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An overview of Dutch relations with the Gold Coast in the light of David van Nyendael’s mission to Asante in 1701/’02

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Introduction

The year 2001 sees the commemoration of 300 years of diplomatic relations between Ghana and the Netherlands, looking back at the mission of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) official David van Nyendael to the court of Asantehene Osei Tutu I in Kumasi in 1701/’02. Commemorating this event as a starting point of the relationship between two modern states has of course merely a symbolic meaning. Current relations can hardly be compared to those of 300 years ago, and besides, the Asante kingdom does not equal Ghana nor the WIC the Kingdom of the Netherlands. However, the WIC did – in its day – act as the representative of the Dutch Republic, the forerunner of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and the historical Asante state is an important constituent part of modern-day Ghana.

David van Nyendael’s mission provides us with an historical anchor point, which enables us to revisit Dutch-Ghanaian relations over the centuries in terms of a relationship between equal parties and partners. This in counterpoint to the rather more colonial terms in which the Dutch historical presence on the Gold Coast is usually described, whereby the history of the slave trade and the colonial aspects of the Dutch presence are highlighted. These aspects can and should of course not be ignored, but they do not provide the whole story either: the Dutch presence on the Gold Coast from 1595 to 1872 and beyond makes for a complex history in political, economic, as well as social and cultural terms.

The project envisaged here is to review the Dutch-Ghanaian relationship from the earliest beginnings in the late 16th century to 20th century, in the light of the mutual interests of the African and European partners over time, as they existed in the context of cohabitation and co-operation on the Gold Coast. The text is divided into five parts, four of which deal with the three main sub-themes of the Dutch-Ghanaian relationship: the political, economic and socio-cultural relations. Central to the review are the problems and challenges the Dutch and the Ghanaians encountered in their relationship, how they solved these problems, what marked the different aspects of their relationship, and why. Before arriving at this broadly chronological-thematic approach, David van Nyendael’s mission is briefly discussed, highlighting its symbolic meaning for the relationship between Ghana and the Netherlands over the centuries.
David van Nyendael’s mission to Kumasi, 1701/02

On 9 November 1701, David van Nyendael, a Dutch West India Company (WIC) official, embarked on a journey from the town of Elmina, centre of the WIC on the Gold Coast, to Kumasi, the capital of the inland Kingdom of Asante. The object of the mission was to plead and negotiate with the Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Tutu I, the king of Asante, for an end to the wars in the interior, and the resumption of trade. Van Nyendael stayed in Kumasi for just under a year, returning in Elmina on 12 October 1702, only to die a week later, before he could write his final report on the mission.¹

Van Nyendael’s mission came at a time when trade on the Gold Coast had been disrupted for several years, much to the chagrin of the European trade companies on the coast, including the Dutch, as well as the Akan and other middlemen traders with whom the Dutch did business. The reason for the economic hold-up lay in a number of political and strategic changes that took place in the hinterland during the second half of the 17th century, leading to political centralisation and the formation of larger and more powerful states. One of these new states was Denkyira, which grew out of the remnants of several older states, and, according to the Ghanaian historian J.K. Fynn, was a project of a number of important families, aimed at the formation at a powerful state ‘capable of sustaining and meeting the rapidly expanding economy in the Gold Coast hinterland’.² By the early 1690s Denkyira was in control of many of the gold producing areas in the hinterland, and when it incorporated the kingdom of Akanny in 1697, it established a virtual monopoly over the gold, ivory, and slave resources in a large hinterland area. Instead of providing a stable environment for the European trade, the Denkyira monopoly only gave rise to further disruptions, however. As the Dutch WIC official and author Willem Bosman stated in 1704: ‘Dinkira, elevated by its great riches and power became so arrogant, it looked on all other Negroes with a contemptible eye, esteeming them no more than its slaves; which rendered her the object of their common hatred …’³ It seems the Denkyira warlords were more concerned with the ruthless exploitation of their newly acquired tributaries, than with a swift return to economic and political normality.

For the Dutch in Elmina and their Akan trading-allies, this situation was serious, because it lasted too long, and became too complicated. The situation in Denkyira was not the only problem the Dutch were faced with. Further to the east, the Dutch trading posts in Senya Beraku and Accra had difficulties too. Here the rival hinterland states of Akyem and Akwamu were the cause of disruptions in the trade. And then of course, the entry of Asante into the political arena in the closing years of the 17th century, as a major contender for power in the Denkyira region, complicated matters even further. All through the 17th century, the Dutch – or other Europeans for that matter – had had little necessity for close contact with hinterland states. As long as trade flourished, and relations with Akan middlemen traders worked out well, the WIC was happy with the situation. Besides, travelling into the hinterland was a dangerous exercise for Europeans in view of the many deadly tropical diseases, as well as a lack of knowledge about the geographical and political situation. In 1701, however, the situation had become so perilous that the WIC Governor in Elmina, Joan van Sevenhuysen, decided to take the uncommon step to send an envoy into the hinterland. To the Directors of the West India Company Van Sevenhuysen explained his actions:

³ W. Bosman, A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea (London 1705) 74-75.
I also have to report (with sadness) about the very bad situation of trade, because, although the Asante have won a total victory over the Denkyira – in accordance with my and everybody’s wishes –, we have less than 200 Mark of gold in our cash box. This is because the Asante are so much saturated from the rich spoils of Denkyira, that they do not think about trade at all […] This situation and the advice of the senior Akan trader has made us decide to a never before undertaken enterprise, namely to send the official David van Nyendael […] in legation [Dutch: “gezantschap”] to the much feared Asante “caboceer” or leader, with instructions how to behave himself, and also with presents for the same leader and his most prominent chiefs, in order for the warfare to end and trade be taken up again.4

Especially interesting in this text is Van Sevenhuysen’s remark that Van Nyendael was sent to Kumasi partly on the advice of the senior Akan trader, the Akan middlemen being the most important allies of the Dutch with regard to the hinterland trade. It suggests a strong bond and mutual trust between the two parties. It also suggests that in the case of the Asante-Denkyira war, the Akan trading community was also out of its depth with regard to finding political solutions for the economic problems they were facing. Advising a European power to send an emissary into the hinterland was an uncommon and never before undertaken enterprise for them too. Earlier reports by Van Sevenhuysen indicate that the Akan traders were his most important informants and that the picture of the disastrous situation in the hinterland only acquired relief in Elmina early in 1701. In June 1700 Van Sevenhuysen just wrote about rumours of the Denkyira being on the warpath, listing all its neighbours as possible enemies. By May 1701, he wrote in great detail about the specifics of the political situation, analysing the role of Asante and the necessity for the Dutch to ally themselves to that nation.5

It is indicative for Van Sevenhuysen’s intentions with the mission that he writes that Van Nyendael is sent ‘in order for the warfare to end and trade be taken up again’. By placing the political objective of the mission in front, Van Nyendael’s becomes first and foremost a diplomatic envoy. The charter of the WIC did indeed provide for such an appointment, in the sense that the Governor of the Gold Coast (or any other WIC Governor for that matter) was not only the highest company official on the spot, but also the representative of the States General, the suzerain body of the Republic of the Netherlands at the time. Indeed, all Governors swore a double oath on their appointment, to the WIC and to the States General.

Acknowledging the fact that Van Nyendael was sent as a diplomatic envoy is important for our understanding of Dutch-Ghanaian relations in an historical perspective. The fact that Van Nyendael’s mission was diplomatic is indicative for the carefulness with which the Dutch treated their African counterparts. On the Gold Coast, this had been the rule since the early 17th century, and would remain the rule until 1872, when the Dutch left. Especially towards Asante, the Dutch always chose for a formal approach, sending out agents or representatives on the request of the Asantehene, or at their own initiative, and then always with the highest regard for the sensitivities of their allies. Van Nyendael turned out to be the first of thirteen known Dutch representatives to the court of the Asantehene in a period of 168 years (see table 1, 2). In time, the Asantehene was to send his own representative to Elmina too, emphasising the special relationship that had developed between the two parties, and that was mutually beneficial.6 Admittedly, Van Nyendael’s mission stood apart in time and nature. After him, no Dutchman plied the road to Kumasi

4 Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, WIC Archives 97, J. van Sevenhuysen to General Board (‘Heren Tien’), Elmina 16 November 1701.
5 Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, WIC Archives 97, Letter of J. van Sevenhuysen to General Board (‘Heren Tien’), Elmina 21 June 1700 and ditto, 30 May 1701.
until the early 19th century, when the Euro-African official Willem Huydecoper, grandson of a Dutch governor, stayed in Kumasi for well over a year. Huydecoper mission was part of the renewal efforts of Governor Daendels, who had arrived in Elmina in 1816, with great plans for the (re-)development of trade for which a solid political relationship with Asante was necessary (see below). Between 1816 and 1869, Dutchmen and Elminans in the service of the Dutch came to Kumasi on a regular basis, while Asante residents were based in Elmina at the same time. And as with Van Nyendael, this mutual representation of the 19th century was both political and economic in nature. If we look beyond 1872, towards the present day, we see that the Dutch interest in the Gold Coast, now Ghana, as well as the inverse, the interest of Ghana in the Netherlands, has remained on this double footing, being both political and economic. In that sense, Van Nyendael’s mission has indeed a solid symbolic meaning for our current relations.

Van Nyendael’s mission and residence in Asante is also an important historical landmark in the Dutch relations with the Gold Coast. From the late 16th century onwards, the Dutch had been interested in the Gold Coast for two reasons. In the first place they were economically interested. This interest initially focussed on the gold, ivory, gum, and other products the area brought forth. By extension, from the middle of the 17th century onwards, the Gold Coast foothold also served as a trading headquarters for the slave trade, which started to grow further down the West African coast, east of Accra, and all the way south to Angola. Van Nyendael’s mission of 1701/’02 heralded the first European contact with the newly formed expansionist state of Asante, which was to become the major slave supplier for the Dutch on the Gold Coast in the 18th century. Because of the local growth of the slave trade in the 18th century, the nature of the European presence on the Coast changed. The relationship with Ghanaian peoples and states became more intensive, and in a sense also more exploitative. Van Nyendael’s mission set the tone for the economic relationship between the Asante and the Dutch, making Asante the main supplier of gold and slaves for the Dutch in Elmina, Accra, and Axim. In the second place, the Dutch interest in the Gold Coast and its hinterland was inspired by political and strategic motives. This was true for the first establishment of a Dutch presence in the early 17th century, and remained the case for the full period the Dutch stayed on the Gold Coast. The simple occurrence of Van Nyendael’s mission re-establishes the political and strategic motivation of the Dutch. At the same time, the result of the mission shows that the Asante, valued the Dutch efforts to seek Asante assistance in the maintenance of peace and political stability highly. After all, it tallied with their own aspirations in the southern Akan regions. Eventually, the political understanding between the Dutch and Elmina on the one hand and the Asante on the other was to survive the demise of the Dutch slave trade in the second half of the 18th century, by another century. Even when in the 19th century the British started a diplomatic and military offensive to draw Asante into their camp, the Asante kings opted for the continuation of strong cordial relations with the Dutch, which would eventually bring them in open conflict with the British, resulting in war in 1873 and destruction of the Asante state in 1896.

† Ibid., 99.
Table 1: Travelling Embassies and Missions of the Netherlands to Kumasi, 1701-1872

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role and Tasks</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D. van Nyendael</td>
<td>WIC official in charge of the Embassy sent from Elmina to congratulate Asantehene Osei Tutu and safeguard trade</td>
<td>1701-1702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Huydecoper</td>
<td>Envoy to Kumase to renew and revive the Dutch-Asante relationship</td>
<td>1816-1817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. Viala</td>
<td>Envoy to Kumase to congratulate the Asantehene and safeguard trade</td>
<td>1831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Simons</td>
<td>Envoy to Kumase to safeguard the diplomatic relationship and negotiate the recruitment of soldiers</td>
<td>1831-1832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.J. Klaassen</td>
<td>Envoy to Kumase to report to the Asantehene the death of the Asante resident at Elmina</td>
<td>1832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Verveer</td>
<td>Royal Commissioner in charge of the Mission to Kumase to negotiate a contract for the recruitment of soldiers</td>
<td>1837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwasi Mensa</td>
<td>Leader of a Mission to Kumase to renew co-operation in trade and in the recruitment of soldiers</td>
<td>1859</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2: Agents of the Netherlands government and directors of the African Recruitment Depot at Kumasi, 1838-1872

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role and Status</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J. Huydecoper</td>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>1838-1842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. Pel</td>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>1842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Plange</td>
<td>Agent (official status unknown)</td>
<td>1848-1853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. de Heer</td>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>1859-1862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Barends</td>
<td>Temporary Agent</td>
<td>1862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. de Heer</td>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>1862-1869</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: see table 1.
Establishing relations and exploring mutual interests in the 17th and 18th century

The first Europeans to establish themselves on the Gold Coast were the Portuguese. They started trading in the area in the 15th century, and established the castle of São Jorge da Mina (later called St. George d’Elmina) in modern-day Elmina or Edina in 1482. Within half a century, the Portuguese expanded their interests with the establishment of trading posts and forts at places like Axim, and Shama. By the middle of the 16th century, English and French traders joined them, all seeking the riches of the gold trade for which the Gold Coast became famous. Soon, it became clear to the Europeans that the trade in alluvial gold mined in the coastal area was difficult to penetrate. The local producers kept this to themselves. Therefore, one had to tap the sources of gold further inland. This in turn made it necessary for the Europeans to strike up alliances with local coastal merchants and rulers, who could deliver gold from the hinterland. Quickly, a complex political situation developed around the European coastal settlements, in which Europeans competed – to the extent of armed skirmishes – with other Europeans, with the assistance of local rulers, who were thus able to build up their own political and economic positions. The settlements around the European forts grew into towns, being at the same time commercial centres for the international trade and political trait-d’unions between the Europeans on the coast and the states of the Gold Coast hinterland. It is safe to say, that by the third quarter of the 16th century, the European presence on the Gold Coast had brought into existence a new, urban, cosmopolitan and perhaps even multicultural society, with a unique political, economic and cultural outlook. On this stage of international economy and politics the Dutch entered in the mid-1590s.

From 1568, the Republic of the United Netherlands was engaged in a war with Spain, with the objective to acquire and safeguard the full political independence of the country. The last decade of the 16th century was a period of transition in this conflict, from the harsh circumstances of the original Revolt, to the onset of the Dutch Golden Age.\(^8\) After 1590, the relationship between the Republic and Spain changed considerably, in the sense that the Dutch more and more acquired an economic upper hand in Europe, forcing Spain to accept the status quo long before the final political settlement of the dispute in 1648. The period after 1590 marked the successful entry of the Dutch in the field of economic and political expansion beyond the confines of Europe, making them, within half a century, a major player in the East and West Indies, to the detriment of Spain and Portugal. In 1590, the Spanish Crown lifted a five-year embargo on Dutch shipping and goods in its territories (which included Portugal). This opened the door for Dutch involvement in the trade with the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as ‘colonial’ commerce. Moreover, combined with a number of political and military successes in the 1590s, the newly found economic role of the Republic also made it a safe base for long-term investment. When Spain renewed the embargo in 1598, this only enhanced the Dutch zeal to become a major player in the international economy. When we look at the Dutch involvement in West Africa, the European political and economic developments are mirrored to a tee.\(^9\)

The original Dutch encounter was accidental. Barend Erickszoon, a sailor from the Dutch town of Enkhuizen, lost his way when sailing to Brazil in 1590, and subsequently landed on the African island of Principe, where caught by the Portuguese. From information gathered during his captivity, he surmised that the Gold Coast would be a good place to trade with. After his return in the Netherlands in 1593, he managed to convince some Dutch merchants to invest in a voyage to the Gold Coast to trade for gold. This


\(^9\) Account of the early history mainly based on compilation of sources by J.K.J. de Jonge, De oorsprong van Neerland’s Bezittingen op de Kust van Guinea (’s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff 1871)
voyage, with one ship, was successful, and his return with a cargo of gold and ivory can be seen as the start of Dutch business with the Gold Coast. How commercially successful the discovery of the Gold Coast was, can be illustrated by the fact that Erickszoon himself was still active in the trade in 1612, while at the same time numerous Dutch merchants got involved in the trade, especially between 1598 and 1600 (new Spanish embargo).

As one could expect, the start of the trade was not easy. Not only did the Dutch have to contend with other Europeans already present, and their local allies, but also in places where there was no competition the local population was naturally shy and suspicious of these newcomers. The Dutch merchants soon organised themselves in trading companies, uniting their capital, strength and know-how. By 1607 almost all trade with West Africa was organised in this way, and it led to expansion. In the merchants own words:

“The Dutch merchants having considered and felt the molestation inflicted upon them from time to time by the King of Spain, have taken into their own hands the trade on the coast of Africa, along Guinea up to Manicongo.”

Also a first effort was made to establish a general West India Company. The effort failed, however, due to internal Dutch political strategy, which went against it. It would not be before 1621 that the first general West India Company was incorporated. In the mean time, trade continued and expanded further, although the political circumstances worked against free trade in Africa. According to a treaty of armistice with Spain, concluded in 1609, the Dutch government was bound to refrain from trading in the areas occupied by Spain or Portugal anywhere in the world. For the Gold Coast this meant that the Dutch were severely restricted in their activities. It did, however, also lead to a much deeper involvement of the Dutch traders with the local population, and eventually the establishment of their own trading posts. Because of the stipulations of the treaty, the Dutch merchants continued to trade, but only in areas, which they considered not to be under Portuguese control, namely the kingdoms of Asebu, Efutu, and Komenda. However, apparently the Portuguese in Elmina used a broader interpretation of the treaty, and persecuted all Dutch merchants along the Gold Coast, where possible killing them. The kingdom of Asebu, because of its friendly relations with the Dutch, suffered most. The Portuguese and their allies attacked them on several occasions and destroyed villages and pillaged the countryside. The king of Asebu, who had seen his trade with the Dutch grow considerably over recent years, invited the Dutch to come to his and their own rescue in force. It was obvious, that without proper military protection, the trade between the two would eventually be lost.

This cry for help from Asebu came in 1611. According to legend, the king of Asebu sent two envoys to Holland to convey the message, and perhaps even negotiate about the measures to be taken. However, evidence for this early West African embassy to Europe is slim. The historian J.K.J. de Jonge mentions the embassy, basing his remark on the instruction of the States General to the commander of the fleet that was to establish a stronghold in Mouri, the coastal town under the jurisdiction of the king of Asebu. The passage roughly runs as follows:

“And he will travel to the place called Mouri, belonging to the territory of the King of Sabou [Asebu]. And arriving there, with God's help, he will, with a number of competent men from the fleet, who are knowledgeable about the area and speak the language, present himself to that King of Sabou, congratulate him in the name of the Prince-Stadholder of the Netherlands on the his offer of friendly relations, his correspondence and good will.

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10 Ibid., 7, from Letter by the merchants and company directors trading on the West Coast of Africa to the States General, c. 1607.
Also conveying the reason of his arrival, being for the protection and security of the merchants in the country, and those with whom they trade.

To which end he will show that the States General are willing to entertain the proposal and request of his [i.e. the king’s] envoys, recently present in these quarters [i.e. the Netherlands], to build a fort or stronghold and to man it [with soldiers to act] against all those who want offend, perturb, hinder or hurt either the trade or the King.’

From the text it seems clear that envoys were sent to the States General by the king of Asebu, in order to involve the Dutch government in the troubles with the Portuguese. What seems less clear, however, from this text is whether these envoys were Asebu men. If this were indeed the case, one can ask, why is so little known about this extraordinary mission. One would expect it to have been reported extensively. It was not quite usual for two black African diplomats to walk the streets of Amsterdam in 1611, and the event would certainly not have gone unnoticed.

Bosman mentions the envoys too, in his description of the Gold Coast published in 1704:

“Before I take leave of the Sabou Country [Asebu], I must tell you that these people are the best and longest known to the WIC, because the Directors have seen two of their envoys within Amsterdam. However, this happened so many years ago, that I do not have the least knowledge about their actions, as is the case with the current king of Asebu, nor to what end they were sent to Holland.”

Bosman apparently knows the story from hearsay, but it is interesting to not that he has no knowledge whatsoever about the origins of the Dutch occupation of Mouri, as – as he contends, is the case with the king of Asebu. Looking at the evidence so far, it seems likely, that the king’s envoys may have been Dutch traders, who, after the disasters that befell Asebu in 1609 and 1610, took it upon themselves to act as representatives of the king, with his permission, possibly at his invitation. Both the Dutch traders and the king of Asebu must have realised that a personal request from the latter to the States General conveyed through envoys carried more weight than a request for assistance by the Dutch merchants alone.

Whatever the case may be, the events of 1609 and 1610 established the first strong commitment by the Dutch government towards an African ruler, and inaugurated the Dutch residency on the Gold Coast of the next 260 years. As the relationship with Asebu was established at government level, it is true to say that official relations between Ghana and the Netherlands are now in their 390th year.

With the establishment of Fort Nassau at Mouri, a struggle for the overlordship of large parts of the Gold Coast ensued between the Dutch and the Portuguese. After the incorporation of the WIC, and the end of the armistice with Spain in 1621, the road was clear for open warfare. In 1625, the Dutch tried to conquer the strategically and commercially important Portuguese headquarters at Elmina, but were unsuccessful in the face of a very large resistance by an army made up of Portuguese and local companies. In 1637 they were successful, however, when an expeditionary force from Dutch Brazil conquered the Castle of St. George in a concerted action from both sea and land side, be it once more in the face of strong resistance by military companies from Elmina. After the fall of Elmina, and with the strengthening of the Dutch position on the Gold Coast, the leadership of other places still under Portuguese jurisdiction invited the Dutch to come in and take over. This happened in Axim in 1642, and in Ahanta, Boutri, and Sekondi in the 1650s. During the 17th century, the WIC company would acquire more possessions, mainly

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11 Ibid, 40-43.
12 Bosman, 56 (Dutch edition, 1704).
to the east of Elmina, like Accra, Senya Bereku, Kormantin, Apam, to name only the most important. In all these places, the intention of both partners in the venture of political and economic cohabitation, namely the local ruling elite and the WIC officials, did their utmost to come to a mutually acceptable agreement on a footing of equality.

From the 17th century onwards, until the end of their stay on the Gold Coast, the Dutch established official and private relations by means of treaties and contracts with many local rulers and states. Most importantly are of course the treaties with the government of Elmina, originally a treaty with Elmina’s nominal overlord, the state of Eguabo, just inland, and those with the overlords of the other main establishments of the Dutch: Axim, Ahanta, the chiefs of Accra, and many others. With these contracts, interpretations may have differed between the parties about matters like ownership of land and land rent, as ideas about ownership of land were vastly different between Africans and Europeans, but in practice this made little difference. The Dutch – and other Europeans – had jurisdiction over a delimited area of land and specific legal matters, and the African parties accepted this. In some cases money changed hands, or rent was paid, in others it was not. Whenever a conflict arose about the parameters of a treaty or contract, it was solved through negotiations. To a certain extent the often regular renewal of contracts can be seen as a ritual performed by parties from disparate cultures, trying to establish a common ground. And indeed, looking at the stability of relationships over time, it seems a common ground was indeed found through the process of regular negotiations and renegotiations.

To illustrate the cordiality and equality between the parties at state level, and its preservation in local folklore, we find a good example in Accra, still visible today, in the palace of the Nai Wolumo. In the compound of the palace we find a mural depicting the conclusion of a treaty of peace and friendship between the Dutch, represented by the WIC Governor Jan Pranger and the Nai in 1734. The painting shows two hands, Pranger’s and the Nai’s, and the staff of office handed by the former to the latter. In the palace, a hardwood staff with engraved silver knob is kept, and brought out for official occasions. The engraving on the knob confirms the year 1734 and names the then commandant of the Dutch fort Crevecoeur at Accra. The story told by the people at the court confirm the story told by the mural and the staff. The symbolism of staff and mural cannot be lost on the visitor. A relationship of equality between former allies is celebrated through the ages, forming a landmark in local history. We can of course wonder if this story is typical for relations with the Dutch in other places. To confirm this would take extensive research into the way in which treaties were concluded, and would also need a considerable amount of evidence from the African side, evidence which is most likely hard to find. Nevertheless, the treaty in Accra may be considered a nice illustration of how political relations were established in the early period.

The lack of open conflict between the Dutch and their African neighbours during the 17th and 18th centuries is indicative for the carefulness with which relations were established and maintained. Local leaders were regularly invited into the forts and castle for discussions, and for the celebration of festivities. Also, the Dutch government contributed to local festivals in kind and money, and paid homage to local authorities. In turn, local leaders would do the same at the arrival of a new fort commandant or a new governor arriving in their midst. These rituals were kept intact for over 200 years, adapted where necessary, and modernised in terms of the type and amount of gifts.

To a large extent, treaties and contracts were the political underpinning of the Dutch presence on the Gold Coast. They set the tone of the official relationships and regulated

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them. Also, they formed the core of other aspects of Dutch-Ghanaian cohabitation on the Coast, in the fields of economic, social and cultural relationships. These can best be seen as a series of concentric circles around the political core. Some aspects were regulated through agreed fixed rules, like economic affairs, or criminal and civil law. Here jurisdictions were agreed and when necessary renewed, and sometimes codified. On other levels the simple vicinity of different cultures and subcultures, over time, created a multicultural society with its own unwritten rules, specific to time and place.

The slave trade was of course one of the important economic activities of the 18th century, that called for extensive regulation through negotiation. A lot of the work connected with the slave trade was done by the slaves ‘employed’ by the West India Company. Their number rose sharply during the 18th century to get all the extra work done. For many activities, like transport, for instance, one had to fall back on large numbers of carriers and canoe men, who were hired privately through contracts, usually co-agreed with the local governments. Also, food supplies for the slaves, as well as a sundry of other services were provided by the local communities. One could simply not do without each others immediate and unconditional co-operation. And then, we have not even discussed the whole intricate system of slave supplies from the hinterland to the Coast, or the information and communication system needed to keep the trade running. In the field of trade, Europeans and Africans knew their business well; parties were well acquainted with the market and had specific demands as to the quality and quantity of trade goods. For the African traders this meant that they had to keep in close contact with suppliers in the hinterland, for the Europeans that they had to inform their suppliers which goods to take with them. As the trade cycle between the Netherlands, the Gold Coast and the Caribbean had a span of many months, the Dutch set up a detailed network of information exchange, between trading posts and incoming ships, with boats and canoes travelling up and down along the West African coast, as far up as Sierra Leone. In this system the African trade partners played an important role, as they had to provide the key information and do so in time too.

The rise of Asante in the first half of the 18th century upset the political status quo in the region for several decades. Due to Van Nyendael’s mission, the Dutch had a good relationship with them from the start, safeguarding a steady supply of slaves. However, the wars in the interior did regularly upset trade in general, and it was not until 1742, when the Asante defeated the state of Akyem, that peace returned to the area. From that point onwards, the Asante were also more capable to control the trade routes, causing the trade volume to increase. By that time, the WIC itself had already lost its last commercial monopoly (ended in 1734) and was unable to profit from the situation. Private Dutch slave traders took over and did good business for a several decades.

The end of the monopoly also opened the doors for private local traders to set up businesses. In the early decades of the 18th century, the WIC had to deal with big local traders who undercut the WIC monopoly. After 1734, a whole new set of local traders entered into the market. Many of them had close relations with the Dutch, because they descended from European fathers and African mothers. These Euro-Africans became a powerful group in the second half of the 18th century, especially in Elmina, where most of them lived. Some entered WIC service, others set up as private merchants, many became powerful. One such merchant was Jan Nieser, son of a German WIC official, who set up a large trading network along the coast, and was active in Dutch as well as British territory. It were men like him, who benefited from the slave trade long after it ceased to be of importance for the WIC and many European traders. It also brought them into conflict with the Europeans, who more and more often complained about the ‘unfair advantages’ the ‘mulattos’ had because of their family networks and better information systems. In the early years of the 19th century, when the political, economic, and – by extension – social
situation was at its worst, he left Elmina altogether, and settled in Apam, where he leased the Dutch fort Patience. Another notable Euro-African merchant was Jacob Ruhle, also son of a German WIC official. Jacob went to school in the Netherlands, together with several of his brothers and sisters. On his return to the Gold Coast in 1769, still a young man, he started a career in WIC service, acting as a purchasing agent for several governors. It presented him with an opportunity to build up a capital of his own, which subsequently set him up in business. By the late 1780s, he was – with Jan Nieser – one of the wealthiest men on the Dutch Gold Coast, trading in slaves and produce, managing a large family business in which his brothers and sisters, took part, and which stretched from the town of Elmina along the Gold Coast, to Surinam and eventually also the Netherlands. In Surinam Jacob had a direct interest in plantations, through a sister and elder brother. After 1790 he built a huge estate in Elmina town, encompassing a country house and a plantation, where he experimented with all kinds of tropical products – perhaps already contemplating how to negotiate the coming demise of the Atlantic slave trade. By 1802 he had moved to Amsterdam, where he settled for good, leaving the family business to be managed by his brother Carel and two of his sons. He remained in the Netherlands until his death in 1828, resembling by then more an upper middle class Amsterdam merchant than the Elmina slave trader he had been four decades earlier. Jacob’s commercial exploits provided his family with an income for several decades after his death, and the Elmina estate, ‘Buitenrust’, is still home to distant descendants and relatives today.

The successful exploits of the local private traders were probably less harmful to the Dutch interests than some of the European officials would want to make their superiors believe. They themselves were at a disadvantage, sure, but the extensive and well-organised trading networks of the Dutch Euro-African merchants and their local families where, in this period at least, still firmly focussed on the Netherlands and Dutch trading firms. Their profits were reinvested in the Netherlands or in Dutch financial interests, and luxury products were normally also bought in the Netherlands. As we shall see, setting up a Euro-African trading network was not a prerogative of the Euro-African group alone. Dutch officials fresh from Europe could do the same, if they wished to do so.

Social life in the 17th and 18th centuries

Relatively little is as yet known about social life in the Dutch settlements in the 17th century. There are some indications, that by the third quarter of the 17th century, the Dutch occupation of St. George d’Elmina and the population of that town had integrated to such an extent, that the characteristics of the Portuguese-Elmina multicultural society of two centuries hence had faded into the background. The Roman-Catholic chapel, established by the Portuguese in honour of St. Anthony had been demolished by the Calvinist Dutch, who actually showed very little religious fervour in their oversees possessions. It is said that the shrine of St. Anthony was saved by the Elmina population (Roman Catholics?) and hidden, to be – over time – transformed into the pagan deity Ntona, still occupying an important shrine in Elmina today. On the basis of evidence from the 18th century it is possible to sketch a picture of the some important aspects of social relations, especially in the largest community, Elmina.

14 ARA, NBKG 334, p. 5. Rent agreement between Jan Nieser and Dutch government, Elmina 1 May 1805.

At any time during the 18th century, several hundreds of European officials, soldiers, seamen, and skilled labourers were present in Elmina. Already in the 17th century a group of Euro-Africans (people of mixed descent) existed, which grew in the 18th century and was still prominent in the 19th century. With a lack of European men and the general knowledge that important gains were to be had from close familial relations, it was only a matter of time before European men of all ranks and local women came together and set up house and shop in the town. It is very likely that this also happened in the Portuguese period, but the most important outward sign of these liaisons, family names, is only known for the Dutch period. So far only limited research has been undertaken into the social history of Elmina in the Portuguese period, which may shed more light on the long term social development of Elmina and other mixed communities. For the Dutch period there is more material available.

When one visits Elmina Castle today, the tourist guide will tell a story of how, during the slave-trade era, the Governor or another high-placed official would pick young slave girls from the female dungeons and sleep with these girls. When a girl became pregnant, she would then be freed and settled in the town. Her offspring would be named after the European father, hence explaining the large number of Dutch (and English and Danish) family names still in existence in Ghana. This rather emotive story, in itself illustrative of the horrors of the slave-trade, is historically false. There can be no doubt that female slaves were indeed taken as concubines for one or more nights by all European staff who had access to the slaves; violent oppression, physical as well as sexual, was inherent to the system of the slave trade. On the other hand, one has to keep in mind that slaves were trade goods, and damaged trade goods fetch less money. It will have made the men in charge very careful in their treatment of the slaves, limiting access to females by the lower staff. Also, it is highly unlikely that many slave women stayed long enough in the castle for the men to find out if they were pregnant. And even in those cases, pregnancy by a European man would almost certainly never have led to manumission. These unfortunate women were without doubt sold overseas, just like there fellow victims. Here we see the ultimate inequality between human beings in action, whereby the chattel slaves are no longer considered human in the social sense.

So, who are these Ghanaians with Dutch names then? How did this group come into being? Most of the better known and still existing Ghanaian families with Dutch surnames stem from voluntary alliances – marriages – between Dutch officials and daughters of local (elite) families. Forging an alliance through customary marriage was mutually beneficial to the Ghanaian elite families and Dutch officials alike. During the slave-trading era, such marriages gave WIC officials access to a vast family network with economic and social ties, often reaching far into the hinterland. The system is best illustrated through an example.  

Such an example of a very successful and profitable marriage is that of Dutch WIC official Pieter Woortman and his African common-law wife Afodua. Woortman first arrived on the Gold Coast in 1721, as a soldier with the WIC. Apparently he was an intelligent man, and he quickly made a career for himself. When he retired to the Netherlands nine years later, he had been a fort commandant and the acting military commander, with the rank of adjutant. While in the Netherlands, he set up his own business and married a Dutch lady, with whom he had several children. In 1741 he decided to return to the Gold Coast and WIC service, most likely because of financial mishap. So he returned to Elmina, working his way as a bottler. Once back, his former local experience made him an ideal candidate for an administrative position. Very soon he was appointed to the position of fort commandant. As such, he spent seventeen years in Apam, one of the slave

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16 Ibid., 310-344.
trading terminals east of Elmina. While stationed there he met Afodua, who came from nearby Jumba, a village under British control. She was a member of a prominent family in her home-town, and together Woortman and Afodua were able to run a very profitable private slave-trading operation, at times undercutting the British trade. Indications are, that Woortman was quite happy with the situation, and for a very long time did not try to improve his position by applying to a more prominent posting. When he eventually did, he rose to the position of Governor within four years. Over time, Woortman was accompanied by two of his sons from his Dutch marriage, Jan and Hendrik Woortman, who also acquired WIC positions, and entered into the business of their father and Afodua. Later on, the children from the relationship of Pieter and Afodua – carrying the surname Plange, after Woortman’s mother – also entered into business and safeguarded its survival long after Woortman’s death in 1780. Pieter Woortman and his Jumba family-in-law played the slave trading game quite well. Woortman carefully used his WIC position and connections to build-up his own business, Afodua, and her family, provided the hinterland contacts and organised access to local infrastructure. Pieter Woortman’s Dutch sons on the Gold Coast followed into their father’s social footsteps and also married local women, extending the family network even further.

The example of Pieter Woortman can be replicated with many others, from the 17th to the 19th century. Euro-African relations did not exactly follow fixed patterns. The relationships between European men and local women were on the whole quite stable, and socially acceptable for all parties, regularly leading to children being sent to the Netherlands for schooling. The Euro-African relations belonged to the social fabric of the multicultural, urban, cosmopolitan atmosphere that towns like Elmina had. One has to keep in mind here to, that a town like Elmina already counted well over 10,000 inhabitants in the 18th century, at some point growing to 20,000, outsizing many important European towns in the same period.

In a sense, the strong social contacts made up for the relatively weak political and administrative position the Dutch government held over the Gold Coast settlements. Social bonds and ties made up for this in the sense that mutual respect for each others standpoints and negotiations over differences of opinion were the rule. From the beginning, the local and the Dutch authorities developed a system in which jurisdictions between ‘Castle’ and ‘Town’ were clearly delimited, and where official relations were marked by formal and informal negotiations and contracts, as discussed above. The importance to adhere to this intricate system of checks and balances through consensus politics shows itself best in cases in which it was breached. One example is that of Acting Governor Hoogenboom. Hoogenboom had arrived in Elmina in 1801, as a young official. Within a couple of years he acquired the rank of Governor because of a high death toll among the officials and a lack of replacements. The story goes that he was a very rude and unfair Governor, who quickly alienated the local population. At one night, while playing billiards with some colleagues in the officers club in the town of Elmina, a group of armed local men surrounded the house and attacked Hoogenboom and the others. In the skirmish Hoogenboom was killed. Although the incident was investigated by the Dutch authorities, it did not have any lasting repercussions for the relationship between Castle and Town. This had much to do with the circumstances of the time – Elmina being isolated from the Netherlands in a period of war, but the point can also be made that the murder was regarded as justifiable in social terms, and for that reason did not pursue it. In other words, consensus had it that the killing of Hoogenboom was unfortunate, but better forgotten quickly, if not to worsen relations further.

On the whole, social relations in Elmina were rooted in a pragmatic approach to life. It was probably the only way to organise day to day matters. The fact that mixed relationships were seen as an asset rather than a hindrance is indicative. In the Caribbean the Europeans
created new societies, based on plantation slavery, strong hierarchical structures, and race distinction. In West Africa this was almost completely absent, because it was not practical. The Dutch could not create society as they wished it. The best they could do was adapt to the societies they encountered. In itself this was not an easy undertaking of course, and there are many examples of European men who could not adapt and eventually perished. Hoogenboom is an example, but on an institutional level the Christian ministers that came out with the WIC are a more important example. In the 18th century almost all of them found themselves in a socio-cultural conundrum. Their European religious and social background give few clues on how to behave in a society alien to Christian beliefs. Calvinist mores and morals had little meaning for both Europeans and Africans alike; getting on a high Christian horse in an effort to enforce them worked counterproductive. The saddest example of a Christian minister who lost his way in the multicultural West African society is perhaps that of Rev. Jacobus Capitein, the first African minister at Elmina. \( ^{17} \)

Capitein, brought to the Netherlands as a young boy, studied theology in Leiden, and in 1742 defended a thesis on the compatibility of slavery with Christianity. The paper became a best seller, Capitein a household name. Soon after finishing his studies, Capitein was appointed minister at Elmina. His mission to this place became a disillusion, however. In Africa he was suspended, as it were, between two loyalties: between his African identity of his youth on the one hand and his acquired identity as a Christian minister and a European on the other. Eventually it would crush him. Misunderstood and despised by many, African and European alike, not able to fulfil his Christian mission, he sank into misery and debt and died only four years after his triumphant arrival.

Also many ordinary men had difficulty negotiating the huge gap cultural gap between the Europe and West Africa, and drowned their sorrows with liquor; after tropical disease probably the most common cause of death among Europeans. In most cases, however, the Europeans that came out did remarkably well, considering the circumstances. They did their jobs, had their private businesses, and made a life for themselves by setting up relations across the cultural divide. The longer the system existed, the easier it became for newcomers to enter and fit themselves in, of course.

Specific to the Dutch-Ghanaian social relations on the Gold Coast is the way in which both parties used the available judicial systems. \( ^{18} \)

Local families were quite willing to make use of the Dutch administrative system to regulate and agree upon issues like probate or ownership of land. Hereby one combined quite happily the specific and well circumscribed local customs with a system of registration and administration rooted in Dutch law. In practice this worked fine, mainly because the already discussed system of intercultural negotiation and consensus was applied to here too. On the other hand, the Dutch authorities fully recognised the local judicial systems and were not shy to defer to them.

The 19th century: a decaying interest

The 19th century of the Dutch presence on the Gold Coast started in 1791, with the dissolution of the WIC. The WIC itself had already lost most of its commercial importance several decades before, when the trade monopoly was given up, and Dutch private slave traders took over the business. By 1790, the WIC was bankrupt, and its possessions taken over by the State, who continued the administration more or less unchanged. The period


between 1795 and 1815 saw great political upheaval. The French Revolution did not pass by the Netherlands, and in 1795 the country was invaded by the French. The old Republic of the United Netherlands was replaced by a unitary Republic, in 1806 succeeded by the Kingdom of Holland, with French emperor Napoleon’s brother as king, and was eventually annexed to the French Empire in 1810. Occupation, naval blockades, and the British occupation of most of the Dutch colonial possession in the East Indies and the Americas put the Dutch Gold Coast in a highly isolated position, both politically and economically.

Already in the late 1780s, the financial position of the Dutch government had become so precarious that the Governor felt compelled to appeal to the local Elmina merchants to assist the government with huge loans. On the whole, the Elmina merchants reacted sympathetic to this appeal, thereby safeguarding the continuity of the Dutch administration. This situation did not change until 1815. An effort to revitalise the administration in 1803, during a brief window of peace in the European conflicts failed, partly because a large percentage of the newly arrived Dutch civil and military personnel died with months from tropical diseases, partly because the wars in Europe soon resumed and continued the isolated position of the Gold Coast. For pragmatic reasons, the British, enemies of the Netherlands in Europe, deferred from attacking the Dutch possessions on the Gold Coast, and maintained the status quo.

Relations between the Dutch and the local authorities and population were maintained as well as possible, although the administration of Acting Governor Hoogenboom ended in crisis and his murder (see below). An eyewitness report for the period between 1802 and 1810 by the Dutch Secretary to the Government of this period, J.A. de Marrée, describes a very pedestrian life in a society which had lost much of its outward looking, cosmopolitan character. Another attempt at administrative revival was undertaken by Governor Abraham de Veer, who arrived in Elmina in 1810. During his term of office, Elmina was confronted with an attack by the Fante, which was repelled – and caused a renewed sense of solidarity in the Elmina community. Things were not as before, however, as a mutiny by the Elmina garrison showed. De Veer was able to suppress it, but it was indicative of the weak state of Dutch government and diminished mutual understanding between the Dutch and the Gold Coasters.

With peace in Europe also came a new administration in Elmina. De Veer wrote a report on the desperate state of affairs on the Gold Coast, and the new Dutch King, Willem I, decided to act positively and put forward a large subsidy to ‘stimulate both trade and cultivation’ on the Gold Coast. The area was designated as a free trade area, and the officials were encouraged to set up private businesses to enhance the economic development. The King appointed Hendrik Willem Daendels as the new Governor. Daendels was a colourful and controversial figure, a leader of the original resistance against the Ancien Régime in the Netherlands in the 1780s, Field Marshal of the Dutch Army, Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, and General in Emperor Napoleon’s Army. He was obviously a powerful political figure, and it may well be that the King and his advisers found it best to sidebar him. Why Daendels accepted the position of Governor-General of the Gold Coast is not completely clear, but it is surmised that money and business opportunity played an important part in his decision to accept.

Daendels’ governorship of the Gold Coast was short but marked by a frenzy of activities. The abolition of the slave trade by the Dutch in 1814, following the British abolition in 1807, forced Daendels to embark on experimentation with new types of activities, mainly in the development of plantation agriculture. Daendels started a business

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Daendels had ambitions for the Dutch Possessions on the Gold Coast, which he treated as his personal fiefdom. Officials that came out with him in 1815, including two of his sons, were Daendels employees first, and public officials second. His actions led to complaints from other Dutch officials who saw their own trading activities hampered by his monopoly. And not only Dutch officials were malcontent with the new economic wind. Local Elmina merchants were not happy either. Already during De Veer’s governorship, tension between government and local merchants and between the local merchants themselves had risen. The reason for this lay in the extremely poor economic circumstances of that period. It may well be that the local merchants expected a change of fortune with Daendels’ arrival, but were disappointed again quite quickly. For most we do not know how deep this disappointment and perhaps even resentment ran. What we do know is that the Jan Nieser – former important slave trader – was put out of business by Daendels. In early 1817 Nieser wrote to former governor Abraham de Veer – with whom he had had difference too – that he was tired of the Gold Coast under Daendels’ government, that he had not been in the Elmina Castle for over ten months, and that he would not do so as long as Daendels resided there. He also wrote that he even contemplated going to Holland, but lacked the financial means to do so. It seems a desperate step for a man who built his whole career and social position on the Gold Coast (unlike his colleague Jacob Ruhle, see above), and can be regarded as one of the most powerful Euro-African merchants of the period between 1780 and 1820. And indeed, he was quite desperate. In 1818, the situation had deteriorated so much for Nieser, that he started to wage outright war against the Daendels regime and its Elmina allies, going so far as to ambush Dutch military patrols with his own army of slaves.

In his correspondence Nieser also shows how the system of marriage alliances between Dutch officials and local women of important families was perverted by Daendels and the Ruhle family. Nieser described how Catharina Ruhle, daughter of the powerful merchant Jacob Ruhle, was forced into a relationship with Daendels by her uncle Carel Ruhle and other members of her family, under threat of death. Obviously, the Ruhle family, competitors to Nieser in Elmina and elsewhere on the Coast, were adamant to get a piece of Daendels’ cake. They were most likely not the only merchant family in Elmina with that wish. After all, Daendels, with his experience of road building and economic expansion in the Dutch East Indies, and a considerable capital and manpower at his disposal, did indeed embark on a vast economic programme. He started a road into the interior, a modern trade road to Kumasi, after the example of the Post Road he built across Java several years before, and he made plans to start plantations for the large-scale production of tropical commodities like cotton, sugar, coffee, indigo and others. As described above, in the field of diplomacy, a concerted effort was made to re-affirm the relationship with the Asante court, by posting a resident representative in Kumasi. Daendels was set to create a new Dutch colonial possession in West Africa, modelled on the Dutch East and West Indian possessions. The government in The Hague was less enthusiastic about Daendels grandiose plans. After all, he had been sent to West Africa as a glorified exile, because one wanted him far away from the political centre. Now, through his plans and aggressive policies, one feared, he was close to re-establishing himself as a political figure.

All efforts came to nothing, as Daendels died after only two years in Elmina, in May 1818. He succumbed to yellow fever, the great killer of Europeans. Many politicians in The

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22 Ibid.
Hague, as well as merchants in Elmina will have uttered a sigh of relief at the news. However, Daendels death also inaugurated the final economic demise of the Dutch possessions on the Gold Coast.

The Dutch government took the opportunity of Daendels’ death to minimalise the Dutch presence. The number of Dutch officials was limited to a mere handful of men, mainly young single men in the early twenties, freshly sent out from the Netherlands. For several decades, the death rate among these Dutch officials was very high, mainly due to tropical diseases, which in turn did not provide for a stable social structure in which to live and work. At the same time, the Dutch government drastically reduced the subsidy for the upkeep of the possessions, leading to the reorganisation of the garrison (henceforth only consisting of local men), the wholesale dismissal of the government slaves in favour of occasional rented labour, and the ‘closure’ of most of the forts. For their income, the Dutch officials on the Gold Coast in the 1820s and 1830s had to rely on private trade, which they were allowed to pursue, especially when stationed at one of the outer forts (i.e. outside Elmina). To emphasise the new lowly political status of the possessions, the title of Governor General Daendels had received, was replaced by the lowly title of Commander. To sugar the pill, and attract at least some men of quality, the Commanders received the honorary military rank of Colonel, and – in later years – a Knighthood in the Order of the Netherlands Lion, the highest civil decoration in the Netherlands. Lower officials also received honorary military ranks, and all personnel was dressed in military uniform. It is illustrative for the way in which the government in The Hague saw its role on the Gold Coast that it was instructed that the Commander should preferably be a middle-aged Army Captain with experience as a Company Commandant and Administrator. All these measures emphasised the fact that the Netherlands were now only policing its possessions on the Gold Coast, waiting for better times or a complete departure. In the mid-1820s the possibility to leave the Gold Coast altogether came up in official documents for the first time, and it would remain a political issue until it finally happened in 1872.

During the following decades the form of the Dutch government was altered several times, mostly in reaction to external events. The most dramatic change came in 1838, when several Dutch officials, including the young, inexperienced Acting Governor and the Military Commandant, were killed in Ahanta (near Boutri in the western Gold Coast) in skirmishes with the rebelling king of Ahanta. The episode showed the absolute weakness of the Dutch administration on the Gold Coast. The Hague took action and send an Expedtionary Force under the command of General J. Verveer, who quickly squashed the Ahanta revolt, and restored Dutch power. The administration was reorganised, the Commander became Governor again, and the official staff was increased and made to include several experienced and well trained men. In the same period (1836-1838), Verveer went on a mission to the court of the Asantehene in Kumasi, to negotiate a contract for the delivery of army recruits to Elmina, for military service in the Dutch East Indies (see below).23 In the 1860s, the administration was reorganised in the light of an exchange of properties with the British, leaving the Dutch all British territories to the west of Elmina, and the British all Dutch possessions to the east of Cape Coast. This exchange was especially wished for by the British, who were intensifying and streamlining their own administration. The British wish to enforce customs duties also initiated such measures by the Dutch, as well as the recruitment of customs personnel and the establishment of a police force. Many of these local officials would after 1872 transfer into British service.

23 On Verveer’s two missions see the original report by his second-in-command: H.F. Tengbergen, Verhaal van den reistogt en expeditie naar de Nederlandsche bezittingen ter Westkust van Afrika (Kust van Guinea) (‘s-Gravenhage, 1839).
The exchange of territory and possessions itself led to a big political upheaval, which showed how deeply engraved the loyalties of local Gold Coast communities were to their respective European partners. The Fante of the British hinterland, in co-operation with a number of leading British Euro-Africans set up the Fante Confederation in 1867, an effort at an independent European type government, to counterpoise the British nascent colonialism in the area. Within the new Dutch territory local populations resisted the exchange too, especially in British Komenda. Eventually the unrest and revolts led to war, whereby Elmina was beleaguered in April and May 1869, by an African army of over 20,000 men. The Dutch garrison counted less than a hundred men. The threat was repelled with the assistance of local Elmina troops, who sided with the Dutch – as they had done many times before – and a small Expeditionary Force from the Netherlands, which was already present. The exchange of territory became the local stepping stone for the definitive departure of the Dutch in 1872.

In economic terms, the period between 1820 and 1872 was of limited importance for the Dutch-Ghanaian relationship. The heydays of the slave trade were gone, and there was as yet little to replace this lucrative trade in the 1820s. It would take another decade before the replacement staple of the international West African trade took off: palm oil, used as an all purpose oil (for lubrication, and as a base product for soap candles and margarine) in the second phase of the Industrial Revolution in Britain and soon after also elsewhere in Europe. Apart from the palm oil production itself, the Dutch areas saw a growth in secondary activities, like logging and casket production in the western forest areas, as well as the provision of storage space and transport for the palm oil. The Dutch government itself did not really benefit from the growth of the palm oil trade, but some Dutch officials did. From the 1840s onwards, the Rotterdam trading firm of H. van Rijkevorsel & Co. claimed a virtual monopoly on the Dutch trade with the Dutch Gold Coast. The firm normally used the Dutch Governor and one or more fort commandants as its local agents, to run the trade for them. Apart from Van Rijkevorsel, we find some American and British firms active in the Dutch possessions. On the African side it were more and more the leading mercantile families of Elmina, Accra, and Cape Coast who dominated commercial activities along the coast. The importance of Britain became such, that many Elmina families send their children to school in Cape Coast, and by the 1850s use English as the commercial lingua franca. This anglification of commerce continued up to the departure of the Dutch in 1872. The only European who seriously tried to set up a private enterprise was a disgruntled Dutch official, J.S.G. Gramberg, who started a plantation on the Pra River near Shama, and wrote a book about his exploits and his ideas for the establishment of a proper plantation colony.

Dutch government tried to develop some commercial activities of its own, but were not very successful. A scheme for a cotton plantation – already tried in the 18th century – failed, as did an effort to develop large-scale gold mining in the Ahanta region. Here the government bought an old local mine and recruited skilled a mining engineer and miners from Germany to run the mine. Many of the miners succumbed very quickly to the harsh environmental conditions and tropical disease, and the mine itself turned out to be almost barren, having been worked for a long period already by local miners. Although one kept the enterprise running for many years, in the end the cost exceeded profit. One of the problems with the gold mining experiment was most likely the lack of interest the Dutch had for local expertise. Local Ahanta miners would have been able to provide reliable information about gold reserves in the area, and assist with exploration and production.

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25 J.S.G. Gramberg, Schetsen van Afrika’s Westkust (Amsterdam 1861).
After all, there was gold present in the areas under Dutch jurisdiction, as became clear in the 1880s, when industrial gold production took off in the Gold Coast. The only successful enterprise the Dutch government set up was the recruitment of soldiers for the East Indian Army. The idea was first floated in the late 1820s, but then came to nothing. It reappeared on the agenda in the 1830s, and when the Special Commissioner Verveer was sent to Kumasi to negotiate terms for the recruitment, one was in business. The Dutch East Indian Army was in need of large numbers of recruits, because one was fighting several wars in this period, trying to establish a colonial state on Java, and later Sumatra. Verveer concluded an agreement with the Asantehene for the procurement of 1,000 soldiers over a period of two years. On his return from Kumasi, Verveer took with two Asante princes, Kwasi Boakye and Kwame Poku, as a sign of good faith on behalf of the Asante king and as a bond. They were sent to the Netherlands where they were sent to school. Jacob Pieter Huydecoper, son of Willem Huydecoper mentioned above, stayed on in Kumasi as the official ‘Agent of the Netherlands Government’ and ‘Director of the Recruitment Office at Kumasi’. He had the double task of reporting to the Governor in Elmina on political matters, and managing the recruitment exercise. With Huydecoper’s appointment the Dutch once again had an official representative in Kumasi. The office would remain operative until 1869, albeit with some intermissions.

In effect the recruitment of soldiers through Asante meant an extension of the overseas slave trade of the 18th century. Officially the recruits were free men when they enlisted, being provided with a certificate of manumission. The enlisting bonus they were entitled too was normally used to pay for their freedom, however. This process ran into strong opposition from the side of the British government, which eventually led to the end of recruitment in 1841. All in all, some 2,100 recruits went to the East Indies in this period. Recruiting was restarted on a smaller scale in 1860, lasting until 1872, when the last shipment of recruits actually left after the official handover of the possessions to the British, setting the total for this period at some 800 recruits. Most of the recruits for the East Indies Army were not Akan, but came from areas to the north and east of Asante, where this kingdom was fighting wars of expansion in this period. In the early period, several recruits came from Elmina, and later too, one tended to recruit a small number of corporals and sergeants from the local population, because they were conversant with Dutch culture and customs, and could speak Dutch and Twi, and therefore act as interpreters and instructors.

The recruitment exercise had a distinct effect on Elmina society. After finishing their regular Army contracts in the East Indies, the African soldiers had several options. They could renew their contracts, they could retire and stay on, which many did, or they could retire to the Gold Coast, in which case they were shipped back via the Netherlands. As many of the retired soldiers had no family on the coast – being originally slaves from the interior – they tended to stick together in Elmina, also because they had to collect their pensions in the castle of St. George, with the Dutch bookkeeper-general. The Dutch government allowed them to build houses on one of the hills in Elmina, which thereafter became known as Java Hill.

For the Dutch government, for some time the recruitment was a reason to hold on to the possessions on the Gold Coast, because the payments made for the running of the recruitment exercise came out of the budget of the Dutch East India Government, which thereby in effect subsidised the Dutch possessions on the Gold Coast to a large extent.

**Departure and after**

The final departure of the Dutch from the Gold Coast in 1872 can, in hindsight, not be regarded as a surprise. For many contemporaries both in the Netherlands and on the Gold
Coast, it was a surprise, however. All through the 1850s and 1860s, efforts were made to streamline and modernise the local administration. The Danish had sold their possessions to the British in 1850, leaving the Netherlands and Great Britain as the only European powers. At that time both had limited colonial aspirations in West Africa, but there was a genuine wish on both sides to create closer co-operation between them. By 1867 the two governments had decided that an exchange of territories was the answer to the modernisation question. However, when implemented, the measure caused an earthquake in the otherwise so peaceful and sedate relations between European and African authorities. The British community at Komenda declared itself to the arch-enemy of the Dutch, and the government of Elmina showed strong resentment about the exchange, supported by the Asante, who saw the status quo of their relationship with the coast upset (in a period when Asante-British relations were extremely bad).

For the Dutch government it was all too much. All of a sudden one had to fight a colonial war, and what had (partly) started as an effort to reduce cost now led to an enormous increase in expenses. Soon after, the Dutch government in The Hague decided that staying on was not worth the trouble. Efforts by the Elmina government, who even sent a mission to the Netherlands to discuss matters, were to no avail. Eventually, the Dutch signed over the Gold Coast to the British on 6 April 1872, rather suddenly, and against their own protocol of transition. The Elmina authorities and population felt deserted, and riots broke out in the town. At the same time the town divided into two camps, one pro-British, one anti-British. Less than a month after the hand-over, the chairman of the Dutch Commission for the Transfer of the Dutch Possession to Great Britain, Lieutenant Joost, was killed in the streets of Elmina. Later the same year, the king of Elmina and some of his chiefs revolted openly, with the assistance of the Asante and moved into the bush. To quash the revolt, the British eventually bombed and burned the old town in June 1873, leaving it in ruins. It would take more than a decade before Elmina was rebuilt in a different spot. In the meantime, the king, Kobina Gyan, a faithful supporter of the Dutch government, was sent into exile to Sierra Leone, only allowed back to Elmina some twenty-two years later.

Although the Dutch left without much pomp and circumstance, and the memory of the Gold Coast faded quickly in the collective memory of the Dutch, the Ghanaians, especially the Elminans, covet their history up to this day. It is kept alive by the memory in stone of monuments, like the castles and forts, the Dutch cemetery and watchtower in Elmina town, but also through family history and tradition, transmitted from generation to generation, and often kept in the form of documents in Dutch, stipulating ownership of land or buildings, once registered with the Dutch court.

The Dutch got a good deal out of the transfer of the Gold Coast possessions. They were able to conclude the so-called Sumatra Treaty with the British, giving them a free hand in northern Sumatra, which in turn led to the conquest of Atjeh and the subsequent discovery of oil in the area, giving a new boost to the Dutch economy. They also concluded the so-called Coolie Treaty, providing them with cheap Indian contract labourers for the plantations of Surinam, replacing the former African slaves. The complex triple arrangement was negotiated because the envisaged departure from the Gold Coast had led to unforeseen opposition in the Netherlands. Opponents published a number of pamphlets, putting forward historical, economic, and legal arguments against the transfer and a political debate ensued. It all remained a paper interest, however.

Some Dutch merchants who saw the departure as a lost opportunity for Dutch trade, briefly established trading firms in Elmina in the 1870s and 1890s. Within the circumstances of the time – economic crisis of both a local and global nature – the success of these firms was limited. From around 1900, the Dutch presence in Elmina was taken over by a succession of Dutch priests and nuns, working in the Roman Catholic Mission, established there in 1880. Only in the 1920s and after did Dutch business return in force to
the Gold Coast, with well-known firms like Bols (‘Schiedam schnapps’) and Vlisco (‘Real Dutch wax prints’), the Holland-West Africa Line (shipping), KLM, and many smaller firms.

After 1872, the Dutch government kept up a consular and diplomatic presence on the Gold Coast all the time. Already before the transfer to the British, the Netherlands Ministries of the Colonies and Foreign Affairs discussed the establishment of a consular post in Elmina. An agency of some sort was necessary, because the Ministry of the Colonies needed this to pay out the pensions of former local personnel, as well as returned veterans from the East Indies. Moreover, one needed someone to administrate the physical hand-over of the possessions and goods. Until 1880, there was a substantial consular office in Elmina, manned by a professional consul, who had formerly seen service in Elmina as an official. Their main occupation was the administration of the pensions as envisaged, and until 1923 this part of the job would be the main reason to keep a consular agency on the Gold Coast, although in the end the number of pensioners bore no relation to the cost of the operation. Until 1895, the Ministry of the Colonies, however, did not want to redeem the pensions, or to hand over the administration to the British, for fear of a revolt of the pensioners, who, as said, still felt strongly about the Dutch connection. In 1877 the then consul, P.S. Hamel, was also charged with the task to research the possibility to recruit soldiers for the Netherlands East Indies army in the western districts of the Gold Coast and in Ivory Coast, as well as labourers for the plantations in Surinam. Here one still had great difficulty in finding personnel, despite the Coolie Treaty and the recruitment of West African contract labourers seemed a viable alternative. Hamel’s efforts came to nothing, however, partly because the British authorities objected to what they said was slave trading by another name (the story of 1840 repeated itself). To escape British criticism, Hamel travelled outside British territory, namely to Liberia, to look for recruits there. In 1879 the Netherlands government further assisted Hamel in his efforts, by elevating the Elmina consulate to a consulate general, with a defined territory and jurisdiction. However, when it became clear that the recruitment exercise would not be successful, Hamel was recalled and the consulate general closed.

The high costs of the consulate at Elmina were severely cut by changing it from a salaried into an honorary – and downgraded – post after the departure of Hamel in 1880. The honorary consular agent received an allowance in lieu of salary, to be paid from the budget of the Dutch East Indies, as compensation for the administration of the pensions. Before his departure, Hamel suggested that it would be very hard to find a suitable candidate for the post in Elmina. Foreign affairs did not want to appoint a former African employee and because the economic importance of the town had diminished strongly, European candidates did not abound. An Englishman was not acceptable, because of the local animosities against the British, which still existed locally. Eventually the Minister appointed Arthur Brun, a young French merchant, who ran his business from Elmina. He was also active in the French Roman Catholic mission, and was set to develop trading relations with Asante. Brun did not speak Dutch, which was a problem, but he solved this by appointing a clerk, J.A. de Veer, who was of Dutch-Elmina descent. Brun died early in 1883 and was succeeded by Anthonie Veldkamp, a Dutchman with four years of West African experience as agent for the Rotterdam trading firm H. Muller & Co. in Monrovia (Liberia). The directors of his firm, who saw possibilities for the development of trade in Elmina, proposed Veldkamp. The combination of business and the consular agency in one person had its – financial – advantages. Three years later it became clear that Elmina did not offer much, business-wise, and Muller & Co. transferred Veldkamp again to Monrovia.

Veldkamp was succeeded by J.A. de Veer, who formed a personal link with the Dutch past of the town, and still lives on in Elmina memory today. Jacob Abraham de Veer was born in 1836 in Elmina, and was the grandson of Abraham de Veer, from 1810 till 1816
Governor of the Dutch Gold Coast. In 1882 Brun appointed him as his clerk, in which position he probably gained experience with the work of a consul. He acted for Brun several times and took over from him after his death in 1883. From correspondence, we know that he had hoped to succeed Brun. The appointment of Veldkamp was a disappointment for him. Nevertheless, he continued to serve the consulate under Veldkamp, and when the latter left in 1887, De Veer took over as consular agent. Even then, fifteen years after the Dutch left, the appointment led to a heated correspondence between the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the British Governor, who was not very enthusiastic about De Veer. The British saw De Veer too much as a representative of the anti-British faction in Elmina. They were not completely wrong: De Veer was not only a leading member of the group of European descendants in Elmina, who were anti-British, but he was also a cousin of the Elmina king, Kobina Gyan, who was exiled by the British in 1873 for his anti-British activities. The British authorities were more enthusiastic about G.E. Eminsang, who was, however, unacceptable to Foreign Affairs, because he was seen as too pro-British. It was discussed whether De Veer could be appointed as paymaster for the pensions in the employ of the Colonial Office, and not as consular agent. This was not an option, however, because without consular privileges he could not draw up and authenticate civil records, which was needed for the proper registration of the pensions. Severing the official ties with the Gold Coast turned out to be not so easy.

De Veer was a colourful figure, who took his consular position very serious. He saw himself as the proper representative of the Dutch Government on the Gold Coast and showed this in a variety of manners. Immediately after his appointment, he ordered a Dutch flag and an official signboard showing the coat-of-arms of the Netherlands. He regularly appeared in public in his consular uniform and was photographed in it several times. De Veer’s consular activities remain somewhat shrouded. In 1888, the Netherlands government requested a report on the state of the former Netherlands forts along the coast. De Veer produced this report wherein he discussed the possibilities of restoration. He also investigated the ownership of the Gramberg plantation. In the early 1890s, De Veer corresponded with several Dutch firms about the possibilities of trade contacts. These contacts brought problems for De Veer. Apparently, he suggested to two firms to send him goods in consignment for sale. Goods were delivered, but not paid for. Complaints about this to the Foreign Office eventually led to his De Veer’s resignation in 1895. It seems as if the Foreign Office reacted rather heavy-handedly. The supervising authorities – the Netherlands Embassy in London – never supervised De Veer properly. The Colonial Office had no complaints about him: he sent in his papers on time, and the financial administration was in order. De Veer, a prominent member of Elmina society, became burgomaster of that town and died a ripe old age of eighty-seven in 1926.

After the dismissal of De Veer one finally decided for a British representative, based in neighbouring Cape Coast. The appointment of a Briton did no go down well with the pensioners, however. They still mistrusted the British. The doubts over the appointment of a Briton, which existed some years earlier, came true. Problems also existed in the absence of the consul from Elmina, where most pensioners lived, and with the language, because most pensioners spoke Fante and Dutch, not English. The consular administration was defective, partly because the forms were in Dutch. The consul’s regular absence from Cape Coast also hampered the proper functioning of the consulate. This situation would more or less exist until 1923. In the mean time complaints reached the Ministry in the Hague from several of the pensioners, but no action was taken on these. In 1923, the consular posts in West Africa were reorganised, partly because of an advice by Dutch business, which showed a renewed interest in the area. A director of the firm of ‘Erven Lucas Bols’, producers of schnapps and other alcoholic beverages, visited West Africa in 1921. He reported that Cape Coast had become an insignificant small town and that the Dutch
interests were better served with consular representation in Lagos (Nigeria) and Accra (Gold Coast). It was proposed that the agents of shipping firms in these places should be appointed consuls. Foreign Affairs followed this recommendation to the letter. The consulate at Cape Coast was moved to Accra. The Minister appointed the Agent of the Holland West Africa Line at Accra, who held the post until he was pensioned in 1946. His four successors were also Agents of the same shipping firm. All had considerable experience in West Africa. The last consul, Van Viegen, remained in office until early 1961, when the newly established Royal Netherlands Embassy at Accra took over the functions of the consulate.

Conclusion

In 1612, the Dutch States General concluded a treaty with the king of Asebu, creating a foothold and a military alliance on the Gold Coast, inaugurating their political and economic involvement with the coastal area of what is now Ghana. Ninety years later, David van Nyendael, sent out as a diplomatic envoy to the Asantehene in Kumasi, pushed the official and unmitigated involvement of the Dutch with the affairs of the area out of the confines of their coastal jurisdictions. In the 19th century first Daendels and later Verveer reinforced the diplomatic relationship with Asante, and from the middle of the 20th century onwards, the economic and political ties between Ghana and the Netherlands have only intensified.

The historical relationship between Ghana and the Netherlands has many aspects, some of which have been discussed in this overview. Most importantly, the economic ties present themselves. From the late 16th century until the advent of the second millennium, trade is central to the relationship. Sometimes it was honourable business, for a long period it was less honourable and even immoral – the period of the Atlantic slave trade – but it was always a relationship of equals, looking for the best bargain and highest quality product for their specific market. The mutual economic interest brought with it the establishment of settlements by the Dutch, succeeding the Portuguese and competing with the British, French, Danes and Germans. The settlements, small islands of European jurisdiction and political culture in a sea of African political formations, acted as a focal point for the development of urban centres, towns with a multicultural atmosphere, an urban and outward looking culture, in which African and Europeans lived together on an equal footing, doing business together, negotiating big and small issues, intermarrying and producing offspring, in short forming a joint community. Despite an overwhelming colonial history which followed the Dutch departure from the Gold Coast in 1872, the Dutch presence is not forgotten in modern day Ghana, and now acts as a focal point in the renewal of Dutch-Ghanaian relations. Past and present are coming together and may provide for better understanding of our mutual cultural heritage and mutual cultural identity.