgestaan.”
Dan, hoorders volgen al die sprookjes, praatjes, vragen,
Die ge u herinren zult nog uit uw kinderdagen:
Of daar gezorgd is voor het oude, grauwe paar,
Waarmee de brave Sint zijn toer maakt over de aard’
En: u komt zóó uit Spanje? U zal de kou wel hinderen?
En: heeft u ook een gard? en: houdt u veel van kinderen?”*

The second last sentence in this poem translates into: “and do you come from Spain? The cold will be a burden then.”

The Spanish connection of Saint Nicolas was even mentioned as far back as 1718⁸. A well-known song of the Saint-Nicolas period contains the phrase “from Amsterdam to Spain” The first documented version of this on paper has been issued in 1810 by the New York historical society. Also, in a publication from 1825⁹ it is mentioned.

Finally, also the notion of a black servant for Saint-Nicolas was already mentioned in a publication from 1836. In this work this black servant of Saint Nicolas is interestingly equipped with chains¹⁰. Also pastor H. Welters writes in 1877 about a black servant that sentences naughty children to the sack. He dates this story¹¹ back to his youth which must have been around 1840. Bernhard van Meurs wrote a poem in 1894¹² in dialect from the “Betuwe”, an area quite central in the Netherlands, in which he recollects memories of his youth around 1843. In these lines a “Pete” (Pieterbaas in Dutch) emerges from a cupboard wielding a chain, while his rod falls to the floor. Consistently, this poem defines the Saint’s home country as being Spain.

In summary, there is overwhelming historic evidence that the book from 1850 was not the beginning of the tradition of Black Pete nor of many other Saint-Nicolas related rituals. All of these, including the figure of Black Pete itself, stem from well before that date. Note also that some elements of the tradition found in historic literature, like the chain, are nowhere to be found in Schenkman’s work. Historical research actually leaves only one element that can be firmly linked to the publication from 1850. It introduced the steamship as means of transport for the Saint during his arrival from Spain, a very revolutionary way of travelling at the time Schenkman wrote his often-cited book.

So, if Black Pete and many of the customs surrounding the Saint-Nicolas festivities did not start in 1850 with the book of Schenkman, what can then be said about their true origins? The remainder of this article will focus on just that and discuss literature and other historical sources that will give us another and more underpinned view on the traditions and the background of Black Pete.

Chains and masquerade, a link with the age-old fear for the devil

Very old people can still recollect the times in which Black Pete was wearing a chain. The chain is a well-known attribute from myths around the devil and hell throughout the Cristian world. It's therefore very plausible that the chain refers back to a role of Black Pete as a chained devil. The tradition with chains lasted long into modernity. Below a picture¹³ from as recent as 1953 is shown where a chain is still visible at the arm of the Black Pete.



Rattling the chain is also a prominent theme in a well-known song about Sint Nicolas. The strophe “Makkers staakt uw wild geraas”¹⁴ refers directly to the making of noise (with a chain). Further proof exists that this link with the underworld did already exist as part of the tradition in the year 1659. A poem from those days reads:¹⁵

*2 Sinte Claes, die rijcke milde man, die is so goet van geven
Dat de Jonghe-luy hem loven met geraes.*

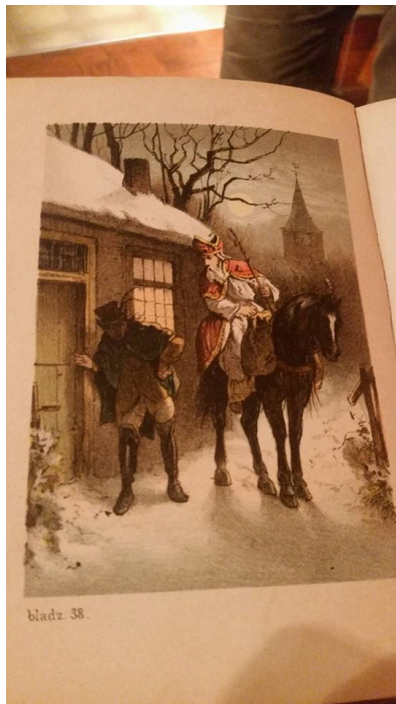
[...]

*4 Daerom is hier sulcken groot geraes,gerammel en gebabbel,
Dattet dreunt en drillt soo singen wy Fa Sol:
Ja men geeft en goyt'er nu voor ons wel so veel goet te grabbel
't Waer geen wonder kreegh'er een sijn Schoenen vol.*

In the first and second strophe there is a reference to “geraes”, an old Dutch term for loud noise.

The devilish theme is further supported by sources in which Black Pete bears other names related to the devil like “Heintje Pek” or Claus.¹⁶ In publications both the chain and the black face are mentioned regularly. (see reference 27 for this) As the previous picture shows these names and customs endured long and were still widespread in 1950. Before that date also the clothing of the Saint and Black Pete varied considerably over the country, in collective memory however they are all remembered as Black Pete

Below a number of old pictures showing these regional variations.



1895 Sint Nicolaasvertellingen W. Mets



Eindhoven after 1907

17



1913



Date unknown

18

Although the historic appearances of Black Pete vary considerably over time and place, as we have seen in the previous paragraphs, several common themes can be identified in all of these.

1. A masquerade with a true masque or a blackened face.
2. A Rod or Switch
3. A Sack (bag or large basket)
4. A chain

These figures are firmly stored in the collective memory of the people as Black Pete.

In his book “Nicolaas, de duivel en de doden” (1993) Louis Janssen puts forward, that these are indeed the key characteristics that identify the companion of Saint-Nicolas. This is not only the case in the Netherlands, but we find similar creatures and attributes throughout Europe²⁰. It is also being noted in this book that a black face is the cheapest and easiest way of masquerade. More well to do people also used real masks for this purpose, indicating again that the prime purpose of the blackening was rendering the Pete unrecognizable. An example of this alternative Masked Pete can be seen in the picture below²¹, in his left hand the “Masked Pete” carries rod/switch and chain.



The double role, Black Pete and Black Claus

Next to Black Pete in all its forms the old sources also frequently refer to a Black Claus, that has almost similar characteristics and variations in attire as Black Pete. One of the most intriguing facts, that is seldomly discussed, is the close resemblance between Black Pete and this Black Claus. In fact, it can be safely assumed that they are representing the same figure that we now know as Black Pete.

Further evidence for these double roles can be found in many places. In the province of Groningen in the North of the Netherlands a figure with the name

“Boerensinterklaas” (farmer Sinter Claus) exists. This figure has many similarities with the German Pelzmartel, a Saint-Maarten clothed in animal skins.



This figure is also known as Pelznickel (a Saint Nicolas figure clad in animal skins). The name can also be found in certain areas of the United States as the nickname Belsnickel for Santa Claus. Furthermore, there are (rare) pictures in which Santa Claus carries a rod or chain and likewise exist with Saint-Nicolas and a rod or chain. In Germany a blackened face is combined with this appearance



Pelznickel



Father Christmas with chains



Santa/Chains



Santa Claus with rod



Saint with rod

The figure “Boerensinterklaas” can also be found in an illustrated story from 1880²³. In this tale about Saint Nicolas a reference to his black servant is made. However, from the picture it is clear this servant is wearing a mask to hide his identity. In those days the mixing in pictures and text of these two very different appearances of the Black Pete was obviously not considered as confusing. Probably the people were familiar with these variations, which is proof, once more, that the black face is nothing more than one of multiple variations to make a person non-recognizable.



Printers and Publishers

Publications coming to us through the mist of years reflect both traditions as well as folktale. And although authors and their illustrators moulded the story according to their own view quite a bit, they had to stay within the experience of the readers to not become irrelevant. Publishers had a large stock of wood engravings to illustrate their publications. If an available

woodcut did resemble the intended picture just a bit, it was reused especially in cheaper pamphlets and books. Creating new wood engravings was a costly process so reusing existing ones had the priority. There is an example below in which Charles the 5th was actually reused as Saint-Nicolas²⁴.



In addition to reprinting existing material plagiarism was widespread amongst publishers and translating foreign work was the easiest way to do so. However, publishers were keen to stay within the boundaries of recognition by their public. This is shown by the foreword of “Voorvallen en merkwaardigheden uit het leven van den kleinen Andries²⁵”, a translated work from Low German.

“... want er kwam toch een en ander in voor, waaraan onze Hollandsche knaapjes niet veel zouden hebben, en dat heb ik of maar overgeslagen of naar onze vaderlandsche begrippen vervormd en met vaderlandsche benamingen uitgedrukt. Wonderingen en buitengewone gebeurtenissen zal men er niet in vinden, maar enkel dingen die u in uwe jeugd zelf reeds voorgekomen zijn of misschien zullen voorkomen....”

This translates into:

It contained a few points that would not be recognized by our Dutch boys. Therefore, I have skipped these or transformed them to the context of our fatherland and used native names.

In this book we also find an interesting description which once more shows how a black face and a mask were used interchangeably.

The original text translated from Low German into old Dutch is:

“Toenmaals was er nog een bullebak. Dit was een grimmig man, met een zwart gezigt, of wel een masker voor hetzelfde, in eene vreemde, lelijke kleeding, met een ‘zak op den rug en een bloot zwaard in de hand.

Zoo ging de vreeslijke bullebak een paar dagen voor Sint Nicolaas op de straat rond, tierde, sloeg met het zwaard vonken uit de steenen, en maakte een ijslijk geweld.....”

Which describes that a few days before the celebration of Saint-Nicolas a stern man with a black face or a mask goes around raving in peculiar clothing carrying a sack and making a lot of threatening noises.

Even more interesting is the following phrase in which is explained that many, even sensible people took to the streets, masked as this bully character and visited their relatives and friends with a rod. There they threatened to put the naughty in the sack

“...zelfs verstandige lieden verkleedden zich als de bullebak, en liepen wel niet de straat rond, maar daarvoor kwamen zij in de huizen hunner verwanten en bekenden, en hielden eene ontzaglijk groote roede in de hand. Dan dreigde hij de goddelooze, stoute kinderen, die niet eens konden bidden, in zijn’ groote zwarten zak te steken, en mede te nemen; maar waarheen? Daarvan zeide hij geen woord. Eindelijk... werd de bullebak toch milddadig, en haalde noten en appelen uit zijn’ zak, wierp die op den grond en ging met vermaningen en bedreigingen heen.”

The similarities with the current tradition where Black Pete is knocking on doors, making a lot of noise and regularly threatening to sentence naughty children to the sack to Spain are stunning.

There are more translations from German describing Saint Nicolas stories. An example is the well-known Dirty Piet (Shock-headed or Shaggy Peter) ²⁶ (Struwwelpeter). Also, with Dutch authors we find many detailed descriptions of comparable traditions during the time of the Saint Nicolas festivities.²⁷ Some of these again include description of a Saint that blackens his face prior to home visits.

Two Dutch pictures with figures in double roles are known: The first one is “Tante Jet die voor Sint Nikolaas speelt²⁸” (“Auntie Jet plays Saint Nicholas”), the second one describes a Black Claus from the Veluwe, drawn by Gait Mulder From Wessinge²⁹. (notice the tail to the left). These Black Clauses operated sometimes alone or in groups until at least the end of the 19th century.



Doubling figures in other countries

This double role (Saint and devil) is a wide spread phenomenon, also in other European countries. In Germany we find the already discussed Pelznickel. Also in Belgium we encounter such a figure, known locally by the name of Père Fouettard (Father Whip) and who in some places is called Saint-Nicolas. On these pictures he is portrayed again with a mask.

In the poem below we see again the usual pattern, Father Whip visits a home just before Saint-Nicolas arrives to check if all children have been good.

'Goeienavond mevrouw, Sint Nicolaas stuurt me om te vragen of uw kinderen zoet zijn?'
 'Zeker, Vader Geselaar, ze zijn altijd braaf.'
 'Dan is 't goed. Sinterklaas zal hen vannacht speelgoed en lekkers brengen.'

Which translates into:

Good evening my lady, Saint-Nicolas sends met to check if your children have been sweet
 Certainly, Father Whip they always are
 Very good Saint Nicolas will visit them tonight to bring presents and sweets





Also, in France we find the double role of Saint Nicolas with a rod. Impersonated as a fur clad person called Père Noël, who is normally portrayed with a riding whip. In other places this character is called Père Fouettard., the name we also know from Belgium



The dark side of the Saint

All the discussion on double roles in the previous paragraphs reveals a glimpse of the older myths around Saint Nicolas in which he is no gentle old man nor attired as a bishop. This is not the Saint Nicolas we know but a dreadful person with fiery eyes, animal skins and a riding whip³⁰. This last description is actually from the reverend W.A. van Hengel dated 1831. In addition, the following verse 1802³¹ lacks any form of respect towards this Saint Nicolas

Zy laggen om Sint Nicolaas

Die met een ketting loopt

En maakt een drommels groot geraas.

The peoples Claus and the holy Nicolas

It was common knowledge that there were actually two figures, two “Clauses”, the peoples “Sinter” Claus with its chain and threatening appearance and the Saint Nicolas. This is reflected in a description from 1833³², in which grandmother explains to Betje the difference between the “good” Saint Nicolas and the rougher people’s variant.

“Gij ziet dus, mijne lieven! dat Betje een regt aardig kindje was; en zulke kindertjes hebben doorgaans van Sint Nikolaas een presentje te wachten.”

“De andere kindertjes weten niet beter, of daar bestaat nog een Sint Nikolaas, en men maakt hen doorgaans bevreesd met den een of anderen wonderlijk aangekleeden of opgeschikten man.”

*“Sint Nikolaas, der kind’ren vrind,
Die alle zoete kinders mint,
Schenkt aan de lieve, gulle jeugd
Deez’ avond weer, vol pret en vreugd,
En wenscht, dat hij nog langen tijd,
Elk jaar, ’t gehoorzaam kind verblijd.”*

We translate this poem as best we can in full without any rhyme as it contains a lot of interesting information

“You see my darlings that Betje was a real good child; and such children can expect a present from Saint Nicolas.”

“The other children know that another Saint-Nicolas exists, and they are usually frightened with a strangely clad or decked out (adorned) man.”

*“Saint Nicolas, the children’s friend,
Who loves all good children
Bestows the good and friendly youth
This night again filled with joy
And prays that he will for long
Each year make the good children happy.”*

The existence of two figures, two Saints, so to say, is also evident in the already mentioned poem from 1659 that reads:

“W’ hebben immer een veel goeder Sinte Claes”

Which translates into “we (after all) have another, better, Saint Nicolas”

This follows a sentence on people that worship him with “geraes”, noise. Maybe these were already called “Sinter Clausen”.

The pattern emerges to us clearly over the depths of time, two roles, one good and holy, and one bad and black, sometimes clearly distinguishable as the Saint and the servant but sometimes almost united in a double role, in which both are mixed.

Ancient rituals surviving Christianization

When Europe converted to Christianity, pope Gregorius the Great instructed to maintain whatever heathen custom that did not directly conflict with essential elements of the belief. The pagan gods had to disappear of course, but places of worship could be baptised with holy water and dedicated to the one god or to one of the many Christian Saints. In temples and on altars relics might still be placed. This shrewd pope intended to ease the transition to Christianity and its one God assuming that the transition would be more acceptable when abrupt changes were avoided and many of the older habits were embedded in the new faith. Therefore, churches were built on older places of worship³³. In addition, traditional festivities were treated in a similar fashion, Christmas being a prime example. Popular Saints were put forward to replace native supernatural creatures, like e.g. the northern god Wodan.

The patron of fisherman and merchants, Saint Nicolas was throughout Europe a first order candidate for such a position. Giving these credentials, it is not surprising that his cult made large inroads in the Netherlands and many churches were dedicated to his memory. The celebration of the anniversary of his death on December 6th was an additional advantage. Early December is when winter first begins to bite in the North, the start of a dark and dangerous time. Until well into the 19th century people in Northern Europe hoped they could weather the cold and hold out on their food supplies until the next spring. A celebration for a popular Saint was a welcome break in these hard times.

Throughout Europe we find very related traditions, that despite many local specifics, clearly have a common theme and ancestry. Once more this is a strong indication that we are dealing here with a very old tradition. The custom of painting the face black can be found back in many places in Europe. The methods of painting may vary from ash and burned cork up to complete make-up using a mixture of ash with butter or oil, these cheap methods were available everywhere since ancient times. Especially in midwinter around the birthdate of Saint Nicholas the masquerade is endemic in these parts of the world, mentioned already in a Saint Nicholaspoem related to the chimney in the Netherlands in 1718.³⁴ An echo from ancient times that has survived in many rituals and traditions until our current days.

Black Pete is Black Claus

The collected historical information as discussed in this article leaves the notion of a recently invented, nineteenth century Black Pete untenable. Black Pete is beyond doubt a continuation of a very old tradition in which a large diversity of black, masked and noble Clauses existed. The variety in characteristics over time and place of these figures has only over the last half century blended into the figure of Black Pete as we know him.

1. A black face or mask
2. A rod³⁵ (sometimes called whisk or switch)

3. A sack³⁶ (a bag or sometimes a basket)
4. A chain

This list of similarities is not exhaustive. As recorded for the (black) Clausen, Black Pete goes around

- a. Rattling with a chain or/and banging on doors,
- b. Shouting with a hollow voice: "Are there naughty children here?"

An illustrative example can be found in the magazine *De Joodsche Wandelaar* from 1792:³⁷

"Gijs de Kleermaker: "Mannen, wat hadden wij op Sinterklaas-avond een pret! het was een klucht, om te zien, hoe bang mijne jongens waren, ha! ik moet er nog om lagchen, als ik er om denk; mijn wijf zelve, schoon zij van de vonk wist, zou wel in een hoek gekropen hebben, zoo had ik mij toegetakeld, met lappen en vodden van allerhande kleuren, mijn bakhuis (bakkes betekent gezicht!) had ik zwart gemaakt, en ik rammelde zoo verschrikkelijk met de ketting, dat het huis er van daverde; met een holle stem vraagde ik, of er ook stoute jongens waren? dat ik Sinter Klaas was, die nu reed, om naar jongens te zoeken, die niet wilden leeren, maar die, voor zoete kinderen, appelen, noten, kastanjes, en Sinterklaasgoed had. De kinderen kroopen in een hoek,..."

The essentials of which can be translated shortly into:

"What a joy we had on the evening of Saint Nicolas (December 5th), it was fun to see how frightened the boys were. Even my wife was shocked how I had dressed up with coloured rags. My face I had painted black and I rattled the chain so that the entire house was shaking. With a hollow voice I asked if there were naughty boys here. I was looking for those who would not listen but for the good children I bring apples nuts and chestnuts and sweets. The children all fled into the corner"

Simon Andreasz Krausz's such a Saint Nicolas night has been depicted. Looking at the prominent nose and chin probably a mask is being worn here.



In many families the evening of Saint Nicolas birthday is still celebrated in similar fashion, although the rattling of the chain has been superseded by banging on the door. After this the children rush to the door to find there a sack with presents and sweets. Very often they still see a glimpse of a Black Pete disappearing in the dark. Sometimes also a Black Pete or Saint Nicolas accompanied by a Black Pete is visiting them. So still a lot of variation but in general the essence of the performance has endured the ages and still follows more or less the same pattern.

c. Often operate with multiple servants or Black Petes together.³⁸

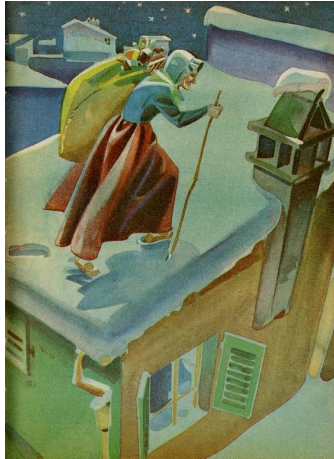
Multiple Black Petes appear to be active simultaneously, where the book of Schenkman only mentions a single servant. This reminds us of the Black Clauses from the historic sources. Probably these took to the streets together to continue their work like the Black Clauses³⁹ of Amsterdam after their visits to the family homes. The masquerades and the festivities for children blended into each other seamlessly

The many attempts, also that of Schenkman, to civilize the traditional figures have been in vain. Even during in the anti-authoritarian trends of recent years, the pedagogic value of the Saint Nicolas tradition has not fully been lost. The story still goes that the presents are only intended for those children that have been good. Also the classical rod can still now and then be found as one of Black Pete's paraphernalia and is also omnipresent in many Saint Nicolas songs.

d. Black Pete enters a house through the chimney, like many of the companions (also in double roles) in other countries . Despite the advance of central heating most homes do still have chimneys.



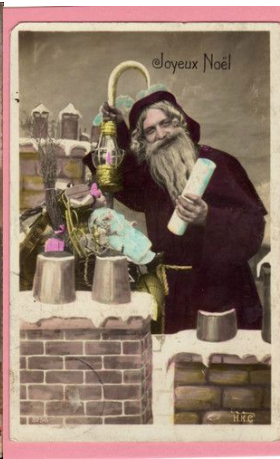
Krampus



Befana



Père Noël



The Clausen were also known from wearing

e. peltry

f. horns

This is reflected in the poem⁴⁰ of Harme Bevoort from Enkhuizen, in which he describes a black head. The interesting part is below:

*“Gerust kunt ge u nu buiten wagen
Geen zwarte kop
Met huiden om het lijf geslagen
En hoornen op.
Geen ketens ramm’len langs de keijen
Als van een beer,
Gij hoort geen deur, geen schot rammeijen
Geen angstkreet meer.”*

After translation this states in summary:

You can go safely outside now, no black face, horned and clad in hides No rattling chains, no clacking of a door, not a single cry of fear can be heard.

And also in the description of Mattheus van Heijningen Bosch,⁴¹ in which a mask is discussed

“Eens bragt ik, met myne zuster, naar d’oudere gewoonte, op een Sint Niklaas avond een schotel by onze Grootmoeder. Wat gebeurt? Nauwlyks waren wy in den woonkelder, welke eenige trappen diep in den grond is, gezeeten, of daar wierd een geraas als van iemand, welke zeer zwaar stapt, boven in het voorhuis gehoord – Dat geraas naderde meer en meer – Daar kwam iets klos, klos, klos met een verward gerinkel, als van yzeren ketenen, en een angstig gebrom de trappen afstommelen. Nog heden ril ik ‘er van. Eindelyk wy allen zagen verwonderd naar de deur en nu trad ‘er iets in, dat meer de gedaante had van een monsterdier dan van een mensch. Het spook, beter weet ik het niet te noemen, had zoo veel wy zien konden, eene koe-huid omgeslagen, zoo dat de hoornen valk boven het gezicht kwamen, dat achter een yselyke scherbiskop of mombakkes verborgen was, en de staart kronkelde achter aan. ’t Geklos van de zwaare houten klompen, welke het zelfde om de voeten

droeg, gevoegd by het gerinkel der ketenen, om het midden geslagen en op den grond sleepende, alles saam genomen gaf zulk een vreeslyk geraas en aanzien, als ik voor of na nimmer weer gezien heb. Hooren en zien verging ons allen. Het ondiep ging langs den muur het vertrek rond, trad toen by de tafel in 't licht, en vroeg met een holle stem: zijn hier ook stoute kinderen?"

Which again describes a Saint-Nicolas evening, it translates into:

As usual on the eve of Saint Nicolas I brought with my sister a meal to our grandmother. What happened? We just descended into her living cellar when we heard the sound of very heavy steps in the house upstairs. The noise came closer and closer. And then it came down the stairs, with a rattling of iron chains and a fearful growl. My blood still freezes when I think about it again. Finally, we gazed at the door and there it entered, more a monster than a human being. This ghost, I have no other name for it, seemed to be clad in the hide of a cow with its horns on top of its head. The face was hidden behind a dreadful mask and a tail dragged behind it. The heavy thump of its wooden shoes mixed with the rattling of the chains which together made such a frightening noise that I will never forget it. The monstrous creature passed along the wall and finally stepped into the light at the table and asked with a hollow voice: "Are there any naughty children here?"

Black Pete Servant and Devil

In 1766 Black Pete is mentioned in an enumeration of names for the devil, spirits and ghosts, shown on the map from 1941 shown earlier.⁴² Here he is also called "Nikker⁴³" which translates into a nix. The connection with Saint-Nicolas, already present in those days, is discussed in another work on superstition and evil spirits ⁴⁴. The below extract from this paper contains some interesting information.

"Dit wijzigen van de vriendschappelijke gezindheid omtrent de Huisgeesten, valt ook bij de aangevoerde benaming: de oude Knecht, in het oog. De Huisgeesten werden voor hulpvaardige dienaars of knechts gehouden, die in gevaar voor het huisgezin zorg droegen, en in het werk der huishouding hun deel namen. Zoo spreekt men in Duitschland van Knecht Ruprecht en Knecht Nikolaas."

It states in the last sentences: "The house spirits are considered as helpful servants, which in case of danger take care of the family and contribute to the housekeeping. In Germany one speaks about servant Ruprecht and servant Nicholas."

For readers unfamiliar with the German traditions it is good to explain that the figure Ruprecht sometimes operates alone but also often appears as servant of Saint-Nicolas. His face is... black, like that of many of the other companions of Saint-Nicolas like the Dutch Black Pete. The fact that also a servant Nicolas is named is essential. Here we see signs of the so-called double role that was discussed in earlier paragraphs of this article.



en



In other countries we also find these devil/servants back, like e.g. in Luxembourg and France



Black Pete is clearly connected to even more devilish figures like Krampus and Ruprecht. From Germany we have the following drawing where servant Ruprecht is even shown with horns.



en



These descriptions of a monster and a horned figure with black head are transitions that also can be found in the Netherlands. The documentary “Wild Geraas” produced by Arnold-Jan Scheer is recommended for more background information on this point.⁴⁵

Another proof point showing that the servant of Saint-Nicolas could also be viewed as a diabolical character with horns can be found in the below drawing from Kollarz⁴⁶ from 1869, that was included in a tale in a Dutch magazine about Saint Nicholas and his servant.



Further traditions involving black figures in the Netherlands

Until recently children from Beringe (Limburg) painted each other's faces black with the ashes of burned branches around the day of burial of Sint-Maarten (November 11th)⁴⁷. A

comparable custom has been recorded in the province of Utrecht⁴⁸. In other places like Hellendoorn similar ceremonies happened around Easter. In Diepenheim the civic guard goes around in September with a number of black painted jesters⁴⁹. In Grou the festivities for the local Saint Piter are around February 22nd. He is also accompanied by a Black Servant called Black Pyt (or Hantsje Pek or Pik). Here also this Black Pyt is the continuation of a more horrifying old tradition in which Piter masked with lace curtains or made black went to the streets in a coat with sweets and rattling his chain as the Black Clauses did. Around 1908 a schoolteacher from the local school adapted this ancient folklore and Saint Piter became a noble bishop very much alike his distant cousin Saint Nicholas. Also in Venlo this older and darker personality lives on in the figure of the black servants that harassed Venlo during the festival of Saint Maarten. These appear in two variations, the first one alike the servant Ruprecht who was also observed in the Netherlands (in Limburg and the Achterhoek, but also found mentioned in Rotterdam⁵⁰) accompanying Saint-Nicolas and later also dressed like a nobleman. Black Pete figures appeared throughout the country in many variations over time.



1925,

1925 and

1938

Black Pete's current attire examined

The black colour of Pete has been explained sufficiently from history as a masquerade, but we have not yet touched upon the background of his colourful clothing. Those can also be related to the extensively discussed double roles with black or masked “Sinter” Clauses. To better understand this, we evaluate a few drawings in which Saint Nicolas is depicted as a nobleman,

Below we see again the picture of Charles the 5th in Spanish attire that has been transformed into a picture of Saint-Nicolas. The original clothes Charles wore on the picture do very much resemble the attire of the colourful Black Pete. This link we also find back in other historical sources, a print of Karel van Orleans (left) and Saint Nicolas from the publisher Wijnhoven-Hendriksen, clearly shows this.



When playing Sinter Claus for children this type of clothing was included. A wig sometimes curls, a hat with a feather, nice clothes it all happened





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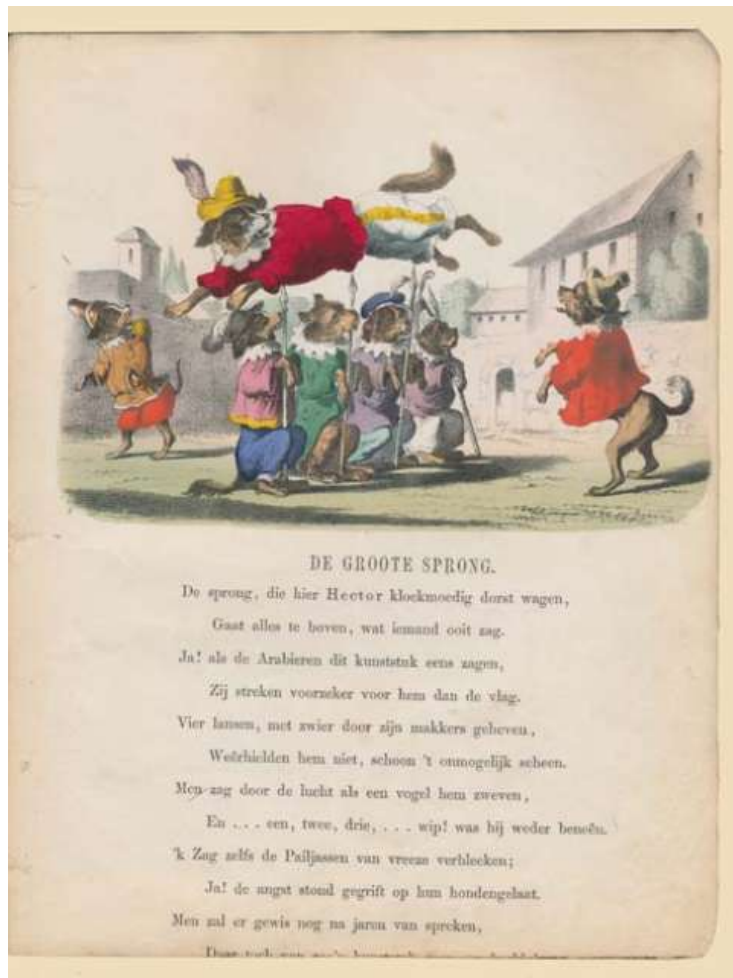
52

The above vignettes were used in advertisements until the 20th century. They were originally representing a “Sinter” Claus but now also serve as Black Pete. Such inconsistency obviously did not present a problem in oral history.

There are so many links between the various Clauses of old and the figure we know as Black Pete that it is inevitable to connect the current tradition to the ancient myths. Study of the sources listed in this article only emphasizes this picture and makes clear where the origins of the Saint Nicolas festivities and its characters and rituals must be sought. This also clearly applies to the clothing. It is good to note that in other books that Schenkman wrote similar clothing frequently appears



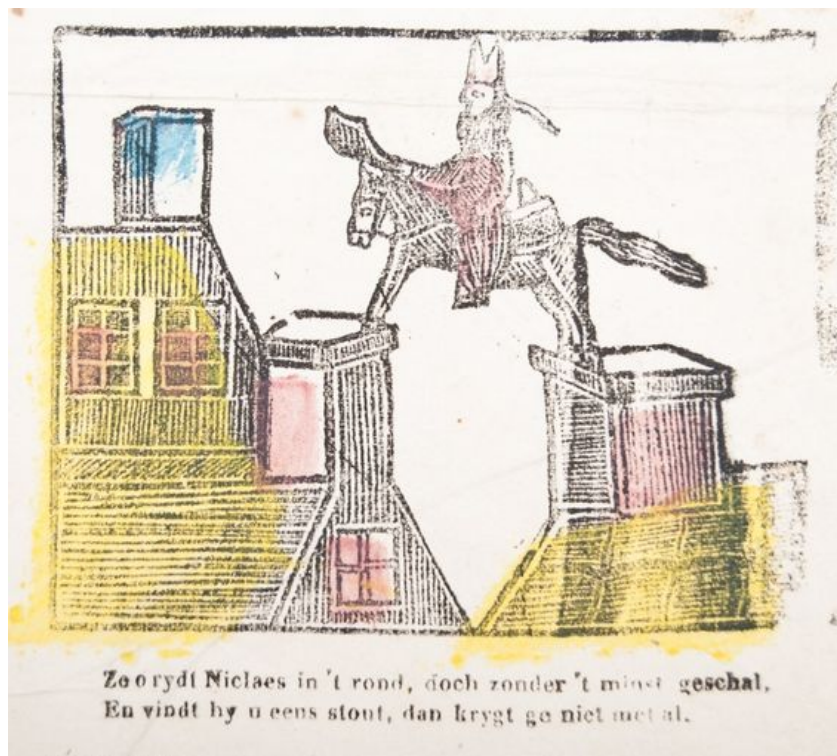
Asschepoester⁵³



Viervoetige Kunstenmakers⁵⁴

On the Chimneys

The strong link between the historical “Sinter Claus” and current day Black Pete is emphasized furthermore by the well-known story of Black Pete listening at chimneys (if there are naughty children in the house). From old “centenprenten” (penny-pictures or penny prints) we know that Saint Nicholas and his horse are often depicted in a peculiar way on the rooftops. The legs of the horse span from one chimney to another. Please also note the rod, that typical Black Pete attribute in the hands of the Saint here.



Sint Nicolaas te paard gezeten,
Laat alle goede Kindren weten,
Dat hij weer als in 't voor'ge Jaar,
Prenstjes heeft, en Lekkers klaar.

Dat hij met giften zal beloonen,
Hun die zich steeds gehoorzaam toonen,
Maar dat een ongehoorzaam Kind,
Door hem volstrekt niet wordt bemind.



Sint Nicolaas, fints lang vermaard
Als Bischof, van een heilig leven!
Was deugdzaam, goed en mild van aard,
Zoo als ons altijd is beschreven.
Hij stond den Armen bij in nood
Was altoos met hun lot bewogen,
En schonk hun zijn geheel vermogen;
Hij bleef hun troost, tot aan hun dood:
Hij was een groote Vriend van Kindren,
Geen wonder dan, dat hij altijd
Van hun bemind wordt, en gevleid.
Niets kon hem in zijn doen verhinderen.

Vier eeuwen is het reeds geleden,
Dat men in 't magtig Amsterdam
Hem tot Patroon of Schutsheer nam,
En als een Heilige aanbeden.
Zijn naam en naamdag, blijft men achten
Bij Kindren, die veel lekkernij
En ook geschenken van hem wachten
Dus hoort men dien verheugd en blij
Luidruchtig aan den schoorsteen zingen:
„o Sint Nicolaas! goed heilig man!
„Trek uwen besten tabbard an!
En nog een aantal andre dingen.

Men zegt: dat hij te paard gezeten
Van de eenen schoorsteen op den aér
Zegt Kindren, zegt, is dit niet waar!
U brengt veel Lekkers om te eten.
Hier ziet gij hem zijn giften deelen,
Gezeten op zijn moedig paard,
Veel dingen, van verscheiden aard,
Die uwen smaak, en oogen streelen.
Hij stort hier uit zijn groote Zak!
Een menigte van Lekkernijen
Banket, en allerlei gebak,
Ja alles wat U kan verblijden.

Maar voor een ongehoorzaam Kind,
Die naar geen Ouders raad wil hooren,
Die is een Gard, ten deel bechooren
't Is Nicolaas die deugd bemint!

Te Amsterdam, bij de Erve H. RYNDERS, in de tweede Tuin Dwarsstraat.

In one of the 16 illustrations in the first edition of Schenkman's book we recognize Saint Nicolas' servant, in a high and mighty position on the rooftop well above the Saint⁵⁵.

In the second and later editions we see that publisher) has adapted already, presumably pressure from his public that did not accept than those known from tradition. The (Black Claus also known as Black Pete) has again in the 16^e century nobility style, as so on the three historic prints above. We know booklets shown there that this figure was children in this fashion. In these later submits to the classical position of Claus on “centsprenten (penny prints)” also. So, there anymore about whom we are dealing with Peter: He is the (black) “Sinter” Claus ⁵⁶.



he (or his under other figures Servant been dressed clearly visible from the played for versions he the is no doubt in Black



Gedigitaliseerd door Google

And this position has continued to present times, as can be seen in the following pictures high on his horse, loved by the people!



Petten 1914⁵⁷



Roosendaal 1948⁵⁸



Amsterdam 2011⁵⁹

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