

## THE PRESENCE OF AFRICANS IN THE DUTCH EAST INDIES IN THE 19TH CENTURY: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to analyze the presence of Africans in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century as a historical review. This study uses a qualitative research method with a historical approach, through a literature study of books, archives, and scientific journals relevant to the history of Africans in the Dutch East Indies. The purpose of this study is to determine the background of the recruitment of Africans in the Dutch East Indies, the formation and characteristics of Zwarte Hollander, distribution and placement in the Dutch East Indies, and to determine the role of Africans in colonial military operations. The results of the study indicate that the recruitment of Africans in the Dutch East Indies did not occur spontaneously and through several reasons, including the Dutch experiencing a serious crisis in the supply of military personnel in the Dutch East Indies, so the Dutch recruited African soldiers to join the KNIL.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Historiography of the Dutch East Indies generally places colonial relations within a Euro-Asian framework, particularly between the Dutch colonial government and indigenous peoples. However, global historical studies show that the Dutch East Indies also served as a transcontinental interface involving Africa. The arrival of Africans in the 19th century was part of colonial mobility driven by Dutch military and administrative needs (Elphick & Giliomee, 1989; Stoler, 2002).

The history of the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century is generally written with an emphasis on the colonial relationship between the Dutch government and the indigenous population. This narrative often ignores the presence of other groups that shaped the colonial dynamics, one of which was Africans. However, the presence of Africans in the Dutch East Indies was not a marginal phenomenon, but rather part of the Dutch colonial strategy to maintain its power and military stability in Southeast Asia (Ricklefs, 2008).

Beginning in 1831, the Dutch began recruiting Africans to join the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL). In colonial sources, they were known as *Zwarte Hollanders*, or "Black Dutch." These recruits were mostly former slaves or individuals who had gained their freedom through military service contracts, although some were forcibly recruited. They were placed alongside European soldiers in the colonial military structure and were often deployed in military operations to suppress local resistance in Java and other regions (Van Kessel, 2002; van Kessel, 2011). Many descendants of African soldiers followed in their fathers' military footsteps. Second- and third-generation Indo-Africans also participated in the war against Japan. They shared their plight in Japanese prison camps. After Indonesian independence, many descendants of African KNIL soldiers chose to leave for the Netherlands.

Besides serving as instruments of colonial power, the presence of Africans in the Dutch East Indies also gave rise to complex social and cultural interactions. Many of them settled permanently, married local women, and formed Afro-Indo communities spread across various cities in Java. This phenomenon demonstrates the transcontinental nature of Dutch colonialism and involved human mobility beyond the European-native dichotomy (Vickers, 2013). The story of the Black Dutch is truly extraordinary. Many Africans recruited into the Dutch East Indies army suffered tragic outcomes. They died from tropical diseases, were killed, wounded, or lost on the battlefield, were disoriented from their homelands, or faced language barriers.

Thus, studying the presence of Africans in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century is crucial for broadening the perspective of Indonesian colonial history. This research not only reveals the military dimension of colonialism but also highlights the social aspects, identities, and global relations within the Dutch colonial network that connected Africa, Europe, and Asia. This article aims to examine the historical background to the recruitment, roles, and impact of Africans in the Dutch East Indies as part of global colonial history.

## METHOD

This research uses a literature-based historical research method, as proposed by Kuntowijoyo (2023), which emphasizes that history is the study of humanity in the temporal dimension and must be developed through critical exploration and analysis of written sources. According to Kuntowijoyo, the historical research method consists of four main stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography.

This research employs a literature review with a historical-descriptive approach. This literature review was chosen because this research aims to trace and analyze the presence of Africans in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century based on written literature, both primary and secondary sources, without conducting field research (Bowen, 2009).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

### Background of African Recruitment

Research shows that the presence of Africans in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century was not spontaneous, but rather part of Dutch colonial policy to address the military crisis. The shortage of European soldiers due to the Napoleonic Wars and the high mortality rate from tropical diseases prompted the colonial government to recruit soldiers from the Gold Coast in West Africa starting in the early 1830s (Emmer, 2006; Van Kessel, 2005).

The recruitment of Africans to the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century was motivated by the military crisis faced by the Dutch colonial government. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815), the Netherlands experienced limited military human resources due to the decline in the number of European soldiers and the high mortality rate from tropical diseases in the colony. This situation prompted the colonial government to seek alternative sources of military manpower outside Europe to maintain stability and colonial power in the Dutch East Indies (Ricklefs, 2008).

Like other colonial powers, the Dutch faced significant challenges due to a shortage of colonial troops. In previous centuries, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the West Indies Company (WIC) were able to maintain their own military forces, employing mercenaries from across Europe. By the end of the 18th century, all overseas ownership had shifted from trading companies to the state.

In the Java War (1825-1830), a guerrilla war against Diponegoro's rebel forces, the Dutch East Indies army suffered a major defeat. At its peak, 1827-1828, European losses accounted for 45% of the total Java War, with 8,000

European soldiers and 7,000 indigenous soldiers killed. Losses to the Javanese rebels and the population were even greater. The Java War necessitated intensive recruitment efforts. Dutch consuls in Hamburg, Bremen, and Frankfurt recruited thousands of German volunteers. Meanwhile, recruitment in the Netherlands for deployment to the East was also intensified. In January 1827, an elite corps of 3,000 men departed from the Netherlands for Java, where they were to finish the protracted war. After two years of fighting, fewer than 1,000 of the 3,000 men remained.

It's not surprising that the suggestion to use African Americans received a favorable response in The Hague, as they were resilient soldiers and resistant to tropical diseases. The decision was based on two considerations: avoiding the appearance of the slave trade and maintaining diplomatic obligations without offending Britain. Furthermore, there was a military need to address the manpower problem for the Indies army. All three suggestions put forward during the Java War had one thing in common: they recommended recruiting African Americans as a solution to the manpower problem. Each proponent had their own opinion regarding the origin of the African Americans.

In addition to personnel shortages, African recruitment was also influenced by colonial racial assumptions that developed in the 19th century. The Dutch colonial government believed that Africans possessed better physical endurance in tropical climates than European soldiers. This assumption, although not fully empirically proven, served as the basis for legitimizing the policy of recruiting soldiers from the Gold Coast region of West Africa, which at the time was within the Dutch colonial sphere of influence (Stoler, 2002; Van Kessel, 2005).

"When entire nations perished, Negroes survived. Most of them were remarkably robust and accustomed from childhood to poor food and hard work. They typically lived long and persevered, mastering their work. Their bodies were accustomed to hard bedding; they had only ever heard of straw bags and beds. Despite their kind but harsh treatment, they submitted to their superiors, and courage was a key characteristic of this people."

This recruitment began systematically in the early 1830s through collaboration with local rulers in West Africa. However, research shows that the recruitment process often took place under conditions of economic and political pressure, even resembling disguised slavery. Many recruits came from vulnerable groups, including former slaves, demonstrating the close link between the colonial system, militarism, and the legacy of the Dutch slave trade (Bosma & Raben, 2008; Van Welie, 2008).

Thus, the background to the recruitment of Africans to the Dutch East Indies cannot be understood solely as a pragmatic military policy, but rather as part of an exploitative global colonial structure. This policy reflects how the Dutch colonial power utilized forced transcontinental mobility to maintain political and economic dominance in its colonies (Emmer, 2006; Bosma, 2012).

### **The Formation and Characteristics of the Zwarte Hollanders**

Africans recruited into the Dutch East Indies were known as *Zwarte Hollanders*, or "Black Dutch." They officially became part of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL). Archival research shows that most recruits came from slave backgrounds or from local communities under political and economic pressure, making the recruitment process often coercive (Bosma & Raben, 2008; Van Welie, 2008).

The Black Dutch story tells the story of a group of people spanning a century and a half. The portrait of Black Dutch life is compiled by three to five generations and spans three continents. Thanks to numerous archives and oral histories, it is a rare opportunity to trace the journey of this group of people and their descendants. From their origins as (usually) freed West African slaves to their descendants scattered across the globe, the Black Dutch story also speaks of identity: multiple identities and shifting identities. Initially, the African recruits identified themselves based on their ethnic origins. They called themselves Mossi, Grunshi, Fanti, or Dagomba. In the early 19th century, the inhabitants of West Africa did not consider themselves African. They identified themselves based on their ethnic groups with which they shared blood ties. It was only when they moved outside the continent that they identified themselves as African.

Awareness of ethnic origins was sometimes passed down to the next generation, but only as an identity detached from geographical context. Upon arrival in the Dutch East Indies, Africa was understood abstractly, as something not shown on world maps. This is evident in family stories that trace back generations of Mossi or Grunshi ancestors to African origins in Ghana and Burkina Faso. The Black Dutch also maintained a connection to each other as Africans. Nevertheless, they also identified with a new identity as European soldiers in the colonial army. They fearfully guarded the rights surrounding their position as European soldiers. In the Dutch East Indies, their group



identity remained closely tied to the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL). There, many Africans demonstrated their excellent adaptability. As a result, within two to three generations, the social status of some of their descendants rose sharply.

A significant portion of the African recruits were purchased slaves. Nevertheless, they held a special place in colonial society. This was due to the Africans' sense of solidarity and their demonstration of their "equal standing" with European soldiers in the colonial army. Within a generation, the African soldiers' status as Europeans had become a right no longer needed to be defended. What remained was a sense of belonging to fellow Africans and a strong identification with their role as Dutch citizens loyal to the queen and their distant homeland in Europe.

Some first-generation veterans felt homesick for their homeland in Africa. However, subsequent generations felt very comfortable in the Dutch East Indies. After settling down, misfortune forced the second and third generations to leave for a new continent, Europe. Their strong identification with the Netherlands is evident in their answers to the question of why they applied to move to the Netherlands by W.Ph. Coolhaas, the state archivist who assisted in the investigation of their origins. The investigation was to prove the right to transfer during the transfer of Indonesian sovereignty (1949) in Jakarta. To this question, Coolhaas received the answer, "Our veins flow with Dutch blood, free from foreign blood." Upon arrival in the Netherlands, they were immediately able to adapt, especially the young people.

Within two or three generations, some former slaves in West Africa managed to develop from KNIL infantry soldiers into established families. According to colonial customs, they were surrounded by "silent domestic servants" (as they were called in Dutch East Indies literature): cooks, laundresses, servants, and gardeners. The third, fourth, and fifth generations of African KNIL soldiers became soldiers, government officials, TV presenters, art experts, housewives, technicians, secretaries, IT specialists, professors, and engineers. They had African features with curly hair, Dutch Indies features with wavy hair, Dutch head shapes, and all sorts of other hybrids. Every individual is naturally interested in their origins, but most people simply consider them knowledge. The exotic side of family history is indeed special, but the greatest attention remains focused on work, immediate family, hobbies, and all the usual 21st-century things. A new generation (African soldiers) feels feminine and proud when vacationing in Ghana. However, she concluded calmly, "Actually, I'm a 'cheese' girl with slightly colored skin, but I still want to know where I come from and feel proud of it. The descendants of KNIL soldiers from Africa live in the Netherlands, Indonesia, the United States, and elsewhere in the world. The story of the Black Dutch reveals the complex and extraordinary history of a group of people. Their history demonstrates the ability of humans to adapt anywhere in the world and to move freely among various ethnicities and social identities.

### **Distribution and Placement in the Dutch East Indies**

Colonial data shows that African soldiers were stationed in strategic areas such as Central Java, East Java, West Sumatra, and Sulawesi. They functioned as infantry and garrison guards. Although their numbers were relatively small compared to native troops, they were quite prominent in the 19th-century colonial military structure (Ricklefs, 2008; Van Kessel, 2005).

Based on military records and colonial reports, the distribution of Africans in the Dutch East Indies was strategic and concentrated, following colonial defense interests.

#### Java

Java was the island with the largest concentration of Africans. They were stationed in major military cities such as Batavia, Semarang, Surabaya, and Magelang. Java served as the colonial administrative and military center, requiring a large number of troops. In this region, Africans played a role in garrison guarding, urban security, and military training. Many African soldiers settled in Batavia, Semarang, Surakarta, Salatiga, Ambarawa, Magelang, or Purworejo.

Research shows that the presence of Africans on Java was closely linked to Dutch colonial policies in the 18th and 19th centuries. Africans were brought to the Dutch East Indies not as free migrants, but through a system of slavery and colonial military recruitment, primarily as part of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL). This recruitment primarily took place in the Gold Coast region of West Africa (now Ghana) and was intensive between 1831 and 1872 (van Kessel, 2005; Knaap, 1999).

The colonial government strategically placed Africans in Java, considering defense and security needs. Colonial archives show that they were placed in areas with military barracks, fortifications, and major ports. This pattern demonstrates that the placement of Africans was not random, but rather organized within the Dutch colonial military structure (Bosma & Raben, 2008).

Central Java, particularly Purworejo, Bagelen, and the surrounding areas, became a center for the deployment of African troops. This area was known as a KNIL military base and served as a training and residential area for soldiers after active service. Several local records and Dutch archives indicate that some African soldiers chose to settle in this region after retirement and formed families with local residents (Carey, 2014; van der Kraan, 1988).

In addition to Central Java, Africans were also stationed in Batavia (Jakarta) and Surabaya. Batavia served as the center of the colonial administration and an international port, making it a transit and assignment location for African soldiers and workers. Surabaya, as a major port and naval base, also witnessed the presence of Africans within the Dutch colonial military and maritime structures (Taylor, 2003; Colombijn, 2010).

Research shows that the distribution of Africans in Java did not develop into a permanently distinct ethnic community. After their military service ended, most of them assimilated into the local community through marriage, adoption of Javanese culture, and religious conversion. This assimilation process caused the social and cultural waning of African identity over several generations (Bosma, 2012; Ricklefs, 2008).

Sumatra (Aceh and surrounding areas)

Research shows that Africans were also stationed in Sumatra, particularly during the Aceh War (1873–1904). They were used as active combat troops in military operations against the Acehese resistance. This placement was based on the colonial assumption that African soldiers possessed high physical endurance and military discipline. Eastern Dutch East Indies

In more limited numbers, Africans were stationed in Sulawesi and Maluku, primarily to guard forts and strategic military posts. In these areas, they served as support troops and safeguards of colonial stability.

Social and Military Placement Patterns

Research shows that the placement of Africans in the Dutch East Indies was limited to the military sector. They were not given roles in the colonial civil administration. Within the colonial social structure, their position was subordinate to Europeans, but they were often considered superior to indigenous people in military contexts.

After their service, some African soldiers chose to settle in the Dutch East Indies. They married local women and formed small communities that later assimilated into the local society. However, their African identity gradually faded due to colonial policies that discouraged the formation of independent ethnic communities and the lack of official documentation regarding their lives after retirement.

Historical Impact

The research findings show that although the number of Africans in the Dutch East Indies was relatively small, their presence had significant historical significance. They reflected the practice of mobilizing human labor across continents within the colonial system and demonstrated the complexity of racial, military, and power relations in the Dutch East Indies. However, their role and presence have received little attention in Indonesian historiography.

The research findings indicate that the historical impact of the arrival of Africans in the Dutch East Indies has not been fully reflected in mainstream Indonesian historiography. National historical narratives emphasize the relationship between the Dutch and indigenous peoples, while the role of African groups is often marginalized. Consequently, their contributions have only recently been widely studied in contemporary social history and postcolonial studies (Bosma & Raben, 2008; Nordholt, 2011).

Role in Colonial Military Operations

Research indicates that African soldiers were involved in various colonial military expeditions, including the suppression of local resistance. The colonial government considered them more ethnically “neutral” than indigenous soldiers. However, health reports showed high mortality rates from malaria and dysentery, challenging colonial assumptions about the physical resilience of Africans in the tropics (Boomgaard, 2003; Bosma, 2012).

Recruited Africans were generally placed as infantry soldiers in the colonial armed forces, particularly under the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL). They were trained and treated as professional soldiers and involved in various military operations, both to maintain stability in the colonial territories and to counter armed resistance from

the local population. This role demonstrates that African soldiers were an integral part of the 19th-century colonial military system (van Kessel, 2005; Taylor, 2003).

Research has found that African soldiers were actively involved in colonial military operations in the Dutch East Indies, particularly on the island of Java. They were used for security duties, patrols, fortifications, and counter-insurgency operations. In several major 19th-century conflicts, such as the Java War, African soldiers served as support forces, bolstering Dutch military dominance (Carey, 2014; Ricklefs, 2008).

Research shows that the role of Africans in colonial military operations was not only technical but also strategic. The colonial government utilized African soldiers as part of its divide and rule policy, aiming to prevent solidarity between troops and local communities. By deploying soldiers from outside the colony, the Dutch sought to maintain more effective political and military control (Bosma & Raben, 2008; Nordholt, 2011).

Overall, this research concludes that Africans played a significant role in 19th-century colonial military operations as professional soldiers, support troops, and strategic instruments of colonial power. Their involvement demonstrates the multiethnic nature of colonial militaries and the dependence of European colonial powers on non-European human resources to maintain colonial domination (van Kessel, 2005; Bosma & Raben, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

The Netherlands was a very small country. Its population was so small that it was regrettably reluctant to leave its homes, which for many were fraught with poverty and deprivation. Therefore, Ambonese, Bugis, Madurese, and Javanese were recruited as soldiers. However, the recruited Eastern soldiers came from subjugated populations who would sooner or later break free from the shackles of Dutch rule. Ritter was relieved that the Europeans could count on the assistance of approximately 1,000 African soldiers. Unlike Europeans, the African soldiers were resilient to tropical climates, fatigue-resistant, cheerful, and courageous. They were also accustomed to a simple life. Africans were spread across several regions in the Dutch East Indies, including Java, Sumatra, Aceh, and the surrounding areas. African soldiers were involved in various colonial military expeditions, including the suppression of local resistance. They were trained and treated as professional soldiers and involved in various military operations, both to maintain the stability of the colonial region and to confront armed resistance from the local population. This role demonstrates that African soldiers were an integral part of the 19th-century colonial military system.

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