



Resisting Colonialism Through a Ghanaian Lens

We often think of resistance to colonialism in terms of armies and battles... and truthfully, there was some of that, especially when a colony was conquered and when big rebellions emerged. But resistance also took many other forms. Ultimately, boycotts, strikes, marches, and diplomacy did a lot of the work that ended formal empires. In this video, we look at some episodes of resistance from Ghana—the British Gold Coast Colony—under the leadership of Yaa Asantewaa and later Kwame Nkrumah.

00:01

Trevor Getz, PhD, San Francisco State University

Animated map of the African continent shows the location of Ghana; we see the continent transform from a continent of independent states to an almost entirely colonized continent

My name is Trevor Getz and I'm a professor of African history at San Francisco State University. And I'm here in Ghana, in West Africa, a place that, like most of the rest of the continent, was made up of independent states and small, self-ruling communities until the 1870s. And then, in that decade, Europeans began to carve out colonies and create vast empires across the continent. By 1916, almost all of the continent had been conquered other than Ethiopia and tiny Liberia. But from the very beginning, Africans resisted, and by the 1960s, colonialism was in retreat across the continent. This was nowhere more true than in Ghana, where independence was won in 1957—the first sub-Saharan African state to become independent.

00:58

How did this happen? Well, the great Ghanaian historian Adu Boahen says, "Independence was not given on a silver platter, but won by blood." In other words, African resistance led to African independence. Adu Boahen has now passed away, but I'm here to interview other Ghanaian historians to find out what the secrets are and the ways in which everyday people and great leaders managed to resist colonial rule and create independence in Ghana.

01:32

Part 1: Yaa Asantewaa and the war for the Golden Stool

GETZ: I'm here in Kumasi, the capital of the Asante Region, with Tony Yeboah, one of the young historians I respect most in Ghana and currently a doctoral student at Yale University. Hi, Tony, thanks for spending time with me today.

- Oh, hi, Trev, thanks for having me. - Tony, I've turned to you because I know you're an expert on this region, on Asante, and on the history of Ghana, and I want to know a little bit more about how Ghanaians resisted colonialism.

02:00

Photo of King Prempeh II of Asante being exiled by the British, 1896

Text: "Having exiled the King of Asante, Britain sought to conquer this state, which covered much of modern-day Ghana"

-Animation of and artwork depicting the Golden Stool-

"The Golden Stool is the symbol of Asante independence. The first High Priest caused it to descend from above for the first Asante King, Asantehene Osei Tutu."

TONY YEBOAH: Well, in the first place, Ghanaians often resisted being conquered through military force. - Was the war that Yaa Asantewaa led, was that a good example? - Absolutely. By 1900, the British had seized control of Asante and exiled their king, of Asante, but it wasn't entirely conquered. So the British governor demanded the Asante people give up the Golden Stool, which is the symbol and the essence of the Asante state.

02:54

*Justice Brobbey, Curator,
Manhyia Palace Museum,
sits with Trevor Getz in
conversation*

JUSTICE BROBBEY: - Here's what happened was, that as the Golden Stool is the symbolic essence of Asante—the blood, the soul, the spirit of Asante—once the Golden Stool is missing, that would be the end of the kingdom. So the British governor, Sir Frederick Hodgson, came in to demand for the Golden Stool. Seeing that the king was not around, the queen was not around, the strong men were not around, he thought he could take as an advantage to seize the Golden Stool.

- But somebody stopped him. - Somebody stopped him. - Who was it? - Nana Yaa Asantewaa. - Okay, so who is Yaa Asantewaa?

BROBBEY: Nana Yaa Asantewaa was a queen at just about 15 kilometers from here. The chief at Ejisu had also been taken to Seychelles, so she was acting as a chief. And because there was no man to fight the British, this woman, Nana Yaa Asantewaa, at age 65, stood up and said, "I am ready to fight to defend the dignity of Asante."

03:48

*"If you, the men of
Ashanti, will not go
forward, then we will.
We, the women, will. I
shall call upon my fellow
women. We will fight
the white men. We will
fight till the last of us
falls in the battlefields."
-Words attributed to Yaa
Asantewaa*

GETZ: - So a 65-year-old woman... - Yes. - Went out and she gathered together the Asante troops. - You're right, you're right. - Was she successful?

BROBBEY:- Yes, she was. She was, in the sense that for nine month, the Asante fought the British. They were unable to take away the Golden Stool. So what happened was that when Asante saw that they were losing the war—and of course, they would lose the, the Golden Stool—they quickly made a fake Golden Stool and gave to the British.

GETZ: - So that, that's an incredible kind of resistance, as well. - Yes, yes—yes. - To make, to make a fake stool and give it to the British. - Yes, yes.

*Text: "The war lasts until
September 1900, when
the Asante forces were
defeated and the country
came over British colonial
rule. The British never
find the Golden Stool, but
by 1902 they occupy all of
Ghana."*

04:41

*Part 2: Resisting Indirect
Rule*

GETZ: - Were there other ways in which Ghanaians resisted British colonial rule?

YEBOAH: When formal colonialism was established, Ghanaians were able to identify several strategies, and these included boycott of British goods, and organizing protests, and sabotaging the British colonial system.

GETZ: So, I've heard from other scholars that a lot of anti-colonial resistance was actually directed at the chiefs. Why was that?

YEBOAH: All right, so, the British ruled through a system, and this system is

Photo of a Ghanaian chief shaking hands with a British colonist

05:38

Part 3: The March to Independence

Text: "After the Second World War, anti-colonial movements emerge around the world, including Ghana

UGCC: United Gold Coast Convention

06:43

Dr. Robert Addo-Fening, PhD, University of Ghana

Animation of Ghanaians marching to the castle in protest

known as the indirect rule. And during the colonial system, the British carried out the orders through the indigenous chiefs, the local chiefs. And so, they expected the chiefs to carry out these orders. And so, whenever the people were frustrated with the system, they registered it towards their chief or to their chiefs, and in some cases, they were able to kick out some of their chiefs.

GETZ: After the Second World War, there was a major push for independence in Ghana. Can you tell us what happened?

YEBOAH: Sure. So, after the Second World War, Ghana had the first movement against British colonialism, and this was led by a group of professionals—mainly lawyers and merchants. And they formed a political party called UGCC, which was the first political party in sub-Saharan Africa. And they formed this party to kick out British colonialism.

GETZ: And what did the UGCC do in the 1940s?

YEBOAH: Beginning in 1947, the UGCC organized a boycott of British goods, and this was followed up by a march by Ghanaian World War II veterans, who marched to register their displeasure about the lack of job and complain about the pension from World War II.

ROBERT ADDO-FENING: During the war, many of them served in Burma. So in their absence, the colonial government paid allowances to their wives. Of course, the wives used these moneys looking after their kids and so on. So when they came back—and they had assured them that when they came back, they would be given jobs. So when the, the war was over, they came back, they had no money, because they have all been used up by their families, and there were no jobs.

So they decided to march to the castle to present a petition to the governor. Of course, they didn't ask for permit. They didn't have the permission. So they managed to get close to the castle, where the stadium is, and there, they were intercepted by a police officer, who said, "Where are you going?" They said, "We're going to the castle to deliver a petition." And he said, "No, you can't." And they say, "Yeah, we can—we are not armed." So he said—Imray was his name, Superintendent Imray—he said, "At the count of three, if you don't recede, I'm going to order my men to shoot." So they said, "Well, we're not going back because we don't have any ill intentions." So one, two, three, he asked an African policeman to fire. He refused, so he grabbed the rifle himself, fired, and shot three people. And that, I've never seen mayhem in the history of this country like that day.

GETZ: And you were here?

ADDO-FENING: Yes, I was. I was in Accra for a while, but that, that was '48.

GETZ: And it's at this point that Kwame Nkrumah becomes really important. How did Kwame Nkrumah come onto the scene?

YEBOAH: Kwame Nkrumah was a young man studying in the United States. And he was invited in 1947 by the leaders of the UGCC. And when Kwame Nkrumah came in 1947, he had a clash of ideas with leaders of the UGCC, so eventually,

08:18

Text: "The leaders of the UGCC hired American-educated Kwame Nkrumah as the party's main

organizer” (Photo of Kwame Nkrumah)

08:54

he broke away and formed his party.

GETZ: What was that party called?

YEBOAH: The CPP, which is the Convention People’s Party.

ADDO-FENING: The positive action was declared by Nkrumah. As I said, I was in Accra, January 1950, and women did not go to the markets, shops were not open—everything came to a standstill. And that was a positive action. That was what Nkrumah meant by positive action. So, and he told that positive action was actually a new name for the Gandhian principle of nonviolence, noncooperation. He said we’re going to extend positive action on the lines of Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence, noncooperation. I was a secondary school student, about 14 year old. So that week, all shops were closed, and some people working on conservancy and the same. Accra came, the day Accra stood still. So he was arrested by the British, you know, and he was sentenced to one year.

09:50

Text: “In 1951, with Nkrumah still in prison, the British hold an election in the colony, hoping to elect candidates friendly to their continued rule. Nkrumah ran for a seat in the government, and won. The British were forced to release him.”

GETZ: He ran for office.

ADDO-FENING: From prison! Whilst he was in prison, he stood for Accra Central. And he won with the largest majority in Accra history. Now the British faced a dilemma. This man is in prison, he’s the leader of a party that has won about 72 out of the 104 seats. If you don’t release him, you risk the failure of the constitution, so they released him. And on that day, I was there, at the James Fort Prison. I saw everything that went on. And after he came out of prison, we all followed the car to Western Arena, where he addressed the people.

10:42

Photo of a statue of Nkrumah that rests over a fountain

GETZ: Eventually, it’s Kwame Nkrumah and his Convention People’s Party that leads Ghana to independence. Why? What did Nkrumah get right?

YEBOAH: So, Kwame Nkrumah recognized that he needed the support of the grassroots, and here we’re looking at farmers and other workers. And he was able to reach out to them, irrespective of their ethnicity and religion. And also, his message of self-government now was very popular among the people. And I think this made the British recognize that their rule was actually coming to an end.

11:16

Text: “in 1957, Ghana is the first sub-Saharan African country to win its independence. Others follow, and by 1975 almost all of Africa is independent, for the first time since the 19th century”

GETZ: Resistance is one of the most difficult things for historians to see in the historical record. The individuals who defied colonialism by doing things like lying to colonial administrators or not paying their taxes or just not showing up for work, they don’t leave a lot of evidence behind, but we know it happened. Where we do get to see a lot of evidence of resistance is when massive groups of people came together to defy the colonial state. In Ghana, this happened right at the beginning, when leaders like the Queen Mother, Yaa Asantewaa, put together armies of men to resist colonial invasions.

And that kind of resistance happened again at the end, when men like Kwame Nkrumah put together mass defiance campaigns. They organized boycotts, they organized marches, and they forced the British colonial administration to understand that Ghana was going to become independent.

I wonder if this is the pattern we see in other parts of the world that become independent around the same time.