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The Netherlands

Merchants, missionaries & migrants: an introduction

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Citation

Kessel, W. M. J. van. (2002). Merchants, missionaries & migrants: an introduction. In *Merchants, missionaries & migrants: 300 years of Dutch-Ghanaian relations* (pp. 10-15). Amsterdam: KIT Publishers. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4741>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Merchants, missionaries and migrants

An introduction

The title of this book – *Merchants, missionaries and migrants* – covers the most important areas of contact between Dutch and Ghanaians over the past centuries. The book grew out of the conference ‘Past and Present of Dutch-Ghanaian Relations’, which was held in The Hague on 7 November 2001 to commemorate three centuries of diplomatic relations between Ghana and the Netherlands. Scholars from Ghana and the Netherlands presented papers on a wide range of issues of mutual interest ranging from the slave trade to the cocoa trade, from the role of Dutch ‘schnapps’ in Ghanaian ritual to relations between African women and Dutch men. The substantial number of contributions on the Ghanaian diaspora, covering Suriname, Indonesia and the Netherlands, illustrates that Dutch-Ghanaian relations are not just a bilateral affair. As a testimony to the globalizing impact of Dutch-Ghanaian contacts, scholars from Suriname and Indonesia also contributed to the present volume. The conference was organized by the African Studies Centre in Leiden, in cooperation with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both of whom also contributed to this book.

The point of departure for the celebration of this tercentenary is a mission carried out in 1701–1702 by David van Nyendael, envoy of the Dutch West India Company (WIC), to Kumasi, capital of the emerging Ashanti empire. In fact, Dutch-Ghanaian relations go back even further, to the last decade of the 16th century, as related in Michel Doortmont’s chapter on the Dutch presence on the Gold Coast. Van Nyendael’s adventurous mission to Kumasi, which is described in Henk den Heijer’s chapter, has been chosen as a convenient starting point for a year of commemorations and cultural exchanges between Ghana, the Netherlands and Suriname.

Balance of power

Trade was undoubtedly the main reason for the Dutch to venture to the unknown lands of the West African coast. It was also the main reason for the people on the coast to welcome the newcomers. Portuguese traders had given Africans a taste for European merchandise, but their heavy-handed conduct had caused resentment. Traders from other parts of Europe added to the range of products available to the Africans, while increasing competition among European trading nations simultaneously increased African leverage. In the 17th century, the Gold Coast hosted five European nations – Dutch, Danes, Brandenburgers, English and Swedes – who between them occupied no less than 21 forts and castles. A unique feature of this part of the West African coast, which was to last until far into the 19th century, was the presence of numerous rival European nations who at best managed a precarious control over the immediate environment of their trading posts. While European powers were busy carving out empires in America and Asia, West Africa for centuries was the scene of trade relations that were heavily dependent on the voluntary cooperation of local partners. A pattern of shifting alliances developed between competing European nations and various African states, in which both sides were aware of their interdependence. Business was perceived as a matter of mutual interest, but both sides persistently kept trying to change the terms of trade in their favour. The local balance of power determined the outcome.

One notable exception to the game of shifting alliances was of course Elmina, headquarters of the WIC in Africa, which from 1637 on was the ever-loyal ally of the Dutch. Ashanti, having established itself as the most powerful state in

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Opposite page:
Allegory – an African
maiden with the horn
of plenty. Illustration
from Johannes Blaeu,
Atlas Maior,
Amsterdam 1662.

the hinterland, became the third leg of this durable alliance.

A central feature of the charter of the Dutch West India Company was its monopoly on trading rights on the African coast. Dutch ships trading on their own, or on behalf of other committees of merchants, were considered illegal interlopers. The WIC's ambition was to establish a monopoly over its West African trading partners as well, an endeavour that was doomed to fail. African states welcomed new trading partners, but had no intention of accepting them as overlords or granting them exclusive rights.

Following the example of the Portuguese, the Dutch concluded treaties with coastal states, stipulating the duties and obligations of the contracting partners. The very first such treaty was concluded in 1612 with the king and elders of the small coastal state Asebu. One of the oldest surviving treaties is the agreement drawn up in 1642 between Axim and Director Ruychaver on behalf of the WIC and the States General of the Dutch Republic, after the Dutch navy had conquered the Portuguese stronghold of Fort St Anthony in Axim. In this agreement, the people of Axim declared that they would be the loyal servants of the Prince of Orange and the WIC, for now and for eternity. They would not engage in trading with any other European nation and vowed to extradite all Portuguese to the Dutch. All civil and criminal cases were to be brought to the Dutch commander of the fort, while the local headmen were entitled to their share of the fines. The Dutch and the people of Axim would consider each other's enemies as their own enemy. The Dutch were entitled to one-fifth of the fish catch. On the other side, the local headmen were entitled to a toll for every Dutch ship that anchored off Elmina, and to a piece of linen per fixed amount of merchandise on these ships (Van Dantzig 1980: 36),

In Axim, the Dutch invoked the right of conquest as the basis for their claims, as they had evicted the Portuguese. But in Accra, for example, the Dutch position was much weaker. The

Portuguese had already left before the advent of the Dutch, and Accra was a more powerful state than Axim. Here was no question of Dutch jurisdiction or of taxation in the form of fish. In exchange for payments in gold, the king of Accra did promise exclusive trading rights to the Dutch, but the Dutch were in no position to enforce their claim to monopoly rights. Most treaties stipulated that the Dutch were to pay ground rents in fixed amounts of specified goods for the right to build and maintain a fortification, while they were also expected to make their contributions to customary festivities.

These ground rents were a source of much misunderstanding. The Europeans believed that they had purchased ownership titles to the land where they built their fortifications. But selling individual titles to land was a notion alien to African custom. In return for gifts and payments, African rulers ceded user rights to land where Europeans were allowed to settle and build forts (Daaku 1970: 49). This was to become a source of conflict in 1869, when the Dutch and the British decided on an exchange of territories without involving the local rulers. The Europeans considered this a transaction between two owners of property, while the affected African populations were understandably infuriated: how could these Europeans cede territories that were not theirs in the first place?

Even if the treaties stipulated monopoly rights, African rulers insisted on their right to trade with others. The result was a frequent change of allies, as old friends did not deliver on their promises and new friends looked more promising. In the 1690s, the rulers of Asebu teamed up with the Fanti and the English against the Dutch, whose claim to exclusive rights in Komenda was thwarted by powerful local traders. Dutch-English rivalry was to continue until the 19th century. The Dutch used dumping practices, known as 'cladden', to undercut the English merchants and squeeze them out of the West African markets. This practice could also turn against the Dutch, as African merchants simply held up their gold and waited for better

bargains (Ratelband 1953). African traders soon found out that the Dutch would drastically lower their prices when an English ship appeared.

The African traders were known as 'Akanists', described by Olfert Dapper as famed merchants, 'very clever in their trade, they (...) travel as unpartisan men through the lands of Sabu and others. (...) These big merchants are rich in gold and slaves and provide two-thirds of the gold which is annually collected by the Europeans on the Gold Coast' (Dapper 1668: 458-9). In pre-colonial times, the Europeans never gained direct access to the gold mines.

Merchants and merchandise

What was the trade all about? In the WIC years, Dutch imports to Ghana consisted mainly of textiles, guns, powder, metal ware and alcoholic drinks. In this period, gold, ivory and slaves were the most important exports from Ghana, followed by products of less importance such as pepper and lemon juice. The Dutch also played an important role as carriers in the inter-African trade (Den Heijer 1997). The organization of the slave trade, in which Ghanaians and Dutch acted as business partners, is described in Akosua Perbi's chapter. Alcohol, notably geneva, remains an important Dutch product in Ghana today, although Emmanuel Akyeampong's chapter makes clear that its meaning has shifted over time from social booze to ritual drink.

Trade remains the core business of Dutch-Ghanaian relations even today. Nowadays, Dutch imports consist mainly of used cars, electrical machinery, textiles, mineral fuels, oils and processed food products, notably dairy products and salted pig feet. The major commodities imported by the Netherlands from Ghana now include cocoa, timber and aluminium. Victor Nyanteng's chapter spells out the central position of cocoa in present commercial relations. In the days of the WIC, both sides attempted to outwit the other with a range of cheating tricks. Ghanaians mixed gold dust with sand, added to the weight of ivory by pouring lead in the tusks and rubbed old or sick slaves with oil to give

them a healthy, shiny appearance. The Dutch sold inferior guns, made false folds in their bales of cotton, silk and linen to cheat with the length and diluted their genever with water. Tricks and all, the overall picture is that of a relationship between equal partners. The Dutch, who numbered a few hundred at most during the peak years of the Guinea trade, were never in a position to impose their will and remained dependent on the cooperation of local partners.

Missionaries

During the centuries of Company rule, the Protestant Dutch showed very little missionary zeal in their overseas possessions and footholds. Ministers of religion sent out by the Company ministered only to the European personnel of the WIC, and perhaps to a handful of Euro-Africans, the descendents of European men and African women. One attempt to reach beyond the small European community and to cater for the spiritual needs of the Africans ended in dismal failure, as is related in the two chapters by Henri van der Zee and David Kpobi on the tragic life of Jacobus Capitein, the first black minister stationed in Elmina.

While for a long time Dutch Protestants had little interest in 'converting the heathen', the Catholic Church in the Netherlands by contrast would later become known for its extraordinary outburst of missionary fervour. Dutch missionaries and nuns swarmed out to Africa in great numbers, Ghana included.

By the last quarter of the 20th century, the tables were turned. The Netherlands had become one of Europe's most secularized nations, while Ghana witnessed a flourishing of various Christian churches, both old and new. Ghanaian churches, notably of the Pentecostal type, proliferated not only in Ghana but also in Dutch towns with a substantial Ghanaian migrant population. Ministers followed their flock to the diaspora, but the Ghanaian diaspora also feeds into religious life in Ghana. Older, established churches also participate in this reverse missionary effort. Thus, David Kpobi, the author of a

chapter on Jacobus Capitein, served from 1987-1991 as pastor in Utrecht on secondment from the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. The role of Pentecostal churches in moulding a new identity and a sense of self-esteem among Ghanaians, who often find themselves at a loss in the paper jungle of the Netherlands' immigration policies, is highlighted in Rijk van Dijk's chapter.

Voluntary and involuntary migrants

For better or for worse, the European presence in West Africa introduced Africans to other parts of the world. European merchants organized a massive forced migration of Africans to the New World. The Dutch were major players in this transatlantic slave trade, both as suppliers for the Portuguese, Spanish and British colonies in the New World, as well as for the Dutch colonies of Dutch Brazil, Suriname and the Dutch West Indies.

The destiny of Africans of Ghanaian origins in the New World is examined in two chapters on Suriname. The focus is on two distinct types of experiences. André Pakosie, himself a member of the Ndyuka maroons, examines the African legacy of the Maroons and the linguistic and socio-religious parallels with the Akan of Ghana. Jean-Jacques Vrij traces the destinies of individuals, some of slave status, some emancipated slaves and some free blacks, who made their own careers in the unpropitious environment of a plantation colony.

More ambiguous was the position of the Africans recruited in the 19th century as soldiers for the colonial army in the Netherlands East Indies. The vast majority of these recruits was originally of slave status, but they were manumitted when entering army service. Moreover, in the East Indies they counted as part of the European contingent of the army, with conditions of service similar to those of Europeans. Although the recruitment venture hovers on the border between voluntary and involuntary migration, the Africans in the East Indies army experienced a rapid rise in social status. As described by Ineke van Kessel and Endri Kusruri

in two chapters on these 'Black Dutchmen', the African soldiers jealously guarded their European status and considered themselves somewhat superior to the native Indonesian population.

Over the centuries, individual people also migrated back and forth between the Netherlands and Ghana. Early examples are discussed in Natalie Everts' chapter on two Euro-African women in Elmina who experienced life in Amsterdam as well as in Elmina. Some of these early migrants acquired international fame, such as the slave boy Jacobus Capitein, who became a minister of religion, or the two Ashanti princes Kwasi Boakye and Kwame Poku, whose dramatic life story is the subject of Arthur Japin's famous novel, *The two hearts of Kwasi Boachi*.

By the last quarter of the 20th century, these pioneers were followed by a substantial flow of young Ghanaians looking for job opportunities. Ghanaians became known as an enterprising immigrant community. Some settled permanently in the Netherlands, while others are saving their earnings hoping to return to Ghana one day. But nearly all Ghanaian migrants maintain intensive contacts with home, travelling back and forth, sending money, supporting relatives and often closely following the latest political developments. Their contribution to the Ghanaian economy and the welfare of relatives at home is discussed in Daniel Arhinful's chapter.

By the end of the 19th century, the Dutch connection had brought Ghanaians to all five continents: to North and South America, Europe, other parts of Africa and to Asia. Indeed, even to Australia. Travelling on foot across the continent in 1882, George Morrison, a young adventurous Australian, met an old gentleman in the middle of Australia by the name of John Smith. He described this new travelling companion as 'a toothless darkie, a native of the Gold Coast of Africa, a cook by profession and one of the kindest, most considerate men it has been my lot to meet with' (Pearl 1967: 30). As a young man, John Smith of the Gold Coast had enlisted on a Dutch man-of-war that was taking Prince Hendrik of the Netherlands around the world.

Thus John Smith became the first black man ever seen in Iceland, and after his maritime travels he ended up in Australia.

Aftermath

On the eve of the transfer of the Dutch Possessions on the Coast of Guinea to the British, Dutch scholar C.M. Kan noted in 1871 that the history of the Dutch on this coast makes for a dark page in Dutch colonial history. 'While initially this history testifies to the fortitude and industry of our forefathers, later it provides testimony of more than usual cruelty, more than common narrow-mindedness, regretful neglect, both of our own interest and those of the local population, great immorality, indifference and egoism. Let us burn the historical records which tell about the Coast of Guinea, which ought never to be opened and never to be used for haughtiness or instruction' (Kan 1871: 7).

Fortunately, his advice to burn the archives was not heeded. The rich documentary record enables us today to trace Dutch-Ghanaian relations over the centuries, not 'in haughtiness', but indeed for instruction. The prevailing 19th-century Dutch perspective on the Gold Coast was that of a failed colony, where the Dutch for centuries had made profits with the infamous slave trade without any efforts at local development. But this is a perspective coloured by the heyday of colonialism. The Dutch presence on the Gold Coast belongs rather to the pre-colonial episode, in which Dutch and Ghanaians interacted, traded and quarrelled as equal business partners. Even if the business indeed included the inequitable slave trade, this was basically a relationship between equals. In this book, published on the occasion of the Dutch-Ghanaian tercentenary, past and present come together, hopefully laying a solid foundation for equitable cooperation in the future.

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Note

For convenience sake, in this book we use 'Ghana' and 'Ghanaians' to refer to the area of present-day Ghana and its people, although these names of course only came into existence when Ghana proclaimed its independence in 1957. Similarly, 'Dutch' in the context of this book can occasionally include people from other European nations, as the West India Company, being a true multinational, recruited its personnel all over Europe.