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Identity? All of us are combis! Do you Feel Dutch or Moroccan? Jewish or Not?

Anne-Ruth Wertheim discusses why we should refrain from posing the loyalty question.

I once belonged to a minority. Most of the people around me had dark skin and I had light skin. Without any choice on my part, I was recognizable and classified accordingly. I discovered how close group labelling is to group violence.

From the age of seven to ten, the Second World War was raging in the Pacific region. The Japanese attacked one country after the other in close collaboration with the Germans, who were overrunning Europe. Early in 1942, they invaded Indonesia, where I lived with my parents and sister and brother and put us in prison camps for years. I tell my grandchildren about it. At schools I show the slides and sound track *De gans eet het brood van de eenden op, mijn kindertijd in een Jappenkamp op Java* (The goose snatches the bread from the ducks, My childhood in a Japanese prison camp on the Isle of Java). On a screen I project the drawings we made of life in the camp. How we slept on wooden platforms and played in between the barracks, the watchtowers and the gate that kept freedom out. You also see the board game with the geese my mother made for us using cardboard from an old box. With the well, the jail and Death on it, the way they looked in the camp.

You sit and watch and listen to the music and bit by bit, you hear my story. Like recently in my ten-year-old granddaughter's class. Afterwards the children sat there staring off into space without a word. Until I said it was okay to ask me anything they wanted. I was showered with questions, why the Dutch were imprisoned and not the Indonesians, if I still had nightmares about it, whether my father came back, whether the Japanese hated the Jews like the Germans.

My experiences gave their imagination something to work with. To fill in the field of the huge not knowing. In wars soldiers do the most awful things to others, and it is easier for them if they cannot see or hear what they are doing. The pilot who dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima, the Japanese kamikaze pilots, the Germans who played a role in the Holocaust machinery, the British who bombed German cities, the Americans who carpet bombed Vietnamese villagers or Iraqi townspeople. Would they have done all that if they had been able to imagine the human figures, their faces, their voices?

In the Japanese prison camp I was with the other Dutch people who lived in the former Dutch colony now called Indonesia. We had been in control there, even though there were only a few hundred thousand of us and many millions of Indonesians. Until the Japanese did what occupying forces always do, stripped us of our power and took over themselves.

My mother, sister, brother and I were at a women's camp, in barracks teeming with far too many people, with everyone hungry and an incredible stench, not enough water and no medicine. Someone would die almost every day, often a child.

The Japanese kept us in line by violently punishing us with everyone watching. Surprisingly though, hardly any Dutch prisoners escaped. Not that it would have been easy, what with the barbed wire fence, guarded with machine guns and the head count twice a day. But what really kept us back was our white skin, which would immediately give us away.

There are a couple of children of colour in my granddaughter's class, including her, but the rest of the class is white. "Your white skin!?!?" The very idea is beyond their imagination. Outside the camp, everyone had brown skin like the Indonesians or yellow skin like the Japanese. After all, what few white people there were in Indonesia were at the prison camps, weren't they? And there was no way to be sure any of the Indonesians would help an escaped Dutch person, since we had ruled over them before the Japanese. Not as cruelly perhaps, but certainly not always very kindly.

Before the war, skin colour did not mean anything to me. I had noticed the children we went to school with were white and our servants were brown-skinned. But it was not until I was at the camp that I realized it was not only the barbed wire and machine guns that were keeping me there, it was also my white skin.

I ask whether the children know any other groups of people who are recognizable and have been a target of violence. Yes, the blacks under Apartheid. And Anne Frank of course, the Jews were marked with a yellow star, which amounts to the same thing. The nature of the conversation changes. Fewer purely informative questions, more stories from their own lives. So that is the way it is, the colour of your skin can get you in trouble, no matter what it is. A dark-skinned boy says everyone is always asking him where he comes from. "And when I say I am from Amsterdam, they go on asking me!"

I hear the children support him from all sides and see the boy smile in response.

In the Dutch climate of growing tension, people seem to be becoming increasingly impertinent in the questions they ask dark-skinned people. On the street, on the bus, in shops or waiting rooms. The white majority seems to want to go to any extreme to avoid ignoring their coloured fellow citizens. But they ought to be able to imagine what it feels like to be approached again and again about your appearance. Reciprocity, also talking about your own background, would make a difference. But now that ethnic minorities are being blamed for so many of the problems society is facing, even the most well-intentioned questions can sound like calling them to account.

My prison camp experience made me especially sensitive to the dangers of turning recognizable people into a group. Whether it entails features they are born with or religious or other characteristics they opt for themselves. Acts of violence do not simply fall from the sky like bombs on innocent citizens. They also are carried out on the ground, individually or in groups. And there is always a history of recognizable groups losing their human aspects step by step and becoming targets. We have to continue to make every effort to fill in our imagination.

A girl talks about her grandpa. He was half Moluccan, but preferred to ignore the fact. He would never sit in the sun and tried to act as Dutch as possible. If anyone noticed anything about him, he would say "I am 100% Dutch!"

Dark-skinned people are often asked where they belong. Do you feel Dutch or Moroccan? In interviews it has become a standard question. Dutch ethnic minority soccer players are asked whether they really want to play for the Dutch team in the World Cup. I have grandchildren with a father from another country. You can tell by looking at the granddaughter I talk about here, and by hearing the last name of the others. They also constantly have to choose between Holland and that other country.

Half way through our time in the prison camp, the Japanese separated the Jews from everyone else. There were rumours about what the Germans were doing to the Jews in Europe, but here in distant Asia they seemed safe. The Japanese ordered everyone with even a drop of Jewish

blood transferred to a separate camp. My mother was distraught. We, her children, had Jewish blood. She herself was not Jewish but my father was and that made us *half*. We knew there is a Jewish law saying only the children of a Jewish mother are Jewish, but the Japanese were not likely to care.

My mother couldn't sleep at night. If she registered us as Jewish, we could be taken away. That also happened to all the boys at the age of ten. I had often seen the mothers running after the lorries, despair in their eyes, the boys doing their best to act tough. Fortunately my little brother had not turned ten yet. So should we keep it a secret that we were half Jewish? But what if they found out or someone betrayed us? Wertheim is a Jewish name and there were horrible punishments for not following orders. Had my father registered as being Jewish and did they know that? In the end my mother decided to pretend to be Jewish herself. That way we were *whole* and she would go with us to the Jewish camp.

Early one morning we had to come to the gate and were packed into a lorry with all the other Jews. The camp we were taken to was worse, even less food, even more diseases, even more violence. The Japanese were following the German example in separating the Jews from the other prisoners. But unlike the case in Europe, it did not happen with the intension of exterminating us. Jews were not separated in all the camps. They were in the camp where my father was, but he figured he could conceal the fact that he was Jewish. Men alone could take more risks than women with children. In the meantime, almost the whole of our family on my father's side had been murdered by the Germans back in Europe. My Jewish grandparents had committed suicide the day the Netherlands capitulated.

The decision my mother had to make was an inhuman one. She ran the risk of either losing her children or being cruelly punished. Her solution was an inventive one. But the Jewish camp was worse, and if people are dying of hunger, a little worse or a little better can be a matter of life or death.

Being forced to make a 'racial' choice like this is something I have never stopped thinking about. To be *whole*, we had to choose between the Jews and the gentiles. But I feel I belong with both of them. And I think everyone ought to have the right to be half this and half that. Not only genetically but culturally as well. I lived in tropical Indonesia for the first ten years of my life and absorbed the smells, colours, shapes and sounds as well as the ways people interact there. The smells still transport me back to my early memories, I still have a weakness for batik type patterns and colours, and no one can put it out of my head that a kampong rooster has a totally different crow than a rooster in a Dutch farmyard. These are all things I don't share with people who grew up in the Netherlands. When I came to live here after the war, the other children in my class laughed at very different things than I did. So in a cultural sense as well, I am not *whole*. I combine different cultural elements in my identity.

It is disconcerting to see that after so many wars and so much racial violence, so many people are still putting themselves and others in groups and – usually unintentionally – helping to create new violence. They obviously do not have the imagination to see that the beautiful and many-faceted human spirit cannot be divided up into pieces. And certainly will not be classified on the grounds of one such piece.

Many immigrants and their children and children's children are of mixed descent, a half of this, a quarter, an eighth of that.

And the ones who are genetically whole usually have a combination of cultures within their personalities. Cultures including the Dutch one that have many facets themselves. In this

atmosphere of people being divided into groups, a combined identity is made into something suspicious and acquires a connotation of unwillingness to be part of society. Just like we had to in the Japanese prison camp, people have to constantly assess the situation and watch every word they say, every little thing they do. Exhibiting affection for their native country can lead to exclusion, and totally assimilating can mean a loss of self-esteem. Immigrants are not allowed to be whole by being a mixture. So my granddaughter doesn't want to be *half* and she doesn't want to be *double* either. You are a combination, I say, do you want to be a *combi*? Now she smiles at me, delighted.

For thousands of years, people have been migrating in all directions over the globe or have been living in different countries during parts of their life's. That is why so much of the world population now consists of genetic and cultural mixtures. Further globalisation only means more mixtures. And it is all fantastic. The fewer clearly delineated and recognizable groups there are, the less chance there is of racial or other violence against groups.

Let us each piece together our own identity. And let it be an identity that consists of more than the constantly emphasized descent and culture. Things we were born with or have become in our lives: male, female, lover, child, grandchild, parent, care-giver, grandparent, sister, brother, descent, skin colour, sexual preference, interests, talents, skills, work, sensitivities, convictions, religious or secular, background, lifestyle, passions ... everyone has a combined identity. All of us are *combis*!

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Other articles of Anne-Ruth Wertheim about racism could be found on <http://www.risq.org/article427.html> and <http://www.risq.org/article441.html> .