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**Same Story, Different Constructions:
Exploring the (Re)Telling of Yaa
Asantewaa's Story as a Female
Military Leader**



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Abstract

This essay explores the different methods in which the stories of 'female military leaders' could, should or have been (re)told and how controversies of the combinations of the words 'female', 'military' and 'leader' have consciously or unconsciously (re)constructed these stories in varying art forms and discourses. It focuses on the story of Yaa Asantewaa of the ancient Asante (Ashanti) Kingdom of West Africa who led the Asante side against British and its allied forces in a war that took place in Asante between 1900 and 1901. She has appeared in diverse forms: as old, young or middle-aged; in cloth, in battle fatigue or unrecognisable save her gun. History exposes a consensus on Yaa Asantewaa being 'female' and a 'leader' and even a 'military leader'. Still, ancient Asante's and her own beliefs on what the combination of these words mean, may have had more to do with a mother as 'protector' of her people and their land rather than the promotion of gender equality in the military or in matters of peace and security.

Key words: *Female military leader; Yaa Asantewaa; Asante; Ashanti*

Introduction

How does one tell the story of a female military leader? Historians, artists, craftspersons and the like have developed several ways of telling these stories in which they expose their own perspectives, attempt to carve the focus of their audiences or construct a character that never really was or could never have been although this woman or girl did indeed live. For instance, a woman's experience as the head of armed forces could be focused on the word 'leader'; a great orator and organiser who rallied her people to war, united them in a common cause of her vision and impacted their future and possibly, those of others beyond their borders. Yet, the 'female' may not be emphasised as it can be swallowed up in nationalistic tales of 'us' against 'them' and described as part of an identifiable group rather than as an individual.

Still, some of these crafters of history could join the words 'military' and 'leader' together, constructing what some scholars may argue is a masculine description of a military leader; usually male or an 'emasculated' female clad in military fatigue, armed with weapons and reputation—both the truthful and the conjured—of battles won, fighting prowess, territories acquired and number of deaths caused. This reputation and its eventual installation into collective memory of the relevant society could be spread through song, dance, visual art as well as words.

But this performance can come to a standstill when the word 'female' is added. The emphasis on 'female' military leader could change the story

to one of feminist discourses and gender equality activism. It could shed light on a patriarchal and essentialist strangeness of the combination and may open up more insight on overt and covert constructions of femininity and masculinity and what some of those views may consider 'rhetorical' questions such as: Can women actually lead anything? Do women have the cognitive, emotional and physical strength to be in a military force let alone direct one? How would it look on those men with a woman in front of them or taking orders from a woman or saluting a woman as commanding officer? Can one actually visualise it? Can these historians using different art forms and media paint this picture of a female military leader?

Yaa Asantewaa

Some have tried with different female military heads in antiquity such as Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc), Amina of Zazzou, the Minos of Dahomey (also known as the Amazons) and Yaa Asantewaa of Asante (Ashanti). For example, Yaa Asantewaa is remembered as being the Queen Mother of the paramount state of Edweso (Ejisu) in the ancient Asante Kingdom of West Africa who led the Asante side in a war against the British and their allies over the Asante Golden Stool. Although this essay uses 'war' to describe what happened in Asante between 1900 and 1901, that event is known by different names. To Asantes in general it is called the Yaa Asantewaa *Sa* (War). It has also been called the "the last Anglo-Asante War of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth

century” (Adu Boahen, 2003, p. 114)¹, even though Wilks demonstrates that the war should be described as an “Anglo-Kumase [Kumasi] War and not an Anglo-Asante one” due to the Asante forces not headed by the Chief of the paramount state of Mampong in absence of the King, and of Kumasi having its own head of forces at that time (see (Wilks, 2000, p. 57)). Other historians have presented it in titles of articles as “the 1900 Asante War of Resistance” (Arhin, 2000, p. 97) and “Yaa Asantewaa’s War of Independence” (Obeng, 2000, p. 137) (see also in text (Aidoo, 1977, p. 12)). Further, according to Adu Boahen, “to the English, it is known as “The Ashanti Campaign of 1900” (Adu Boahen, 2003, p. 114) and Obeng shares that “the British described the war as the “Last Ashanti Rising,” the “Ashanti rebellion,” and the “Siege of Kumasi,” and adds that “the Asante offer a paradigm shift by calling it the *Yaa Asantewaa Sa...*” (Obeng, 2000, p. 149). These descriptions and others like these place Yaa Asantewaa in anti-imperial and anti-colonial discourses. In both she is a ‘leader’ not necessarily female but one who marked out history by declaring and leading a war.

Those who tackle the concept of ‘military leader’, visually model Yaa Asantewaa almost always with a gun. She is at times in ancient Asante military fatigue or in *densikran*—the robes of an Asante queen mother that comprise of a long cloth covering the chest to the legs at varying lengths from below the knee to the ankles and of a shorter cloth draped around the torso and left shoulder of the queen mother—but the gun is the almost constant part of her memory. Indeed, she was supposed to have faced “cannons” as expressed in one song (see (Adu Boahen, 2003, pp. 62-63))², which some may contend as being nothing short of immortal and supernatural³.

And another constant is that Yaa Asantewaa is always ‘female’⁴ but not usually with the emphasis as look at what a ‘woman’ did but rather as one of her characteristics. Walking through the modern Asante Kingdom, one could find that

unless a question is directed or highlights Yaa Asantewaa’s femininity, it could be glossed over. However, this is changing in the space of feminist discourses and campaigns as Yaa Asantewaa’s story has been seeping into the world of women’s empowerment and gender equality. But as McCaskie demonstrates in *The Life and Afterlife of Yaa Asantewaa*, her story could become politicized in bipartisan politics of Ghana’s—where the modern Asante Kingdom is located—two most patronised political parties (see (McCaskie, 2007, pp. 162-170)) and in ancient Asante internal politics (see (McCaskie, 2007, pp. 151-155 & 160-161)). Or her story could fall into the list of what DeGroot describes as “random incidents from the past when women, usually as a result of military emergency, have assumed a combat role and have performed effectively” (DeGroot, 2001, p. 23), which he claims “campaigners [for gender integration into the military] cite” and in following the thread of his paragraph, it would seem he infers that they do this to counter notions of women’s pacifism and the capability of women “to become effective soldiers” if trained as men (see (DeGroot, 2001, p. 23)). These feminist campaigners and scholars also run the risk of being criticised by other feminist schools as backing patriarchal institutions such as the military and in turn, patriarchal values and patriarchal mind-sets.

Explorations

The Construction or De-Construction of a Female Warrior

Consequently, this present study into Yaa Asantewaa’s life delved into this debate by asking: How could an old woman in a cloth or *densikran* lead an army into war? And where did they fight as Asante and especially, the ancient Asante Kingdom is a large piece of territory? While the first question may appear mundane or even amusing, it highlighted the challenges visual artists have projected in (re)telling the story of Yaa Asantewaa and her war. Just a review of artistic impressions of

1 While one way Adu Boahen describes this war is “the last Anglo-Asante War of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth century” (Adu Boahen, 2003, p. 114), he as well as McCaskie and Wilks point out the divisions within the Asante nation in 1900 generally or specifically with reference to the war (see (Adu Boahen, 2003, p. 154; McCaskie, 2007, p. 158; Wilks, 1975, p. 123)). In other words, not all Asante paramount states fought alongside Yaa Asantewaa. Indeed, McCaskie records that “while some Asante battled the British, others supported them and many others stayed neutral” (McCaskie, 2007, p. 158). Adu Boahen also explains that there were states that overtly were against Yaa Asantewaa’s war but covertly supported her (see (Adu Boahen, 2003, p. 166)).

2 Adu Boahen records the English translation of a song sang by “women in Edweso” following the end of the Yaa Asantewaa War as thus: “Yaa Asantewaa; A woman who fights before cannons; You have accomplished great things; You have done well” (Adu Boahen, 2003, pp. 62-63).

3 Yet, ancient Asantes believed in and relied on the spiritual (see for example (Akyeampong & Obeng, 1995, pp. 483-484)).

4 Even though, it should be pointed out that Akyeampong and Obeng share an instance in which she is claimed to have been “a man in female disguise”; possibly inferring some elders in her royal line were trying to mask the fact that the Chiefs were not proactive in their responsibility and duties with respect to the Yaa Asantewaa War (see (Akyeampong & Obeng, 1995, pp. 505-506)).

Yaa Asantewaa can reveal the first two sides of the debate. On the one hand, either consciously or unconsciously members of the school of thought promoting her as having an active combat role seem to provide an image of a young or middle-aged woman or as the sculpture on the Edweso Roundabout where Yaa Asantewaa is wearing a headscarf, a *batakari* (a top, which used to be used as part of the ancient Asante war fatigue), a cloth as a lower garment and canvas shoes. On the other hand, the school of thought that posits that she led the army but did not engage in combat appear to make her older such as the wax image at the Manhyia Palace Museum of her sitting on a royal stool projecting her power as a female political leader and decision-maker in the ancient Asante Kingdom. She is also in black *densikran* worn during royal court by royal leaders and as a funeral cloth⁵ holding a gun. In a nutshell, the wax image could be said to portray a 'female military leader' who did not fight.

Constructing Another Battleground

Regarding, the question on where did 'they' fight, Quainoo explained that the Kumasi Fort (now the Ghana Armed Forces Museum) was the epicentre of the battle where European hostages were held (Quainoo, 2013). Yaa Asantewaa is remembered as the 'military leader' of the Asante forces who decided policies, worked with her field leaders on strategies such as the stockades system, bolstered her troops, provided supplies and so on (see (Adu Boahen, 2003, pp. 129-131 & 135)). Yet, where she was during the battles is also contested. Adu Boahen puts forward that she was "on battlefields and at some battlefronts but did not fight" (Adu Boahen, 2003, p. 135) and then there is the reproduction of an account of "a fleeing teacher... [to] the Basel missionaries at Abetifi" that places her at Edweso sending orders to "the different camps around Kumasi" (Akyeampong & Obeng, 1995, p. 505)⁶.

However, one could put forward that the physical battleground of the Yaa Asantewaa War could possibly feature in another battleground; that of gender equality in the military. In other words, the larger question on Yaa Asantewaa could be: How could a woman at the turn of the 20th century lead an army into war when women's access into

the army or other sections of the armed forces is still a challenge in the 21st? Specifically, did this seemingly 'breaking of a glass-ceiling' have anything to do with the ancient Asante culture, the time in history of the Yaa Asantewaa War or something unique about Yaa Asantewaa?

To answer these questions and more was to take a journey back into a time when Asante was an absolute monarchy. It was to probe into oral, written, drawn, sculptured and photographed histories, find out the perspectives of modern day Asante historians, traditional leaders and other people on what they believed was the driving force in Yaa Asantewaa being able to lead in a war. It appeared difficult for her actions to be placed into discourses on gender equality and women's empowerment as that was not the larger picture of her war. Hers was to secure the Asante Golden Stool. Moreover, she led an all-male army not a female one or a gender equal one. Nonetheless, paradoxically, the catalyst for her declaration of war was steeped in the constructions of femininity and gender relations in ancient Asante.

To explain, Asante was built to function on the concept of matriliney or "the practice of tracing descent through a mother's line" (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2019) or in other words, inheritance and royal ascent through the female blood line on the idea that only the females passes on blood to her offspring and the male, the spirit⁷ (see (Rattray, 1969, p. 77)). As a result, Asante was and is⁸ a women's land and the people and their royal stools and deities, such as the Golden Stool, women's responsibilities. Additionally, due to matriliney and gerontocracy, ancient Asantes sought wisdom from their elders, particularly the female elders of their families. This was replicated at state and national levels in the form of queen mothers. A queen mother was a member of the royal family, a ruler in her own right and the principal advisor to her male counterpart ruler i.e. chiefs at state and sub-state levels and the King at national level. Yaa Asantewaa is estimated to have been around 60 at the time of her war. As the Queen Mother of a paramount state, she had an open door into state and national legislative and decision-making platforms. However, this access did not necessarily extend to the military and its leadership.

5 Brobbey shared that black and in general funeral cloth was also worn in wars as fatalities were expected (Brobbey, 2016).

6 Derived from "Obrecht to Basel, July 30, 1900 (No. 1900.II.169). Paul Jenkins, "Abstracts Concerning Gold Coast History from the Basel Mission Archives" (n.p., n.d)" (Akyeampong & Obeng, 1995, p. 505).

7 Rattray translates the Asante word *ntoro* as 'spirit'.

8 The reader should note that some practices, beliefs and systems in the ancient Asante Kingdom remain the same in the modern Kingdom even though the past tense may only be used in most parts of this paper.

The ancient Asante army or Asante *Kotoko* (porcupines) was an all-male institution headed and led by the King and in his absence, the Chief of Mampong. Women were excluded from this institution due to the believed spiritual uncleanness and supernatural potency of menstrual blood. Ancient Asantes believed that menstrual blood could reduce the power of other spiritual things to Asantes (Osei Kwadwo, 2013; Osei-Hwedie, 2014) and thus, a woman or girl in that state of any social class was not allowed to enter into spaces where these beings, objects or their representations were found such as family homes, rivers, royal courts, stool rooms and battlegrounds⁹.

Nevertheless, exceptions in the latter case have been uncovered ancient Asante history including Queen Mothers Ama Serwaa of the paramount state of Dwaben (Juaben), “Akyia” of the paramount state of Asansu, Ataa Birago of the paramount state of Kokofu and Anima Pinaman also of Kokofu (Rattray, 1969, p. 81; Aidoo, 2005, pp. 54-55) and a royal woman, Akyaawa Oyiakwan of Akorase¹⁰ (Aidoo, 2005, p. 53). But these exceptions could have been prompted by some special historical event. For example, in Yaa Asantewaa’s case, the King and the Queen Mother of Asante and some other members of the royal family including the Chief of Edweso, had all been exiled by the British and therefore, the traditional leader and some of the leaders of different sectors of the army were not available for what became the Yaa Asantewaa War. Furthermore, before the exile, Asante had

gone through a civil war over the nomination of the next King which had brought about cracks within the national royal court and there was disconcertion on how to respond to the request for the Golden Stool, which had been believed to be the spiritual guarantor of the unity of Asante. Moreover, the previous Anglo-Asante War (the Sagrenti War of 1873-1874) had caused a major defeat of Asante; decreasing its borders, razing its capital, and with the subsequent civil war, causing several fatalities and reduction to its financial and material resources. Accordingly, another Anglo-Asante war would have seemed unwinnable¹¹ and this may have been one of the reasons that some chiefs refused to go to or to declare war. These events could be seen as having contributed to Yaa Asantewaa becoming a military leader.

Additionally, Obeng highlights that the menstrual restrictions did not apply to her (Obeng, 2000, p. 148) and Arhin adds that “[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” (Arhin, 2000, p. 109)¹². And this was the case of Yaa Asantewaa as she had also taken on the role of chief due to the exile of the substantive Chief of Edweso¹³. Furthermore, with respect to her becoming a military leader, Wilks quotes British documents that she was “elected to command Ashanti Forces” (Wilks, 2000, p. 55)¹⁴ and Arhin infers that she was selected to be the military leader “by the men” (Arhin, 2000, p. 101). He points out that there are no records to

9 Rattray writes of the restrictions to women’s movements during that season including living in a hut which he claimed “every ‘bush’ village” in Asante had; his original publication was in 1923. He explains what he describes as “abhorrence of the unclean woman in Ashanti...to be based on the supposition that contact with her, directly or indirectly, is held to negative and render useless all super-natural or magico-protective powers possessed by either persons or spirits or objects...” (Rattray, 1959, p. 75). Brobbey explained that these practices no longer apply in homes with the exception of religious spaces and ceremonies. However, these practices still operate within royal circles. For instance, the *Mponponsuo* Sword, which is used by the *Asantehene* (King of Asante) to swear the oath of office, is usually present when he sits in state. However, it is usually covered with white calico once a woman enters that space. This action Brobbey clarified, is not only to protect the sword from losing its power and in turn the strength of the King but also women from infertility by going near the sword (Brobbey, 2016).

10 While Rattray quotes that these Queen Mothers whom he describes as having “accompanied an army to war”—four in all including Yaa Asantewaa—were able to do so “because they were old and [post-menopausal]” (Rattray, 1969, p. 81), Aidoo shares the story of Akyaawa Oyiakwan (“trailblazer”) who was also present at a battlefield. Akyaawa Oyiakwan was a member of the royal family but she was not a queen mother. Furthermore, Aidoo writes that she was “probably in her forties”, which could infer that she had not yet reached the post-menopausal stage of life. Additionally, “it is not fully clear why [she]...was present at the war. But oral traditions indicate that she went as the guardian [to a god; an offshoot] of...a favourite Deity of the Asante rulers and people” (Aidoo, 2005, p. 53). Thus, it does appear that Akyaawa Oyiakwan did not engage in physical combat. However, Aidoo in another article describes Queen Mothers Ama Sewaa of Dwaben, Ataa Birago of Kokofu and Yaa Asantewaa as “fighting queen mothers” (Aidoo, 1977, p. 5).

11 Wilks terms the defeat as inevitable “in view of the extreme disparity in the military resources of the protagonists” (Wilks, 1975, p. 123).

12 Arhin posits that Yaa Asantewaa was an exception amongst the Akan as a parallel to “the British Boadicea”; possibly referring to a female leader of an army or a warrior queen, he states that “there are only examples of those who urged on their male counterparts to fight to death in order to retrieve the national honor” (Arhin, 2000, p. 109). He concluded on “the essential female role [in war in ancient Asante] was encouragement to men” (Arhin, 2000, p. 109). Yet, as cited earlier, Aidoo records that Queen Mothers Ama Sewaa of Dwaben, Ataa Birago of Kokofu and Yaa Asantewaa fought (see (Aidoo, 1977, p. 5)).

13 Adu Boahen shares that at one point the Golden Stool was in the care of the Chief of Edweso and this was taken over by Yaa Asantewaa when he was arrested until 1899 when it was moved from Edweso to Bare (Adu Boahen, 2003, p. 149).

14 He cites “Parl. Papers, Accounts and Papers, Cd. 933, “Gold Coast. Further Correspondence,” HMSO 1902, 12-13: Nathan to Chamberlain, 19 March 1901, and 19: end. 2 entitled “X”.

explain why they chose a woman, he puts forward some ideas and adds that she “must have had outstanding qualities and qualifications for a war-leader” (Arhin, 2000, p. 101).

Arguably, there were other queen mothers and possibly, women outside the royal class of Asante whose actions would have had significant impacts on their communities, state and the Kingdom. Nevertheless, it could be put forward that the most famous of all these Asante women in antiquity is Yaa Asantewaa. She did have social standing, political power and age on her side, which non-royal and non-ruling royal women and men would not have had; still, what she is mainly remembered for is her declaration of war and the reason for that declaration—the Golden Stool.

Asantes were warned by Asante’s spiritual founder, *Okomfo* (traditional Asante priest) Anokye, that if the Golden Stool “was taken or destroyed...the... nation [would] sicken and lose its vitality and power” (Rattray, 1969, pp. 289-290). Hence, to ancient Asantes, it was a deity to be protected at all costs. The fact is that Yaa Asantewaa was the first, be it male or female, to forcefully uphold the survival of the Asante union even after the civil war, the exile of the King and Queen Mother of Asante and other royal rulers, and after each state ruler including herself (see (Climo, March 1904, p. 216; Wilks, 1975, p. 122)) had had to sign “separate treaties of submission...obtained from each of the *aman* [state] and the larger towns” ((Wilks, 1975, p. 122) see also (Adu Boahen, 2003, pp. 149-150)) by the British¹⁵.

She still believed in the Asante union set-up by nine matri-clans circa 1695. And to her and others like her, the Golden Stool was not just a symbol of this union or of royal power (see (Rattray, 1969, pp. 292-293)) but as *Okomfo* Anokye explained to the first King of Asante—Osei Tutu I and others—it was the “(soul or spirit) of the Ashanti nation, and that their power, their health, their bravery their welfare were in this stool” (Rattray, 1969, p. 289).

The union had been established for the clans to gain independence from the Denkyira Kingdom (Brobbe, 2013). The Golden Stool became, in their eyes, their security against returning to a state of vulnerability. Therefore, Yaa Asantewaa’s memory within Asante and by some other societies is ultimately, the preserver of the Asante Kingdom till date. Nonetheless, not everyone celebrates her or the concept of a ‘female military leader’.

Discourses

‘Asante’ Female Military Leader

In a larger framework, there are schools of thought that either denounce or revel in the idea of a warmongering ancient Asante. These would put forward that the Asante *Kotoko* was one of the most formidable armies in ancient Africa with a porcupine inspired war strategy; succinctly explained in the war cry, *se wo kum apem, apem beba* (if you kill a thousand, a thousand more will come or they will be replaced by another thousand).

Ancient Asante conquered territories, extended its political and economic dominance over other societies to become an empire at the zenith of its power (see (Brukum, 2005, p. 3))¹⁶. Akyeampong and Obeng reproduce a quote from J.K. Fynn that ““Ashanti was fundamentally a military union”” (Akyeampong & Obeng, 1995, p. 492) in the context of discussions on gender power politics and the role played by war¹⁷. Hence, Yaa Asantewaa would fit the picture of either school; either as a continuation of a history of violent aggressors (see for instance (Baden-Powell, 1896, pp. 17-22; Brackenbury, 1874, p. 1)) or of yet another war hero(ine) underlining the military protection of Asante pride. However, there is a growing Asante school of thought that argues that ancient Asantes were misunderstood in their military campaigns. They posit that these were peace-loving people who went to war for defence purposes (see for instance (Sarpong, 2005, pp. 35-36))¹⁸. Thus in

15 Wilks places this within the context of “the aim...of ‘the destruction of the central power of Kumasi’ ” (Wilks, 1975, p. 122); the seat of power of the entire kingdom. Wilks in another article infers that Yaa Asantewaa and the Governor of the Gold Coast at that time, had different understandings to what she had committed her state with respect to “Britain’s Friendship and Protection” (see (Wilks, 2000, p. 56)).

16 Brukum describes the ancient Asante Empire as “extended from parts of today’s Ivory Coast in the West to parts of the modern Republic of Togo in the East and from the Atlantic Coast in the South to an indeterminate area to the North...[and] at the apogee of its power, which was the beginning of the 19th century, the Empire covered more than seventy percent of the land area of modern Ghana, and her influence extended beyond the frontiers of the country” (Brukum, 2005, p. 3). Owusu states that “[b]y 1820, the Asantehene’s [the King of Asante] power and influence extended over an area one and a half times the size of modern Ghana” (Owusu, 2009, pp. 2-3).

17 “J.K. Fynn, “The Rise of Ashanti,” Ghana Notes and Queries, 9 (1966), 27.”

18 According to Sarpong, the “slogan [*Asante Kotoko, Kum apem a apem beba*], which expresses the peacefulness of the Asante people, their dislike for *kwaseabuo* [cheating], which they would avoid by their own life or fight against from others, has been explained to mean just the opposite, that the Asante people are war-like, war mongers and so on” (Sarpong, 2005, pp. 35-36). He adds that “[t]his interpretation has been adopted so the *Asante kotoko* stands for the “porcupine warrior”” and explains that “[t]he porcupine is not a carnivorous animal, it is not a predator, it does not eat meat, it does not run after other animals to destroy them like the lion or the leopard. It is a peaceful animal that

this framework, Yaa Asantewaa would have just been defending the Golden Stool to protect the land and its people. Arguably, she did not call for a war when the British arrested the King and Queen Mother of Asante and other royals including her own grandson, the Chief of Edweso in 1896, neither did she refuse to sign a treaty of submission to the British, which meant on paper the division of Asante, or call for war at that time. Yet, she did so for the Golden Stool¹⁹.

'Female' Military Leader

Furthermore, in the framework of feminist discourses, a number of feminist schools would agree on the need to increase women's participation in decision-making on matters of peace and security; in other words, the encouragement of the concept of 'female leader' in these sectors. These schools recognise the dearth of female participation in this area and point to patriarchy as the main obstacle to women's advancement in these and other sectors. Accordingly, female participation in peace and security became one of the catalysts to the feminist movement for and the eventual United Nations (UN) Security Council's adoption of resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in October 2000. However, there are differences between the feminist schools of thought promoting this participation, particularly when 'military' is added to 'female' and more so, to 'female leader.'

Feminist scholars with a more pacifist leaning such as standpoint theorists appear, to address patriarchy by rejecting its systems, values and priorities, one of which is the military and its components of militarism and militarisation of women and men in different forms. One aspect of this theory, with criticism of appearing essentialist, is based on a "feminine-women-peace nexus" (see Steans, 2013, p. 97). To put it in another way, this can be seen as promoting a difference between femininities and masculinities in terms of pursuing peace versus pursuing war. Thus, these scholars

and related activists are more likely to propose female leadership in pacifist organisations and movements to counter patriarchy than leading any form of violence.

Therefore, they could assess a 'female military leader' as Yaa Asantewaa as selling out to a patriarchal system instead of leading what they would view as a matriarchal one founded on peace. In the same vein, she could be seen by pacifist feminist scholars in general as having been manipulated by patriarchal men to do their bidding by promoting armed conflict to protect the Golden Stool rather than having diplomatic discourses with British colonialists. The challenge with such views on Yaa Asantewaa and her war is, firstly, that hers was a matriarchal war. As stated earlier, the land, people and stools were women's possessions due to Asante system of matriliney²⁰, which also made them women's responsibilities. The current *Beseasehene* (Chief of Besease)²¹ explained that if the Golden Stool had not been a woman's stool, Yaa Asantewaa would never have risen to fight (Beseasehene Nana Acheampong Akwasi III & Elders, 2013).

Secondly, as explained earlier, due to matriliney, women, especially elderly women were critical in decision-making and usually a queen mother's advice would be the final advice the King of Asante or a chief of an Asante state, depending on the level of the queen mother, would implement. Thus, it appears difficult to portray queen mothers in ancient Asantes as easily manipulated rather than as equal political actors along with other male political leaders. Moreover, history records the charge to war led by Yaa Asantewaa and not by any male leader and that several male leaders (overtly)²² opposed her decision.

Still, there is the third issue that could she have pursued a peaceful path in securing the Golden Stool. Adu Boahen demonstrates that there were diplomatic advances during the war to try to resolve the situation, which did not work (Adu Boahen,

lives on insect and leaves...When it faces danger, it buries its head under its body and raises the quills. When it does that, no animal can catch or destroy it...So, the slogan means insuperability, invincibility, unconquerability, not war-mongering...The slogan is telling all non-Asante: "let us live in peace. Do not commit an act of aggression towards us because it will be a futile exercise" (Sarpong, 2005, p. 36).

19 Fuller posits that the war broke out mainly due to "order to pay the war indemnity", while describing the Prempeh I's exile and "the demand for the [G]olden [S]tool [as] contributory causes" (Fuller, 1968, p. 189). Actually, Yaa Asantewaa's declaration of war highlighted her opposition to the payment of the war indemnity and her shock at the chiefs inaction when the King was arrested (see Yaa Asantewaa's speech in (Aidoo, 2005, p. 59; Aidoo, 1977, p. 12; Adu Boahen, 2003, p. 118)). However, it could also be argued that if the war indemnity was the main catalyst of her war, then war should have broken out right after the Sagrenti War that was the pretext for the war indemnity or when the King and others were arrested over the payment of the war indemnity in 1896. Indeed, Rattray writing after Fuller, was instrumental in avoiding another war as he discovered the significance of the Golden Stool to the outbreak of the Yaa Asantewaa War (see (Rattray, 1969, pp. 292-293 & 295)).

20 Osei-Hwedie highlighted that all stools were the possession of women due to the matrilineal system (Osei-Hwedie, 2016).

21 Besease is part of Edweso and Yaa Asantewaa's hometown.

22 Adu Boahen shared that while certain states overtly opposed her, two out of these covertly supported her war effort (see (Adu Boahen, 2003, pp. 166-173)).

2003, pp. 138-141). Furthermore, it is difficult to tell if such overtures could ever have worked in the grander context; first, because at the time in history, the European geopolitical scramble for Africa could be seen as having negatively influenced a similar earlier trial of Asantes to negotiate the payment of the Sagrenti War indemnity with the British and this rather became the pretext for the arrest and eventual exile of the King and Queen Mother of Asante and other Asante royals. Further, the British had tried to find and appropriate the stool before and after the official request for the stool by the British Governor Frederic Hodgson of the Gold Coast at that time, which in turn perpetuated Yaa Asantewaa's declaration of war. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly was the misunderstanding by the British of what the Golden Stool represented to Asantes. It took clarification and research by British army captain and anthropologist, Rattray, who was sent by his government to study Asante (see (Public Records and Archives Administration Department, n.d., p. ARG1/21/11/54/1)) before the British government was able to see the Golden Stool through the eyes of Asantes and agree, to leave it with Asantes in Asante. He inferred that Hodgson, had thought it was a King's throne or symbol of authority; not an Asante deity seen as critical to the Asante nation's survival (see (Rattray, 1969, pp. 292-293)). But this clarification happened around two decades after the Yaa Asantewaa War, when the hiding place of the Golden Stool was accidentally uncovered.

And while others including the UN would agree with the prioritisation of peaceful resolutions to conflict to military ones as guided by *The Charter of the United Nations* (United Nations, 1945), still, the same Charter appears to take into account history and current events, which have shown that military interventions are needed and could at times be the only options to maintain "global peace and security" (United Nations, 1945)²³ and save lives. Consequently, the Charter prescribes roles in that regard for militaries including what was later implemented as observers of ceasefires, peacekeepers and at times, as peace enforcers²⁴, which in practice has been increasingly done with civilian and police counterparts.

With regard to Yaa Asantewaa, specifically, feminist scholars with a more liberal leaning may assess her

differently. This school promotes gender equality in all spheres, occupations and institutions, including the military, to address patriarchy. While feminists recognise the "link between masculinity, citizenship and participation in combat (in defence of the state/political community)", Steans puts forward that this "was taken up by liberal feminists in the 1970s in the US [United States] particularly" (Steans, 2013, p. 54). To put it differently, combat can be viewed by some feminists as key to gaining equal access into the public arena as men, particularly promotion in the world of politics. Even more so, it could be said that they see combat as significant to moving women from what they would view as a position of " 'second-class' " citizenship to that of " 'first-class' " (see (Steans, 2013, p. 54) laying out points of "[l]iberal 'rights feminists' in the National Organization of Women"). However, criticisms of this "campaign" include that it does not contest the theoretical basis, space and system for this discrimination or gender inequality but rather fights to be part of masculine constructs, values and systems (see (Steans, 2013, p. 54)). All these notwithstanding, this school appears to propose that an effective way of countering patriarchy and its discrimination towards women is by 'breaking the glass-ceiling' in all spaces and at all levels, especially in patriarchal institutions such as the military. Consequently, this school would encourage the idea of not only females in the military but also of 'female military leaders'. Yet, Yaa Asantewaa would not easily fall into this description.

To begin with, although she was a 'female military leader', it could be argued that her larger and minor goals were not gender equality in the military. By all accounts, she did not recruit women into her army²⁵, or change women's roles in military campaigns. Additionally, she did not change the construction of masculinity as it pertains to fighting with the military. For instance, statements and exchanges attributed to her include: "If you, the chiefs of Asante, are going to behave like cowards and not fight, you should exchange your loincloths for my undergarments..." (Aidoo, 2005, p. 59; Aidoo, 1977, p. 12) and "... "Asantefoo mmaa, me su mo" ["Asante women, I pity you"]. Someone asked: "What about us, the men?" Yaa Asantewaa replied: "Which men? The men died at the battle front." (Akyeampong & Obeng, 1995, p. 506)²⁶.

23 See Article 24(1); the "maintenance of international peace and security" is made the "primary responsibility" of the UN Security Council.

24 Chapters VI-VIII provided a blueprint for these roles but did not specify the titles to be given to military contingents that implemented these activities.

25 There are some references to the Queen Mother who was also the acting Chief of Offinso supporting Yaa Asantewaa but it does not appear that Yaa Asantewaa recruited her and that there is a consensus on what the support actually was.

26 Akyeampong and Obeng quote Mawere Poku from an interview in "Accra, August 30, 1994."

Furthermore, while ancient Asante had a similar case of men getting political access through the military of which women were ritually banned (see (Aidoo, 1977, pp. 4-5; Akyeampong & Obeng, 1995, p. 492 & 496)), as demonstrated in other parts of this essay, women did participate in the military by being post-menopausal and of the royal class and were active in politics through royal structures. Moreover, a significant area of feminist liberal discourses on the military is women's participation in the 'elite' combat section of the military. Yet, while Yaa Asantewaa's most distinguishable feature in artists' impressions is her gun, as highlighted earlier, her combat role is contested.

Adu Boahen presented three schools of thought with respect to Yaa Asantewaa's combat role: first, she did not engage in combat and stayed at Edweso "through-out the war"; second, she did engage in combat; and third, she did not engage in combat or even fire "a gun" but "visited the various battlefields and stockades to encourage the soldiers" (Adu Boahen, 2003, p. 134). Adu Boahen settled on the third school (Adu Boahen, 2003, p. 135). However, even though he conducted extensive research into Yaa Asantewaa's life, his third view is not the final word in this debate. Nevertheless, unlike what appears to be the concern of feminist liberal scholarship of perception of female military personnel as being diminished if not having earned their stripes in combat, it seems that Asantes memory of Yaa Asantewaa and for those in general who elevate her, the focus is not on her combat role or even on 'female military leader' but rather on 'female leader'.

Yaa Asantewaa's story may fit better within discourses of African feminist schools, which could be seen as part of a larger scholarship of post-colonial feminist discourses. Scholars in this context seem to counter the notion of a universal (claimed as being predominantly Western) framework of 'feminism' and its constructions of masculinity and femininity; while appearing to agree with the notion of there being plurality, multiplicity of and combinations with other identities in such constructions (see for instance (Oyěwùmí, 1997)). Therefore, these could seem to be ethnic and time specific—as in pre-colonial versus colonial and post-colonial (influenced by colonisers)—in their descriptions of these constructions and their relations with each other. For example, Oyěwùmí elaborates on the non-biological constructions of social hierarchy and classifications in pre-colonial

Ọyọ-Yorùbá as evidenced in language, age and social relations (see for instance (Oyěwùmí, 1997, pp. 13-14, 29-36, 39-44 & 112)). She demonstrates the impact of colonialism, the recording of history and art, and universal westernization of social constructs based on biology in changing these constructions to fit Western basis for 'males' and 'females' and in turn, discrimination against women (see for instance (Oyěwùmí, 1997, pp. 78-79, 80-86, 107-146 & 150-164)).

In the same vein, pre-colonial Asante's construction of sex—both 'male' and 'female'—appears to have been based more on the spiritual than the physical. Menstrual blood and all its spiritual connotations were the determining factors of access into militaries rather than patriarchal essentialist constructions of women's cognitive, physical and emotional capabilities. Still, regarding the spiritual, ancient Asante women were said to have had a 'spiritual' role in the background of military campaigns in the form of *mmomomme*. Now, there are contentions on what *mmomomme* actually was. In general, it is said to have included singing both to praise soldiers and shame men avoiding war, dancing and play-acting of what soldiers were to do to the opposing side. However, one view is that it was the form of supernatural warfare (see for instance (Akyeampong & Obeng, 1995, p. 492)), while another 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...into joining the war" (Arhin, 2000, p. 109).

And when it came to the physical, even though it appears to have been a back-runner to the spiritual, constructions of and relations between individuals were also based on age, social standing and money. Basically, an elderly, royal wealthy 'female' had a better chance of becoming a 'leader' in matters of peace and security and if needed, entering battlefields with or as part of or leading the military than a young poor male commoner.

Nevertheless, if those women and women such as Yaa Asantewaa were to tell their own stories, they may not focus on sex or gender power relations or even on their individual selves. They may look at what they could have perceived to be the larger picture; their community. They may, as Achebe and Teboh, have based their identities on their ethnicity first before their sex (Achebe & Teboh, 2007, p. 63 & 65)²⁷. While each woman

27 They both add other identities next and highlight that there are differences between the male and female lives within their respective

could construct herself differently, those women's prioritisation of identity may be what led them to appear as "random incidents from the past when women, usually as a result of military emergency, have assumed a combat role and have performed effectively" (DeGroot, 2001, p. 23). This identity in ancient Asante wrapped in ethnicity and nationhood would seem to be founded on their roles as 'mothers' or 'matriarchs' of their families and clans; the ones with the menstrual blood who were able to give birth due to this blood.

In this, motherhood is not just the consoler but also the strong 'protector' of children, family, clans and by extension, people, their possessions and their future²⁸. So, constructions of certain 'female military leaders' in antiquity fighting national, ethnic or racial battles may have less to do with wearing battle gear and riding horses, or running through battlefields shooting or decapitating men or holding guns to show their authority or to promote gender equality and more to do with their constructions of femininity as tied to the preservation and protection of their communities; which may have at times called them to arms.

Conclusion

So, how does one tell the story of a 'female military leader'? Would it be to focus on the word 'leader' and whether or not being female affects leadership abilities or if there is only one fixed type of leadership style that is acceptable or who is the ultimate judge of what a 'leader' can be or should be? Yaa Asantewaa was born into the royal class and into a political system that reserved a space for royal women. But there were many women in royal families; thus it was a space for royal women with the knowledge, skills and political savviness to take on that very high role as an advisor on kingdom matters and as a 'leader'—one with a vision to which others would submit and follow.

Or could the story of a female military leader focus on her 'military leader'-ship? Would it be to focus on how strange or exceptional her story is or whether her story would be better placed within the context of the supernatural; something which cannot be scientifically explained? In ancient Asante, there have been stories of women, royal women mainly queen mothers, who have played one role or another in war from decision-making level to its execution to its peace negotiations. Yaa

Asantewaa was not the only one. Nevertheless, there are few stories on women who played such roles; particularly of non-royal women. It may be that there were no others or that their stories have been forgotten or have never been disseminated through oral and written histories. They may be locked-up within the archives of individual families with their memories passed down as heirlooms. However, the belief system in the supernatural did play a role on these women engaging in combat but the exceptions of women on battlefields hinted at the clarity on what the belief system actually was. When menstrual blood is present in females, it is not present at all times. Thus, although the reverence or fear of that blood may not be present in all faiths, the exceptions could portray that it was not necessarily a blanket ban on women in combat but on that blood. Therefore, women such as Yaa Asantewaa could become military leaders by being political leaders, as well as being assessed individually even within a criterion that could *prima facie* be regarded by certain cultures and faiths as discriminatory.

Or should the story of a female military leader focus on 'female'; the individuality of women and the acknowledgement of different constructions of femininity? Yaa Asantewaa's was demonstrably linked within her community and her roles as both 'queen' and 'mother' and Rattray demonstrated and put forward that "the Queen Mother is to an Ashanti the personification of motherhood" (Rattray, 1969, p. 85). The understanding and acceptance of her responsibilities as Queen Mother, a woman and a mother in her family, clan and nation, which she as other queen mothers and elderly women would have promoted and preserved, meant through the lens of her culture and at that time of history, that she had to do all in her power to protect the Golden Stool from capture, even if it meant declaring war.

So, if one tells the story of a 'female military leader' within the context of the lengths a mother would take to save her family, her clan, her unborn generations, their property, inheritance, culture, history and identity, even if all these may be believed to be wrapped-up within a stool; possibly the phrase 'female military leader' may appear less strange to those who believed it was so before.

ethnicities.

²⁸ Obeng points out that "Yaa Asantewaa's leadership called attention to the importance of her understanding of how women in Asante matrilineal society through their blood...reproduce society" (Obeng, 2000, p. 146).

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Same Story, Different Constructions: Exploring the (Re)Telling of Yaa Asantewaa's Story as a Female Military Leader

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