

## African mutinies in the Netherlands East Indies: A nineteenth-century colonial paradox

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*Between 1831 and 1872, the Dutch government recruited 3,000 Africans from the Gold Coast and Ashanti for service in the colonial army in the Netherlands East Indies. The majority of them were ex-slaves but were promised that their conditions of service would be the same as those of Europeans. With the 'equal treatment' clause, the Dutch government defended itself against British accusations that the recruitment operation amounted to a covert form of slave trading. While this policy made sense in the context of the pre-colonial relations prevailing in the Gold Coast, its merits were less obvious in the East Indies. The colonial army here was the instrument of empire building but mutinies among African troops stationed on Java and Sumatra caused it to rethink its policy concerning African soldiers. This chapter explores the background to these rebellions.*

‘Wherever the Negro soldiers served together in a company, they have banded together in mutiny, under the pretext that infringements had been made on the promise of equal treatment with the European soldier.’<sup>1</sup> (Major-General Cochius to the Department of Colonies in The Hague, 8 August 1840)

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<sup>1</sup> Algemeen Rijksarchief (ARA), Ministerie van Koloniën na 1850 (hereafter Kol.), Generaal Overzicht van hetgeen betrekking heeft tot de werving van Afrikanen en van de verkregen resultaten, nr 49, exh. 4-11-1850, Missive van den kommandant van het leger, dd 8 augustus 1840, geheim.

## Introduction

Revolts and resistance by Africans occurred not only on the African continent but also among Africans in the diaspora. The best-known examples are the slave rebellions in the western hemisphere, where historians have also explored and described patterns of accommodation and acquiescence among slave populations. However, very little is known about instances of resistance and patterns of accommodation among other groups of Africans in the diaspora. This chapter deals with a series of mutinies by West Africans recruited in the nineteenth century as soldiers in the Dutch colonial army in the Netherlands East Indies, present-day Indonesia.

The vast majority of the 3,000 Africans who were shipped to Java between 1831 and 1872 had previously been of slave status. Their freedom had been purchased with an advance on their army pay. Although they entered army service as free men, there is reason to doubt the voluntary nature of their enlistment. But the Africans in the East Indies did not rise in protest against their conscription into the Dutch army. On the contrary, they fully identified with their prescribed role. They had been recruited with the promise of equal treatment with the European soldiers, and they insisted that the promise be kept in every detail. The series of mutinies erupted in protest against repeated infringements on their status as European soldiers. With their newly acquired corporate identity as 'African soldiers' or 'Negro soldiers', these men of disparate ethnic origins and largely of slave descent banded together in solidarity to demand that their European status be respected to the letter.

Enlisting Africans in colonial armies was of course common practice during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Like the Africans in the Dutch East Indies army, the famous *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, established in 1857, were also largely of servile descent. As Myron Echenberg pointed out, the roots of the African *Tirailleurs* are much older and can be traced back to the era of company rule in Senegambia in the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> African soldiers were not only instrumental in wars of conquest and in the consolidation of empire in Africa but were also used for military expeditions overseas. In 1827, the French sent 200 Wolof soldiers to Madagascar, followed in 1831 by the despatching of 220 troops to Guyana. In Sierra Leone, the British recruited among freed slaves to swell the ranks of the British West Indies regiments. In the twentieth century, the King's African Rifles played a vital role in the consolidation of British rule

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<sup>2</sup> M. Echenberg, 'Slaves into Soldiers: Social Origins of the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*', in P. Lovejoy (ed.), *Africans in Bondage: Studies in Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Madison, 1986); M. Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857-1960* (Portsmouth NH, 1991).

in East Africa.<sup>3</sup> The rationale for African recruitment was remarkably similar in all cases: a shortage of European recruits and high mortality rates among European soldiers who, voluntarily or involuntarily, were despatched to the tropics. The lower cost of local personnel could also have been a compelling argument, although there were obvious limitations to cost cutting. The loyalty of African troops was generally ensured by granting them special benefits and privileges. Thus, even when they were of servile origins, African soldiers used their newly acquired corporate identity as military men to enhance their status *vis-à-vis* civilian society. It fitted the purposes of colonial rulers to instil their African soldiers with a sense of superiority over their civilian colonial subjects. In his history of the King's African Rifles, Timothy Parsons pointed out that African servicemen both consciously and unconsciously exploited the contradictions of the colonial state to seek greater rights and status. He aptly quotes Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper who remind us that: 'One of the most basic forms of colonial control (...) depended on soldiers who were simultaneously coerced and coercing, who enforced the will of the elite yet made demands themselves'.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly in the phase of conquest and early consolidation, imperial rulers generally deemed it advisable to use foreign-born Africans rather than locals. But even foreign-born African soldiers were not always reliable tools of imperial expansion. It is noteworthy that, in the phase of conquest, the British preferred to strengthen their colonial forces in East Africa with Indian troops. As the Inspector-General of the King's African Rifles put it bluntly in 1912: 'The Indian contingents were introduced in order than we might have a body of troops with no religious or local sympathies, and therefore no incentive for throwing in their lot with the native inhabitants'. The same rationale underpinned the Dutch decision to recruit African soldiers for the East Indies rather than expand local recruitment in the Indies.

Yet, the story of African recruitment for the Dutch East Indies is somewhat different from the British and the French experiences. Unlike the British and the French, the Dutch exercised no territorial control on the Gold Coast and fostered no colonial ambitions in West Africa. The African soldiers for the East Indies army were not despatched as an expeditionary force to be repatriated after the campaign was over. If the experience with African recruits proved satisfactory, the African presence was envisaged as a permanent feature of the East Indies army. After the expiry of their long-term contracts (on average 12 to

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<sup>3</sup> T.H. Parsons, *The African Rank and File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the King's African Rifles, 1902-1964* (Portsmouth NH, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

15 years), they could opt for re-enlistment, repatriation to the Gold Coast, or permanent residence on Java.

While the Netherlands had no colonial ambitions in West Africa, the East Indies was the mainstay of its overseas empire. By 1830, the Dutch had re-established colonial control over Java. During the Napoleonic wars the island had been under British rule. Subsequently Dutch rule was undermined by a major uprising, known as the Java War or the Diponegoro War, after its princely instigator. As many rebels found a refuge on the southern and western parts of Sumatra, this became the scene of future military campaigns. In the 1820s, three Islamic leaders from these parts of Sumatra went on a pilgrimage to Mecca, from where they returned full of zeal to launch an orthodox reform movement in their home areas. The hadjis engaged the infidel Dutch intruders in a series of armed conflicts, known as the Padri Wars, which, with some interruptions, would last for about 20 years. The mutinies to be explored in this chapter took place both on Sumatra and on Java.

But before turning to the 1840-1841 mutinies, I will first make some remarks on the information sources and the historical context. Since the African recruitment was launched as an experiment, the colonial army documented in considerable detail both the positive and the negative experiences they encountered with the Africans as soldiers. The abundance of army records allows us today to describe the rebellions in some detail. What were the grievances of the Africans? How did the Africans view their predicament? What was the response of their commanding officers? Apart from its inherent interest, the story of the mutinies provides an intriguing insight into colonial ambiguities with regard to race and social status. The military archives offer a mine of information on the army careers of the African soldiers: it is unusual to have such a wealth of information on individuals of low social status in a nineteenth-century colonial setting. By their very nature, army sources have their obvious limitations since the army was interested in the Africans as soldiers and paid little attention to other dimensions of their experience. As for the Africans' own interpretations of their predicament, we have unfortunately no direct sources. The vast majority were illiterate. A handful of soldiers of mixed Dutch-African parentage, recruited in the experimental phase in the early 1830s, were literate in Dutch but unfortunately their writings have not survived, to my knowledge. An additional source of information is to be found in the memoirs published by Dutch army officers who served in the East Indies. Some were prolific writers who recorded military campaigns and daily life in great detail. African soldiers indeed figure in some of these accounts but usually only on the margins: officers tend to elaborate on their own feats and those of fellow officers, not on the exploits of soldiers and NCOs. In these memoirs, we again see the Africans through the eyes of Dutch officers. From some of these accounts, it clearly

transpires that at least some of the Dutch officers did not accept the rigid racial stratification of the colonial army as a natural order with a self-evident logic.<sup>5</sup> The professional publications by and for the military are a third important source of information but they only came into existence in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> A final word of caution: the present chapter very much represents 'work in progress' as I am still delving my way through vast amounts of archival records. In order to capture the atmosphere of the time and the place, I have used extensive quotations from these nineteenth-century sources, although some of the racial qualifications are out of tune with present codes of correctness.

The military records allow a fairly detailed reconstruction of the story of the 1840-1841 mutinies on Java and Sumatra within the colonial setting of the mid-nineteenth century, a period of rapid Dutch expansion in the vast Indonesian archipelago. The consolidation of Dutch rule also meant that the Dutch East Indies were shaped as a colonial society with a rigid social and racial stratification, with the inherent racial stereotypes underpinning white domination. By contrast, the Gold Coast presented a radically different picture in the mid-nineteenth century. In the pre-colonial balance of power, the Europeans on the Gold Coast were heavily dependent on the cooperation of local rulers and middlemen. In spite of the grand name of the 'Dutch possessions on the Guinea Coast', the Dutch 'possessed' only a tenuous foothold in a few coastal settlements, symbolized by a string of derelict and partly deserted forts, remnants of the days of the now-defunct Dutch West India Company. Trade had almost come to a standstill and attempts to revitalize these 'possessions' by the introduction of plantations and the exploitation of goldmines – mining had always been fully controlled by local rulers – failed miserably. For any endeavour, including the recruitment of soldiers, the Dutch were heavily dependent on the cooperation of local rulers. Under these conditions, it makes sense that race relations on the Gold Coast were still far more fluid than in the East Indies. In Dutch-African relations, social status was a more important category than pigmentation. In the Netherlands itself, soldiers were a social category held in very low esteem, and this was even more true for the soldiers who entered colonial service. The colonial recruiting depot in Harderwijk, the assembly point for 'volunteers' from many European nations, was known as 'the sinkhole of Europe'.

Colonial domination could only be maintained with the cooperation and collaboration of the subject population. Throughout most of the nineteenth

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<sup>5</sup> See for example the prolific writings of W.A. van Rees.

<sup>6</sup> The *Indisch Militair Tijdschrift*, the main professional periodical of the East Indies Army, began publication in 1870.

century, half of the Dutch colonial army in the East Indies consisted of native soldiers. It was considered too risky to increase the native component beyond this 50% mark because the native soldiers might be tempted to use their weapons and their training against their colonial masters, as some of them did in the Java War (1825-1830). Therefore, the other half needed to be European soldiers, who were unlikely to make common cause with the natives. As an instrument of colonial domination, the army itself was organized on racial and ethnic principles: Europeans were at the top of this racial hierarchy and the natives at the bottom, with an intermediate category of Amboinese, soldiers of privileged status from the Moluccan islands. As Christians, the Amboinese were unlikely to fraternize with the largely Moslem Javanese and Sumatrans. By allocating European status to the Africans, the colonial power minimized any danger of the Africans being tempted to fraternize with the native population. But when the Africans took their European status seriously, they undermined the colonial logic, which held that people of colour ought to fear and respect the superiority of the white man.

In this respect, there are certain parallels between the African mutinies in the East Indies and African protest movements in colonial Africa. In many instances of so-called anti-colonial protest, Africans did not challenge colonial rule as such but demanded their rightful place in the colonial order. The demand for equality, for equal rights and privileges as enjoyed by the Europeans, was often a more pervasive theme than the desire to undo the process of colonization. Nevertheless, acceding to these demands undermined the logic of the colonial state and inevitably led to the demise of the colonial order. The African soldiers in the East Indies did not challenge colonial rule or the racial hierarchy of a colonial state. They insisted on their rightful place in this racial hierarchy: as African soldiers they were entitled to 'European status'. Before turning to the mutinies, we need to explore the preceding decade, which marked the beginning of the experiment with African recruitment.

### African recruitment: An experiment

The idea of recruiting Africans to compensate for the lack of European army volunteers came from Dutch army officers who had served in Surinam and the Dutch West Indies. They had been impressed with the performance of the blacks in the British West Indies regiments and suggested to the government in The Hague that the Dutch footholds on the Guinea coast be used to recruit blacks for the East Indies army. After several years of discussion about the manpower problem in the East Indies army, the Department of Colonies decided to experiment with a detachment of 150 volunteers from the Guinea

Coast. If all went well, recruitment would be stepped up to achieve a target number of 1,800 Africans. In 1831 and 1832, three ships were contracted to collect the volunteers in Elmina, the headquarters of the Dutch on the Guinea Coast, and take them to Java. However, as Governor Last in Elmina had already warned, young African men were less than enthusiastic about a military career in a foreign army in unknown lands. His instructions specified that recruitment be limited to free men, without the use of force or coercion. The three ships collected no more than 44 volunteers. The low numbers resulted in astronomical costs. Governor-General Van den Bosch in the East Indies calculated that the 44 African volunteers had cost the enormous amount of Dfl 1,232 per head, while European soldiers were shipped to Batavia for Dfl 120 per head. Initial reports on the military qualities of the recruits were highly favourable but the governor suggested stopping the experiment because of the excessive costs.

Recruitment at the Guinea Coast proceeded nevertheless but with meagre results. At the request of the Dutch governor in Elmina, the king of Ashanti promised to send some slaves as 'army volunteers' but these recruits never materialized. To comply with his instructions from The Hague, the new governor, Lans, therefore decided to purchase some slaves himself, who were then shipped off to Batavia as 'army volunteers'. In 1836, the Dutch government decided to send a high-level mission, headed by Major-General Jan Verveer, to the Ashanti king in Kumasi to obtain 2,000 recruits in exchange for 6,000 to 8,000 guns and 2,000 tons of gunpowder.<sup>7</sup>

As a first step, Verveer opened a recruiting station in Elmina but subsequently had to report that coastal Negroes would not volunteer for army service and that therefore the only option was the recruitment of slaves.<sup>8</sup> His mission to Kumasi seemed successful: the Asantehene Kwaku Dua did indeed sign a treaty promising to deliver 1,000 recruits within a year and permitting the Dutch to open a recruitment station in the Ashanti capital. As proof of good faith between the contracting partners, the Asantehene trusted his son and nephew into the care of Verveer, with the request that they be given a European education. The story of Kwame Poku and Kwasi Boakye has acquired deserved fame with the publication of Arthur Japin's historical novel on the life of these two Ashanti princes.<sup>9</sup>

Verveer's initial hope of recruiting Ashanti men, reputed for their warrior qualities, proved unrealistic. Ashanti warriors were not available as mercenary forces for foreign armies. The recruiting process was, therefore, limited to

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<sup>7</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzigt, KB 11 mei 1836, no. 91.

<sup>8</sup> Kol. na 1850, nr 5820, Nota betreffende de negerwerving, exh. 16 april 1839, no. 20.

<sup>9</sup> A. Japin, *De Zwarte met het Witte Hart* (Amsterdam, 1997); English translation: A. Japin, *The Two Hearts of Kwasi Boach* (London, 2001).

slaves, known as Donkos. The king delivered a number of Donkos, while individual Ashanti could also bring their slaves to the Dutch recruiting station. Their freedom was purchased with an advance on their army pay. With a document of manumission, they went to the Indies as free men, although it is not clear to what extent their army career was a voluntary choice.<sup>10</sup> The promised large numbers of slaves did not materialize, possibly because the amount of money offered by the Dutch – about 100 Dutch Guilders (Dfl) a head – was less than could be obtained for healthy young males in the illegal slave trade. Another possibility is that the supply of marketable slaves in Kumasi was less bountiful than the Dutch had imagined, or that the Northern trade had overtaken the coastal trade in importance.

Nevertheless, between 1837 and 1841, over 2,000 African recruits were shipped from Elmina to Batavia. This was not only a quantitative but also a qualitative shift in the African recruitment operation. Initially, the army in the Indies absorbed dozens of African recruits without many problems. As these men were recruited on the coast, they were familiar with Europeans. Some spoke Dutch – more or less fluently – and could be used as interpreters and mediators in cases of misunderstanding. A few had had previous military experience serving in the Elmina garrison. All of them probably understood Fante and/or Twi and a few of the coastal mulattos were even literate in Dutch.

The massive numbers enlisted from the interior were not familiar with ships, the world of Europeans or European concepts of armies and soldiers. Many of them, originating from north of the Akan-speaking region, probably did not understand Fante or Twi. None could serve as interpreter or mediator and communication problems caused numerous misunderstandings as the lingua franca in the East Indies army was Dutch or Malay. Moreover, the Africans were counted as part of the European component of the army. The annual troop supplements shipped from the Netherlands were now to a large extent replaced by Africans. Training the African troops took up more time and involved more communication problems than with European or native troops. The massive replacement of the regular troop supplements from Europe by Africans must have overwhelmed the European officers in the Indies, who were totally unprepared for this new development. From the perspective of Dutch army

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<sup>10</sup> Larry Yarak argues that slaves on the Gold Coast could in fact make their own choices, at least to a certain extent. He therefore concludes that the Dutch recruitment operation should not be seen as a revival of the slave trade but rather as a form of nineteenth-century indentured labour recruitment. See L.W. Yarak, 'New Sources for the Study of Akan Slavery and Slave Trade: Dutch Military Recruitment in the Gold Coast and Asante, 1831-1872', in R. Law (ed.), *Source Material for Studying the Slave Trade and the African Diaspora* Papers from a Conference of the Centre for Commonwealth Studies (Stirling, 1996), 35-60.



officers, it made little sense that these untested newcomers were entitled to better pay and better treatment than the loyal Amboinese who were reputed to make good soldiers and NCOs.

The instructions flowing from Verveer's treaty with the Ashanti king were quite clear: the African soldiers were to be treated as Europeans with regard to pay, promotion, clothing, food and in all other respects. This policy made sense in the conditions of the Gold Coast and Europe, where the Dutch were very concerned to counter British allegations that the recruitment operation amounted to a covert form of slave trading. The situation in the East Indies was more ambivalent. On the one hand, it made sense to treat the Africans as Europeans because as Europeans they were unlikely to fraternize with the natives. On the other hand, treating people of colour as equals undermined the logic of the colonial state.

In later years, the Ashanti prince Kwasi Boakye fell victim to the same colonial contradiction. While pursuing a classical education in the Netherlands, Boakye and his cousin may have aroused curiosity because of their unusual appearance but their status was first and foremost determined by their royal lineage. They were welcome visitors at the Dutch royal court. After graduating in Delft as a mining engineer, Boakye opted for a career in the Netherlands East Indies. The Governor-General in Batavia objected. In a letter to the Minister of Colonies, he argued that: 'The principle of *la noblesse de peau* and of the moral and intellectual superiority of the white race above the brown, upon which our domination in the Indies rests, would receive a severe blow by this [appointment]'. His objections were overruled and Boakye was given his appointment but with the title of 'extraordinary engineer'. Secret instructions from the Minister of Colonies ensured that Boakye was never promoted to a position in which he would exercise authority over Dutch officials.<sup>11</sup>

## Mud and mattresses

A series of incidents that culminated in the armed mutinies had in fact begun with some economizing measures that initially affected the Amboinese but were later extended to the Africans. From 1835, the Amboinese were no longer issued with straw mattresses (*bultzakken*) as the Europeans were, but with native sleeping mats and leather pillows. The measure was of course advertised

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<sup>11</sup> L.W. Yarak, 'Kwasi Boakye and Kwame Poku: Dutch-Educated Asante "Princes"', in E. Schildkrout (ed.), *The Golden Stool: Studies of the Ashante Center and Periphery* Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 65, part I, (New York, 1987), 140.

as being in the best interests of the health of the Amboinese. The argument was that the Amboinese, not being used to straw mattresses anyway, did not know how to keep their sleeping quarters clean. Unlike the native soldiers, the Amboinese were entitled to wear shoes. As this privilege was equated with European status, the Amboinese would never leave their barracks without this important attribute. While shoes were an important status attribute, they were not necessarily comfortable. Inside military quarters, the Amboinese thus often walked barefoot, muddying their mattresses. When the army decided that they had to change their mattresses for sleeping mats, the Amboinese accepted this ruling without protest.

In 1838 this measure was extended to the African soldiers.<sup>12</sup> Like the Amboinese, the Africans took off their shoes inside their army quarters and, according to documents from army headquarters in Batavia, 'were known to be of an uncleanly nature, to have a greasy skin, greasy hair and a peculiarly strong and unpleasant smell'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the army reasoned that native sleeping mats would make more suitable bedding for the Africans too.

The Sumatra revolt was sparked off by the replacement of mattresses with native mats, while the issue of bedding is also mentioned among the grievances of the mutineers in Kedong Kebo, in central Java. Discontent had, however, apparently been brewing for some years. On 16 March 1838, the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion had already reported a 'spirit of discontent'. He advised against having more than one company of Africans per battalion, as the Africans were 'choleric, quick-tempered and extremely insolent' and could easily band together to cause mischief.<sup>14</sup> Army organization prescribed that ten battalions would each have one African company, with the other companies consisting of natives, Europeans and perhaps Amboinese. Two battalions would each have three African companies, while the other half of these battalions would then consist of three companies with only Europeans.

### Courageous but ill-disciplined

In 1838, seven years after the start of African recruitment, the commander of the colonial army started to receive regular reports of disturbances in the African companies and several cases of desertion and protest. Army headquarters reported to the colonial government the difficulties they had when

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<sup>12</sup> Kol. na 1850, Generaal Overzigt, Missive van den kommandant van het observatiekorps dd 6 februarij 1838, no. 186.

<sup>13</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzigt, bijlage La G, Aantekeningen op nevenstaande memorie.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

dealing with the Africans and warned that it would require much patience and caution to obtain the desired results. But in spite of the manifold difficulties, the overall opinion of the Africans as soldiers was still largely positive, as is evident from reports sent in 1838 by battalion commanders with Africans under their command.<sup>15</sup> As this is a combined report covering various regions and battalions, it is worth summarizing extensively. According to their commanders:

The Africans had adjusted well to the military way of life, but they had little notion of subordination and showed little respect for non-commissioned officers and corporals. Yet they were rarely punished, as the army command had given instructions for lenient treatment. Much patience was required to make capable and orderly soldiers out of the African recruits, with communication problems being the main obstacle. The Africans spoke and understood neither Dutch nor Malay, the languages of instruction in the army. They spoke a variety of African languages, so that even among themselves communication problems persisted. As a consequence of the communication problem, it was not yet possible to submit the Africans fully to the rules of army discipline.

Their cleanliness left much to be desired, they did not know very well how to handle their clothes, but demonstrated more interest in cleaning and maintaining their weapons. Initially diseases were widespread, notably stomach problems, skin infections (due to laziness resulting in uncleanliness), syphilis, and worms in their legs. But most of these problems had been overcome.

The Africans kept their distance from both Europeans and natives. They were very distrustful and always worried that they were being cheated (with good reason, as will be shown later). Some spoke a bit of broken Dutch and a little Malay, just enough for shopping in the bazaar. The Donkos from the interior were less intelligent than coastal Negroes. In the third battalion, Lieutenant De Villepois had organized a daily language class with the Eurafrican Corporal Ruhle, while the 4th battalion had admitted eight of the most ambitious Africans to the garrison school. Arms instruction took a lot of time, due to language problems.

According to their commanding officers, the nature of these Africans was hot-tempered, irascible and often very insolent. Used to having one master only, they could not understand that so many were giving them orders. They were of a rough nature, jealous, distrustful and greedy. On the other hand, they were honest men; no traces of thievery had been reported. They were mostly strong, muscled, indefatigable and very adapted to the tropical climate. During military expeditions they demonstrated bravery and fearlessness, even more so than the Europeans. In combat their ardour needed to be tempered, otherwise they ignored the orders of their officers. Some reports mention a substantial use of alcohol, but less so than with the European soldiers. Much friction was reported between the various tribes, notably between coastal Africans and those recruited from the interior, known as Donkos. It was repeatedly emphasized that the Africans looked down on the native population.

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<sup>15</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzigt, Verslag over bij het leger dienende Afrikanen, attached to Missive van het militair departement dd 3 september 1838, no. 3 geheim.

Their main vice was laziness. Their greatest pleasure was doing nothing, or lying down to smoke tobacco. Therefore it required constant attention to make them attend to cleanliness, but otherwise their conduct was deemed satisfactory. The reports advised strongly against plans for the formation of a separate African corps in the East Indies Army. This proposal was put forward by the Department of Colonies in The Hague, but in the Indies it was feared that then the Africans would develop a too dominant *esprit de corps*, which would go against military subordination. With too many Negroes in one corps, they might become ungovernable and as they were already inclined to mutinies, they would then cause great mischief. Summing up, the conclusion of the battalion commanders was overwhelmingly positive: the Africans were to be preferred even above Europeans, and it was therefore deemed desirable that African recruitment be maintained.

Yet, only three years later, African recruitment was reduced to 200 new recruits annually, and shortly afterwards, in December 1841, recruitment in West Africa was stopped altogether.<sup>16</sup> Then the Minister of Colonies in The Hague even proposed schemes to rid the army of the Africans as far as possible and as soon as possible, by assigning them coolie duties or employing them as rowers and crew on navy or transport ships in the Indies. These proposals were never implemented but are indicative of the drastic change in perception in official Dutch minds. What had happened to cause this startling reversal of judgment?

### A series of mutinies 1838-1841

In June 1841, 37 fully armed African soldiers of the 10<sup>th</sup> infantry battalion walked out of the Dutch fortress of Van der Capellen on the west coast of Sumatra after repeated refusals to obey orders. A detachment of soldiers was sent in pursuit and met the deserters near Fort Kayoetanam on the way to Padang. Attempts to persuade the Africans to return to their duties were futile. They were obviously prepared to resist attempts to escort them back. When the pursuing party attempted to take them by force, a fight ensued, leaving two Africans dead and four badly wounded. The remainder were taken prisoner.<sup>17</sup>

A year before, in April 1840, African soldiers of the 4<sup>th</sup> infantry battalion in the garrison town of Kedong Kebo (Purworejo) in central Java had staged an

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<sup>16</sup> By Royal Decree of 17 December 1841, African recruitment at the Guinea Coast was abandoned altogether. The decree specifically cited the African mutiny of 1841 in the 10<sup>th</sup> infantry battalion on the west coast of Sumatra as the reason for stopping African recruitment.

<sup>17</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzigt, Missive van den militairen kommandant ter Sumatra's Westkust dd 9 julij 1841, no. 1143/84.

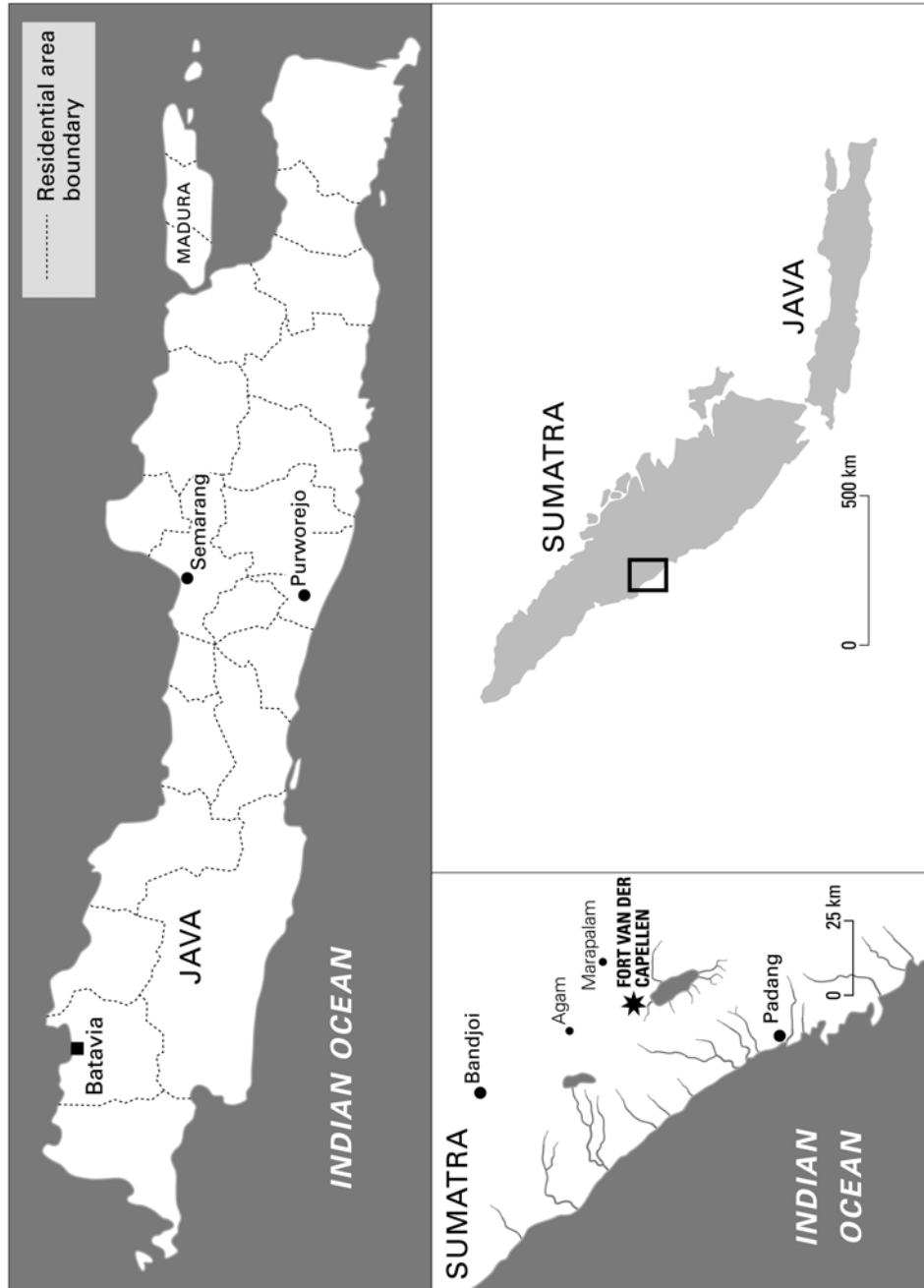
armed revolt after a row regarding their pay. This 4<sup>th</sup> battalion was unusual in that it had three African companies, numbers 3, 4 and 5. Discontent had been brewing among them because of infringements on promises made to them in Elmina of equal treatment with Europeans. With regard to pay, clothing (underpants) and bedding, these promises had not been kept. With the formation of a third African company, the Africans apparently gained confidence and began to protest openly. It had been reported to the commander of this battalion that the Africans had gathered in the moonlight and had sworn an oath that on 16 April they would insist on receiving equal pay with the Europeans or otherwise would go on strike. On this day, the Africans of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> companies disobeyed their officers, stormed into the kitchen and returned armed with wooden sticks. Shouting rebellious slogans, they returned to the barracks to get hold of guns. Meanwhile, the 4<sup>th</sup> company had already armed itself. As the commander had had prior warning, the European troops had already occupied the barracks to prevent the Africans from taking the guns. The mutineers were dispersed and armed patrols were sent out in pursuit. They succeeded in apprehending 85 Africans, while three men managed to escape. The African NCOs and corporals did not take part in the rebellion but it was assumed that they were not totally innocent of this conspiracy.<sup>18</sup>

The commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> military department on Java, Colonel Le Bron de Vexala, had now had enough. He sent the battalion commander's report to army headquarters and recommended imposing an exemplary punishment as the only way to clip the mutinous instincts of the Africans. He asked government permission to shoot the instigators of the mutiny. If the instigators could not be identified, a certain number of the Africans who had participated in the uprising would be shot as an example to the others. Thus far, insubordination had been punished by disciplinary measures (i.e. caning), but Colonel Le Bron de Vexala believed that this had led the Africans to the wrong conclusion. They no longer behaved with the usual respect towards their officers and were getting out of control.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzigt, Missive van den militairen kommandant te Kedong Kebo, 17 april 1840, (no number).

<sup>19</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzigt, Missive van den kommandant der 2e militaire afdeeling dd 18 april 1840, L D.



Map 6.1 Netherlands East Indies: Java and Sumatra

## Court martial

The commander-in-chief chose to ignore this hotheaded recommendation and asked the military prosecutor to start an investigation.<sup>20</sup> The prosecutor agreed that vigorous action was necessary but pointed out that if the accused Africans were not familiar with the army's disciplinary code, the judge might decide that the Africans could not be held responsible.<sup>21</sup> An investigation by army headquarters brought to light the fact that there was no uniform procedure to make Africans familiar with the disciplinary code that dealt with offences such as desertion, treason, insubordination and theft. In the 4<sup>th</sup> battalion, the scene of the Kedong Kebo Mutiny, the articles of the code were read monthly in the Malay language, as the Africans were more familiar with Malay than with Dutch, as a result of their contacts with native women. Elsewhere, a translation of the disciplinary code in the Ashanti language was read to the troops every month, while the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion on Sumatra's west coast used a translation 'in the African language'. No procedure existed to acquaint the Africans who had been assigned to artillery and cavalry battalions with the rules. The various translations were now circulated through the different battalions to find out whether the Africans understood the contents.

For the first time, insubordination by Africans was now referred to the military courts. The Supreme Military Tribunal in Semarang passed sentence in the Kedong Kebo case on 18 December 1840. The sentences read as follows: the five ringleaders were sentenced to 25 lashes (*klingslagen*) and two years in prison; six were sentenced to 25 strokes and one year in prison; four to 25 lashes and 6 months in prison; 18 mutineers received a sentence of one month in prison; 50 Africans were sentenced to 14 days in prison and one African was acquitted.<sup>22</sup>

On 29 November 1841, the ringleaders of the 1841 mutiny on Sumatra were tried by the military court in Padang. The Supreme Military Court confirmed the sentences on 8 April 1842. Two suspects, Coffie Prins and Kudjo Serroe, were identified as the instigators and leaders of the mutiny. They were sentenced to death but the Governor-General exercised his prerogative to change the verdict to ten years in prison. After serving their prison sentences, Coffie Prins and Kudjo Serroe were discharged from the army and shipped back

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<sup>20</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzicht, Missive van den kommandant van het leger dd 21 april 1840, no. 12 spoed.

<sup>21</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzicht, Missive van den Advocaat Fiscaal voor de Land- en Zeemagt dd 22 april 1840, no. 171 spoed.

<sup>22</sup> ARA, Stamboeken onderofficieren en minderen van het Nederlandsch Oostindisch Leger. Some of the military personnel registers for this period are missing. This list of verdicts, therefore, may not represent the complete picture.

to Elmina. Three ringleaders were sentenced to 6 months detention and 25 strokes each, while six convicted mutineers got off only with 25 lashes.<sup>23</sup> In army terms, these were remarkably lenient sentences.

Who were the mutineers? Coffie Prins, Kudjo Serroe and their associates were former slaves but they had been recruited in coastal settlements such as Elmina and Accra and were therefore probably quite accustomed to the world of Europeans and unlikely to have been overawed by their white commanders. If the ringleaders were indeed correctly identified, we can discern much the same pattern in the sentences passed both in the Sumatra case and the Kedong Kebo case. The ringleaders – those who were sentenced to prison sentences of six months or more – were all slaves from coastal towns. Their followers – those who got off with 25 strokes and perhaps a few weeks in prison – were a mixed bunch of former slaves from the coast and from the interior, including Ashanti. Only one of the mutineers was of free descent: Kobbena Esson from Elmina enlisted as a free man who needed the advance on his army pay to pay off his debts. With a sentence of two years and 25 lashes for his part in the Kedong Kebo Mutiny, he was obviously among the perceived ringleaders.

The mutiny in Kedong Kebo was the final straw for the commander-in-chief of the East Indies Army, General Cochius. He concluded that the experiment had failed. Experience had shown that the ‘Negro race’ was not as suitable for the army as had initially been thought. Moreover, he believed that the promise of equal treatment had been a serious psychological error and that the immediate and total emancipation of former slaves inevitably caused problems, even with those who had previously been exposed to the civilizing influences of European masters. Even more so would this apply to slaves who had recently been liberated from the most abject state of slavery where they had been treated as cattle waiting to be slaughtered at the whims of their Ashanti masters. This psychological misjudgement, he believed, was the cause of all the uprisings and mutinies. In any case, Cochius deemed equal treatment nearly impossible because of the ‘uncleanliness and the peculiar stinking exhalations’ of the Negro race, which made them most unfit to use the European type of bedding. In his opinion, the Africans had no need of mattresses in view of their previous life style. The army had not dared to take their shoes from them even though their performance as soldiers was hampered by this novelty to which they were not accustomed. The commander stated that their ‘childish conceit’ and ‘stupid pride’ should not be encouraged but suppressed.

Cochius concluded that experience had shown that the Negro soldiers would never be a substitute for Europeans in the army: ‘Wherever the Negro soldiers served together in a company, they have banded together in mutiny, under the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



pretext that infringements had been made on the promise of equal treatment with the European soldier.' In support of this conclusion, he cited Colonel Michiels, who had commanded the expeditionary force on Sumatra: 'They should not send us any more Negroes, as they are only fit to be used as beasts of burden, ruled by the whip. Even in combat they are not useful: they shout more than they have courage, are dirty and will never act in a disciplined manner.' Cochius proposed halting the recruitment of Africans, or at the very least reducing their numbers and sending out more Europeans.<sup>24</sup>

For army officers in the East Indies, it was difficult to understand why the Africans ought to be treated better than the tried and tested Amboinese soldiers. The privileged position of the Africans must have been puzzling to many Dutch, Amboinese and native soldiers alike. From the point of view of the Africans, the distinction between Amboinese and natives most likely made no sense. They had been promised equal treatment with the Europeans and vociferously objected to being treated as 'natives'. They were probably unimpressed when their commanders retorted that they were not being treated like natives at all but as Amboinese, and therefore as Christians.

From the memoirs and sketches by W.A. van Rees, a retired army captain who later became a prolific writer, it is obvious that even contemporaries did not universally endorse the racial hierarchy of the army as the natural order of things. In one of his volumes, he presented a sketch of the tragic dilemma of native Lieutenant Saridin, a fictitious character who figures in the non-fictitious story of the African mutiny in Kedong Kebo.<sup>25</sup> As a reward for his bravery and model behaviour, Saridin had made it to the rank of sergeant. Yet, as he now had 'set foot on the road of civilization', he became disgruntled with the discriminatory treatment of the Javanese in the army. 'Javanese were undeniably stupid people, compared to Europeans, but they did not remain stupid. Old soldiers often performed better than quite a few Europeans.' Yet they received lower pay and lesser quality food. They could not even hope to reach the status of the Amboinese. Enter the African soldiers, whose company was lodged next to Saridin's Javanese company. What had caused these 'loud and throaty speaking people' to be categorized above the Javanese? They were after all at least ten times, even twenty times, darker in complexion than the Javanese! As a native sergeant, Saridin, who was always impeccably dressed, was ordered to take off his shoes. Standing on guard duty with the African

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<sup>24</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzigt, *Missive van de kommandant van het leger* dd 8 augustus 1840, no. 1, geheim.

<sup>25</sup> 'Een Inlandsch Luitenant', in W.A. van Rees, *Historisch-Indische Schetsen: Leesboek voor den Militair* (Arnhem, 1873), 238-58.



Native and African troops in the Netherlands East Indies army. The African soldier is wearing shoes, while the native is barefoot.

Source: P.F. Brunings, *Onze Krijgsmacht*. 's Gravenhage: Charles Ewing, n.d.  
Collection: Legermuseum, Delft

Corporal Kidjekroe, Saridin noticed that he himself was standing barefoot while the African was wearing shoes on his big ungainly feet. Kidjekroe told his Javanese companion how, in Africa, he had been captured and carried off as a slave to be sold to the Dutch. Kidjekroe is pictured as the apex of barbarity. 'With eyes flashing with lust', he related to Saridin, how in his native land, they used to slaughter their enemies and drink their blood. Now why did this African rank higher in status than the Javanese? Only because the Africans were not born on Java? Unlike the Amboinese, the Africans were not even Christians at the time of their recruitment. The African had been a slave in his native land, used to walk about naked, had no notion of morality and was much darker than the Javanese. Yet the Dutch had placed him above the Javanese! Incomprehensible! The brave and loyal Sergeant Saridin then is instrumental in quelling the African mutiny in Kedong Kebo, for which feat he is rewarded with promotion to the rank of second lieutenant – with the right to wear shoes. However, as an officer he is even more acutely aware of his inferior status, which means that he receives only half the pay of a European lieutenant while he has similar expenses. Saridin's musings reflect, of course, Van Rees's own doubts about the fairness and logic of this racial and ethnic hierarchy. Many contemporary European officers probably shared these sentiments. Moreover, it is quite conceivable that similar grumblings were to be heard in the Javanese and Amboinese barracks too.

### Causes of the mutinies: Two views

The causes of the African mutinies are discussed at some length in a later memorandum and counter-memorandum, written respectively by J. de Bruijn who had accompanied Verveer on his mission to Kumasi, and by an anonymous author on behalf of the East Indies army, probably Cochius.<sup>26</sup> De Bruijn was subsequently put in charge of matters relating to the African recruitment operation at the Department of Colonies in The Hague.

De Bruijn identified one serious error as the cause of African discontent: the Africans had been treated as natives or Amboinese, not as Europeans. De Bruijn argued that in African religion (which he labels 'fetish superstition'), God created only two kinds of men: whites and blacks. God gave brains to the white

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<sup>26</sup> Kol., *Generaal Overzicht*, bijlage La G, Pro memorie aan den heer secretaris generaal bij het ministerie van koloniën op den brief van den Gouverneur Generaal van Nederlandsch Indië dd 18 november 1838, 558/19, het berigt inhoudende van eene plaats gehad hebbende munterij bij de Afrikaansche Kompagnie van het 1<sup>e</sup> Bataljon Infanterie ter Westkust van Sumatra.

man and gold to the black man, thus creating a balance between them. All people who are of mixed race thus deserved to be held in deep contempt by both whites and blacks. Naturally therefore, the Africans looked down on the Asians, who were neither white nor black. Africans had no reason to differentiate between Amboinese and other natives. According to De Bruijn, they looked down in contempt on all the peoples in the Indies and therefore found it unbearable to be treated like natives. Sleeping mats might have been suitable for the natives but the very fact that the Europeans had a different kind of bedding was sufficient reason for the Africans to reject the mats with indignation.

Verveer equally believed that Africans detested anybody who is not Negro-black or European-white.<sup>27</sup> De Bruijn recalled that the issue of equal treatment was central to the African recruitment exercise. He had repeatedly witnessed how Verveer had assured hesitant recruits that they would be treated as 'white soldiers', acting in strict compliance with his instructions. Verveer also dwelled on the significance of religion. Africans from the Ashanti region presumably held a 'fetish' religion, which Verveer considered a point in their favour. If the African soldiers had been Moslems, they would possibly have been tempted to fraternize with the Javanese and Sumatran Moslems. But if their religion was 'fetish', they could easily be persuaded to adopt 'the external appearances' of the Christian religion that would ensure they kept their distance from the Javanese and 'other Eastern tribes'.<sup>28</sup> The Roman Catholic faith was deemed the most appropriate for this purpose.

De Bruijn believed that Africans had a natural sense of justice. The African was inclined to respect whites as long as they did not offend his sense of justice. The issue was not, according to De Bruijn, whether native sleeping mats were adequate for the Africans. The issue was that infringements on the promise of equal treatment were felt as deeply humiliating. 'Men who have so many talents to be proud, mighty and courageous soldiers risk becoming troublesome mutineers, not to be reined in by even the most severe application of military law, if the initial promises are not loyally implemented.' Employment of African troops would only be profitable, stated De Bruijn, when they were treated as Europeans in every respect. Would it not be a wise policy to organize the Africans in a separate African corps, to protect them from the harmful influences of European soldiers, many of whom had been assigned to the East Indies by way of punishment for their misconduct in the Dutch army in the Netherlands?

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<sup>27</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzicht, Gouvernements renvooi dd 3 julij 1837, no. 1 kabinet.

<sup>28</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzicht, bijlage La G. Verveer's message dd 11 November 1836 no. 1 to the Governor General of the Netherlands East Indies is quoted in this Memorandum.

According to the anonymous author (maybe Cochius) of the counter-memorandum, the mutinous behaviour of the African company had nothing to do with the Africans' sense of justice but with their presumptuous conduct now that they found themselves liberated from slavery and arbitrary masters. Coming from a position of extreme hardship where slaves were living in constant fear of becoming victims of a gruesome sacrificial death, the Africans in the Indies now found themselves in positions of relative wealth, thus becoming 'intoxicated and presumptuous'. The anonymous author believed that De Bruijn's explanation of the causes of the rebellions was mistaken: the Africans were not being treated as natives but as Amboinese. And the Africans had no reason at all to look down with contempt on the Amboinese, who had so often demonstrated that they made good and loyal soldiers. On the contrary, it would be most unfair to allow better treatment for Africans than for the Amboinese.

The author of this counter-memorandum conceded that benign treatment of the Africans in the army was necessary, but with sufficient firmness. Immediate punishment had to be applied after misdemeanours until their rough characters became more civilized. He concluded that Africans could only be submitted to the European procedures of the army's disciplinary code once it has become possible to appeal to reason. With the massive influx of African recruits from 1837 onwards, the government decided to suspend the application of military law for Africans in the army. Offenders were to be punished by disciplinary methods (usually by the withholding of pay or by caning) and the corps commanders were expected to send a detailed report of any incident to army headquarters in Batavia. Only very serious cases, involving murder or injuries, would be referred to the military court and then only after authorization by the military prosecutor.<sup>29</sup>

The reason for the mutinies seems clear: the Africans protested against infringements on the promise of equal treatment with Europeans. The Africans said as much and the European officers apparently understood these grievances perfectly. Time and again, this explanation was given in the army records dealing with this and other African mutinies. Nevertheless, a dense fog of mystification developed with regard to their motives. Why was the issue of equal treatment of such paramount importance to the Africans? And why was this so difficult to understand for the Europeans?

In the reasoning of Dutch army officers, most recruits were of Donko origin and therefore used to a life of hard labour and arbitrary masters. They were men who, according to Verveer's reports, walked for a whole day with a heavy load

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<sup>29</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzigt, Kabinetsmissive van den Gouverneur-Generaal dd 18 april 1838, no. 55.

and, sustained only by a few bananas and a handful of maize, slept nearly naked on the soil before continuing on their way at sunrise the next morning with their head-loads. They were not used to eating meat and had never tasted a drop of alcohol. Moreover, at any time they could be selected as sacrifices to accompany their deceased masters to the other world. Living in these conditions, entering Dutch military service must have been seen as the greatest luck that could befall them.<sup>30</sup> Why would they now make such a fuss about the issue of equal treatment?

The key to unravelling the psychological mindset of Africans and Europeans might be found in the privileged position of the Amboinese soldiers. To a European officer in the East Indies army, 'being treated as Amboinese' indicated a privileged status, usually enjoyed by Christians only. The Africans should have been grateful that they enjoyed equal status with the Amboinese. To the African soldiers, the Amboinese most likely were just another kind of native. And they were most determined not to be treated as natives. Had the Europeans slept on sleeping mats, they would undoubtedly not have objected to this bedding arrangement. But with their newly acquired corporate identity as 'African soldiers with European status', they resented being put on the same footing as 'natives'.

### Gradual erosion of status

The Africans had good reason to jealously watch their status. While the promise of equal treatment was observed with the first detachment of 44 soldiers, later, when the operation assumed a larger scale, numerous infringements occurred. This began on board the troop ships. Unlike Europeans, African recruits were not paid for the duration of the voyage with the rationale being that this was in their best interests. Otherwise they would squander their three months' salary accumulated during the trip soon after arrival, in the gambling houses of unscrupulous Chinese, and on drink and women. In other words, they would behave exactly like European soldiers disembarking in Batavia. On the ships they might not have noticed being disadvantaged but when their European comrades went off partying after disembarking, they surely must have sensed that something was not in order.

During the voyage they were issued with their military outfits, minus a few items that were part of the standard European outfit such as sewing equipment, brushes, a knapsack and water bottles. On board, their daily ration of *jenever* (Dutch gin) was half that received by the Europeans but this measure might

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<sup>30</sup> Kol., gouvernementsrenvooi, dd 3 julij 1837, no. 1 kabinet.

indeed have been inspired by health concerns as some of the Africans, notably those from the interior who had never tasted alcohol before, reacted badly to this regular Dutch army 'medicine'. In July 1838, the military department ordered that socks and underpants no longer be issued to African soldiers because, after all, Amboinese were not entitled to these articles either.

Much thought and paper was devoted to the issue of *delegatiën* (delegated payments). At the time of recruitment, most, but not all, Africans had made arrangements that a part of their army pay would be transferred to relatives or in most cases to creditors. In the early stage of recruitment, most recruits were debtors or pawns. Army service was a way to pay off these debts. In view of the slow communication lines between the Indies, the Netherlands and the Guinea Coast, this was an administrative nightmare. Payments on the Gold Coast could continue for a year after the death of a soldier because it could easily take a year before the death notice reached Elmina. Soldiers in hospital did not receive any pay but nevertheless payments to relatives or creditors in Africa continued, usually at a rate of Dfl 2.50 a month. State treasury loss was the subject of much correspondence. In 1837, it was decided that 8.5 cents per day would be subtracted from the pay of every African in the army: they would thus earn Dfl 2.55 a month less than Europeans. This way the government tried to limit the damage it sustained through the system of delegations although an exception was made for those 10 Africans already in the Indies and who had not delegated any money to family or creditors in Africa.<sup>31</sup>

This meant that henceforth Africans were paid less than Europeans, not just on the basis of delegated payments to relatives or debtors, but by virtue of being African. This discriminatory measure was introduced to ease the bureaucratic nightmare of dealing with individual arrangements. It also meant that the 8.5 cents were subtracted every day throughout the soldiers' army careers, even when their debts in Africa had long been paid off. With the mission of Major-General Verveer to Kumasi, the system of delegated payments was abandoned as it was too open to abuse. Governor Lans had himself pocketed the *delegatiën* from the slaves whom he had sent out as army volunteers. However, a new system was introduced whereby the recruit had to repay the money paid for his manumission. It became a bureaucratic headache for the East Indies army and a new cause of dissatisfaction on the part of the Africans. The chief of staff in the East Indies suggested simply continuing to deduct 8.5 cents a day but now for the purpose of repaying the money paid for manumission. But he realized that this system was unfair to those Africans who had enlisted as free men and who

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<sup>31</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzigt, Missive van den kommandant der troepen dd 28 oktober 1836, no. 6 aan de Gouverneur Generaal; Besluit van de GG dd 19 november 1836, no. 8.

were therefore entitled to a full European salary. The chief of staff suggested that the most honourable solution would be if the Dutch state paid for manumission, leaving the Africans fully entitled to their European salaries.

Part of the cost could then be reclaimed by not paying salaries for the duration of the three-month sea voyage. In this way, the confusion surrounding money transfers would be avoided. The Governor-General decided that indeed no pay would be given for the duration of the voyage, while the issue of full pay or reduced pay was left to the government in the Netherlands.<sup>32</sup> The final outcome of this drawn-out procedure was that 8.5 cents per day would be deducted throughout an African's military career, even though the amount due to cover the costs of manumission (about Dfl 100) would have been paid off in about three years. The new rationale for the deductions was simply that the army's budget could not sustain equal pay for Africans, and that recruitment in Africa had caused much unexpected expense anyway. Equal pay would have meant extra costs of about Dfl 41,685 annually, based on the 1,500 Africans still in active service in 1842.

As a consequence of the deduction of 8.5 cents per day, a new ruling had to be issued with regard to the premium to be paid for every deserter brought back to the army. The captors of a European deserter would receive an amount of Dfl 12, while the bounty for an Amboinese amounted to only Dfl 6. The rule was that this bounty money would be withheld from the deserter's salary over the following three months. It was therefore decided to put the African deserter on an equal footing with the Amboinese, as his pay would not sustain a restitution of Dfl 12.<sup>33</sup>

An important difference between Africans and Europeans in the army was the duration of their term of service. The first batch of Africans signed contracts for six years, just like the Europeans. But the Africans recruited under the terms of Verveer's treaty were enlisted for an unspecified period of time. In 1844, after the mutinies, their terms of service were reduced to 15 years. When Africans signed up for another term of service after the expiry of their initial contract, their re-enlistment premium was lower than that of Europeans. And then, while grievances were already accumulating, the Africans were told that they were no longer entitled to their 'European' straw mattresses. This was obviously interpreted as another step in the gradual erosion of their status as European soldiers.

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<sup>32</sup> Kol., *Generaal Overzicht*, Besluit van den Gouverneur Generaal 8 augustus 1837, no. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Kol., *Generaal Overzicht*, Missive van den kommandant van het leger dd 26 september 1839, no. 4.



Another bone of contention was the career of Pieter Hermans, the only African who rose to the rank of officer in the course of the nineteenth century. His unusual career did not fit the colonial pattern and, therefore, became a source of conflict and considerable correspondence. The African sergeant had been appointed second lieutenant with the 1<sup>st</sup> infantry battalion, and received half the amount of pay to which a European second infantry lieutenant was entitled.<sup>34</sup> That meant that he was treated as an Amboinese lieutenant. Not surprisingly, he complained. As a sergeant, he had received a regular European salary. Pieter Hermans, born in Axim in 1812, was literate and put his complaints in writing.<sup>35</sup> He was probably of mixed Afro-European descent because his father's name was given as Jan Hermans while his mother is mentioned only as Johanna. He belonged to the very first detachment of recruits that had arrived on the ship *Rotterdams Welvaren* in Batavia on 15 March 1832. His career was quite successful. By April 1834 he had been promoted to sergeant, followed by this promotion to second lieutenant in 1837. Yet all was not well. Hermans complained about being paid as a 'native lieutenant' and he also added a number of grievances voiced by his mates who had travelled with him in 1832. The Africans complained about ill treatment and a lack of proper bedding and said that they received neither rice nor meat. The issue of maltreatment was investigated and was found to be 'highly exaggerated', while redress was given for unspecified 'real grievances'.<sup>36</sup>

Colonel Michiels, commander on the west coast of Sumatra, explained to Hermans that he was not being treated as a native but as an Amboinese, and therefore as a Christian. Hermans, baptized in 1835, remained deaf to this argument and insisted that the colonel put his grievances to the commander-in-chief of the army in the Indies.<sup>37</sup> His superiors warned the African lieutenant that his behaviour would block opportunities for advancement for his fellow Africans. Hermans's military career came to an end due to his insistent demands for equal treatment. In 1842, the commander-in-chief proposed dismissing him since his 'misconduct and lack of zeal' was deemed harmful to the army. He was to be sent back to Africa via the Netherlands with an annual pension of Dfl 184.

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<sup>34</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzicht, Besluit van den Gouverneur Generaal dd 1 december 1837, no. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately his writings have not been preserved in the Dutch archives.

<sup>36</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzicht, Missive van het Militair Departement dd 9 juni 1838, no. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzicht, Missive van het Militair Departement dd 10 oktober 1838, no. 1.

## Accommodation and identification

After the Sumatra mutiny, the situation calmed down. Throughout the 1840s, a few reports trickled in about new disturbances and fighting but army correspondence no longer reflected a sense of urgency. Obviously the army and the Africans had settled into a routine that both sides could live with. The disturbances apparently did not exceed normal patterns, and once or twice the commander-in-chief even concluded that the Africans had understandable grievances that needed redress. Some were indeed duly addressed but the position of the African soldiers remained ambiguous. They counted as part of the European formations and were treated as Europeans in many, but not all, respects. Sometimes they equalled Europeans, sometimes they were treated like the Amboinese, and in some respects – re-enlistment premiums and pensions in particular – specific regulations were introduced for Africans as a separate category.<sup>38</sup> The deduction of 8.5 cents for the ‘restitution of the advance payment for manumission’ continued and was initially even extended to the second generation of Indo-African soldiers, men who were born free in the East Indies! In 1891(!), the *Indisch Militair Tijdschrift* carried an anonymous plea for the abolition of this unfair deduction.<sup>39</sup>

The story of the Africans in the East Indies received a new and unexpected turn with the Third Expedition to Bali in 1849, a successful expedition following two previous failures, which was celebrated with much pomp and circumstance in the main square in Batavia. The untiring efforts of the Africans, their courage, loyalty, state of health, strength and endurance had greatly impressed the newly arrived commander-in-chief, Duke Bernhard van Saxe-Weimar Eisenach. In his view, this experience proved that Africans were very suitable as troops. The Africans compared favourably with the European part of the army below the rank of officer, which mostly consisted of ‘soldiers with a criminal record, deserters from the Dutch national army, drunkards, deserters from the Belgian and French armies and Germans, most of whom are rascals and tramps, and for whom the service in this colony is a last refuge’. According to the new commander, the Africans could hardly be blamed for all the

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<sup>38</sup> *Verzameling der Algemeene Orders en van Eenige der Meest Belangrijke Besluiten en Instructiën Uitgevaardigd aan de Koninklijke Nederlandsche Landmagt Dienstdiende in Oost-Indië. Derde Deel, bevattende de jaren 1850 tot en met 1855* (Breda, Broese, 1858); D.R.F. van Haeften, *Pligten en Regten van den Indischen Militair in het bijzonder van den Infanterist. Handleiding voor den Soldaat, tot de Kennis zijner Dienstpligten. Gids voor Officieren en Onderofficieren, bij het Houden van Theoriën* (Batavia, 1882).

<sup>39</sup> ‘Een voorstel in het belang der Indo-Afrikanen’, *Indisch Militair Tijdschrift* II, (1891) 481-83.

problems that had been detailed in earlier military correspondence. They simply had been unable to understand that promises of equal treatment, which had been made in the name of the King, were not kept. And since they had been unable to express their grievances in Dutch or Malay, discontent had escalated to violent protest. For their part, the African soldiers readily conformed to their role as loyal European troops. At the parade in Batavia after the 1849 victorious campaign on Bali, one of the African sergeants proposed a toast:

Gezigt Zwart	Face Black
Hart Wit	Heart White
Leve de Koning	Long Live the King

This anecdotal evidence is cited in several publications as proof that the Africans identified with their prescribed role.<sup>40</sup> More convincingly perhaps, the local population did indeed perceive the African soldiers as Europeans: in Malay they were known as *Belanda Hitam* (Black Dutchmen) and in Javanese as *Londo Ireng* (Black White Men).

The new commander-in-chief, supported by the new governor in Batavia, urged a resumption of African recruitment.<sup>41</sup> The enthusiasm of the Duke is perhaps not so surprising. Twenty years earlier, he had been one of the main advocates of the recruitment of Negroes (either from America or from Africa) to solve the manpower problem of the army in the East Indies. The government in The Hague initially decided against a reopening of African recruitment but a decade later, in 1860, recruitment in Elmina was resumed albeit on a much smaller scale than in the 1830s. Measures were introduced to ensure that all recruits enlisted voluntarily, even if their pay and enlistment premiums were still used to pay off debts or to buy manumission from slavery. Between 1860 and 1872, some 800 African recruits sailed from Elmina to the East Indies, where most of them served in the Atjeh (Aceh) war. The epic of African recruitment for the Netherlands East Indies army came to an end with the transfer of the Dutch Possessions on the Guinea Coast to Great Britain in 1872.

### A colonial paradox

The Dutch position on the issue of equal treatment was ambivalent. On the one hand, emulating European standards was deemed necessary to heighten the sense of self-esteem on the part of the African soldiers. Therefore, the wearing

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<sup>40</sup> See for example, *Tijdschrift voor Nederlands Indië*, 16, I (1854), 367-78.

<sup>41</sup> Kol., Generaal Overzigt, Missive van Zijne Hoogheid den kommandant van het leger dd 21 augustus 1849, no. 4, zeer geheim.

of shoes, for example, was indispensable. Army policy aimed at maintaining a social distance between the Africans and the indigenous population, notably the Javanese.

Thus, Dutch army officers deemed it opportune to inculcate in the Africans a sense of superiority *vis-à-vis* the indigenous population of the East Indies. It was probably assumed that the Africans would look down on the Asians anyway, and this fitted the purpose of preventing too much fraternizing between the colonial army and the local population. From army records, it would seem that the Africans willingly adopted their prescribed role as 'European soldiers'. But when they displayed a behaviour befitting this role – looking down on the natives for example – they were at the same time out of tune with prevailing notions about the proper racial hierarchy in the East Indies. In the view of some of their commanding officers, the Africans behaved unbearably arrogantly and were thought conceited and insolent. They expected the Africans to be grateful for their upliftment from an abject state of slavery to an almost-European status as soldier. Looking down on the natives was apparently only acceptable if the Africans would look up to the Europeans. But that did not make sense as the Africans had been told that they were indeed to be regarded as Europeans in the army's racial hierarchy.

The African soldiers in the East Indies were caught in a colonial paradox. As soldiers in a colonial army, they were encouraged to look down on the natives, to foster a corporate identity as soldiers who were above the colonized civilian population, and to maintain a status of Europeans. From the point of view of the army command, their loyalty would be ensured by their privileged position *vis-à-vis* the natives. For this purpose, it was acceptable that the Africans be given European status. But the same army command found it difficult to cope with Africans who took their European status at face value and insisted that their treatment be accorded in every detail with that of Europeans. The African soldiers fully identified with their role as European soldiers. Their story is largely one of adaptation, accommodation and even identification with the Dutch colonial administration. The mutinies mentioned in this chapter were caused by encroachments on their status as Europeans. Once they felt that their rightful place in colonial society was being respected, they established a reputation of bravery and loyalty. In the course of the nineteenth century the African soldiers played their part in the process of Dutch colonial expansion in the Indonesian archipelago, notably in the decades-long Atjeh (Aceh) war. Their Indo-African grandsons and great-grandsons fought against Japan in the Second World War, suffered in prisoner-of-war camps and ultimately fought the Indonesian nationalists until the final transfer of sovereignty in 1949. For the majority of these Indo-African descendants, Sukarno was not the hero of the liberation struggle but the evil genius who was going to evict them from

paradise. After Indonesian independence, most Indo-Africans opted for repatriation to the Netherlands.

Later judgments on the performance of the Africans in the East Indies Army were largely positive. As summed up in the *Encyclopaedia of the Netherlands East Indies* (1917): 'These Africans were a highly valued element in the army: although their training was difficult and they were intemperate and ill disciplined in combat, they were also strong and courageous'. The mutinies around 1840 were now explained by 'injudicious acts' on the part of the army commanders.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Encyclopedie van Nederlandsch Oost Indië* I, ('s Gravenhage, 1917), 13-14.