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Silva, F.R. da

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“A kind of cunning sort of under-minding people”

Views of the Dutch in Seventeenth-century West Africa

Filipa Ribeiro da Silva

Introduction

On 21 August 1681, James Nightingale, serving the Royal African Company of England at James Fort in Accra, reported: “The three persons Ahenesa [local authority] send down to us [...] bid us beware of the Dutch, for they are all rogues and lyers.”

Although scholars have devoted a great deal of attention in the past fifty to eighty years to studying European expansion and the subsequent processes of empire-building, thus producing an extensive body of literature on disputes and rivalries between European sea powers and European views of indigenous populations, we still know little about how European explorers and empire-builders were viewed by the people who were targeted by their actions and activities. Similarly, little is known about how the various Europeans involved in maritime expansion and empire-building regarded each other in the overseas areas where they had to devise strategies to defend their interests. This article aims to fill part of this gap in the historiography by analysing how the Dutch were perceived in the 1600s by other Europeans and the indigenous population on the West African coast, with the main aim being to show how political disputes and commercial rivalries on the coast coloured the relationships between Europeans and the various groups’ views of each other.

Unlike other areas of the world, sub-Saharan Africa is poor in terms of written sources produced by the local population during the pre-colonial period, especially in the continent’s western coastal regions. This study consequently had to be based on source materials produced by European

¹ Robin Law, ed., *The English in West Africa, 1681-1683. The Local Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England, 1681-1699*, Part 1, (Oxford: British Academy, Oxford University Press, 1997) 169.

explorers, traders and naval and military officers of the various commercial companies and states. These sources consist of travel reports, journals of voyages, descriptions of African regions and their populations, correspondence and the like. From these I selected the most coherent and comprehensive materials regarding the English, Danish, French and Portuguese presence in seventeenth-century West Africa. Unfortunately, Portuguese sources are scarcer than the English, Danish, French and Dutch sources; in some cases, therefore, I had to use non-Portuguese materials to reconstruct Portuguese views on and attitudes towards the Dutch.

By critically analysing these materials I have sought to reconstruct how the Dutch were seen by the Portuguese, English, Danish and French, and also the attitudes of Africans towards the Dutch. Let us start, however, with a brief overview of the Dutch arrival and presence on the west coast of Africa in the late sixteenth century and subsequent decades.

The Dutch on the coast

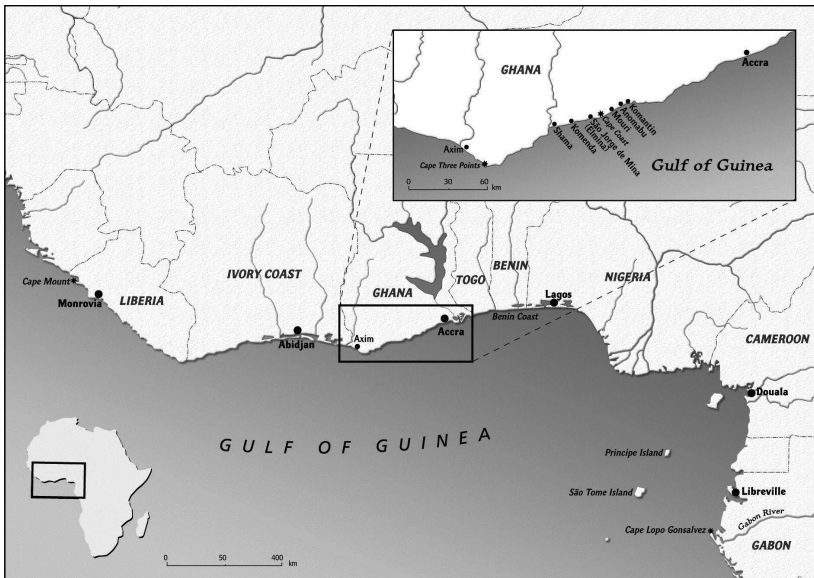
The merchants of the Dutch Republic (hereafter the Republic) first sailed to the west coast of Africa for commercial purposes in the 1590s. These initial voyages were organised by private merchants, mostly based in major port cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Middelburg. These merchants traded products such as hides, ivory, gold, beeswax, ambergris and civet cats, as well as sugar from the island of São Tomé, in the various coastal regions stretching from Senegambia to Cape Lopez and the Loango Coast.

However, the increasing political and military tensions that arose between the Republic and the Habsburg Empire following the Dutch Revolt in 1568 against Habsburg rule and the subsequent Eighty Years War (1568-1648) caused rising losses for merchants engaged in overseas trade, including commerce with West Africa. Some sectors of the mercantile community consequently requested intervention by the States-General of the Republic. The States-General responded to these requests by deciding to sponsor expeditions in 1599 that were aimed at taking over the island of São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea.² During the Twelve Years Truce (1609-1621) between the Republic and the Habsburgs, the States-General also negotiated the establishment of Fort Nassau, the first fortress on the Gold Coast, which was built in Mouri in 1612 with the permission of the local African ruler, the chief of Asebu.

2 Adam Jones, ed., *German sources for West African History* (Wiesbaden, 1983) 9-17.

After the Twelve Years Truce ended, conflicts on this coast, as elsewhere, intensified. In 1621, the States-General decided to charter the West India Company (WIC, or the Company) and grant it a monopoly on Atlantic trade (with the exception of the northern fisheries), including commerce with West Africa. Between 1624 and 1638 private merchants were permitted to participate in the monopoly only if they were hired by the WIC or were willing to invest in WIC shares on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange.

The WIC, however, also became involved in intense naval campaigns against Spanish and Portuguese interests in the Atlantic, and these campaigns extended to West Africa. Over time, these naval attacks resulted in the WIC gaining control of various trading posts and settlements previously controlled by the Portuguese, including Arguin, Mina, Axim, Shama, São Tomé and Angola, all of which were taken over by the WIC in the 1630s and 1640s.



Map of the Gulf of Guinea, by Armand Haye, Amsterdam

In the years thereafter, however, these attacks also disrupted trade and created a huge financial burden and enormous logistic strain for the Company.³ From the late 1630s onwards, therefore, the Company started to loosen its monopoly and to allow private merchants once again to participate in trade. These merchants' human, financial, and material resources were

³ Michiel A.G. de Jong, *'Staat van oorlog': wapenbedrijf en militaire hervorming in de Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden, 1585-1621* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2005).

much needed by the Company in order to continue operations. In 1674, the Company was declared bankrupt; however, the States-General then established a second Dutch West India Company, with identical jurisdiction over the west coast of Africa.

European views of the Dutch on the coast

When the merchants of the Republic first started their commercial activities on the west coast of Africa, the Portuguese were the sole Europeans settled either temporarily or permanently in various locations in these coastal areas, stretching from Arguin and Senegambia to the Gold Coast and Angola further south, as well as the archipelagos of Cape Verde and São Tomé. Not surprisingly, therefore, it is among the Portuguese that we find evidence of the first views held on these merchants.

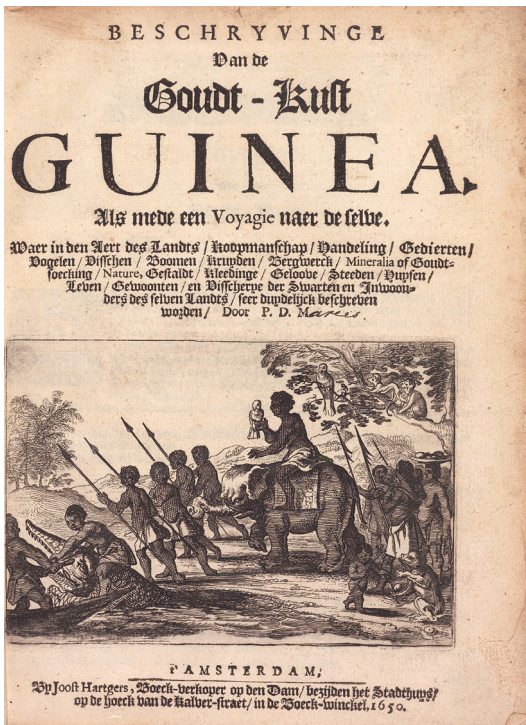
Portugal's commercial presence in this region was based on a monopoly held by the Portuguese Crown and in which private merchants were allowed to participate, provided they had trading licences or were leaseholders of the monopoly and its various branches. Therefore, officials of the Crown and merchants operating in this region would all have seen the Dutch as intruders in the region. The Portuguese had held a privileged position there for over a century, without facing any significant competition from other Europeans. In addition, the military conflicts at the time meant that merchants from the Republic arriving on the coast were often regarded as enemies of the Portuguese Crown and, therefore, as a threat to the latter's interests.

In his *Description and historical account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea* in 1602 Pieter de Marees provides details of Portuguese attitudes towards the Dutch and other foreigners seeking to trade on the Coast: "Once the Portuguese had made themselves Masters of the Land applying full rigour and force when they were in full possession, they forbade the Blacks or Negroes to trade or barter with any foreign nation except themselves, several times taking people captive, greatly torturing those whom they knew to have traded with nations other (than theirs). [...] They attacked them with all the rigour they could master, respecting no person, whatever his quantity or nation: first of all the French, then people of their own nations and now, lastly, the Dutch or Flamengos."⁴

From a military and naval point of view, merchants from the Republic

4 De Marees, *Description*, 205-207.

lic were often regarded by the Portuguese as a threat because their merchants' ships were often well armed and not only were they able to defend themselves against attacks by the Portuguese military and coastal fleets, but they could also cause harm to Portuguese posts and settlements, as evidenced by several descriptions of attacks on São Tomé and the Gold Coast. In addition, merchant vessels under the Dutch flag were better equipped for defence than the Portuguese coastal fleet, which often had insufficient ammunition, weapons and skilled soldiers and whose ships were often not properly maintained. According to De Marees: "The Portuguese of the Castle de Mina then saw [...] that the Flamengos, [...] were coming to trade there. For they came with bigger ships and were more capable of resisting them, whilst the galleys which they [the Portuguese] had were sure to founder, as they were in such a condition that they could hardly be used."⁵



Title-page of Pieter de Marees, *Beschrijvinghe van de Goudt-Kust Guinea, als mede een voyagie naar de zelve* (Amsterdam 1650).

Bijzondere Collecties, Universiteit van Amsterdam

⁵ De Marees, *Description*, 209-211.

By the late seventeenth century, however, Frenchmen serving on the west coast of Africa, either in Senegambia or travelling elsewhere along the coast, offer us a rather different picture of the Dutch, especially regarding their military power. Both Jacques-Joseph Le Maire and Jean Barbot, when referring to the French takeover of Arguin (present-day Mauritania) and Goree (present-day Senegal), portrayed the servants of the WIC in these areas as weak and incapable of defending their posts, hinting even that they acted cowardly.⁶ According to Le Maire, “For Arguin was taken by the Dutch from the Portuguese, and retaken from the latter during the war of 1672, by M. Ducas, Captain of the [French] African Company. There were only 120 men in this expedition, and they only lost three. The cowardice of the Dutch Governor did much to win this conquest, for nothing could have been easier than to prevent it. Our guns consisted of six small ones, the largest were eight pounders. We had no protection, and with all that, we were short of water.”⁷

In economic terms, Dutch merchants were often accused of being unfair competitors and ruthless bargainers, using various strategies to push their rivals out of the markets. They were often accused of offering higher *dashes*⁸ to African merchants to entice them to their vessels and factories to conduct trade. Dutch merchants were regularly also denounced for flooding markets with products by offering those products to Africans at lower prices so as to guarantee faster sales of commodities and thus reduce the costs of staying on the coast. That way, they would also destroy the business opportunities of the Portuguese and later of other Europeans merchants.⁹ In 1602, Pieter de Marees wrote: “Yet they [the Portuguese] are faring quite badly and are much in decline, so that nowadays the Castle d’Mina gives the king of Spain more loss than profit; and this is because the trade of the Portuguese is totally ruined, so that they hardly make any commercial transactions there any longer, as a result of competition from the Dutch

6 “The island [Goree] was given to the Dutch Company by King Biram around 1617, and this Company occupied it until 1677 when it surrendered it to Marshall D’Estrees, who with six large vessels captured it. There was so little resistance that the history of the siege is not worth repeating.” P.E.H. Hair, ed., *Barbot on Guinea. The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678-1712*, vol. 1 (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1992) 44.

7 Jacques-Joseph Le Maire, *Voyage to the Canaries, Cape Verde and the Coast of Africa under the command of M. Dancourt (1682). Translated from the French of M. Le Maire by Edmond Goldsmid, F.R.H.S., F.S.A. (Scor.)* (Edinburgh: privately printed, 1887) 26.

8 *Dashe* or *dashey* from the Portuguese *doa o*: gift.

9 In the early period of private free trade with West Africa, similar strategies were also employed by various groups of merchants from the Republic against each other while operating on the coast. De Marees, *Description*, 45.

ships, which offer trade-goods here for about the same price as the Portuguese have to pay in Portugal."¹⁰

During the seventeenth century, the English, Danish and French also increased their presence in Senegambia and on the Gold, Ivory and Slave Coasts. This resulted in the production of a series of written sources that allow us to reconstruct these groups' view of the Dutch, either as officials of the WIC or as interlopers. The image of Dutch merchants as being extremely competitive is confirmed by officials of the Royal African Company of England (RAC), especially on the Gold Coast. Servants of the WIC and interlopers from Rotterdam, Middelburg and other cities alike continued to be accused of offering presents to African rulers and chief merchants to attract them to their deals. On 23 June 1682, Charles Towgood, aboard the *Cape Coast Briganteen* at Allampo Road,¹¹ reported: "I had gott slaves if the Dutch Company ships had not given the Negroes great dashey¹² that they should not come aboard of me."¹³

During this period the Dutch were regularly accused of saturating local markets with their products by altering the balance between price and quality and so reducing the opportunities for the English and Danish to do business. These complaints came mainly from servants of English and Danish companies, in particular the RAC (1672), the Gluckstadt Company (1659) and the Danish West India-Guinea Company (1697).

On 1 December 1681, Richard Thelwall, stationed at Annamabo in the service of the RAC, reported: "Att present sayes¹⁴ is a drug, for the Dutch have lowered their say's to 17 angles and the people say theirs is of better couller." Two weeks later, on December 17, Thelwall added: "I find the Dutch are a kind of cunning sort of undermining people; they have sent a bendy¹⁵ to our Arcanies here to gett them send mony's to them."¹⁶ Two years later, similar complaints were made by Mark Bedford Whiting while serving the RAC at the Sekondi factory. On 5 October 1683 he reported: "I understand that the Generall of the Mina is resolved to supply their factory here with all sorts of goods and to sell them at low rates only to draw the country people in, and to get us off this place."¹⁷ Similar complaints

10 De Marees, *Description*, 213-214.

11 Location stated in the source. Meaning: anchored at Allampo.

12 See note 9.

13 Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. 1, 274.

14 Fine woolen cloth made in the Netherlands and England.

15 Two ounces of gold (value: 8 pounds sterling).

16 Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. 1, 123.

17 *Ibidem*, vol. 1, 17.

were made by RAC servants aboard ships trading along the coast and serving various forts, as Robert Young from James Fort in Accra reported on 23 October 1683: “[O]ur powder and muskets doe not att present goe off by reason of the Dutch whoe undersells us.”¹⁸

In 1697, Erick Tilleman made similar complaints about the Dutch in his *Short Account of West Africa*. As he wrote: “There is much good gold here [in Axim, but] the trade must be carried on mostly at night so the Company’s revenue officers may know nothing about it, since the Dutch have imposed a strict prohibition against trading anywhere along the *Coast* with *particuliere* ships.”¹⁹

The servants of the WIC were not only portrayed as responsible for all these practices regarded by their rivals as abusive strategies, but were also depicted as individuals who tried at all times and by various means to prevent other Europeans from trading on the coast, especially on the Gold Coast, where competition was more intense due to the proximity of European forts and trading posts controlled by companies representing the interests of different merchant groups and states. Again, Tilleman reports in his *Short Account* that “At that time [early 1660s] the Dutch were virtually masters of the entire *Coast* and did not, in any way want to permit any other nation to be found in that area; therefore from *Cabo Corsso* [Cape Coast] they began to fire on the Danish *Castle Friderichs-Berg* [Frederiksborg] which lies close by, seized the Danish lodge near *Cabo Corsso* on 23 March 1664 and treated the Danes who were stationed there wretchedly.”²⁰

The English sources also contain references to practices that we would classify as sabotage. On 14 January 1683 for example, Ralph Hassel, serving the RAC at James Fort in Accra, informed his superiors that “The Dutchman here paniard²¹ some goods that I had sold some Acquomboes, [...] for I conjecture that he doth it out of malice.”²² In English sources, too, WIC officials are often accused of making intrigues or speaking badly of other Europeans in the presence of African rulers and chief merchants so as to manipulate them and set their minds against other Europeans, especially the English and Danish on the Gold Coast. These intrigues were often for economic and geo-strategic purposes. On some occasions, these manoeuvres by WIC servants led to the takeover of ports from other Europeans on the coast or

18 Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. 1, 215.

19 S. Winsnes, ed. and trans., *A Short Account of West Africa*, 23.

20 S. Winsnes, ed. and trans., *A Short Account of West Africa*, 27.

21 Paniar or Panyar from the Portuguese *penhorar* ‘distrain’. Used here to mean seizing goods or persons in order to enforce payment.

22 Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. 1, 198.

to the removal of their factories from specific trading areas, and to conflicts between Europeans and African rulers. On 27 July 1683, for example, Mark Bedford Whiting, at the service of the RAC at the Sekondi factory, reported that "The Generall of the Mina I am inform'd hath sent a great dashes to the said Ayampama to rout the English out here" and, on 12 August, added that "I am informe'd that the Dutch have sent dashey²³ to the Cabasheers²⁴ following vizt Quoteamboushou, Nakaba, Obonie and Aymbo, to come here and route the English out."²⁵

This negative portrayal of Dutch merchants and WIC servants as being rootless and creating unfair competition on the coast should, however, be nuanced because source materials mentioning their presence in the region in the early modern period also provide multiple examples of positive images and exchanges between Dutch and English, Danish and Swedish company servants, as well as between these groups and the interlopers from different backgrounds who regularly visited the coast. On 10 September 1681, for example, James Nightingale, serving the RAC at James Fort in Accra, reported: "I am very well satisfied that Mr. Arthur Wendover bought some time agoe out of a Dutch ship some sayes, perpettuanos²⁶, fine sletias²⁷ and other goods."²⁸

WIC officials on the Gold Coast are also portrayed as capable of showing some solidarity, when necessary, with their fellow Europeans in the event, for example, of illness. On several occasions Dutch doctors travelled to English forts and posts to assist RAC servants who had fallen ill. On 18 August 1681, for instance, William Cross, serving the RAC at Ophra (also known as Ardra), wrote to the head of the Company based at Cape Coast Castle to say: "I am sorry I am to send you the unhappy news of Mr. Gouldings death, whoe died on the 5th of May last, he lay sick but 4 dayes, all which time I had the Dutch doctor with him, who att first comeing told me he was a dead man, after he understood what he had taken, which was too large portion of some physick he brought downe here with him."²⁹

Captains serving onboard Dutch ships were also often portrayed in a positive light by the English, especially when it came to the transportation

23 See note 9.

24 Cabasheer, from the Portuguese *cabeceira*, meaning to be the head of something. In this context it is used as equivalent to chief, chief officials of African Kingdoms and African chief merchants.

25 Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. 1, 9-10.

26 Type of hard-wearing wool serge cloth.

27 Type of linen cloth.

28 Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. 1, 171.

29 Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. 1, 219-220.

of English correspondence. On 9 December 1681, for example, James Nightingale wrote: “The first ship that sailed from the Mine to Europe will be Captain Leendart Joosten van Dyck [...]. It will be the latter end of January before Captain Balk will depart. Both these captains presents (sic) their humble servants to your worship, and will be glad to serve you in carrying letters for Europe, or anything else that lies in their power but begg pardon that they cannot waite on you at Cape Corsoe.”³⁰

It should be noted, however, that the Director of the WIC at Elmina was not always pleased by and on some occasions tried to prevent these practices. On 24 June 1682, James Nightingale, serving the RAC at Komenda, reported: “I was this morning aboard the Dutch ships bound for Europe, whereof I understand that there are two design’d to sail upon Monday next without failure, whereof one for Zealand and the other for Amsterdam, but they are absolutely ordered by the Generall of the Mina, not to carry letters for the English nation without his especiall order, but if your honour may be pleased to write under my covert I doubt not but it shall have a safe conveyance. I have the commanders promise for the safe conduct of my owns letters.”³¹

The Dutch were also willing to help their fellow Europeans if they needed skilled workers, such as artisans, or use of means of transport. On 25 June 1682, for instance, Ralph Hassel, serving the RAC at James Fort in Accra, mentioned to his superior while reporting on the progress of the repair works at the fort: “I have now three maisons att work and a carpenter, which I borrow from the Dutchman.”³²

The Dutch through an African lens

Africans appear to have regarded the Dutch (like other Europeans) trading on the coast from a utilitarian and pragmatic perspective. In situations of armed conflict, either against other African rulers or Europeans on the coast, African authorities would see individual soldiers serving the Dutch as potential mercenaries for their own armies, or Dutch merchants and the Company as a possible ally who could be useful in defeating a powerful

³⁰ Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. 1, 28.

³¹ Ibidem, vol. 1, 42.

³² Ibidem, vol. 1, 189. On 18 August 1681, William Cross, serving the RAC at Ophra, also wrote: “I have bin beholden to the Dutch for Captain Bowler and Captain Bramfill both, for the use of their canoes.” Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. 1, 220.

enemy. Both on the Gold Coast and in Angola (during the WIC's rule from 1641 to 1648), African authorities allied with Dutch soldiers and armies in an attempt to fight a common enemy, whether African or European.³³

In situations, however, in which Dutch interests conflicted with the priorities of the African rulers, Africans could easily switch from regarding the Dutch as potential allies to seeing them as enemies and potential targets for retaliations. The disputes surrounding control of the Cape Coast Castle (named Carolusborg under Swedish rule) are a good example of such conflicts. In his *Short Account of West Africa* (1697) Erick Tilleman provides a description of intervention by African authorities in the conflict, and shows how quickly they shifted sides to safeguard their interests. He wrote: "During that same month of April [1659] it was taken away from them [the Dutch] by the *Natureller* and again committed to the Swedes, [...] in the year 1663, [...] the *Natureller* took it away from the Swedes again with cunning in return for large payments delivered it to the Dutch."³⁴

Another good example of how quickly negotiations with African rulers and chief merchants could turn sour was reported on 16 November 1681 by James Nightingale, serving the RAC at Komenda, who wrote: "The General of the Mina, send some days agone his chief Cabbisheer³⁵ Aban to Chama, Jabie and the Antha country to agree with the natives not to bring their gold to Commenda; he instigated them as much against the English as possible he can; but alas the whole country hates him from Ashanee to Fanteen, and as for this place they [the Africans] have broken downe the factory to the ground and stolen away all the stones that was for the building of their fort."³⁶

The utilitarian view that Africans appear to have had of the Dutch (and Europeans, in general) was not limited to political and military affairs. To obtain high payments of customs, more impressive presents and better commercial deals from the various Europeans, African rulers and the most powerful merchants tried, on various occasions successfully, to manipulate European merchants. This sometimes meant they acted against each other's interests, particularly on the Gold Coast, where competition between the different groups of Europeans (either in the forts or trading posts) was

33 Jones, ed., *German Sources*, multiple references in several accounts published in this edited collection of documents.

34 Winsnes, ed. and trans., *A Short Account of West Africa*, 27.

35 See note 25.

36 Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. 1, 24-25.

strong. On 12 June 1683, for instance, Mark Bedford Whiting reported from Sekondi: "I was by the natives welcom'd on shoare and have gotten free possession of the Royal Company factory, but the Dutch [are] shamefully turn'd out of doors, being not lookt upon" and added some six weeks later that "The Cabasheers desire your worship that you'l be pleased now to keep possession to yourself for they are resolv'd to entertain noe more Dutch att this place."³⁷

Conclusion

The evidence presented here suggests that the Dutch were not well regarded among Europeans in seventeenth-century West Africa. They were often reported to be "rogues", "lyers", "cunning" and "undermining" people, capable of using all kinds of strategies to gain control of markets and trading posts, to obtain the best deals and to destroy the business opportunities of their competitors. This general view of the Dutch was certainly heavily coloured by the commercial competition between Europeans on the coast and the disputes through which they sought to gain political leverage over African rulers and chief merchants.

Although the impartiality of the English, Danish, and French seventeenth-century reports may be queried, given the aforementioned rivalries, there must have been some truth in the claims made by critics of Dutch behaviour in the markets on the Gold, Ivory and Slave Coasts. After all, the Dutch appear over time to have lost credibility in the markets, while French, English and Danish influence and activity in these areas increased and their volume of trade with Africans grew.

The reputation of the Dutch also does not appear to have been very positive among Africans. In some instances, Dutch were even reported as threatening African chief merchants. Mark Bedford Whiting wrote on 5 October 1683, for example, that "The Dutch man heareing of the said caba-sheere³⁸ standing up for the English, hee sent him word that one day her hop'd to ssee him at the Mina without his head, hee [the Cabouseer, African merchant] sent him word that he had not better speak too much, least Tick-adoe make him carry his stoole after him."³⁹

³⁷ Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. 1, 9.

³⁸ See note 25.

³⁹ Law, ed., *The English in West Africa*, vol. I, 17.

About the author

Filipa Ribeiro da Silva (1974) is assistant professor at the Department of History University of Macau and member of the Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations at the International Institute of Social History of the Netherlands Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences. Her research interests are Early Modern Social and Economic History, Maritime History, Portuguese and Dutch Overseas History, and Iberian Inquisitions. She has published material on the Dutch and Portuguese in Western Africa and the Atlantic System, on labor migration to West Africa and on labor relations in Mozambique. Filipa obtained her PhD at Leiden University in 2009, after reading History and History of Portuguese Oceanic Expansion at the New University of Lisbon, where she received her BA honors and Master degree in 1996 and 2002.