The Routledge Companion to Black Women’s Cultural Histories

Janell Hobson

Reframing Yaa Asantewaa through the shifting paradigms of African historiography

Publication details
Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch
Published online on: 17 Mar 2021

How to cite: Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch. 17 Mar 2021, Reframing Yaa Asantewaa through the shifting paradigms of African historiography from: The Routledge Companion to Black Women’s Cultural Histories Routledge
Accessed on: 13 Oct 2023

Please scroll down for document

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
This chapter examines how particular lines of inquiry in the literature on African women’s history have informed historical analysis of Yaa Asantewaa’s remarkable role in the last war against the British at the end of the nineteenth century. The West African heroine is renowned in Ghanaian history and African history more broadly as the woman who led the final Asante war against British colonial rule and has been widely commemorated as such. I trace the nodes of inquiry that have informed existing scholarship on Ghana’s past as it relates to the precolonial Asante kingdom, gendered and sexuality dynamics within it, nationalist impulses, and the role of a particular class of women, that of the ohemaa or queen mother, in the history of the kingdom. I offer some commentary on the shifts or rather, progression in the paradigms by which Yaa Asantewaa’s life history has been understood in the past and more contemporary era. The chapter demonstrates that a broad historical arc has been cast for the (re)positioning of Asantewaa in Asante history, the Ghanaian nation, and the larger African Diaspora. In recent years, alternative geographies and mobility have been mapped onto Asantewaa’s life story in powerful and unexpected ways that foster the reframing of the analytic categories used to foreground the diverse histories of African women and for this case, those who went to war.

Early articulations of the state of historical research on women across sub-Saharan Africa demarcated the ways in which historical research on African women shifted from an emphasis on queens and prostitutes, privileged women and heroines, to victims and the exploited. This shift was the result of efforts that brought attention to larger questions around class formation, the development of an urban proletariat, and the existence and experiences of enslaved and other marginalized actors across society. Indeed, African women’s history has been concerned about how to balance a gendered approach with class, oppression with agency, and victimization with resistance beyond simplistic binaries. Utilizing gender as a category of analysis and gendered meanings to overcome a singular emphasis on gender roles has been an important facet of the scholarship on women’s history.

The emphasis on “queens” or more broadly, on autonomous privileged women was the result of the predominance of political history during the early period of African historiography. The participation of elite African women in nationalist movements underscored the role of individual West African heroines. For instance, scholars centralized the role of Asante queen mothers in the nineteenth century, since they had been marginal in the eyes of British colonial officials and
male historians, while others focused on women political leaders in other areas of the region. The result was a body of writing about African heroines in West Africa that aimed to illustrate women’s social and economic autonomy in the domestic sphere and the complementary political and economic roles across society.

Considerations of gender and state building in Asante historiography

Iris Berger has underscored the scholarly trajectory of African women’s history, noting that it has been shaped by three overarching themes: an interest in women as “forgotten heroines” in the 1970s, a focus on women as “underclass actors” in the 1980s and early 1990s, and “gendered subjects” in the late 1990s into the new millennium. Kate Skinner’s recent and excellent overview has examined the ways in which the application and understanding of the categories “women” and gender” in the historiography on African women have informed Ghana-specific literature as it relates to wider trends in the field of African studies, gender history, and women’s history. Skinner demonstrates the ways in which scholars have utilized specific categories of women and individual examples of political actors to examine the gendered nature of political power. The centrality of Asante historiography to broader studies of Ghana continues to permeate diverse areas of inquiry. Considerations of the gendering of Ghana’s precolonial African history underscore the pre-occupation with state building as manifested in the Asante kingdom and its imperial expansion.

My analysis here is not intended to be a full examination of the vast Asante historiography. Rather, I briefly highlight a few important threads as they relate to Asantewaa’s efforts explored later in this chapter. An evolving thread of Asante-centric historiography focused on the theme of matrilineage, among others. An examination of how queen mothers achieved their positions, and the ways in which they exercised their authority and influenced important events, demonstrated the evolution of the Asante state and dynamics of political power. The bureaucratic dynamics and offices that Ivor Wilks had identified in his seminal book in 1975 had largely focused on men. Issues of sexuality later emerged as a point of entry into examining how premenopausal women’s disqualification functioned in the Asante kingdom. Agnes Aidoo demonstrated that premenopausal women were prevented from engaging in battle and thus were unable to pursue one of the important avenues for individuals to demonstrate their abilities, accumulate wealth, and elevate their status or proximity to political power. While the office of the ohemaa was noteworthy, it did not extend to women beyond the royal lineages, indicating the significance of class and the centrality of elite women. Moreover, queen mothers evidently did not work to advance the interests of women across society or represent them in political matters. They were concerned with lineage affairs, accruing substantial influence through the networks of alliances that could be developed during political contestations.

From the margins to the center: Yaa Asantewaa and the nationalist approach

State and society, patriarchal power and matrilineal kinship, as well as history and memory were central in previous scholarship on the Asante kingdom. Those themes were revisited in the remarkable biography of Asantewaa as an avenue to trace the nature and scope of her agency and resistance to colonization at the turn of the millennium. Much of the literature on Asantewaa is concerned with her role in the last war against British imperial forces in 1900 to 1901. Yet, a lack of precision about her actions in that war has permeated existing scholarship, explored...
later in this chapter. In McCaskie’s summary of the points of inquiry for historians, he notes that scholars have questioned whether she planned, directed, or led the uprising or whether she functioned as a symbol of resistance. They have sought to answer whether she engaged in live battles or oversaw operations from Edweso, the seat of her authority, and the nature of her movements at the end of the war, when it became clear that British troops had won. Moreover, the conditions of her surrender, either voluntary or as the result of betrayal, have been of interest to historians. The circumstances around whether British forces exiled Asantewaa to the Seychelles in 1921 because she was a central player in their last efforts to consolidate rule or because she was deemed to be a figurehead have also captivated historians.16

Even in colonial Asante, it seemed that the most powerful authority holder attempted to obscure Asantewaa’s role in the war for political reasons. The Asantehene, Osei Agyeman Prempeh II, appointed a committee that labored during the late 1930s and 1940s to produce an authorized history of Asante dedicated to showing the occupant of the Golden Stool to be “king over all.” This unpublished History of Ashanti, with oral traditions that came from all corners of the former kingdom, formed the core of the text, but their inclusion and interpretation were overseen by the Asantehene. It represented a history from the perspective of the Kumasi dynasty. The section on the war offers scanty treatment of Yaa Asantewaa. Furthermore, the text fails to mention her holding any leadership role, and she receives less attention than several other actors in the resistance.17 McCaskie posits that considerations of gender and the notion that Asante troops were led by a woman may have played some part in Prempeh II’s erasure of Yaa Asantewaa. Notwithstanding, her absence from such a politically fashioned text suggests that the suppression of her role was a calculated one, born of her brother’s demands and contesting Kumasi royal power over the Edweso State in the 1880s.18

Asantewaa’s actions were informed by the widening relationship with the British and their influence on the affairs of the Asante state during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Between 1874 and 1896, the British presence in the Gold Coast was tentative, in the sense that colonial officials could not decide the extent of territory they wanted to secure. However, relations between the British and Asante took a turn for the worse in 1893 after the Asantehene, Nana Prempeh 1, rejected the offer to Asante by Frederick Hodgson, colonial secretary and acting governor to the Gold Coast Colony, to become a British protectorate. Although the British did not attack Asante that year, Prempeh’s rejection of Britain’s offer set the stage for the events in January 1896 that led to the arrest of the Asante officials and their subsequent deportation and the declaration of Asante as a British protectorate. This paved the way for the dissolution of the Asante union between Kumasi and constituent states.19 Asantewaa was present at the meeting in March 1900 where Sir Hodgson, now governor of the Gold Coast, laid out the British policies to a gathering of Asante rulers, who were astonished at the demands but offered no apparent resistance. Asantewaa was reported to have taunted Asante rulers, questioning what she viewed to be their passive response.20 In any case, a war commenced, with British forces defeating Asante, abolishing the monarchy and disbanding the central government, and annexing it as a British colony on September 26, 1901.

A special issue of Ghana Studies was organized by Emmanuel Akyeampong in 2000 to commemorate the state of the field on Yaa Asantewaa and Asante history on the centenary of the Yaa Asantewaa War of 1900. The aim of the special issue was to inspire new modes of inquiry in the history of the period, the war, and Asantewaa’s life.21 The focus on Asante nationalism and statehood, and the distinctive nature of the office of queen mother as an instance of the agency of specific women in resisting colonization, were central in the writings of the various authors. The nationalist dimensions of Asante history are deeply intertwined in the existing historiography, such that it appears impossible to separate Asante nationhood from any analysis.
of Asantewaa’s actions and leadership in the anti-colonial war of 1900–01. Sometimes called the Anglo-Asante War or the Anglo-Kumase war against the impending British colonial onslaught in the Asante region, the events were interpreted in various instances as a “nationalist movement,” a “rebellion,” and “a resistance.” This framework has contributed to the overarching view that Asantewaa committed herself to the restoration of the Asante monarchy and a nationalist cause with the desire for the freedom of the nation from British control after she became sole ruler of Edweso in 1896.

However, in one of the more recent renditions of the debates about Asantewaa’s efforts as evidence of an Asante nationalist cause, T.C. McCaskie offers caution about the widespread interpretation of Asantewaa’s actions in the literature. He argues that far from a harmonious unity within Asante political and national history, the actions of Yaa Asantewaa between 1894 and 1900 advanced the interests of the Edweso State, which she led, more than those of the Golden Stool that represented Kumasi and Asante monarchical power. McCaskie contends that the events of 1900–01 were not an Asante national war against the British. Although some Asante battled the British, others supported them, and many others stayed neutral. Asantewaa in turn chose to fight and hoped to gain in return concessions that would benefit Edweso. Yet, it is clear that Yaa Asantewaa’s stool and the Golden Stool were the ones the British troops sought to acquire in their efforts to overcome Asante. This fact places Asantewaa at the center of Asante politics.

There is evidence that Asantewaa’s military involvement was partly inspired by patriotism in the sense that she played a prominent role against British colonial advances for the return of Asantehene Nana Agyeman Prempeh 1. Yet, she did not seek a reinstatement of the Asante past in a nationalist sense but rather, “a restoration of the status quo ante of the later 1880s” that would benefit the Edweso State for instrumental reasons. Asantewaa was interested in upholding and ratifying a past religio-political pact between the Asante king, Prempeh 1, and her brother, the Edweso paramount chief, Kwasi Afrane 1, on the one hand, and Afrane’s cousin, Ofinsohene Apea Sea, on the other.

She did so because British overrule dissolved the arrangement that a repatriated and independent Asantehene would still be held to the terms of the oaths he had sworn and the promises he had made to Edweso royals. In other words, returning to the dynamics just before 1896 would empower Edweso to recover the status and power that had recently allayed its lengthy history of humiliation and loss at the hands of Kumasi royal power. Moreover, by going to war, Asantewaa could honor the death of her influential brother, reunite with her exiled grandson, and live out her old age in a manner that was likely only a few years before the events of 1896. For McCaskie, these reasons constituted her decision to go to war. It was a high price to pay, for Asantewaa was sent into exile and died, roughly at the age of 90, on the remote Indian Ocean archipelago of Seychelles in 1921.

Establishing precedent or building on traditions of diplomacy

Beyond the question of nationalism and Yaa Asantewaa’s political calculations, scholars have focused on whether Asantewaa’s role in the war set a precedent or built on established practices of her contemporaries and previous queen mothers. Asantewaa emerged as a figure who followed in the footsteps of Asante women in the nineteenth century, such as Akyaawa Yikwan and Prempeh’s mother, Yaa Akyaa, both of whom assisted in shaping Asante politics and foreign relations, especially with the British. For instance, in January 1896, Yaa Asantewaa was in charge of Edweso and engaged in talks and negotiations with the British over mines of interest to Edweso and British speculators. She was part of a long tradition of Asante men and women who distinguished themselves at critical moments in the history of the kingdom. Traditions of
opposition to the British were passed on to Yaa Asantewaa of the subordinate state of Edweso. It would seem that the political role of Asante queen mothers was particularly heightened in times of crisis when male leadership was either unavailable or ineffectual. Moreover, Asantewaa followed precedents that connected her to earlier efforts of other fighting queen mothers who had all reached menopause.

Aidoo’s survey of some nineteenth-century queen mothers is one of very dynamic women who skillfully blended a sense of history, politics, and responsibility towards the preservation of their communities and societies. Their careers reveal the modalities of their power in local, regional, and national affairs. The careers of Afua Kobi, Yaa Akyaa, and Yaa Asantewaa reveal certain aspects of the queen mother’s role in government and politics. The ohemaa was most effective when she was free from ritual constraints, when she commanded independent resources, and when there was no available or effective male leadership. The structural definition of her position as a hereditary co-ruler from a royal lineage limited any “representative” features in her position. Her participation in government politics therefore cannot be regarded as a general index to female political activity. Her political goals were defined and generalized from concrete lineage and family interests. Her political fields were the arenas of lineage and state, and she drew her support not from “female power” but from all effective sections of society.

Leading a war and choosing a woman to lead

An important line of inquiry has focused on the military role that Asantewaa played in the 1900–01 war and why Asantewaa’s male contemporaries would have chosen a woman to lead it. Kwame Arhin postulates that rivalries between male chiefly authorities or the British military presence in Kumasi, which prevented the city from serving as the center of the uprising, may have encouraged chiefs to select a female war leader. In Arhin’s view, Asantewaa “must have had certain outstanding qualities and qualifications for a war leader.” Asantewaa was more than a symbolic figure; she surpassed the conventional military and political roles of Asante women. She achieved the position of the first female war leader, sahene, in planning and leading the War of 1900. Both British colonial and oral and documentary sources confirm that Yaa Asantewaa initiated efforts and carried out the necessary tasks for the rebellion; she was the commander-in-chief and leader.

Yet this interpretation does not appear to take into account the evidence of a tradition in which Asante queen mothers took on crucial political and diplomatic positions in state affairs. There was an established precedent of Akan queen mothers occupying male chieftaincy stools and engaging in war and diplomacy. It seems that what set Asantewaa apart from her predecessors was the military role she played in war. However, perhaps Asantewaa’s position was not exceptional in the sense that she was working within the confines of Asante ritual constraints that prevented premenopausal women from going to war, even though that caveat did not apply to her. As a postmenopausal ruler, Yaa Asantewaa was empowered to consult with powerful war deities, prepared medicines for Asante warriors, constructed stockades, and engaged in other war rituals designed specifically for women and men. Asantewaa challenged men and women as they prepared for war with rhetoric about gender differences. She was articulate and provocative as she employed “gender-charged” speeches to incite Asante men and chiefly authorities into action.

Contemporary dynamics in the mapping of Asantewaa at home and abroad

Interpretations of Yaa Asantewaa’s position shifted over the course of the twentieth century from political prisoner, dangerous subversive, and anti-colonial leader to having schools named in her
Reframing Yaa Asantewaa

In recent years, Asantewaa has emerged in other manifestations and been appropriated as a historical figure to meet the needs of various constituencies. As noted earlier, 2000–1 marked the centenary of the Yaa Asantewaa War (1900–1), and the Asantehene authorized the establishment of a centenary committee to plan the activities. The ways in which the centenary of Asantewaa’s efforts was understood to be a preservation of Asante independence was a watershed moment in demarcating Yaa Asantewaa’s legacy. The celebrations afforded new opportunities for Asantewaa to be recognized, examined, and placed in the context of Asante history and the country as a whole. The centenary cast Asantewaa as a patriotic Asante heroine who led a national war of resistance.

Commentators who acknowledged the contemporary fascination with her public persona with limited knowledge of her personal life acknowledged that for most of the previous century, scant attention had been paid to her. She represented many things to various communities at home and abroad. Asantewaa was understood to be “an anti-colonial guerilla fighter, role model for black women globally, a conservative royalist who attempted to restore an outmoded imperial system, an African feminist, an antagonist to global capitalist expansion, a Ghanaian heroine, an Asante nationalist par excellence.” Lynda Day has traced how Asantewaa’s legacy crossed many boundaries by the centenary year and underscores the ways in which the commemoration served as a medium for advancing several agendas that resulted in sites of contested historical discourse. The social construction of historical memory was central to the planning of the commemorative activities in the Asante region. The celebrations utilized historical recreation as a means of reclaiming history’s potential for empowering contemporary communities on a local and global stage.

Moreover, the centenary and congress at one of the premier universities in the country, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, involved the convening of an international conference to commemorate and honor Yaa Asantewaa in August 2000. McCaskie has documented the ways in which the politics of honoring Asantewaa underscored how political parties and government officials attempted to gain political advantage and international praise by capturing Yaa Asantewaa from Asante and relocating her in the wider Ghanaian, African, and Diasporic consciousness as a transnational, anti-colonial, Black female role model and icon. Asantewaa was recast as an internationally known historical figure, for Asante representations of her have increasingly been shaped by international observations and expectations. Moreover, proclaiming pride in Asante history and culture to a global audience has translated into generating revenue from tourists or investors who identify themselves in one way or another with Asantewaa. Asantewaa has been transformed into a cultural relic, an African heroine who can be (and is) (re)presented on the global Internet in many formations. Others have recently demonstrated the ways in which postcolonial Ghana has immortalized and commemorated Asantewaa’s actions through an analysis of museums, monuments, and the memory of Asantewaa. Symbols of nationhood, including money, postage stamps, museum exhibits, monuments, and festivals have been the tools that a range of Ghanaians have utilized to symbolically resurrect Asantewaa in various formulations.

Conclusion

These developments point to the promise of mapping new geographies onto the lives of historical figures such as Asantewaa, which engenders fruitful ways of examining the past in the present. The continued salience and relevance of Yaa Asantewaa’s life history for contemporary audiences in continental Africa and its multiple diasporas indicate the multiple directions scholarly analysis can take in studying the West African heroine. Comparative approaches to the questions that have
animated historians and contemporary observers would enrich the existing literature and perhaps offer a definitive study of the sources that have enabled scholars to reconstruct Yaa Asantewaa’s biography. In turn, establishing Asantewaa’s place in the annals of African and global histories of nineteenth-century women at peace and at war would highlight how case studies of African women inform methodology questions of interest to a wide range of historians.

Notes

14 Aidoo, “Asante Queen Mothers,” 2–5.
Reframing Yaa Asantewaa


22 Boahen, Yaa Asantewaa, 4.


29 Obeng, “Yaa Asantewaa’s War,” 151.


32 Aidoo, “Asante Queen Mothers,” 12.


34 Arhin, “The Role of Nana Yaa,” 110.


37 Boahen, “Yaa Asantewaa,” 114.


Bibliography


