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The black Dutchmen: African soldiers in the Netherlands East Indies

Kessel, W.M.J. van; Kessel I. van

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12. The Black Dutchmen

African soldiers in the Netherlands East Indies

Between 1831 and 1872 some 3,000 African recruits sailed from Elmina to Batavia (now Jakarta), the capital of the Netherlands East Indies. They had been recruited to serve in the Dutch colonial army, which throughout most of the 19th century experienced a chronic shortage of European manpower. The Africans counted as part of the European contingent of the army and were to be treated as Europeans. After expiry of their contracts, some returned to the Gold Coast. The majority settled in Elmina, where the Dutch governor allocated plots for the veterans on a hill behind St George's Castle, which today is still known as Java Hill. Their army pensions were paid out in the castle. Others, having established families during their long years of army service, opted to settle in the East Indies. They became the founding fathers of the Indo-African communities in the Javanese towns of Purworedjo, Semarang, Salatiga and Solo. On Java, the African soldiers and their descendants became known as 'Belandia Hitam' – Black Dutchmen. An army career became a family tradition, for many sons and grandsons of the African soldiers also served in the Dutch army. After Indonesia's independence, most Indo-Africans opted for repatriation to the Netherlands.

'Children of nature'

The shortage of manpower in the Dutch colonial army became particularly acute in the wake of the Java War (1825-1830), which took the lives of 8,000 European soldiers and many more native soldiers, and the secession of Belgium in 1830, which meant that the national reservoir for army recruitment had shrunk considerably. Various options were explored to find new sources of manpower to supply the army in the East Indies, by far the most profitable part of the Dutch

colonial empire. The example of the black regiments in the British West Indies inspired government officials in The Hague to look first of all at the possibilities of recruiting blacks in the New World. A report submitted to the Department of War with the portentous title 'Thoughts on an inexpensive and efficient organization of the army in the Netherlands East Indies' proposed to recruit liberated Negroes and runaway slaves in the United States.¹ But the Department of Colonies objected: American Negroes were likely to cause problems, as they would be infused with ideals of equality, which thus far had been frustrated in the United States. And if the US government itself at some point were to acquire colonial ambitions, the loyalty of American troops in the East Indies could not be taken for granted. The Department of Colonies preferred to recruit 'children of nature', unspoilt blacks who would willingly submit to European guidance.² These children of nature, it was believed in The Hague, were to be found in Africa.

Thus, the Department of Colonies turned to the almost forgotten Dutch Possessions on the Guinea Coast, where commercial activity was at a low ebb following the abolition of the slave trade in 1814. These neglected outposts now had the opportunity to make themselves useful in the eyes of the Dutch government by supplying manpower to the army. It was assumed that Africans would be better equipped to withstand the hot climate and dreaded tropical diseases in the East Indies. The Negro race was deemed to be very strong and used to a tough life under harsh conditions: 'where whole populations become extinct, the Negroes will remain'.³ Most European soldiers in the tropics succumbed to diseases, while casualties on the battlefield itself were relatively low.

Ineke van Kessel
African Studies
Centre, Leiden

Page 132: Wounded African KNIL soldier
Kees Pop. Oilpainting
by Isaac Israels (1880).

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam,
SK-A-4954.

1. ARA (Algemeen Rijksarchief in The Hague), Kolonien 1814-1849 (henceforth Kol. I), 4217, geheim verbaal 15 Dec. 1829 :

'Gedagten nopens eene weinig kostende en doelmatige organisatie der Landmagt in Neerlands Oost Indische Bezittingen'.

2. ARA, Kol. I, 4217, 7 Nov. 1829.

3. ARA, Kol. I, 4217, 7 Nov. 1829.

Like all colonial armies, the East Indies army (Koninklijk Nederlandsch Indisch Leger, known as KNIL) also recruited native soldiers in the Indonesian archipelago. Army policy in the 19th century dictated, however, that roughly half the troops had to consist of Europeans, who were deemed more reliable and better qualified. Reliance on native troops carried the inherent danger that some day they would use their training and their weapons to turn against their colonial masters.

The most favoured native troops were the Amboinese, as the people from the Moluccan islands were commonly known. As Christians, they were considered more loyal to Dutch rule than the largely Islamic population on Java and most of Sumatra. The Amboinese were much better paid than other native troops, had more opportunities for advancement and were in some respects placed on equal footing with the European troops.

The African soldiers were to be counted as part of the European contingent. It was deemed most unlikely that they would make common cause with the local population. Dutch officials were convinced that the inhabitants of Java and Sumatra would fear the Africans as 'cannibals'. On the other hand, the Africans would certainly look down on Asians, as these were neither properly black nor properly white.⁴ It is not quite clear how the Dutch officials arrived at these stereotypes, but they evidently saw no risk of fraternization between Africans and Asians. Troop reinforcements were urgently needed to counter local Moslem rebellions on West Sumatra, led by leaders whose religious fervour had been fuelled during a pilgrimage to Mecca. As the Africans held a 'fetish religion', the Dutch saw little danger that they would collude with Moslem insurgents. Army policy aimed to keep the Africans at a distance from the local population. The Africans were encouraged to be baptized as Christians: Catholicism was seen as the most suitable cult for people who indulged in elaborate rituals.

Their conditions of service were mostly the same as those of Europeans, and considerably better than those of the indigenous soldiers. This policy of equal treatment made sense in the context of diplomatic relations in Europe and perhaps also in the still largely pre-colonial societies of the Gold Coast, but it was incongruous with developments in the Netherlands East Indies. In Europe, the Dutch government had to defend African recruitment against British accusations that this operation amounted to a covert form of slave trading. If the Africans were paid and treated as Europeans, they were demonstrably not of slave status. On the Gold Coast, the balance of power between Europeans and Africans had not yet shifted decisively in favour of the Europeans. Racial boundaries were still relatively fluid. In the East Indies, by contrast, the mid-19th century marked an episode of empire building and consolidation of Dutch rule. With the racial hierarchy of a colonial state rapidly consolidating in the mid-19th century, the rules with regard to equal treatment for Europeans and Africans must have seemed incongruous, and thus were constantly eroded.

In at least one important respect the army did not succeed in its intention to maintain social distance between Africans and natives of the East Indies. Like other KNIL soldiers, the Africans established a relationship with native women. In due course, the Indo-African descendants of these liaisons became part of Indo-European society. They spoke Dutch as their mother tongue, their children attended Dutch schools and they held Dutch nationality. The largest Indo-African community lived in the garrison town of Purworedjo in central Java, where in 1859 king William III allocated them a plot of land. Other garrison towns such as Semarang and Salatiga were also home to a number of Indo-African families. Indo-Africans living outside these main centres tended to assimilate into Indo-European or Indonesian society, often becoming oblivious of their African roots.

4. ARA, Kolonien na 1850 (henceforth Kol. II), *Generaal Overzicht van hetgeen betrekking heeft tot de werving van Afrikanen en van de verkregen resultaten*, bijlage La G, aantekeningen op nevenstaande memorie.

Three phases of recruitment: a slow start

In 1831 the Department of Colonies instructed Governor J. Last in Elmina to recruit 'a company of 150 Negro soldiers'. If the experiment proved satisfactory, recruitment would then be organized on a more sustained basis. Instructions from The Hague emphasized that recruitment had to take place 'without coercion or force'.⁵ Last doubted whether volunteers could be found but sent agents to Axim and Accra, while in Elmina he invited the king and his council to St George Castle to outline the new scheme. He advised the king of Elmina that service in the Dutch army would offer a unique opportunity for his subjects 'to abandon their usual loafing, to earn an income, see the world and secure an old age pension'. The king promised to cooperate, but also made it clear that he could not force his subjects into army service overseas.⁶

Last's doubts proved well founded. Three ships that were sent from Holland in 1831-1832 collected eighteen, nineteen and seven recruits respectively in Elmina. Among them were the sons of several well-known Afro-European families in Elmina and Accra: Jan Nieser, Willem Nieser, Manus Ulzen, Matthijs Rühle and Willem van der Puye. Some, such as Jan Nieser, who belonged to a well-known Eurafrican merchant

family, had previously served with the Elmina garrison and were now qualified for the rank of corporal. Manus Ulzen was the great-grandson of Roelof Ulsen, governor of the West India Company in Elmina from 1755 to 1757. He had been enticed into army service with the promise of immediate promotion to corporal. His knowledge of Dutch gave him the bargaining power to obtain a better deal than most others. Some of the other volunteers were young men who needed the enlistment premium and their advance pay to clear debts or to settle fines for various offences. To make enlistment more attractive, the Dutch introduced a system of 'delegated payments'. The recruits, which included both free men and slaves, could authorize the Dutch army to deduct a certain amount from their salaries, that would then be sent to their relatives, creditors or masters on the Gold Coast. This system of delegated pay ('delegatiën') was open to abuse and would become a contentious issue in the next years.

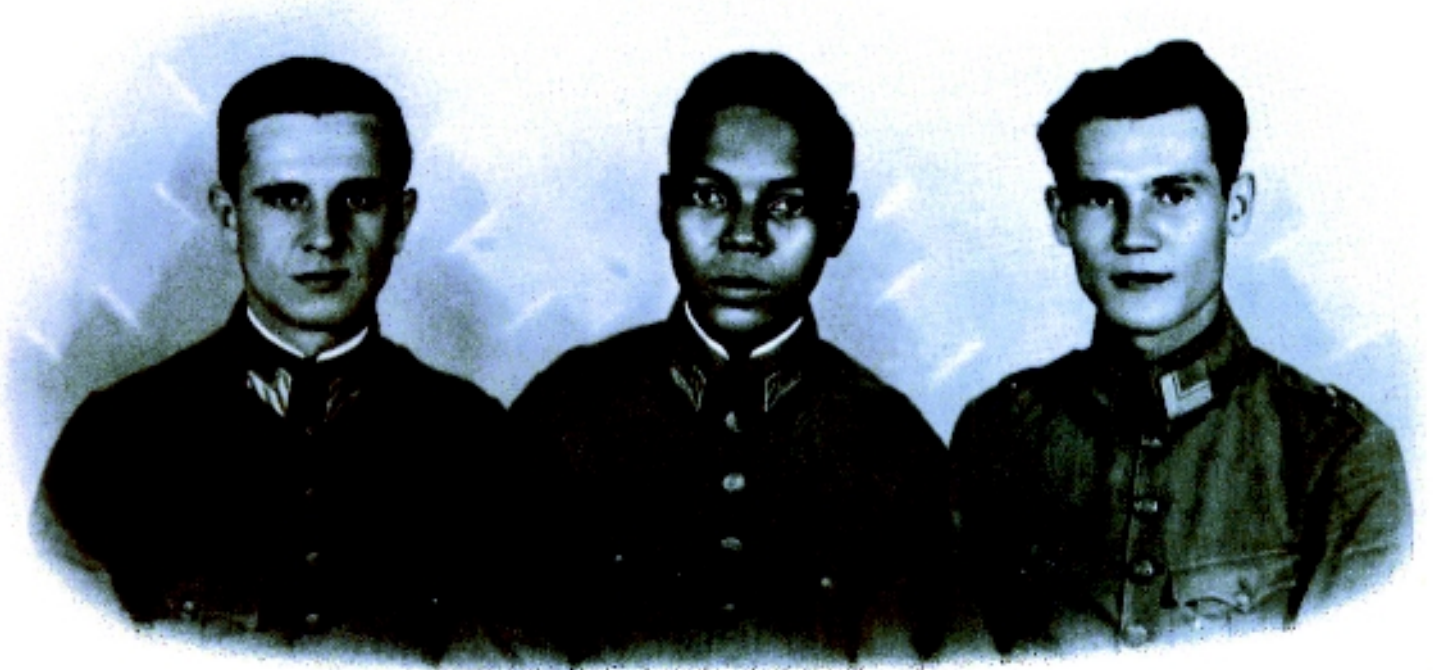
This first batch of 44 African soldiers took part in a military expedition in southern Sumatra, where the army was sent to quell an uprising by Islamic fundamentalists known as the Padri Wars. Initial reports about their qualities as soldiers were highly favourable. Reports from Batavia to The Hague stated that the

5. ARA, Kol. I, 4222, geheime resolutie 29 Juni 1831, no. 77/A.

6. ARA, Kol. I, 3964, Kommandeur Last aan Kolonien, 29 Nov. 1831.

Three KNIL soldiers in the 1930s: a Dutchman, an Indo-European and an Indo-African (Pierre Nelk)

Collection I. van Kessel.



Sumatrans were 'full of awe and admiration' for these black giants, who were reputed to be somewhat ill-disciplined but very courageous in battle. However, because of the small number of men, the costs of the experiment were excessive. Governor Van den Bosch calculated that the 44 African volunteers had cost the Dutch State the astronomical amount of 1,232 guilders per head, while European soldiers were shipped to Batavia at a cost of 120 guilders per head. He suggested abandoning the experiment because of these excessive costs, but once the recruitment operation was in progress, it was not easily abandoned.⁷ The next frigate with another 68 soldiers on board arrived only in 1836, but meanwhile the Dutch government had decided to expand its recruiting operations.

1837-1841: a massive influx

In September 1836 an official mission, headed by Major-General Jan Verveer, sailed from the Netherlands with a vast array of presents for the king of Ashanti and instructions to arrange for the enlistment of between 2,000 and 3,000 soldiers. Along the coast volunteers were few and far between, but the Kingdom of Ashanti, which since olden days had been on friendly terms with the Dutch and was a traditional supplier of slaves, was seen as the key to solving the manpower problem. Verveer, accompanied by a large retinue of over 900 men and women, finally arrived in Kumasi in February 1837. They were well received and the presents – ranging from liquor and guns to perfume, silverware, sweets, crystal, a clock and a camera obscura – were much appreciated. Asantehene Kwaku Dua I was particularly pleased with the performance of the brass band, and later sent some of his own musicians to Elmina to learn the same repertoire and to acquire similar outfits. The asantehene manifested a keen preference for the Hunters' Chorus from *Der Freischütz*, which became known as the asantehene's Song.

On 18 March 1837 a contract between king Willem I of the Netherlands and Kwaku Dua I of Ashanti was duly signed.⁸ The asantehene would

deliver 1,000 recruits within a year. He received 2,000 guns by way of advance payment, with the promise of 4,000 more to come. Moreover, the Dutch obtained permission to open a recruitment agency in Kumasi that, for the next few years, would be headed by Jacob Huydecoper, a mulatto from Elmina. Witnessing the frequent human sacrifices in Ashanti, the Dutch delegation was convinced that the asantehene and his court controlled vast amounts of manpower, some of which could be made available to the Dutch army. As recruitment was still supposed to be voluntary, slaves offered to the recruiting agent received an advance payment to purchase their freedom. Upon arrival in Elmina, they were given a certificate of manumission as proof of their legal status as free men.

As part of the deal two young Ashanti princes, Kwasi Boakyee and Kwame Poku – the son and the nephew of the king – accompanied Verveer back to The Netherlands, where they were to receive a Dutch education. Boakyee later continued his studies in Delft and became a mining engineer. Contrary to the initial plans, he did not go back to the Gold Coast but went to work in the Netherlands Indies, where he died in 1904. Kwame Poku did return to Elmina in 1847, but never made it back to Kumasi. He committed suicide in St George's Castle in 1850. The story of the two Ashanti princes has become justly renowned with the publication of Arthur Japin's novel (Japin 1997; 2001).

Recruitment in Kumasi never met Dutch expectations. In the first year, the asantehene delivered only 51 recruits. Huydecopers's own efforts at recruiting were somewhat more successful, but still remained far below target numbers. Ashanti law prohibited Ashanti citizens from leaving Ashanti territory, and the supply of slaves was much smaller than had been anticipated. The Ashanti would only sell a few of their slaves to the recruiting agency when they were in need of cash. Most recruits were probably bought from traders who brought new supplies from slave markets such as Salaga. As the army records list the place of birth of the recruits, it is

7. ARA, Kol. I, 4235, no. 214 J, Van den Bosch aan Kolonien, 29 Aug. 1832.

8. ARA, Kol. I, 4246, no. 176.



*African KNIL soldier
on Java by Ernest
Hardouin (ca. 1850).
KITLV, Leiden, cat no 36 b 187.*

possible to make a rough estimate of their origins. Among the places of origin are Dagomba, Mamprusi, Grushi, Hausa and a very substantial number of Mossi (Latorre 1977). So a large number of the Africans in the Dutch army did not come from present-day Ghana but from present-day Burkina Faso and other neighbouring countries. In spite of their disparate ethnic origins,

the recruits soon developed strong bonds of solidarity. In Africa they were known as Mossi, Grushi or simply 'Donko' (general label for Africans of slave status who originated from territories north of Ashanti), but in the East Indies army the soldiers acquired a new, additional identity as 'Africans'. Dutch army records provide ample evidence of a strong 'esprit de

corps' in the African companies of the KNIL: individual grievances could escalate easily into collective protests.

Later generations of Indo-Africans tended to know very little about their African origins. Their fathers had told them that they were now Dutch, and that they had to find their place in the East Indies. While memories of the African past faded away, the ethnic identification was sometimes the only element of African identity that was passed on to the next generation. Thus, Mrs Mes, now living in the Netherlands, remembers her grandmother telling her that great-grandfather was a Mozie who had sailed to Batavia from Port Elizabeth. Therefore she had concluded that her family roots originated in Mozambique or South Africa. She proved her point by singing Boer War songs in my interviews.⁹ But her great-grandfather, who had been given the Dutch name 'Trappen', was indeed a Mossi who sailed from Elmina on the ship *Elizabeth*. While Oscar van den Berg, whose grandfather was a 'Groessie' (Grushi), firmly believed that the family tree could be traced to Ethiopia.¹⁰ As a 12-year-old schoolboy in the Javanese town of Solo in the 1930s, he made plans with Indo-African schoolmates and soldiers to form an auxiliary corps that would go to Africa to help liberate Abyssinia from Mussolini's invaders. Abyssinia equalled Africa, and he identified with the struggle of the Africans.

In several families, some fragments of information were handed down to the next generations, but without much context. Some descendants had African names, or knew a few places such as Elmina, Sinjoors (St George) or Ashanti, but without having any notion that these can be located in present-day Ghana. A few families did relate their family history to Ghana, but most only re-discovered their region of origin when they started organizing reunions in the Netherlands in the 1970s. The Dutch historian Dr Sylvia de Groot, who at that time was working with students on a research project on the Africans in the KNIL, was instrumental in assisting the descendants in uncovering their Ghanaian 'roots'.

Equally important element in reconstructing the past was a publication in which the origin of the wax prints on the West African Coast was linked to the history of the African soldiers (Kroese 1976). Between 1837 and 1841, some 1,500 Africans were recruited in Kumasi. From Kumasi, the recruits were escorted to Elmina, a journey of ten to twelve days. Meanwhile, recruitment also continued in Elmina. All in all, between 1836 and 1842 some 2,100 African soldiers left via Elmina for the East Indies. In 1840, a group of 50 soldiers was sent off to Suriname, but this was the only time recruits went across the Atlantic rather than across the Indian Ocean (De Groot 1990).

Recruitment was first suspended and then abandoned altogether in 1841. The British government had protested that this mode of recruitment amounted to a covert form of slave trading. The Dutch, having long lost their naval superiority, could ill afford to alienate the government in London. Several mutinies by African troops in the East Indies had meanwhile also led the colonial administration to doubt the wisdom of the African recruitment scheme. Most mutinies followed a similar pattern. Infringements on the promise of equal treatment were almost invariably the cause of discontent and at times violent protest. Before the arrival of the African soldiers, the Dutch army in the East Indies had three categories: Europeans, Natives and Amboinese. Official instructions stated that the Africans were to be treated as Europeans in every respect. In local practice however, various exceptions were made, sometimes to the benefit of the Africans, but mostly to their disadvantage.

Once the African recruits began to arrive in large numbers, problems of communication became more pressing. The languages of instruction in the army were Dutch and Malay. Some among the first batch of Africans, recruited in the neighbourhood of Dutch settlements on the Ghanaian coast, had a working knowledge of Dutch. But the large detachments from the interior, who had never seen Europeans before, found it at first difficult to cope. Some battalions used improvised translations of the army's penal

9. Interview with Mrs G.B. Mes, 3 March 2000, Spijkenisse.

10. Interview with Oscar van den Berg, 28 Aug. 2000, Echt.

code in Twi or Fanti, written in phonetic script, others read the rules to the troops monthly in Dutch and Malay, and again others had no official instruction.

Not surprisingly, army officers found that the instruction of Africans took more time and effort than the instruction of Amboinese recruits. So it did not make sense to give these newcomers better treatment than the tried and tested loyal Amboinese. The process of eroding the promise of equal treatment in fact began with an economizing measure affecting the Amboinese troops: in 1835 they were given native sleeping mats rather than the straw mattresses used by European soldiers. The army advertised this decision of course as being in the best interest of the health of the Amboinese, who were much better off with sleeping mats and leather cushions. Like the Europeans, the Amboinese in the army wore shoes. As this was an important attribute of European status, they always wore shoes outside army barracks. But since shoes were most uncomfortable, they preferred to walk barefoot inside the barracks. Thus their muddied feet soiled the straw mattresses. The Africans, also equipped with shoes, followed the Amboinese practice. But while the Amboinese accepted their sleeping mats without protest, the Africans protested vociferously when in 1838 the bedding arrangement for the Amboinese was extended to African troops as well. The measure, of course, was advertised as being in the best interest of the Africans, as they 'were known to be of an uncleanly nature, to have a greasy skin, greasy hair and a peculiarly strong and unpleasant smell'.¹¹ The issue of the sleeping mats was a factor in several mutinies. In April 1840, the three African companies of the 4th infantry battalion in the garrison town of Kedong Kebo (Purworedjo) in central Java had risen in armed protest against infringements on the equal treatment clause with regard to pay, clothing and bedding (sleeping mats). The grievance with regard to clothing was that the army no longer issued underpants to Amboinese and Africans. The discontent on pay was related to the matter of the delegated

payments to the Gold Coast. The army deducted 8½ cents a day from their pay. Sometimes the Africans had authorized this deduction, as the money was meant for their relatives. But in most cases, the deductions were meant to pay off the advance that the army had given for the manumission payments. After about three years, a soldier would have paid off his debt (about one hundred guilders) made to purchase his liberty. Yet, the deductions had become institutionalized, without any direct relationship with obligations incurred on the Gold Coast. Thus, the Africans received a structurally lower wage than their European comrades did. The African soldiers in Kedong Kebo had sworn an oath that they would go on strike if on the 16 April 1840 they did not receive pay equal to that of the Europeans. Shouting rebellious slogans, they disobeyed their officers and stormed the barracks to get hold of the guns. As the commander had had prior warning, the European troops beat off the attack, dispersed the rebels and followed them in hot pursuit. They succeeded in apprehending 85 rebels, while three escaped.¹²

The next year, in June 1841, 37 Africans of the 10th infantry battalion, fully armed, walked out of the Dutch Van der Capellen fortress on the West Coast of Sumatra after repeated refusals to obey orders. A detachment of soldiers was sent out in pursuit and met the deserters near Fort Kayoetanam on the way to Padang. Attempts to persuade the Africans to return to their duties were futile. When the pursuing party attempted to take them by force a fight ensued, leaving two Africans dead and four badly wounded. The remainder were taken prisoner.¹³ In both cases, the mutineers were court-martialed. They got off relatively lightly. The most severe sentence, passed in the Kedong Kebo case, was two years in prison and 25 lashes.

Now the army command had had enough. Even before the Sumatra mutiny, the commander-in-chief of the Netherlands East Indies army, major-general Cochius, had requested the government in The Hague to scale down African recruitment or halt the operation altogether:

11. ARA, Kolonien II, Generaal Overzigt, bijlage La G.

12. ARA, Kol. II, Generaal Overzigt, Missive van den militairen kommandant te Kedong Kebo, 17 April 1840.

13. ARA, Kol. II, Generaal Overzigt, Missive van den militairen kommandant ter Sumatra's Westkust, 9 Julij 1841.



African soldier with his children by August van Pers (1851).

KITLV, Leiden, cat 37 c 27.

'Wherever the Negro soldiers served together in a company, they have banded together in mutiny, under the pretext that infringements had been made on the promise of equal treatment.'¹⁴ The general's complaint is an eloquent testimony to the bonds of solidarity among the recruits, who now apparently banded together under their newly acquired identity as 'Negroes' or 'Africans'. Cochijs believed that the promise of equal treatment had been a serious psychological error, which had encouraged the 'childish conceit' and 'stupid pride' of people who had just recently been liberated from the most abject state of slavery. The Africans, he stated, had no reason at all to look down on Javanese and Amboinese. It was just another proof of their conceit and ignorance.

For The Hague, the Sumatra mutiny was the final straw. By government decree of 17 December 1841, recruitment at the Guinea Coast was abandoned. Those soldiers already in the Indies served the remainder of their contract, but there would be no new arrivals.

However, after the upheavals in the period of massive influx (1838-1841), things calmed down. Reports of incidents were few and far between, less so than with the Europeans who were a notorious bunch of ill-disciplined drunkards. The African soldiers turned out to be no less

vulnerable to diseases than their European counterparts. Mortality rates among the African troops were as high as those among the Europeans. As with the Europeans, most Africans died in hospital rather than on the battlefield. Mortality during the three-month voyage on the ships was low, but vast numbers died within a year of their arrival in the East Indies.

One initial motive behind the African recruitment scheme was the hope that African soldiers would be less expensive than Europeans because of the shorter voyage – three months instead of the five to six months from the Netherlands to Batavia – and their longer terms of service. High mortality rates undermined this logic however. Recruitment expenses, including sizeable advance payments, had already been made, while the benefits proved short-lived. However, this type of cost and benefit calculation apparently did not figure into subsequent deliberations about the pros and cons of African recruitment.

1860-1872: a modest operation

After some reconsideration, recruitment was resumed in the late 1850s but on a much smaller scale and with more precautions to ensure the voluntary nature of enlistment. A decisive element had been the performance of the Africans in the third expedition to Bali in 1849. The newly arrived commander of the East Indies army, Duke Bernhard van Saxe-Weimar Eisenach, had been greatly impressed by the courage, loyalty, state of health, strength and endurance of the Africans in this expedition. They compared favourably with the Europeans below the rank of officer, who for the most part were 'soldiers with a criminal record, deserters from the Dutch national army, drunkards, deserters from the Belgian and the French army and Germans, most of whom are rascals and tramps, for whom the service in this colony is a last refuge'.¹⁵ The Dutch government initially decided against his recommendation to resume African recruitment, but in the late 1850s recruitment in Elmina was reopened.

Between 1860 and 1872, another 800 African soldiers sailed from Elmina to Batavia. They took

14. ARA., Kol. II, Generaal Overzicht, Missive van den kommandant van het leger, 8 Aug. 1840, geheim.

15. ARA., Kol. II, Generaal Overzicht, Missive van Zijne Hoogheid den kommandant van het leger dd 21 Aug. 1849, no. 4, zeer geheim.

an active part in the decades-long ferocious Atjeh (Aceh) War. Recruitment ended in 1872 with the transfer of Elmina and the other remaining Dutch Possessions on the Guinea Coast to the British. Arrangements were made for the continuation of pension payments, while the veterans retained their right to plots on Java Hill.

However, few demobilized soldiers opted for repatriation to Africa during this last period. Most chose to stay on in Java, where they were welcomed into the now well-established Indo-African communities. After one more unsuccessful experiment in 1890 with recruitment in Liberia, the Dutch colonial army finally ceased its recruiting efforts in Africa. By 1915, there were no longer any African soldiers in active service in the East Indies.

The aftermath

Many of the sons and grandsons of the African soldiers continued to serve in the Netherlands East Indies Army however, establishing colonial control over the vast Indonesian archipelago, fighting the Japanese in the Second World War, suffering the hardships of prisoner-of-war camps and ultimately fighting the Indonesian nationalists until the final transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia in 1949. Along with vast numbers of Dutch and Indo-Europeans, most Indo-Africans were repatriated by ship to the Netherlands. Here, contact among the group was re-established when the generation that grew up in the East Indies reached the age of retirement. Since the 1980s, a bi-annual reunion has offered an occasion for old-timers as well as for the new generation born in the Netherlands to explore Indo-African roots, to fill in the gaps in family histories and of course to enjoy Indonesian cooking and African music.

The 10th reunion, held in September 2000, was pleased to welcome a special guest: Professor Thad Ulzen, the great-great grandson of Corporal Manus Ulzen, travelled from the United States to the Netherlands to meet the other descendants of the African soldiers. The story came full circle later that same year with a visit

to Ghana and Elmina by Daan Cordus and his wife Eef Cordus-Klink, both descendants of African soldiers, and for a long time the driving force behind the Indo-African reunions in the Netherlands. Now that contact between the descendants in Ghana and those in the Netherlands had been established, a new initiative was launched to keep the memory of the story of the *Belanda Hitam* alive. The Ulzen family decided to host a permanent exhibition on the African soldiers in the East Indies in their family house in Elmina, which was baptized the Java Museum. The Java Museum in Elmina, to be opened in 2002, will stand as a fitting monument to the largely forgotten history of the Black Dutchmen.

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13. Reminiscences of the African community in Purworejo, Indonesia

For almost a century, the central Java town of Purworejo was home to a community of Africans from the region of present-day Ghana and their Indo-African descendants. African army veterans from the Dutch East Indies army (Koninklijk Nederlandsch Indisch Leger, or the KNIL) also settled in other towns such as Gombong, Semarang, Salatiga and Ambarawa. But the garrison town of Purworejo was the only place where Africans had their own settlement. At first they lived among the Indonesian people, but as more and more pensioned African soldiers came to live here the Resident (the Dutch administrator) thought it advisable to give the Africans a place of their own.

So a plot of land in the village of Pangenjuru-tengah was bought from the local peasants and allocated to the African veterans. This decision was formalized by Government Decree no. 25 on 30 August 1859. Until recently, the street names still indicated the location of the African 'kampung' (village): Gang Afrikan I and Gang Afrikan II (Africa Alley I and II). At present, there are no more Indo-African descendants living here, while in Purworejo itself only one descendent of the African soldiers can still be found. Unfortunately, the street names in Kampung Afrikan have recently been changed into Gang Koplak I and II (which means a place to tie up horses). When I did a new round of interviews and surveys in Purworejo in early 2001, 100 per cent of respondents indicated that they would like to have the street names changed back to Gang Afrikan. Obviously, the people of Purworejo harbour no negative memories of their erstwhile African neighbours.

A strategic town

Purworejo was a strategic town in the early 19th century. In this region, then known as the district

of Bagelen, the Dutch colonial administration built no fewer than 25 fortresses. Dutch power in the East Indies had been undermined first of all by the English occupation during the Napoleonic wars. This period marked the end of the rule by the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-indische Compagnie). As the newly established Kingdom of the Netherlands struggled to assemble a colonial army and to regain control, it was confronted with a large-scale uprising on the island of Java. Under the leadership of Prince Diponegoro, the Javanese staged a guerrilla war, known as the Java War (1825-1830), against Dutch troops. The Dutch colonial army suffered very severe losses. Over 8,000 European soldiers and many more native soldiers lost their lives. In 1822 the Dutch administration was confronted with another uprising, the Padri War in Western Sumatra. This uprising, mounted by Islamic fundamentalists, was not quelled until 1837. Meanwhile, the Dutch colonial army lost a traditionally important reservoir of manpower after the secession of Belgium in 1831. This crisis of manpower in the army was solved by recruiting soldiers in West Africa, where the Dutch possessed a string of forts and castles along the Guinea Coast, remnants from the days of the West India Company, which dealt mainly in gold, ivory and slaves.

The first batches of African recruits were sent off to West Sumatra, where they took part in the campaigns against the Padri insurgents. But it was perhaps no accident that the Dutch colonial government chose Purworejo as their place of more permanent settlement. In spite of all the fortresses built in the area, the region of Purworejo had become known as a stronghold of Pangeran Diponegoro Anom, the son of rebel prince Diponegoro. African veterans were

Endri Kusururi
Salatiga.

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Page 142: The Indo-African family Land-Cordus posing in front of the Land family house, Purworedjo ca. 1932. Standing second from the right is Daan Cordus.

Collection Daan Cordus.