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300 Years Ghana – Holland

On Wednesday 7 November, 2001, a conference was held in The Hague, The Netherlands, on '300 Years Ghana – Holland: Dutch-Ghanaian Relations, Past & Present'. It was organised by the African Studies Centre at Leiden, the University of Groningen, and The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The conference's formal reason was to commemorate that David van Nijendael arrived in Kumasi, capital of *Asanteman*, the 'Asante nation', in November 1701 at the head of an embassy of the Dutch West Indies Company (WIC). That mission had been undertaken from the WIC's headquarters in Elmina on the coast, because Asante had emerged in the previous year as the new major centre of political, military, and commercial power in the hinterland of the Gold Coast under the leadership of Osei Tutu, the first *Asanthene*, and his adviser *Okomfo* Anokye. Van Nijendael's mission to Kumasi in 1701-1702 was discussed in papers by Dr. Michel van Doortmont of Groningen University, and Dr. Henk den Heijer of Amsterdam University. The former stressed that relationships of equality obtained between the WIC and other European 'chartered' companies and the indigenous polities and traders in the pre-colonial, 'mercantilist' period. The latter emphasised on the basis of a letter in the WIC-archives, that Van Nijendael did not keep an 'exact account' of his stay at Kumasi, as Bosman had asserted in his *Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (Utrecht, 1704; London, 1705: 76). 'The lost journal of Van Nijendael', for which historians of West Africa have been searching in vain, turns out to be a myth.

The conference, however, actually surveyed a much longer period, to wit Dutch relationships with the Gold Coast from 1593-1594, when Erik Barendsz was the first Dutch captain to trade there and return home with a profitable cargo of gold, pepper and ivory, till 1872. In that year, the Dutch ceded the last of the twenty-four fortified trading posts they had possessed on the Gold Coast – like the famous stone castle, Sao Jorge del Mina, headquarters of the WIC, at Elmina – to the British. By exchanging them for concessions by Britain in Asia, the Dutch paved the way for the establishment of the 'Crown Colony of the Gold Coast' by Britain in 1874.

This period, 1593-1872, was addressed in seven papers. Dr. Akosuah Perbi, of the University of Ghana, at Legon, Ghana, discussed 'The Slave Trade: Ghana and the Dutch in the Making of the Atlantic World from the 16th to the 19th Centuries'; and Jean-Jacques Vrij investigated 'Forced and Voluntary Migration from Ghana to Surinam in the Era of Slave Trade'. Henri van der Zee and Dr. David Kpobi dealt with 'the dramatic life' and 'impossible mission' of the former slave and black Protestant minister Jacobus Capitein (c.1717-1747), who was the first black student ever to enter Leiden University in 1737. He completed his studies in theology there in March 1742 with his *Dissertatio politica-theologica: De servitudine libertati christianae non contraria* ('Political-theological dissertation: On Slavery as not opposed to Christian liberty'), a defence of slavery on the basis of Christian theological arguments. It made Capitein quite famous in Dutch society at that time: an African defending Dutch slavery as consistent with the profession of the Christian religion. Capitein was ordained a minister in the Dutch Calvinist Church in that same year, and then posted to the WIC-headquarters in Elmina, where he died on 1st February 1847.

Nathalie Evers, of Leiden University, treated two 'Eurafrican Women in Elmina: Helena van der Burgh and Wilhelmina van Naerssen'. Dr. Ineke van Kessel, of the African Studies Centre at Leiden, and dra. Endri Kusruri (of Salatiga, Indonesia) discussed 'The Black Dutchmen: African Soldiers in the Netherlands East Indies and their Indo-African Descendants'. Lastly, Dr. Emmanuel Akyempong, of Harvard University, discussed in his '*Ahenfo Nsa* (the 'Drink of Kings'): Dutch Schnapps and Ritual in Ghanaian History', the social history of alcoholic drinks in the Gold Coast in the 20th century, and in particular the rise of Dutch aromatic J.H. Henkes' *jenever* (gin, *schnapps* in the characteristic square green bottle) to the position of *ahenfo nsa*, 'drink of kings'. Chiefs and elite families invariably use it for libation in all their traditional religious rituals.

In addition, the conference looked at other aspects of the complex relationships between the Netherlands and the Gold Coast in the colonial period (1874-1957) and those with the modern state of Ghana since 1957. They were dealt with in three papers. The first two were by Dr. V.K. Nyanteng, of the University of Ghana at Legon, on 'Cocoa Trade between Ghana and the Netherlands: Past, Present, and Future'; and Dr. Kofi Arhinful, of Amsterdam University, on "'We think of them": Money Transfers from the Netherlands to Ghana'. In the third paper, Dr. Rijk van Dijk, of the African Studies Centre at Leiden, examined the growth of the c. forty Ghanaian Pentecostal Churches in the Netherlands since the early 1980s, when Ghanaians began to come to The Netherlands. He also considered the role these churches play in their integration into Dutch society, with which Ghanaians have a tense relationship due to Dutch restrictive immigration policies. Lastly, in a

fourth paper, André Pakosie, a *bonuman*, or healer, from Surinam practising in The Netherlands in the tradition of the Afro-Surinamese religion nowadays known as *Winti*, discussed the influence of ‘African culture’ [and religion] on the culture, religion and healing rituals of the ‘Marrons’ – run-away slaves – in Surinam, and on *Winti* rituals in The Netherlands.