

CULTURE, MUSIC, HISTORY AND CROSSING BOUNDARIES

CHIP ON THE SHOULDER OR JUST EXAGGERATED RACIALIZED TENSION? PERSPECTIVES OF A BLACK ARUBAN STUDENT AND PROFESSIONAL LIVING IN THE NETHERLANDS

GREGORY T. E. RICHARDSON
INSTITUTO PEDAGOGICO ARUBANO

Introduction

This article is an output of a longitudinal study on black Aruban culture between 2000 and 2010. This study includes auto-ethnographic analysis of the author's personal experiences as well as numerous interviews, panel discussions, case studies, observations and literature reviews. The author not only describes his personal ethnic experiences, but also places them within the wider theoretical debate on race and ethnicity.

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It is a widespread practice on the island of Aruba as well as in other Caribbean territories allied to European entities that students upon completing secondary school leave their homes to go to the European metropole for further studies (Nicolaas, 2006). While colleges and universities are increasing their presence on the island, the prospect of wandering off to distant lands in search of academic success involves a risk worth taking for many Aruban students. Therefore a considerable number of these students choose to establish themselves in the Netherlands, not only because they are familiar with the Dutch education and governmental systems, but also because of the relatively low cost of education there (Kralingen, 2003).

Upon their arrival in the metropole, Aruban students are confronted with a society that is dissimilar to theirs. Prior perceptions of ethnicity and ethnic relations that were common to them were suddenly not applicable anymore; other rules are now in effect. What Arubans considered white, is not white any longer, and what was once considered black, takes on a completely different significance (John James, 2000-2007). The demographic constellation of Aruba is akin to the populations in Cuba and Puerto Rico, where people of indigenous and mixed race in large part predominate in the makeup of the population (Richardson, 2010; Alofs & Merckies, 2001). The world the Aruban student knew before going abroad, was a world where ethnic lines were differently constructed. The world of *shadism or colorism*, where those who are “more

white” in appearance are given preferential treatment, does not exist in the Netherlands (Rellihan, 2005). In Aruba one’s skin tone could be *jet black, dark skin, brown skin, light or fair skin, red skin, yellow skin, apache¹ or white*. Similar racial stratifications are also common in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially in places like Brazil, Puerto Rico, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic (Alleyne, 2002).

Aruban multiculturalism is a product of vast migratory processes that occurred during the various decades of the 20th century. Aruba never had an immense plantation economy involving African slaves. Instead the black minority on the island consists mainly of the descendants of British Caribbean migrant laborers. They have been on the island for over three generations now and constitute a distinctive unit within the larger multiethnic fabric of Aruban society (Richardson, 2010; Alofs & Merkie, 2001).

The black Aruban experience has often been neglected and has never been placed within the context of the wider Aruban historical narrative. This has left a tremendous void with respect to the expressions and the voices of this important constituency on the island. In this article, I will shed some light both on the experiences of black Arubans before leaving for the Netherlands as well as on the challenges that they encounter when they arrive. I will also discuss my academic and professional life as a black person in the Netherlands. It is my aim to familiarize the reader with the black Aruban experience and to stimulate public and private debate on race, ethnicity and ethnic relations in the Netherlands and in Aruba.

Island View of the Netherlands

The Netherlands is known in Aruba and much of the rest of the world for its wooden clogs, windmills, liberal lifestyles, sex and drugs. Besides these obvious stereotypes, black Aruban students also see the Netherlands as the land of independence and educational opportunity. At a very early age Afro-Caribbean Aruban students are prepared for a life where nothing comes easily. There would be no handouts in this lifetime. Older folks would say “*we don’t have any godparents wuking in government to help us get a job, we have to wuk hard for we self.*” In practice this meant that blacks had to work harder to demonstrate their worthiness and blacks had to excel in education to be considered smart.

At an early age these students learn to cook, clean, wash dishes and assist in household chores. In traditional black Aruban families very often boys are brought up doing yard work and girls doing household chores. A constant parental reminder is, “*you have to look after yourself when you get big and go away because aint have nobody to do it for you!*” Janice Hale Benson’s studies on black American children in

¹ Name commonly used amongst black Arubans of British Caribbean descent to refer to indigenous Arubans. However these perceived Indian groups are not of the North American Apache Indian tribe.

the 70's and 80's show many similarities. It is clear that African Diaspora communities around the world feel the added pressure of having something to prove, what may be termed 'the chip on the shoulder' mentality (Hale-Benson, 1986).

The black Aruban is historically familiar with migratory practices. Numerous generations have traveled around the globe in search of an improved future. First generation black Arubans deemed education to be very important, constantly preaching a pro edifying message metaphorically comparable to a dusty LP record repeating the identical melody (Alofs & Merkies, 2001). For African descended Aruban students, life in the Netherlands presents a new challenge. They have to live up to the hype. Many have preceded them, setting the bar quite high and success is often measured by equaling or the surpassing the achievement of one's siblings and other family members. There is a strong *Harambee*² mentality in black Aruban culture where the spirit of pulling together is an important aspect of the upbringing. Many black Aruban students are fearful of failing; therefore they work tirelessly to succeed. Their hunger for success is often not driven by goals, instead, it is driven by fear and when a parental standard of success is not achieved, they experience profound shame.

Aruban students in general see the Dutch as cold, cheap and as being prejudiced towards foreigners. This image has been continuously reinforced by the manner in which Arubans talk about the Dutch on the island; "*e macambanan ey ta pichiri, ta hole stinki y ta bot*³." Many times these stereotypes are not reflective of the contemporary Dutch person but rather based on perceptions of older Arubans' experiences with the Dutch during colonial times. Upon stepping onto the aircraft there is already a preconceived notion of what life is going to be like. One prepares mentally for racism and other forms of discrimination because in ones frame of mind, Euro-Netherlanders are all naturally racist! In the next paragraph I will describe some of my personal experiences when newly arrived in the Netherlands.

Personal images deconstructed

When first arriving in the Netherlands I was confronted with a different culture than initially expected. Dutch people always seemed to be in a hurry. The Netherlands was also more racially and ethnically diverse than I had first imagined; especially in the bigger cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. Experiencing black culture in the Netherlands was also very surprising. European blacks were the same color as me but they weren't the same as back home or what I was accustomed to seeing in the U.S. European blacks were similar outwardly but seemed to be different

² Harambee is a Kenyan tradition of community self-help events, eg. fundraising or development activities. *Harambee* literally means "all pull together" in Swahili, and is also the official motto of Kenya and appears on its coat of arms.

³ Translated as "the Dutch are cheap, do not smell pleasant and are straightforward."

inwardly. They all had white boyfriends or white girlfriends, spoke Dutch like *dutchies*⁴ and could speak neither Caribbean English, nor Papiamentu. The first thing that came to mind was, “bounty”. A bounty is a chocolate bar that is brown on the outside and white on the inside and is a term used to describe someone who has sold out his or her race. They were not as they say, “keeping it real,” which is hip hop slang for not truly representing your culture.

My perception of a black person at the time was constructed by what was portrayed in the American and Caribbean media. Blacks in Aruba wear baggy jeans, speak American and Jamaican slang and listen to rap, soca, reggae and R&B music. Blacks in Europe often wear tight jeans and boots and listen to an array of music ranging from American urban music to European trance, techno and house. The culture and environment they grew up in has groomed them to differ from their racial counterparts elsewhere. Environment, at least partially, decides what clothes you wear, how you speak and how you act. This certainly brings up the question: what does being black really mean? When confronted with these issues it certainly forces one to think differently about race. How can I call someone else racist if I myself am prejudiced towards my own race? When human beings feel isolated in a new environment we tend to cling on to what is familiar to us, often enhancing stereotypical views of the other. Black students many times cling on to constructs of ‘Africaness’ saying to themselves, “we are black, we do things differently.”

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During my time in the Netherlands I haven’t experienced racism all that often. Have I created a world where racism is nonexistent or have I willfully ignored its existence? Questions like these are extremely difficult to answer because racism often doesn’t openly manifest itself but subtly rears its ugly head in times of distress. In the next paragraph I will go deeper into the life of a black Aruban student.

Academic Life

When I arrived at college I had no notion of what was in store for me. Was it going to be a smooth ride or was it going to be a ride filled with obstacles? I preemptively took on an apprehensive attitude. I was like, “all these white people around here thinking they’re better than me, I have news for them, I am better than them.” The chip on the shoulder mentality again! This position was of course a mask to hide some of my insecurities, but looking back it was this same attitude that also contributed to my eventual academic success.

As I arrived in the classroom my “look for foreigner switch” went on. The first foreign looking person in the classroom I saw, I sat next to. This Moroccan colleague was not black, but I couldn’t care less, he was close enough. We had a similar position in

⁴ Diminutive of Dutch. Often used by Black Arubans to say something about Dutch persons in a negative way.

Dutch society which was our common bond. We were the *allochtonen*⁵. “We foreigners have to stick together,” I thought.

Academic adaptation was at first extremely difficult. My first tests and reports were not at all up to par. The first ever research report that I handed in to my professor was returned with a barrage of red marks; the paper looked like a Christmas tree. On the bottom of the report page there was a note which stated; “*jouw Nederlands is slecht, je hebt absoluut hulp nodig*⁶.” I felt like, “*what the hell am I doing here, who the hell send me.*” With plenty of struggle, I eventually passed through the teacher training academy with success. I must say that during my years in college I often felt inadequate. I questioned my intellectual ability because I felt that the Dutch students always knew the right answers and were very proactive. I sensed that the teachers were giving me a pass because they pitied me; “*oh arme Antilliaan*”⁷. Whether this was truly the case or not, it affected my psyche deeply.

Upon finishing college, I went on to specialize in Latin American and Caribbean studies at the University of Utrecht. During this experience a real sense of pride came upon me. It wasn't until my research trip to Trinidad that a whole new world opened up to me. When I first visited the University of the West Indies in St Augustine, Trinidad, I called my wife with excitement telling her that “*I never see so much black professors in my life.*” In all my years in the Netherlands I had only seen but one black professor walking around on campus. This research fieldtrip was like a confirmation that I could be anything I set out to be and that I should never ever settle for less. Images of successful people resonate more than stories. If you don't see it, it's hard to be it! In the following section I will discuss my first experiences on the job scene.

On the Job front

As I was finishing graduate school, I started applying for jobs as a school teacher at various secondary schools in the Netherlands. I sent over 30 applications and all resulted in negative responses. I rarely got invited to an interview. I remained calm after the first few declines, but eventually I became disheartened and thoughts of discrimination began to slowly infiltrate my mind. “Was it because of my background? It just did not add up; I was young and educated and it was still so hard to get a damn job? They needed teachers, didn't they, so what the hell was the problem then?”

After being jobless for about 5 months, my cousin called me up and said that there was a position available at the school where he worked. I applied for the job and got invited to an interview and surprisingly I got the job. The secondary school where I

⁵ Allochthonous in Dutch.

⁶ Your Dutch is bad, you really need help! (translated from Dutch)

⁷ Poor Antillean (translated from Dutch)

was going to work was nearly 100% white, including the staff. The location of the school was in a high income neighborhood in a midsize city called *Apeldoorn*. I was the only black teacher along with my cousin who is half Indonesian and another colleague who is half Antillean. Quickly my “find the foreigner switch” turned on. At that time it seemed like the best thing to do. After having lived in the Netherlands for over 6 years, I had realized, however, that I couldn’t isolate myself, for it would not be beneficial for my standing on the job.

Amid all the supposed “whiteness”, my experience at that school was edifying; it was a tremendous place to gain work experience. The staff was very professional, innovative and really did their best to incorporate their new teachers into the school culture. They frequently asked about my experiences and valued my opinion in matters that were of concern to the school. I also had a good relationship with the students. They automatically gave me the “*boks*”. It is the action where people greet each other by bumping their fist on another instead of a handshake. They thought it was hip, they thought that all black people greeted one another in that fashion. They said I spoke cool with a different accent and dressed differently. They seemed genuinely interested in my background and my reasons for choosing to live and study in the Netherlands. I knew it was a form of racial stereotyping but I saw it as the students’ honest attempt to connect with me. In this case it had a positive effect on both parties. Racial perceptions can also be used to your advantage, I quickly found out. My brother always says he doesn’t mind being the only black guy. If you’re a positive worker you stand out. The negative side is, however, that when you work badly you also get noticed in a negative way even more because they will say, “the black guy messed up.”

Academically, there are always certain challenges new teachers will face, but I can’t help but think that black teachers have to cope with just a little more pressure. There is always an internal sense that you have to prove yourself. My Dutch wasn’t always up to par and I often got some remarks from my colleagues. I dealt with it the best way I could by studying the Dutch language more thoroughly because I knew I was being watched. Despite all my successes at the workplace, my feelings of inadequacy in large part still remained. Black academics and professionals often feel isolated as they are confronted with their place and function in society. Blacks see them as “bounties” and whites wonder how they got to that position. In the next section, I will take a closer look at the place of the black family in the Netherlands.

Image of the Black Family in the Netherlands

When my son was born it was the beginning of a new chapter in both the lives of my wife and myself. We received a great deal of attention, phone calls and well wishes from friends and colleagues alike. My son had a brown complexion, beautiful round

eyes and curly black hair. We noticed that most of our Dutch colleagues made the same statement, “*Oh leuk, zijn haar heeft veel krulletjes*”⁸. My wife and I wondered if the same comments were made to white babies.

We lived in a flat in a multicultural neighborhood on the outskirts of the city of Utrecht. Most of the tenants were middle class and white. Our neighbors were quite apprehensive and limited interaction with us to “hello” and “good night”. We wondered what they thought of us as black people. As a matter of fact, we often wondered what Dutch people in general thought about the black family, the black mother, black father and black child. Did they think we were illegals, asylum seekers or poor Antilleans? Did they think we were “antsing” off the welfare state as Samuel Selvon described Caribbean migrants in post World War II Britain? When my wife and I talked to others and mentioned that we were both teachers they often reacted with surprise. I almost always got asked; “*Dus ben je een gymleraar?* So are you a gym teacher?” Not to discredit gym teachers but it seemed that I was more likened to be the athletic type and not the intellectual. Why?

The way that blacks are portrayed in the media is mostly negative and in socially undesirable positions; often as criminals, materialistic entertainers indulging in drugs and sex or as welfare recipients. These images shape the mindset of the general public. The image of the black professional and intellectual is painfully absent in the Netherlands. Paul Gilroy’s 1987 “Aint no black in the Union Jack”, was a critique on the limited black representation in higher positions in the United Kingdom. The same could be said for modern day Netherlands as well. My black Aruban friends also find it difficult to come to terms with the way the media portrays black persons in the Netherlands and elsewhere. These images are not reflective of the world that we live in.

Conclusion

In this paper I intended to depict the life of a black Aruban student living and working in the Netherlands. It is a deeply personal look at race as an element of ethnicity by someone who has benefited from a higher education and wonders in what manner others around him view his race, family and success.

By having lived in the Netherlands for over 7 years I have evolved in the way I view race and ethnicity. I have learned that being of a certain race does not automatically imply that one holds certain attitudes or practices a certain culture. I have seen many black Netherlanders who beside physical phenotype are entirely part of white Dutch culture and vice versa. The idea of race being equated to attitude and culture is mistaken. This colonial mentality is very much alive today and has been adopted by

⁸ Oh nice, he has curly hair,

many African Diaspora communities around the world. These sayings are all too common amongst blacks, whites and other races: “blacks dance well, have rhythm, are good athletes” as well as: “blacks are promiscuous, bad spenders, poor, inarticulate and uneducated.” Ethnicity is partly decided by past and culture, but can heavily be influenced by environment and choice.

As human beings we have constructed race as an element of ethnicity to function as a method of classification. We classify and categorize to be able to compare and to ultimately understand or manipulate. We quickly profess to be non judgmental, but rely on stereotypical preconceptions of the other. Education and interethnic contact is thereby essential in making persons aware of their prejudices towards other races as well as their own. In many aspects I have never really gotten to know the Dutch culture very well, for fear of leaving my own behind. I would advise a member of any minority group migrating to a foreign country to keep an open mind and to let people get to know the real you. Some disappointment along the way is inevitable, but the long term benefits of a multicultural, multiethnic and multiracial understanding far outweigh these temporary setbacks.

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