

# Orange pride and prejudice

By Robin Pascoe

Any foreigner arriving in Amsterdam on April 30 to be confronted with a sea of orange wigs, beer and loud music would be forgiven for thinking that he had either landed on another planet or that the traditional image of the sober, modest and hardworking Dutchman was a myth.

And with the glossy launch of Rita Verdonk's Trots op Nederland party, high hopes at the European football championships and Olympics to follow, 2008 is an excellent year for celebrating being Dutch.

So what is it that causes a people known for their pragmatic and non-nonsense approach to dealing with difficulties to throw all caution to the



wind a few days a year? And are the Dutch really as insecure about who they are and what they stand for as the polls and endless soul searching in the media would suggest?

'The Dutch are so intent on following their creed of 'doe maar gewoon' that just occasionally they really have to let off steam, says Donna Decarme, an American who has lived in Amsterdam for the past seven years. 'It is no wonder they get out of control on occasion. The Dutch culture seems to have this inbuilt release button. I think it's great.'

Koninginnedag exuberance aside, Decarme - a theatre maker who runs the ABC Treehouse arts centre in Amsterdam - believes the Dutch could do with being a bit more proud of themselves and their achievements. 'They go on about their involvement in slavery and diamond mines, but they are also responsible for New York,' she points out. 'Nationalism is a word with a bad reputation. People only see the dark side of it. But the healthy side of nationalism is pride in your homeland, a sense of community.'

It took a foreigner, albeit a foreigner married into the Dutch royal family, to really arouse the hackles when she stated that she had failed to find a single Dutch identity. Princess Máxima's gentle 'een koekje bij de koffie' cliché was taken very seri-

ously in some quarters. The princess was vilified, dismissed by anti-immigration MP Geert Wilders as 'politically-correct rubbish' and serious questions were asked about the quality of her advisors and speech-writers.

Yet Máxima was only echoing a widespread feeling among the multi-ethnic population that there is no such thing as a typical Dutchman or woman. In a global village, multiple nationalities are becoming increasingly common – a fact which many new Dutch feel the old Dutch have so far failed to grasp. Newcomers do not see the Dutch as an insecure people struggling to come to terms with who they are.

Paul Matthews, director of the Affordable Art Fair Amsterdam, has lived in the capital for just one a year, and says the Dutch definitely have a sense of national pride. But he is has been surprised to discover how many international brands – Bugaboo baby carriages and and G-Star denim for example – are Dutch. 'I don't know whether it is a deliberate decision or just that they want to present themselves internationally,' he says. 'But there is such a wealth of creativity and ideas here. For a small country, the Netherlands punches well above its weight.'

That modesty about its international brands is something which could be seen as a typical Dutch trait. Galen Irwin, professor of political science at Leiden University, has been in the Netherlands since 1970. So does he believe there is different set of beliefs, a unique combination of ideas and values which makes someone Dutch?

Nationality, he says, is often a 'we they thing'. Part of having a national identity is being able to communicate with people and expect that they know certain things. As a Dutchman, you are expected to know who Jip and Janneke are and who Toon Hermans is. That is what makes you part of a group, says Irwin.

Having a language which few other people speak is also a part of the Dutch identity. 'It is like having a secret code, you can identify one-another by speaking Dutch – something which you just can't do in English,' he says. And that feeling of belonging is reinforced by wearing orange. 'Then you are part of the in group – it contributes to that 'us as separate from them' feeling.'

When Irwin first came to the Netherlands in 1970 he became used to being told that Americans are very patriotic and nationalistic. Then came the 1988 European cup and the semi-final revenge match against Germany – revenge for the 1974 World Cup in which the Netherlands lost the final 2-1.

'Everyone was in orange. It was a huge outburst of national feelings,' Irwin says. 'It was a combination of nationalist and anti-German sentiment, combined with having a good time. And of course the Dutch won which only emphasised that feeling of national pride.'

After the Dutch victory, an estimated 70% of the population hit the streets for an impromptu party. It was 'the biggest celebration in the country since it was liberated by

the Allies in 1945,' as one commentator described it.

James Kennedy, professor of Dutch history at the University of Amsterdam, remembers when he first came to the Netherlands as a Fulbright scholar during the European Cup of 1992. 'Everyone I knew was watching. The streets were deserted,' he says. The Superbowl final might be the biggest sporting event in the world, but it does not generate the same 'we feeling' as an international football match.'

'This is a country that has been proud of itself for a long time and chooses its moments to celebrate that,' says Kennedy. 'Sport, like football, is a way of being gezellig together. Now we are no longer members of religious or ideological groups and don't feel we belong to a wider Europe, sport is filling part of that gap, that sense of belonging.'

Gerald Traufette is the Netherlands correspondent for German news magazine Der Spiegel and sees many parallels between the Dutch focus on nationality and developments in his home country.

In Germany the public display of national symbols was frowned on until very recently. 'Before the last World Cup, which Germany hosted, if you put up a German flag you were considered a neo Nazi, he says. 'When I was first confronted by all this orange, it was really astonishing. The Dutch are not at all embarrassed about their nationality,' he says. 'They raise their flags whenever they can. But now Germans too are finding their national pride again.'

The custom of flag raising – and the fact that so many private homes have their own flag pole – is another eye-opener to many foreigners not use to quite such widespread displays of nationalistic fervour. At the beginning of March, the Dokkumer Vlaggen Centrale said it had received orders for 400,000 Dutch flags this year – annual sales are normally in the region of 100,000. Not only are the EK and the Olympics driving sales, but a number of retail chains are planning to give away flags in event-related promotional campaigns.

With a staunchly pro-monarchy husband, Courtney Smith van Rij has become an expert on Dutch flag protocol, rising at dawn with her children to get the flags up and making sure they are down before dusk. Her home in Wassenaar has four flagpoles.

Having lived in seven different countries, Smith van Rij says the Dutch stand out with their patriotism, especially as far as colour is concerned. 'In the US they raise the flag all the time – every children's baseball match seems to involve the flag and fireworks. It's overdone. But with Koninginnedag or when they win something with sports, they suddenly become dramatically Dutch,' she says. 'They are the most exuberant patriots.'

Smith van Rij, known affectionately as the honorary ambassador of Wassenaar because of her work in welcoming new expats, moved to the Netherlands eight years

ago after a lifetime on the move. American by birth and now with dual nationality, she first celebrated Queens Day in Shanghai in 1999, before she had any real contact with the Netherlands.

‘I was invited out to celebrate with friends. They were all dressed up in orange wearing badges that said ‘stay in touch with the Dutch’. I did not know what it was all about, but we had a great time,’ she says. Her next Koninginnedag came one year later - a red carpet affair in The Hague with expecting a fancy first got a plate with a piece herring – not even a ‘It was a very symbolic

introduction.’ In the provinces, of is a far more restrained wildness of the capital, people arrive to join the

Brazilian Cleo Petry, Netherlands for eight first April 30 in Hilver- was that special. It was make money out of all want,’ she says. ‘But I realised what the fuss at a standstill, everyone music and drinking everywhere.



course, Koninginnedag affair than the youthful where up to one million endless street party.

who has lived in the years, celebrated her sum. ‘I did not think it just people trying to the things they did not when I hit Amsterdam was all about. The city was outside. There was

‘It’s the Dutch showing a part of themselves which I almost think they are ashamed off. It is what they would like to be but can’t because they are raised to keep their feelings to themselves and not show off. They seem to be worried about people will think of them. But then look at the Sinterklaas celebrations. Everyone gets involved. They take it so seriously. Old people act like children, singing all those songs.’

Petry believes that the Dutch are proud of their country and its achievements. ‘They just don’t talk about it,’ she explains. ‘But the fact that they hang flags out on national days, that they support the royal family and watch the Queen’s speech at Christmas shows that they are.’

In some parts of the country, flying the flag is, literally, an essential part of the in-burgeringsproces. Englishwoman Debbie Visser, a part-time postbode, has lived in Bovenkarspel in West Friesland for nine years and relishes in the Dutch displays of national pride. Like Smith van Riji, she too is responsible for the flag-raising in her household.

For Visser, Koninginnedag is a moving experience. ‘I find it very touching to walk

down the street at 7.30 in the morning and see everyone outside and all the flags. Something like this would not happen in Britain. I think it is lovely that the Dutch can celebrate their nationality like this.'

The Dutch, says Visser, are absolutely proud of who they are. 'Orange unites everyone,' she says. 'My daughter paints the flag on her face, my sons when they were younger wore orange shirts. I think for a small nation, the Dutch are rightly proud of themselves and their history.'

And with the EK it will be just as mad. 'Every house will have orange bunting and whatever freebie Heineken and the rest have come up with this year. If you don't decorate your house, you are the one who looks a bit foolish. And the fact England did not qualify means my household is united behind the Dutch team.'

Professor Kennedy has lived in the Netherlands for the past five years, but with a Dutch mother has been versed in the country all his life. 'The Dutch have not had a very explicit, articulate and positive sense of who they are,' he says.

Nevertheless, they are proud of their nationality, best epitomised with the saying Oost West thuis best, he says. 'The Dutch know that their country is more open and better regulated than most. In the past they have been able to coast on their success. Now they have to work harder at it.'

The murder of Pim Fortuyn by an animal rights activist was simply a catalyst rather than the creator of a social trend which had been going on for some time, Kennedy says. The Netherlands was late in terms of other European countries in embracing a shift towards populist politics. The no vote in the European referendum in 2002 is just one example of where the man in the street asserted his identity. Today, post Fortuyn, Rita Verdonk is able to capitalise on a feeling of unease about the present and the future.

But the Dutch are not the only ones who feel they are being forced to ask questions about what makes them who they are. Chinese journalist Bei Wang says the emphasis on China's human rights record has created a lot of questions and confusion in Chinese nationals who live abroad. 'Sometimes I feel ashamed because of all the criticism,' she says. 'People are feeling lost. The government and the people are seen as the same thing. I have never been so cautious in expressing my opinions.'

But this summer Wang, a journalist for the Wereldomroep's Chinese service, is looking forward passionately to the Euro 2008 football championships. 'In China they love Dutch football,' she says. 'It the attacking style, the orange colour'. It is, she points out, considered lucky to have a specific colour which links you all together.

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