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## Dutch letters from Ghana

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**Jos Damen** tells the stories of two unusual men who lived a century apart in the Dutch colony at Elmina in West Africa; a poet who became a tax inspector and a former slave who argued that slavery did not contradict ideas of Christian freedom.

# Dutch Letters from Ghana

This is an account of two men, Willem van Focquenbroch and Jacobus Capitein, who lived in different centuries and came from different backgrounds. They might at first appear to have nothing in common but there are similarities between them, and their personal stories offer a particular insight into the Dutch colony on the Gold Coast, now part of modern Ghana, in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Both men were educated at Leiden University and both clashed with the societies in which they lived. These were partly cultural clashes and partly personality conflicts. Both were headstrong individuals who followed their own paths. They were the same age –

**Flying the flag: Elmina Castle following the Dutch conquest of 1637, an illustration used in the *Atlas Blaeu-van der Hem*.**

just 30 – when they died. Van Focquenbroch was a Dutch intellectual who studied theology at Leiden and medicine at Utrecht, became a successful playwright and poet and went to Elmina as a tax collector where he died in 1670. Capitein was born a slave in the area a century after van Focquenbroch. He also became a student at Leiden and argued in his dissertation that slavery was in accordance with the Bible. He later returned to the land of his birth to preach the word of God and died there in 1747.

Van Focquenbroch was overcome with homesickness while in Dutch Guinea, whereas Capitein was torn between two races and had to assimilate twice, firstly in the Netherlands and later back in West Africa.



Dutch leaders arrive in Guinea and negotiate the purchase of slaves. An illustration from Theodor de Bry's *Petits Voyages*, 1585-88.

Famous in their own times, over the past few decades and after many years of obscurity both van Focquenbroch and Capitein have returned to the limelight. This is partly the result of their work, the letters that survived them and the mystique surrounding their adventurous lives and tragic early deaths. They were individuals who opted to follow their own life paths rather than do what might have been expected of them. Van Focquenbroch was young and full of promise and Capitein reached stardom as a black man and a former slave who not only supported slavery but also tried to convert the heathens in the place of his birth. The growing interest of Africans and African Americans in their heritage has boosted interest in the history of Ghana and the colonial period.

#### The Dutch conquest

The castle fortress of São Jorge da Mina (St George of the Mine) was built on the Ghanaian coast in 1482 by the Portuguese knight Diogo de Azambuja (1432-1518) at the instigation of Juan II of Portugal. The Portuguese presence dates from 1471 and the castle was its first permanent trading post in the region, a symbol of its occupation and determination to defend its interests from other European competitors. The oldest surviving European building in tropical Africa, once visited by Columbus, the castle played a critical role in the development of the town around it (El-Mina, later Elmina), a trading post for gold and slaves, which resulted in the region being referred to as the 'Gold Coast'. This significant area was of considerable interest to the Dutch, who established the West-Indische Compagnie (WIC) in 1621, along the same lines as the East India Company they

had formed in 1602. During its 50-year existence the WIC fought to gain and maintain a trade monopoly in Africa, the Americas and the West Indies. In July 1637 the Dutch captured the São Jorge da Mina with the help of nine ships and over 1,000 men under the command of Colonel Hans Coine. Within five years they had gained control of the entire Gold Coast. As the long struggle with Spain came to an end, culminating in the Peace of Westphalia (1648), they emerged as a significant world power. By the mid-17th century Elmina comprised a few thousand houses, a population of up to 10,000 Africans, around 200 Europeans and about the same number of people of mixed race.

The Dutch companies played a significant role in the transatlantic slave trade and Elmina was an important link in the chain of supply. It is perhaps ironic that a country that had just liberated itself from the yoke of its own oppressors (the much-hated Spanish) should be so heavily involved in slavery. It transported around 450,000 slaves to the Americas, Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, which accounted for around five per cent of the total transatlantic slave trade. The Dutch officially abolished slavery in 1814 but it took until 1863 for it to become illegal in the colonies. In 1872 the Dutch sold all their Gold Coast forts to Britain.

#### Fumus gloria mundi

Willem Godschalk van Focquenbroch was born three years after the Dutch conquered Elmina. He was baptised on April 26th, 1640 in the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam. Van Focquenbroch, whose father was originally a tradesman from Antwerp, went to the

**From the Archive**

**Ghana's Slave Castles**

In 1999 a group of Ghanaians, led by lawyers and tribal chiefs, convened an Africa-wide meeting to seek 'retribution and compensation for the crime of slavery'. Malcolm Billings' 1999 article discusses the first steps towards coming to terms with the past in Ghana. [www.historytoday.com/archive](http://www.historytoday.com/archive)

Latin School in Amsterdam before studying theology at Leiden University. He defended his dissertation in 1661 and then moved on to study medicine in Utrecht, where he was awarded a second PhD for his thesis on venereal disease (*De lue venera*, 1662).

Van Focquenbroch published his first literary work, a comedy entitled *De verwarde Jalousy*, in 1663. It was an adaptation of Molière's 1660 comedy, *Sganarelle, ou le Cocu Imaginaire*, about a self-deceived husband and was an instant success. He had a small medical practice in Amsterdam at the time but continued to write, publishing *Thalia, of geurige sang-godin* in 1665 and a translation of Virgil's *Ecloge* in 1666, both of which were well received. However financial reasons were probably the driving force behind his applying for a job at the West-Indische Compagnie in Elmina, where he was awarded the important job of tax assessor (*fiskaal*). This was the second most senior position in Elmina and he reported directly to the governor.

**Paradise lost**

Van Focquenbroch sailed from the Dutch island of Texel to Elmina on the *Gideon* in July 1668 with his cousin Philippus van Heeden. Van Heeden's death in 1669, just a few months after they arrived, was not surprising. More than half of those Europeans who went to the Tropics died in their first year from diseases such as dysentery and malaria. However his cousin's death had a devastating effect on van Focquenbroch. This is evident if one compares his first impressions of the fortress at Elmina written in January 1669 with what he wrote soon after. In the first letter to his friend, Johannes Ulaeus, he sounded almost ecstatic:

*Now in order to tell you of the wondrously Strange Things I observed here with amazement upon my arrival (and which I had never seen before), would be impossible; but I can tell you that none of Amadis' magic Castles could have been more miraculous to me. And I had imagined to see something like this. The distant Castle, of a glorious, shining, White, built on a Rock that is hollowed-out all around (the foot of which is washed and kissed by a Sky-high Surf), with its Canals on the Land-side seemingly reaching into the Abyss ...*

Compare this to a passage in his second letter, written just 14 days later, on February 10th, 1669:

*Just try to imagine a somber Castle, situated on a dry and barren Rock, against which the Sea keeps beating with an endless and dreadful noise ...*

He became clearly depressed and his sombre mood permeates the poetry and letters he wrote in Elmina, for example, in these desolate lines about his worn-out violin:

*You would grow Sad when you'd see my Violin hanging on the Wall, deprived of so many of its Strings that you would only find a lone Bass still on it.*

He became ill, probably with a tropical disease, and died some time before November 1670, when his post was readvertised. His death went unreported by the West-Indische Compagnie, who perhaps did not wish to broadcast the fact that so many Dutch settlers died so soon after arriving in the colony.

Van Focquenbroch's letters were published after

Dutch Guinea c.1640 by the cartographer Joan Blaeu.

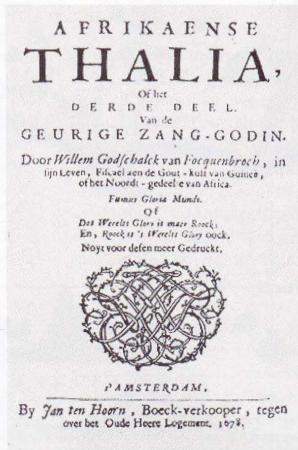




An inspector calls: Pieter de With's painting, c.1669, shows Dirck Wilre, Director General of the North and South Coasts of Africa of the WIC, at Elmina Castle. Looking in on the far right is van Focquenbroch.

Below: titlepage of the 1678 edition of his letters from Africa.

his death. His works, popular in the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century, fell into obscurity until the 19th century when the Dutch author and anti-colonialist Multatuli (1820-87) rediscovered his writings. Interest followed from other important Dutch writers, including J.J. Slauerhoff (1898-36) and W.F. Hermans (1921-95). The latter compiled an anthology of van Focquenbroch's writings (*Bloemlezing uit zijn lyriek*) in 1946. More recently Wolfgang Marguc has written a dissertation on his work (Münster, 1982) and E.M. Beekman produced a biography, *The Crippled Heart* (Leiden, 1997). His letters from Africa (*Afrikaense Thalia*) were republished by Thomas Rosenboom in 2007 and were also translated into Afrikaans. There is now a website and a Van Focquenbroch Foundation that publishes its own journal, *Fumus*, entirely devoted to his life and work. Some of his plays were recently performed in Leiden by the Leydse Kluchten Compagnie; another – *Min in het Lazarushuis* (Love in the Lazaretto) – as a musical in Rotterdam. Since 2010 he has featured in an exhibition of the hundred most significant Dutch writers at the Dutch Literary Museum at The Hague. The director of the museum, Aad Meinderts, even went to Ghana to lay a white rose in his honour at Elmina Castle.



Van Focquenbroch's popularity is easy to understand, partly due to his sentimentality and skill at parody. The subjects of his poetry (unrequited love, melancholia, etc) are universal topics with timeless appeal. Even his description of the simple pleasure of smoking a pipe is delightful. His motto was *Fumus gloria mundi* ('The world's glory is only smoke, but smoke is also the world's glory'). A good example of his melancholy humour is demonstrated in this verse about death from his *Sonnet* (1668):

*To think that in the end my life will finally change,  
And that I finally will be happy,  
To hope that in the end a bright, shining Sun,  
Will take away the night of sorrow from my soul.*

**A slave's story**

Jacobus Capitein was probably the name given to the slave boy by his abductor, the slave trader Arnold Steenhardt, in honour of the master to whom he was subsequently presented as a gift, Captain Jacob van Goch. Capitein was born about 1717 and was captured by Steenhardt when he was approximately seven years old. I speculate that Jacobus was chosen as a present because he was intelligent and obedient, but that is of course a wild guess inspired by the characteristics Capitein demonstrated later in his short life. The boy

spent two years in Ghana serving van Goch and was then put on a ship by his master which sailed from Elmina on April 14th, 1728 to the Dutch city of Middelburg. When he set foot on Dutch soil on July 25th that year, Capitein's status immediately changed: the slave boy became a free man. From Middelburg, Capitein went to The Hague where he lived in van Goch's house for several years, taking classes at the Latin School there, learning the Catechisms from the Reverend Johan Manger and preparing for university. He was baptised in 1735 before registering at Leiden University in 1737.

Capitein is famous for a booklet he wrote in 1742. As a former slave he held that slavery was not against the Bible and argued this point in his PhD defence at the university on March 10th, 1742. The text was certainly written by Capitein, though the subject may have been suggested by the chair of the dissertation committee, Professor Johannes van den Honert.

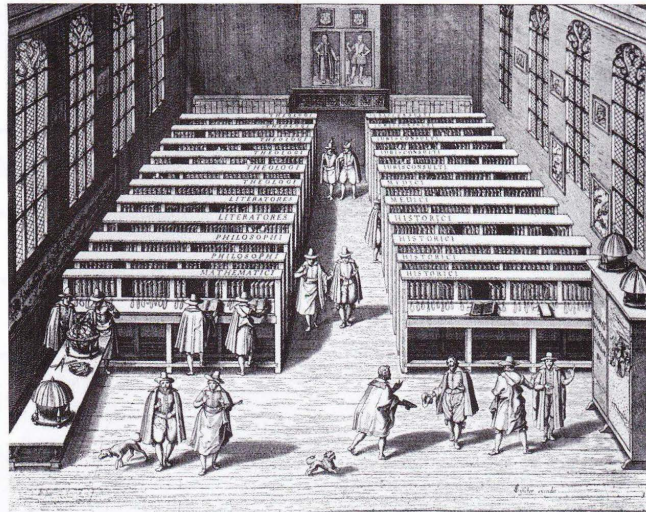
The proposition is clear from the title: *Dissertatio politico-theologica de servitute, libertati christianae non contraria* (Politico-theological Dissertation Concerning Slavery, as Not Contrary to Christian Freedom) and Capitein adopts the classic points. He produces all the biblical arguments against slavery (2 Corinthians 3: 17 'Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'; Galatians 5: 1; 1 Corinthians 7: 23; John 8: 32), but explains them in terms of spiritual freedom. He even mentions the Dutch jurists Hugo Grotius and Gisbert Voetius in his argument but is clever enough not to cite Grotius' *De iure belli ac pacis* (On the law of war and peace, 1625): 'No human beings are slaves.' Capitein must have known the work of the Reverend Udemans, who condemned slavery in his book *Geestelyck Roer* (1638), but again there is no mention of him. Instead, Capitein stresses examples of spiritual freedom, such as those of Paul (Hebrews 12: 20) and Peter (Acts 15: 10).

Capitein's dissertation was successful and the Dutch translation had four printings in one year. A *laudatio* (celebration) appeared in print with more than ten praise poems by the theologians Hieronymus de Wilhem, Gerardus Kuypers and others. 'O eer van 't Moorenlant! (O respectable from the land of the Moors!), was the dedication of his university friend Brandijn Rijsen. Capitein toured the country and two of his sermons (in Muiderberg in May 1742 and in Ouderkerk in June 1742) were also published. His fame can for a large part be explained by the fact that he was a black man and a former slave who was advocating slavery. A better opponent of the abolitionists could not be found.

#### His skin is black but white his soul

Capitein wanted to go further. Brandijn Rijsen, whom he had met while a student at Leiden, had already signalled his intention in the foreword to Capitein's dissertation:

*See this Moor, his skin is black, but white his soul ... He will bring faith, hope and love to the Africans, so they will, whitened, honour the Lamb, together with him.*



Leiden University Library in 1610 by Jan Cornelis Woudanus.

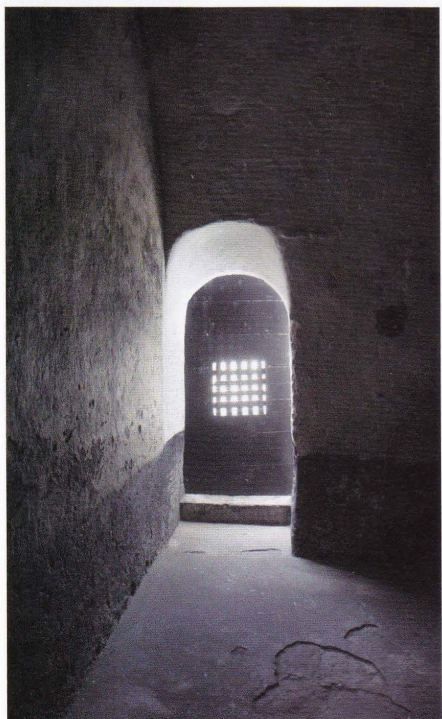
Black sheep: Jacobus Capitein in an 18th-century Dutch engraving.

In July 1742 Capitein sailed to Elmina to bring God's word to the heathens there. He tried hard for more than four years but he was not taken seriously by the Dutch in Elmina, who did not want to be lectured on their moral laxity and their not-so-very Christian behaviour, or by the Akan people in West Africa, although he initially had some success at the small school he established there. His masters, the Classis of Amsterdam, also had their doubts about his proclamations. When the directors of





Above: title page of Jacobus Capitein's 1742 dissertation on slavery.



Left: one of the dungeons at Elmina castle where slaves were held by both the Portuguese and the Dutch.

**Watch Online**  
 Watch the director of the Dutch Literary Museum lay a white rose in honour of van Focquenbroch at Elmina Castle:  
<http://youtu.be/FJ54960tfl>

the West-Indische Compagnie told the Classis that Capitein wanted to marry into the African community (in his words, 'to guard myself from the temptations of Satan') they raised their objections and took immediate action, sending a white Dutch woman, Antonia Ginderdros, to the Guinea in 1745 for Capitein to marry.

Capitein translated the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer into the local Mfantse language and the work was published in 1744. He used these texts to instruct his pupils in Africa. However he was rebuked by his superiors from Amsterdam for leaving out the fourth Commandment, which stipulates that servants also had to rest on the Seventh Day. The Classis probably did not understand that Capitein left that part out on purpose so as not to generate unrest among the slaves on the Gold Coast. He seems to have then lost interest in new plans he had for another school. He died in February 1747 and was buried in an unmarked grave somewhere in Guinea.

In 1742 Capitein became probably the first African to defend his PhD at a European university; he may have been the first black person officially to marry a white woman; perhaps, most importantly, he was the first person ever to publish a text in the Mfantse language. In the last two decades there has been a revival of interest in him so that at least seven books and articles have been published about his life, his theology and ministry and about his translations.

After one of the lectures at the Berkeley 2011 Conference on Colonial and Post-Colonial Connections in Dutch Literature a question was asked about Capitein. How was it possible that the death of such a prominent figure could have gone so unnoticed? Was this because of his failings during his last few years? A comparison between the two (initially unrecorded) deaths, though almost a century apart, show that they were both high-profile figures and among the elite of Elmina in their time. For the West-Indische Compagnie it was important to fill the gap van Focquenbroch left in their personnel. Reporting his death was irrelevant.

The remains of van Focquenbroch and Capitein lie hidden in Ghanaian soil but their intellectual legacy remains. Comparing their experiences sheds light on some little-known events and helps broaden our understanding of relations between the Netherlands and Ghana both in the past and the present.

**Jos Damen** is Head of the Library and ICT at the African Studies Centre in Leiden, The Netherlands.

**Further Reading**

David Kpobi, *Mission in Chains: The Life, Theology and Ministry of the Ex-slave Jacobus E. J. Capitein, 1717-1747* (Zoetermeer, 1993).

Grant Parker, *The Agony of Asar* (Princeton, 2001).

Jacobus Capitein, *Dissertatio politico-theologica de servitute, libertati christianae non contraria* (Lugduni Batavorum, 1742).

E.M. Beekman, *The Crippled Heart. An introduction to the Life, Times and Works of Willem Godschalck van Focquenbroch* (Leiden, 1997).

Website: <http://www.focquenbroch.nl>

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