

# Yaa Asantewaa, Queen Mother of Ejisu

## *Extended Biography*

You may wish to share this biography with students, or just to read it for your own information.

Asante was the most powerful empire in its region. It was also a Confederation, or a country made up of several allied states bound together in one unit. Early in its history, a number of small states had been brought together by its founding King, Osei Tutu I, to overthrow a state that was ruling them all. After winning a great victory at the battle of Feyiase in 1701, Osei Tutu brought these states together in an alliance centered upon his own territory, Kumasi. Kumasi now became the capital, and the other allies became neighboring provinces within the Confederation. Together, they managed to conquer the states around them and to create an enormous empire.

But at the core of the empire remained that Confederation. Of course, there were tensions within the alliance of states that made up the Confederation. The Asante Kings, in Kumasi, often tried to centralize power, to become more powerful and to make Kumasi the center of all power. On the other hand, the rulers of the other states tried to keep power decentralized, so that each of them was more like an equal partner.

One of the states in the Confederation was called Ejisu. The rulers of Ejisu lost a lot of power, and land, to the rulers in Kumasi throughout the 1840s-1870s. But in 1883, their soldiers helped to put a new King of Asante on the 'stool', or throne, of the kingdom. Because of this, they got much of their power and land back. Unfortunately, the ruler of Ejisu, Kwasi Afrane, died not long after. Fortunately for Ejisu, his successor Kofi Tene was assisted by his great-aunt, Yaa Asantewaa.

Yaa Asantewaa was technically the *Ohemaa*, or Queen Mother, of Ejisu. In a matrilineal society, where descent was calculated mainly from the mother, the *Ohemaa* was a powerful force. Her *mogya*, or life force, bestowed upon her children their citizenship, rights of succession, and rights to inherit property. Theoretically, the *Ohemaa* was a co-ruler with the king, although in practice she was more of an advisor, but one with the right and responsibility of rebuking the king as well as advising him. In Asante, the *Ohemaa* also nominated new candidates to be king when the position was open. She had her own court and was also part of the governing council of a state. But the *Ohemaa* did not normally serve in the army, and especially not before menopause.

Born in the 1830s, Yaa Asantewaa had married and had one daughter. She had probably advised her brother when he had plotted to get his land back by supporting the successful claimant to become King of Asante. In fact, she was probably very interested in making sure that Ejisu became richer and more powerful within the Asante Confederation. She advised her grand-nephew just as she had advised her brother.

In 1895-1896, however, the British invaded Asante, and disaster struck. In fact, Britain and Asante had fought for years, each one trying to be the power that controlled this region of West Africa. By 1895, the Asante Kings were investigating the possibility of allying themselves with Britain's rivals – France or Germany. Moreover, the British were very interested in Asante's wealth in gold, cocoa, palm oil, and rubber. Despite the Asante King's attempts to negotiate, the British sent a military force to Kumasi. The King did not resist, and the British arrested him. They then sent him into exile in the Seychelles Islands, along with many important men and women, including Kofi Tene, the ruler of Ejisu.

Now, Yaa Asantewaa was left in control of Ejisu. She acted as ruler for four years, while the British slowly grabbed more and more authority in Ejisu and the other states of the Asante Confederation. Eventually, in 1900, the British Governor, Sir Frederick Hodgson, decided to end Asante independence entirely. He demanded that they turn over



the symbol of Asante Kingship – the Golden Stool, or royal throne. He gathered together the Asante rulers to make this demand, and they were stunned. Indeed, some of the men looked ready to agree. But then Yaa Asantewaa stood up and taunted them. According to one account, she said to them:

“How can a proud and brave people like the Asante sit back and look while whitemen took away their king and chiefs, and humiliated them with a demand for the Golden Stool. The Golden Stool only means money to the whitemen; they have searched and dug everywhere for it. I shall not pay one [cent] to the governor. If you, the chiefs of Asante, are going to behave like cowards and not fight, you should exchange your loincloths for my undergarments (*Montu mo danta mma me na monnye me tarn*).”<sup>1</sup>

She then grabbed a gun and fired it into the air. Soon after, she was leading a force in the field in a desperate guerilla war against the British. The details of this conflict are foggy. It isn't clear if she fought in person, or was just the spiritual leader of the movement. It's also not clear how she was captured, but eventually she was indeed caught and sent into exile, and the conflict ended in the total subjugation of Asante. Yaa Asantewaa died in exile in 1921. Three years later, the King of Asante was allowed to return from exile.

Why did Yaa Asantewaa lead this resistance? What were her motives? In Asante society, it was not unusual for *ohemaa* to lead. Admittedly, it was rare for women to be involved in military matters, but it was not unheard-of for post-menopausal women. Moreover, this was a war in which women were highly involved, for in many cases their sons, grandsons, and grand-nephews had been exiled. Finally, Yaa Asantewaa in particular wanted to return to a time just before the exile, when her state of Ejisu was becoming richer and more powerful.

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<sup>1</sup> Agnes Akosua Aidoo, “Asante Queen Mothers in Government and Politics in the Nineteenth Century”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 9 (1977), 1-13: 12.