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Commemorating an African Queen

Ghanaian Nationalism, the African Diaspora, and the Public Memory of Nana Yaa Asantewaa, 1952–2009

Harcourt Fuller

All photos by the author except where otherwise noted

The years 2000–2001 marked the centennial of the Anglo-Asante War (otherwise known as the War of the Golden Stool) of 1900–1901. This battle was led by Nana Yaa Asantewaa (ca. 1832–1923), the Queen Mother from the Asona royal family of the Asante paramount state of Ejisu, who took up arms to prevent the British from capturing the sacred Golden Stool.¹ This milestone produced several publications on such an important episode in Ghanaian, African, and British imperial history. These works included a special issue of *Ghana Studies Journal*, edited with an article by Emmanuel Akyeampompong (2000), with contributions from other prominent academics including Larry W. Yarak, Ivor Wilks, T.C. McCaskie, Nana Arhin Brempong (Kwame Arhin), Adu Boahen, Pashington Obeng, and Lynda Day. Some of these scholars went on to publish monographs and other articles about the life and legacy of Yaa Asantewaa (Boahen 2003; Day 2004:98–113; McCaskie 2007).² In addition to these new millennial writings, there have also been several documentaries produced exclusively about or with some content on Yaa Asantewaa's defiant stance against British colonialism in 1900–1901, including her subsequent legacy: *Africa—The Story of a Continent* (1984); *Akwantu—The Journey* (2012); *The Golden Stool* (2005); *Queen Yaa Asantewaa and the Golden Stool* (2008); and *Yaa Asantewaa—The Heroism of an African Queen* (1999).

Ghanaian politicians, journalists, and others also used the occasion of the War's centennial as a platform to advocate for more public recognition of Asante history in general and the story of Yaa Asantewaa in particular. In 1998, the Honourable Kojo Yankah, an Ashanti regional minister, emphasized the need to awaken the general public to this significant but neglected chapter in Ghanaian history and to the ordinary and heroic

deeds of Yaa Asantewaa. The minister encouraged the nation to commemorate Yaa Asantewaa's heroism, demonstrated through her self-sacrifice in defending the Golden Stool in 1900–1901. He also recommended that a history book be published on her life, personality, and the War of Resistance specifically. His suggestions resulted in the 2002 publication of *Yaa Asantewaa: An African Queen Who Led an Army to Fight the British* by Asirifi Danquah, a veteran Ghanaian journalist. The author professed that the text targeted ordinary Ghanaians as opposed to the intellectual classes, whom he accused of not having an interest in Ghana's anti-imperialist history. Danquah sought to:

Provide [an] opportunity for the present and future generations to educate themselves about how some patriotic Ghanaians, Asantes in particular, exhibited a high degree of nationalism by sacrificing their lives in defence of their motherland against imperial domination. The Yaa Asantewaa war provides a typical example of such a high degree of nationalism that if denied its rightful place in the nation's history would constitute a painful ingratitude to her memory and the memories of [other] gallant men ... who shed their blood in defence of the nation (2002:xi–xii).

The publication of *Yaa Asantewaa* was in line with the goals of the National Commission on Culture's *Cultural Policy of Ghana* document (2004:22–23), which identified the local publication of books on the Ghanaian/African experience (authored by Ghanaian writers) for use in the education system as a priority area. With the exception of two scholars (Day 2004 and McCaskie 2007), what is missing from this analysis of the life and legacy of Yaa Asantewaa is the way in which her story has been imagined and immortalized through official and popular Ghanaian and Diasporic expressive culture.

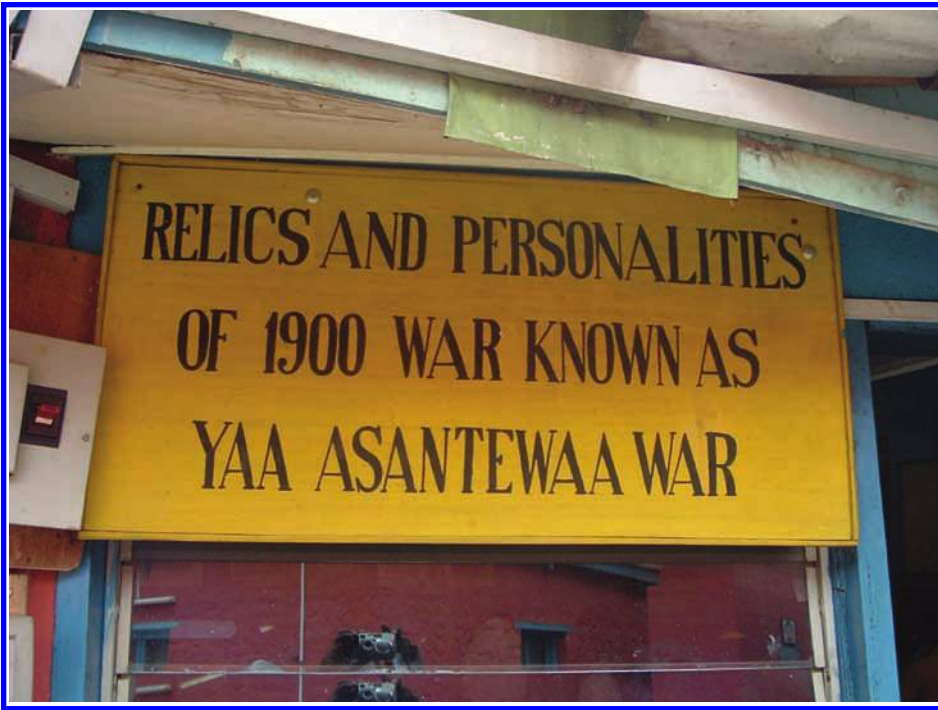
I have argued elsewhere (Fuller 2008) that Kwame Nkrumah, the premier of the first nation-state in sub-Saharan Africa to



1 Current Asantehene Otumfuo Nana Osei Tutu II dressed in *batakari kese*.
Photo: Ellen Kaplowitz

regain its independence from a European imperial power, pioneered a nation-building ideology and strategy encompassing the use of nationalist iconography and idioms, which I termed “symbols of nationhood” or “symbolic nationalism.” This was characterized by the political and propagandistic use of money, postage stamps, monuments, museums, dress, nonverbal maxims (*adinkra* symbols), the national anthem, emblems, and both national and party flags to articulate his political philosophy. While these largely visual sources of expressive culture were produced during the Nkrumah era, they were either destroyed or redesigned immediately after he was ousted by the National Liberation Council (NLC), while others were developed during the Limann, Rawlings, Kufuor, and Mills administrations, as well as by nonstate actors. Nonetheless, very few scholars have examined these rich and revealing visual sources and associated archival material. This includes the holdings of the Ghana Museum and Monuments Board, the Manhyia Palace Museum, the Bank of Ghana, and the Ghana Post Company Limited. The latter, for example, houses primary archival documents and images relating to the issuance of national postage stamps dating to as early as 1955. The Ghana Post and Bank of Ghana Archives demonstrates how the iconography of postage stamps was an essential aspect of Ghana’s nation-building and Pan-Africanist propaganda machine.

In this article, I apply my concept of symbolic nationalism to another significant figure in the history of the Gold Coast/Ghana, namely Nana Yaa Asantewaa, by analyzing some of the nationalist symbols, including museum exhibits, monuments, paper currency, postage stamps, and festivals, that have been used from 1952 to 2009 to commemorate her war against the British. Every modern, sovereign nation-state issues its own money and postage stamps to proclaim its sovereignty, foster economic development and monetary independence, and advertise its history and culture through nationalist iconography. All independent nation-states create national flags, anthems, coats of arms, and other insignia and emblems to distinguish themselves from other countries. States construct museums to preserve and display their glorious historical past, material culture, and traditions for the citizenry and the world to memorialize and celebrate. Nations construct monuments to commemorate



2 Sign for the Yaa Asantewaa War exhibit at the Ghana Armed Forces Museum.

3 Jail cell at the GAFM where the British imprisoned Yaa Asantewaa in 1901.

important individuals and historical antecedents such as victorious (and sometimes lost) battles and the attainment of independence, which are often the site for nationalistic milestones. They elevate their war dead to the status of national icons through the erection of war monuments such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and honor their founding fathers (and occasionally founding mothers) by building statues in their likeness.

YAA ASETEWAA IN HISTORY

The mighty Asante Empire stood in the way of Great Britain's quest to consolidate the Gold Coast Colony while keeping its European rivals at bay. After several battles with the Asantes in the late nineteenth century, the British finally captured the Asantehehene, Nana Prempeh I, first imprisoning him at Elmina Castle on the coast for several months, then banishing him to the British-administered Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean. In March 1900, moreover, British Governor Sir Frederick Hodgson also demanded to be given or rewarded with the Golden Stool (Asikadwa/Sika Dwa Kofi)—the symbol and soul of the Asante Kingdom—for him to sit on upon his arrival in Kumasi.³ Governor Hodgson had realized that it was the Golden Stool itself and not the person who occupied it to which the Asantes owed allegiance, and that any person who possessed this sacred object would automatically have authority over the Asante nation, commanding their full obedience and cooperation.

Disillusioned by the banishment of their king, along with members of the royal family and senior war officials, the men of Asante were unwilling to take on the British militarily. At that critical point, Yaa Asantewaa took up the mantle of commander-in-chief, raising an army of some 20,000 Asante warriors to confront the British and their allies on the coast, in what would become the last Asante war of resistance against British colonialism in the Gold Coast, this time to prevent the British from cap-



turing the legendary and sacred Asante Golden Stool (Danquah 2002:xiv). As commander-in-chief, Yaa Asantewaa donned a war dress called the *batakari kese*, which had been worn by war-waging Asante kings since the inception of the empire-kingdom toward the end of the 1600s. This comprises a series of stitched-together pouches made of different kinds of material (including leather, cloth, silver, and gold) and in various shapes, each embedded with pieces of Qu’ranic scriptural writings and other sacred substances. These “commodities” were sourced from resident clerics in Kumasi and also bought from Muslim traders from the north of Gonja, Dagomba, and other savannah states, where the “Moors” or Islamic merchants have traded with the Asante Kingdom for centuries. The Asantes believed that these charm- and amulet-laden warrior smocks were endowed with supernatural powers that rendered wearers unbeatable in battle (Bowdich 2012:222–24). This war dress would be immortalized on several symbols of nationhood almost a century later in post-colonial Ghana, as we shall see. According to the Manhyia Palace Museum and the National Museum, the *batakari kese* is no longer used for military, but rather for ceremonial purposes; it is now worn only twice in the life of an Asante monarch: at the burial of a deceased king, and by the new Asantehene during his coronation or enstoolment (Fig. 1).

In 1820, the Asantehene Osei Tutu Kwamina had built a military stronghold called the Kumasi Fort, as a replica of the British-owned Cape Coast Castle. It was destroyed by British forces in 1874, but was later rebuilt in 1897 and used by the British District Commissioner as a military launching ground for the final offensive to incorporate the Asante Empire into the expanding British Empire. During Yaa Asantewaa’s military campaign against the British, her forces blockaded all routes leading to Kumasi to prevent the British from capturing the Asante capital. This resulted in

a seven-month-long siege of the British governor and several hundred of his entourage inside the Kumasi Fort. Many of the British forces died as a result of their isolation from resources. The seizure of the Kumasi Fort was only broken when Governor Hodgson managed to escape and returned with greater guns and reinforcements from the Gold Coast Colony, Lagos, and Sierra Leone. In 1901, the British retook the Kumasi Fort, captured Yaa Asantewaa, and imprisoned her and members of her war council in the fort. They were later exiled to the Seychelles Islands to join the Asantehene Prempeh I and the rest of the rebellious royals (Danquah 2002:xiv; *Yaa Asantewaa Festival Brochure* 2006:10). The British also banned the seat of Asantehene, and although Prempeh I was allowed to return to Ghana in 1924, he was prohibited from holding this title. Instead, the British only permitted the Asante king to use the diminished title of Kumasihene or King of Kumasi, which he held until his death in 1931. The imprisonment of opponents and rivals such as Prempeh I was a fairly common penalty enforced by colonial administrations in the annals of the British Empire. It was a strategy of conquest and political suppression which the British would use fairly widely again against other men who would become leaders of several African nation-states, including Kwame Nkrumah. For both Prempeh I and the Nkrumah, going to prison for their stance against British colonialism would prove to be a badge of honor that bolstered their popularity and political power. It was not until January 31, 1935, that the British reconfigured and allowed the title of Asantehene to be reused by the reigning Asante sovereign Otumfuo Nana Osei Tutu Agyeman Prempeh II.

MUSEUMS, MONUMENTS, AND THE MEMORY OF YAA ASANTEWAA

Museums are vanguards of national culture and the material history of a nation and serve many social, cultural, and nation-

4 Emmanuel Quainoo, Senior Museum Guide, showing a group of school children the exhibits of the GAFM, including the Yaa Asantewaa cell and relics. This would have been similar to tours given to schoolchildren at the museum during the Nkrumah period.





5a-b Monument of Yaa Asantewaa, which stands next to statues of Kwame Nkrumah—damaged during the coup against him in 1966—at the National Museum, Accra.



alistic purposes. Ghana currently has over twenty-four museums that are recognized by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a UN-sanctioned international consortium of museums and museum professionals that exists to promote the importance of museums to the cultural and natural heritage of different societies (ICOM 2006). In 1957, the Nkrumah administration established the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB), a governmental agency that was placed in charge of Ghana's national, regional, and thematic museums and monuments. The GMMB professes that the National Museum is "the only place where the true identity of a people can be seen and the cultural hub for the preservation and presentation of the material cultural heritage ... [a museum is] a medium for identity and diversity. It is trite knowledge that the museum houses the cultural soul of a nation." This "soul of a nation" is a primary building block of identity, which is itself an important tenet of nation-building. Moreover, national, regional, and thematic museums not only store the nation's past and present through cultural artifacts, but also display items that exemplify a particular political philosophy of the state, such as nation-building, the codification and display of national identity, and Pan-Africanism.

One such thematic museum that came under the governance of the GMMB was the Ghana Armed Forces Museum (GAFM), otherwise known as the Military Museum. Located in Kumasi—the capital of the Ashanti Region—the GAFM is currently one of only a handful of museums in Africa dedicated to military history. The Military Museum houses items of importance to the military history of the Gold Coast/Ghana, primarily on the Yaa Asantewaa War of 1900–1901, the Gold Coast Regiment, and artifacts documenting the modern military history of the Ghana Armed Forces.

After World War II, the colonial government decided to designate a place to warehouse its war relics used or captured by British forces during their campaigns against the Asantes, as well as in World War I, World War II, and Abyssinia (Ethiopia).

These items included military hardware and ammunition, historical photographs, colors, letters, maps, medals of honor, and other war memorabilia. In 1952–1953 (at the beginning of Nkrumah's apprenticeship as prime minister of the Gold Coast), the old Kumasi Fort was thus taken over by the colonial armed forces and converted into the Museum of the Gold Coast Regiment (MGCR), where these items were exhibited. Since much of these military memorabilia and exhibits were contributed by the Imperial War Museum in London, the MGCR reflected British interpretation of historical events (ICOM 2006). For the British, the MGCR represented their various victories against hostile Asantes in the Gold Coast, Nazi Germans in East Africa, and Fascist Italians in Abyssinia. Through omission from MGCR exhibits, the British colonial government controlled the historical narrative of Yaa Asantewaa and

6 Wax replica of Yaa Asantewaa with rifle at Manhyia Palace Museum, Kumasi
Photo: Chester Higgins Jr. for Manhyia Palace Museum



their war against the Asantes. They portrayed her as a “dangerous subversive,” allowed no statues of her to be erected, and rewarded those who had betrayed her with royal appointments and paraphernalia. Songs also vilified and portrayed her as a coward who had ran away from the battlefield and was vanquished by the British (Day 2000:1).

With the rise in African nationalism across the continent after World War II, there was a new climate that demanded a radical reinterpretation of colonially centered history. After Nkrumah came to full power in 1957, the MGCR was renamed the Ghana Armed Forces Museum, and its mandate was also diver-

gent from that of its predecessor. Although the Museum kept the artifacts bequeathed it by the British after they left, the narratives were changed to reflect Ghana-centric, nationalist versions and reinterpretations of history. The exhibits at the GAFM now underscored the spirit of resistance and resilience of the Ghanaian people in times of national challenges.

The first and only individual to serve as curator of the GAFM while Nkrumah was in office was Bukari Moshie, a former Regimental Sergeant Major in the Gold Coast Regiment. He served as curator from 1952 until 1966, which spanned almost the entire time that Nkrumah presided over the Gold Coast/Ghanaian



7 Yaa Asantewaa Statue in Ejisu, erected in 2009 by the Canadian non-profit organization Yensomu Youth and Community Development.
Photo: Action 4 Reel Flimworks/MACPRI

government (1951–1966). His long custodianship indicates that Nkrumah must have had much faith in his loyalty to the ideology of the Convention People's Party (CPP) and his capabilities of developing exhibits designed to promote nation-building. One key aspect of nation-building was the inclusion of narratives about exemplary women whose values and deeds were to be admired and emulated by other Ghanaian women. In the "Midnight Speech," delivered on the eve of independence at the old British polo grounds, Nkrumah thanked "the chiefs and people of this country, the youth, the farmers, the women who have so nobly fought and won this battle [for independence]" (Nkrumah 1957). Although he did not specifically mention her by name in the independence speech, Nkrumah acknowledged Yaa Asantewaa as a model of African resistance to colonialism in other speeches that he made on anti-colonial nationalism.⁴

When the Nkrumah administration took over the museum in 1952, one of the first exhibitions opened to the public included memorabilia from the British-Yaa Asantewaa War of 1900–1901. According to Retired Major Maxwell O. Tweneboah-Kodua, cura-

tor of the GAFM⁵ and Emmanuel Quainoo, Senior Museum Guide at the GAFM,⁶ Moshie converted the jail cell in which the British had incarcerated Yaa Asantewaa into a public exhibit (Figs. 2–4). Various other relics, such as a rifle similar to the one that she would have used in the war and the cannons used during that war, were also put on display for the public, forming part of the "national memory" of Yaa Asantewaa as an anti-colonial warrior. In addition to opening up the jail cell to the public, the relics and the building itself all performed the function of being repositories and sites of memorializing and remembering the bravery and unity of the "nation" against a common colonial enemy. This was despite the fact that it was the Asante and not the Ghanaian nation-state (which did not yet exist) that fought for the preservation of its empire and survival. Nonetheless, the narrative of Yaa Asantewaa possessed all the ingredients of triumphs, tribulations, and sacrifices for a good cause that is the substance of which national heroes, heroines, and legends are made, even in ultimate defeat.

Defeat notwithstanding, the British-Yaa Asantewaa War symbolized a kind of victory in defeat to Ghanaian nationalists (including Nkrumah), intellectuals, and ordinary people. "Although militarily, Yaa Asantewaa lost the war, psychologically her resistance against the British attempt to dispossess Asante of the precious Golden Stool symbolizes a resounding victory for Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante Kingdom as the Queen of England could not capture the Golden Stool" (Danquah 2002:xii). By redesignating Yaa Asantewaa's jail cell and relics as public exhibits, the Nkrumah regime attempted to convert an Asante warrior woman into a Ghanaian national heroine. In 1960, moreover, the Ghana Educational Trust financed the construction of the Yaa Asantewaa Girl's Secondary School in Kumasi to facilitate the education of young girls and to cultivate future female leaders to follow in the footsteps of Yaa Asantewaa. It was Nkrumah who ensured that the school was named after the Asante warrior queen (Day 2000:1).⁷

Therefore, to Ghanaian nationalists, the GAFM was seen as a site of national resistance against British colonial aggression, as well as the hardly acknowledged participation of Gold Coasters and other Africans in the defence of Britain in its twentieth century world wars. The narrative of Yaa Asantewaa now turned into one of symbolic victory out of physical defeat. The popular story of Yaa Asantewaa promoted by African nationalists now became that of a heroic Pan-African and anti-colonial military and cultural leader who raised an African army to challenge the most powerful colonial force on earth (ICOM 2006). The GAFM then became a site of national resistance against British colonial aggression. The exhibits and tour guides emphasized the critical participation of Gold Coast and other African soldiers and servicemen in the defence of European and African freedom from tyranny in the twentieth century world wars and civil conflicts in Africa.

However, not all of Nkrumah's efforts at appropriating the memory of Yaa Asantewaa in order to cast her as the mother of the nation were as successful as the museum exhibit and the naming of the school in her honor. During his administration as Leader of Government Business of the Gold Coast, Nkrumah had attempted to appropriate Yaa Asantewaa "as a part of the



(clockwise from top left)

8 Obverse and reverse sides of 20 *cedis* banknote with vignette of Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa on front, and June 4 Uprising with soldiers, workers, and a flag procession on back. Issued 1984 and 1986.

9 Obverse and reverse sides of 10,000 *cedis* banknote, with vignettes of “The Big Six,” Independence Monument, and a watermark of Yaa Asantewaa. Issued 2002.

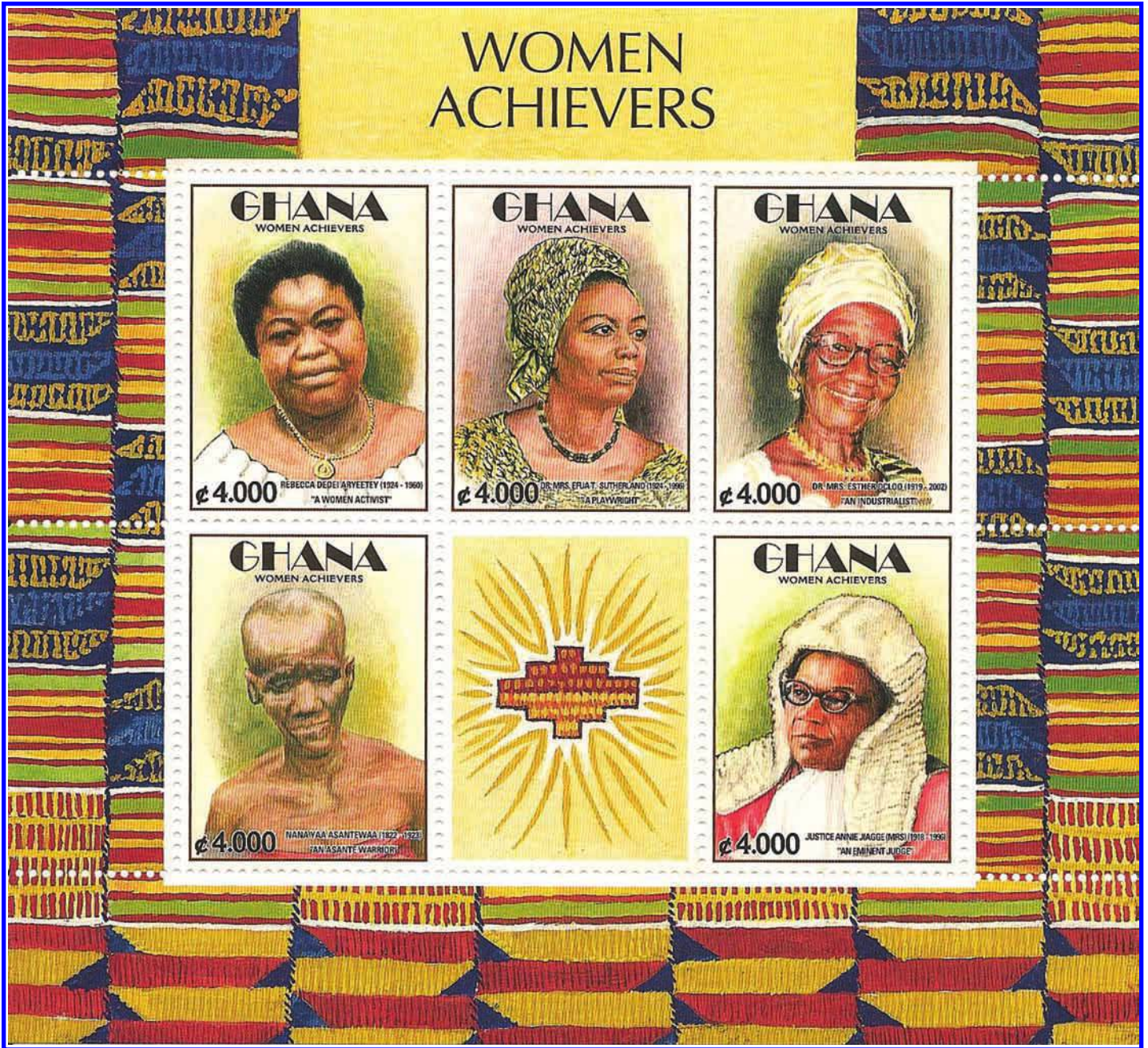
10 Obverse and reverse sides of 20,000 *cedis* banknote, with vignettes of Ephraim Amu, the National Theatre, and a watermark of Yaa Asantewaa. Issued 2002.

11 Nana Yaa Asantewaa was commemorated on Ghanaian currency for the last time during the administration of John Kufuor (2001–2009), when her image appeared as a watermark on 10,000 *cedis* and 20,000 *cedis* banknotes—both issued in 2002.



symbolic and/or revolutionary construction of womanhood.”⁸ However, this project met with limited success given the resistance of Asante officials to allow Nkrumah and his CPP functionaries in Asante, especially Krobo Edusei, to steal this important symbol of Asante resistance. After the 1951 election, James Owusu and other CPP members of the Kumasi Town Council in Ashanti proposed a motion to erect a statue of the “anti-colonial heroine” Yaa Asantewaa in Ejisu or her home town of Boankra. At the same time, the animosities between Nkrumah and the Asante chiefs were steadily building up after the 1951 election. Asante representatives thus rejected the CPP’s initiative and viewed it rather as an affront to their history and sovereignty. The meeting of the Kumasi Town Council “ended in uproar when the anti-

WOMEN ACHIEVERS



12 “Women Achievers” stamp series, featuring Nana Yaa Asantewaa (lower left) along with women’s rights activist Rebecca Deedei Aryeetey; Judge Annie Jagge; playwright and educationist Efiat Sutherland; and Dr. Esther Ocloo, an industrialist. Issued 2003.

CPP members said Yaa Asantewaa was an Asante not a Ghanaian, and that the ‘southern tribes’ had never fought the British” Despite this utter rejection of his initial attempt at nationalizing the symbolism of Yaa Asantewaa, Nkrumah did not give up on the issue. He subsequently contemplated the creation of a “women’s garden” in Accra, honoring heroic Ghanaian “resisters” like Yaa Asantewaa with statues to be made in China or Yugoslavia.⁹

In 1977, the giant statue of Nkrumah that stood in front of Parliament House, which had been toppled by an angry mob during the 1966 coup, was recovered, repaired, and mounted on the grounds of the National Museum (GMMB 1977; GMMB 1982). Between 1986 and 1987, the College of Art of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi made a sculpture collection for the sculpture garden of the National Museum, which included a statue of Yaa Asantewaa dressed in *batakari kese* and rifle in hand (Fig. 5). The pose of her statue and the shape of her mouth positions her as a leader taking a major step forward, shouting orders or commands to her followers to take some kind of action. The statue was incidentally juxtaposed to the two Nkrumah statues.¹⁰ The juxtaposition of both statues presents Yaa Asantewaa as the Mother of the Nation and Kwame Nkrumah as the Father of the Nation.

The reinterpretations of the historical trajectory and mean-

ing of the Yaa Asantewaa War of 1900–1901 at Ghanaian museums continued from the Nkrumah era to the 2000s, during John Kufuor’s administration. During tours at the GAFM, for example, Ghanaian school children and tourists, including Ghanaians residing abroad, are lectured on the significance of the Yaa Asantewaa War to Ghanaian national history and pride and the importance of national unity to Ghanaian/African advancement. Her legacy is heralded as a measure of the resistance of the Ghanaian national stock against any form of aggression, whether domestic or foreign. Museum officials also use her story to remind Ghanaians about the need for and consequences of lacking national unity. On a visit in 2006, for example, Emmanuel Quainoo, senior tour guide at the GAFM, argued that Yaa Asantewaa was betrayed by a local turncoat, which resulted in the military defeat of the Asante alliance. “Had it not been for this betrayal [of some Asantes against Yaa Asantewaa], Ghana’s and Africa’s history would have been different today.”¹¹ Moreover, Yaa Asantewaa’s jail cell as a museum site has come to memorialize both the individual and her struggles against colonialism in Ghana, in a similar way as Nelson Mandela’s Robben Island jail cell became an important pilgrimage cite symbolizing the man and his struggles against and triumph over the apartheid regime in South Africa.

During Nkrumah’s reign, the CPP placed restrictions on the development of museums that his administration deemed “tribal” in nature, that is, those that highlighted specific ethno-regional groups as opposed to the nation as a whole. This policy led to the conversion or nationalization of entities such as the Asante Cultural Centre, which was renamed the Centre of National Ghanaian Culture. Nkrumah’s nationalization of the Asante Cultural Centre was a part of his policy to subsume the rich Asante history, culture, and traditions as part of the glorious national history and culture.

After Nkrumah’s death in the 1970s, the Asantes were able to eventually construct museums and monuments to represent their own royal history and culture. In Kumasi, various royal and historical museums, monuments, street sculptures, and centers of culture were erected to highlight the contribution of the Asante Empire to the Ghanaian nation-state, especially in terms of the legacy of the various Asante kings and the lesser chiefs. These included the Manhyia Palace Museum, which was established in 1995 as a royal museum dedicated to the history of the Asante kings; the Prempeh II Jubilee Museum; the New Juaben Palace Museum; and the Centre for National Culture, formerly the Kumasi Cultural Centre (ICOM 2006). In front of the Okomfo Anokye Teaching Hospital in Kumasi, the artist Azzii Akator erected a statue of the priest Okomfo Anokye summoning the Golden Stool from the heavens. Akator also built a monument of Asantehene Otumfuo Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II (who reigned from 1931–1970) in Odum—the highest point in the colonial area of Kumasi (Hess 2006:63–64). A wax statue of Yaa Asantewaa with her rifle laying in her lap forms one of the main exhibits at the Manhyia Palace Museum (Fig. 6). The statue depicts her wearing a black *adinkra* cloth, which symbolizes both mourning, as when worn at funerals, and celebration, for instance, when worn at installation ceremonies for new chiefs or when commemorating previous royals.

In 2000, week-long centenary celebrations were held in Ghana (which will be further explored later) to acknowledge Yaa Asantewaa’s accomplishments. As part of these celebrations, the Yaa Asantewaa Museum was established in Kwaso in the Ejisu-Juaben District on August 3, 2000. Unfortunately, on July 23, 2004, a fire there destroyed several personal and historical items, including her sandals and battle dress seen in the iconic photograph, monuments, and currency on which she is depicted, which forced the building to be temporarily closed (ICOM 2006).



13 Banner for the biannual Yaa Asantewaa Festival in Odum, Kumasi, 2006.

The most recent monument of Yaa Asantewaa iconically depicts her clad in her *batakari kese* battle dress, clutching a rifle, towering atop a base surrounded by *adinkra* symbols (Fig. 7). Erected in Ejisu, it was funded not by the government of Ghana or the Asante regional administration, but by a Canadian nonprofit organization founded by a Jamaican immigrant in Toronto, turned chief in a rural village in Ghana (Tancock 2010). The caption on the monument reads, “Yaa Asantewaa Queen General (Okatakyiwaa). This statue was donated to the people of Ghana by Yensomu Youth and Community Development and the African-Canadian Community on 5th May 2009.” This highlights the appeal of Yaa Asantewaa’s symbolic rebirth not only to Ghanaians, but also to many people in the global African Diaspora.

COMMEMORATING YAA ASANTEWAA ON MONEY AND POSTAGE STAMPS

After staging a successful *coup d’état* in June 1979 and briefly governing Ghana as chairman of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), Flight Lieutenant Jerry John “J.J.” Rawlings handed over power to a civilian government, for a short period.¹² In the 1980s, he served a second, and much longer term as chairman of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) for a decade.¹³ During this time, the likeness of Yaa Asantewaa was minted on Ghanaian money—a 20 *cedis* banknote issued in 1986. On the obverse side of the note, she was depicted attired in a *batakari kese* war dress and associated headdress (Fig. 8).

The front of the 20 *cedis* note also carried other symbols that were utilized by the Rawlings regime as propaganda to iconographically present a narrative to a mass audience about his own militancy, to express his political philosophy and path to power. Beside the image of Nana Yaa Asantewaa, a composite logo with the phrase “Freedom or Death” is arched over a clenched fist, the universal salute and symbol of defiance, resistance, strength, sol-

idarity, support, and unity. At the bottom of this logo is the Akan phrase “Gye Nyame” taken from the *adinkra* symbol which means “Except God” or “I fear nobody except God,” symbolizing “the supremacy, power, and domination of God over all situations and creations. He is therefore regarded as the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent” (Agbo 1999:3). As in the 1900–1901 war that Nana Yaa Asantewaa spearheaded, the phrase “Freedom or Death” was historically used by Ghanaian nationalists in the spirit of the anti-colonial movement and the rhetoric of freedom from corrupt and inept governments. “Gye Nyame” epitomizes the centrality of the belief in divine assistance and justice in human affairs, notions which were important in the long struggle in the Gold Coast for independence from Great Britain, as well as the belief held by many of Rawlings’s supporters that his leadership was ordained by God.¹⁴ Furthermore, the scene on the reverse side of the 20 *cedis* note (Fig. 8) depicts a flag procession of workers and warriors armed with rifles, spears, bows and arrows, machetes, drums, and farming tools, led by a torch bearer. Above this group are three larger headshots of a mine-worker, female school graduate, and military official, as well as a freestanding hand clenching an elephant’s tail. The Ghanaian flag, with its prominent black star, is depicted waving toward the side. The vignette is most likely an illustration and commemoration of the June 4th Uprising/Revolution of 1979, when junior officers loyal to Rawlings from the Ghana Army rescued him from jail and the death sentence that had been imposed by the regime of Lieutenant General Frederick William Kwasi “F.W.K.” Akuffo, chairman of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) II.¹⁵ In a 2006 speech in London, Rawlings argued that the June 4th Uprising commenced in response to a popular revolt against the corrupt and inadequate SMC regime, where the people, especially university students, took to the streets shouting “Let the blood flow” (Rawlings 2006, Gocking 2005:180). The image of



14 Banner for the 2006 Yaa Asantewaa Festival and Trade Fair at the National Cultural Centre, Kumasi.

an elephant's tail is significant, as the elephant itself is a symbol of leadership, power, wealth, and status. Many traditional chiefs in Ghana and other parts of Africa use the elephant's tail as a fly-whisk. The Akan proverb, "Though the elephant's tail is short, it can nevertheless keep flies off the elephant," attests to the chief's or leader's ability to solve problems, notwithstanding any shortcomings that he may have.¹⁶ This message of working with the limited resources at one's disposal would have served Rawlings well, especially in the 1980s, which is often described as the "lost decade" in Africa due to the austerity programs imposed on developing countries like Ghana by the Bretton-Woods institutions, among other factors.

The iconography of the 20 *cedis* banknote was meant to justify and align Yaa Asantewaa's legacy of taking up arms against an imperial enemy with Rawlings's history of taking up arms to purge the Ghanaian government of his adversaries, whenever he deemed it necessary. The depiction of a university student, women, mine workers, and other people from the masses was also meant to pander to his political base, which was responsible for his coming to and maintenance of power. The last time that Nana Yaa Asantewaa would be commemorated on Ghanaian currency was during the administration of John Kufuor (2001–2009), when her image appeared as a watermark on the then highest denomination notes—the 10,000 and 20,000 *cedis* banknotes—both issued in 2002 (Figs. 9–11).

In addition to Ghanaian currency, Yaa Asantewaa has also been immortalized on postage stamps. These "tiny transmitters of nationalist and colonial ideology" (Cusack 2005) are similar to currencies in that they are considered "legal tender" issued by national governments and protected with harsh penalties against forgery and counterfeiting. Despite their small size, they can be imprinted with detailed iconography with political propaganda to promote nation-building projects, highlight historical personalities, and send other messages. In 2003, as Figure 12 depicts, Ghana Post "issued five new millennium stamps in various denominations in honour of five distinguished Ghanaian women who have made special contributions in their various fields of endeavour" (*Modern Ghana News* 2003). One of those "Women Achievers" and "daughters of the nation" was Nana Yaa Asantewaa, who "exhibited outstanding courage, hitherto unknown to the women [of Asante] by mobilising the people of Asante to fight the British in one of the bloodiest wars ever fought on Asante soil" (*Modern Ghana News* 2003). Despite Ghana's attempt to portray the strength and resilience of Yaa Asantewaa, the photograph that appears on the stamp, ironically, is one that the British took of her during her capture and forced exile to the Seychelles Islands, which shows her looking down and dejected. Nonetheless, Yaa Asantewaa was memorialized through this philatelic medium as one of the "great heroines of our soil and of womanhood," because she "has become a symbol of courage and justice ... against dictatorship, who placed the value of her people above her own values at the peril of her safety and life" (*Modern Ghana News* 2003).

CELEBRATING AN ASANTE AND GHANAIAN NATIONAL HEROINE

Events such as festivals are "significant events in the life of a community for the transmission of culture ... [and] in the cul-

tural life of the nation as a whole ... traditional festivals [are important] factors of public education and information, communal interaction and cohesion in the localities" (National Commission on Culture 2004:36). In Ghana, they are also a crucial aspect of national development planning, being the prime substance of the culture industry that supports tourism, "a means by which the wealth of cultural products and values are shared with the rest of the world towards the promotion of our common humanity and global understanding" (National Commission on Culture 2004:39).

Beginning in 2000, a biennial festival was launched to celebrate the centenary and legacy of the Yaa Asantewaa War, which took place at her birthplace in Edweso (now Ejisu) as well as in Kumasi (Figs. 13–14). The Yaa Asantewaa Festival was organized by a consortium of Chiefs and Queen Mothers, cultural organizations, educational institutions, government agencies, media houses, NGOs, and commercial interests. A second Yaa Asantewaa festival was held August 1–5, 2006, in Ejisu. The theme of the 2006 Yaa Asantewaa Festival was "Celebrating the Heroism of the African Woman." As the Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II (the reigning king of the Asante people and the occupant of the Golden Stool) noted, the Yaa Asantewaa Festival was inaugurated to preserve "the golden ideals for which Yaa Asantewaa stood for—bravery, fortitude, the determination to uphold and protect the spirit and symbolism of the Golden Stool, the commitment to Asanteman [the Asante nation] unity and pride" (*Yaa Asantewaa Festival Brochure* 2006:1). Although these ideals were expressed specifically in relation to Asanteman and can be seen as a form of subnationalism, the Otumfuo also acknowledged their wider significance for Ghanaian nationalism. "The Yaa Asantewaa Festival has grown to become a national affair, an international symbol of the heroism that women like Yaa Asantewaa represented ... I would like to urge all the youth ... particularly the African girl-youth, to study hard and emulate the virtues of women like Yaa Asantewaa which till today have been preserved to give dignity and pride to all women on the continent and in the diaspora" (*Yaa Asantewaa Festival Brochure* 2006:1).

In underscoring the importance of the Yaa Asantewaa Festival to nation-building, the Asantehemaa (Queen Mother of the Asante Kingdom), Nana Afia Kobi Serwaa Ampem, noted that, "Yaa Asantewaa's name brings goose pimples to some of us because we cherish the heroism of this great Queenmother. Yaa Asantewaa brought dignity to the Ghanaian and African woman ... May our children, and our children's children grow stronger each day to fight injustices, indignities, and greed" (*Yaa Asantewaa Festival Brochure* 2006:3). The three vices mentioned by the Asantehemaa have deep roots in the historical encounter between the British and the Asantes and also helped to form the basis of Ghanaian anticolonial nationalism.

The historical significance of Yaa Asantewaa notwithstanding, festivals organized to celebrate her legacy also have economic ends in mind. For a so-called developing country such as Ghana, history is more than just a study of the past. It is a vital tool for socioeconomic development. As with other festivals in Ghana that highlight the rich cultural heritage of the country, the Yaa Asantewaa Festival was on the radar of academics, wom-

en's rights activists, and tourists, including Africans on the continent, but especially people from the African Diaspora, the latter representing the vast majority of tourists that come to Ghana annually. They flock to cultural events such as Panafest and chiefly durbars, making pilgrimages to UNESCO-sanctioned historical sites such as the Elmina and Cape Coast slave "castles," researching their roots and interrogating the history and impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The 2006 Yaa Asantewaa Festival was partially designed to target this African American market. It was to feature a vigil and reenactment of the historic war at Ejisu, a mock battle of the Asante seizure at Kumasi Fort/the Military Museum, a cultural show at the Kumasi Cultural Centre (featuring dramatizations about Yaa Asantewaa and patriotic songs), a trade fair, a "Women's Day" featuring durbars of Asante Queen Mothers, women's rights activists, and the recognition of other black heroines, as well as an intellectual colloquium to discuss the role of women in Ghanaian history and contemporary society (*Yaa Asantewaa Festival Brochure 2006*, *Ghanaian Times* 2006:17). However, due to lack of proper planning and media miscommunications, not all these events took place and the festival itself was rather lackluster. While the Yaa Asantewaa Festival is still placed on the calendar of Asante celebrations, it has not overtaken other traditional and long established events in Kumasi, such as the Akwasidae and Adaye Kese Festivals.

CONCLUSION

The last major Asante War of Resistance against British imperialist expansion in 1900–1901 ended in the military defeat of the Asante Empire, the capture and exile of the Asantehene Prempeh I and his royal court, and the incorporation of the Asante people into the British Empire as a dependency of the Gold Coast Colony. One hundred years later, at the dawn of the new millennium, ordinary Ghanaians, as well as politicians, scholars, and people of African descent in the Diaspora, had the occasion to reflect on and reevaluate the importance of this Asante woman who became the last hope for the survival of her kingdom.

Despite her significance to the Ghanaian past, some Ghanaian intellectuals believe that Yaa Asantewaa's legacy has not been adequately incorporated into the fabric of Ghanaian history. They contend that this may be due to the fact that she was a woman and that African scholars have not shown enough enthusiasm about chronicling their own history (*Yaa Asantewaa Festival Brochure 2006*:11). In this article, however, I have shown that throughout the nearly sixty years of Ghanaian independence, Yaa Asantewaa's historic actions have been immortalized and commemorated through symbols of nationhood, including money, postage stamps, museum exhibits, monuments, and festivals. These symbols served as tools to symbolically resurrect her from the dead of history, presenting her as an icon to which the nation, the African continent, and the Diaspora should look up and emulate.

Beginning in the early 1950s, Kwame Nkrumah sought to appropriate the memory of Yaa Asantewaa and elevate her memory as a symbol of African resistance against European colonialism, but to encourage other women to sacrifice for the new nation-state, which he sought to build. This was especially evident through the Yaa Asantewaa War exhibit at the Ghana

Armed Forces Museum. However, given the strong opposition that Nkrumah's policies faced from the majority of Asantes, his efforts to claim Yaa Asantewaa as a national (and not merely an Asante) heroine were constantly frustrated.

During the Rawlings, Kufuor, and Mills periods, from the 1980s to the 2000s, moreover, Yaa Asantewaa's image and associated iconography were minted and printed on Ghanaian currency and postage stamps. Museum exhibits and monuments were built by both state and non-state actors in celebration of her bravery. The commemoration of historic personalities also serves the economic needs of Ghana, which is dependent on tourism for foreign exchange. The Yaa Asantewaa Festival, for example, attempted to not only resurrect her memory, but bring in needed revenues, generate employment for local, regional, and national stakeholders, and help to maintain the infrastructure necessary to sustain nation-building.

In 2007, when Ghana commemorated fifty years of independence from Great Britain, history and the people who made history in the name of nationalism and nation-building were among the major aspects of the year-long commemorations. The Golden Jubilee celebrations recalled how the Golden Stool, symbol of Asante nationhood, was defended by a warrior queen called Nana Yaa Asantewaa in 1900–1901, as well as the role of the founding fathers ("the Big Six"), particularly Kwame Nkrumah, in the construction of the Ghanaian nation-state. In much of the literature and popular media articles emanating from the Yaa Asantewaa War Centennial, Yaa Asantewaa was portrayed as an ordinary Asante/Ghanaian woman (housewife, mother, and farmer), who rose to the call of "national" service as a military general when Asanteman was threatened, first after the capture and banishment of their king, Prempeh I, and then when British Governor Hodgson demanded the Golden Stool for himself. However, Yaa Asantewaa was more than an "ordinary" woman. She was a Queen Mother from the Asona Royal Court of Ejisu who wielded tremendous sociocultural, spiritual, and political power among her people. And when the sovereignty of Asante was challenged, she demonstrated courage, resolve, and resilience in the face of overwhelming British military might. Ghanaian nationalists insisted that the virtues of Yaa Asantewaa were to be emulated by modern Ghanaian citizens. History is important to nation-building and nationalism because it can remind the nation about the sacrifices that certain historical characters had to make to get the nation to where it is today, and the examples that must be taken by "ordinary" citizens from such personages in order to move the nation to the next stage of its development.

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Notes

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- 1 In each Akan state, the Queen Mother wields considerable power, such as choosing who becomes king or queen.
- 2 In the 1980s, there were also other important works chronicling the story of Yaa Asantewaa and other women leaders in African history, including Arhin (1983) and Sweetman (1984).
- 3 Asante history maintains that the sacred Golden Stool was commissioned from the heavens by the seventeenth century priest-prophet Okomfo Anokye, who warned the Asantes that, without the sacred Stool, the unity of Asanteman would disintegrate and their empire would crumble. See Danquah 2002:xi, xiii.
- 4 Ivor Agyeman-Duah, e-mail message to author, August 30, 2009.
- 5 Retired Major Maxwell O. Tweneboa-Kodua, curator of the GAFM, e-mail message to author, August 26, 2009.
- 6 Emmanuel Quainoo, Senior Museum Guide at the GAFM, personal communication, July 27, 2006.
- 7 Ivor Agyeman-Duah, e-mail message to author, August 30, 2009.
- 8 T.C. McCaskie, e-mail message to author, September 1, 2009.
- 9 T.C. McCaskie, e-mail message to author, September 1, 2009.
- 10 Zagba Oyorley, Executive Director, GMMB, email message to author, January 23, 2014.
- 11 Emmanuel Quainoo, Senior Museum Guide at the GAFM, personal communication, July 27, 2006.
- 12 Almost four months after the June 4th Uprising, Rawlings relinquished his rule (on September 24, 1979) to the civilian government of Dr. Hilla Limann's People's National Party (PNP). However, Rawlings soon after became dissatisfied with Limann's leadership and staged another coup to oust him on December 31, 1981. Rawlings would remain in power for almost two decades.
- 13 Rawlings held this position from December 1981 to January 1993, after which he held democratic elections, which he won. He then hung up his military uniform, dropped his military title, and became president of Ghana and his party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), from January 1993 to January 2001.
- 14 After his first attempted (and failed) coup in 1979, the masses of Ghanaians referred to him as "Junior Jesus"—a play on his initials (J.J.).
- 15 Rawlings had been jailed for leading junior officers of the Ghana Air Force in a failed coup on May

15, 1979 against the SMC government, which lasted from July 5, 1978 until June 4, 1979. See Gocking 2005:179–80.

16 Fowler Museum at UCLA. "Elephant: The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture." <http://www.fowler.ucla.edu/category/exhibitions-education/elephant-animal-and-its-ivory-african-culture>; accessed January 23, 2014.

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