The tricontinental voyage of Negro Corporal Manus Ulzen (1812-1887) from Elmina

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This article describes the voyages of Manus Ulzen, a young man from the West African town of Elmina, who in 1832 enlisted in the Dutch East Indies Army. His army career took him to Java and Sumatra, and subsequently to the Netherlands, where he spent a year in hospital for the treatment of a leg injury sustained in an army campaign on Sumatra. The article, based on detailed archival evidence, demonstrates that subaltern subjects, such as an illiterate young man from West Africa, could exercise a considerable degree of control over their life, even when far removed from their land of birth. Even in the unfamiliar environment of a Dutch hospital, he was apparently not intimidated. The Dutch king was persuaded to change the rules for military decorations so that Manus Ulzen could receive his promised bronze medal. Subsequently, his exposure to the wider world served to enhance his status in Elmina society.

On 14 March 1832, 20-year-old Manus Ulzen from the West African town of Elmina boarded the Dutch brig Clara Henrietta, bound for Batavia (today Jakarta), the capital of the Dutch East Indies. Five years later, on 19 March 1837, Ulzen returned to his native Elmina after an arduous journey that had taken him to Java and Sumatra, and subsequently to the Dutch towns of Harderwijk, Utrecht and Hellevoetsluis.

Manus Ulzen was a mulatto, or “tapoeyer’, as people of mixed European and African descent were called on the Gold Coast. His father carried a Dutch name (Roelof Ulzen), his mother had a Fanti name, Abbenada Atta. By the 19th century, Elmina had already had centuries of contact with Europeans. The Castle of St. George d’Elmina is the oldest European stone building in sub-Sahara Africa, built by the Portuguese in 1482 and conquered by the Dutch in 1637. By the end of the 18th century, the mulattos had formed a separate quarter, known as the Vrijburger or Akrampa quarter, with its own mayor. Some vrijburgers were considered part of European society in Elmina, working as officials and scribes for the Dutch in

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the Castle, or trading as private merchants. Among prosperous vrijburgers, it was common practice to send their children to school in Europe.

Most mulattos, however, did not belong to the small “European” circle, that consisted of a few dozen Dutch and Eurafrikan officials and merchants, but were fully integrated in Elmina society. Manus Ulzen probably never went to school. On all the documents he signed in his lifetime, he marked his name with a cross, “having stated that he is unable to write”. With one exception: on his departure from the Netherlands in 1837, he signed his own name. Although illiterate, he did speak and understand a bit of Dutch, probably a rudimentary kind of Dutch. After his arrival in the Netherlands, it was reported that he was not familiar with the Dutch language, but it was his language skills that propelled Manus Ulzen on his tricontinental voyage.

In 1831, the Dutch government in The Hague had decided on an experiment to supplement the European part of its colonial army in the Dutch East Indies with African troops. Mortality among European troops in the tropics was notoriously high and there was a chronic shortage of Dutch and other European volunteers. About half the East Indies army consisted of native Indonesian troops, but native troops were not considered completely reliable. Africans, it was thought, were much more suitable than Europeans for strenuous duties in the tropics while they were sufficiently alien not to make common cause with native Indonesians.

The idea came up of using the Dutch Possessions on the Coast of Guinea to help solve the manpower problem of the Dutch East Indies army. These tiny footholds from the days of the now-defunct West India Company, consisting of a string of derelict forts, were no longer of much commercial use after the abolition of the slave trade. After a round of consultations in the late 1820s with the East Indies and the West Indies – from which the Governor in the neglected outpost of St. George d’Elmina was excluded – The Hague decided to dispatch 150 African recruits to Batavia. If the experiment proved successful, recruitment would be expanded to some 2,000 men.

Hence, on 28 November 1831, Governor F. Last in Elmina received instructions from The Hague to recruit 150 volunteers, “young, strong, well-built, without physical defects and with a minimum height of 1 el, 6 palm en 7 duim in Dutch measures”, and preferably a bit taller. The men were to be contracted for a minimum of 6 years, under the condition that they would be paid the same salary as European troops and also be entitled to a pension. After their contracts

2. The title of the highest Dutch official on the Coast of Guinea changed back and forth from Gouverneur to Kommandeur. For convenience’s sake, I have used the title Governor, even though these functionaries had the lower ranking title of Kommandeur in the 1830s.
3. These Dutch measurements amount to roughly 156 cm.
expired, they could choose to enjoy this pension in the East Indies or in Elmina. The instructions from The Hague stipulated that only “full Negroes” ought to be enlisted, but Governor Last decided that a few mulattos could be recruited as well, particularly if they were “suitable individuals who could speak a bit of Dutch or English”4. Last informed The Hague that mulattos on the Gold Coast were to all extents and purposes the same as full Negroes, in appearance, in endurance and in lifestyle. They were, after all, mostly fifth or sixth-generation mulattos. Manus Ulzen’s European family roots indeed went as far back as the 18th century.

His Dutch ancestor Roelof Ulsen had arrived in Elmina in 1731, at the age of about ten, with his father Jan Ulsen, who had entered the service of the Dutch West India Company. The next year, Roelof was orphaned. He spent his whole life on the Guinea Coast, finally serving in the highest position of acting governor from 1755-1758. He manumitted two slave women who had borne him children. Roelof Ulsen took his mulatto son Hermanus with him when he at long last returned to the Netherlands, after 29 years in the Company’s service. He died however in 1765 on board ship, on this homeward-bound voyage. Hermanus arrived as an orphan in the port of Rotterdam. He received only a meagre portion of his father’s substantial estate but the inheritance would nevertheless have been sufficient to pay for his education in the Netherlands. In 1779 Hermanus made his way back to Elmina, where he entered the service of the Dutch West India Company. The Manus Ulzen (named after Hermanus) who set off for the East Indies in 1832 must have been the great-grandson of Roelof Ulsen 6.

The recruitment scheme proved a major headache for Governor Last. In Last’s words, this experiment was “totally alien to these lands” and was difficult to explain to the Negroes, for whom the notion of emigration, even of a temporary nature, was totally unknown and outlandish. “Nobody considers leaving the land and place of his birth”7. The instructions from The Hague made provision for men in the rank of corporal, or men who had enlisted for 12 years, to take along wife and children. According to Last, this would not serve as an incentive. Wife and children do not belong to the husband, he explained to the Department of Colonies, but to the maternal family, and this family was unlikely to give permission for them to leave. Therefore, Last devised some incentives of his own, one of which was to prove very controversial during a later stage in the

5. NA, MK I, Ingekomen stukken van de Kust van Guinea 1831, inv. no. 4000, Last to Dept. of Colonies, 7 Dec. 1831.
7. NA, MK I, Ingekomen stukken van de Kust van Guinea 1831, inv. no. 4000.
recruitment saga: the system of delegated payments. To entice young men to serve on Java, Last stipulated that they could assign a part of their wages to relatives and creditors at home, as was customary for both military and civilian personnel in the Dutch colonial service. The controversial element was that this system was also extended to slaves, who made over part of their wages to their masters in Africa.

Young men who signed up for Java received a premium of one romaal (a piece of cloth) or four gallons of rum, plus an advance of three months’ salary, equal to the duration of the voyage from Elmina to Batavia. In the Netherlands, the colonial army paid an enlistment premium of 10 guilders (Dfl) for Dutchmen and Dfl. 6 for foreigners 8. Men who had already served with the small permanent Dutch garrison in Elmina, or with the British or Danish on the Gold Coast, could be enlisted in the rank of corporal. Last was authorised to appoint one corporal for every 14 men. He had strict orders to recruit only volunteers 9.

The Governor showed plenty of drive in this complicated endeavour. He sent out recruiting agents to various coastal towns; he invited the King of Elmina and his elders to the Castle to point out the benefits of this “most advantageous occasion”; he dispatched a messenger to the King of Ashanti to obtain some of his surplus manpower; he prodded the soldiers of the small permanent force in the Castle; he freed some prisoners on condition that they would “volunteer” for Java; he advised debtors that army service would enable them to pay off their debts, or – in the case of pawns – the debts of their relatives or masters.

However, when the first troop ship, the Rotterdams Welvaren, anchored off Elmina on 6 December 1831, Last had only two recruits ready to embark. The ship’s captain had instructions to transport 50 Africans to Batavia. After much plodding and prodding, the Rotterdams Welvaren sailed ten days later with only 18 recruits on board. Its departure was a festive occasion. Canoes had been coming and going all day to allow friends and family to see for themselves the sleeping quarters, the new uniforms and the generous food supplies on board ship. Last noted in his journal that the recruits were cheerful and that the relatives had been convinced that the men were being incomprehensibly well treated and well fed and would have nothing to complain about 10.

Yet, this festive occasion failed to attract new volunteers. By way of precaution, the Dutch government had decided to send out three ships to pick up 50 Africans each. These frigates usually carried between 100 and 200 men, but for the start of the African experiment this was deemed inadvisable. It could not be taken for

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8. M.P. Bossenbroek (1986: 33); Dfl. (florin) indicates a Dutch guilder. The Royal Dutch East Indies Army (Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger or KNIL) received its name in 1833 when it obtained autonomous status from the Dutch national army. The name became common usage only after 1933, but for the sake of brevity I will refer to the KNIL in this article.

9. NA, MK I, journaal 1831, inv. no. 3964.

10. Ibid.
granted that the Africans would remain well disciplined during the long voyage. The captains had strict instructions to avoid any kind of coercion that would smack of slave trading. This precaution proved unnecessary. No trouble on board ship was ever reported during the period of African recruitment (1831-1872), during which 3080 Africans sailed to the East Indies. On Java, they became known as Belanda Hitam or Blanda Item, which in Malay means “Black Dutchmen”.

On 14 February 1832 the three-master Henrietta Klazina anchored off Elmina. The third ship, the brig Clara Henrietta, was delayed, having suffered damage that needed repair in the port of Plymouth. Desperate for recruits, Last sent out messengers to various towns and villages and increased the advance payment to 1 oz of gold, which equalled 40 Dutch guilders. He managed to supply the Henrietta Klazina with 19 recruits. But when, finally, the Clara Henrietta appeared on 24 February 1832 to take on board its 50 African recruits, Last was hard pressed to deliver any recruit all.

Captain W. Blom and naval lieutenant Rombout van Loon of the Clara Henrietta spent three weeks at Elmina, while Last mounted his frantic search for recruits. On 10 March, envoy J. Simons returned from Kumasi with the news that the Ashanti King would send some soldiers later, but presently had none available. Aware that the shipping company would charge the frugal Department of Colonies one hundred guilders for every day that the ship had to stay at Elmina beyond the agreed period of eight days, Last dutifully explored all his options. After 20 days, the captain would be entitled to continue his voyage regardless of the numbers of recruits on board.

Utilising his curriculum vitae

By 14 March, Last had managed to assemble six soldiers for Java, none of whom understood a word of Dutch. In his journal, the Governor noted the presence of a tapoeyer in Elmina who had been to Europe and who was not unwilling to enlist. But he insisted on one condition: he demanded to be enrolled in the rank of corporal. “I will wait until the last minute to see if some more men will join, including perhaps someone who understands a bit of Dutch”. But Last could wait no longer, as any further delay for the Clara Henrietta would become too costly. Thus, Manus Ulzen entered the service of the Dutch East Indies army with the rank of corporal, although he had no prior army experience and the number of six men did not warrant a corporal. Of the seven African recruits who boarded the Clara Henrietta, Ulzen would be the only one to return to the

11. NA, MK I, geheime verbalen, inv. no. 4223, Dept. of Colonies to Foreign Affairs, 12 Sept. 1831, no 165 k geheim.
12. NA, MK I, Journalen van de Kust van Guinea 1832, inv. no. 3965.
land of his birth. Four of his companions died while in KNIL service, one settled on Java and one ended up in a mental institution in Batavia.

No details are mentioned about Manus’ previous travels to Europe. It was not uncommon for men from Elmina to join the crew of European merchant ships plying the West African coast. Possibly, Manus Ulzen had made his way to Europe as a crew member. Whatever the case, Manus Ulzen apparently knew how to utilise his c.v. His language skills and previous travel experience increased his value. As a corporal, he would earn 29 cents a day, compared to 21 cents as a soldier. He may also have been attracted by Last’s system of delegated payments, which enabled him to provide for his mother. Throughout his army career, he sent three Dutch guilders a month to his mother, Abbenada Atta.

The Clara Henrietta finally sailed for Batavia on 16 March 1832. The seven Africans joined a detachment of only 12 European soldiers. Manus and his companions therefore must have had plenty of space, food and water. On previous voyages to Batavia, the Clara Henrietta had carried 115 men⁵. Bigger ships transported up to 250 troops.

After a voyage of 172 days, counting from the day of departure (24 December 1831) from Nieuwe Diep (Den Helder), the Clara Henrietta reached Batavia on 13 June 1832. The long delay at Elmina was partially responsible for the exceptional duration of the trip. The average duration of a voyage from the Netherlands to Batavia – without a stop at Elmina – was in this period 120 days⁴.

Before leaving Elmina, the African recruits were issued with their new uniforms: one waistcoat, one pair of trousers, one pair of gaiters, one fatigue cap, one neckerchief, one waxed linen rucksack, two coloured shirts, one bread bag, a set with sewing equipment and a water bottle. As European soldiers, they were also entitled to socks and shoes, items that proved to be of great symbolic significance at a later stage in the recruitment saga⁶. Lieutenant Rombout van Loon had received detailed instructions from Governor Last, who after 16 years of experience on the Gold Coast considered himself an expert in dealing with the natives. He explained that Africans prefer to sleep on the floor, wrapped in a blanket; they were not used to beds. Experience would tell whether they wanted to use the hammocks between decks. The accompanying officers reported later that the recruits willingly used the hammocks once they found out that this minimized the impact of the backwash of the ship. Food would be no problem, as long as the Africans saw that they were given the same meals as the European troops. However, to avoid a too sudden change in diet, Last had added some yams, peanuts and malaguette pepper to the regular food supplies, as well as some

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15. Infringements on their rights as European soldiers were the cause of several African mutinies in the period 1839-1841. See: I. van Kessel (2003 : 141-169).
tobacco and soap. He told the supervising officer to ensure that the Africans took a daily bath and washed their clothes regularly.

According to the Governor, the “character of the Negroes” need not cause any problems:

“They are of a quiet nature and have an almost unlimited respect for the authority of white men. The Negro has a fairly correct idea of justice and injustice, of right and wrong. He is never inclined to mutinous behaviour, except when he is drunk or severely maltreated without reason. He will not touch a white man, except when incited to do so by another white man. His main vice is carelessness and laziness”.

And, Last warned, he will never forget a promise or commitment, however minor, until the promise has been fulfilled. The story of Manus Ulzen – and many of his compatriots – illustrates that this last remark was a valid observation.

Captain Blom also carried correspondence from Elmina to Batavia, including a letter from Governor Last to the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, in which he explained again that it had proved impossible to deliver the required numbers and added:

“Lastly I think that I must point out to Your Excellency that I felt obliged to appoint one of the recruits as a corporal – even though the number [of recruits] did not allow me to do so – in view of the fact that none of the recruits understood a single word of Dutch, and the recruit Ulzen, who has been in Europe, is therefore able to serve as interpreter, which he was willing to do, on condition that he be appointed corporal”.

Once on board, the African troops settled down to the monotonous routine that would determine the rhythm of the next three months. To fight boredom, the Africans were provided with games of checkers, and a few “Negro guitars”. They had also brought along their own musical instruments and games. Drums feature regularly in reports on these voyages, as does the popular African board game of owari.

Efforts to obtain a British laissez-passer to avoid problems with the British navy patrolling the West African coast in search of illegal slavers, had failed. The Clara Henrietta was issued only with a laissez-passer from the Dutch authorities, issued in French by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague and stating that the ship carried a maximum of 50 free Africans destined for military service on Java. The Ministry did succeed in obtaining the signature of the British Consul in The Hague, Disbrowe.

16. NA, MK, journaal 1831, inv. no. 3964.
17. NA, MK I, geheime veralen, inv. no. 4235, 3 Sept. 1834, no. 214 k, Governor F. Last to the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, dd. Elmina 14 March 1832.
18. The owari game is mentioned in J.-M. Birkmeyer (1860: 133). Birkmeyer served as a medical doctor on one of the troop ships around 1837-1838.
19. NA, MK I, Geheime veralen inv. no. 4224, various correspondence.
Troop ships chartered by the Dutch government were obliged to reach their destination as quickly as possible. Calling at ports en route was only permitted if the ship had suffered damage that needed repair, or in case of a shortage of drinking water. This happened very rarely. During the previous centuries of Company rule, mortality on the ships to the East Indies had been very high. In the 19th century however, detailed regulations concerning sleeping quarters, hygiene, food and drinking water made death on board a rare event. The captain and the ships’ physician received a premium of respectively five and three guilders for every soldier delivered alive in Batavia. Soldiers were scarce and expensive: the government had a direct interest in their health and safe voyage. The real health risks occurred in the first year after arrival in the East Indies, not on board ship.

This does not mean that conditions for soldiers were comfortable. Their sleeping quarters were the between-decks, which ought to have a minimum height of 1.56 cm. If weather conditions allowed, sleeping on deck was usually permitted. The soldiers’ sleeping quarters were separated from those of the sailors. Each soldier was entitled to at least 1 m². The between-decks was furnished with chests that served simultaneously for storage, table and benches. Hammocks hung from the ceiling. Many travel descriptions give a vivid impression of the stench in this narrow space of wood, tar and (sick) bodies. But as the *Clara Henrietta* carried less than two dozen troops, Manus Ulzen must have had plenty of space and air.
The day on board ship would begin at seven o'clock with a round of genever (Dutch gin), reputed to be a boost in cold weather, “while on hot days it is, mixed with some water, very suitable to wash the chest, joints and legs”. If they so desired, the men could also have some rusks. Breakfast proper consisted of boiled grits, twice a week enriched with butter and syrup. At noon, the main meal was served, alternating between sauerkraut or dried peas, with either stockfish, salted beef or bacon. On Sundays, there was the additional attraction of pickles. Lunch would be washed down with a pint of beer. The second round of genever was issued before noon or before the evening meal. This was a basic meal, consisting mainly of rusks and cheese. Drinking water was freely available, but ought not to be wasted. Wine and tobacco was also available, but at their own expense.

The main business on board was fighting boredom. The routine fatigue duties included cleaning the sleeping quarters, cleaning and washing uniforms and assisting the crew. If the weather was right, the commanding officer conducted military exercises, as well as theoretical instructions on life in the East Indies. The soldiers were instructed in military rules and procedures, in the use of signals, elementary knowledge of hygiene and health precautions in the tropics, and perhaps some basic Malay, the lingua franca in the East Indies. Manus Ulzen served as the interpreter for the six African recruits. In addition, the Africans had to get used to their various garments. Corporal Ulzen, with his European experience, no doubt would have been responsible for overseeing the proper dress code.

Entertainment depended largely on the soldiers’ own initiative: board games and card playing were most popular, but music, singing, masquerade balls and theatre were also regular features on the troop ships. Soldiers and passengers remained strictly separated. All in all, 35 voyages were made with Africans troops between 1831 and 1872.

The officers accompanying the first 44 African recruits had no complaints about their charges. They reported that the Negroes behaved quietly and respectfully, but had no notion of property. However, this problem soon disappeared under European supervision.

“They possess a high degree of amour-propre, bordering on conceit; for individuals an unfavourable characteristic, but with a favourable effect in the interest of their military destiny. This characteristic spurs their ambition; they regard themselves as equal to the European and superior to the natives.”

After arriving at Batavia on 13 June 1832, the men marched to Weltevreden, the large garrison outside the capital, which was used for the training of newly arrived

troops. Here, they were welcomed with a meal of soup, rice and sambal (a hot peppery paste with meat or vegetables), and scrutinized by Javanese girls chewing sirih quid. Newcomers were always vulnerable. Javanese girls and Chinese gambling houses and drinking spots competed to empty the pockets of the newly arrived troops who were desperate for some entertainment and company after the long voyage. At Weltevreden, Corporal Ulzen and his companions would have joined the Africans who sailed on the Rotterdams Welvaren and the Henrietta Klazina.

While Corporal Ulzen and his companions explored their new surroundings, the army command made up the bill. On average, getting these 44 Africans to Batavia had cost the Dutch state the astronomical sum of Dfl. 1,232.23 per head. By far the most expensive were Manus Ulzen and his six companions. The shipping company had to be paid on the basis of 50 men from Elmina, while only seven had boarded ship. Thus, bringing Corporal Manus Ulzen to Batavia had cost the Dutch state fl. 2,188.61. The costs of bringing a European soldier from the Netherlands to Batavia was not more than Dfl. 420. Not surprisingly, the Governor-General of the East Indies advised the Department of Colonies to halt the experiment of African recruitment because of these excessive costs. Only if the costs could be substantially cut should African recruitment be continued. For the next four years, African recruitment was halted. The next troop ship from Elmina only arrived in Batavia in August 1836.

In November 1833, Abbenada Atta received the first payment from her son Manus, two guilders from his pay for November 1832. It took a full year before the list of “delegated payments” with the attesta de vita had completed its journey from Batavia via The Hague to Elmina. From 1834, regular payments of 3 guilders a month arrived every 3 months in Elmina. Corporal Ulzen apparently continued to be in good health. Soldiers in the army hospital did not receive any pay and therefore could not make payments to relatives, creditors or owners.

The Africans at war

The 44 African recruits served to the full satisfaction of the army command. In a report to the Governor-General, Commander General De Stuers was full of praise for the African soldiers, who had their first battle experience on Sumatra in the campaigns against Jambi (central Sumatra) and the Lampong districts (south Sumatra).
“They are indefatigable, and in this respect far superior to the European, whom they equal in courage when facing the enemy (...). They distinguished themselves most commendably in the expeditions to Jambi and the Lampongs”. Their physique was imposing. These strong, muscular men overawed “the small and less robust inhabitants of our East Indies possessions”. The general concluded that their endurance in the tropics made it profitable for the Dutch government to have a Negro presence in the colonial army. De Stuers then added some remarks about their moral and intellectual characteristics. Thus far the Africans had not attended the garrison school because of their continued involvement in army campaigns, but the army commander was convinced that some of them would make useful non-commissioned officers. They are “fond of games and women” and also like a drink, but they were not given to the alcohol abuse that prevailed among the European troops.

Among each other, the Africans showed strong bonds of solidarity. As an example, De Stuers referred to one African, who was discharged after being injured in battle. When he was asked where he wanted to enjoy his pension, the injured soldier replied: “I want to stay here with my comrades, and if ever some of them will return to Guinea, then I will join them”. A later remark in De Stuers’ report makes it clear that the injured African was none other than Manus Ulzen. In the three years since March 1832, four of the 44 Africans died, three were killed in battle, one was discharged because of madness and one (Ulzen) was pensioned off because of injuries sustained in battle. The entry in the regimental roll mentions that Manus Ulzen was shot in the left thigh during the campaign in the Lampong districts. De Stuers calculated that a loss of only 20 per cent in three years was much less than the average losses sustained among the European troops. The sample of 44 is too small to allow any detailed comparisons between Negro soldiers and European soldiers but the army commander, supported by the Governor-General, recommended a resumption of recruitment on the Coast of Guinea. Over the following decades, over 3,000 Africans followed in the footsteps of Manus Ulzen and his companions. Most died during their long terms of army service, a few hundred returned to Elmina and the remainder settled with their Indonesian wives and their Indo-African children in the various garrison towns on Java where their pensions were paid out.

The campaign in the Lampong districts took place in the context of the Padri wars, a long drawn-out armed conflict between an Islamic fundamentalist sect on southern Sumatra and the Dutch who were engaged in efforts to expand colonial control from Java to Sumatra. As part of the reinforcements sent from Batavia, a

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25. NA, MK I, openbare veralen inv. no. 1030, exh.21 mei 1836 no. 21, De Stuers to Governor-General, Batavia 23 March 1835 no 93/3.
26. NA, MK I, Oost-Indisch Boek, inv. no 334, monsterrol van de Clara Henrietta, folio nr 103; inv no 619, pensioenstaten, folio no 861.
contingent of African soldiers was shipped to Padang. In August 1834, three Africans were killed in battle in a failed attempt to storm the fortifications at Radja Gépé. The exact date of Ulzen’s injury is not mentioned, but he was discharged from the army by decree of 24 July 1835, no. 1, with a pension of 142 guilders per annum. Corporal Manus Ulzen was among the first Africans in the KNIL to be pensioned and repatriated to his native Elmina. But going home involved another long, arduous voyage.

### From Batavia to Holland

Manus Ulzen left Batavia on 27 August 1835 on the *Schoon Verbond*, with seven other returning soldiers. The *Schoon Verbond*, a much more spacious ship than the *Clara Henrietta*, with more room in the between-decks, sailed via the Cape of Good Hope and past Elmina to Texel, an island off the north coast of the Netherlands. Arriving in mid-winter, on 4 December 1835, Manus must have shivered during his subsequent trip on a much smaller boat from Texel over the Zuiderzee to Harderwijk, the home base of the colonial troops, where he was provided with winter clothing. On 11 December 1835, the commander of the colonial garrison reported to the Department of Colonies the arrival of a detachment of returning soldiers from the East Indies on the *Schoon Verbond*, including an African corporal with documents stating that he was entitled to an annual pension of fl 142, payable in Elmina in Africa. Because of his injuries, the corporal walked on two crutches. According to the commander, Corporal Ulzen was not familiar with the Dutch language and did not know where to go. Colonel A.R. de Muralt asked the minister for instructions and was told that the African corporal should be shipped to the Coast of Guinea at the earliest opportunity. Meanwhile, he was to be well treated and his injuries taken care of, so that he would present a favourable testimony to his compatriots back home. A positive report would be in the interest of the African recruitment scheme, which now had resumed on a much more ambitious scale. The colonial garrison in Harderwijk was under the authority of the Department of War, but the Department of Colonies agreed to reimburse any costs made on behalf of Corporal Ulzen.

It was usual in the KNIL that all returning army personnel were to be formally discharged in the garrison town of Harderwijk, the home base of the colonial

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27. E.B. Kielstra (1917 : 148-174); NA, MK I, Stamboeken onderofficieren en minderen.
28. NA, MK I, inv. no. 2559, Besluiten van de Gouverneur-Generaal van Nederlandsch Indië.
29. NA, MK I, Index op het Openbaar Verbaal Archief 1836, inv. no. 2104.
30. NA, MK I, Register van schepen voor Oost-Indië, inv. no. 4172; NA, MK I, Monsterrol van de Clara Henrietta, inv. no. 343.
31. NA, MK I, openbare veralen in nr 1005, exh. 17 Dec. 1835 no. 10; Commander of Harderwijk garrison to Dept. of Colonies, 11 Dec. 1835 no. 3095; Dept. of Colonies to Harderwijk, 17 Dec. 1835 no.19.
troops, both for recruits and for returning veterans. There, they were issued with a passport, pension documents and evidence of their discharge from the army, that would allow them to travel freely to their destination. The African veterans had to wait in Harderwijk until an Elmina-bound ship was available. Ulzen had the misfortune of arriving in December. Later detachments of Africans would sail from Batavia according to an adapted travel schedule in order to spare them the harsh Dutch winters. Nevertheless, over the century a few dozen Africans died in Harderwijk, the last station on their way home to Africa.

Corporal Manus Ulzen had no opportunity to explore the pleasures and vices of this garrison town. On 10 January 1836 Colonel De Muralt dispatched him to the military hospital in Utrecht for further treatment of his leg injury, with “an excellent and comfortable covered carriage” in the company of a responsible person. Apparently, the injury had developed complications. Some weeks later, the hospital reported that the leg would probably have to be amputated. If that were the case, Manus Ulzen would be unable to travel for quite a while. The Department of Colonies was arranging for the departure of another African soldier, John Gober, who was destined to return to Elmina on the Maria, that was scheduled to depart in March 1836. The unfortunate Gober, who had disembarked on 27 September 1835 in Hellevoetssluis while his luggage remained on board, had spent some months in prison in The Hague. Finding himself without means, Gober had stolen 5 guilders from an army sergeant and had been sentenced to four months in prison. After his early release he was despatched to Harderwijk to wait for a shipping opportunity to Elmina. Ulzen was, however, not yet well enough to join him.

Some months later, Corporal Ulzen received a visitor from Harderwijk, possibly Colonel De Muralt himself, or someone on his behalf. The subsequent correspondence between Harderwijk and The Hague makes no mention of the state of Manus’s leg, but instead initiates a complicated discussion on his eligibility for a bronze medal. Ulzen had told his visitor that he had been promised the bronze medal shortly before his departure from Batavia. He had carried a certificate as proof of this promise, and on arrival in The Netherlands he had handed this certificate to an unknown person. He obviously attached tremendous importance to this distinction and, true to the admonition in Last’s instructions on dealing with Gold Coast Africans, he had not forgotten the promise made in Batavia. The colonel proposed granting him the medal if sufficient grounds for it could be found in his service record. The minister

32. NA, MK I, openbare verbalen, inv. no. 1014, exh. 15 Feb. 1836 no. 37, Harderwijk to Dept. of Colonies.
33. NA, MK I, openbare verbalen, inv. no. 1016, 26 Feb. 1836 no. 12.
34. NA, MK I Openbare verbalen, inv. no. 1040, exh. 25 July 1836 no. 13, Harderwijk to Dept. of Colonies.
replied that such a promise seemed highly unlikely as the bronze medal had been instituted by King Willem I in 1825 as an award for twelve years of loyal service. Even if his 3.5 years in active service were counted double, as was customary for Europeans serving in the tropics, Ulzen would still not qualify. But if the medal was of such huge importance to the corporal, it would nevertheless be wise to make an exception. A bronze medal for Manus might serve to promote the enlistment of more Africans in Elmina. The problem was that Dutch soldiers with less than 12 years service would seize this precedent and put in their own claims for a medal as well. However, this could be avoided if the ceremony were to take place on board ship. The minister therefore requested authorisation by King Willem I to grant Corporal Ulzen a bronze medal by way of exceptional favour.

The Department of War supported the request, and proposed extending this privilege to all African soldiers who were honourably discharged, even if they had not completed the full term of 12 years (in effect 6 years). Again the argument was that this would encourage more Africans to enlist in the Dutch army. King Willem I gave his approval and authorised the bronze medal plus the full Dfl. 12, – premium for Negro Corporal Manus Ulzen.

While officials in The Hague deliberated about his medal, Manus Ulzen was facing the prospect of another Dutch winter. However, on 25 December 1836, Colonel De Muralt reported that the medical officer at the hospital deemed Ulzen sufficiently recovered to undertake the voyage to his home country. It was felt that the return to the climate of his native lands would be conducive to further recovery. However, as his leg wounds were not yet fully healed, he would need proper care on board ship.

35. NA, MK I, Openbare veralen, inv. no. 1040, exh. 25 July 1836 no. 13, Dept. of Colonies to King Willem I.
36. NA, MK I, Openbare veralen, inv. no. 1052, exh. 6 Oct. 1836 no. 4, King to Depts. of Colonies and War.
37. NA, MK I, Openbare veralen, inv. no. 1071, exh. 4 Jan. 1837 no 10, Harderwijk to Dept. of Colonies.
Manus Ulzen was to be taken from Utrecht to Hellevoetsluis, from where the frigate *Jonge Adriana* was destined to sail to Elmina and then on to Batavia. A medical officer and a sergeant from Harderwijk were directed to accompany the corporal. The correspondence does not specify Ulzen’s state of health but includes minute details about the trip from Utrecht to Hellevoetsluis. On 8 January 1837 Manus Ulzen left hospital in a French carriage hired by Sergeant Elders for the considerable sum of Dfl. 30. They made a stop in Gouda where Ulzen had coffee with two rolls for 30 cents. Quite an expensive lunch, considering the corporal’s salary was 29 cents a day. They stayed overnight in a lodging house in Maassluis where a hot meal, bed, breakfast and heating cost Dfl. 3.30. The next morning, a ferry took Corporal Ulzen and his luggage from Maassluis to Rozenburg. Two more carriages and one more ferry were required to deliver Manus on board the *Jonge Adriana*. His luggage was apparently fairly substantial, as it was listed separately on all the receipts for carriages and ferries. On the way, the carriage
passed the town of Brielle, the birthplace of his great-grandfather Roelof Ulzen, but Manus was most likely unaware of his ancestral links to this town on the island of Voorne. All in all, the trip from Utrecht to Hellevoetsluis had cost 42 guilders.

Sergeant Elders delivered Ulzen to the care of 2nd lieutenant Meister, who was to accompany the troops from Hellevoetsluis to Elmina and then on to Java. Once on board ship, Ulzen received the remainder of his pension money for the past year and last but not least the bronze medal with the accompanying ribbon and certificate plus a bonus of Dfl. 12. The total amount added up to Dfl. 49.61. The remainder of the pension did not amount to much, because Dfl. 130 had been deducted for hospital costs and extra clothing. Manus Ulzen signed the receipt with his name. It is the only surviving document with his signature: perhaps he learned to write during his many months in hospital. Later in Elmina he would again sign by marking a cross. On 19 January 1837, the Jonge Adriana sailed from the small port of Hellevoetsluis, taking Manus Ulzen on yet another hazardous journey.

On 22 January, the ship ran aground in adverse winds in the English Channel, and was in danger of breaking up. “The ship pitched alarmingly and the captain was very worried that the ship would be lost.” Distress shots were fired and an alarm lantern was hoisted. However, the rising tide lifted the ship off the sand banks and there was no apparent damage apart from the loss of an anchor. An English pilot arrived to take the ship to Deal where a new anchor was purchased. The remainder of the voyage to Elmina took unusually long because of unfavorable winds and long periods of calm. On 15 March the Jonge Adriana finally arrived at Axim to take on fresh supplies of water, which took two days because of the considerable distance between ship and shore. On 19 March 1837, at 2 o’clock in the afternoon, Negro Corporal Manus Ulzen at long last arrived in Elmina where Lieutenant Meister delivered him in the care of acting Governor Tonneboeijer. Meister reported to the Department of Colonies that Manus’s injuries, sustained in the Indies, had much improved during his voyage to Elmina.

Among the correspondence handed to the Governor were Ulzen’s papers and a letter from the Department of Colonies, stating that Manus Ulzen was to receive a lifetime pension of Dfl. 142 per annum, to be paid in monthly instalments, or other terms such as deemed suitable by the Governor. The first instalment was to be paid on 1 March 1837. By way of comparison: retired

38. NA, MK I Openbare veralen, inv. nr. 1075, exh. 6 Feb. 1837 no. 7, receipts for the transport of Negro Corporal Manus Ulzen from Utrecht to Hellevoetsluis.
39. ibid.
40. NA, MK I, Openbare veralen inv. nr. 1102, exh. 23 June 1837 no 34, report by 2nd lieutenant Meister to the Dept. of Colonies.
41. ibid.
Sergeant-Major Hendrik Ulzen, possibly Manus's brother or cousin, received a pension of only 108 guilders a year after an army career of more than 25 years in higher ranks with the permanent force of St. George d'Elmina. The minister advised the Governor to treat “the said M. Ulzen in such a way as will be conducive to the encouragement of other Negroes to enter into our service”.

Corporal Ulzen was not the first Java veteran to return to Elmina. During 1836 pensioned soldiers John Gober and Kudjo Akutscha had arrived from Java via the Netherlands. Of the first batch of 44 recruits, seventeen men ultimately returned to Elmina, three settled on Java and the remainder died during their long years of army service. Of the 24 men who died, seven were killed in battle.

By this time, the resumption of the African recruitment scheme was in full swing. The Dutch government had despatched a special envoy, Major-General Jan Verveer, to the Ashanti king in Kumasi. On 18 March 1837, a treaty was signed between King Willem I and the Asantehene Kwaku Dua, under which the Ashanti king agreed to deliver 1,000 recruits, in exchange for payment in guns and gunpowder. In addition, he authorized the Dutch to open a recruitment bureau in Kumasi where individuals could enlist. In practice, the scheme meant that the recruits were slaves of the Ashanti who bought their freedom with an advance on their army pay. They were issued with an Act of Manumission so that the recruitment scheme would not contravene the treaties banning the slave trade. The costs of manumission were about hundred guilders, to be repaid at a rate of 8.5 cents a day from their army pay. Recruitment was halted in 1841 after a series of mutinies in the African companies on Java and Sumatra. However, the scheme was resumed on a smaller scale in 1855 and ended only with the transfer of the Dutch Possessions on the Coast of Guinea to Britain in 1872. By then, some 3080 Africans had signed up for the Dutch East Indies army.

Recruitment was not only opened in Kumasi, but also continued along the coast where the Dutch commander of the Elmina garrison doubled as commander of the African recruitment station. There is no evidence in the archives that Manus Ulzen or other returning veterans became actively involved in the recruitment scheme. They were living evidence that the Dutch would keep their promise to bring the soldiers home after their contracts had expired, but it is not known whether their injuries and the stories they had to tell about army life in the East Indies would have encouraged or dissuaded aspiring recruits. The handful of returned veterans, including Corporal Ulzen, were used by the Dutch government in its running argument with London about the legitimacy of the recruitment scheme. After one shipload of recruits from Elmina had been

42. NA, MK I, inv. no. 4031, Soldijboek van de ambtenaren ter Kuste van Guinea.
43. NA, NBKG, inv. no. 434, Minister of Colonies to the Commander of the Dutch establishments of the Coast of Guinea, Gravenhage 4 Jan. 1837, no. 101.
44. NA, MK, Stamboeken van onderofficieren en minderen van het Nederlandsch Oost Indisch Leger.
directed to the Dutch colony of Surinam, the British government reiterated its accusations that the scheme amounted to a kind of covert slave trading. The Hague retorted that these accusations were totally unfounded. As proof, a list with the names of five returned East Indies veterans was attached. Here Manus Ulzen is misspelt as Ulgen, and moreover, he is credited with an army campaign in which he could not possibly have participated: “injured by the enemy during the siege of Bonjol, 4 Jan. 1837”\(^4\). By that date, Ulzen had long left the East Indies and was in the Netherlands preparing for his homeward bound journey. According to Ulzen’s entry in the regimental rolls, the shot wound occurred in the Lampong districts in 1835.

There is some evidence however that at least a number of veterans were proud of their army record, showing off their medals and remnants of their army uniforms. They never missed an opportunity to show visiting Dutchmen their army passes, listing campaigns “on Bali, Palembang, Montrado, Bandermasin or Boni”. The Java veterans were reportedly the first to volunteer whenever the Dutch assembled an expeditionary force to settle a local dispute, on condition that they would get their share of the provisions of European food and drink.

Judging from the pension rolls, Elmina now (1837) had three Java veterans. By 1850, some 40 pensioners were receiving a total annual amount of Dfl. 3,000, a modest sum which nevertheless must have had some impact on the economy of a small town like Elmina\(^5\).

Manus Ulzen had most likely had his fill of army life, or perhaps his leg injury had permanently disqualified him for military service. On his return to Elmina at the age of 25, Manus Ulzen was still a young man. About the rest of his life, only a few details are known. There is no evidence that he was employed in any type of service by the Dutch, in spite of his language skills and his army experience in the East Indies. For a brief period, from 25 February until 31 March 1868, he was re-engaged in military service, along with a few dozen other Java veterans\(^6\). This period coincided with a series of local uprisings in the wake of an ill-fated exchange of territories between the English and the Dutch on the Gold Coast. To consolidate their spheres of influence, thereby creating the conditions for the imposition of import duties, the Dutch and the English had agreed that territories west of Sweet River (between Elmina and Cape Coast) would be “Dutch”, while territories to the east of Sweet River would be “English”.

45. NA, r afdeling Suriname na 1828, no. 50, Correspondence with British Commissioners at Sierra Leone, The Havana, Rio de Janeiro and Surinam relating to the Slave Trade. London: 1841, third enclosure no. 125.
46. C.A. JEEKEL (1869: 29-30).
47. NA, MK I, Ingekomen stukken van de Kust van Guinea, inv. no. 4019.
The deal proved a disaster: the European powers exercised no sovereignty over these lands and had neglected to consult the African rulers whose territories were to be “exchanged”. The people of Kommenda refused to fly the Dutch flag. A Dutch warship was sent to demonstrate Dutch authority, along with the permanent force of the Elmina garrison and a few dozen Java veterans, who – according to a Dutch army officer – “are mostly quite willing to take up arms again to join the campaign. In spite of their advanced age, they are often very useful because of their calm courage and war experience”. Manus Ulzen was employed as an overseer for sick and injured soldiers. The fact that he was called to active service for five weeks indicates that he must have been physically fit, but does not constitute conclusive evidence that he was able to walk unaided.

After the 1840s, returning Java veterans were allocated plots on a hill behind the Castle of St. George d’Elmina that soon became known as Java Hill. Its inhabitants were mostly veterans who originated from remote places in the interior. Going “home” – even supposing that they knew where home was – was no option for them: they would not be able to access their pensions and more importantly, they were likely to revert to slave status as the Acts of Manumission issued in Elmina carried no authority beyond a limited sphere of influence. Manus Ulzen, as a native from Elmina, had no reason to settle on Java Hill. At first he probably lived with relatives until he set up his own household in 1846. Nevertheless, he obviously kept in touch with his comrades from the East Indies. On 26 November 1846 Manus Ulzen, along with half a dozen other Elmina inhabitants, was awarded a plot of land on the sea side of the Heerenweg (nowadays Liverpool Street). Five years later, a fire broke out in his house but the flames were quickly extinguished. At one point in 1854, he ran into trouble. Together with his neighbour and fellow Java veteran Jan Pot, Ulzen accused another Elminian, Jan Niezer, of pocketing the pension payments of three Java veterans and of selling another Java veteran into slavery in Accra. Niezer was incarcerated but the Dutch Governor later established that Ulzen and Pot had laid false charges. Ulzen was sentenced to three months in prison and a fine of 16 dollars, while Pot received a lighter sentence.

From 1868, Ulzen’s name appears as co-signer on the lists of death certificates issued by the Dutch administration. He routinely reported the deaths of pensioned Java veterans, signing with a cross, “having declared that he is unable to write his name”. Deceased Java veterans were entitled to a coffin supplied by

49. Van Braam Houckgeest (1870: 7).
50. NA, MK I, journalen van de Kust van Guinea, 1846, inv. no. 3979.
52. NA, MK II, inv. no. 6661, Journalen van de Kust van Guinea 1854. It is not clear whether this is the same person as the Jan Niezer who served simultaneously with Ulzen and Pot in the KNIL. The US dollar was increasingly common currency on the Gold Coast in the later part of the 19th century.
53. NA, NBKG inv. no. 998.
the Dutch administration. By this time, Ulzen had apparently become the doyen of the Java veterans as well as a man of authority among the vrijburgers. In the minutes of the Dutch Colonial Council discussing the complicated relations between Elmina and the Ashanti kingdom in the context of the impending handover of Elmina to the British, Ulzen is mentioned as spokesman on behalf of the vrijburgers.

After the spectacular journeys of his youth, Manus Ulzen spent the rest of his long life in Elmina. The pension rolls register regular quarterly payments of Dfl 35.50, with an interruption of one and half years from January 1839 to June 1840. As payments had to be made directly to the pensioner, it is clear that Ulzen did not embark on any extended travels, except perhaps during this one period.

Manus Ulzen was among the first Elminians to be married in the Catholic Church, which was introduced by French missionaries in 1880 after the departure of the Dutch. On 10 February 1883, he married Ekua Maria Esson. Church records describe him as "an old man, with a white beard, an ex-soldier, who had been baptised at Batavia in the Dutch East Indies, where he had been fighting. He acted as church keeper, lit the candles and looked after the chapel.".

Negro corporal Manus Ulzen died in Elmina on 9 January 1887, 15 years after the departure of the Dutch who had taken him on his tricontinental journey. He left a wife and four sons. His life is a chapter in two extraordinary tales: the family history of Roelof Ulsen and his descendants, and the saga of the African soldiers recruited for Java. Both stories have recently been revived in Elmina with the opening of the Elmina-Java Museum in early 2003. The museum, an initiative by Dr Thad Patrick Manus Ulzen, a great-great-grandson of Manus Ulzen, houses exhibits on the family's history, the soldiers for Java and the history of Elmina.

Sources, Subjects and Souls

I have told the tale of the voyages of Manus Ulzen almost exclusively on the basis of archival sources. The Ulzen family has a keen interest in its family history.
but oral tradition does not go back as far as the lifetime of Manus Ulzen. However, the name of “Manus” or “Hermanus”, sometimes adapted as “Mends” or “Herm”, was carried over to the present generation of Ulzens. Nor does Manus’ name figure in the published accounts written by contemporaries on the army campaigns in southern Sumatra. That leaves the Dutch archives as the sole source of information about the remarkable life of Manus Ulzen, with the Elmina parish records as an additional source for the last phase of his life.

The archival sources are at the same time incredibly rich and infinitely frustrating. They allow the reconstruction of the life of Manus Ulzen as a bureaucratic subject. It is unlikely that one could find the same amount of detail on the life of an ordinary illiterate 19th-century Dutchman. We owe the wealth of detail to bureaucratic entanglements and the Dutch obsession with bookkeeping. Manus Ulzen figures in the archives of the Dutch Possessions on the Coast of Guinea, in the archives of the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, in the archives of the Department of Colonies, and lastly also in the records of the Department of War. There is therefore a fourfold chance of finding surviving records. Moreover, the archives over this period have been well preserved. Those for the period after 1845 have suffered from a massive clean-up, particularly of files on individuals.

Much of the surviving documentation is concerned with payments. As a soldier in active service, Manus Ulzen was on the budget of the Department of Colonies, under the heading of the East Indies budget. During his stay in the Netherlands and in hospital, Ulzen was the responsibility of the Department of War. Expenses made on his behalf would be reimbursed by the Department of Colonies. Hence we can still marvel at the neatly stapled set of receipts covering Manus’ voyage from Utrecht to Hellevoetsluis. The accompanying sergeant would have to be reimbursed by the colonial garrison in Harderwijk, which in turn passed the bill to the Department of Colonies. Once back in Elmina, Ulzen’s pension payments became the responsibility of the Dutch governor there.

Thus, we know today that Manus Ulzen had coffee and rolls for 30 cents in Gouda on 8 January 1837, that his bronze medal set a precedent for the African KNIL soldiers, that he paid a fine of 12 dollars in 1854 and that he looked after sick and injured soldiers for five weeks in 1868.

Unfortunately, we cannot make any conclusions about Manus’s personal experience. How did a young man who had grown up in a small African coastal town react to the alien world of Java and the jungle of Sumatra? Was he an eager warrior or a reluctant soldier? What were the circumstances in which he sustained the shot wound in his left thigh? It took more than half a year to get him from the Sumatra battlefield to a well-equipped hospital in Utrecht. I have not found any conclusive evidence that his leg was actually amputated in Utrecht, but his injuries must have been quite severe if they kept him in hospital for almost a year. The decision about whether or not to amputate would have been a medical one,
and one that would not have required any correspondence with the Department of Colonies. Here, the archival search becomes exasperating: there is no clear information about Manus’s leg, but endless correspondence about money and medals.

Was Manus Ulzen angry and bitter about his misfortune? Was the army experience and his worldwide voyage a source of pride and prestige once he was back in Elmina, or instead a reason to warn his compatriots about the dangers of the outside world? Did he bring new products and ideas back to Elmina? What was in his – apparently fairly substantial – luggage? Did he experience racial discrimination either in the East Indies or in the Netherlands? In his case, the Dutch authorities kept their promise of equal treatment. The promise was not upheld for later detachments of recruits, who found plenty of reason to complain about encroachments on the promise of European status for the African soldiers. Manus Ulzen was treated as well – or as badly – as any lowly Dutch soldier in the KNIL could expect to be treated. It would seem that in his case more care was taken, in order not to jeopardise the recently relaunched scheme of African recruitment for the East Indies army. According to a tenacious but improbable tradition, returning soldiers took batik prints from Java to Elmina and thus stood at the origins of the now hugely popular “real Dutch wax prints” or “Java prints” in West African fashion. But in fact Asian textiles had found their way to West Africa long before the 19th century. It is moreover unlikely that the returning veterans could have afforded to purchase many luxury goods from their meagre wages. We do have a detailed inventory of the chest belonging to John Gober. It contained a substantial amount of clothing (including ten pairs of trousers, blue, white and orange respectively), some toiletries and a few luxury goods such as four porcelain items and a string of red coral beads, but no batik prints.

We can conclude with some confidence that Manus Ulzen, in spite of his initial lowly position in Elmina society and in the Dutch army, managed to exercise a considerable degree of control over his own destiny. He imposed his own conditions for enlistment in the KNIL, joining only after he had been promised the rank of corporal. Even in the unfamiliar environment of a Dutch hospital, he felt apparently not intimidated. He reminded his superiors that he

58. I. VAN KESSEL (2003: 141-169)
59. This myth surfaced again in the preface written by Eveline HERFKENS, then the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation, to the book FASHION AND GHANA, (The Hague 2001). She cited the story to illustrate the benefits of cultural exchange. See also: W.T. KROESSE (1976). In a typewritten appendix to the book, dated January 1986, the main producer of Dutch Wax Prints, Vlisco in Helmond, adds: “the popularization of exotic Asian textile goods in West Africa did not start with the home-coming of the Blanda Items, but developed slowly from trading activities which began at least one thousand years before”.
60. NA, MK I, Openbaar Verbaal, inv. no. 1016, 26 Feb. 1836 no 12.
had been promised a bronze medal. He got his way, even if it required some
bending of the rules. His subsequent career in Elmina society indicates that Ulzen
ultimately became a respected member of the vrijburger community, speaking on
their behalf during the difficult transition phase from Dutch to British rule. It is
likely that his exposure to the wider world and his knowledge of European
practices had indeed contributed to his rising status in Elmina society. He clearly
took his Catholic baptism seriously and was apparently receptive to new ideas.
But archival sources have their obvious limitations: they provide minute details
about Manus Ulzen as a budgetary item, but unfortunately do not allow us a
glimpse into the soul of a real living African person who plunged into
unimaginable adventures on two foreign continents.

Résumé

Cet article relate les pérégrinations de Manus Ulzen, jeune homme originaire de la ville
d’Elmina en Afrique de l’Ouest, qui s’enrôla en 1832 dans l’armée des Indes néerlandaises.
Sa carrière militaire le conduisit à Java et Sumatra, puis aux Pays-Bas, où il demeura un an
dans un hôpital pour se faire soigner d’une blessure à la jambe reçue au cours d’une
campagne militaire à Sumatra. Fondé sur des documents d’archives détaillés, l’article
montre que des individus de rang subalterne, comme ce jeune homme analphabète
originaire d’Afrique, pouvaient dans une mesure considérable maîtriser leur vie, même
lorsqu’ils se trouvaient loin de leur pays natal. Même dans l’environnement étranger d’un
hôpital aux Pays-Bas, Manus Ulzen ne se laissa pas intimider. Le roi fut amené par la
persuasion à changer les règles concernant les décorations militaires, si bien que Manus
Ulzen reçut la médaille de bronze qui lui avait été promise. Par la suite, son expérience à
l’étranger lui permit d’élérer son statut dans la société d’Elmina.

Samenvatting

Dit artikel volgt de wereldreis van Manus Ulzen, een jonge man van Eurafrikaanse
afkomst uit de Westafrikaanse plaats Elmina, die in 1832 dienst nam in het Koninklijk
Nederlands Indisch Leger (KNIL). Na zijn militaire training op Java werd hij ingezet in
een militaire expeditie op Sumatra, waar hij een schotwond in zijn been opliep. Vanwege
die verwonding werd hij voortijdig gepensioneerd en naar Nederland gezonden. Na een
jaar in het Militair Hospitaal in Utrecht keerde hij terug naar Elmina.

Het artikel, gebaseerd op omvangrijk archiefmateriaal, toont aan dat mensen in een
ondergeschikte positie, zoals een ongeletterde jonge Afrikaan, een grote mate van
zeggenschap over hun eigen leven konden hebben, zelfs in verre en vreemde oorden.
Manus Ulzen liet zich niet intimideren door de vreemde omgeving van een Nederlands
ziekenhuis, maar verlangde de bronzen medaille die hem in Batavia was beloofd. Om
uitreiking van de medaille mogelijk te maken, maakte Koning Willem I een uitzondering
op de bestaande regels. Dankzij zijn internationale ervaring werd Manus Ulzen later een
gezaghebbend burger in Elmina.
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