Gemengde huwelijken, gemengde gevoelens: Aanvaarding en ontwikkeling van etnisch en religieus verschil sinds 1945
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Summary

Mixed marriages, mixed feelings
Acceptance and avoidance of religious and ethnic difference in the Netherlands since 1945

Two persons meet and fall in love. While primarily focusing all their attention and energy on each other, they soon find themselves surrounded by others, onlookers, observers, commentators. When there is a difference in denomination, religion, nationality or skin colour between them, they receive more intense reactions and comments than a couple which at first sight exhibits no such differences. Parents, brothers, sisters, friends and acquaintances react to their meeting, their plans to live together or to marry. The process of these reactions over time, the acceptance process, is the subject of this book. The starting point is the idea that a mixed marriage forms a testcase for tolerance, in the private circles of families and friends, as well as in wider public social circles. The study of practical and everyday forms of religious and ethnic interaction, as experienced by mixed couples, can also produce insight into the following more general questions. How did Dutch society deal with religious and ethnic difference in the post-war period? Did Dutch society become more tolerant, and are these differences more easily accepted in the 1990s than they were in the 1950s or 1960s?

The main research questions were: first, the – historical – question whether and how this acceptance process changed over time; second, the – comparative – question whether and how the acceptance of religious intermarriage and the acceptance of ethnic intermarriage are related, similar or different, and what phases and stages can be distinguished in both forms of acceptance since 1945. Third, was the – more general – question how Dutch society, public and private, has dealt with mixed couples, with religious and ethnic difference, and with the phenomenon of mixing. The goal is to gain insight in the ways in which mixed couples who have been together for at least several years keep their ground in an environment that watches them carefully; in how they handle possible rejection or limited acceptance. This focus implies that the research is restricted to existing mixed couples. This restriction implies also that mixed couples who have divorced, as well as shortterm mixed liaisons and infatuations, did not form part of the researched group of couples. The resulting research group can be characterized as a whole as having experienced more or less ‘maximum acceptance’: the
implication is that the total acceptance of intermarriage and of mixed couples in the postwar Netherlands is probably less positive, at least not more positive than the group researched in this book. New figures for interethnic and interreligious divorce are presented in chapter 4.

Among the sources and data gathered to answer these questions were archives (of the Dutch Ministry of Culture and Social Work 1955-1980, of the Peregrinus Foundation, the first organisation involved in social work among Italian and Spanish migrant workers in the Dutch steel industries, and of a special national state commission ‘Huwelijk en Gezin’ – Marriage and Family – devoted to advising Dutch girls and their parents on questions regarding intermarriage with non-Dutch nationals such as Italian, Spanish or Turkish men); magazines, in particular Protestant and Roman Catholic youth and women’s magazines from the 1950s and 1960s, and more general family and women’s magazines from the 1970s to the 1990s; population statistics on religious affiliation, nationality and ethnicity; surveys and opinion polls on religious and ethnic tolerance and acceptance from the 1950s until 1990s; and interviews with mixed couples. The parts and chapters of the book are sorted by source, in a historical context. Part one is an introduction to the field and to relevant research; part two gives the historical and statistical context and describes the developments based on all sources except interviews; part three is the analysis and presentation of interviews with mixed couples; and part four contains conclusions.

The first part of the book introduces the acceptance process and the developments in relevant research in the Netherlands and in some other European countries (Great Britain, France) and the United States. The acceptance process has many forms and stages. I distinguish first of all active versus passive forms of acceptance and (in)tolerance. Both tolerance and intolerance, or acceptance and rejection, can be shown in passive or active attitudes. As active forms of acceptance I regard the enthusiastic embrace of difference, but also acceptance after persuasion. Active forms of rejection are confrontation and attempts to end the relationship. Passive forms of acceptance are indifference and toleration by overlooking. Passive forms of rejection are ignoring, avoiding, evading, distancing and spontaneous segregation. Interestingly, passive tolerance and passive intolerance are hard to distinguish. These subtle variations in acceptance or the lack thereof were also found in the interviews conducted with 88 mixed couples. In analyzing these interviews, I used a more simple classification, distinguishing three levels or types of acceptance: ‘complete or flawless acceptance’, ‘acceptance with difficulty’ or ‘hard acceptance’, and ‘no acceptance’ or ‘break-up, rift or split’ (between a mixed couple with an important part of their mutual families or friends).
The subtle variations in avoidance form a typical and important part of the experiences of mixed couples and therefore deserve more attention. By comparison, the more extreme and active forms of acceptance or rejection, such as both enthusiastic welcoming of the ‘other’ partner, as well as the outright and violent rejection of such a partner, were much more rare. The wish to avoid confrontations with parents or children dominates the interaction of direct family members and close friends around mixed couples. Avoidance has important functions such as conflict management, self-protection and self-defence. There may be healthy and unhealthy forms of avoidance; in other words, mixed couples and the circles around them actively try to find a balance between avoidance and acceptance of difference.

The developments in demography and population statistics concerning religious affiliation, nationality and ethnicity, are presented in chapter 4. The Netherlands have not had a national census since 1971. Consequently, national forms of self-identification relating to religion and ethnicity are absent. The national statistics bureaus considered large scale surveys and general estimates based on nationality and country of birth to be reliable enough, but recently researchers have begun to call for self-identification as additional and corrective data to be combined with other population statistics. A major change in acceptance took place between 1955 and 1970. Detailed analysis of the yearly numbers of mixed marrying couples who managed to celebrate their marriage in church show that this change was quite prominent already in the early 1960s. This is an indication that religious authorities became more lenient and cooperative toward Christian intermarriage.

With regard to interethnic and binational marriage, in the whole postwar period a slight overall increase was found. The diversity of nationalities involved increased considerably, starting at the end of the 1950s, with a much stronger development in the late 1970s and afterwards. Non-European partners formed the majority in binational marriages with the Dutch from then on. Of the Surinamese- and Antillian-Dutch marriages, the early equal sex-ratio is a feature which is different from research in the United States, where the vast majority of black-white couples consist of black men with white women. In the Netherlands today, in contrast to this, many more Surinamese women have married Dutch men than Surinamese men marry Dutch women. Of the Turkish- and Moroccan-Dutch marriages, the vast majority of Dutch partners are Dutch women, although Dutch men and non-Dutch women have started to marry more and more in the 1990s. Anti-immigration measures have also affected intermarriage rates in the Netherlands. Laws to regulate or restrict family reunification, as well as a special law against so-called marriages of convenience, conducted mainly to legalize the position of the non-Dutch national partner, were enforced in 1994, causing intermarriage figures to drop.
Divorce of mixed couples is a dominant public expectation, and a severe private fear of those engaged in mixed marriages or those considering marriage. I conducted two case studies on the durability of mixed couples. The first study concerns workers at the main Dutch steel industries Hoogovens, not far from Amsterdam. I checked how many of a group of approx. 170 mixed and non-mixed couples who had married on the same days during 1957-1972 were still married in 1996. The mixed couples, mostly Italian-Dutch marriages, turned out to have lasted longer than the Dutch-Dutch couples. The second study were calculations for the city of Amsterdam between 1975-1996 on interethnic and interreligious divorce. Findings correspond with recent national research on interreligious divorce by Janssen et al. The common conclusion is that religious difference has a small and diminishing effect on the chances to get a divorce. With regard to interethnic divorce, figures are even more limited, but new data for Amsterdam show that ethnic differences between marriage partners still have a large effect on the chances to get a divorce, but also that this chance is smaller now than it was in 1975 or 1980. Therefore, interreligious and interethnic couples face a higher risk of divorce than do non-mixed couples, but the figures show a trend towards more balance, and towards a lower risk. The impact of difference is still there, but it is losing weight.

In chapter 5, the postwar developments in religious intermarriage are reconstructed. The focus is on what can be considered ‘the’ mixed marriage in the Netherlands: Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians. A second part describes the acceptance process of interreligious marriages between Christians and Muslims, and Christians and Jews. The title ‘When there are two beliefs on one pillow, there is always the devil sleeping in between’ refers to the most popular traditional Dutch proverb on intermarriage. Most churches forbade intermarriage until 1971. There was a pluralist practice however from the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s onward, when couples depended upon the cooperation of individual priests or ministers.

During the first decade after 1945 intense changes in mobility took place, as well as the decolonization wars. The reigning attitude, however, was one of pretending that very little was changing. Here a paradox can be observed. It appears that the Dutch are inclined to continue life as usual, pretending that little is happening around them, during times when intense changes are taking place. Whether this silence and seclusion during periods of change is typical for the Netherlands could be a subject of further research. The increased mobility and intenser interaction in the labour market, in housing and in education, increased the chances of potential marriage partners from different denominations to meet and to get to know each other. In the 1950s several studies on religious intermarriage were conducted, all driven by certain worries about the vanishing or diminishing size of the religious groups involved.
An example of a both religious and binational marriage which provoked serious tensions took place in 1964, when Her Royal Highness Princess Irene, daughter of Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhard, secretly converted to Catholicism (the Dutch royal family of the House of Orange is Protestant), and announced her engagement to a Roman Catholic Spanish/French Prince Hugo Carlos. The reactions were negative, and Irene received serious warnings from all sides. When the marriage was finalized, she lost her right to the Dutch crown, her position as a member of the royal family, and most of her assets, as is described in chapter 5 and 6. However, this controversial marriage, which was regarded by many as a national disappointment, stimulated consultation between Protestant and Catholic authorities. Full recognition of mutual christening (baptism) and marriage rituals was reached between the main Dutch Protestant and Catholic churches in 1970 and 1971.

This agreement created an atmosphere of optimism in ecumenical and interreligious circles, but that turned into disappointment in the 1970s and afterwards, when only a handful of the many mixed couples remained active in their churches. Massive secularization turned the non-religious affiliated into the majority in Dutch society from the 1970s onward. The movement away from the churches can be regarded as a form of avoidance, and the same applies to the increase in cohabitation without marriage, which soon became common practice in the Netherlands. By living together rather than marrying, and by choosing a secular rather than a religious lifestyle, most couples silently avoided confrontations with families, churches and the authorities.

The developments around the more recent interreligious marriages between Christians and Muslims, or Christians and Jews, follow a similar pattern. The vast majority chooses a secular lifestyle, and only a handful of couples actively confront their religious differences. At the same time, a pluralist practice is currently being tried out by this small but active group – quite similar to Christian youth groups who sought to bridge and to discuss the gap between Catholics and Protestants in the 1950s and 1960s. This indicates that religious difference is still somewhat of an issue in the Netherlands.

Chapter 6, ‘Dutch ambivalence’, describes the changing reactions both in the colonial and decolonizing Dutch societies towards ethnic intermarriage and ‘mixing’. Although the Dutch had a large colonial empire, and a long history of migrant settlers, in 1947 the country’s population was homogeneous and virtually all-white. Only 1.1% of the inhabitants did not have Dutch nationality, and virtually everyone was born in the Netherlands. Decolonization and labour migration changed this demographic picture. Within every newly arriving and settling group, some found Dutch marriage partners. International and global developments in the labour and tourism markets further increased the chances of international marriage. Early Dutch colonial attitudes toward
mixing, in the 17th Century, were surprisingly positive and encouraging. By marrying, for example, Indonesian or (South)African women, the colonial settlements would gain more stability, so it was expected. Intermarriage was legally possible in these Dutch colonies from the early 17th century onward, on condition that the non-Dutch wives became Christians, and that the couples promised to stay in the colony. Moving to Holland was forbidden. A certain pluralist marriage practice developed, and a mixed population grew. However, in the 19th century nationalism and racism intensified, and intermarriage became much less acceptable. In the Caribbean colonies of Suriname and the Antillean Islands ruling whites were much more segregationist from the beginning of their domination. There, after centuries of slave trade and slavery, the gap between white and black was left intact and segregation legitimized for much longer. Intermarriage and conversion to Christianity were discouraged and forbidden. A small mixed population grew in spite of these rules. Upon arrival in the Netherlands, the black and Asian Dutch were regarded as very different.

In the Dutch reactions to interethnic couples an ambivalence between curiosity and fascination, on the one hand, and fear and concern, on the other hand, can be found at all times. A remarkable example of these mixed feelings about mixed couples was found in the history of the Dutch state commission for Marriage and Family (Commissie voor Huwelijk en Gezin) in the 1960s that advised and informed about marriage with non-Dutch nationals. The commission’s policy was officially open, but in practice it generally discouraged mixed marriage. One reason for the concerns voiced at that time was the general and self-evident expectation that a woman entering marriage will follow her husband, and therefore mixed couples with Dutch women would inevitably settle in the husband’s country of origin. In the 1970s, consciousness-raising women’s groups of Dutch women married to non-Dutch men debated their positions, based on the idea that a cultural difference was a problem. In the 1980s and 1990s, Dutch society became more multicultural, but not without controversy and continuous ambivalence.

An example of this ambivalence was found in the attitudes toward difference in skin colour. In the interviews I held with Surinamese-Dutch couples I noted that visible difference between partners and the reactions to this difference were difficult topics to discuss. The dominant norm prescribes that skin colour is ‘unimportant’, and that ‘it does not matter’ what skin colour one has. At the same time, skin tone stratification is still a fact, and colour is one of the most persistent, unchanging and obvious differences. In a situation where the privileges of white skin are never mentioned, and darker skin tones only mentioned as not relevant, tensions around visibility, a crucial factor, are inevitable. In the interviews with mixed couples, both Indonesian, Moluccan, Italian, Spanish, Moroccan, Turkish and Surinamese partners explained that white Dutch
people often mistake them for someone from another group. On the other hand this apparent Dutch inability to distinguish more than two groups increases the possibilities to switch and ‘play’ with difference. What has been called ‘passing’ is also a phenomenon in present-day Dutch society. First and second names can be changed, languages learnt, accents and dialects adapted; some differences can be hidden, others not. Mixed couples actively try to enlarge their choices in this respect.

The third part of the book is the presentation and analysis of open, partly-structured interviews with partners (men and women separately) in 88 interethnic couples. Four groups of couples are distinguished, following important groups in Dutch post-Second World War migration history: Dutch partners with Dutch East Indian, Eurasian or Moluccan partners (chapter 7); with Italian or Spanish partners (chapter 8); with Surinamese or Antillian (Caribbean) partners (chapter 9); and finally with Moroccan or Turkish partners (chapter 10), including some from other Muslim countries (such as Egypt, Tunisia, Pakistan, Iran). Among the topics presented are, first, the first reactions the couples encountered, and the changes in those reactions over time. Second, the strategies mixed couples use and those which they would advise others to use in handling rejection and promoting and stimulating acceptance from parents, family members and friends. Third, the changes they described in their orientation toward, and identification with their own as well as their partner’s group of origin. For all four groups, specific questions and issues are presented. The first concluding chapter is devoted to the conclusions from these interviews. Here the comparisons are made between the four different groups of couples, between older and younger couples, the impact of gender, religion, location and visible difference upon acceptance of mixed couples is discussed.

Eight strategies mixed couples use and sometimes also advise to stimulate acceptance were found: avoidance of difference; a conscious careful attitude and patience when getting to know mutual families and friends; confronting prejudice, lack of knowledge and rejection with information, facts, including visits and complete holidays of hesitant family members to the Netherlands or to the country of birth of the non-Dutch partner; firmness in defining own borders when it comes to adapting to family members or friends; practical attempts to neutralize, reduce or compensate differences, for example by choosing one or avoiding both religions, by attempting to reach the same level of education, by learning each others languages; practical and pragmatic adaptation to the situation, the surroundings and the company of the moment, in particular during meetings with mutual families or friends; extra helpfulness, helping out in crisis situations in families such as sudden disease or death, do-it-yourself activities or cooking copious meals for everyone, giving gifts and general hospitality;
and lastly, the strategy of determination in not accepting a breakup with family members or friends, in other words not accepting hindrance, apparent borders and restrictions too easily.

I conclude that in most cases, passive strategies to create more acceptance were sufficient for the couples I interviewed. I was surprised to find that the extent to which partners in mixed couples acknowledged a personal change in identification with or orientation toward the ethnic group of their partners, differed significantly according to gender. Many more women claimed that they had not changed, whereas many more men had no problem admitting that they had changed in the direction of their wives. I regard this as an indication that in the Netherlands, in particular Dutch women in mixed couples are more under pressure than are Dutch men. Mixed couples can be regarded as experts on at least two ethnic or religious groups. However, the various kinds of pressure they endure usually makes them silent experts.

The book ends with general conclusions, focusing on more general developments in how Dutch society deals with difference. Mixed couples in the Netherlands do not receive much direct rejection from friends and family members, but they do receive serious warnings. These warnings are typical, and they need to be taken seriously; as it turns out, warnings announce the distancing of close family members and friends from persons entering a mixed marriage. Toleration and distancing go together. As a general conclusion, it is suggested that acceptance of religious as well as of ethnic, racial or national differences toward mixed couples has increased during the postwar period. Most couples reported that their marriage or relationship was accepted with some difficulty, ranging from shortterm hesitations to longterm problematic relations with parents, in-laws and friends. There was no significant difference in acceptance of couples with Dutch men or Dutch women. Not all four groups of couples reported that over time, acceptance increased. In particular the older Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch couples experienced much less acceptance in the 1990s than in the 1960s when they got married. The couples who were most enduring in their efforts to keep the relations with their parents – mostly Dutch parents – intact, in spite of the severe rejection they face, were some of the Moroccan-Dutch, Turkish-Dutch and in particular the couples with a muslim male partner from another country. The persistence these couples showed in maintaining family ties was impressive. A more general difference between older (married before 1975) and younger couples was that the younger couples, in particular those with Dutch women, expected rejection from the first moment they started a mixed relationship, which made them prepare and harden themselves for all the legal and official steps toward marriage and citizenship. They stood out in pragmatism and determination.
In dealing with the issue of difference in the Netherlands, avoidance is the dominant public as well as private attitude and behaviour. Confrontations are rare. This avoidance deserves serious attention as mixed couples declared that certain levels of avoidance of difference helped their acceptance as a couple to such an extent that they advise others in similar situations to take advantage of this as well. Avoidance appears to be a condition for acceptance of mixed couples in the Netherlands: no avoidance, no acceptance.
Most couples reported that the process of living together was difficult, ruminating over obstacles like differences in education, income, parent, in-laws and friends. These couples with Dutch man and Dutch woman/Indian woman couples experienced much less acceptance for their relationship when they got married. The couples who were from Indian background were more prone to have conflicts in their relations with their parents – mostly, Dutch parents who don’t accept their children’s rejection they face, were aware of the Bint-clamp-Dutch race gap. However, the couples with a Muslim male partner faced multiples challenges. These couples tried to maintain their families by working together, making significant improvements between older (married before 1973) and younger couples and that the pressure to make changes to particular those with Dutch women, expected rather from the Indian partners to find a mixed relationship, which enable them to prepare and burden themselves through the legal and official steps toward marriage and relationship. They were not in preparation and determination.