

Primary Sources: *Reports by Slave Traders in West Africa about Refugees, 1670s- 1710s*

Introduction

While refugees in Western Europe often produced robust evidence that survives today that describes their experiences from their perspective, that's not the case for refugees in West Africa during the same time period, because they did not use a written language. As a result, some of the most valuable sources about Africans were produced by Europeans, most of whom were slave traders. While we need to use such evidence carefully with thoughtful analysis and reasoning, there's a lot we can learn from them too.

As you read, first consider these questions:

- Were the forced migrants described in the sources refugees? Why or why not? How does your answer compare to the migrants in Lesson 1?
- How does the goals of the author in writing this text shape our understanding of their situation? What information might they be leaving out?
- What evidence, if any, did the author want to leave behind for others to access?

When you are done, go back over the text and review Reading 3.

Make a list of all the push factors compelling them to escape and all the pull factors that might have drawn them to their new destinations.

Then list all the preexisting structures that you can identify that shaped their travel.



PRIMARY SOURCES

INTRODUCTION

A WIC OFFICIAL REPORTS

A HUGUENOT REFUGEE DESCRIBES
ACCRA

WEST INDIA COMPANY MINUTES

A LETTER FROM WILLEM BUTLER AT
AXIM

Primary Source 1: *A WIC Official Reports to his Supervisors about the Situation in West Africa*

In 1679, Heerman Abramsen, the director-general of the West India Company's trade in West Africa, returned from West Africa, providing a report about the slave trading forts on the Gold Coast to the so-called Heren X (Ten Lords), the supervisors of the West India Company at the time. He wrote his report on November 23, 1679.

Source: The Dutch and the Guinea Coast, 1674-1742: A Collection of Documents from the General State Archive at The Hague, trans. Albert van Dantzig (Accra: Gaas, 1978), 17-18. The names of places and peoples, and some spellings have been edited for consistency with current scholarship.



European ships off the Gold Coast

"The Accanists* who are the real traders, used to trade in all these areas, and they alone controlled all trade, travelling with large numbers of slaves to carry their goods through all those places. But as a result of the wars which the blacks so often start for trifling reasons, this trade is suddenly stopped ... since musket and gunpower have been introduced, things have become much worse, the natives have become much more war-like ... the whole Coast has come into a kind of state of war. This started in the year 1658, and gradually this has gone so far, that none of the passages could anymore be used, and none of the traders could come through. This caused considerable damage to the last Company... Slaves were very easy to get by on the Gold Coast, because of the wars..... Your Honors have done well to try ... to bring this long lasting war finally to an end to revive the trade. I have done my utter best, when on duty in that land, to put Your Honors good intention into execution, and it has pleased the Almighty God to bless our labors and attempts, if not entirely, at least in good part; Your Honors may be content with the fact that not only the Little Popo of Accra have come to an agreement with their enemies and have now brought other traders with them, but also that at the time of my departure our trade had again become as considerable as it was during the years 1676-78, and to all appearance it will only continue, but even increase since I have made Adom, Wassa, Uiffer and other states introduce a new market on every Friday."

* This refers to people of the kingdom of Accra, who had fled Akwamu attacks to Little Accra on the coast in 1677.

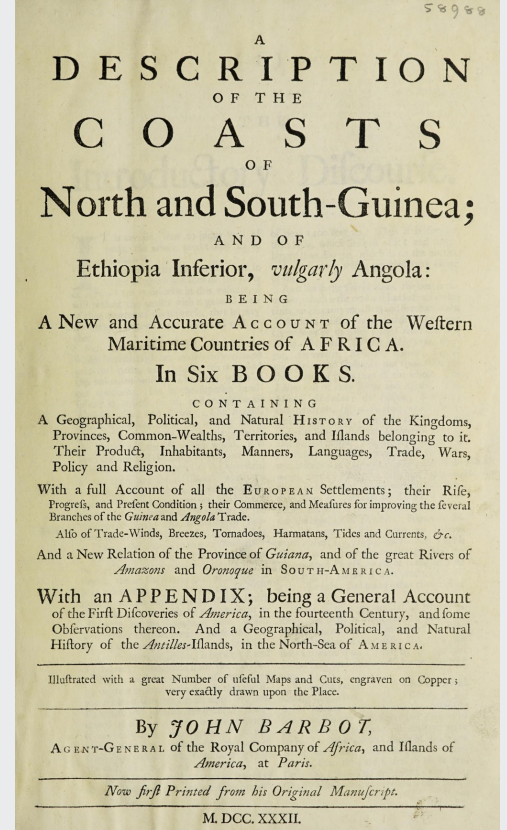
** In 1674, the WIC was dissolved to its high debts. Within a year, however, it was organized and restarted. This reference is to the first version of the join-stock company

† Adom was kingdom controlling some coastal areas. Wassa and Uiffer lived further inland, but still to the south of the more powerful Denkyira Kingdom to whom they were tribute states.

Primary Source 2: *A Huguenot Refugee Describes Accra*

Jean Barbot, who served as a trader for the Senegal Company, a for-profit French trade company, made two voyages to West Africa, in 1678 and 1682. Upon return, he began writing journals of his voyages. While writing, he had to flee France in 1685 as a Huguenot refugee. He escaped to England, where he completed his *Description of the Coast of Africa (Description des Côtes d’Afrique)* in 1688. The work is not a straightforward account by Barbot, but an account that merges materials from multiple sources and is often misleading or inaccurate. Here he describes the kingdom of Accra soon after King Ofori had escaped to Little Popo as refugees.

Source: *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678-1712*, ed. P. E. H. Hair, Adam Jones, and Robin Law (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1992), 430-31. The names of places and peoples, and some spellings have been edited for consistency with current scholarship.



Title page of John Barbot's account of the Gold Coast printed in English, 1732

"The kingdom of Accra or Acara is 15-16 leagues in circumference.... there are only three villages on the sea, Soko, Little Accra and Orsoka.... Each of these villages is backed up by a fort; Soko by Fort James, belonging to the English, Little Accra by Fort Crevecoeur, belonging to the Dutch, and Orsoka by Fort St Francis Xavier, belonging to the Portuguese.... Soko is the smallest, not having 100 houses, and those all dispersed. The village of Little Accra used to be very agreeable and convenient, having a fine market, but since the war with the Akwamu, it is almost all burnt down, scarce 60 houses being left standing. King Ofori, whom I saw there on my first voyage, liked it much better there than at Great Accra. This place was famous for its trade in gold and slaves at the time when it was free for everyone to trade there. Orsoka is also of only small importance today, having, like the previous villages, suffered from the fury of the Akwamu's war.

You might reasonably conclude, Sir, that the trade in gold and slaves might not be good at Accra.... But in fact, however exhausted and afflicted this little state regularly is by wars and frequent famines... you will find there more favourable dispatch than at any other place on this coast. The kings of Accra have naturally always liked the whites, but they could not be persuaded to allow the building of forts. However, the last of these kings ...allowed himself (38-40 years ago) to give way to the persuasion of the Dutch and Danes, who at first asked only for permission to set up lodges, for a payment of tribute of seven marks of gold a year... these forts have been a great help to the peoples of Accra, because without them, not one would have remained alive during the conquest made by the king of the Akwamus in 1680...."



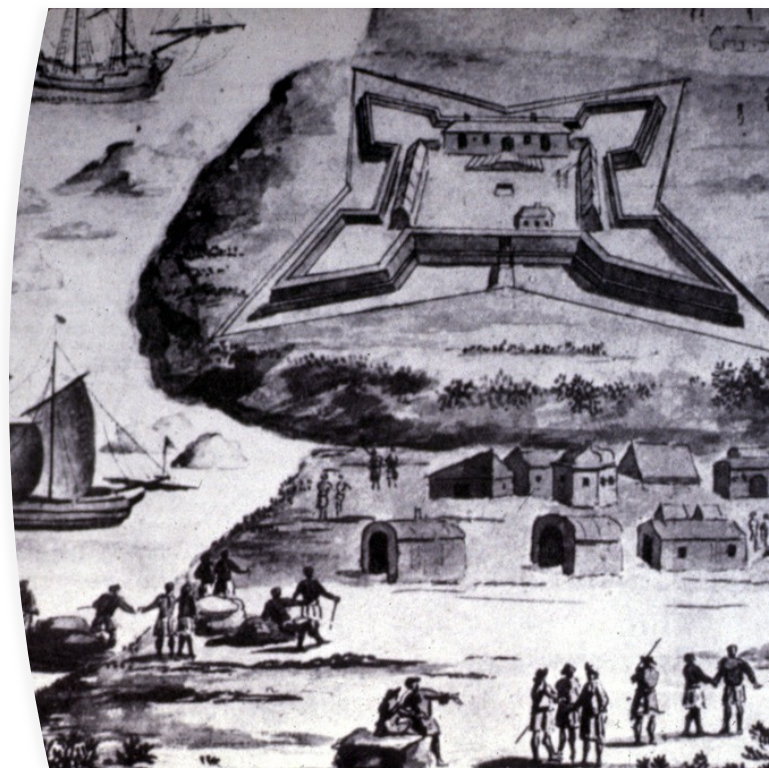
State Emblem of the Akwamu

Primary Source 3: *West India Minutes*, August 16, 1711

By the early 1700s, Akwamu expansion had halted, and Asante military expansion dominated the western Gold Coast. In March 1711, a new director-general at Elmina, Hieronimus Haring, was appointed as lead for the WIC in West Africa. That year, Dutch traders first learned that Jan Conny had been amassing a large body of followers and considerable influence around the Brandenburg-Africa Company's Fort Great Fredericksburg, not far from the Dutch Fort St. Anthony at Axim. Conny had developed good trade relations with the powerful Asante Kingdom, the Aowin, and others in the region. Not long after this report was sent to the Netherlands, war broke out between Conny and the Europeans. As Conny grew more famous for standing up to the Europeans, more displaced people from the region joined him, including Ahanta, Wassa, Cape Appolonians, and others.

Source: *The Dutch and the Guinea Coast, 1674-1742: A Collection of Documents from the General State Archive at The Hague*, trans. Albert van Dantzig (Accra: Gaas, 1978), 160-61. The names of places and peoples, and some spellings have been edited for consistency with current scholarship.

"Reading of a letter from Commies Boerhave,* in which he writes that Jan Conny, the headman of the Brandenburg Natives is more and more chasing away our subject peoples, robbing some of them, killing others; even, that having similarly attacked the Natives under the English Fort Metal Cross at Dixcove, he had burned down the suburb of that town. That he had furthermore dared, together with Obem,** to declare war on us, threatening to commit similar acts of violence under our fort. The President then represented how aforementioned Conny, after the peace ending the war between the Axim and Brandenburg Natives, had violated the peace again immediately and attacked the very ones with whom he had just made peace.... Similarly, how he had compelled the English Natives again to withdraw from the protection of the guns [of Fort Metal Cross] and to say now under the protection of our fort at Butre. For that reason he is now threatening with some of his rebellious subjects ...which may lead to the death of the trade there....

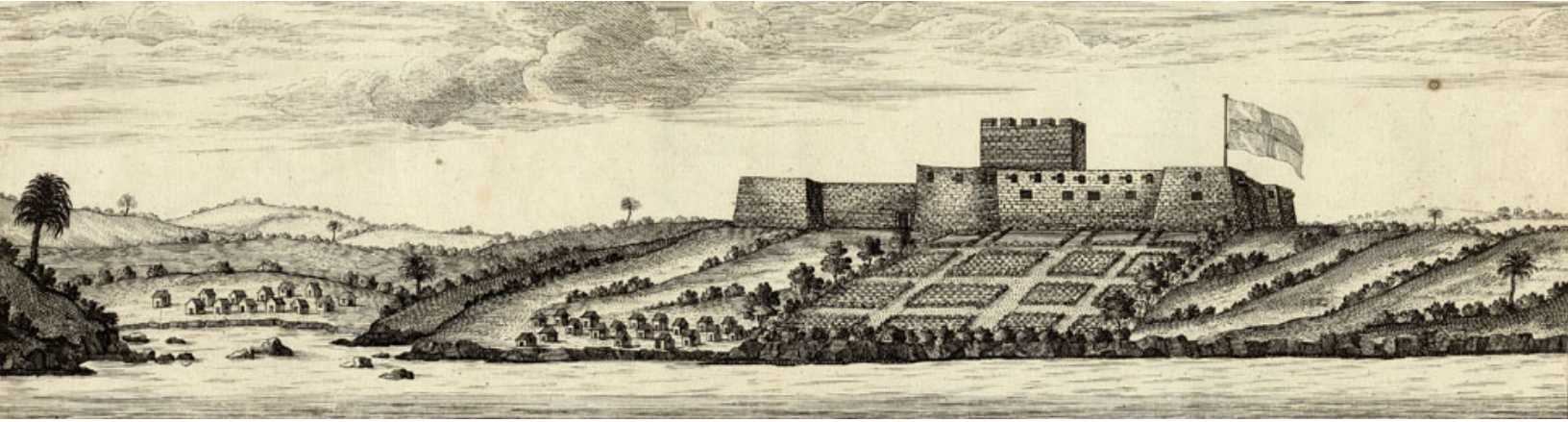


Fort Fredericksburg, including African houses, people, and boats

* This was the WIC officer at the Dutch trading post Fort Good Hope (*Goede Hoope*), at Senya Beraku, roughly 130-150 miles (200-240 kilometers) east along the coast of the events being described.

** A merchant-prince of Butre, who was a close ally of Conny. At Butre was the Dutch Fort Batenstein.

† Ahanta people lived in the coastal region inland from Senya Beraku and Dixcove.



**View of Fort Metal Cross at Dixcove,
1727**

Agreed, in order to put a stop to this evil, to send a person thither who had sufficient experience with those Natives to be able to bring about a settlement in these matters, either by friendly or by forceful means.... if Conny is still staying at Dixcove, and if the English are still trying to avoid any cause for dispute, Their Honors the English will be informed this evening still per letter, requesting them to at *de communi concerto*[‡] with us in this matter... H. Harding had been requested to supply all the needed *Minase*[§] with arms and go thither, and, if more men are required, to arm all the people under our neighboring forts in that area."

[‡] That is, in concert.

[§] That is, Africans from the region who served the Dutch as mercenary soldiers.

**Contemporary view of
the fort at Dixcove**



Primary Source 4: *Letter from Willem Butler at Axim, October 17th, 1715*

In 1715, Willem Butler was the chief trading agent for the WIC at Fort St. Anthony at Axim, which meant he managed trade with Africans, including for enslaved people to be shipped to the Americas. He was writing as the Asante were expanding through military campaigns on their powerful neighbor, the Aowin Kingdom, just as Jan Conny had taken over Fort Great Fredericksburg. The passage below comes from his letter to the Director-General Hieronimus Haring at Elmina about the situation in his area.

Source: *The Dutch and the Guinea Coast, 1674-1742: A Collection of Documents from the General State Archive at The Hague*, trans. Albert van Dantzig (Accra: Gaas, 1978), 186. The names of places and peoples, and some spellings have been edited for consistency with current scholarship.



Detail of map showing costal kingdoms on the West Coast of Africa

"The Aowins seem to have asked the Asantes, Little Popo of Little Accra, and Denkyira residing in their country to help them in their defense against the Asante ... The Egila and Abokro* were defeated by the Asante and they came to us for protection as refugees, we should not refuse them that protection, or they would go to John Conny in the Prussian fort; as Egila and Abokro constitute in fact border posts of the Axim District, we better stay on good terms with them if these people were to go away, others would occupy their country ... and the Asante might make an attempt on Axim: they show already hardly any respect for the Europeans."

* These were peoples who lived south of the Asante, but still inland. Apparently, while other groups fled west to the Aowin, these refugees fled toward the forts along the coast, where the Dutch had Fort St. Anthony, and the Jon Conny held Fort Great Fredericksburg, about 8.5 miles (or 14 kilometers) southwest along the coast.

Image Citations:

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Map of West Africa, 1743, Geographicus
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Page 3:

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