

Chapter

47



The Brave and Gallant Women of African History: A Feminist Analysis of Yaa Asantewaa in Hezekiah Lewis' Short Film, *Warrior Queen*

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47.1 Introduction

Historically, there is an abundance of women (both African and European) who have impacted greatly on the socio-political territory of their various societies. However, for some overt patriarchal values and interests, a befitting focus on such women has continued to be hampered. Contrary to the erroneous beliefs and views that women are generally docile, lacking in power and bravery which is in every sense a patriarchal conception, an account of the exploits of notable women in the past will invalidate this standpoint. In these accounts, we find remarkable women whose extraordinary models serve as inspiration for both men and women in the present and future generations. Such women in history are: Moremi Ajasoro, Queen Idia (Queen mother of Benin), Queen Nanny (National Queen of the Jamaican Maroons), Muhumusa and Kaigirwa (feared leaders of the East African Nyabingi Priestesses), Carlota Lukumí, Queen Nzinga Mbande (the reformist and ruler of the Ndongo and Matamba Kingdoms modern-day Angola), Amanirenas (ruled over the Meroitic Kingdom of Kush in northeast Africa), Harriet Tubman (African-American abolitionist, humanitarian, and union spy during the American Civil War), Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (the woman activist), Yaa Asantewaa (Queen Mother of the Edweso tribe of the Asante/Ashanti), Queen Amina

of Zazzau, Queen Kambasa of Bonny and the Dahomey Amazons also known as Ahoosi or Mino (an all-female military regiment of the Fon people of the Kingdom of Dahomey – present-day Republic of Benin). These women and many more like them prevailed when the stakes were high and the odds were against them.

Women have played very important roles in the history of Ghanaian communities and other African societies in general. However, the traditional story, more often than not, revolves around the kings and warriors who fought to build kingdoms and empires. These women have only enjoyed peripheral attention despite their unprecedented feats. In recognition, they play second fiddle to the men as they are being pushed down into the abyss of irrelevance and obscurity. Aside the story of Yaa Asantewaa of the great Asante Kingdom, the stories have always favoured the exploits of the men and left that of the women in the background. This prejudiced treatment of historical African heroines in both the media and oral performance is largely not unconnected to male chauvinism and the patriarchal nature of the society. This is corroborated by Lerner who affirms that “patriarchal values dominate and order the writing of history” (169).

As a historical and rare media documentation and projection of an African warrior queen and commander, the focus of this paper is on the bravery of Yaa Asantewaa as depicted in the movie, *Warrior Queen*, where the past made present, can inspire other women to embrace the path of selfless heroism for the preservation of the African heritage as well as the good of the society. In view of so many other African women like Yaa Asantewaa who had also impacted in the annals of history as fearless commanders and brave warriors, this paper underscores the need for heroines, like their male counterparts, to be commemorated significantly and, thus, given adequate media projection as well as literary recognition. The need to revere and preserve the legacies of African heroines through the medium of film so that their memory lingers on is of utmost importance because film, as a universal language embedded with messages that transcend national boundaries can affect our perception of the world and, especially, about women. According to Sassatelli, “what we watch on the screen could and should be interpreted as bearing a latent, and partly hidden, meaning, reflecting the profound concerns of the culture it emerges from, thus eliciting emotions, pleasure and pain” (123).

A probing statement by Dutt which seemingly provides justification for this study and also reinforces its significance of inspiring filmmakers in Africa and the world over to delve into the threshold of history, explore and re-enact the lives and exploits made by women in the past is that while these brave women made tremendous strides in the historical development of their various societies, these progressions have sufficiently not been translated into popular culture and the media we consume regularly (2014:3). As Kellner, quoted by Dutt, points out, “radio, television, film and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities, our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female ...” (3). Beyond the entertainment function performed by the entertainment industry and, by extension, the media (especially the movie industry), films are potent tools for the formation or propagation of certain ideologies. Along this line, Dutt again submits that:

While much of the entertainment industry is considered to be just that, entertainment, we cannot deny its power to produce and promote ideologies far and wide. Many cultural constructions, societal norms, fantasies and historical moments are conveyed and understood through films, so the way in which they represent women is of the utmost importance (3).

47.2 Theories of African Women (Heroines) in History

In human population even from the past, women have always been numerically significant which is a fascinating reason and justification to study them and/in their past. Yet, the media and literary spotlight of recognition on African heroines has been very dim and faint especially when compared to heroes (men). Sadly too, the heroics of African heroines have often been neglected and, therefore, not satisfactorily reflected in African historiography just as much as their depictions in movies have remained insufficient. According to Awe, it seemed that African historians, even while developing their own image of African society as distinct from the depiction by Western nations, have inherited a certain level of Western bias in that they perpetuate in their writings the masculine-centred view of history (211). Therefore, the conscious or unconscious acceptance of the African male experience as conventional (standard) by historians or scholars of history and even filmmakers translates into African women, especially heroines, becoming unconventional (inconsequential) in literary historical discourse and films. Beyond entertainment, while film has the power to sway our perception and shape our imagination on vital social issues like gender, class, ethnicity, race and the likes, the degree to which the medium of film has been employed to mediate and reflect reality or historical antecedents that pertains to women has been very low and minimal. On account of this bias and neglect, Awe further maintains that the eight volume *General History of Africa* published by UNESCO in 1981 which contains important knowledge in African history says nothing about the contribution of women to that history. Also along this line of argument, there was no specific remark on the significant role Nigerian women played in the development of their various communities/societies in the book regarded as the benchmark text on the history of Nigeria, *The Groundwork of Nigerian History*.

According to Imam (30), there are four categorical approaches to the presentation of African women in history. The first approach holds that women have not been presented at all; in the second, women have been presented basically to be seen as inferior and subordinated to men; the third approach is the conception of women's role as complementary of the men; and the fourth dimension, which this paper already sets out to achieve, is the movement towards seeing women as active agents in the historical process. In this regard, therefore, the representation of African heroines in dramatic texts by both feminist and pro-feminist dramatists in recent times and what Lewis' depiction of Yaa Asantewaa in the movie, *Warrior Queen*, ultimately suggests is that women are active players in the historical process rather than passive recipients of change. The movie, as with a handful of plays like *The Legendary Inikpi* by Idegu; *Idia, The Warrior Queen of Benin* by Salami-Agunloye; *Moremi, The Courageous Queen*

by Ajayi; *Morountodun* by Osofisan; etc., has been created as a historical reconstruction in order to project women as active agents in the historical process or development of various African societies. This, obviously is in the effort to grapple with the scant and superficial recognition that is accorded women and which puts them at risk of being rendered absent from history someday.

According to Kuhn, the representation of women in the media is not only economically and politically oppressed but also symbolically oppressed. She stresses the increase in the use of women as mere visual accessories (a view also shared by Laura Mulvey in her theory of visual pleasure) which invariably denotes the dearth of movies reflecting women outside of the men's world. In her examination of this demeaning patriarchal ideology, Kuhn emphasises the need to scrutinise how fixed and mediated women's representation have been in films in ways that it prevents them from reflecting the real social world (Dutt 5) or, contextually, daring and heroic acts/roles performed by women in various anti-colonial resistance struggles across Africa. If films are cultural artefacts that inherently reflect reality, then films, more than ever, must be utilised in the reconstruction of historical reality that involves the bravery of women as with the men. Hence, in the light of Lewis' portrayal of the bravery exhibited by warrior queen, Yaa Asantewaa, and as posited by Emeagwali, it is obvious that historical reconstruction (particularly in film) is influenced not only by primary sources but also by the researcher's speculative philosophy of history which is itself affected by his or her own value system and the intellectual and socio-economic environment (110).

47.3 Historical Background of Yaa Asantewaa (1840-1921)

Nana Yaa Asantewaa, a thoughtful, strategic and brave heroine, lived in the golden kingdom of Asante. She was the Queen Mother of Edweso (or Ejisu, English spelling), who led the Asante to fight the British. While 'Yaa,' according to the Akan birth calendar in Ghana, is the name of a female born on Thursday, 'Asantewaa' is a female named after or dedicated to the Asante Kingdom. As a member of the Asona royal family, Yaa Asantewaa was born around 1832, according to several accounts. Although the record of Yaa Asantewaa's early years appears vague in history, she was said to have been in her early 60s by 1900 when the British tried to humiliate the Asante nation. By then, Yaa Asantewaa was the Queen of Ejisu, a small village eleven miles to the east of Kumasi that has now almost become a suburb of the city of Kumasi. She had a brother called Kwasi Afrane, her mother was Ata Po and her father Kwaku Ampoma. Both parents were from Ampabame near Besease in Ejisu. Available records have it that Yaa Asantewaa's brother died in 1894.

In 1877, Yaa Asantewaa became the regent Queen of Edweso (now spelt Ejisu) following the banishment of the then Asantehene, Prempeh I, and other chiefs of Asante to Seychelles Island in 1896 by the British. Later, she became the Paramount Chief of Edweso when her grandson, *Akwasi Agrane Kuma*, the Chief of Edweso, was also exiled in the same year. According to corroborated accounts, her reign was distinguished by her sense of fairness and objectivity, and also her readiness to defend



Queen Nana Yaa Asantewaa of Ghana

women's rights whenever the opportunity arose, clamping down heavily on rape, domestic abuse and vices against the vulnerable, helpless and hapless in Edweso society (Adu and Anokye).

Subsequently, in March of 1900, the demand by the British through the then Governor General of Gold Coast, Sir Frederick Hodgson, to the Asante chiefs for the handover of the Golden Stool which was considered the soul and spiritual symbol of the Asante nation was preceded by an official announcement to forbid the leadership of the nation from assuming their rightful authority. The demand to relinquish the Golden Stool was considered an affront to the Asante people and, as a result, a meeting to take a course of action was immediately held at Kumasi, capital city of the Asante nation and the seat of confederacy. Citing Donkoh in her article entitled "Yaa Asantewaa, A Role Model for Womanhood in the New Millennium", Azikiwe notes:

This was the environment in which Nana Yaa Asantewaa, the only female present at the gathering in her capacity as the caretaker of the Edweso State rose up and defied British authority by questioning the Governor. She inquired of the Governor, whether he had seen the Asantehene before coming to Kumasi, that since the Asantehene was the traditional custodian of the Stool, he was the appropriate person to disclose its whereabouts. She then turned on her male counterparts who had been stunned into silence, and taunted them about their manhood.

With disagreement ensuing amongst the chiefs on whether to negotiate with the British or square up to them fearlessly, Yaa Asantewaa, who was among those thought to be disposed to combat, expressed bluntly before the council what has today become one of her famous speeches:

Now I see that some of you fear to go forward to fight for our king. If it was in the brave days of Osei Tutu, Okomfo Anokye, and Opoku Ware I, chiefs would not sit down to see their king to be taken away without firing a shot. No European could have dared speak to chiefs of Asante in the way the governor spoke to you this morning. Is it true that the bravery of Asante is no more? I cannot believe it. It cannot be! I must say this: if you, the men of Asante, will not go forward, then we will. We, the women, will. I shall call upon my fellow women. We will fight! We will fight till the last of us falls in the battlefields (*Oxford Encyclopaedia of Women in World History*).

Enraged by the demands of Governor Hodgson, she was able to assemble sizeable formidable army to counter the British onslaught and used her charisma and bravery to inspire the Asante nation to war while taking on the role of Commander-in-Chief. In some accounts of the 1900 warfare, it is said that Yaa Asantewaa led an army of about 4, 000 men to resist what she regarded as the most abusive and blatant form of oppression and exploitation by the British. Being in her 60s at the time of this revolt, Yaa Asantewaa defied the mores and odds with regards to a woman's role in her immediate society by stepping out of the shadow with an army in resistance to the British. She showed just how much of an astute strategist she was by erecting roadblocks on all routes leading to Kumasi to halt the advance of British reinforcement. Telegraph

poles were also destroyed to disable communication in order to lay siege at the Kumasi Fort where the governor and his people were eventually trapped. It was an unrelenting assault even though several Asantes were killed.

Those at the Fort were ravaged by disease, starvation and death. As a result, Sir Hodgson made at least two attempts to negotiate and initiate a cease fire with Yaa Asantewaa but refused to accept her terms on each occasion, which included the return of the nobles that were exiled (Adu and Anokye). Somehow, the Governor managed to escape and the Asantes were ultimately defeated with the influx of further reinforcement and superior firepower. Notably, the Yaa Asantewaa-led army gave as much as it received before yielding to the British big guns finally. According to records, Yaa Asantewaa was betrayed and then captured in her place of hiding at Sreso Timponmu, marking the last significant effort by the Asante people, specifically by a woman, to disrupt or halt the machinery of British military and cultural expansionism. Yaa Asantewaa paid an extreme price as she was exiled and died at the age of about ninety on the Seychelles Islands off Africa's east coast in 1921 (*MsAfropolitan*).

Despite the defeat in the 1900 uprising which was later named the Yaa Asantewaa War, the Asantes did achieve a primary aim of protecting the Golden Stool – *Sika Dwa Kofi* – from being captured by the British. Also, the role performed by Yaa Asantewaa both in preparation for the war and in the war itself deserves recognition on the stage of contemporary discourse on women who had played essential role in the historical development of their societies in ancient times. Yaa Asantewaa's feats which are a direct result of her selflessness and doggedness in defending the Asante kingdom makes her such a remarkable figure to be held in high esteem and celebrated.

Although she was likened to Joan of Arc of France when referred to as "Africa's Joan of Arc" for her daring battle against the British, it is very much likely that she had reminded the British, like anyone else, of Boadicea who also led the British in fights against Roman forces. For all her achievements, Yaa Asantewaa's role as a war commander/general and strategist in confronting British colonialism is what she has often been remembered for and celebrated in history. Again, according to Donkoh as cited by Azikiwe, "Yaa Asantewaa comes across as a 'Mother Courage' figure as well as an astute tactician and able military leader" whose taunts, for example, challenged some of the men to act.

47.4 Review of Selected Historical African Heroines

Generally, women are glossed over in history despite their remarkable achievements and extraordinary feats. They are visibly rendered invisible in history, and even when or where they are marginally mentioned, it is often in relation to men and to complement the deeds of men, making it his-story. This is likely because to a large extent, men have been considered over the years the measure for significance and relevance. Today, history is made up of threads of selection from men's activities in war, politics, business, knitted together according to patterns of male prowess and power as conceived in the minds of men. History describing women is usually shallow, topically narrow and discussed only in the passing. Historical narratives that concern

the legacies of women as well as their momentous and self-sacrificing contributions to society have always been trivialised, treated as insignificant and often tossed out as not history worthy. The upshot of this is the propagation of expurgated historical accounts that do not show women as having played key or active roles in grappling with the various challenges encountered by various African societies.

It is of great significance to note that while there is undoubtedly, although rarely told as prominent features of historical narratives, an existing long list of powerful African queens, warriors, revolutionists, leaders and fighters that decorate the African history, it is imperative to take a succinct look at a few of them. Doing so would be in line with the feminist consciousness and endeavour to direct on women whose stories are replete with acts of selfless sacrifices and courage, worthy of emulation, a deserving spotlight of recognition as is being enjoyed by men. These heroines, some of whom led monarchical societies in ages past, did courageously lead anti-slavery/anti-colonial resistance against assaults by European powers in various territories and regions of the African continent. Theirs is a tale of bravery, gallantry and undaunted rebellion against the onslaught of forceful European invasion and oppression in the face of likely cruel and death consequences. From the complex, rough and tough pages of struggle, resistance and earth-moving feats, few out of the many female figures of legendary prominence whose unsung exploits are worthy of both literary and media commemoration are highlighted below.

Ahosi or Mino (Dahomey Amazons): Historically, the Dahomey Amazons or Mino who were an all-female military regiment of the Fon people of the Kingdom of Dahomey in the present day Republic of Benin, existed from the 17th century to the end of the 19th century. These women soldiers are called Ahosi (king's wives) or Mino (our mothers) in the Fon language but referred to as 'Amazons' in European accounts and by Western historians/observers because of their similarity to the semi-mythical Amazons of ancient Anatolia and the Black Sea. History has it that the Ahosi were extremely well trained ferocious fighters with a reputation for decapitating soldiers in the middle of battle, and those who unfortunately fell into their hands as captives.

One of the great leaders of the Ahosi was Seh-Dong-Hong-Beh who, in 1851, led an army of 6,000 women against the Egba fortress of Abeokuta. Notably also, at a time when European intrusion into West Africa gained pace, King Behanzi in 1890 deployed the services of the Ahosi fighters combined with the male soldiers to battle the French forces during what is today known as the First Franco-Dahomey War. Given the female warriors' skills of the Dahomey Amazons who were mainly armed with Winchester rifles, clubs and knives in the latter period, the French army did lose several battles to them. Although these women soldiers also suffered several defeats, it should be noted that they were consistently judged to be superior to the male soldiers in effectiveness and bravery (Law 246-247).

Queen Nanny or Granny Nanny: Queen Nanny also known as Granny Nanny is the well-known leader of the Jamaican Maroons in the 18th century. She was forced into slavery as a child in Jamaica following her abduction from Ghana. Nanny drew inspiration for her heroism from the Maroon people and other leaders of the enslaved

Africans who fled the oppressive plantations and established their own communities in Jamaica's interior. Nanny and her brothers who escaped from the plantation led several revolts across Jamaica from the Blue Mountains area where they hid. As an intelligent leader who was well respected, Nanny was instrumental in organising the strategies to free enslaved Africans. It is on record that over the period of three decades, she liberated more than eight hundred slaves and settled them into Maroon communities. Queen Nanny's settlement known as Nanny Town was under the control of Maroon for many years owing to her defeat of the British in many battles even in the face of repeated raids by the British fighters.

Harriet Tubman (born Araminta Harriet Ross): Harriet Tubman was an African-American abolitionist and humanitarian. Although she was born into slavery, Tubman escaped to Philadelphia in 1849, then immediately returned to Maryland to free her family. Subsequently, history has it that she made more than nineteen missions to rescue over three hundred slaves with the help of the network of anti-slavery activists and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. Later on, Tubman facilitated the recruitment of men for John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry from October 16-18, 1859, to free enslaved Blacks.

Harriet Tubman became the first woman to lead an armed expedition in the 1863 Civil War. In what has become the largest liberation of enslaved Blacks in American history, Tubman commanded the Combahee River Raid which freed more than seven hundred enslaved Blacks in South Carolina.

Amanirenas: Amanirenas is regarded as one of the greatest kandakes, or queen mothers who reigned over the Meroitic Kingdom of Kush in North East Africa (between 40 B.C.-10 B.C.). The brave warrior, although wounded and blinded in one eye by a Roman, Amanirenas was a resolute fighter who was involved in a combat together with her soldiers. Amanirenas and her son, Akinidad, heroically led an army of about 30,000 men to dismiss the Roman fort in the Egyptian city of Aswan when the Roman emperor, Augustus, imposed tax on the Kushites in 24 B.C. In their aggression, they also destroyed the statues of Caesar in Elephantine.

There was a reprisal attack from Roman General Petronius, as demanded by Augustus, but it was met with strong resistance from Amanirenas and her militias. This fierce fighting was on for over three years before the two warring parties agreed to negotiate a peace treaty. At the end, the Romans agreed to annul the tax, return their army to Egypt, withdraw their fort and give the land back to the Kushites.

Carlota Lukumí: Carlota of the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria was kidnapped as a child, taken to Cuba in chains and forced into slavery in the city of Matanzas, working in a sugarcane plantation under very vicious conditions. Described as musically gifted, determined and clever, Carlota is said to have led a well-planned rebellion at the Triumvarato sugar plantation in 1843 with the help of another enslaved woman known as Fermina. Following discovery of plans for the rebellion, Fermina was locked up but was freed along with others by Carlota and her fellow warriors. Using talking drums to secretly communicate, Carlota and her fellow combatants carried out further well-

organised armed revolts against at least five inhuman slave plantation operations in the area. Carlota's bravery in battles went on for a year before her eventual capture, torture and execution by Spanish landowners.

Nyabingi Priestesses, Muhumusa and Kaigirwa: Muhumusa and Kaigirwa were both feared leaders of the East African Nyabingi priestesses group that was influential in Rwanda and Uganda from 1850 to 1950. It was said that in 1911, Muhumusa boldly declared "she would drive out the Europeans" and "that the bullets of the Wazungu would turn to water against her" (Moore). She carried out armed resistance against German colonialists and was eventually detained by the British in Kampala, Uganda, from 1913 to her death in 1945. In the line of rebel priestesses to have fought colonial control, Muhumusa stands out as the first. She continued to inspire and attract massive followership even while in prison. It was in a direct response to a spiritually based resistance crusade influenced by Muhumusa that the British passed its 1912 Witchcraft Act.

With an unwavering public support, Kaigirwa followed in the steps of Muhumusa to start the Nyakishenyi revolt in 1917. High price was placed on her head by the British, but none would claim it. Kaigirwa and her main fighters succeeded in evading the British army following attacks on her Congo camp in 1919. It was on record that Kaigirwa attempted another uprising, before going into the hills where she was never captured.

Mantatisi (1781-1836): Mantatisi, warrior queen of a Sotho tribe called the Batlokoa – which means 'wild cat people' in South Africa – in the 1820s, fought to preserve her tribal lands during the wars between Shaka Zulu and Matiwane. Although her son, who became king when she died was eventually defeated by Mahweshwe, she was successful in protecting the Batlokoa's heritage. She commanded her own army and acted as regent for her son, Ali Alulus. She was wounded and captured in a battle in 1847 but was ransomed by her son and continued to rule until 1853 (*Pan-African News Wire*). In the heydays of her military might, Mantatisi had an estimated forty thousand armies/fighters. The fame of her triumphs in battles spread across several boundaries even to far away modern day central Botswana.

Queen Nzinga (1583-1663 AD), also known as Queen Jinga, is regarded as the reformist. Through an organised powerful guerrilla army, Nzinga conquered some of her enemies and later developed alliances to control the slave routes. One of such alliances is with the Dutch to help stop the Portuguese advancement into present day Angola. Reputedly, two of her war leaders were her sisters (*MsAfropolitan.com*). Queen Nzinga is also known for going against the odds to boldly appoint and assign women into important positions/offices in government.

Queen Amina: Amina was born around 1533. She became Queen of Zazzau following the death of Karama who took over from Queen Bakwa Turunku. Zazzau, which is today a part of Nigeria called Zaria, operated on matrilineal consideration as women were also allowed to rule as the men. Just after three months of been in power, Queen Amina embarked on her first military expedition and continued until her death.

During her thirty-four-year reign, Queen Amina, who was a cavalry-trained – and great – military strategist, was known for her exploits, having fought many wars and conquered as far as Nupe and Kwararafa. These wars led to the expansion of the territory of Zazzua to its largest size ever. According to Kano chronicle, she controlled the trade routes in the region and established a network of commerce within the great earthen walls that surrounded Hausa cities within her dominion (*Black History Heroes*).

Queen Amina is credited with popularising the earthen city wall fortifications, when she commanded the building of defensive walls around each military camp that she established. With the growth of cities into these high defensive walls, they became characteristic of Hausa city-states even till date. The walls are referred to as “ganuwar Amina” (Amina’s walls). Today, she is mostly remembered as “Amina, Yar Bakwa ta san rana,” meaning “Amina, daughter of Nikatau, a woman as capable as a man” (*Pan-African News Wire*).

On the whole, there is no gainsaying that there is an overwhelming number of great and powerful African queens whose actions influenced the destinies of their communities/societies. These women and many more alike are, in the like manner of cultural artefacts, emblems of Africanity. They have left their heroic footprints on the sand of not just African but World history. Yet, their feats have remained largely unacknowledged and never sufficiently recounted. Their stories are being gradually repressed by male domination as evident of the frequent identification with and veneration of African heroes. This scenario is what Obbo referred to as the invisibility of African women in any serious study of history and society, regardless of the fact that anthropology has not been an exclusive male preserve (1).

47.5 The Bravery and Gallantry of Yaa Asantewaa in *Warrior Queen*

As a historical narrative short film, Lewis’ *Warrior Queen* is a retelling of the bravery and gallantry displayed by Nana Yaa Asantewaa when the men were fearfully inclined to diplomacy or negotiation with the British over their demand for the Golden Stool rather than face them. Although a non-English language film, the English translation for the characters’ verbal expressions and dialogues which appears on the screen makes it possible for non-Ghanaian language speaking audience lacking in understanding of the Twi dialect to identify with the narrative. Set in Boankra, Ghana in 1900, the opening scene of the film shows Yaa Asantewaa, as a farmer, engaged in farming with some other women in the field. After the day’s planting and some harvest, she sits with her grandson, Kwadwo, to play the Mancala game which is sometimes called the ‘sowing’ or ‘count-and-capture’ game. Just then, a concerned Kwadwo raises a question that has to do with the Golden Stool and the demand for it by the British:

Kwadwo: Nana, why can’t we just make them one?

Yaa Asantewaa: You think too much.

Kwadwo: I’ll make a new Sika Dwa for the Whiteman.

Yaa Asantewaa: My child, the Sika Dwa was not made by men. It’s a gift from the heavens. No man should own it.

Yaa Asantewaa's response to her grandchild validates historical accounts that the people revered the *Sika Dwa* (Golden Stool) as the soul and spiritual symbol of the Ashanti nation which, once lost to the Whiteman, means the loss of a distinctive identity as a people. The brief conversation set off by Kwadwo on the subject of the Golden Stool apparently robs her of the interest to continue with the game as she beckons for them to leave. She returns home from the farm to meet one of the chiefs, Kwame, and a British representative waiting. The mission for the visit is still the same – hand over the Golden Stool – and Yaa Asantewaa's stance over the request made by the British remains unchanged – we would rather die than hand over the spiritual symbol of our people:

Chief Kwame: Queen Mother, we must seriously talk about the demands of the British.

Yaa Asantewaa: It seems as if that discussion has already begun.

Pastor Grey: Queen Mother Asantewaa, I've come here today to beg you to reconsider handing over the Golden Stool.

The Queen Mother gives an outright impression of hearing but not listening to Pastor Grey when she immediately deviates from the subject to rather introduce her grandchild, Kwadwo, who is standing by, to him. However, after acknowledging the presence of Kwadwo, Pastor Grey goes back again to the Golden Stool topic, thereby infuriating Yaa Asantewaa:

Pastor Grey: The orders of the Queen, they cannot be ignored.

Yaa Asantewaa: (*Sternly*) I don't remember giving that order.

Pastor Grey: You must understand...

Yaa Asantewaa: (*Interjects furiously in English*) you, go and tell your Queen that her demand has no meaning on this land.

Chief Kwame: Queen Mother, you're writing our deaths.

Yaa Asantewaa: Pastor Grey (*she gets up from the Golden Stool*), we thank you for your time. I would like you to deliver a message to your people: no one refuses to go to war for fear of death.

This scene as well as action shows the contrast between the disposition of the (male) chiefs, represented by chief Kwame, and the uncompromising course of action taken by the Queen Mother. Just as Pastor Grey bids to take his leave and Chief Kwame makes similar move to go along probably to seek for a more pacifying resolution, Yaa Asantewaa immediately restrains him with a simple tap on his shoulder. Afterwards, she excuses her grandchild from their presence with a repeated hand gesture that says "leave us alone" before directing on Chief Kwame a berating gaze:

Chief Kwame: Queen Mother, we're no match for the British. They've offered us protection and we've chosen to throw that offer in their face.

Yaa Asantewaa: They've also offered to change our culture. Should we give them that right too? We've fought through too many battles and

wars.

Chief Kwame: Queen Mother, yes but our ancestors never fought a power as great as the British army.

Yaa Asantewaa: Do you believe the British will protect us?

Chief Kwame: I know they will.

Yaa Asantewaa: From who?

Chief Kwame: Queen Mother, there're many who would love to harm us.

Yaa Asantewaa: (*Chuckles*) all of my life, the only invader that I've ever known ... has been the British. We have to pay the British so that they can protect us from the British. Have the British put fear in your heart?

Chief Kwame: Queen Mother, No. They've put sense into my head.

While it appears that she sees through the deceit of the British, Chief Kwame and all other gullible chiefs have been fearfully blinded to think the supposed protection that would be provided them in exchange for the Golden Stool to be too good an offer not to embrace. She is not swayed by the reliable façade of a religious personage (Pastor Grey) acting as a mediator to convince the people to peacefully relinquish the Golden Stool just as she would tell her grandchild during one of the combat trainings he undergoes under her tutelage: "You must keep your guard up. Never take your eyes off the enemy." Few moments later after the brief training session while in the farm, some armed British forces accosts them, demanding to know where the men are hiding the Golden Stool. Yaa Asantewaa's decline to call out her men from the bush as commanded by the British forces earns her a ferocious slap which provokes her young grandchild, Kwadwo, to react by attempting to strike the soldier with a stick. In a swift move by one of the British soldiers to counteract, he eventually stabs Kwadwo. They all suddenly appear bemused and decide to retreat, leaving Yaa Asantewaa and her guard with her injured grandchild who is at the point of death. It did not take long before Kwadwo takes his last breath. Kwadwo's death at the hands of the British was clearly the straw that broke the camel's back as Yaa Asantewaa's appearance, having buried the child, radiates fury and wrathful passion.

At the gathering of the chiefs to deliberate, amongst other things, the possible return of their exiled king and how best to respond to the demand of the British for the Golden Stool, the men are divided in their decisions with majority of them suggesting that they plead with the British and yield to their demand. But seeing their so called 'peaceful' resolve as a sheer display of fear and cowardice, Yaa Asantewaa rages:

Yaa Asantewaa: Now I have seen that some of you fear to go forward to fight. If it were in the brave days... the days of Osei Tutu, Okomfo Anoyke and Opoku Ware, chiefs would not sit down to see their King taken away without firing a shot. No Whiteman could have dared to speak to a chief of the Ashanti...the way the governor spoke to you chiefs. Is it true that the bravery of the Ashanti is no more? I cannot believe it. I must say this. 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. We will fight. We will fight till the last of us falls in the battlefields!

Subsequent to her speech, the women there begin to cheer while the chiefs who are opposed to the idea of fighting against the British look on sheepishly. As the chant grows stronger and the people disperse in the spirit of a fight for freedom, Yaa Asantewaa declares: "If they kill thousands, thousands will come." A point proven by Yaa Asantewaa, her women and all other men who later took part in the fight to defend the Ashanti heritage which the film reflects is that the preservation of one's cultural heritage and tradition, no matter the danger that may arise from an action to do so, ensures its identity and pride. In due course, Yaa Asantewaa leads the people into a battle that spanned a long period of time before they were finally defeated but the Golden Stool was never surrendered. In the written epilogue of the film, it is stated that:

Both the men and women took up arms and fought the British. For months, the Ashanti fought very bravely and besieged the British fort. 1,400 British reinforcements arrived at Kumasi, Asantewaa and other leaders were captured and sent into exile. Although they lost the battle...the Ashanti people maintained possession of the Sika Dwa.

For her heroism, there is the Yaa Asantewaa Festival which is annually being celebrated to honour the brave role performed by the queen mother in her fight to liberate her people from the British threat and cultural imperialism. It is presently one of the most celebrated and heavily patronised festivals by tourists, Africans from all over the continent, as well as Africans in the diaspora, as a mark of tribute for her bravery and gallantry, and, interestingly, continues to serve as encouragement and inspiration for young women to endeavour to attain higher laurels in their chosen professions while recognising the honour-deserving unique role of the legendary queen mother.

47.6 Patriarchal Factor in the Neglect of African Heroines in History

A look at the 19th century Asante Queen mother, Yaa Asantewaa, in relation to other African heroines with such audacious feats to their names, is a clear indication that these women were indeed endowed with personal strength and ability such that they were very active where effective male leadership was lacking. Apparently in pristine past, cutting across the various societies and communities of Africa, there were so many women who stood fearlessly in defence of their kingdoms and people. However, historical revisionism of these African heroines has, for the most part, been neglected and ignored over the years largely due to the patriarchal nature of the society.

Patriarchy subscribes to and describes the unjustified suppression and oppression of women. It provides the foundation for male domination, oppression and deprivation of adequate recognition for African women and heroines. As a result of the patriarchal

configuration which has today influenced the world being looked upon as “a man’s world,” the attention on these African heroines have been unsatisfactorily slight. In the words of Johnson, “a society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male-centred” (5). This view is corroborated by Walby who conceptualised patriarchy as:

... a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women... the use of the term social structures is important here, since it clearly implies rejection both of biological determinism, and the notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate one ... (20)

Therefore, in spite of the feats and incredible accomplishment of so many African heroines, it has relatively still been a case of inattention on them while the men continue to enjoy tremendous recognition and commemorative celebrations. For instance, in Nigeria just like other African nations, the sacrifices made by women in the course of their laborious and vigorous resistance to break loose the firm hold of colonial powers on the country’s collective destiny have largely gone unrecognised. A very brief historical span of enigmatic amazons and heroic nationalists who fought relentlessly one way or the other for Nigeria’s independence (and, by implication, in defending their kingdom) in the 1950s and 1960s include but is not limited to Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900-1978), who advocated for women right in Nigeria to vote and also led women of the Egba clan in the struggle against arbitrary taxation. It was this resistance action that caused the then Egba ruler, Oba Ademola II, to relinquish his throne in 1949. Mrs Ransome-Kuti has been described as the doyen of women’s rights in Nigeria, and also the “Lioness of Lisabi” by the *West African Pilot Newspaper*. She handed down to Nigeria and posterity, three cherished assets – late Prof. Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, late music icon Fela Anikulapo Kuti, and Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti.

Another great woman is Hajiya Gambo Sawaba (1933-2001), who rose above her challenges of poor educational background and early marriage at age 16 to become an independent dynamic political activist, helping in the education of several others as well as the liberation of African women from the yokes of despicable traditions considered to be anti-women. As a staunch supporter of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), she was instrumental to the political struggle of Nigeria for independence. Margaret Ekpo (1914-2006) also played significant roles as a pioneering female politician especially at the grassroots in the eastern city of Aba (at a time men dominated the independence struggle), an active social mobiliser and Nigeria’s women right activist who brought together women beyond the bounds of ethnicity. In the 1950s, she joined forces with Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti to openly condemn the killing of protesting workers at the Enugu Coal Mine against some harsh colonial actions. Madam Mary Okezie (1906-1999) was among the prominent women who led the Aba Women’s Riot of 1929. As a civil servant who was sympathetic to the cause of the rioters, Madam Okezie submitted a memo to the Commission of Enquiry, explaining why the riot broke out. She was the founder and leader of the Ngwa Women Association in 1948 to progress women’s education and welfare to which she dedicated

the rest of her life. Mrs Grace Eniola Soyinka, who was a sister in-law to Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, with whom she co-founded the Egba Women Union was another great woman. She is the mother of the renowned Nigerian dramatist and Noble Laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka. As an activist, she also played a significant role in decongesting Nigeria of colonial manoeuvring and was active in organising workshops for illiterate Egba women on their rights as citizens.

These women, just like many others in the country and across Africa, participated actively and fearlessly in a dangerous socio-political reality of their societies to leave indelible impacts for posterity to draw inspiration from. However, these highly esteemed African women of great repute have, for the most part, existed only in a dim retrospection of indigenous (National) or African history. It suffices therefore to say that, a comprehensive or near-exhaustive account of hitherto unsung and unstudied African heroines will be compelling and fascinating even to historians of high repute in both media, oral and documented history.

47.7 Conclusion

Going by historical antecedents, there is evidently the existence of matriarchal societies over the ages. This is particularly true of African women like Yaa Asantewaa who were in position of power, leading combatants against the intrusion of Western forces who would and, sometimes too, not stand the reign of these powerful matriarchs (women). In an era when it was thought that women are generally feeble both physically and otherwise, Yaa Asantewaa and other warrior queens alike invalidated such misconception or claims by squaring up to fierce masculine oppositions as they fought fearlessly to defend their societies. As a successful farmer, mother, conquering war leader/Commander-in-Chief of the Asante army and gatekeeper, Yaa Asantewaa fought relentlessly to protect the Golden Stool of the Asante kingdom.

Unfortunately, a long list of such powerful African queens in history are rarely remembered today or accorded the recognition they deserve. In addition to the dearth of detailed historical documents on these female combatants, the significant and mediating role of women in confronting colonial powers in warfare to halt slavery and watching over the affairs of their heirs and descendants as influential leaders is being suppressed in history. Thus, the proud history of these powerful African queens, warriors, freedom fighters and matriarchs are being overlooked by today's scholars, suppressed by the colonial powers just as it is also downplayed by the men who seized thrones from these heroines.

In reconstructing a (mis)constructed gender relations in Africa within the feminist ideological leaning, there is therefore the crucial need for writers/scholars and filmmakers (both male and female) to direct significant and thorough attention to remarkable African women like their male counterparts. Lewis' *Warrior Queen*, although a short film for his thesis, is a right step in the right direction which goes a long way to suggest that there are a lot of historical grounds to be researched into by (African) filmmakers and made into films. Through the making of films to commemorate the life and heroism of African heroines like Yaa Asantewaa, it is no doubt that their stories and histories will be long

preserved, cherished, and, thereby, salvaged from been forgotten someday. As further suggested by Dutt, if there are more films that projects the lives and contributions of these heroines and we carry out more scholarly exploration of these films, then we can begin to anticipate and most likely change the course of future media products towards a better and positive representations of women (26).

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