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CHAPTER 3

Dutch Culture for Dummies

The Netherlands is such an advanced country they like to update their racism. First it was Indonesians, then Surinamese, now it's Turks and Moroccans. I like to think they have an official drawing, like when they pick the Olympics: 'From now on, we'll all be hating... Belgium. – Tom Rhodes, comedian

If you fly to the Netherlands on KLM and read about the Dutch in *The Holland Herald*, you may not realize that *Holland* is not the name of the country. You may be similarly confused by the Foreign Ministry ('Holland' logo) or the viral ad campaign 'Holland, the Original Cool.' In fact, there are 12 provinces here, and ten don't have *Holland* in the title. This gets pointed out within 1.5 seconds, when you say 'Hello, Holland' in, say, Brabant. It's understandable that most Dutch don't want to be called 'Holland.' *Hol* translates to *hollow*. And while Americans can be shallow, at least we're not *hollow*.

The name *Holland* also seems confusing to certain Dutch people, for example the Dutch national football team. Every two years, the stadiums are full of orange fans, yelling 'Hol-land! Hol-land!' But that only really refers to two provinces: Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland. What about the players from the other ten provinces? What if they pass the ball to the guy from Friesland? He thinks, 'I'm not from either Holland' and misses. It must be so frustrating they feel like kicking some Spanish player in the chest.

In the assimilation course, we also got to learn the Dutch National Anthem: 'Het Wilhelmus.' It starts: '*Wilhelmus van Nassouwe, ben ik van Duitsen bloed...*'

I was the one in class raising my hand after the first line: 'I'm translating on the fly here, but is the opening line to your national anthem "I'm William, Founder of your country, and by the way I'm German?"'

And then came my follow-up question: 'Are there any other countries that start their national anthem by name checking another country?'

Not that we could think of. Can you imagine if America would do that?

'O say can you see – our British history? And Canada's nice. And a shout out to Mexico.'

And the Dutch anthem gets weirder. The end of the first stanza is basically: 'My allegiance for all time I pledge to the King of Spain.'

The anthem starts out by naming two other countries: Germany and Spain. And these are not just any two countries. As we learn in the assimilation course, these are countries that have invaded and occupied the Netherlands. Hence, the question: ‘What kind of self-hating country has this as a national anthem?’

And don’t forget, *Oranje* is *Orange*, which is in France. They might as well write, ‘And don’t forget Napoleon – he kicked our ass too.’

And no wonder the Netherlands don’t do very well in the World Cup. How do they start off every international match? They sing ‘Wilhelmus van Nassouwe ...’ Just when they should be trying to psych themselves up, they’re thinking: ‘We’re going to win today! ... Unless it’s Germany or Spain.’ That helps explain World Cup 1974 and 2010.

The Dutch Olympic team also seems affected by the odd Dutch anthem. Personally, I quite enjoyed the Dutch Men’s Gymnastics champion Epke Zonderland. I happened to be watching the 2012 games with some people from the US and the UK. And – as there were no Dutch people around – I was happy to represent Nederland. After Zonderland won the gold, they asked me, ‘*Zonderland*. What does that mean?’

And I told them: ‘Well ... *zonder* means *without*. And *land* is land.’ So Mr. Zonderland accepted the award for Nederland. But his name was saying, ‘I’m not with them.’



As an American, I’m technically *allochtoon*. So are my kids. Then again, I realize the term *allochtoon* wasn’t invented for people like me. Because we’re ‘Western.’ And, I’m writing this in English. In fact, my third generation Moroccan neighbor speaks better Dutch than I do. But she gets called *allochtoon* and I don’t. What are they really getting at?

As I understand it, ‘*allochtoon*’ is a word Dutch people made up so that – if you can’t pronounce it correctly – they know you’re probably not one of them. I was introduced to the term *allochtoon* by a Dutch person, who explained, ‘It’s the opposite of *autochtoon*.’

What’s *autochtoon*? (and why would you choose to call yourself that?)

‘*Autochtoon* is someone born in the Netherlands.’

So it’s like America and the way we use the word *foreigner*. As in: ‘I don’t trust them dang *FERners*.’

Allochtoon is a word that stays with you. If you’re *allochtoon*, you can learn the language, assimilate, and even marry a Dutch person. Then after you have kids ... they’ll still be *allochtoon*. But THEIR kids ... will still be *allochtoon*. After the fourth generation, well, maybe then they can be Dutch.

For a country based on tolerance and individual freedoms, it’s odd the way the Dutch love pointing out people who are different.

The Amsterdam City Council has now placed a ban on the term in official business. According to the Amsterdam Integration Chairwoman Andréë van Es: 'Amsterdam will no longer be using the term *allochtoon*. We are all Amsterdammers, and from now on we will talk about Moroccan Amsterdammers or Turkish Amsterdammers.'

This is not the first time the Dutch have tried to replace the term *allochtoon*. Last time they tried '*Nieuwe Nederlander*.' It didn't catch on. Why? If you ask me; too many syllables. Now Amsterdam wants to change it to something largely unpronounceable, which will probably result in everyone still saying *allochtoon*.

Why not call people what they call themselves? In Amsterdam, I've heard Dutch Moroccans call themselves *Mocros*. I've heard Dutch Turks call themselves Turks. And if Dutch people call me a *Yank*, I won't be offended. In fact, legend has it that *Yankees* comes from the term *Jan-Kees*, so I'm half-Dutch already.



The *Inburgeringscursus* is an assimilation course designed to teach things about Dutch culture that most Dutch people don't know.

This assimilation course is very informative. Soon I was learning how to play 'Stump the Dutchie.' Why was the Treaty of Westphalia so important to the Dutch? My wife wasn't sure. Who was Johan Thorbecke? (Most Dutch people near Rembrandtplein think he's the patron saint of acute alcohol poisoning.) What's the most densely populated country in Europe? (It's not Nederland.)



'HEADSCARF IS A SYMBOL OF OPPRESSION'

I was the only tall, white male in my assimilation class. I was surrounded by people from Turkey, from Morocco, from Africa, Russia, Poland, and Romania. They were, according to a friend of mine, 'a United Nations of countries the Dutch don't want here.'

One of the biggest lessons I learned in the assimilation course wasn't about Dutch culture. It was about the other cultures. Every week, we'd find a partner and talk in Dutch about where we were from. I learned that the women in headscarves from Turkey had been to university in Istanbul and came over together to look for work / further their studies. I learned that the guy from Africa wanted to study water engineering here and return home to teach. I learned that the Moroccan woman wanted to start up a club for other Moroccan women to do fitness together. Most of them had already heard about the Dutch history of tolerance and immigration. In fact, that's why many of us moved here.

Our instructor was teaching us about the all-important Western values, such as the Freedom of Religion. We then learned that the headscarf is a symbol of oppression. We learned this while I was

sitting next to six different women in headscarves. Awkward. One of the women raised her hand and said, 'Excuse, please. But – so you know – where I grew up, in Turkey, it was very secular society. Government rules were very strict. No headscarf allowed. So – for me – to move to the Netherlands and wear my headscarf, that is actually a symbol of liberation.'

The response: 'Sorry, but in this class that would be incorrect. If they ask you in the exam, just say it's a symbol of oppression.'

The most difficult part of the assimilation course was that I was being introduced to two different cultures at the same time: the Dutch culture of the textbooks; and the everyday Dutch culture I was seeing on TV.

Textbook: 'Tolerance is the foundation of Dutch identity.'

TV: 'Election Results Favor Right Wing. The Death of Tolerance.'

Textbook: 'Nederland is a country built upon consensus and the Polder Model.'

TV: 'Polder Agreement Rejected. The Polder Model is History.'

Textbook: 'Immigration has contributed to a rich and dynamic Dutch society.'

TV: 'Full is full!'

I was left to wonder, 'How do you teach about the Dutch identity when the Dutch are having an identity crisis?'



Nuts Support
When your underwear breaks down,
they deliver.



Sickmanns Snackhouse
'Achoo! Here's your order.'

CHAPTER 24

Dutch Identity: A New Ombudsman



Willem-Alexander looks good as a Queen.
– Overheard on Dam Square

As of this writing, the Dutch identity crisis is still in plain sight. According to the polls, the Dutch don't trust their leadership to steer the country out of the crisis. They no longer feel confident of their place in the European Union. And they're not as good at football (soccer) as they'd like.

There's one bright note that brings a lot of Dutch together: the Dutch Royal Family. At the abdication of Queen Beatrix, her approval was overwhelming. The investiture of King Willem-Alexander was a flawless event. A rare, international display of Dutch pride. Even the protestors gave grudging approval. The loudest anti-monarchists these days are in the Socialist Party. (Yes, Dutch Republicans are Socialist.) Instead of boycotting the Investiture or refusing to pledge their allegiance to the King, the Socialists decided not to dress up or even to wear ties. The result – where I was watching – was less 'Wow, what a statement,' but more 'Ugh, who let *them* in?'

Is this indeed what the anti-monarchist Willem van Oranje would have wanted for his country?

Sometimes I think back to that seminar on ‘Dutch Identity: Who Are We?’ If I could go back to that panel, there are a few things I’d like to say.

I took the assimilation course, and it was great! It might not hurt for everyone to take it, Dutch people too. Call it a universal ‘Participation Contract’ if you like: ‘You are about to Participate in the grand experiment known as Dutch Society. Rembrandt, Leeuwenhoek, Tasman. They’re all Dutch. But also Spinoza, Descartes, even Willem of Orange *van Duitsen bloed*. They’re all immigrants. You’ve got some pretty big shoes to fill. Do your best! Sign here.’

It’s all there in black & white & orange: the Netherlands is the first republic in the world. You had the world’s first multinational company, the first stock exchange, the first multi-ethnic colony in the New World and the inspiration for the American Dream.

The Dutch have a lot of unique selling points in the world. Indeed – from dikes breaking to oil spilling to global warming – Dutch people have answers to a lot of the world’s problems. The problem is the rest of the world doesn’t know about it. The rest of the world should give the Dutch more credit. But they can’t – not as long as the Dutch refuse to take any credit.

Nederland, take some credit! I get it, you’re Dutch: being proud is not in your DNA. But you can learn.

Stop saying ‘Full is full.’ If the land gets too full, you’ll just make more. You’re Nederland!

Stop saying ‘Our economy is in trouble ...’ You still have some of the lowest unemployment in Europe. You’re Nederland!

Stop saying you’re afraid Islam is taking over your culture. You’re Nederland! Half the Muslims in the world started out half-Dutch already.

Maybe the Dutch anthem really should be: ‘Wilhelmus van Nassouwe; I come from German blood. And French. And Spanish. And Turkish and Moroccan and Surinamese and Indonesian and American and the more the better.’

And as proof of the benefits of cultural diversity, there’s me. I’m Dutch enough to be proud of the Dutch, and American enough to not care how loud I am about it.

How to Be Orange

– The Assimilation Exam

The following questions are taken from the ‘Nationale Inburgering Test’ at NTR.nl. These are the closest I could find to the questions I had in my course.

To pass the test you need 5.5 out of 10. It sounds easy, but there’s one group of people who traditionally have a hard time: the Dutch.

The online exam even gives you some examples of how some famous Dutch people have scored.

Jacques d’Ancona (TV journalist): 4.7

Howard Komproe (comedian): 4.6

Victoria Koblenko (soap actress): 4.0

Note: none of them achieved 5.5.

Now is your chance to prove you’re more Dutch than famous Dutch people!

One year, the Dutch Assimilation Test appeared on TV. The winners were Chinese food delivery guys.

Many of the questions were not covered in my class. Nor were they covered in standard Dutch education, apparently. Nor are they particularly relevant.

But is that a bad thing? In any given classroom full of people taking this exam, there’s a real sense of solidarity as everyone looks around and shrugs ‘I have no idea.’

Of course, there’s always been controversy around the exam. Recently, a researcher from Radboud University found that the entire process is counter-productive, in part because the exam questions are so subjective.

Yes, they’re subjective: that’s what makes them so perfect! A simple analysis of each question reveals more about the Dutch mentality than the exam ever intended.



SAMPLE QUESTION

Wat of wie herdenken wij op 4 mei?

A – Alle oorlogsslachtoffers

B – Het begin van de Tweede Wereldoorlog

C – Het einde van de Tweede Wereldoorlog.

TRANSLATION

[via Google / Shapiro]

What or who is commemorated on the 4th of May?

A – All war victims

B – The beginning of World War II

C – The end of World War II.

ANSWER = A