4. The Coast of Guinea in the Dutch archives

Introduction

In the preceding chapters, we have looked at the Dutch archives relating to Ghana and the rest of West Africa from a European perspective. In the following chapters, this bias will also be strongly present. This is the result of the nature of the archival sources, which were in the first place, if not wholly, designed for European administrative purposes. As such, the Dutch archives are very much ‘colonial’ in character, like many of the other European archives relating to Africa. On the other hand, most African cultures were oral cultures before the onset of colonialism, with all the limitations connected to oral sources in the construction of history. This makes that African history is always in search of documentary sources, and that European written source materials remain important. From the body of academic work on African history published over the last half century or so, it is clear that African historians have been extremely inventive in ‘turning around’ European historical information to write African history.

The rigorous local administration of the Dutch government on the Coast of Guinea, both in the WIC period and under State government, allows for a detailed study of many African historical themes, however. This is especially true for the coastal societies in which the Dutch were physically present over a long period of time, but also for societies and polities further in the hinterland. An important Dutch source in this respect is the government journal, kept in Elmina, which is available for a long period of time and gives many details about African affairs (see discussion above). Other materials include special reports commissioned by the Dutch government, regular and irregular economic reports and records, contracts and treaties, agreements, and contracts with local Ghanaian authorities and other partners. In this chapter we will look at three issues:

1. Ghanaian and West African polities and political organisation;
2. Ghanaian and West African social-economic history;
3. Ghanaian cultural history.

It is hard to give clear guidance to researchers here, because of the scattered nature of information about African affairs in the Dutch archives. One is therefore advised to check the available literature first, to see which sources other researchers have used. The texts in this chapter are more than elsewhere rather impressionistic.
Ghanaian and West African polities and political organisation

The Dutch archives can give us detailed information about local societies, but this requires some stamina and inventiveness on the part of the researcher. A good example of a historical reconstruction of African states and polities from the Dutch sources is the attempt undertaken by Furley. Van Dantzig describes in his article on the Furley Collection (Van Dantzig 1987) how this collector of sources was most likely trying to write a history of the Gold Coast based on original (European) materials that had not been used before. As such, Furley’s own notes from the Dutch archives can be divided into two distinct types: raw materials – notes directly taken from the records – and reworked notes – notes organised in such a manner that they can be regarded as the last stage of collection before the transformation of source material into historical text. Furley’s volumes N37 and N38, titled Tribal States volume I and II, are the best example of this process, and give us a clear insight in the usability of the Dutch source materials for a reconstruction of African political history.

Modern successful academic efforts at such reconstructions making elaborate use of Dutch sources include the work by Daaku on early economic history (Daaku 1970), Kea on the early Gold Coast States (Kea 1982), Law on the early development of the kingdom of Dahomey and the town of Whydah (Law 1991; 2005), and Yarak on relations between the kingdom of Asante and the Dutch from the eighteenth century until 1872 (Yarak 1993). Parker’s authoritative recent town history of Accra also uses Dutch and other European material with positive results for the reconstruction of the Ga polities in that town (Parker 2000). Earlier work by inter alia Wilks and McCaskie on the Asante state could not have been written without Dutch material either (e.g. Wilks 1975; McCaskie 1995), as was the case with Feinberg, who focused on the coastal societies in the eighteenth century (Feinberg 1969; 1989). However, these Anglophone authors – with the exception of Yarak – were compelled to lean heavily on the Furley Collection for their information. Looking at the original documents, especially those in the archives of the NBKG, it is obvious that more detailed information is available in the journals, correspondence, and general and special reports. Several examples highlight the specific possibilities and problems of research here.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the kingdom of Ahanta was a very powerful state, which roughly covered the coastal area from the Pra River westwards to Axim and Apollonia, having its heartland around the coastal town of Busua, and extending strong political and economic influence over the state of Axim and other neighbouring polities, at times incorporating them into the kingdom as such. The Dutch were the dominant European power in the area from the middle of the seventeenth century until 1872, and had close relations with the king of Ahanta and other local chiefs. Regional political wrangles were interlocked with European conflicts and commercial competition, especially in the