

# **Moffen and Maffen: Dimensions of Dutch Tolerance**

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## **I. Ik ben een Mof**

When I grew up in the post-war years in Southern Germany, I had the usual romantic mental picture of the Netherlands -- windmills, wooden shoes, tulips, and the wresting of land from the sea. I still can recall vividly black and white newsreel clips of the devastating 1953 flood. I somehow was aware that the Dutch did not like Germans, but so did many citizens of other nations, and I found this little surprising after Hitler had overrun their countries. Further, I recollect that I once entered a sweepstakes contest in which one of the prizes was either a trip to Rome or Amsterdam. Strangely enough I was more attracted to Amsterdam (this was long before it became the center for hippies and drugs) which seemed farther away and more exotic. Little did I know that the Netherlands would play such an important role later in my life.

The first time I actually visited the Netherlands was in 1966 on the way back from World Cup soccer in England. I had already been living for one year in the United States and I was hitchhiking with my American fiance. One day, near Utrecht, we were picked up by an elderly gentleman who could have been my father. He seemed to like us and offered to let us spend the night at his home. His wife greeted us with open arms and we passed the evening pleasantly in animated English conversation until it came out that I was not American but German. I will never forget the sudden, chilly silence which fell over the house. The older couple glanced at each other in dismay. As the awkward silence wore on, I could see the anguish in their faces as troubled thoughts raced through their brains. They had come to like me but now were confronted with their hatred for Germans. Finally, the husband broke the silence mumbling something about their wartime experiences. Slowly the conversation gained momentum again and the evening was saved. They were able to overcome their deep-rooted prejudices in my favor nevertheless teaching me a unforgettable lesson in history. For the first time, I was confronted with the reality that there were "Moffen" and "Maffen", the bad and good guys of a self-invented game played in the 1970s by Moluccan and Indo-European children in Waalwijk -- and I was a "Mof".

I went on to study Cultural Anthropology at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. By deciding to choose the Moluccas as my area of specialty, I indirectly renewed my links with the Netherlands which had been the colonial power there for 350 years. Now, the Netherlands had to cope with a restless exile community demanding to be returned to a free Moluccan republic independent from Indonesia. While I was doing fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation in Ambon, the first train hijacking by young Moluccans occurred in the Northern Netherlands (1975).

Most of the materials I needed for my research were written in Dutch and, for once, being German was an advantage since it was much easier for me to read Dutch than for my fellow American graduate students. In 1980 I went again to the Netherlands to work in various libraries and to visit Dutch friends I had made while in the Moluccas. One of them made an appointment for me at the Ministerie van Welzijn, Volksgezondheid en Cultuur. At the invitation of the Ministry, I returned to the Netherlands from June of 1983 to August of 1985 to conduct research on

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socialization processes among Moluccan exiles<sup>1</sup>.

## **Dutch Tolerance**

During those two years, and during another 15 months in 1989-90<sup>2</sup>, I had ample opportunity to be confronted with myth and reality of the fabled and cherished "Dutch tolerance". Fabled and cherished by whom?

As to what degree such an image of "Dutch tolerance" has been recognized in the rest of the world, it is impossible to tell. It hardly exists in Germany. In my place of residence, the United States, there is a vague notion among the general public of "Dutch tolerance". This includes, on the positive side, the belief in the Dutch as defenders and saviors of Jews from the Nazis due to the Anne Frank story. Thanks to periodic negative reports by the U.S. media, "Dutch tolerance" has also come to mean images of an undisciplined and unreliable Dutch military (based mainly on the policy of permitting soldiers to wear long hair!) and of decadent Amsterdam as a paradise for drug users. Otherwise Americans remain pretty ignorant about Dutch culture and "Dutch tolerance" has certainly not become a standard expression in American English as have "Dutch treat", "going Dutch", or "Dutch uncle".

I have come to suspect that this concept is largely a creation of the Dutch themselves and, as I will argue below is, at least as important for the Dutch self-image as for the image they like to project to the outside world. In countless conversations I have had in the last decade or so with members of the Dutch middle class and working classes, "Dutch tolerance" was frequently stressed with a touch of pride. The more astute pointed to the unique Dutch "zuilenmaatschappij" -- a social arrangement based on mutual respect among the various segments or "pillars" of society divided by sharp religious or ideological differences -- as the source of Dutch tolerance which was eventually extended to foreigners in their midst.

## **The Acid Test: Treatment of Ethnic Minorities**

After the collapse of the Dutch colonial empire at the end of World War II, it seems that the Dutch were generally quite tolerant towards the arriving ex-colonials, Moluccans and Indo-Europeans. Aided by a rapidly growing economy, the latter were integrated with few problems and the former also were smoothly absorbed into the labor force (Penninx 1979: 19). The Commissie Vervey-Jonker (1959:104) found little evidence of discrimination against Moluccans and first generation Moluccans praised the Dutch farmers who gave them jobs as having accepted them as fellow human beings. In the late 1960s, Indo-Europeans were so integrated that they almost became invisible. Prejudices against Moluccans became more articulate because they had become more politicized. However, at least the Dutch middle class continued to remain tolerant not just in theory but also in practice. For example, when Moluccans moved into a housing project adjacent to a middle class neighborhood in Culemborg, the well-to-do and well-educated Dutch parents living there firmly believed that they must not discriminate and agreed that the minority children must be given a fair chance for a good education and thus had no objections to the Moluccan children joining their own children in school (Bartels 1990: 542-543).

Moluccan train hijackings and hostage seizures in the mid-1970s led to a deterioration of good will among the Dutch toward this group. However the rising racism in the 1970s was not limited to Moluccans. A flood of colored immigrants from the Dutch colonies in Surinam and the Caribbean led to a flare-up of racial prejudices.

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1 This research resulted in the English publication of *Moluccans in Exile* (1989), translated into Dutch as *Ambon is op Schiphol* (1990).

2 From May 1989 until August 1990, I was engaged in compiling a textbook for inter-cultural education on the ethnography and history of the Central Moluccas. This work was published in 1994 as *In de schaduw van de berg Nunusaku*.

The pre-existing stereotypes regarding the various "allochtonen" in the country became even more crude and affected the hiring practices of Dutch employers<sup>3</sup>. Tensions between the lower class and minorities competing for unskilled jobs rose. This was mirrored in Culemborg where by the 1980s in the district of the fore-mentioned elementary school the middle class had been replaced by members of the lower class and the children brought their parents' bigotry to school leading to racial conflicts and segregation.

Nevertheless, I found in the early 1980s that, despite negative stereotyping, prejudices, and discrimination, Dutch society remained largely tolerant towards ethnic minorities. While their presence was not always welcomed, there seems to have been a certain acceptance (perhaps based on guilt) that at least the immigrants from the former colonies had a right to live in the Netherlands. Another indication of continuing tolerance was that the Dutch worried mostly about relatively trivial, sometimes tragicomic, incidents such as the celebrated case of the ritual slaughter of a goat by Moslems on the balcony of an apartment in a housing project. People also were worried that oriental-style mosques with large minarets might disturb the skylines of Dutch cities or about forcibly arranged marriages which run counter to Dutch values. Furthermore, while a small minority became openly hostile<sup>4</sup>, perhaps a greater number of young Dutch men and women thought nothing about intermarrying with Moluccans, Surinamese, Antillans, and other racial minorities. During my extensive research of Moluccan-Dutch couples, I heard few complaints that they or their children suffered discrimination nor did I discover much open hostility against racial intermarriage -- as it is the case in the United States<sup>5</sup>.

A squeeze on the job market in the latter part of 1980s and in the 1990s, combined with an ever greater influx of "asielzoekers", consisting largely of economic refugees from Third World countries, has markedly decreased Dutch tolerance of foreigners, especially among the lower class which is in direct competition with immigrants for unskilled labor jobs and cheap housing. Violent racial incidents are on the rise but the growing xenophobia seems to primarily directed against the newcomers and therefore does seem to affect to a much lesser degree the tolerance towards the earlier immigrants from the former Dutch colonies<sup>6</sup>. Aside from the asylum seekers, Turks and Moroccans who had come as guest workers in the post-war boom years are most under attack<sup>7</sup>.

Thus while it appears that the average Dutch person was fairly tolerant in the first decades after World War II, "Ausländerhaß" has become quite common in the last 10 years or so. But was "Dutch tolerance" in the past, or is the currently escalating Dutch xenophobia, drastically different from that of neighboring countries with similar

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3 It would be too simplistic to view discrimination in hiring as racism. Employers who don't hire dark-skinned males because of their perceived negative characteristics (e.g. unreliability, high absenteeism, insubordination, etc), often do employ women from the same ethnic groups, the women being seen as compliant and non-threatening.

4 Politically many of the xenophobes found a home in the extreme right Centrumpartij (CP) founded by Janmaat in 1980 and later renamed Centrumpartij '86. After being kicked out of his own party, Janmaat founded in 1984 the so-called Centrumdemokraten (CD) (Van Donselaar 1993:5).

5 For more details on the Dutch-Moluccan miscegenation phenomenon, see Bartels 1990:262-264; 436-439.

6 Black soccer stars playing in the national team, such as the Surinamese Ruud Gullit and Frank Rijkaard, have certainly been embraced as Dutch even by fans in the lower echelons of society who otherwise might not be very "foreigner friendly".

7 In the early 1980s when the majority seemed to be still fairly tolerant, there were actually more racial incidents. Conversely, in the late 1980s, racial violence decreased but general tolerance appeared to decrease. Perhaps it was the calm before the storm; the 1990s have brought less tolerance and a wave of serious racial violence. For a detailed analysis, see Van Donselaar, 1993. Moluccans too have voiced resentments about Tamils and other recent economic refugees. A Moluccan even ran for office as a candidate for the Centrumdemokraten and was actually elected as a council member in the 1994 communal elections (Marinjo 1994/2-3:28). Could this acceptance of a brown person in a white racist Dutch party be the ultimate proof that there is really a Dutch tolerance greater than that of other nations or is it a sign total chaos?

minorities, including Germany? Unemployment, economic insecurity, and an inundation by foreigners are linked in the public mind and thus fertile breeding grounds for racism and xenophobia anywhere. Despite the seriousness of the situation, I wonder if the problem has not been blown out of proportion in either country -- in Germany because of the overwhelming guilt feelings concerning the Nazi past and in the Netherlands because of the Dutch proclivity to severe self-criticism.

#### **4. Fixation with Germans**

When I returned to Leiden in 1982 for preliminary discussions about my future research, I came from Munich where I had borrowed my mother's car. As I parked it along one of the canals, a group of children between the ages of 8 and 12 noticed my German license plate. They yelled "Mof" and a few other choice expletives as I walked towards a university building. A year later the same car again triggered an anti-German attack when it was parked in front of a house I had rented in an upper-middle class neighborhood in Capelle a/d IJssel. When I left the house one cold winter morning, I was greeted by the message "IK HAAT DUITSERS!" which some child had written in large letters on my frosted windshield.

I usually shrug off such incidents but still I wondered why children two generations removed from World War II were being raised to hate their neighbors to the East. Ironically, both the Germans and the Dutch are among the strongest supporters of a United Europe and most Dutch exports go to Germany. Yet many continue to instill hatred of Germans in their children. Also, after many years of dealing with "nice" Germans who do not fit the stereotype, many businessmen still harbor strong prejudices against Germany.

If anything, anti-German feelings seem to have not only increased but also have become more vehement, even though the war generation is slowly dying out. Soccer, the substitute for modern war among European nations, has played a pivotal role in upholding anti-German attitudes. Many fans still hold deep grudges ever since Germany became world champion in 1974 by defeating the Dutch equivalent of the "dream team". In 1988, when the Dutch in 1988 won the European championship on German soil, there was almost certainly more joy about having taken revenge on Germany for the defeat in 1974 by beating them in the semi-finals as for winning the title. The reception of the team in Amsterdam in a sea of orange flags was a sheer joy to watch. It was the first time I had ever seen the Dutch displaying pride in their country en masse and they did it without the nationalistic overtones of superiority so common on such occasions elsewhere. The media, however, did not let the opportunity pass to debunk Germans again.

Particularly in the newspapers, this hostility against Germans seems willful, if not calculated and even ritualistic. German politics and social problems are more scrutinized and criticized than those of other foreign countries. No stone is left unturned in the search for evidence of German racism. During the 1990 world cup in Italy, a black Dutch player spit in the face of a German player. Immediately, it was assumed that the German player had used some racial slur. Even after the Dutch player honestly stated that this was not the case, the press remained doubtful. When a Jewish cemetery in Nijmegen was vandalized in 1993, German Neo-Nazis from across the border were immediately, and wrongfully, suspected. One of the best Dutch newspapers, *De Volkskrant*, rarely disappoints those who need a regular dose of reinforcement of their anti-German feelings.

Until recently this Germanophobia<sup>8</sup> was for internal consumption and had little effect on international relations. In 1993, after a Neo-Nazi attack on Turks in Germany, the crusade against Germans was escalated and reached its climax thus far. Adorning themselves with the halo of "Dutch tolerance", two Dutch disc jockeys of a

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8 I coined this term to be defined as 'strong dislike or hatred of Germans'.

radio program called the "Breakfast Club" on Radio 3, started a huge anti-German publicity campaign. Printing presses across the country got into the act and donated the printing and distribution of "Ik ben woedend" postcards to be sent by individuals to the German government as an expression of outrage against racism in Germany. In light of similar racist incidents occurring in the Netherlands, this action was seen as plainly hypocritical in Germany and the audacity of such a campaign considered an affront by many Germans who were just as upset about the incident<sup>9</sup>. Even when concerned people confront "Ausländerhaß" in the Netherlands, they wonder whether it is a harbinger of "Duitse toestanden" (Van Donselaar 1993:9) rather than squarely accepting it as an international phenomenon to which the Dutch too have no immunity.

Even many Dutch are becoming more aware of the widespread Germanophobia. In 1993, a study of the Nederlands instituut voor internationale betrekkingen Clingendael found that many Dutch, and especially the young, have a very negative picture of Germany based on clichés such as that Germans are fat, drink great amounts of beer, drive big Mercedes', and dig fortress-like pits with high walls into the sand of Dutch beaches which they possessively try to occupy for the duration of their vacation<sup>10</sup>. This summer, a segment of the television talk show *De tijd staat even stil* (NCRV) was dedicated to this theme. Among the voices of reason was soccer star Jan Wouters who had just returned from playing two seasons with Bayern München. Wouters stressed his own good experiences with Germans but expressed the fear that despite his preventative efforts his children will learn anti-German sentiments in school. The show was designed to show the irrationality of German-bashing<sup>11</sup> but it is doubtful that Dutch attitudes will change in the foreseeable future.

## 5. Dutch Tolerance and Germanophobia

Germanophobia will continue as long as it remains a central ingredient of Dutch core identity. Internationalism in business and politics made the Netherlands one of the most progressive and modern countries in Europe. Yet the price they paid was a considerable loss of cultural identity. The magnificent flat landscape with its endless skies, the old city centers, and a few lonely windmills are still Dutch -- but around the windmills urban sprawl continues to gobble up more and more of the polders while a gray haze frequently obscures the sky. People extol American management practices, drive foreign cars, down international fast food and listen to English-language tunes. The above mentioned harsh self-criticism has helped to further deteriorate cultural confidence. Aside from some not so obvious idiosyncracies, what is still really Dutch?

Language is one important identity marker. Consistent with their internationalism, the Dutch have allowed foreign words (mostly English but even some German) to creep into their language. Yet they also have an obsession with what is proper Dutch. Flemish, the Belgian variety of Dutch, is belittled. At home, the inability to speak

9 An associate of mine spoke recently with a staff member of Radio 3 about the campaign. On the defensive, he claimed that the action had nothing to do with Germany. They would have done the same if the incident had occurred elsewhere. They exclusively crusaded against Germany despite the fact that there were plenty of opportunities to assail racist attacks at home.

10 This research led to the publication of a gratis booklet sponsored by the German embassy, *Duitsland... een Europese democratie* (1994) designed to polish the German image by attempting to demonstrate that the Netherlands and Germany have much in common and differ little from each other. As we will see below (p. 6), this commonality is precisely what the Dutch try to deny. A review of it in *De Volkskrant* (September 7, 1994), titled "Positief boek over Duitser"(!), immediately criticizes that "Van enigzins objectieve geschiedschrijving is daarbij geen sprake. De naam Hitler wordt vermeden, en de invloed van het nazi-verleden is in een paar regels afgedaan". In other words, Germans must constantly dredge up their past in a proper *mea culpa* attitude in order to be accepted.

11 This irrationality is underlined by the fact that the Dutch royal house has for generations intermarried with German nobility and the husbands of the last three Dutch queens were all Germans. The Dutch national anthem still begins with "Wilhelmus van Nassaue, ben ik van Duitschen bloed...".

proper Dutch is a barrier for the upward social mobility of minorities who often talk with an accent and use faulty grammar. The Dutch normally assume that members of ethnic minorities use substandard Dutch and are often surprised when the person who talks to them in flawless Dutch on the telephone turns out to be of different ethnic background. The Dutch are very proud of their language and very sensitive about any reminders (and überhaupt not by Germans) that Dutch is the outgrowth of a German "dialect".

It is the fear of being like, and mistaken for, Germans which looms large in Germanophobia. It almost seems as if the Dutch have taken all their own negative characteristics and created out of them a composite stereotype they call "German" and contrast it with a stereotype of their positive traits which is "Dutch"<sup>12</sup>. Thus the loss of traditional cultural identity, and a corresponding decline in cultural confidence, is compensated for by an identity largely based on a "Feindbild"<sup>13</sup> (if I am allowed to use a powerful German image) of the big brother in the East with whom they share a great deal of heritage and interests<sup>14</sup>. It appears that until World War II, the Netherlands were largely German-oriented. Perhaps it can be argued that after World War II there developed an inverse relationship between the loss of Dutch cultural identity and the need for greater schismogenesis to the point of Germanophobia. In this framework, the trauma for the German invasion of the older generations has become the justification of continuous anti-Germanism for the younger generations.

In this context of national self-definition at the expense of the related neighbor, "German racism" is contrasted with "Dutch tolerance". The latter, regardless of whether it was once a self-invented fiction or actually did in fact exist, is now seen as a national virtue towards which many people have been striving. Paradoxically, it may have been their anti-Germanism, and especially their perception of German racism, which made the Dutch, at least until recently, more tolerant against racial and ethnic minorities in their own country. Even now, when faced with rising racism in their society, they can ease their consciences and salvage their national self-image by perpetuating this myth about the superiority of "Dutch tolerance" compared with the

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12 For example, quite a few Dutch resent the annual "invasion" of Netherlands' beaches by German tourists who are considered pushy, boisterous, and arrogant. This behavior of (some) Germans is precisely that of (some) Dutch tourists elsewhere in Europe wherever they are found in large groups. Yet the above traits are deplored as "typically German". People living in the border town Venlo are understandably vexed that many Dutch merchants accept only German Marks and not Dutch guilders. However, they blame the Germans, merely for shopping in Venlo, for this outrage created by their own shopkeepers. Mental and physical endurance are "German traits" which even otherwise anti-German Dutch persons grudgingly admire. Particularly in sports the ability of German teams to achieve come-from-behind victories has become legendary and is feared whenever Dutch and Germans meet on the playing field.

13 There is no corresponding "Feindbild" for the Dutch in Germany despite recent findings that young Germans have just as many prejudices about the Dutch. The Netherlands are, in the German view, just too insignificant to focus on one way or the other. True, over the years a genuine rivalry in soccer has emerged but it is restricted to that sport and based on high respect and admiration for Dutch soccer. There were many Germans (including the author) who were pleased that the 1988 Dutch team captured the European title, not only because they were the best but also the most elegant and eye-pleasing team. Even the spitting-incident two years later did not have much effect on the German image of Dutch soccer. Germans residing in states adjacent to the Dutch border are quite aware of the Dutch dislike of them but usually don't reciprocate with the same intensity. Further south, the image of the Dutch becomes vague and often restricted to such odd complaints as "the Dutch use German freeways to avoid tolls in France but spend no money, eating and drinking in their campers" and "Dutch cucumbers taste horrible because they fertilize with fish meal" (this was done decades ago and has long been stopped but has never been forgotten by German consumers). The opposition of then prime minister Ruud Lubbers to German reunification in 1989 has seemingly done little to affect the German image of the Netherlands. But it probably cost him the job as European commissioner in 1994 as German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who considers himself the father of German unity, did not forget.

14 The Germans are not the only ones against whom the Dutch differentiate themselves. The easy-going Belgians (Flemings) are considered "stupid" and the butt of endless jokes. While increasingly succumbing to American culture, the cultural imperialism and political bullying of the U.S. has given rise to growing anti-Americanism.

evils of "German racism". This may lead to a justification like: "We Dutch may have prejudices but in Germany they are real racists and the situation is much worse".

Of course, by continuing to label the Germans as racist (as in the "Ik ben woedend" campaign), the Dutch can also conveniently postpone to face up to their own racist past, both during World War II and as colonial power in the Netherlands-Indies<sup>15</sup>.

## 6. Personal Postscript

In the past decade, I have been spending at least three months per year in the Netherlands. In all that time, I have never been grossly offended on account of my German nationality but frequently when I met new people I felt as if I were being scrutinized and had to prove that I was an "okay" German. Some feel more comfortable by classifying me as a "Duits-Amerikaan". Often new acquaintances searched for positive signs such as in my last name, saying: "Oh, Bartels is a Dutch name, isn't it?" I'm not aware of any Dutch ancestry but it's possible and it certainly puts people at ease.

Dutch nationals also appreciate that I have bothered to learn Dutch, a skill which very few Germans who don't permanently reside in the Netherlands possess. Germans who come for business or as tourists automatically expect the Dutch to speak the more widespread German and their chauvinism irks some Dutch. I realize that a remark like: "You have such a soft accent, you don't speak Dutch like a German!" is meant as the ultimate compliment but it only thinly veils anti-German prejudices<sup>16</sup>. Of course such sentiments are often suspended once I have become accepted. Good-natured bantering about ethnic differences usually becomes the norm, keeping me always self-conscious of my national origin, a feeling which I rarely have in the United States.

I'm not sure whether I'm a hedonist or masochist but I must admit I do savor the attention I get for being a German in the Netherlands and I do enjoy this country which may not be as tolerant as its inhabitants like to believe but where I feel intellectually and socially less constrained than anywhere else.

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15 During World War II, the Dutch furnished the largest contingent of foreign volunteers in Hitler's army and Jews (including Anne Frank) were regularly denounced by Dutch people. As far as the Netherlands-Indies are concerned, the Dutch struggle here with their own "unbewältigte Vergangenheit", as the present flood of books about the colonial era demonstrates. Shocking revelations about Dutch brutality are slowly forthcoming and, just as in Germany, involve some people who achieved high government positions in post-colonial years. Incidentally, Moluccans, who in the long years of exile often unconsciously have taken on the Dutch prejudices against Germans, frequently point out the hypocrisy of Dutch attacks on Germany's past, pointing to their own colonial experiences with the Dutch.

16 I'm not quite sure how to take the remark: "You speak like Prince Bernhard". I believe that it is usually only a statement of fact. However, some Dutch friends assure me that his Dutch is rather atrocious and mine is certainly far worse... At least, they don't compare me with Arnold Schwarzenegger like those Americans who say my English accent is like his (actually, it's the other way around)

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