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Berkeley Undergraduate Journal

Title

Multiculturalism: The Dutch Influence in America's Beginnings

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0624j69x>

Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 25(3)

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Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/B3253015879

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

DUTCH NEW YORK

Multiculturalism in New Amsterdam

By Marissa Teitalman

“Because of its geography, its population, and the fact that it was under the control of the Dutch (even then its parent city Amsterdam was the most liberal in Europe) this Island would become the first multiethnic, upwardly mobile society on America’s shores, a prototype of the kind of society that would be duplicated throughout the country, and around the world.”¹ This bold statement by Russell Shorto about Manhattan as it existed under the Dutch paints a picture of a pre-American colony that became the foundation of the American tradition of multiculturalism. But what made Shorto believe that New Amsterdam was the precursor to American pluralism?

In this project, I seek to produce an analysis of seventeenth-century New Amsterdam and how it set a precedent for the way in which multiculturalism developed in America. Here, I will analyze how New Amsterdam came to be an American prototype, exemplifying the multiculturalism infused within the Dutch colony. Not only will my findings demonstrate how America developed its still-pervasive cosmopolitan atmosphere, but they will also shed light on the underrepresented role of the Dutch in American history. Lastly, a discussion of the implications of the creative component of my thesis will illuminate the importance of narrative and storytelling.

I will primarily analyze aspects of Dutch culture that paved the way for New Amsterdam to become pluralistic. Next, I will examine the Dutch West India Company to demonstrate how and why New

1 Russell Shorto, *The island at the center of the world: the epic story of Dutch Manhattan and the forgotten colony that shaped America*, (New York: Doubleday, 2004), IV.

Amsterdam became the birthplace of American diversity. Finally, I will discuss two cultural examples that illustrate New Amsterdam's unique place in American history.

My methodology included travels to New York, where I followed the New Amsterdam trail to discover the former colony's multicultural aspects. In addition, I conducted archival work at the Holland Society library in which I examined original and translated documents from New Amsterdam, as well as papers that were sent to the city's mother country, Holland. From there, I traveled to Amsterdam to further examine records and letters about New Amsterdam and to experience first hand the cultural aspects that became precursors to America's multiethnic culture. Finally, I spent time at the Berkeley Folklore Archive examining America's multicultural folklore that pervaded under Dutch influence and researched slave narratives in order to capture the truth of the slave experience.

For a conceptual framework, I draw on aspects of Dutch culture; in particular, the idea of *Gedogen*, which focuses on the concept of a pragmatic tolerance. This concept led to the creation of an atmosphere in which multiculturalism was able to flourish. Pragmatism, as it applies to tolerance in this case, deals with how tolerance was used as a tool that helped Dutch society to function. The Dutch used tolerance only as it was useful to them, meaning that it consisted more of allowance than acceptance for practical reasons. In my discussion, toleration refers to allowing others to maintain their beliefs and behaviors even if others don't accept or agree with them while simultaneously retaining their inherent rights and freedoms. I also draw on Wibren Van Der Burg's discussion of equal recognition and tolerance as prescribed in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, in which he discusses tolerance as an "attitude or practice" that was ingrained in the Dutch political and social structure.²

Russell Shorto states that, "If what made America great was its ingenious openness to different cultures, then the small triangle of land at the southern tip of Manhattan Island is the New World birthplace of that idea, the spot where it first took shape."³ Although New Amsterdam was at the forefront of new traditions and ideologies, these 'ingenious ideas' were first found in the Netherlands, and were imported to New

2 Wibren Van Den Berg, "Beliefs, Persons and Practices: Beyond Tolerance," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 1.2 (1998): 228, JSTOR, accessed December 1, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27504029>.

3 Russell Shorto, *The island at the center of the world: the epic story of Dutch Manhattan and the forgotten colony that shaped America*, (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 125.

Amsterdam. Certain aspects of Dutch culture were imperative to the formation of New Amsterdam's culture and development. One of the most important aspects of Dutch culture that led to pluralism within New Amsterdam was the Dutch tradition of tolerance (*Gedogen*). It is not tolerance as defined today, but more a pragmatic tolerance where a consensual society exists as a means of social control. By the seventeenth century this practice was already in use in Amsterdam, as flourishing trade and a small population necessitated imported labor. Amsterdam was also the central hub for political, religious, and intellectual refugees such as Rene Descartes and Baruch Spinoza, making pragmatic tolerance desired and necessary.⁴ To further understand *Gedogen* as it applied to seventeenth-century life, Wijnand Mijnhardt explains, "The key to successful social interaction and religious cohabitation was relative tolerance, or rather a general culture of lenient permissiveness that aimed at the preservation of mutually good relations."⁵

Gedogen is tied to another institution of Dutch culture that allowed for multiculturalism within New Amsterdam: religious diversity. After the horrible mistreatment of the Netherlands by the King of Spain under the Inquisition, the Netherlands famously granted its citizens freedom of conscience. Article 13 of the Union of Utrecht in 1579 states, "Each person shall remain free in his religion and that no one shall be investigated or persecuted because of his religion." This institution of Dutch culture increased the tradition of tolerance, and allowed people of different affiliations to live together peaceably. Although imperfect in practice, the tradition was sustained due to a general wariness of a central powerful religious authority, as well as due to longstanding Dutch business traditions of not discriminating against customers.

Amsterdam's own tradition of multiculturalism and local autonomy was a model for the new Dutch city on the tip of Manhattan. Between the years 1560 and 1670, the population of the Netherlands grew by 250 percent.⁶ Much of this growth was due to extensive waves of immigrants arriving from Spanish territories, Central Europe, and Scandinavia. Jews

4 E.B. O'Callaghan, *History of New Netherland: Or New York under the Dutch*, (Spartanburg, SC: Scholarly Publishing Office, University of Michigan Library, 1966), 64.

5 Mijnhardt, Wijnand. "A Tradition of Tolerance." *In Discovering the Dutch: On Culture and Society of the Netherlands*, edited by Emmeline Besamusca (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University, 2010), 111.

6 M Prak, and Diane L. Webb, *The Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century: the Golden Age*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 17.

from Spain, Portugal, and Central Europe, Huguenots from France, and large numbers of Scandinavians and Germans made up the diverse immigrant population that immigrated to the Netherlands, settling largely in Amsterdam.⁷ The Dutch Revolt to the Inquisition in the sixteenth century (1568-1648) strengthened tolerance of diverse religious practices in the Netherlands, and restored local autonomy. This came about as a rejection of the Inquisitorial approach in the treatment of citizens. The restoration of local autonomy at the time New Amsterdam was founded allowed it to differ from non-Dutch colonies in that it was seen as equal to a domestic city in status, able to maintain and generate its own laws and local customs.⁸ In this way, New Amsterdam was able to implement traditions of tolerance, religious diversity, and multiculturalism, and was able to maintain these customs through its local autonomous state, largely preserved even after the British invasion.

So how did all of these customs and people come together to make up a multicultural New Amsterdam? The Dutch West India Company played a large role in the transference of culture from Amsterdam to the New World and was a main mode of transportation for the diverse group of people who ended up in Manhattan. In 1625 the Dutch West India Company (or WIC) had a lucrative trade with the Native Americans in furs, particularly beaver skins.⁹ This, coupled with peaceful trading encounters with the natives, led the WIC to invest in a settlement in Manhattan along the Hudson River. Because Holland's citizens were very content in the flourishing Dutch economy, no citizens volunteered to uproot from a profitable society to start anew in a foreign land. Therefore the majority of the inhabitants who came to the New World were immigrants to Holland, as well as low status citizens looking for a fresh start. Between 1627 and 1663 Jews, Germans, Scandinavians, Huguenots, and many other immigrants to Holland decided to once again immigrate to the New World in search of their own economic prosperity. 20 percent of the population in New Amsterdam was German, and 15 percent consisted of other Europeans, including Scandinavians, Spanish, French, and even New Englanders who preferred the laxer attitude of New

7 Franklin J. Jameson, *Narratives of New Netherland 1609-1664*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1909), 35.

8 Jaap Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland: A Dutch Settlement in Seventeenth-century America.*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell : UP, 2009).

9 *Ibid.*

Amsterdam.¹⁰ This means that 35 percent of the immigrant population consisted of other European cultures. In addition, a plethora of other cultures were represented in New Amsterdam, including Jews, Native Americans, and Africans. In 1643, a Jesuit Missionary named Isaac Jogues wrote about New Amsterdam, “On the island of Manhate, and in its environs, there may well be four or five hundred men of different sects and nations: the Director General told me that there were men of eighteen different languages.”¹¹ This illustrates how from its founding days, New Amsterdam was a city made up of a multicultural group with different social statuses.

Since its inception, the Dutch WIC’s crew was made up of a diverse group of people. Holland was an economic powerhouse that had plenty of jobs for its citizens, who therefore did not have to brave the harsh conditions of the sea. The majority of the workers employed by the WIC were made up of immigrants, pirates, mercenaries, and scallywags of all kinds. These sailors would often make the journey across the sea and, realizing the new start that New Netherland offered, would decide to stay in the New World. As a flourishing port city, New Amsterdam had a constant stream of ships coming in and out, each with its own diverse crew.

Moreover, the main focus of the WIC was the Atlantic Slave Trade. The WIC was the main supplier of Africans to New Amsterdam. The WIC brought over not only slaves from Africa, but also creoles from the Caribbean and South America. This meant that New Amsterdam became a melting pot not only of European culture, but African, Caribbean and South American culture as well. The pervasive Dutch culture led New Amsterdammers to treat their African slaves more as indentured servants who could buy or earn their freedom, and which ultimately led to the first free African American society. In 1654, Dutch Jews who had previously settled in Brazil also came to New Amsterdam through the WIC after the failure of the Dutch South American colony.¹² This meant that New Amsterdam, in terms of permanent inhabitants, was one of the most multicultural cities in the world.

In order to illustrate the pluralism of New Amsterdam and its consequences for American society, I will discuss a diverse couple that lived in Dutch Manhattan. Greit Reyniers was born in Amsterdam, and

10 E.B. O’Callaghan, *History of New Netherland: Or New York under the Dutch*, (Spartanburg, SC: Scholarly Publishing Office, University of Michigan Library, 1966), 89.

11 Franklin J. Jameson, *Narratives of New Netherland 1609-1664*, (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1909), 37.

12 *Journal of New Netherland. 1647.*, (Albany: N.P., 1849).

came to the New World as the WIC Director's mistress. She was New York's first high class hooker. In the Register of the Provincial Secretary of 1638-1642, two witnesses testified and "attest[ed], that some time ago Grietje Reyniers came into Fort Amsterdam and spoke these following words: 'I have long enough been the whore of the nobility; from now on I shall be the whore of the rabble.'¹³ This quote exemplifies New Amsterdam tavern culture, which was bawdy, coarse and not found anywhere else on the American continent. Her tavern invited a congregation of multiethnic groups who interacted in a single space. In New Amsterdam's culture, Greit's tavern was not only tolerated, but also flourished. The American continent was fast becoming dominated by prudish British colonialists and strict Puritans, which left New Amsterdam an isolated cultural island, resembling modern America much more closely than the British colonies of the day.

Greit later met her husband in New Amsterdam, a man named Anthony Van Salee, or "Anthony the Turk." Anthony's life exemplifies the various ways in which New Amsterdam's multiculturalism flourished. Anthony came from Salee, a port town in Morocco and plied his trade as a pirate of the seas. He came to New Amsterdam as a practicing Muslim and although deemed, "a Turk, a rascal and horned beast,"¹⁴ by his neighbors, he was allowed to practice Islam, marry Greit, and open a tavern with her. Furthermore, in a court document dating back to 1638, Anthony's dog attacked a free African townsman's hog. Anthony was required to pay restitution for his dog's actions. Not only is this case important in that it discusses the first free African American society on the American continent, but it also illustrates New Amsterdam's policies towards its multicultural population. New Amsterdam culture went beyond merely being a tolerant society to having, as Van Der Burg calls it, equal recognition towards multiple cultures that lived within the society.¹⁵ This equal recognition of legal rights was far ahead of its time, and was not seen in other parts of the Western world. This recognition can also be seen in regards to Anthony's ability to continue practicing his Muslim faith.

Although Anthony and Greit were considered a problematic and low status couple, government marriage documents reveal that their children were able to marry into high status families. The mobility of

13 "Online Publications of the New Netherland Research Center." New Netherland Institute, accessed October 9, 2012, http://www.nnp.org/nnrc/document_index.html.

14 Ibid.

15 Van Den Berg, "Beliefs, Persons and Practices: Beyond Tolerance," 228.

multicultural children, the tolerance shown towards a chaotic couple, and the equity shown to its free African inhabitants all paint a picture of New Amsterdam that sounds too good to be true to come from a seventeenth-century city.

The Dutch cultural tradition of *Gedogen* paved the way for the existence of New Amsterdam's mixed society, and the beginning of America's great multiethnic culture. The circumstances in which New Amsterdam arose also led to its pluralism, not only as a Dutch satellite, but also as a fresh start for immigrants, a central port and trading hub at the base of the Hudson river, and as part of the business ventures of the WIC. Indeed, Shorto was spot-on in his statement that the idea of America's multicultural identity began in New Amsterdam. Multiculturalism and the idea of tolerance first came into America through this Dutch city of New Amsterdam, a small microcosm containing many of the unique aspects of the Netherlands. Not only did New Amsterdam contain the most multicultural society in America, possibly even the world, but it also possessed truly exceptional cultural traditions in the context of the time-period of its existence.

Seventeenth century and modern day America are both far from utopian societies in which multiple cultures are able to interact perfectly. Although today we have a relatively multicultural society, we still have a long way to go to achieve full racial sensitivity and equality. I hope that a thorough understanding of the origins and beginnings of America's multiculturalism will provide a vital insight to Americans, and aid us in our progress to form the ideal America.

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