

## MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER

Dutch West India Company (Westindische Compagnie) Archives

(Netherlands, Brazil, Ghana, Guyana, Netherlands Antilles,  
Suriname, United Kingdom, United States)

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*Ref N° 2010-72*

### **PART A – ESSENTIAL INFORMATION**

#### ***1 SUMMARY***

The DWIC or Dutch West India Company (Westindische Compagnie), was a Dutch trading company, modelled on the example of the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) or Dutch East India Company. In 1621 it was granted a charter for the 'right on shipping and trade' and a monopoly of trade and navigation, conquest and commerce in the Western hemisphere by the States General of the United Province of the Netherlands. The Company was created to eliminate trade competition in the West Indies, particularly against the Spanish and Portuguese and to gain a share in the African slave trade. Therefore the DWIC was authorized to make alliances with the natives of West Africa, America and the Pacific islands east of New Guinea; to build fortresses, maintain troops, garrisons and fleets. The area where the company operated was West Africa (the area between the Tropic of Cancer and Cape of Good Hope) and the Americas (including the Pacific Ocean).

In the 1620s and 1630s, many trading posts or colonies were established in the Atlantic area. The New Netherland area, which included New Amsterdam, covered parts of present-day New York, Connecticut, Delaware, and New Jersey. Other settlements were established on the Netherlands Antilles, several other Caribbean islands, Suriname and Guyana. In 1630, the colony of New Holland (Recife) was formed, taking over Portuguese possessions in Brazil. In Africa, posts were established on the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and briefly in Angola.

Facing bankruptcy, the DWIC was reorganized in 1674 as a slave-trading enterprise with profitable side activities in the trading of African slaves and products such as gold. It was the DWIC that introduced the triangular trade, which was to link manufacturing communities in Europe, slave procuring communities of Africa and plantation communities of the Americas to one another in an increasingly massive and profitable circuit of trade and production. After that the DWIC was engaged solely in the administration of the remaining African and American overseas territories and fortresses until the Company was definitively abolished in 1791.

In 2003 the archives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) were successfully nominated as UNESCO Memory of the World. While the VOC was dominant in the east, the DWIC operated in the West. It is fair to say that the DWIC has had a huge impact on the history of the Atlantic World and its legacy is still visible today in numerous ways. By importing hundreds of thousand of African slaves into the New World the DWIC has, among other slave trading companies, forever altered the history of Latin and North America. The DWIC archives are direct witnesses and offer insight into this critical part of international history.

The DWIC archives are primary resources for researching the history of the European expansion into West Africa and America. The records concern various themes such as commerce and slave trade, warfare, early modern diplomacy, plantation cultures and daily life issues. Moreover the DWIC archives contain information on the history of the regions where the DWIC founded colonies and trading posts. In many instances there is no other written information available for that period. The DWIC archives comprise of unique information that is important for the history of Brazil, Ghana, Guyana, the Netherlands, the Netherlands Antilles, Suriname and the United States and therefore have a great international value.

## **2      *DETAILS OF THE NOMINATOR***

### *2.1    Name (person or organisation)*

Albany County Hall of Records, Albany, NY  
Arquivo Nacional (National archives of Brazil)  
Archivo Nashonal (National archives of the Netherlands Antilles)  
Municipal Archives New York  
Nationaal Archief (National archives of the Netherlands)  
Nationaal Archief Surinamee (National archives of Surinamee)  
National Archives, Kew (National archives of the United Kingdom)  
New York State Archives (National archives of the United States)  
PRAAD (National archives of Ghana)  
Walter Rodney Archives (National archives of Guyana)

### *2.2    Relationship to the documentary heritage nominated*

Custodian of the DWIC archives and/or DWIC related countries

### *2.3    Contact person (s)*

M.J. Berendse LLM, MA, director of Nationaal Archief; National Archivist  
Mr Berendse is in charge of the nomination process

M. de Groot, MA, project co-ordinator Mutual Cultural Heritage programme  
Mrs de Groot takes care of the consultation and correspondence.

### *2.4    Contact details*

include address, phone, fax, email

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### 3 **IDENTITY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE**

#### 3.1 *Name and identification details of the items being nominated*

The definition of the DWIC-archives in this application reads: "records from Dutch organisations and governmental archives composed in the Netherlands and the former Dutch colonies, both related to the administration and management of the chartered areas of the DWIC, from the moment of founding (1621) till the moment of the closing of the charter (1791) and the subsequent aftermath." \*

According to this definition archives of the DWIC are still present in:

- a) Guyana
- b) Suriname (With the independence of Suriname in 1975, the Suriname and Dutch government signed a treaty in which they stated that the Netherlands should take care of the colonial archives until Suriname gets its own building that would be suitable for proper storage of archives. In April 2010 this will be a fact and now the colonial archives, among which some DWIC material, will be restored to a basic level, digitized and sent back to Paramaribo)
- c) The Netherlands
- d) The United Kingdom (Kew)
- e) The United States of America

The record groups in the Netherlands, Guyana, the United Kingdom, the United States and Suriname together make up the Archives of the Dutch West India Company.

More DWIC related material is sparsely distributed in other Atlantic countries, like Curacao and the Dutch cities of Rotterdam, Amsterdam and the province of Zeeland. This material is not included in this application since these records form no part of the official administration of the DWIC or are of very fragmented nature.

\* Private archives and maps are not included.

#### 3.2 *Description*

The DWIC archives contain the records of the first and second (or old and new) Geoctroyeerde West Indische Compagnie, the Dutch West India Company. The DWIC was organized similarly to the Dutch East India Company, which had a trade monopoly for Asia from 1602, except for the fact that the DWIC was not allowed to conduct military operations without approval of the Dutch government. The DWIC-company had five offices, called chambers (*kamers*), in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Hoorn, Middelburg and Groningen, of which the chambers in Amsterdam and Middelburg contributed most to the company. The board of directors consisted of 19 members, known as the Heeren XIX (the Gentlemen Nineteen, after 1674: Heeren X).

The archives of the first DWIC (1621- 1674) present in the Nationaal Archief comprise of records on the Coast of Guinea, minutes of the meeting of the chambers collectively, minutes and records of the chambers of Amsterdam and Delft. A large part of these archives are records from the chamber of Zeeland, among which an important collection of records from Brazil from the period 1630-1654.

The archives of the second DWIC present in the Nationaal Archief comprise of records from the period 1674-1791. It contains records from the “Vergadering van Tienen”, such as the coast of Guinea, Curacao, Essequibo and Demarara. An important and extensive series is the register of the resolutions of the Chamber Amsterdam from 1674 till 1791. Furthermore, the archives comprise of financial-administrative records from the DWIC; (general accounts, lists of personnel, pay and records of the Colonial Board).

The administration of the trading posts includes records of the resolutions of the local director and his council, daily reports, reports about the exploration of the region to the local authorities, financial records, correspondence, treaties with local rulers, reports about the trade and the products needed in the region. Most of the papers found in DWIC archives were produced by locally stationed company officials, but much was also produced by the peoples with whom they interacted: kings and noblemen, traders and middlemen, shippers and harbour masters.

As the DWIC archives were part of a global information system of the DWIC trade organisation, they contain abundant cultural, religious, social, political, economical information as well as geographical, geological and agricultural information. In a time when a voyage from Europe to Africa or South America took several months, the DWIC needed this information network to control the trade and the servants of the company. In addition, being a multinational operating company alike the VOC, the Board of Directors needed the data to give account for its policy to the stockholders. A DWIC governor was in charge of a trading post for a few years. He had to keep a diary with information about the daily affairs. Moreover, when he left he had to compose a report for this successor with information about what had happened in his region in the period that he was in charge of the trading post. The directors also wrote reports about expeditions to explore the region and embassies of the local and national rulers. In the case of Ghana, these reports describe the personal relations of the court, the shifts of power, the friends and allies. In addition, dozens of other types of documents were created and they reflect the life and history of the people in the region of the trading posts.

The various DWIC record groups and sub-record groups in Guyana, the Netherlands, Suriname, the United States and the UK make up one fonds and cannot be separated. They constitute an organic whole and tell the story of the European encounter with the Atlantic World and vice versa.

#### **4 JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION/ ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA**

##### **4.1 *Is authenticity established? (see 4.2.3)***

Yes, the archives were always kept under the custody of the subsequent governments.

##### **4.2 *Is world significance, uniqueness and irreplaceability established? (see 4.2.4)***

The DWIC was initiated in the Netherlands but left its traces all over the Atlantic region. The remaining DWIC-archives tell the story not only of the history of the DWIC, but also of the regions of the trade posts of the DWIC. The archives of the DWIC contain social, cultural, political, geographical, military and economical information from and about many countries

in Africa, the Americas and the Netherlands and about the relations between those countries. Many of these lack written sources or have hiatuses in the written sources concerning this period. The archives are not only used for anthropological, cultural and historical studies, but also for scientific research. For instance meteorologists use the thousands of weather reports in the archives for research on long term climate change in the CLIWOC project.

4.3 Is one *or more* of the criteria of (a) time (b) place (c) people (d) subject and theme (e) form and style (f) social, spiritual and community significance satisfied?

a) Time

When exploring the African and American world, the DWIC servants described and made drawings of numerous 'discoveries'. In this respect the documents opened up the Atlantic world formerly unknown to Europeans. Moreover, together with the VOC, the DWIC was the first multinational and with the development of shares and shareholders it was an important link in the development of modern financial instruments.

b) Place

The DWIC-records have been created in: the Netherlands, the US, Brazil, Surinamee, Guyana, Ghana and the Dutch Antilles.

c) People

The DWIC archives not only contain information about the countries where these archives were formed, but also concerning the surrounding region. For instance, the archives created by the DWIC officials based in Mauritsstad (part of Recife). Governor Johan Maurits van Nassau took with him several scientists and artists to develop, enrich and promote Dutch Brazil. Navigators explored the coasts of not only Brazil, but also of Angola and Chile and made detailed maps of this. Also he described the people, the flora and fauna that they encountered during these trips.

d) Subject and theme

A negative but in its own unique feature of the DWIC was the detailed administration of the massive forced transfer of people from Africa to the Americas. The DWIC archives offer insight in both character and volume of the slave trade. Although UNESCO's Slave Trade project ended in 2005, these records can still contribute to the knowledge of slavery.

e) Form and style

The DWIC archives contain unique and original handwritings of an indigenous tribe of Brazil: the so called Tupi-letters.

4.4 Are there issues of rarity, integrity, threat and management that relate to this nomination?

a) Rarity

Due to the nature of the organization, many documents are unique in relation to its type and time. The remaining documents related to the DDWIC are very sparse. In 1821 a large volume of archival material of the DDWIC was sold to a bumpkin by order of the Dutch Ministry of Colonies. This meant the loss of an irreplaceable and unique collection of manuscripts and maps concerning the Dutch activities in the Atlantic area. In 1844 a huge fire at the department of Marine, used as a storage room for the remaining once bulky DDWIC-archives, depleted the material even more.

b) Integrity

In the course of time the tropical climate as well as neglect have destroyed many records. In the nineteenth century many documents were deliberately destroyed because they were not considered as important. Yet the surviving records comprise the fragments of the history of the DWIC and the regions of the trading posts of the DWIC.

c) Threat

Due to their age and the tropical climate where many of the records have come to existence and kept in storage, many of the documents are in a very poor condition.

d) Management

The Nationaal Archief takes part in an international programme called Mutual Cultural Heritage programme (2009 – 2012), initiated by the Netherlands Ministry of Culture, Education and Science and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The DWIC archives contain information both on the Netherlands as the countries in which the DWIC operated and are therefore considered as Mutual Cultural Heritage. In the programme the Nationaal Archief co-operates with the repositories who are custodians of the Mutual Cultural Heritage-archives in Brazil, Ghana, Suriname, Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia and South Africa. The programme intends to secure the future of the mutual archives, to make them accessible and to encourage the use of archives all over the world by means of knowledge exchange, capacity building and improved visibility of the material.

## **5 LEGAL INFORMATION**

### 5.1. Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

The archives are owned by agencies or departments of the various governments.

### 5.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details, if different to owner)

### 5.3 Legal status:

(a) Category of ownership

The archives are owned by agencies or departments of the various governments

(b) Accessibility

There are no specific restrictions concerning the accessibility of the DWIC-archives, except for the physical condition of part of the holdings.

(b) Copyright status

There are no specific copyright restrictions, except for the regulations of the various institutes concerning the use and publication of documents in general.

(c) Responsible administration

The agencies of the various governments are legally responsible for the safekeeping of the DWIC archives.

(d) Other factors

There are no other factors that could concern the nomination of the DWIC archives as Memory of the World.

## **6      *MANAGEMENT PLAN***

### **6.1    Is there a management plan in existence for this documentary heritage?**

Concerning its own records, the Nationaal Archief is storing all off its archival material in secured storage rooms that are under climate control. The storing conditions are based on the Dutch Archival Act 1995.

On the international level the Nationaal Archief is actively participating in the Mutual Cultural Heritage programme. The overall objective is to identify, restore, digitize and make online available the remaining Mutual Cultural Heritage archives, like the VOC and DWIC. One of the first projects that will be undertaken is the conservation and digitizing of the archives of the first DWIC (1621-1674), which is present in the Nationaal Archief itself. The product, digitized records, will be published online.

A management plan for the MCH-programme will be developed and adjusted in consultation with all parties involved, since the situation in every country is different and asks for tailor-made solutions. To save as much documents as possible, the projects focus on instruments that benefits the main part of the DWIC archives, like adequate boxing, good housekeeping, collection control and improvement of the storage environments. For example the Nationaal Archief, together with its partner, Arquivo Nacional from Brazil, is busy designing a universal archive box. This box should overcome the most threatening causes of decay in the Tropics: humidity, insects and temperature fluxes and should be an affordable and durable solution for all countries.

Next to the Archive Box, the Nationaal Archief together with its partner the National Archive of Suriname, is putting up a preservation course for archivists and museum workers. When successful, this course could also be introduced in other interested countries.

Finally, the Nationaal Archief together with its partners in the MCH-program are also working on an MCH-portal which should contain all the remaining MCH-records (including those of the DWIC) in digitized form so that they will be accessible worldwide.

## **7      *CONSULTATION***

### **7.1    Provide details of consultation about this nomination with (a) the owner of the heritage (b) the custodian (c) your national or regional *Memory of the World* committee**

Annual MCH-meetings (the Hague in June 2009, Malta in November 2009 en Paramaribo in April 2010)

## **PART B – SUBSIDIARY INFORMATION**

## **8      *ASSESSMENT OF RISK***

### **8.1    Detail the nature and scope of threats to this documentary heritage (see 5.5)**

Due to their age and long-term storage in a tropical climate, many documents are in very bad condition.

## **9 ASSESSMENT OF PRESERVATION**

9.1 Detail the preservation context of the documentary heritage (see 3.3)

See 4.d and 6.1