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The role of Nana Yaa Asantewaa in the 1900 Asante War of Resistance

Introduction : Subject matter

At the centenary commemoration of the 1900 war, the object of this paper is to examine the role of Nana Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen Mother of Ejisu, an Asante principality, in the Asante-British war of 1900 known to the Asante people as the “Yaa Asantewaa war” and to the British as the “Last (Ashanti) Rising” (Fuller, 1921:185), but which I choose to call the Resistance War of 1900. This examination proceeds by matching the Asante legend of Yaa Asantewaa as a fighter against the reports on her in the British written sources, with a view to establishing just what she did during the war. The Asante view of Yaa Asantewaa is embodied in a song that I heard during my childhood at Barekese,¹ one of the battlefields of the 1900 war.

The song was :

*Kookoo hin ko*²
Yaa Asantewa
Ôba basia a
Ogyina apremo ano
Kookoo hin ko
Yaa Asantewaa !

In English translation :

Kookoo hin ko
Yaa Asantewaa
The mere woman
Who faces the cannon³
Kookoo hin ko
Yaa Asantewaa !

¹ 12 miles off Kumasi in the Nwabiagya sub-district of the Atwima District.

² These words are apparently exclamatory.

³ This echoes a line in the praise poem of the Asantehene :

Kaekae Gyame a
Ode ntutua ko apremo ano!
Kaekae Gyame
Who fights the cannon with the musket !

In order to answer the question of the nature of her role during the war, one must turn to the British written sources, such as in Metcalfe (1964) and Fuller (1921). G.E. Metcalfe's work consists of selected official documents, correspondence, reports, and minutes of meetings of the colonial administration of the Gold Coast and of the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the Colonial Office in London. Fuller's writing on the 1900 war was based on documents in the office of the Chief Commissioner of Ashanti to which he had unhindered access as Chief Commissioner, 1905-1920.

Beside her role in the resistance war, interest in Nana Yaa Asantewaa also lies in the extent to which she departed from the military and political roles of Asante women, particularly those of high office. Therefore, this paper must include a sketch of those roles. Already Wilks (1993 : 329-369) has shown how another Asante woman of high status, Akyaa(wa), a daughter of *Okoawia* Osei Kwadwo, Asantehene, (1764-77) "blazed a trail" (*oyi akwan*) by being appointed by Nana Osei Yaw Akoto, Asantehene (1823-1834) as the head of a diplomatic mission that successfully negotiated the Maclean Treaty of 20th April, 1831, and another treaty with the Danes at Christianborg Castle on 9th August, 1831. Akyaa's distinction lay in being the first woman to be appointed the head of a diplomatic mission and a "chief negotiator" of treaties.

In the attempt to determine the actual role of Nana Yaa Asantewaa in the war and hence the real basis of her distinction, the paper will look at the historical context of the war, its major events including its planning and, as noted, the political and military role of Asante women or the sociological context.

The historical context of the war

In the history of the British in the Gold Coast the period 1874-1896 was one of hesitant imperialism, when they could not make up their minds how much territory they wanted. But it is fairly well-known that in 1893, Nana Prempeh I, Asantehene, rejected an invitation from Frederick Hodgson, then colonial secretary and acting Governor of the Gold Coast Colony to Asante to become a British protectorate, and Asante suffered no attack from the British. Yet in January 1896, Sir William Maxwell, the Governor of the Gold Coast, went to Kumasi, and at a public meeting ordered the arrest of the Asantehene, his mother, and a number of subordinate rulers and advisers. The captives were thereafter sent successively to Elmina, Freetown and the Seychelles Islands. The kingdom of Asante was declared a protectorate. But the colonial authorities proceeded to dismember the Union by signing separate treaties with the constituent states and insisting that they were and ought to act, particularly in judicial matters, independently of the Kumasi rulers. The Kumasi state was to be administered by a Resident representing the Governor of the Gold Coast and supported by a Committee of "native" chiefs, namely, Opoku Mensah,⁴ the Gyasewahene, Kwaku Nantwi a counsellor, (*ôkyeame*) of the

⁴ Also known as Obuabasa, the title of Adu Bofu who had held the position of Gyasewahene in the reign of Nana Kakari (1867-74). The Gyasewahene was the immediate subordinate of the Gyasehene, the Samanhene, the head of the organization of the palace of the Asantehene.

Asantehene and Kwame Afrifa of Atwima. The Committee was ordered to confine themselves to Kumasi and its villages in matters of dispute settlement and others in which the British colonial authorities instructed them. This was the major British measure for “pacifying” Asante and preventing it from fighting against the imposition of alien rule; (Fuller, 1921: 185-189; Tordoff, 1965: 88-93).

Between 1896 and 1900, the main British concerns were : revenue collection for financing their administration, exacting compulsory labour for public works, and getting accepted by the Asante such “humanitarian” acts as the abolition of domestic slavery. The British also thought that, in order to impress upon the Asante people that the Osei-Poku Dynasty had, in the words of Fuller, “vanished” forever (Fuller, 1921), they ought to secure for themselves the Golden Stool, the supreme symbol of Asante kingship and unity. Apparently, in British thinking, the loss of this national symbol, with its accepted mystical attributes would destroy the sentiment felt towards it and hence the bonds of unity among the Asante people.

It was to advance British policies in these areas that on the 28th of March, 1900 the Governor of the Gold Coast, Sir Frederick Hodgson, addressed a gathering of Asante rulers in the precincts of the new fort. The main points of his address were :

- That neither Prempeh nor Atwereboana, his former rival for the succession, would be allowed to return to Kumasi.
- That the powers of the erstwhile Asantehene were now vested in the Resident, the military predecessor of the projected chief commissioner who represented the Queen of England.
- That the Resident had the right to claim compulsory labour for public works, road construction, and transportation.
- That interest on the expenditure on the war of 1874 and the expedition of 1896 assessed at 160,000 pounds a year would be levied on the Asante and apportioned among the various states on the basis of their ascertained separate populations.
- That the Golden Stool was to be surrendered to the British authorities, who had now replaced Osei Tutu’s descendants as its occupants.

Fuller reports (p. 188) that the listeners were stunned, and that “the meeting broke up quietly”. But a highly-placed palace official⁵, reports an old palace functionary, who had been present at the meeting with the Governor, as recalling that Nana Yaa Asantewaa, present at the meeting in the absence of her grandson, Afranie, the Ejisuhene in exile with Nana Prempeh, taunted the Asante rulers, enquiring how they could sit there and listen to all that “nonsense”, and had they been turned into women or not ?

Whether or not they were stirred into action by Yaa Asantewaa’s taunts or, as has been suggested by Donald Stewart, the 1900 Resident, the Asante were bound to fight any way (Tordoft 1965 : 103-105), the leaders of the resistance held a meeting in the evening of the day of the “palaver” at the house of the Gyasewahene, Opoku Mensah, where a resolution was adopted or, in the words of Fuller (p.189), they “drank fetish” (*nom abosom*) to submit no longer to British rule.

⁵ My informant stated his preference for anonymity.

Additionally, clearly, the Governor's speech clarified the nature of Asante-British relations for the Asante rulers. British rule was no longer to be considered a temporary episode but an enduring ordeal. Their own king, triumphant after a bloody, three-year civil war, 1885-1888, was gone forever. The Asante were to pay what amounted to tribute to foreigners, and give up existing long-established institutions; and the Golden Stool was to become a trophy or a toy of the British Queen, or an exhibit in the British Museum.

The moving spirits of the resistance were, reportedly, Kofi Fofie of Nkwansan (possibly Nkonson), Antoa Mensa or Antoahene Mensa, Kwame Afrifa of Atwima and Osei Kwadwo Kruni. But they chose Nana Yaa Asantewaa to lead the resistance (Fuller, 189). Fuller suggests that she gladly accepted the responsibility because as noted, her grandson, Kwasi Afranie the Ejisuhene, had been sent into exile with Nana Prempeh I.

The question is why the men chose a woman, Nana Yaa Asantewaa, albeit a queen mother to be the war-leader, commander of the Asante fighting force, *sahene*. There is, expectedly, no record of the proceedings at Opoku Mensah's house, so there can be no definite answers. It may well be that it was considered strategically unsafe to assign the leadership to Kumasi, the capital of Greater Asante and now the seat of the British colonial administration, which would keep a sharp eye on the movements and activities of the leading political figures : conspiracy would be difficult to sustain in Kumasi. Jealousy among the men may have led them to choose a woman, who had already shown a keenness to defy the British and, perhaps, unusual leadership qualities. What is certain is that Nana Yaa Asantewaa must have had certain outstanding qualities and qualifications for a war-leader. The case of *Akyaa a oyi akwan*, noted above, shows that the Asante could in appropriate circumstances accept female leadership.

The meaning of leadership in the context of the "rising" must be clarified if we are to obtain a good measure of the achievements of Nana Yaa Asantewaaa. A leader of the "rising" was the one to initiate, in consultation with others, the planning and execution of the strategy and tactics of the war, the mobilization of men and material for it, the declaration of armistice(s) and the negotiation for peace with the enemy. These were the usual activities of an Asante war leader now imposed on Nana Yaa Asantewaaa ; and it may be assumed that she directed from her headquarters in Ejisu, the battles of the war after the 28th of March, 1900. It need be added that a war leader led from the rear of the fighting forces.

The major events of the resistance

There were, though, only a few hotly contested battles at the stockades erected at the crossroads around Kumasi by the leaders of the resistance movement.

The main events centred around the search for the Golden Stool, the siege of the fort, and the harassment of the rear-guard of the governor's party as it broke through the siege and went through Patase to Tabuom, Manso-Nkwanta, Edubiase and Praso (Fuller 1921).

The search for the Golden Stool began when a lame boy, Asumin, went to Accra in December, 1899, and reported to the Governor that his father Kwame Ta of Ejisu, allegedly a guardian of the Stool, had sent him to deliver a message to him concerning the Stool. The message was that his father and the other guardians of the Stool were tired after four years of guardianship, and were prepared to reveal its location in return for protection and suitable reward.

In February in the new year, the Governor sent a search party under the leadership of his private secretary, Captain Armitage, to look for the stool in the Nkwanta-Barekese forests. The search proved futile : Asumin was either a fake or too frightened to go near the Stool, if, indeed, he knew where it was hidden.

The search for the Golden Stool resumed under the leadership of Captains Armitage and Legett after the Governor's meeting on the 28th. Meanwhile Asante traders in Accra had leaked the news of the Governor's search in February for the Stool. The information had occasioned a meeting at the Anantahene's house where an oath had been sworn "not to reveal the location of the stool".

On March 31st, Armitage and Legett with 45 men went to Barekese in search of the Stool. On April 2nd, the search party visited Offinso, apparently on false information, and found no preparation for war. The party searched the houses and the nearby jungle before returning to Barekese. At Barekese while resting in a number of compound houses, a Barekese armed force fired on the British soldiers. The British force left Barekese and were met on the banks of the Ofin river by a combined Ejisu-Offinso force. They broke through but were attacked again by an Ejisu, Offinso and Atwima force at Akyiase, six miles or so from Kumasi. They succeeded in fighting their way through and reached Kumasi on April 3rd. *Etuo ato Bare*⁶ i.e. "a shot has been fired at Bare", which is reported to have been done without the knowledge of the resistance leaders, became a clarion call for the Asante resistance, a potent encouragement to Asante to make a stand for Asante independence.

On the 28th of April, at a meeting at Opoku Mensah's house, the resistance fighter sought to broaden the base of the movement beyond Kumasi, Atwima, Ejisu and Offinso by asking for the support of other Asante rulers to whom envoys were dispatched. The responses to the message showed divisions within Greater Asante that were rooted in the civil war of 1885-88, or were the result of the usual British divide-and-rule policy ; they had insisted on making separate treaties of protection with the constituent states. Ejisu, Offinso, Kumasi and Atwima provided the core of the resistance with assistance from Ahafo, Bechem, Nkwanta, a section of Kokofu, and after some "hesitation" Adansi forces. Ironically labelled, "loyal" in the British documents (Fuller, 1921 : 120; Tordolf, 1965), i.e. the "allies" of the British, were Bekwai, Mampong, Takyiman, Wenchi,

⁶ "Etuo ato Bare" is a well-known saying in Asante, a lasting reminder of the resistance war. The priest of the local deity, Obuo, is said to have directed the movements of the Bare fighting force, and it is recalled that only one man, Yaw Tabi, fell in the exchange of fire with the British force.

Berekum, Nkoranza, Gyaman, and Manso-Nkwanta. Of these, Bekwai, Mampong, and Manso-Nkwanta were units and sub-units of the original Asante Union. The rest were “Brong” states, which had always vacillated in their allegiance to the Golden Stool. After 1893, the British had played upon their anti-Kumasi feeling with a measure of success.

The position of Juaben, Kumawu and Mampong during the uprising was ambiguous. They were labelled as “loyal” to the British government, but were accepted as mediators by the resistance leaders whom the British called “rebels” (Metcalf, 1964 : 434 ; Fuller, 1921: 190-192 ; Tordolf, 1965 : 83-105). The divisions in Asante and the position of such Amantuo states as Juaben, Mampong, and Kumawu may help in explaining Asante military inaction at the arrest of Nana Prempeh and his entourage, and also the apparent lack of vigour in the resistance movement. Asante was no longer the united force she had been in the expansionist period, 1701-1807. The British pressure on her, intensified after Bowdich’s mission in 1817 (Bowdich, 1819) had insidiously sapped the strength of Asante unity of purpose and militaristic virtues. Since the British invasion of Kumasi in 1873-74, the kingdom had been thrown into an anomic condition. There was no longer general certainty about the need to uphold the integrity of the Union forged by Osei Tutu and Ôkomfo Anôkye in 1699-1700, and consolidated by Opoku Ware, 1720-50.

A lull followed the futile search for the Golden Stool in the precincts of Barekese, Kumasi and its allied forces engaged themselves in procuring arms and ammunition. The British sent for reinforcements from Accra, the Northern territories, Sierra Leone, and Northern Nigeria. The puzzle of this interval is that the Kumasi forces failed to attack the fort in its weak state. On the contrary, they accepted the mediation of Juaben, Kumawu, and Mampong, reported by Fuller to have sworn oaths of allegiance to the Governor when they heard of the fighting between the British and Asante forces on the Barekese road.

During the negotiation, the Governor promised to stop the collection of the interest on the indemnity and also to deal leniently with “the young men” who, they believed, “had been led astray by their chiefs”,⁷ if they laid down their arms. The resistance leaders, in turn demanded the return of Prempeh I, liberty to buy and sell slaves,⁸ immunity from compulsory labour,⁹ and the banishment of all “strangers” and “traders”¹⁰ from Kumasi (Fuller, 192). Both parties rejected the demands.

The mutual rejection of demands meant the beginning of hostilities. Yet the Asante forces allowed groups of people to leave the fort unattacked, and the acting Inspector-General of the Gold Coast constabulary to enter it with a force of 100 rank and file without

⁷ It has always seemed amazing to me that it never occurred to the British that the colonized peoples could harbour patriotic sentiments. Hence Asante young men could not have rejected British rule without the persuasion or coercion of their “chiefs”. In the days of the movement for independence, they also spoke of “irresponsible minority”, the educated professionals, who somehow influenced the mass of the people who were otherwise “content” with British rule.

⁸ In the absence of a moderately monetized economy, slaves were the main source of labour on the farms

⁹ Highly humiliating to the Asante aristocrats as well as ordinary men.

¹⁰ This was against the Asante imperial tradition. But “strangers” and “traders” were apparently regarded as allies of the British. The population of Kumasi in the 1820s included people from all over Western Africa.

hindrance. Between 21st and 25th April, the British tried to drive the Asante forces from the vicinity of the Kumasi fort. They attacked Asem and Amakom on the 21st without encountering the enemy, and on the 22nd, Kaase and Adeebaba, capturing 20 prisoners. A march on the Kwamo road, apparently on misinformation about the disposition of the Kumasi forces, resulted in major defeat for the British at Fumesua.

It was on the 25th of April that the resistance leaders decided to fight seriously. They cut telegraph wires and completely “infested” Kumasi. All the Europeans, including missionaries, took refuge in the fort, while their allied Africans settled under its walls. The Asante attacked the Basel mission buildings, but were repulsed by the guns in the fort. They raided and fired the Hausa Zongo¹¹ and the Hausa fled to the fort. They threw open the gaol and released the prisoners. They forced the evacuation of the hospital and officers’ quarters.

The siege of the fort began in earnest when the Asante fighters loop holed the walls of the houses near the fort and began shooting at it. The result of this was the gathering of the Governor and his party inside the fort, and their African adherents under its walls.

In view of the concerns of this paper, it is not necessary to go into greater detail about the encounters between Asante and British forces. These occurred between April 20th and July 15th, 1900 when Colonel Wilcox with his relief army arrived from Cape Coast, via Kwissa (Fomena), Esumegya, Bekwai and Trede and lifted the siege. On May 23rd the Governor, with his wife and an escorting party, had broken out and run for the coast through Patase, Tabuom, Manso-Nkwanta, Edubiase, and across the Pra river.

A note-worthy mention of Nana Yaa Asantewaa in Fuller’s account of the Asante-British encounters is in the context of detailing an Asante army which was to follow and harass the Governor’s party. Fuller reports (p. 201) that “When the Ashantis realized that the Governor and his party had slipped through their cordon by the Patase road, Akwasi Boadu, Yaa Asantewaa’s representative, detailed Antoa Mensah with a large force to follow him up.” The meaning of the passage is clear. Yaa Asantewaa, as War-leader was represented at the meetings of the council that directed the placement of blockades around Kumasi, declared the armistice on May 13th, allowing the fort to be provisioned, and broke it on May 15th when reinforcements for the fort arrived from the Northern Territories. The passage also meant that it was Yaa Asantewaa’s representative who gave orders at these meetings deriving his authority from the queen mother.

The sociological context: the political and military roles of Asante women

Since it is firmly established that Nana Yaa Asantewaa was appointed and acted as war-leader during the uprising, the question arises as to the extent to which she departed from the normal political and military role of Asante women ; i.e. in which sociological context does her extraordinariness become patent. In a previous publication (Arhin,

¹¹ The Hausa formed the core of the British constabulary.

1983), I addressed the question of the political and military roles of Akan women and reproduce the relevant portions below.

Among the Akan people, female stools complemented the hierarchy of male stools. In the village, the elders (*mpanyimfo*), heads of the matrilineages, who constituted with the *ôdekuro* the village council, had their *aberewa* or *ôbaa panyin*, who looked after the women's affairs. The *ôdekuro* had an *ôbaa panyin* who was responsible for the affairs of the women of the village and was a member of the village council ; the *ôhene*, head of a division, and the *ômanhene*, head of the autonomous political community, had their female counterparts known as *ôhemma*, female ruler, who sat on their councils. The *ôhene* and *ôhemma* were all of the same *mogya*, blood or localized matrilineage. The *Asantehemma*, the occupant of the female stool of the Kumasi state, and therefore, of united Asante, since her male counterpart was ex officio the Asantehene, King of Asante, was a member of the Ktôtôkô Council, the Executive Committee or Cabinet of the Asanteman *Nhyiamu*, General Assembly of Asante rulers.

As members of their respective councils, female stool occupants participated in the legislative and judicial processes, in the making and the unmaking of war, and in the distribution of land, the basic resource of the economy. An *ôhemma* of a state also had her own *ntam*, oath, a formula for starting the judicial process, and her own court, as well as her own *ôkyeame* (spokesman) who in the Akan courts acted as prosecutor and judge.

An *ôhemma* was a refuge for a fugitive from the *ôhene's* court who often successfully sought her intervention in cases of the death penalty. Called the "mother" of the *ôhene*, she was the latter's most effective adviser and she had the right to administer to him even a public admonition. The *ôhemma* was the *aberewa*, wisdom personified : an Akan court panel preceded their retirement to discuss a case before passing judgement by saying that they were going to consult *aberewa*, the old woman. As the *aberewa* of the town, the *ôhemma* was the moral guardian of the females of the political community and a kind of moral censor : she examined adolescent girls before the main puberty rites which ushered them into adulthood and licensed their marriage, and was expected to say whether or not pregnancy had occurred before the rites. A girl who was found to have become pregnant before the rites was known as *kyiribra*, and was punished with ostracism together with her partner. The polity thrived on a sound moral discipline.

As the *aberewa*, the *ôhemma* was also custodian of "custom". She was officially the foremost authority on the genealogy of the royal matrilineage, and hence the first and final arbiter on who was qualified by blood to be a male ruler ; it was said of the *ôhemma's* stool in relation to the male stool that it was the elder stool, *akonnwa panyin*. It was the *ôhemma* who played the leading role in the selection of a successor to a deceased or destooled (removed from office) *ôhene*.

The *ôhemma's* role in the succession process to a vacant stool can be understood in terms, first, of the composite nature of most of the Akan matrilineages and, secondly, of the Akan rules of succession. The composite nature of the Akan matrilineage lay not in

its segmentation over time and space, but in the incorporation into it of “stranger” segments which in time became concealed ; even when it was known; it was not permitted for outsiders to point it out. “Stranger” segments could be descended from slave women or free-born women of another clan who, therefore, were not of pure blood and whose descendants were not eligible for the stool. The *ôhemma* was the one who could pronounce on the fitness of potential successors for the stool from the viewpoint of true descent from the founding ancestors / ancestress.

Secondly, while the Akan vested the right of succession in the royal matrilineage, they left open the question of the actual successor among the eligible males, which was resolved by joint consultations between the *ôhemma*, as leader of the royal matrilineage, and the members of the village, divisional, or national council. In the process of consultation, the *ôhemma* and the council were governed by the following rules : brothers should succeed one another before sisters’ sons in the order of seniority in age : but age could be discounted in favour of superior wisdom and character in a junior person. Seniority in age could also be discounted in favour of a younger successor, if rotational succession among the segments of the royal lineage had been adopted as a “convention” by the lineage and the community as a whole. Where rotation had been adopted as a working rule, both the male and female stools rotated among the segments, so that at any moment the occupants belonged to different competing segments.

It was the *ôhemma* who operated these rules and ensured orderly succession to the stool. On the decease or destoolment of an *ôhene*, the members of the council formally asked the *ôhemma* to nominate a candidate for their approval, and gave her three succeeding options at the end of which the councillors could in turn present a candidate for her approval. It rarely, if ever, came to this. An *ôhemma* consulted members of her matrilineage, her husband, if she had one, and the community at large through discreet inquiries by her *nkotimsifoô*, house maids, who, like the palace functionaries, were so selected as to represent the various sections of the community. The candidate she turned up was thus, more often than not, the result of communal consensus. It was easy to arrive at this kind of consensus in the small-scale, face-to-face communities of the period before colonial rule.

The peace, order and stability of the political community, therefore, depended to a large extent on the *ôhemma*. She could give the community a good or bad ruler or defy the customary rules, and thus jeopardize the well being of the community. The part of Yaa Akyiaa, the *Asantehemma*, in the crises of succession to the stool of the *Asantehene*, 1885-88, illustrates the crucial responsibility of an *ôhemma* in a keenly contested election. Yaa Akyiaa sponsored her own son, Kwaku Duah III (later Prempeh I), as Asantehene against the claims of Atwereboana, who was both older than Prempeh and belonged to an alternative segment. It was also abnormal for mother and son to occupy both the male and female stools at the same time. In the face of objections from the Asante states of Mampong, Nsuta, and Kokofu, Yaa Akyiaa organized the Kumasi forces together with those of Bekwai and Ejisu, and thus split Asante into two factions. The result was civil war which, following the turbulent reigns and destoolments of Kakari

(1867-74) and Mensa-Bonsu (1874-83), weakened Asante and made her an easy target of the British colonial takeover in 1896.

The Akan *ôhemma* was not only a joint mother of the occupants of male stools ; she could herself occupy a male stool. The best known of female occupants of Akan male stools were Dokua of Akyem Abuakwa and Juaben Serwah of Juaben, who reigned in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Female occupants of male stools performed the duties of their male counterparts, including the rites in the *nkonnwafie so*, the room where the blackened stools are kept and which is barred to women in general on account of their ritual impurity incidental to the menses.

Both male and female royal persons were used as linkages in the unification of segments through marriage. An *ôhemma* selected a wife for a newly installed *ôhene* and the selection was done with an eye on political alliances. It was of great significance that in the course of the consolidation of the Asante Union in the eighteenth century Safo Kantanka, the Mamponghe, head of the non-*Oyoko* section of Asante, married a succession of Kumasi, Dwaben and other *ahemma* of the *Oyoko* section of Asante, and thus created filial and affinal ties which supported the formal political and military organization. Political marriage as a political instrument in Asante and other Akan states is yet to be studied.

Among the Akan, the military organization was given in the political organization. Political status determined military status. The commanders of the Asante army and its subdivisions were first elected as heads of territorial divisions or appointed as heads of palace associations and then assumed corresponding military positions : European visitors to the Akan states in the nineteenth century referred to the heads of the subdivisions as “captains”. A female who acceded to a male stool also formally assumed the corresponding military position and, if war occurred, she would be expected to lead her “men” in war. With the exception of Yaa Asantewaa, however, the Akan had no parallels to the British Boadicea ; there are only examples of those who urged on their male counterparts to fight to death in order to retrieve the national honour.

Women and adolescent girls were normally camps-followers and performed commissariat duties. Royal females of Kumasi accompanied the Asantehene, Ofibiriti Osei Yaw Akoto (1823-34), at the Battle of Dodowa in 1826, when the Asante pitched their national shrine, the Golden (the Paramount Asante) Stool, against combined southern Akan and Ga-Dangme forces led by British officers. It appears from the events following the war that women were generally desired as hostages (Wilks, 1993).

The main female military role, albeit played far behind the battle-lines, was to engage in what was known as *mmomomme twe*, perform pantomime dances and sing dirges in support of the men at war. It is unclear whether the dances and songs were expected to have magico-religious effects on the enemy. But they had the practical effect of shaming potential war-dodgers known as *kôsaankôbi* into joining the war. Women were also authorized to compose songs which could drive confirmed war-dodgers to suicide.

The situation can be summarized by saying that the essential female military role was to give encouragement to men. Giving encouragement could, however, take a dramatic and more positive turn, if a woman of high status seized arms, or as the Asante called it, *bontoa*, as an example to the males in order to arouse their sense of honour and sharpen their martial ardour.

Conclusion

Nana Yaa Asantewaa's role in the 1900 resistance war exceeded the normal political and military roles of Asante women. She did not merely dare the men to fight. The men recognized in her a potential leader and elected her as the first female war-leader, *sahene* ; it was an, not an ascribed, position.

As leader of the resistance, she personified the Asante historic military tradition and values, and gave expression to Asante's intense objection to foreign rule. The war she led was lost, as she and her co-leaders probably knew it would be in view of British advanced weaponry. She was exiled, not burnt like Joan of Arc of French resistance to English overrule, and died in exile. But she lives in the memory and heart of the Asante people, as expressed in the song mentioned in the introduction to this paper, in which she is immortalized. She shall for long be remembered as a personal symbol of Asante's final stand against British imperialism, and as proof that, for the Asante, gender was irrelevant to leadership.

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