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Editor | Letlhokwa George Mpedi

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@Santa, Fyi, Black Lives Matter

Letlhokwa George Mpedi

"Senzeni na?

Sono sethu, ubumnyama?

What have we done?

Our sin is that we are black?"

1. Introduction

I did not know that Santa Claus had a sidekick called Black Pete ('Zwarte' Piet in Dutch) until one fateful afternoon when the duo stepped into our train carriage on our way from Salzburg (Austria) to Munich (Germany). My colleagues could not understand why I did not know of or about Black Pete. To me, having grown up in South Africa, Santa sans his reindeer is a loner. It was a shock to see a sad figure with a black painted face carrying a sack and walking timidly behind a cheerful Santa. This was a miserable and painful sight for me. I have seen and experienced a lot of strange things during my sojourn in Munich, particularly at the Hofbrauhaus (HB). Yes, the same old Bavarian HB where Adolf Hitler made his revolting speeches. For example, I had drunk *Fränkisch* (Franconian) men calling me *Schwarzer Mann* (a black man) at the HB. Yes, I am a black man. However, I have names that my grandmother gave me. Secondly, it is impolite to approach a man and start calling him by his race, especially when he is minding his important business, i.e. irrigating his tonsils and enjoying "*In München steht ein Hofbräuhaus, eine, zwei, g'suffa!*" ("There's a

Hofbräuhaus in Munich - one, two, down the hatch!"). Hell, this is a story for another day.

The event on the train got my mind working overtime. What is this strange 'partnership' supposed to mean? And, why did the other fellow paint his face black? These are some of the questions that were going through my mind. As I was trying to make sense of the situation I was witnessing, he, Black Pete, gave me a handful of groundnuts. This gesture left me confused. The truth is that I was wondering if this was altruistic or malevolent? I guess that I will never know. At any rate, my colleagues and fellow travellers could not comprehend why I was astonished. To them, black paint is inherently necessary for the role. It is *Black Pete* anyway. Secondly, this is part of their 'culture' and 'tradition'. They told me that Santa and Black Pete are something that was part of their childhood. Their opinions aside, the truth of the matter is that I have never managed to get over that ordeal. In this chapter, I try, albeit modestly, to go back in time and confront one of the most prickly experiences of my life.

2. *Black Pete is a racist figure*

As mentioned above, Santa in South Africa is a lone wolf. What I do not understand is why in Europe he would prefer walking around with a man whose face is painted black. Yet, he acts as a one-man crew when he graces our shores. Does this mean that he knows that his actions are or will be offensive to the local (black) folks? Secondly, is he alive to the fact that he will not get away with this reprehensible conduct on the African soil? My hunch is that Santa's antics are premeditated. Enough with conjectures. However, who is Black Pete and why is he a racist figure that Santa should stop spending time with? Black Pete is a black-faced assistant of Santa. He shows up every year in countries such as the Netherlands with gifts and sweets for the children (Van den Berge, 2018). Black Pete is a racist figure for a range of reasons which are too numerous to address here. The entire charade evokes sad memories of black suffering which include slavery and colonialism. Those who see nothing wrong with this sort of disgraceful behaviour can call me ultrasensitive if they like. However, wrong is

wrong. This folly is an “expression of racism and discrimination related to enslavement” (United Nations, 2015). As rightly pointed out in the Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on its visit to the Netherlands “[t]he image of Black Pete stereotypes Africans and people of African descent in image and behaviour” (*ibid*). In a nutshell, the whole Black Pete spectacle is offensive to the core and reopens old wounds. Therefore, it **can’t, shouldn’t** and **won’t** be tolerated.

3. *Santa Claus, Santa Claus, watcha gonna do when the fighters come for you?*

Now that I have stated what is wrong with this Black Pete business, I think that Santa can learn a thing or two from the recent Clicks “natural hair” matter (see Ramsunder, 2020), Showmax’s removal of Leon Shuster’s films with blackface characters (see Ferreira 2020) and the H&M “monkey hoodie” saga (see Head, 2018). Santa might argue that he does not “parade” Black Pete in South Africa. Therefore, he is good and South Africans like me have no reason to complain. Well, such a line of thinking will not cut it. It is tantamount to a situation where a fashion house encourages its customers, usually in wealthy countries, to buy its products which are known to be manufactured in sweatshops, usually in developing countries. If this does not jolt Santa’s conscience back to that of an upright human being, then I invite him to take his sleigh and visit the Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle in Cape Coast (Ghana) and Goree Island (Senegal). I have been there and I can tell you that what happened to women, men, children and families at the aforementioned places is hair raising and should not be romanticised in any shape or form. From West Africa, I invite Santa to head south and spend some time at the Apartheid museum and learn something about this crime against humanity. From there, I would urge him to cross the Atlantic ocean and head to the Americas. While flying over the Atlantic Ocean, I recommend that he plays The O’Jay’s song “Ship Ahoy” at full blast. The fact of the matter is that there are more than enough harrowing stories on slavery and colonialism almost everywhere in the world. Should the foregoing not serve as a

persuasive nudge for Santa to change his heart and mind about Black Pete, then the fighters should and will intervene. They always do. He must ask Clicks and H&M.

4. *Repent or don't show your face here!*

Dear Santa, haven't black people suffered enough? You are a global figure; use your reach to unite the nations. In this world, which is full of hatred and bigotry, we need love, peace and happiness. I think Mama Africa, the late Zenzile Miriam Makeba, was talking to people like you when she said, "unify us – don't divide us". So, what is it going to be Santa? You have two options in as far as I see it. You either change your obnoxious ways and, *inter alia*, retire Black Pete with immediate effect or do not come to South Africa. Finish and *klaar!* Black lives matter!

5. *List or references*

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