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Kessel, W.M.J. van

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WEST AFRICANS IN THE DUTCH COLONIAL ARMY

By Ineke van Kessel, African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands

Holland's *African Army* is the English title of an exhibition on the little-known history of the West Africans who served in the Dutch East Indies Army, and their Indo-African descendents. Recruitment took place in Elmina and Kumasi between 1831 and 1872, when the Dutch handed their Possessions on the Coast of Guinea to the British. Most of the 3,080 recruits were men from the area of present-day Ghana and Burkina Faso.

The modest-scale exhibition opened on 12 May in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, with an unexpected flurry of publicity in the Dutch media, including a substantial item in the evening TV news and stories in all major newspapers. On display are nineteenth-century paintings and lithographs of African soldiers in the East Indies, and a selection of photographs depicting Indo-African family life on Java. The paintings and lithographs are on loan from various Dutch museums, while the photographs come from private family collections and from the Indo-Afrikaans Kontakt, the organization of Indo-Africans living in the Netherlands. Also on display is an early twentieth century *wayang golek*, a figure in the Javanese puppet theatre, depicting an awesome African soldier in army uniform with sharp teeth.

The exhibition will be on display in the Tropenmuseum till 4 September, after which it will move to Museum Bronbeek, the colonial army museum in Arnhem. From early 2006, the exhibition will be shown in the Indisch Huis in The Hague. Texts are in Dutch (Dutch title is: *Zwart in dienst van Oranje*) and in English. The exhibition came about as a byproduct of my book on the Africans and Indo-Africans in the Dutch East Indies.¹ In contacts and interviews with Indo-African descendents, an unexpectedly rich treasure of photographs was unearthed, some dating from the early twentieth century.



Left to right: Richard Hulskamp, Mary Land, Daan Cordus, Eef Cordus-Klink, Joyce Cordus and Grace Comijs on a visit to St. George d' Elmina, from where their forefathers began the long journey to Java. The Indo-African delegation travelled to Ghana in 2003 to take part in the opening ceremony of the Elmina-Java Museum, where the story of the African soldiers is on display.

From 1831, the Dutch used their tiny footholds on the Gold Coast to solve the manpower problem of the East Indies army, or KNIL (Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger). African recruits were counted as part of the European contingent, and were entitled to European status in terms of army pay, uniforms (including shoes) and most other conditions of service. In spite of numerous infringements on the promise of equal treatment, the African soldiers were certainly better paid and better treated than native Indonesian soldiers. However, volunteers proved very scarce. Three ships, meant to transport an experimental "Negro company" of 150 men, sailed to Batavia with only 44 volunteers. Army reports on their performance in

campaigns in southern and western Sumatra were highly favorable.

In view of the longstanding cordial relations with Ashanti, the Dutch government subsequently decided to send an envoy to Kumasi. In 1837, a treaty was concluded between the Asantehene Kwaku Dua and General Jan Verveer, on behalf of the Dutch King Willem I. The Asantehene would deliver 1,000 men within a year, in exchange for 6,000 guns with powder. In addition, the Dutch obtained permission to open a recruitment bureau in Kumasi, which was staffed by a Eurafrican official from Elmina, Jacob Huydecooper. Initially, Verveer had hoped to recruit Ashanti men, reputed as a "warrior race." When this proved impossible, he settled for the slaves of

the Ashanti, "Donkos," who subsequently acquired the reputation of a "warrior race," even though their ethnic origins were very diverse. The Asantehene never met his obligations, sending only a trickle of recruits to Elmina. Huydecooper, however, managed to acquire considerable numbers of men from private Kumasi citizens. The recruits were given an advance on their army pay to purchase their liberty and were issued with an Act of Manumission and Emancipation. Meanwhile, recruitment also continued along the coast.

The operation ended in 1842, after a series of mutinies in the African companies on Java and Sumatra caused the army command to doubt the wisdom of the African recruitment scheme. Recruitment was resumed in 1855: another 800 young African men made the voyage to Batavia before Elmina was handed to the British in 1872.

Recruitment in Africa can only be illustrated by archival documents, but the African experience in the East Indies has been amply portrayed and photographed. Paintings and drawings made in the nineteenth century focus on their military valor. Corporal Jan Kooi from Elmina, who earned a series of medals in the Aceh war (including the Militaire Willemsorde, the highest distinction in the Dutch army), had his portrait painted during his stay in the Netherlands on the voyage home to Elmina. Photographs of the first generation Africans are rare: Corporal J. de Leeuw is photographed with the Militaire Willemsorde, sergeant Piet Klink figures with his Javanese wife, while Jacobus Jol arranged a studio photograph with his Indo-African son and



Joseph Nelk was the Indo-African son of African soldier Willem Nelk and his Javanese wife Sarina. Willem Nelk returned to Africa in 1881, but Joseph stayed behind to join the Dutch East Indies army at the age of 15. He served till 1910 and afterwards made a career in music. His grandchildren now live in the Netherlands and the USA.

daughter. Judging from the photographs of the second generation, quite a few Indo-Africans succeeded in joining the lower echelons of the colonial elite. Family pictures show smartly-dressed families in front of comfortable houses, or wedding pictures in style, with all the paraphernalia of a European wedding. Most telling are the *baboes* (house maids) and house boys in the background: in two generations, the African recruits had achieved a considerable rise in social status, from ex-slaves to European citizens in colonial society.

The third phase in the saga of the Black Dutchmen, or *Belanda Hitam* as the soldiers and their offspring were called in Java, is the journey to the Netherlands. An army career had become family tradition in many households, with the sons and grandsons of the African soldiers serving as professional soldiers in World War II against Japan, and subsequently in the Dutch war against Indonesian nationalists. Since most Indo-Africans identified strongly with their Dutch citizenship, after Indonesian independence, they opted to settle in the Netherlands. In this section of the exhibition, we see large passenger ships followed by the first snowball fights in the Dutch winter. The story ends with the rediscovery of Africa: dozens of Indo-Africans have by now made a roots trip to Ghana. Daan Cordus and Eef Cordus-Klink, for many decades the driving force behind Indo-African reunions, are photographed in the courtyard of St. George d'Elmina, together with Thad Ulzen, the great-grandson of Corporal Manus Ulzen, who returned from Batavia to Elmina in 1836. When in 2000 the Ulzen family in Ghana first learned about this part of their family history, they decided to use the family plot in Elmina for a museum. The Elmina-Java Museum, situated along the main road from Cape Coast to Takoradi, opened in February 2003. Some of the displays now shown in Dutch museums will have the Elmina-Java Museum as their final destination.

¹ Ineke van Kessel, *Zwarte Hollanders: Afrikaanse Soldaten in Nederlands-Indie* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2005).