

SINTERKLAAS IN VICTORIA: ST. NICOLAAS AS A SYMBOL OF DUTCH ETHNICITY

David S. Moyer

University of Victoria

For the anthropologist the study of Sinterklaas presents a variety of theoretical and practical challenges. Sinterklaas is a polyvalent symbol with different meanings and modalities in different social contexts. One can demarcate at least three distinct types of variation: geographical variation, historical variation, and life cycle variation.

The study of geographical variation involves an examination of the range of variation in Sinterklaas practices at any given time. Included in this is an examination of the celebration of Sinterklaas in the European Netherlandic culture area and among emigrant Dutch populations in other parts of the world. Particularly striking is the fact that there appears to be as much or more variation in the Netherlands as there is among overseas Dutch populations. One only needs to note the carnival-like atmosphere at the Ameland Sinterklaas celebrations to underscore the very wide range of variation within the Netherlands (cf. Van der Molen and Vogt: 180-87).

The study of historic or temporal variation involves an examination of the relation of Sinterklaas celebrations to their social setting in a given time period. While one can use direct observation for an examination of present practices and personal reminiscences for the recent past, one must rely upon the full range of written documentation for an examination of the more remote past. This includes literary as well as other, more conventional historical sources. For example, in his Camera Obscura Hildebrand mentions the practice of koekvergulden. This practice of having parties paint (with frosting) speculaas cookies is unknown to most Netherlanders today. In addition to this literary reference, there are theological statements against the allegedly foolish and even blasphemous Sinterklaas practices. However, as G.J. Zwier points out, "not only the Calvinists but also the anarchists overburdened the immortal bishop with scorn" (Zwier 1982: 16). Indeed, it seems that anti-Sinterklaas viewpoints may be easier to find than pro-Sinterklaas viewpoints. However, what is clear from even a casual examination of the past, is that Sinterklaas practices have survived, though undoubtedly in modified form, for the last 500 years (van den Graft: 120).

From an anthropological point of view one of the more interesting aspects of Sinterklaas celebrations is the range of attitudes that a given individual will have towards Sinterklaas in his lifetime. This variation is in addition to that created by any social changes that have occurred in society during a person's lifetime. Thus a child of four or five will have a distinct set of impressions of St. Nicholaas and the Zwarte Piets. A major factor influencing these impressions will be the way the family has chosen to interpret the general symbol of Sinterklaas. In particular, the

degree to which Sinterklaas is seen as both a rewarding and punishing figure, as opposed to an entirely benevolent one, will have a significant impact on the child's perception. In contrast to the believing child there is the unbelieving teenager who still participates in Sinterklaas celebrations, sometimes as a Zwarte Piet but more often on the receiving end of barbed familial poems. As an adult one may be involved in the work place party where, under the guise of Sinterklaas, gifts and poems are exchanged anonymously. Often the poem points out an irritating personal habit of the recipient. The recipient is obliged to read the poem aloud and then say "dank u Sinterklaas". Thus, in this setting, Sinterklaas can be and often is used as a means of social control. At the same time that one is participating in the office party one might also be attending a Sinterklaas party at one's association, or be a parent perpetuating Sinterklaas beliefs with one's own children. Still later in the life cycle one might be a grandparent. At this stage one might choose to be a public St. Nicholas figure. Regardless of the specific dimensions that one focuses on, there is a wide range of personal experiences available to the European Netherlandic participant in Sinterklaas celebrations.

In examining the Sinterklaas celebrations and attitudes of first generation Dutch Canadians the above domains are extremely important. Before making judgments on a particular set of Sinterklaas practices one must be aware of the geographical component, the historical component and the life cycle dimensions of an immigrant's attitudes. Thus it is often important to know what part of the Netherlands people come from, as it may influence how they celebrate Sinterklaas in Canada. It is often important to know when people immigrated to Canada. For example, people who have immigrated to Canada in the early fifties often bring a rather different set of Dutch values than those who came in the seventies. This difference in values may often have an impact on how people view Sinterklaas. Lastly, the position that one held in the life cycle at the point of immigration may have a considerable effect on the attitude that one has towards Sinterklaas in the immigrant context. In short, someone who immigrated as a child will most likely have different attitudes than someone who came as an adult. Among second and third generations of Dutch Canadians the factors shaping attitudes towards Sinterklaas are even more complex.

In an effort to better understand Dutch Canadian attitudes towards Sinterklaas I began a systematic ethnographic study of Sinterklaas celebrations of the Vancouver Island Netherlands Association in Victoria, British Columbia. The public celebrations which began in 1974 were moved to Victoria's Inner Harbour in 1975 and have continued with minor variations until the present. In December 1983 I undertook as complete a study as possible of the celebrations. The following is a brief description of the 1983 celebrations.¹

In 1983 Sinterklaas celebrations in Victoria consisted of three events: the official arrival of St. Nicolaas, a children's party at Holland House and an adult party in the evening. All three of these events took place on Saturday 3 December.

Victoria's Inner Harbour provides an ideal setting for recreating the "arrival of St. Nicolaas from Spain." There is a suitable dock across the street from the main entrance of the stately Empress Hotel. To the south is the British Columbia Legislature Building. And within sight is the Dutch carillon donated to British Columbia as a centennial gift by Dutch Canadians. Furthermore, the causeway across the end of the Inner Harbour provides an ideal viewing position for spectators.

Starting at noon, prior to the arrival of St. Nicolaas, onlookers are entertained by the Association's children's dance group dressed in traditional folkloric dress. The high point of the children's presentation is the "Birdie Song" in which the dancers imitate small birds. A Dutch brass band plays for the dancers and performs on its own. As a backdrop to these performances, there is a large banner saying "Welcome St. Nicolaas." Additionally, there is Dutch bunting draped over a historical marker and along the waterside chains which extend about thirty feet on either side of the ramp where St. Nicolaas will step ashore. The dock itself is part of a marina that juts out about 150 feet into the harbour. On top of one of the arches over St. Nicolaas' route is the round emblem of the Vancouver Island Netherlands Association. This plaque is surmounted by three flags: a Canadian one in the center with Dutch ones to either side. The entertainment and the decorated setting theatrically heighten the anticipation of the arrival of St. Nicolaas, who is due at about one o'clock.

By one o'clock a substantial crowd of about three to four hundred people has gathered. About half are Dutch, and they are usually closest to the roped-off area where the dancers and musicians perform. At about 1:15 the Seaspan International tugboat bringing St. Nicolaas from nearby Esquimalt appears in the distance. As the tug approaches one can easily see St. Nicolaas and two Zwarte Piets standing on the foredeck. One can also see a large sign draped across the tugboat's bow. The sign, in three foot high letters, says "SPAIN". As soon as the tug is secured to the end of the dock the president of the Vancouver Island Netherlands Association helps St. Nicolaas ashore and introduces him to his wife. The president, his wife and St. Nicolaas proceed towards shore followed by the two Zwarte Piets. At the ramp connecting the dock and shore St. Nicolaas is welcomed by children in Dutch costume who are for the most part members of the children's dance group. Once ashore, an official welcome is extended by the Acting Mayor of Victoria. Then St. Nicolaas presents gifts to the Acting Mayor and the president of the Vancouver Island Netherlands Association. This is followed

by a formal presentation for St. Nicolaas by the children's dance group and the singing of Sinterklaas songs in Dutch. Meanwhile, during the less serious moments, the Zwarte Piets are throwing pepernoten. Once the performance is over everyone rushes to surround St. Nicolaas just before he makes his way to the stairway that leads up to the Causeway and the awaiting black convertible provided by a local radio station (CFAX). While local policemen guide traffic, St. Nicolaas and the Zwarte Piets make their way through the surrounding crowd, get into the automobile and are driven off.

Meanwhile, the children of the dance group and other children who have signed up for the party board a waiting double-decker bus. Other than the anthropologist and his photographer, all of the adults (including the driver) on the bus are women dressed in traditional Dutch costume. The departures of St. Nicolaas, on the one hand, and the children on the other, conclude the public portion of the celebrations.

The children's party at Holland House begins with the arrival of the bus bringing the children from the Inner Harbour. Once they are all seated they are given a hot dog and a Coke. About half an hour later St. Nicolaas and the Zwarte Piets arrive in the CFAX convertible. He enters the building, goes up a short flight of stairs and turns into the main hall. He proceeds along the center aisle towards his seat at the front of the room. The high level of excitement reaches a fever pitch as the Piets scatter pepernoten in the crowd. Once St. Nicolaas and the Piets have been seated and welcomed by the Association president there is a magic show which lasts for about half an hour. With the magic show complete, St. Nicolaas moves to center stage and is seated. In addition to the Zwarte Piets, St. Nicolaas is assisted by two adults, both in traditional Dutch costume; the man is the coordinator of the entire event and the woman is the leader of the children's dance group. In a carefully coordinated flow the children are called to St. Nicolaas in family groups. The only interruption in the flow of greeting St. Nicolaas, receiving a gift and a package of sweets and returning to one's seat occurs when a child who has learned a Sinterklaas song in Dutch sings it for St. Nicolaas. Once the child has completed the song the children and adults present respond with very enthusiastic applause. The previous practice of having St. Nicolaas saying something specific to each child based on information in his "Big Book" has been abandoned because it lengthens the process even more. As it is now, the common practice in Victoria of leaving after one's child has participated, means that at the end there are only a few children in the hall. After the last child has been seen, St. Nicolaas and the Piets proceed towards the automobile and depart in a casual fashion. With this departure the ladies who have assisted with the party begin the rearrangement of the hall for the evening Sinterklaas party.

The evening party can, with one exception, be described as a regular

evening dance with a live band. The exception is the half hour visit of St. Nicolaas. Other than during this visit everyone wears conventional dress. The party begins about eight o'clock and gathers momentum by nine o'clock. At ten o'clock there is an announcement that St. Nicolaas will be late because he has been "caught in a roadblock". This is a reference to the local police forces' program against drunk drivers. The facetious implication is clear: St. Nicolaas was having problems with the police. At about 10:20 a disheveled St. Nicolaas with wig and beard askew hurries unceremoniously into the room and makes his way to the chair in front and plunks down. The effect is comical. He is followed by two adult Zwarde Piets in the traditional Spanish costume. The Piets throw pepernoten from their sacks to the eager "children". Then one Piet stops and starts eating all of the pepernoten himself. The effect is hilarious. When all three have arrived at the front of the hall St. Nicolaas begins to complain (in English) in a vintage Dutch style. "The trip from Spain in that boat was too long and too uncomfortable... the police roadblock was so annoying ... etc., etc." He then announces that he won't do anything until he has "wet his whistle". At this point one of the Piets jumps up, fetches a drink and returns to St. Nicolaas. With mock daintiness he lifts St. Nicolaas' beard and pours the drink into his mouth. Refreshed, St. Nicolaas begins.

He admonishes the club members for their general lack of attendance at club events. Following several other general admonitions, he begins with individuals. The total number of people eventually called is only a small proportion of those present. Each "child" is called and escorted to St. Nicolaas by one of the Piets. Occasionally, the escorting Piet rides the "child" to the front of the hall. The "child" kneels before St. Nicolaas and listens to a mock serious speech and is given a small present. The general tone is one of comic uproar. Three examples are sufficient to give the general impression.

At one point one of the Piets, while looking for a present, gets lost in his sack and has trouble either finding the present or extricating himself from the sack. Later a Piet tells a kneeling "child" that he has a present in there. At this point he sticks his hand into his oversized Spanish breeches. He then proceeds, amidst total uproar, to rummage in his drawers. Finally, he extracts a small, neatly wrapped package. At another point the wife of one of the men dressed up as Zwarde Piet is called to the front. When she is kneeling before St. Nicolaas he says, "I hear you have been fooling around with one of my Piets." The innuendo is unmistakable and very funny. After about 30 minutes of such antics St. Nicolaas and the Zwarde Piets depart. A little while later, after changing back into normal clothing, the three actor-comedians return to their tables. The dance ended at about one o'clock.

When one compares the three aspects of the celebrations one is struck by how different the adult party is from the other two. The key to this

difference is the fact that the adult party presupposed that everyone understood the Dutch tradition of Sinterklaas celebrations. Without such an understanding most of the jokes wouldn't be comprehensible, let alone funny. By emphasizing this common knowledge the evening served to reinforce the group's self-identity. The other two events had a rather different focus. Instead of assuming a knowledge of Dutch traditions, the arrival in the Inner Harbour and the children's party had a strong didactic element. They were teaching Dutch Canadian children about an important aspect of their Dutch heritage. The children's party was a particularly clear example of this teaching dimension. It is worth noting that there were a substantial number of Dutch grandmothers who had brought their grandchildren so that they could "see" St. Nicolaas. The arrival of St. Nicolaas in the Inner Harbour is somewhat more complex. Though many Dutch Canadian children were present in the audience there were also some who were participating in the event. Thus, some children were learning by participating while others were learning by watching. Additionally, it should be stressed that it was not only a presentation of Sinterklaas to Dutch Canadians, but was also watched by a substantial number of people of non-Dutch background. The Vancouver Island Netherlands Association is to be congratulated for its tasteful display of Dutch ethnicity to a general Canadian public in a totally non-commercial fashion.

Thus one can see that, in the Canadian context, the traditional Dutch celebration of Sinterklaas is very similar to its Dutch counterpart, i.e. it is an incredibly polyvalent symbol with different meanings and modalities in differing social contexts.

¹I am deeply indebted to the Vancouver Island Netherlands Association for making this research possible. I would like to particularly thank Bep and Ernie Hoekstra for their help. With their ten years of experience of the Victoria celebrations they have been invaluable informants.

REFERENCES

- VAN DE GRAFT, C. Catherine
1947 Nederlandse volksgebruiken bij hoogtijdagen. Utrecht: Uitgeverij Het Spectrum.
- VAN DER MOLEN, S.J. and VOGT, PAUL
1980 Onze Folklore. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- ZWIER, GERRIT JAN
1982 De verschrikkelijke goedheiligman. NRC Handelsblad zaterdag 4 december: 16.