



Reflections

A Dutchwoman in Ghana

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In July 2023 the Dutch king formally apologized, on behalf of himself as king and on behalf of the Dutch government, for the Dutch involvement in slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. This was 160 years after slavery was abolished in Suriname and the Dutch colonies in the Caribbean. To me it sounded far away and near at the same time. Near, as it was only 160 years ago: 1863 was just a few decades before my grandparents were born. But it was also far away. In school in the eighties, I never learned the full story of slavery and, especially, of the Dutch involvement in it: it just was not a topic in our history books at the time. When the protests against ‘*zwarte piet*’ arose, at first, I did not really understand why people bothered so much. Why this resistance and opposition against these funny, cheerful black (wo)men who helped *Sinterklaas* with Christmas festivities? What could be wrong with that?² But with time I listened better to the people raising the issue and understood that it was (and is) a problem for them as it reminds them of an ugly page in history that they still feel every day.

When I was asked to come to Ghana for the Transatlantic Writing workshop, I saw it as a nice distraction from regular workdays behind my computer and conferences. I had been to East and Southern Africa before and looked forward to visiting West Africa as well. It felt like a junket. But a few

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² *Sinterklaas* is the Dutch name of Saint Nicholas, whose birthday is celebrated each year at the beginning of December. *Sinterklaas* is a friend of children, and he has assistants that walk with him and his white horse on the roofs to bring presents to the children by going through the chimney. These assistants are, of old, black and used to be called ‘*zwarte piet*’ or ‘black Pete’. Nowadays, the chimney (and its soot) aspect is highlighted as a cause for the blackness, which is severely reduced when compared to the old days: in my youth the Petes’s faces were fully covered in black make-up, with big red lips and jingly earrings (a commonly racist way of depicting African people in those times).

Tessel Jonquière
A Dutchwoman in Ghana

months before the workshop was going to take place an extremely stressful period at work left me with a burn-out. I spent a few months at home, sorting Legos, doing jigsaw puzzles, and caring for my daughters. I had to cancel work trip after work trip to get back on my feet and people suggested to cancel the Ghana trip as well. But I didn't. And it was the best decision I made.

I arrived in Accra a few days before the workshop. I am aware that 'Africa' is not a country — it is a continent with as much diversity as anywhere else. Accra is not Johannesburg is not Harare is not Maputo is not Kampala. But the sounds, the smells, the red earth, the houses painted bright with advertisements, the sellers at traffic lights carrying bowls with water bottles on their heads, the neat stacks of fruit in stalls along the road, the motorcycle taxis and the potholes in the roads — even though I had never been to West Africa, it all felt so familiar.

From Accra we traveled to Cape Coast, where the workshop was going to take place. In my guidebook I saw some interesting places to visit, and together with one of my fellow travelers we planned a trip west, to walk the top of the rainforest in Kakum National Park and to visit the castle in Elmina. Even though I had read the guidebook and had heard people say, "if you're Dutch, you have to go to Elmina," I was not prepared for what kind of 'castle' this was, and how its history was linked to my country.

The first time we tried to visit the place in Elmina we could not enter. Five minutes before we arrived, all museums in Ghana had called for a strike and no visitors were allowed. Standing there at the entrance my eyes fell on a sign



Tessel Jonquière
A Dutchwoman in Ghana

suspended above the entrance where the Dutch Embassy invited people to an exhibition to commemorate *Keti Koti* (a Surinam annual celebration marking the abolition of slavery there in 1863). I realized that until then I had not really



known how closely connected the Netherlands was to the place where I was standing: how West-Africa, Ghana, and Elmina were linked to this Dutch colony. The little tourist shops on the castle square were open, so we spent some money on bracelets for my daughters and talked to the women working there, but all the time I was resolved to come back the next day and see what was inside.

The next day the strike was over, and we were guided around the castle in a group of people. We saw the places where atrocities were performed, felt the greasy floors of the horrible dungeons where slaves were inhumanely kept like goods, heard the stories about the governor picking girls from a gathering in a courtyard, smelled the thick, dusty air of the prison cells for slaves and guards, and could almost taste the fear of the men and women waiting to pass through the Door of No Return, on their way to the ships that took them away.

When the guide approached me at the end of the tour, he asked how I had experienced it and I told him that I was Dutch. It felt like a confession. It was not that I felt responsible for what had happened, but whereas usually I would be proud to be Dutch when I encounter a Dutch presence abroad, it was the opposite here. I was ashamed.

The guide assured me that was not necessary at all. He said that people of Ghana at the time were also guilty; that without the participation of the chiefs in the country, the Dutch would never have accomplished what they did, would

Tessel Jonquière
A Dutchwoman in Ghana

never have gotten so many people to the castle and to the ships, selling them like cargo. But shared guilt is not encouraging. I was glad to hear the Dutch today are very much working on helping Ghanaian communities to develop through financial aid and project support. A small kind of reparations, if such ‘payback’ is even possible.

Nevertheless, my trip to Elmina, and also to Cape Coast Castle a few days later, was an eyeopener for me. It seemed like a beginning: when I came back to the Netherlands, I suddenly saw transatlantic, colonial history all around me. I saw books referring to the era, documentaries on TV relating to Dutch history — now luckily no longer ignorant of our role in the transatlantic slave trade. And a few months after I came back, there was an exhibition at a museum in Utrecht, the city where I live. It was about Christianity and Slavery. It showed the link between slavery and religion, about the role of the Dutch Reformed Church, and also the hypocrisy of Christianity, which promoted the idea that ‘a Christian cannot be a slave, because that is not what God wants. So, as long as we do not convert them, they are not Christians and we are allowed to keep them as slaves . . .’ It brought me back to the castles in Elmina and Cape Coast, where the Christians were celebrating their Sunday services *literally* on top of the dungeons where slaves were kept. How can such complexities be resolved?

As we visited Cape Coast Castle with the TWP group, a couple of days after me and my friend went to Elmina, I somehow felt a bit relieved. Unlike Elmina Castle, this castle had not been inhabited or used by the Dutch, but by the British. It made me feel less responsible, in a way, though seeing and hearing about the horror that took place there of course did not make things better.

Exiting Cape Coast Castle I noticed another Dutch sign. This time it was not about slavery, or the Dutch involvement in it. Unexpectedly, in the midst of the tourist shops, the sign read: *In dit huis krijg je de beste koffie van de hele wereld*, ‘in this house you get the best coffee in the whole world’. It was a café



Tessel Jonquière
A Dutchwoman in Ghana

owned by a Dutchman and, obviously, we had to go in to try the coffee. Sitting in the nice atmosphere, adorned with local art and Dutch coffee grinders, I was sipping the coffee that was indeed, by my 'coffee snob' standards, quite good. And I wondered: is this a way of paying back to the community, or simply a(nother) opportunistic business opportunity by the Dutch in Ghana? As a real coffee lover, I like to think the first. But either way, it was an unexpected cultural juxtaposition in castle grounds.

This certainly was not the usual 'work trip,' but as 'a Dutchwoman in Ghana,' it left me with a lot to consider.