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# YAA ASANTEWAA

AND THE  
ASANTE — BRITISH WAR OF  
*1900-1*

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## *Chapter One*

# THE OUTBREAK OF THE YAA ASANTEWAA WAR

TO THE BRITISH, THIS WAR was the Asante Rebellion or the Asante Campaign of 1900; to the Asante, it was the Yaa Asantewaa Sa or the Asantewaa War of Independence! Whatever its designation, it is certainly the most famous, the most interesting, and the most decisive of the Anglo-Asante wars that began in the nineteenth century. In the first place, it was the last war of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth century. The first shot was fired at Barekese on 2 April 1900, and the War did not finally end until March 1901. Never again have the Asante and the British clashed on the battlefield. It was the last war between the Asante and the British. Secondly, it is certainly the best known of what an American scholar has termed, with some exaggeration, as "the Hundred-Year War for Africa's Gold Coast."<sup>1</sup> While it can be said that not many people, both Asante and British, remember or know about the Asante and British wars of 1807, 1824, 1826, 1873-4 and 1896, practically every Asante and many British still remember the Asante Rebellion or the Asante Campaign of 1900. Thirdly, it was certainly the most bloody, fiercely contested and protracted of the wars.

In 1874, the British army under Sir Garnet Wolseley entered Kumasi, the capital city of Asante, on 4 January, looted and set it on fire on 5 January, and left on 6 January. On January 17, 1896, Sir Francis Scott and his assistant,

Major Baden-Powell, entered Kumasi at the head of a British military contingent. On 20 January, they arrested Prempeh, the Asantehene, his parents, his younger brother and heir-apparent, and a number of Asante kings (*amanhene*) and chiefs. The force left for the coast on 22 January. In 1900, the then British Governor of Ghana, Sir Frederick Hodgson, entered Kumasi on 25 March. His demand for the Golden Stool of the Asante on 28 March led to the first shot of the War by the Asante at Barekese on 2 April. Although military engagements ceased after 3 December 1900 – when the British Commander, General Willcocks, left Kumasi – the War was not formally over until the surrender of Yaa Asantewaa on 3 March 1901.

Significantly, the Asante War of 1900-1 was the only war in which the leader and commander-in-chief of the Asante army, was a woman. She was an old woman of about 60 years at the time, namely, Nana Yaa Asantewaa, Queen of Edweso, one of the component states of the Asante Union. All these unique features of this War certainly make it the most famous and the most memorable of the Anglo-Asante wars.

What, then, were the causes of this War? Who were the commanders and leaders of the war? What strategies and weapons were used? What were the phases of the War? Who was Nana Yaa Asantewaa, and what was her role in this War? How justifiable is the designation of this War as the Yaa Asantewaa War? Finally, what was the outcome of the War and what were its consequences and significance? These are the questions that will be examined in this book.

What precipitated this War? The remote causes of the War were first, the refusal of the Asante to accept or reconcile themselves to the arrest and deportation of Prempeh I and his family and chiefs; and second, the imposition of

direct British colonial rule on Asante between 1896 and 1900. The immediate cause that precipitated the War was the highly provocative and arrogant speech delivered to the Asante chiefs on 28 March 1900 by Sir Frederick Hodgson, the then Governor of the Gold Coast.

As the Scramble for Africa gained momentum in the 1880s, and the areas adjacent to the Gold Coast were annexed by the French and the Germans, Britain felt compelled to extend her control north of the coastal and southern areas of the Gold Coast which she had annexed in 1874 to forestall their occupation by either the French or the Germans. In 1891, therefore, Britain offered a treaty of protection to Asante and some of the states further north such as Attebubu and Nkoranza. Prempeh I rejected this offer and he did so again when it was repeated in 1895. Instead, he sent a high-powered delegation to England in 1895 to negotiate a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the British. The British rejected this offer, and while the delegation was still in England launched the invasion of Asante in January 1896. After the entry of the British army into Kumasi, Prempeh resisted the pressure of his chiefs and advisers to fight the British and rather peacefully submitted to the British and accepted protectorate status. The British, nevertheless, illegally arrested him, his family and some of his chiefs on 20 January 1896, looted the palace and desecrated the Bantama mausoleum. Prempeh and his entourage were then deported, first to Cape Coast, and then to Elmina where they were kept until December 1896. The Asante political prisoners were moved to Freetown in the more distant colony of Sierra Leone, arriving there on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1897. The outbreak of the Yaa Asantewaa war led to the transfer of the Asante prisoners in August 1900 to an Indian Ocean Island of the Seychelles. They arrived there in September 1900.

Had the Asante accepted the arrest and deportation of their King, all would have been well. But they could not, and did not, accept it. As Fuller, who wrote his account of this event only twenty years later put it, "The sudden and unexpected deportation of their Monarch appeared to daze the Ashantis. They became listless and supine."<sup>2</sup> This is confirmed by Asante oral traditions: the Asante considered the arrest and exile of their king not only a betrayal, but also as an illegal and treacherous act. They therefore refused to accept it and as soon as they recovered from their shock, swore to do all they could to get their monarch back using mainly peaceful and diplomatic means. Thus, in July 1896, the Asante raised money by direct taxation to hire two lawyers to present a petition to the Government for the release of Prempeh and the others, but the Colonial Office rejected the petition. The Asante also genuinely believed that the deposition and exile would be temporary and could not last for more than three or four years. This explains their refusal to resort to arms during the first four years. As will be seen below, it was the categorical statement of the Governor on 28 March 1900 that Prempeh would never be repatriated, that precipitated the Yaa Asantewaa War of 1900.

The second remote cause of the War was the nature of the colonial rule imposed on the Asante. Though the British did not conquer Asante because of the peaceful submission of the Asantehene, they proceeded politically to treat it quite illegally as a conquered territory and therefore imposed direct colonial rule on it.<sup>3</sup> They first of all completely dissolved the Asante Union by signing a treaty of protection with each of the component states granting each of them internal self-government and placing each under the direct supervision and jurisdiction of the British Resident Minister, Captain Donald Stewart. Secondly,

they set up a Native Committee of three chiefs in 1896, to assist the Resident Minister to administer Kumasi and the Kumasi state. The members were Opoku Mensa, (Obua-basa), the Gyaasewahene, Kwaku Nantwi, a veteran linguist and Kwame Agyei of the Bantama division, who died towards the end of the year and was replaced by Kwame Afrifa of Atwema, the Toasehene. This committee was strictly forbidden from interfering in the affairs of the other states of the Union and to confine its activities to Kumasi and its surrounding villages.

Thirdly, the British built the fort from stones collected from the demolished palace of Osei Bonsu in 1874, which they garrisoned with Hausa soldiers. They set up a Magistrate's Court and a Resident's Court, which steadily encroached on the judicial powers of the Asante chiefs, even trying cases involving the Great Oath of Asante. Fourthly, the Asante were asked to perform compulsory labour, such as the construction of roads and buildings, and the carrying of goods, which they found humiliating and intolerable. Fifthly, they were asked to pay the war indemnity imposed on them by the Fomena Treaty of 1874 at an annual rate of 2000 *praduan* (£160,000), and the Governor, as we shall see below, indicated the amount to be paid by each state. The British also insisted that missionaries should be allowed to operate in Asante, and in June 1896 Ramseyer and Khune of the Basel Mission Society entered Kumasi to establish a missionary station. The British further insisted that people from the coast should be allowed to enter, live and trade freely in Asante. Finally, the British abolished slavery and imposed a contingent and constabulary of Hausa soldiers on the Asante.

All these new colonial arrangements, which were rigidly enforced between 1896 and 1900, greatly infuriated and humiliated the Asante. The chiefs and the Native

Committee strongly objected to and resisted the dissolution of the Union. They rather suggested the establishment of a provisional government to be headed by the Mamponhene, Owusu Sekyere, and the Kokofuhene, Asibe, "to exercise full control in the name of the Golden Stool over all subordinate kings, chiefs and tribes".<sup>4</sup> They also insisted on trying all cases involving the swearing of the Great Oath of Asante and throughout the next four years tried to establish their control over the whole region and especially over the Ahafo and Bono areas. Some Asante young men and *Akonkofo* (rich men), like Osei Mampon, Kofi Nsenkyire, Yaw Berko, Kwaku Dua Gare, Akwasi Traa, Moosi, Prince Kofi Nti Takra, Kwame Tua, Kwasi Nuama and Bosompra emerged to assist the British Resident, and their rude and insolent behaviour further enraged the chiefs and members of the Committee. It is significant, as we shall see below, that it was these young men who were later selected by the British to fill the stools vacated by the political prisoners and exiles. These young men took advantage of their close relationship with the British to "molest the people and extort money from them and so became very rich".<sup>5</sup>

The activities of the numerous strangers — the Fante, Ga, Hausa, Kwahu and others from the Northern Territories — who poured into Kumasi to trade and work under the colonial free trade policy, annoyed the Asante as they challenged established Asante economic interests. Fante scholars entered many parts of Asante and were accused of robbing and extorting large sums of money from the Asante people. Many posed as rubber traders in the Ahafo and Bono areas where they even set up illegal courts and imposed heavy and arbitrary fines in gold and rubber on the innocent citizens. The Hausa troops of the Constabulary also took the law into their own hands and "bullied

and molested Asante citizens, committed assault and rape and forced many Asante girls into concubinage".<sup>6</sup> All this created an atmosphere of disorder and anarchy in different parts of Asante for which the colonial administration was held responsible.

The granting of many gold mining concessions, including that of the Ashanti Goldfields at Obuasi between October 1895 and December 1900, and the assumption of concession rights and royalties by the colonial government further alarmed and enraged Asante chiefs and land owners. This became one of the major causes of the 1900 War. It should be emphasized that it was the concession of the Ashanti Goldfield Corporation in 1897 that caused a sharp division between the Adansehene and the Bekwaihene and drove the latter to the side of the British, while the Adansehene remained loyal to the Golden Stool and joined the War of Independence.

The rigid enforcement of the anti-slavery laws also created widespread discontent in Asante since it endangered the domestic economy. As Vroom reported:

It may be remarked generally that Ashanti-land is at present unsettled. There are feelings of dissatisfaction in many parts of Ashanti arising from our interference with the question of slavery: so great a social change could not be effected without endangering feelings of irritation, or even incurring some risks.<sup>7</sup>

And Governor Hodgson in his letter of 29 January 1901 to the Colonial Office observed:

The abolition of slavery and human sacrifices was a matter of course upon the occupation of Ashanti but it was inevitable that there would be discontent in consequence. The West

African native holds very tenaciously to ancient customs, and the inability of the Ashantis to obtain slaves seriously interfered with their livelihood. They found themselves unable to obtain a sufficient number of labourers to work in the native gold pits and to carry on their farming operations.<sup>8</sup>

As Vroom reported, the increasing activities of the missionaries, including the opening of schools and their attacks on Asante customs, also enraged most of the traditional rulers who opposed these activities as endangering Asante religion, culture and economic interests. The unwholesome nature and impact of these missionary activities is confirmed by Vroom, who, in his report on his Mission to Asante in June 1897, noted:

The occupation of Ashanti land by the English has opened a large field for missionary enterprises. There are already 13 Basel Missionary schools with 209 pupils and 6 Wesleyan Schools with 182 pupils. The Mission work is progressing satisfactorily. I regret, however, to note that some of the agents would not keep away from interfering with the native chiefs and their palavers.<sup>9</sup>

The general mood of the Asante by the middle of 1897, is evident from Vroom's conclusion:

To a casual observer, the country may appear peacefully settled by the seeming rebuilding and repopulation of a few towns and villages, but the careful observer will not fail to see that much remains to be done by judicious administration before the country could be considered as settled. Those districts who opposed Prempeh or revolted from his rule entertain grave doubts as to our future domestic policy, or intentions of the Government, particularly with Prempeh.<sup>10</sup>

But these conditions grew worse with the years and by the end of 1899, most of the Asante were on the verge of rebellion. What then touched off the Asante War of 1900-1?

### *The Onset and Causes of the Yaa Asantewaa War*

Even though in their interviews, some of the leaders, as will be shown below, denied that there were any plans for the rebellion before Hodgson's speech, other oral and documentary evidence show that the actual plotting and preparation for the War began in February 1900, when Hodgson sent a secret mission to Kumasi under the command of Captain C. H. Armitage to search for the Golden Stool. This mission was sent on the basis of information supplied by one Kwadwo Asumen of Edweso, a servant of Yaw Awua and Yaw Atwereboana. Atwereboana's unsuccessful bid for the Golden Stool had plunged Asante into civil war between 1884 and 1888, which ended with the installation of Prempeh as Asantehene. According to Kumasi oral traditions collected in the 1940s by Prempeh II and his team:

Four years after this (i.e. the arrest of Prempeh), Kwadwo Asumen of Dweso, who was a court-crier and who was living in Accra with Barima Yaw Atwereboana and Yaw Awuah, went to report to the Governor, that he could betray the hiding-place of the Golden Stool, provided the Governor ensured his safety. Kwadwo Asumen's uncle was Kwadwo Apang. On hearing this, the Governor F.M. Hodgson sent Captain C.H. Armitage and some Hausa soldiers with some labourers, who brought with them shovels

and pickaxes, to accompany Kwadwo Asumen to Ashanti to search for the Golden Stool. When they arrived in Ashanti, Asumen led them to Bare, where it was suspected that the Golden Stool had been kept. Asumen, however, became sorely afraid afterwards that he would be killed if he was found out. On their arrival at Bare, he showed them certain places where the Golden Stool was supposed to have been hidden. The labourers were ordered to dig out, but they did not find the Stool, so they went back to Accra.<sup>11</sup>

According to the same source, after the failure to find the Golden Stool, Kwadwo Asumen escaped to a nearby village, Ahodwo, and told the chief there about this secret mission. The chief reported this to Opoku Mensa who in turn informed the whole of Ashanti by private messengers of the Governor's intention to acquire the Golden Stool. As a result, they all drank fetish "that if at any time, any attempts were made by the Governor for the seizure of the Golden Stool, they would fight". This source continues that: "fetish was administered to the chiefs by Okyeame Kwaku Kumasi, Okyeame Yaw Pense, Kwaku Safo and Kofi Fofie Kaserepa, Nkonsonhene. The following four chiefs did not drink fetish because they were not consulted by the Kumasi Elders - Yaw Sapong, Dwabenhene; Kwasi Sekyere, Mamponhene; Kwame Afram, Kumawuhene; and Kwame Boakye, Agonahene." From this time, the account continues: "the Kumasi chiefs began to make private preparations by purchasing muskets and ammunition from the coast".<sup>12</sup>

But what precipitated the War was the speech delivered by the Governor at the meeting with the Asante chiefs in front of the Fort on 28 March 1900. In this speech, Governor Hodgson made a number of highly provocative declarations. First, he stated categorically that neither

Prempeh nor Barima Atwereboana would ever be allowed to return to Kumasi and that the British Resident would administer Kumasi. Secondly, the Asante could be called upon for compulsory labour, such as carrying goods, constructing roads, building houses and carrying mail and luggage. Thirdly, interest on the war indemnity imposed on Asante after the Sargrenti War of 1874 and the expenses incurred in the 1896 invasion were to be paid at the rate of 2,000 *pratum* (16,000 oz of gold) a year. The Governor read out each Asante state's liability: Kumasi was to pay 125 *pratum*; Mampon, Adanse, Bekwai, Nkoransa and Mansu Nkwanta, 150 *pradwan* each; British Gyaaman 100; Dwaben, Takyiman, Bekyem, Nkwanta, Wam and Bompata 75 each; Ofinso, Edweso, Kumawu, Wenkyi, Abodom, Ahafo and Obogu 35 each; and Agogo 20. A commission of 10% of every £100 collected was to be paid to the collecting chief.<sup>13</sup>

What infuriated and enraged the Asante most was the Governor's arrogant and blasphemous demand for the Golden Stool:

What must I do to the man, whoever he is, who has failed to give to the Queen, who is the paramount power in this country, the stool to which she is entitled? Where is the golden stool? Why am I not sitting on the golden stool at this moment? I am the representative of the paramount power, why have you relegated me to this chair? Why did you not take the opportunity of my coming to Kumasi to bring the golden stool and give it to me to sit upon? However, you may be quite sure that although the Government has not yet received the golden stool at your hands, it will rule over you with the same impartiality and with the same firmness as if you had produced it.<sup>14</sup>

The chiefs are said to have listened to the speech "in deep silence" and left the meeting without saying a word.

From the oral traditions and the interviews of some of the Asante war leaders conducted in December 1900 and January 1901 by Captain Stewart, there is no doubt that it was principally these demands in general and those questions of the tribute tax and the Golden Stool in particular that precipitated the War. According to Osei Kwadwo Krome, one of the prominent leaders who was interviewed on 28 December 1900, the reasons for the uprising were:

- (1) The extortioners from Kumasi who went about the country extorting money - Kwame Tua
- (2) On account of the Tribute Tax
- (3) No King of Ashanti on the Stool
- (4) Searching for the Golden Stool.<sup>15</sup>

According to Kwaku Nantwi, Linguist of Kumasi, and a member of the Native Committee, in his interview with Stewart on 3 January 1901:

After Captain Houston came as Acting Resident in your place, I served him. We then heard that the Governor was coming to Kumasi, and it was talked of that he was coming to arrest the big men of Ashanti. When the Governor came he asked us to pay money at a public meeting, we did not answer; the following Thursday the Governor sent for me and Opoku Mensah, he then asked us to produce the Golden Stool, we told him we had not seen it. In the expedition of 1896 the King was arrested and had no chance to tell us where he had put the stool; many people came up at that time, some of them had the stool. When we said we did not know where the stool was, the Governor said he knew where the stool was and that he was going to get it. On Saturday we heard

that the white man had gone for the stool at Bali. On Sunday the Kumasis left the town. Opoku Mensah sent Kwaku Kumasi to the Atchimas to find out what was up; on Monday we heard that the white man had fired on them. The reasons we rose were:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Demanding payment of a tax
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Taking away the stools of the big chiefs
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Search for the golden stool

The Governor looking for the stool had nothing to do with the rising, but his going to Bali and firing brought on the rising, as the people thought that he was going to take all the chiefs' stools away...

The rising was only plotted after the Governor came up; it was never arranged previously.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, Kofi Kofia, another rebel leader also stated:

There was no plotting against the Government until the Governor came up and demanded the Golden Stool from the big men and money from all of us. The big men said they had no money to pay and if the Governor was going to take certain big chiefs to the coast, that the rest of the chiefs go to the coast also...

In Kumasi I am not a big chief like the other big chiefs, Opoku Mensah is a Chief of Gaasi [Gyase], and was ordered by Government to look after Kumasi, and when anything was wanted he used to call the chiefs and speak his wishes through the Linguist...

Kwabena Baako, the centenarian sword bearer and war captain of Edweso, told Lewin on 14 September 1970:

The whites told the Asante they would bring Premepe back... The Asantes waited for three years. Premepe did not come

back. After three years the whites came again for the Golden Stool. The war began.<sup>17</sup>

These oral traditions are corroborated by the contemporary reports by the British officials and officers. According to Captain Stewart who was also the Resident Commissioner in Kumasi, "the reasons of the risings were (a) Search for the Golden Stool, (b) Demand of payment of war tax (c) Punitive expeditions round Kumasi after they had laid down their arms after the fighting at Bali." The new governor, Major Nathan, also attributed the rising to the following causes:

- (1) Dislike of the Ashantis to British rule.
- (2) Allowing them to accumulate large stores of guns, powder and lead.
- (3) Announcement of the war tribute and of the Governor's desire to sit on the Golden Stool in March 28<sup>th</sup>.
- (4) Search for the Golden Stool at Bali, north of Kumasi on April 3<sup>rd</sup>.
- (5) Burning of villages south and east of Kumasi on April 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>18</sup>

It is quite evident that it was because of this arrogant and sacrilegious speech that the Kumasi chiefs took the decision to fight for their independence. Indeed, according to oral traditions collected from Opanin Kwabena Baako, who claimed to have been present at the secret meeting held in the house of Gyaasewahene Opoku Mensa, on the night of 28 March 1900, it was mainly at the instigation of Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen of Edweso, that the chiefs "drank the gods" and took an oath to fight to rid Asante of British rule.<sup>19</sup>

The question then is: why did Governor Hodgson com-

mit such a stupendous blunder by asking for the Golden Stool? Though Lady Hodgson defended her husband and in fact denied that he made any such demand, all the available evidence both oral and documentary, proves that he did. But he demanded the Golden Stool not out of ignorance or arrogance or contempt for the Asante but rather for reasons given by his very self in his very long letter to the Colonial Office of 29 January 1901. In this letter, he gave reasons for the outbreak of the Yaa Asantewaa War, among which was his demand for the Golden Stool:

Finally, I will refer to the Golden Stool, about which so much has been said in the newspapers. Very few people seem to realize the Political value of a tribal stool. They regard it as the throne of the reigning chief for the time being and nothing more. But as a matter of fact the stool is of far more importance to a tribe than the King or chief who occupies it. To deprive a tribe of its stool is a far more severe punishment than to deprive it of its king or head chief, because there is always a person who is known as "next to the chief" — what we should call a deputy chief — who in the absence of the head chief through illness or from any other cause, takes his place. The stool is there for the deputy to sit upon, and everything goes forward as usual. So with the Golden Stool of Ashanti, so long as it remains in the hands of the Ashantis, so long does the power of the King — whether the King exists or not — remain with them. Mr. Ramseyer, whose knowledge of Ashanti and the Ashantis is perhaps unique, writes about it as follows: — "Concerning the Golden Stool, your Excellency is right in believing that it would be of the greatest importance to the British Government to get hold of it... the whole history of Ashanti is attached to it, and only the possessor of it is acknowledged as Head or Master of the Ashantis". The Golden Stool is, therefore, a valuable asset to the Colonial

Government, and it is a matter for regret that its delivery was not insisted upon in 1896.<sup>20</sup>

It is abundantly clear from this passage that Hodgson demanded the Golden Stool on 28 March because it was only by the seizure of that stool that the Asante would acknowledge the British, in the words of Ramseyer, "as Head or Master of the Ashanti". And it is precisely for the same reason that the Asante held the meeting that evening and decided to fight to drive out the British.

It was after this meeting that a Council of War was formed with the following members – Gyaasewahene Opoku Mensa, Toasehene Nana Kwame Afrifa, Nkonsonhene Nana Kofi Fofie, Okyeame Kwaku Nantwi, Nsumankwaahene Nana Kwasi Domfe, Edwesohemaa Nana Yaa Asantewaa, and Ofinsohemaa Nana Afranewaa – to plan the war. Its first move was to secure the Golden Stool and hide it in a rocky cave at Bare from where it was sent to Wawase and thence to Aboabogya. It was kept there until 1921, when it was desecrated by Seniagya and 5 others. It was therefore moved to Wawase again where it was hidden in a forest called Mpeasem. It was from here that Prempeh I secured it on his repatriation in 1924.<sup>21</sup> The second move was to organise troops, secure arms and ammunition and to work out the strategies for the war.

The actual fighting, however, began when three days after his provocative and sacrilegious speech, the Governor sent Captains Armitage and Leggett with a detachment of Hausa soldiers and carriers to search for the Golden Stool. This search began on 31 March. According to most Asante oral traditions, when the Kumasi people heard of this, they instructed the Atwema forces under the command of Boakye "that if the Governor's party arrived there, they were to fight."<sup>22</sup> After a fruitless search

at Nkwanta, the search party entered Bare on 1 April 1900 and searched in vain for the Golden Stool. It left Bare the following day and made another fruitless search during three hours' march. It was on the party's return to Bare after this fruitless search that the Asante forces fired the first shot of the war on 2 April 1900. This originated the Asante saying "Etuoto Ato Bare", which announced the commencement of the Yaa Asantewaa War, and has now come to signify the beginning or launching of any serious event or action.

This account of the actual commencement of the War is confirmed by recently collected oral traditions and documentary sources. Oheneba Kwadwo Afodoo, in his twenties by the 1890s and a witness to all these subsequent events, who was interviewed by Thomas Lewin on 30 August 1970, gave this account:

When Prempeh was taken away, the Asantes took the Golden Stool from Kumasi. They hid it outside Kumase. Kwame Tua blew the *ntaliara* in the Palace. The Ntahara is a special horn. It has a special name. It warns people when the Asantehene is about to speak. Kwame Tua told the white men he would help them to get the Golden Stool. The Asantes heard of this. The Asantes said they must shoot if the whites came for the Golden Stool. All the Kumase chiefs swore an oath calling the shrine. They kept calm. One white man, named Armitage, did not want the Asantes to see Kwame Tua.

The white soldiers carried Tua on their heads. They covered him with clothes. The Kumase people saw Kwame Tua. They knew he was with Armitage and his men. Kwame Tua learned that the Kumase people knew he was with Armitage. Tua told Armitage his nephew would take his place. Kwame Tua's nephew, named Adu Boahene, was unknown to the stool carriers. The whites carried Adu Boahene in the same

way. He was covered. They went to Bare. The Bare people heard Armitage was coming to their village. They left the village. They left their children in the streets. The children cooked kenkey and yams and sold them. The whites asked the children why the elderly people were not in town. The children told the whites their fathers had gone hunting in the bush. The white man asked the children where the Golden Stool was kept in Bare. The white man said he would beat the children if they did not bring their fathers from the bush. The children told the white man not to call their fathers. If he wanted to beat them, he should do it. The children knew the whites were coming for the Golden Stool. The children did not fear beating. The white soldiers began to bully and beat the children. The elderly people were around the village. They would not allow the whites to bully their children. The white men searched for the Golden Stool themselves. The Bare people did not allow the white men to come back to Kumase. They knew if Armitage went back to Kumase he would trouble the elderly people in Kumasi for the Golden Stool.

So the Bare people gave the first shot.<sup>23</sup>

According to Ofinso oral traditions, it was Opanin Fro-boo from Barekese who fired that shot.

Captain Armitage, who actually led the detachment of 45 soldiers under Captain Leggett, "with instructions to search the villages of Nkwanta and Bali for guns and powder ... and to make an attempt to find the Golden Stool and treasure", has also left the following account of the outbreak of the War:

On Saturday morning, the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, I left Kumasi ... We stayed the night at Ofinsu, a village consisting of two groups of huts, connected by a broad, well-made road, 500 yards

long. This was quite the prettiest as well as one of the largest villages in the neighbourhood of Kumasi, and was ruled over by the Queen Mother of Ofinsu, an old lady, whose son, the Chief of Ofinsu, had been taken to the coast with Prempeh ...

Next morning we started at day break along a narrow tract almost covered with undergrowth and grass. The forest was wrapped in mist, and the dew dripping from the trees added to the discomfort of the march. Nkwanta was reached at 9 am, and was quickly surrounded by the Hausas before a single inhabitant had time to leave the village ... A hut-to-hut search was made, but to my surprise this only resulted in the discovery of a few old guns and a very small quantity of powder. These I returned to their owners, and we parted on very good terms. After a hot march of three hours, our party at last reached Bali.

Bali is a large circular village of about 250 huts, with a single broad road bisecting it, planted with shade trees. The village belonged to King Prempeh ...

I saw at a glance that the inhabitants had been warned of our coming, for, with the exception of four men, the village was deserted. The houses were searched with the same disheartening result as at Nkwanta ... As it was now past two o'clock nothing more could be done, so I was determined not to make an attempt to obtain the Golden Stool until next day.

On the following morning I made an early start, and by daybreak had left the main road and, led by the boy, (who had promised to guide a party to the spot where the Golden Stool and Prempeh's treasure was concealed), had plunged into the dense forest. I had left Captain Leggett with 15 men and some of the carriers at Bali ...

For over three hours we marched silently in single file until we suddenly entered a large clearing, planted with banana and plantain trees and coco, while nestling in the

centre were three small huts, which had evidently not been occupied for some time.

Here, according to our guide, under the flooring of the huts, lay the Golden Stool and Prempeh's treasure. The picks and shovels we had brought with us were at once produced, and every one laboured amid great excitement to dig up the floor of the largest hut - no light task, as the flooring itself consisted of hard clay, stamped down and levelled. As the diggers grew tired, others took their places until, after an hour's hard work, a hole some four or five feet deep had been dug. Excitement gave way to disappointment, for there was no sign whatever of buried treasure. The flooring of the other huts was dug up with no better result, and when questioned, the boy said that he must have made a mistake. Nothing more could be got out of him, as he was evidently half mad with fear, so very reluctantly I gave the order to fall in, and we once more entered the gloomy forest.

Tired out and disgusted, we retraced our steps along the wretched track. A heavy fall of rain did not improve our spirits, but the sky soon cleared. We entered the main road not far from Bali at 3 pm... I found Captain Leggett at the north-east corner of the village, where a broad road led to a small fetish house, which stood in a cleared space about 60 yards from the village. This clearing was packed with armed Ashantis, who were dancing, howling, and hurling abuse at the stolid Hausas whom I had left behind, and who now stood at intervals facing the howling mob round the fetish house ...

The fetish priest of the village had been trying to hold back the Ashantis, who were growing more violent every minute, and who were, Captain Leggett said, on the point of opening fire on him when I arrived with my party. The fetish priest, a fantastic figure, with long matted locks hanging over his shoulders, now returned from the fetish house, and

through the interpreter begged me not to fire upon the Ashantis. I replied that I had no intention of doing so as long as they kept their distance, and that I would meet their chiefs, listen to their grievances, and come to some understanding without useless bloodshed. The priest went off to bring the chiefs, and in the meantime I placed my Hausas round the village, so that it could not be suddenly rushed ...

My boy now informed me that he had made some tea, for which I felt I should be most grateful after my seven hours' march, and in order to show the Ashantis that we were indifferent to their demonstration, the camp table was brought out and placed on the road about twenty yards from the village. The fetish priest now came back and said that the chief in command of the Ashanti was at the Ofin River, one hour's march from Bali, but he had sent messengers to him ... when a sudden roar on our left told us that the Ashantis had begun to attack ... A terrible fire was opened immediately all round the village, the slugs thudding on the walls and falling on the thatched roofs like hail ...

Our poor tea table was bearing the brunt of the enemy's fire in this direction. As we looked, the tin of condensed milk leapt wildly into the air and disappeared into the bush and undergrowth by the roadside, closely followed by the butter tin, while the enamelled tin cups and saucers kept up a continuous clatter until they, in their turn, dived from the table into the bush <sup>24</sup>.

This written eyewitness account confirms the oral traditions in all the essential details. So by the end of 2 April 1900, the Yaa Asantewaa War was in full swing.

In his explanation of the reasons for the outbreak of the Yaa Asantewaa War in his letter to the Colonial Office dated 19 March 1901, Nathan, the successor of Hodgson as governor, has emphasized the Asante dislike of British

rule because of their peculiar barbarous character and nature. To quote his own words:

I should say the real origin of the rising is a profound dislike on the part of the chiefs and leading people of Ashanti to British rule. This dislike is not unnatural. We take away from them all they care about and give them in place conditions of life, which have no attraction to them. We have deprived them of the power of making war on each other and on neighbouring tribes, of the power of keeping their people in order by barbarous punishments and of the power of recruiting their labour with slaves. We try to give them protection from external aggression, peace within their own boundaries, law enforced by our own civilised methods, and opportunities of making wealth by labour... Peace within the country has no attractions to a man whose title to respect and whose recognised source of power are in feats of war. Humane punishments for offences and particularly for offences against the power and dignity of big men are to his mind ridiculous as well as unsatisfactory to the pleasure he derives from seeing blood flow.

Personal labour of any kind is beneath the dignity of the Ashanti and a wage, which has to be slowly accumulated before it reaches a sum as he could obtain from a day's loot in an enemy's town is no compensation for labour. I fear that the only things which European civilisation has brought him, which he really appreciates, are spirits and powder ...

A complicated system of administrations, hallowed by antiquity and historic precedents, which our ignorance and policy have alike tended to break down, and a deep rooted superstition which we are unable to understand and from which our presence in the country has detached a proportion of the people, further help to make our rule distasteful to the Ashanti <sup>25</sup>

Many British historians such as David Kimble and William Tordoff have accepted Nathan's interpretation as valid. The former calls it a "careful analysis" while to Tordoff these are sound comments in a "perceptive dispatch".<sup>26</sup> But the attribution of the basic cause of the War to the barbaric and warlike nature of the Asante is not only wrong, but racist, and based on the contempt of Nathan for the Asante. The rising was not because of the warlike, barbaric and primitive nature of the Asante. Rather, as should be obvious from the contemporary oral traditions and documentary sources, the War arose out of the absolutely justifiable sense of anger and frustration arising out of the consequences of the colonial presence and the provocative policies of the British administrators and the challenge to the beliefs and culture of the Asante, the activities of the northern and southern immigrants, the behaviour of the Hausa soldiers of the Constabulary, and above all and more immediately the demand for tribute and compulsory labour, the refusal to allow the return of Prempeh to Kumasi, and the demand and search for the Golden Stool.

### *The principal plotters and leaders of the War*

According to Okyeame Kwaku Nantwi who was arrested by the British and interviewed by Captain Stewart on 3 January 1901:

These are the chiefs who plotted the rising - Elfilla [Afrifa], Osei Kudjoe Krum, Ghanza, Enchie Agay [Antwi Agyei], Asamoah, Yaw Bubu [Boadu], Osei Agogo, Akwesi Adele, Ehen Boateng, Antoa Mensah, Edu Kofi, Asamoah Kwami, Kwoku Bayen, Kofi Eyem, Appiah Ahinkora, Kwoku

## Chapter Four

# THE ROLE OF NANA YAA ASANTEWAA IN THE WAR

IN ASANTE ORAL TRADITIONS, the last Anglo-Asante War of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth century from April 1900 to March 1901 is known as the Yaa Asantewaa Sa (War) while to the English, it is known as "The Ashanti Campaign of 1900".

Unfortunately, while we have some information from Asante oral traditions and some documentary sources about this War and about Yaa Asantewaa, nowhere has her actual involvement been discussed. Was Nana Yaa Asantewaa a real or mythical personality? What actual role did she play in the War? When, where and how was she arrested and what happened to her after her arrest? Why did she get so involved in this War? Is there any justification for naming this War after her? And finally what is the real significance of this War? These are the questions that this chapter will attempt to answer.

### *Historical and Biographical Background*

From Asante oral traditions, especially those of Edweso and Kumasi,<sup>1</sup> Nana Yaa Asantewaa is not a legendary or mythical figure but an actual historical person who was born at Besease near Edweso, about 12 miles from Kumasi on the present Kumasi-Accra trunk road. Her mother was

Nana Ataa Po or Nana Teepo of the Asona matrilineal royal clan of the Edweso state. Her father was Nana Kwaku Ampoma from Ampabame near Besease. They had only two children, Yaa Asantewaa and her brother, who became the Edwesohehe under the stool name of Kwasi Afrane Panin (Afrane I). From 1885 Kwasi Afrane and the Ofinso-hehe Appia Sae fought in support of Prempeh's claim to the Golden Stool and got Prempeh enstooled in 1888 as Asantehene. Afrane died in 1894. Oral traditions are silent on the date of Nana Yaa Asantewaa's birth and only maintain that she grew to a ripe old age and was certainly old at the time of the War. *Opanin Kwadwo Mosei*, who was about 80 years in 1970 and who told Lewin at his interview with him on 8 June 1970 that he met Yaa Asantewaa when he was conveying foodstuffs from Onwe to the battle-front at Gyaakye, stated that Nana was "a heavy woman, about 5' 10" and not fifty years old by then".<sup>2</sup> Nana Afodoo described her as "really a woman, a very shortish one". Harold Boatin who was born in the Seychelles and got to know her well described her as not being "more than four feet 6 inches, small built and what the French called petite" and was said to be very old, "nearly sixty to seventy years".<sup>3</sup>

All the British officers, especially Armitage, Montanaro and Biss who saw her during the War described her as "the old Queen Mother of Ejisu". Some documentary sources also give us some indications. According to Edgerton, Yaa Asantewaa was 60 years at the time of the Battle of Edweso on 31 August 1900 and "her size (was) five-foot ten and about two hundred pounds".<sup>4</sup> The *Daily Mirror* of London of June 1950 also reported that Yaa Asantewaa, who it described as "The Joan of Arc of Africa", died on the Seychelles Islands "a heroine of her people, aged 101".<sup>5</sup> From all this, and judging from the photo-

graph taken of her at the time of her arrest in 1901, as well as a group photograph on the Seychelles Islands seen by this writer during his visit to the Seychelles in 1972 (Yaa Asantewaa was seated in the front row holding an open fan and looked in her eighties or nineties), it may be safely conjectured that Nana Yaa Asantewaa was born in about 1830 during the reign of Osei Yaw Akoto (1822-1833) rather than Kwaku Dua I (1834-1867) or Kofi Karikari (1867-1874). She was about 70 years old at the time of her arrest and about 90 years on her death in 1922, and was not more than 5 feet tall.

She got married to Nana Owusu Kwabena from Kankinyiren near Trede, who was a grandson of the Golden Stool and a relation of Baffuor Akoto. Yaa Asantewaa and her husband had only one child, a daughter, Ama Serwah Brakatu, who married Kwadwo Frimpon from Bansa, which is now part of Manhyia near Besese on the main Kumasi-Accra road. They had eight sons and three daughters. Among the sons were Yaw Afoakwa, Yaw Barima and Kofi Tene who became Edwesohene in 1894 with the stool name of Afrane Kumaa or Afrane II and was arrested in 1896 and exiled to the Seychelles. Some people are of the opinion that Afrane II was the son of Nana Yaa Asantewaa. But others believe that he was not her son but rather her grandson. We now know that Afrane II or Kofi Tene was in fact her grandson. It is indeed interesting and significant that Prempeh himself referred to Afrane II as Yaa Asantewaa's "grandson" and to Yaa Asantewaa as his "grandmother".<sup>6</sup> Ama Serwah's daughters were Afua Buo, Akosua Nkruma alias Akosua Pokuwaa, who became queen of Edweso and died only recently, and Adwoa Badu. Akosua Nkruma had, in turn, two children, Afua Twene-boa (still alive), and Akwasi Afrani III. It is one of Afua Tweneboa's three daughters, Abena Serwah, who

was enstooled as Queen of Edweso on Thursday, 20 January 2000 under the stool name of Nana Yaa Asantewaa II.

Yaa Asantewaa lived and grew up at Besese and later moved to reside at Boankra to look after and extend her farms, which are still being maintained by her descendants. Indeed, one tradition narrated to this author by one of Nana's grandsons, R. S. M. Joe Mensah on Tuesday, 25 January 2000, was that the name Boankra emerged from the saying that *Yaa ko afluom a onkra* ("Yaa always leaves for her farm without bidding farewell to anybody").<sup>7</sup> It is not known when she ascended the Edweso stool but she was definitely queen in the 1880s and 1890s, when her brother Afrane Panin was also the king. On the arrest of her grandson, Afrane Kumaa, in 1896, she became both king and queen of the state. As will be seen later, it was partly because of the arrest of her grandson together with Prempeh I and their exile to Freetown in Sierra Leone in 1896 and later to the Seychelles and the attempt to impose British colonialism on Asante which provided her with the motivation for the various roles that she played in the War. What then were these roles?

### *Forging a Front of Resistance: The Beginnings of the Yaa Asantewaa War*

First, it is now clear that it was Yaa Asantewaa who instigated and precipitated the Asante War of Independence of 1900. She did so by her fiery and provocative speeches and the gender-conscious challenges. This was especially the case of the speech she gave at the meeting on the night of 28 March 1900, after Hodgson's demand for the Golden

Stool. The meeting was held in the house of Opopu Mensa (Obuabasa), then Gyaasewahene of Kumasi and the Chairman of the Committee of Native Chiefs. This is clearly borne out first by the available Asante oral sources. Agnes Akosua Aidoo has given the following account of what Opanin Kwabena Boadu of Edweso, who was present at the meeting on the night of 28 March 1900 and whom she interviewed on 24 August 1970, said:

After refusing categorically to pay an ounce of her assigned share of the interest to Hodgson, she gave a graphic account of all the grievances of the Asante against the British. Her conclusion was that only war could regain their usurped power and maintain their cultural identity and unity embodied in the Golden Stool. When the men began to argue and discuss the issue, Yaa Asantewaa stood up and declared:

'How can a proud and brave people like the Asante sit back and look while white men take away their king and chiefs, and humiliate them with demand for the Golden Stool. The Golden Stool only means money to the white man; they searched and dug everywhere for it. I shall not pay one *pretwum* to the Governor. If you, the chiefs of Asante, are going to behave like cowards and not fight, you should exchange your loincloths for my undergarments: *Monitu mo dantia nnuma me na monye me tam.*'

To dramatise her determination to go to war, she seized a gun and fired a shot in front of the chiefs. The challenge was accepted. That night all the chiefs "drank the gods" and took "an oath to fight to rid Asante of British rule".<sup>8</sup>

Nana Akosua Ama, then about 84 years old, also told Lewin that it was Yaa Asantewaa who told the Adumhene, the Bantamahene and the other chiefs publicly that they should "prove to the British that they could fight and re-

turn Prempeh. The chiefs agreed".<sup>9</sup> On 2 June 1970, Nana Osei Akwasi, about 66 years of age, also told Lewin:

Three years after Prempeh was taken away, Yaa Asantewaa called a conference of Asante chiefs at Manhyia. She campaigned for the chiefs to come to Manhyia. The meeting was secret: the British did not know it was taking place ... Only the important chiefs came to Manhyia ... She told the chiefs ... [they] should make ready for war and worry the British. The British would get tired and would then set Prempeh free. The conference was called after the British asked for the Golden Stool but not long after. The Asantes were looking for an avenue to free Prempeh. By searching for the Golden Stool, the British gave the Asantes a chance to fight and free Prempeh".<sup>10</sup>

Nana Poku, the father of the Asantehene, Opopu Ware II, who was over 95 years old, told Lewin that "it was Yaa Asantewaa who brought the Asantes the idea of fighting the whites". The old lady, Amakoo, also said that Yaa Asantewaa fired a gun at the meeting. Akosua Ama of Asokwa, who said she was about 9 years old when Prempeh was taken away and therefore 13 by 1900, said that: "Yaa Asantewaa announced through a gong-gong that she was prepared to fight the British. All chiefs should gather their soldiers and join her".<sup>11</sup> All these traditions have been confirmed in their essential details by the versions given in very recent interviews of Nana Serwah, the great granddaughter of Nana Yaa Asantewaa and Baffuor Akoto. And it was at the meeting on the night of 28 March 1900 that, as Fuller put it, "the Queen-mother of Ejisu was asked to head the movement".<sup>12</sup>

The contemporary written dispatches and accounts of the various battles of the War by the British officers also

clearly show that it was indeed Yaa Asantewaa who instigated and precipitated the uprising. Lt. Col. Montanaro, one of the leading British officers, called Yaa Asantewaa (or as he calls her "Queen Ashantuah") "one of the prime movers in the rebellion". The Basel Missionary Obrecht, based at Abetifi, in his letter of 30 July 1900 called her "the soul and head of the whole rebellion". Armitage and Montanaro also described her as "the old queen-mother of Ejisu, whose name has figured so largely in the rebellion". According to them, she caused "much amusement at the durbar on 28 March 1900 by carefully examining the Governor's medals" when he was greeting the chiefs.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Stewart in his letter to the Colonial Secretary of 25 January 1901 concluded, after interviewing some of the Asante leaders and field commanders, "that Opoku Mensah (Dead), Elfilfa, Nenchie, Osei Kojokrum and Yaa Asantewah were the authors of it (the rising)".<sup>14</sup> All these sources, oral and documentary, then leave no doubt about the role of Yaa Asantewaa as the principal instigator and precipitant of the 1900 War.

Secondly, from both the oral and documentary sources, Yaa Asantewaa became the leader as well as the Commander-in-Chief of the Asante Independence War. However, the oral sources provide contradictory evidence here. While almost all speakers agree that Nana Yaa Asantewaa was the inspirer and instigator of the uprising, there are some who maintain that there was no single leader or commander-in-chief of the Asante forces, whilst others mention names other than Yaa Asantewaa. According to I. K. Agyeman, in his interview with Lewin on 16 June 1970, the Asante did not have a single military leader but "the military leaders came from their respective sections" and that Yaa Asantewaa "was only the Asante moral leader". At a later interview with Lewin, on 22 June, I. K. Agyeman

said that "the Gyaasehene Opoku Mensah, was the overall Asante Commander during the War".<sup>15</sup> Al-Hajji Sullayman, over 80 years of age, told Lewin on 21 July 1970 that: "The Asantes did not have one overall leader. Individual leaders gave instructions to the Asantes ... Opoku Mensah was not the overall leader". Nana Kwadwo Afodoo, about 98 years of age, who said that he took part in the War, told Lewin on 30 August 1970 that: "there was no one leader in the absence of the Asantehene and the Bantamahene" and that "all had to take commands". But he also maintained that Opoku Mensah sent "the messengers to start the war" and that "all the Asante leaders were under him", and that he died during the War in the Fort. Opoku Mensah II, the then Gyaasehene of Kumasi also told Lewin on 9 October that "Opoku Mensah I was an Asante leader against the whites during the Yaa Asantewaa War. He died shortly after the War ended from sickness".<sup>16</sup> However, Haruna, aged 71, told Lewin that "the overall leader for the Asantes outside the Fort was Baafo Akwasi Domfe, the Nsumankwaahene." But he adds that he was chosen by Yaa Asantewaa to be the military leader and that though he led the Kumasi troops "Yaa Asantewaa was 'the brain' behind the fight". Domfe Kyere, aged 90 years, and a brother of Akwasi Domfe told Lewin that "the Atwemahene Kwame Afrifa, can be regarded as the main leader ... the Anantahene, Adu Kofi, was next in command and died in the War at Sepedee". He added that everybody looked to their particular *osantehene* for leadership.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, there were many others who told Lewin that Yaa Asantewaa was appointed leader and commander-in-chief of the Asante forces while individual leaders were chosen for each of the Asante contingents. According to Osei Akwasi, 66 years old, "All the Kumasi

chiefs supported Yaa Asantewaa as the leader". The 80-year-old man, Kwadwo Donko, told Lewin on 13 June 1970 that "Yaa Asantewaa was the military leader of the Asante army." Opanin Kwadwo Bo, about 82 years old, who seemed to have very vivid memories of the War, told Lewin on 1 September 1970 concerning Yaa Asantewaa that: "She was an important *ohemaa* (Queen) in Asante at the time. All the important Asante chiefs had gone with the Asantehene. She was the leading *ohemaa*. The War was named after her. She was the overall military leader. The other leaders supported her in the War". Finally, Kwabena Baako, about 100 years old and a former sword bearer of Edweso, who took an active part in the War as one of Yaa Asantewaa's leading soldiers, told Lewin on 14 September 1970 at Edweso that "Yaa did not fight. She stayed in Edweso town. She was the *ohemaa* of Edweso. The troops fought on her behalf and in her name. She was an Asante leader." Later, he added "she (Yaa Asantewaa) did not fire a gun, Asante women do not fight. Kwasi Boadu was at the war front. He was the Edweso leader. The Edweso troops were Yaa's subjects. She supplied gun powder. She acted as a leader. The Asante military leaders came to her when they needed gun powder. Then she found out how the troops were faring. Yaa Asantewaa gave orders to kill each man who ran away".<sup>18</sup>

Some of these statements can be easily rejected. Opoku Mensa (Buabasa), the Gyaasewahene (not Gyaasehene), was indeed the chairman of the three-man Native Committee appointed by the British and one of the leaders of the group that plotted the uprising. He presided over the meeting held at his house on the night of 28 March, and he must have sent orders to the Atwema and Ofinso forces to fight the British at Bare. But the Missionaries in Kumasi reported to Basel that "on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April, they heard that

the Chief Buabasa had been taken into the Fort as a prisoner".<sup>19</sup> Armitage also reported that after the battle at Bare "the old chief Obu Abassa was brought to the Fort and provided with a room, as it was considered that he would otherwise be spirited away by the Kumasis, among whom he had great influence".<sup>20</sup> Opoku Mensa was therefore arrested a day after the gun was fired at Bare on 2 April and was held a prisoner in the Fort until May 1900 when he died of pneumonia. He therefore could not have been the overall leader and commander, let alone taken part in the War.

The Nsumankwaahene, Akwasi Domfe, as is evident from the other oral traditions, was rather one of the commanders of the Kumasi forces, and not the overall leader let alone commander-in-chief. In any case, whatever his position was, he seemed to have been appointed by Yaa Asantewaa herself. Kwame Afrifa, who became a member of the 3-man governing council of chiefs, was also the leader of the Atwema forces rather than the commander-in-chief. Though often referred to as the Atwemahene, he was rather the Toasehene.<sup>21</sup> Kofi Fofie or Kofi Kofia, nicknamed Kasrepe (somebody who is bold and does not fear anything), the Nkosoehene was also not the leader or commander-in-chief but a great and fearless fighter who was in charge of the military organization and was later appointed Deputy Commander-in-Chief by Yaa Asantewaa.<sup>22</sup>

The contemporary documentary sources more than confirm the oral accounts of Yaa Asantewaa as the overall leader and Commander-in-Chief. The first set of evidence comes from the British officials who took part in the War. Captain Biss in his book *The Relief of Kumasi* published in 1901 described "Yah Ashantiwah (as) the most important rebel leader, who had, beyond comparison, the biggest following".<sup>23</sup> In his account of the remaining rebel leaders,

who had not been captured by the middle of November 1900, Biss wrote:

Some of the submitted rebel leaders were sent to track him (that is Kofi Kofia) down and duly brought him in, thus, leaving only one name on the list of "wanted". This person was, however, the most important of all, and was none other than the Queen-mother, Yaa Ashantiwah, of Ejisu. However, she, too, was caught, and the campaign was finally concluded."<sup>24</sup>

Willcocks also described "Queen Ashantuah (as) one of the chief rebel leaders who had with her a considerable force." He went on to state that by September, although many Asante were tired of fighting, some of the rebels had come to Kumasi to surrender unconditionally, while a number of their most prominent leaders had been killed in action or had died of wounds:

Queen Ashantuah, Chief Kofi Kofia, and some others had great influence over them and would not surrender as long as they could keep together four or five thousand fighting men. There is not much use in arguing with an Ashanti when he means fighting, and I therefore decided to follow up these obstinate chiefs and keep them incessantly on the move so as to make their own people tire of them to give them up.<sup>25</sup>

Armitage and Montanaro also described "the old Queen mother of Ejisu," Yaa Asantewaa as somebody "whose name has since 28 March figured so largely in the rebellion".

Secondly, Major Nathan, the Governor, in his despatch to Chamberlain on 19 March 1901 stated that "Yaa Asantiwah, the queen-mother of Ejisu is said to have been made the leader of the insurrection".<sup>26</sup> Thirdly, as indi-

cated above, on the list of 15 of the rebel leaders who were deported to the Seychelles, whereas most of them were described as "instigators and ring leaders of the rising", Yaa Asantewaa was described as "elected to command Ashanti forces".<sup>27</sup> Fourthly, when the exiled political prisoners sent a petition to the Governor dated 25 May 1901, on the morning of their setting sail for the Seychelles, accusing the kings of Dwaben and Mampon of complicity in plotting and executing the uprising against the British and requesting that they should also be arrested and deported with them, the reply to this petition was addressed to Yaa Asantewaa, then in the Seychelles. As will be seen later, Yaa Asantewaa did reply from the Seychelles, dated 11 September 1901.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, on the ship, "Dwarka", conveying the prisoners to the Seychelles, it was only Yaa Asantewaa who was provided "with first class, the remaining 14 prisoners with second class".<sup>29</sup> All this indicates that the British government did recognise Yaa Asantewaa as the leader and general commander of the War. Thus, both the oral and documentary evidence clearly show that Yaa Asantewaa was indeed the leader and Commander-in-Chief of the Asante forces.

### *Yaa Asantewaa as Military Leader and Commander-in-Chief of Asante Forces*

As leader and Commander-in-Chief of the Asante forces, Yaa Asantewaa turned her hometown, Edweso, into the headquarters of the War, especially after the relief of Kumasi in July 1900. As Biss reported:

Ejisu was the most important fetish town in Ashanti. It was practically, since the white man had put himself so much *en*

evidence at Kumasi, the capital; and it was the residence of the Queen-mother, Ya Ashantiwah, and headquarters of the remnant of the rebel army. A fight here, and a good one, was considered a certainty, and general opinion concurred that it would be the last one of the War.<sup>30</sup>

The Governor also confirmed the importance of Edweso in the 1900 War in his report to the Colonial Secretary on 10 August 1900:

There is but one punitive expedition which is absolutely necessary at the present time, namely that against Ejisu which is one day from Kumassi. This town is the centre of rebellion and ought to be looted and completely destroyed unless a post could be established there which would be better and the queen's stool if possible captured.<sup>31</sup>

As seen above, Edweso was indeed invaded and captured after a bloody battle on 31 August 1900.

As leader and Commander-in-Chief, Yaa Asantewaa appointed and dismissed field commanders; sent orders and advice to the various field commanders and the troops mainly through her personal war captain, Akwasi Boadu; supplied the soldiers with gun powder; worked out strategies; sent gifts and drinks to the various field officers to encourage and inspire them or boost their spirits; visited some of the stockades; and was present at some of the battles to cheer them up. According to Kwadwo Donko, a sub-chief of Asokwa, in his interview on 13 June 1970:

Yaa Asantewaa was the military leader of the Asante army. She appointed individuals to be leaders. The Asante fought in companies of fifty to sixty men each. Kwadwo Donko's mother's brother named Agyampoma, was one of the Asante

leaders. He [Agyampoma] was appointed unanimously by Yaa Asantewaa. He was the leader of several companies more than 1000 men. Agyampoma was a sub-linguist to the Asantehehene. He was chosen by Yaa Asantewaa because he was an able fighter and taught the Asantes how to fight. He lived in Asokwa. He was an elderly person who knew how to shoot guns. He was a bold man. Agyampoma fought with his men against the whites at Subinaso ... He used a gun called Atwereebotuo (gunshot with flints).<sup>32</sup>

According to Akosua Ama of Subinso, the site of the present Kejetia lorry park, the Asante leaders were "the Kuntanasehene, Gyaakyehene [Amankwa], Feyiasehene [Osei Hwedeg], Aputuagyahene, Agogohene (Atta) and Asokwahene (Kwasi Ampon)". She also said that "the chief of Asokwa, named Akwasi Ampon, brought his men to fight the British". It would appear from the list, as well as the fact that he lived in Asokwa, that Agyampoma was the Asokwahene, Kwasi Ampon.<sup>33</sup> Haruna also told Lewin on 5 August 1970:

The overall leader for the Asantes outside the Fort was Bafo Akwasi Domfe, the Nsumankwaahene. Yaa Asantewaa chose Akwasi Domfe to be the military leader. She was the 'brain' behind the fight. Yaw Dane, then chief of Suame, led his people against the whites. Akwasi Domfe led the Kumase troops. Akwasi Domfe was shot and killed at Gyaakye.

Kwadwo Bo informed Lewin that: "Yaa Asantewaa was the overall organizer in the war. Asantes always added her name after they mentioned the leaders. All the Asante military leaders mentioned her name at their barricades. There was no Asantehehene in Asante after Prempeh was taken away".<sup>34</sup>

Akwasi Boadu of Besease and Gyaasehene of Edweso was appointed by Yaa Asantewaa as the commander of her own army and one of her field commanders or generals for the entire War. According to Nana Afodoo, Boadu fought in the wars on behalf of Yaa Asantewaa, a fact confirmed by the centenarian, Kwabena Baako of Edweso. Kofi Fofie, the veteran war leader, must have been appointed the commander-in-chief of the Kumasi forces and deputy commander of the Asante forces, since according to the Nkonsonhene, interviewed by Lewin in the 1970s, and other oral sources, he did not only supervise the people in the capital but fought at Kokofu, Kaase, Krapa near Edweso, Essase and Biemso.<sup>35</sup>

Some documentary sources confirm these oral traditions about the appointment of field commanders and chief captains by Yaa Asantewaa. After the Battle of Biemso on 3 September 1900, Biss relates that information reached the British commanders that:

The remaining rebel leaders had fled to the north-west, that Queen Ashantuah had deposed Kofi Kofia from the chief captainship of the army, and had made Kobina Cherri, a powerful chief of Odumasi, her chief war captain, and that the leaders had but few followers.<sup>36</sup>

On 14 November, Biss again reported that Kwabena Kyere, whom he described as "then the Commander-in-Chief of the scattered Ashanti forces", had been captured. Governor Nathan in his letter to Chamberlain of 19 March 1901 also described Kofi Kofia as the chief who was in charge of the Asante military organisation.<sup>37</sup>

As the overall leader and Commander-in-Chief of the Asante forces, Nana Yaa Asantewaa, with her field commanders, was responsible for the organization and the

strategies for the War. Haruna called her "the brain behind the fight", while to the 82-year old Kwadwo Bo of Suame said, "Yaa Asantewaa was the overall organizer in the War". Osei Akwasi emphasized that: "Yaa Asantewaa brought the plan to fight the British".<sup>38</sup>

As discussed above, the main strategy adopted in this War, and a novel one in Asante warfare, was the use of stockades or *epic* or *abim*. It appears that this decision was taken by Yaa Asantewaa and her field commanders. Osei Kofi, one of Edwesohehene's courtiers and an eye witness of the War, told Lewin in 1970 that:

Yaa Asantewaa instructed that a barricade be built at Kokofu town to prevent the Bekwai from passing. The Asante chiefs who supported Yaa Asantewaa built barricades on the roads leading to their areas. All the important chiefs had their barricades.<sup>39</sup>

Yaa Asantewaa saw that that strategy was the most effective answer to the fast-repeating rifles or Maxims and the long-range .75 millimetre and 7-pounder guns that the British were using in this war. As Akosua Ama observed, the stockades could "act as shields".<sup>40</sup> As we have seen above, she was proved right as the stockades provided the Asante with effective protection from these bullets during the first five months of the War. It is interesting and significant that as soon as the British found an effective answer to the stockade strategy at the Battle of Edweso on 30 August, Yaa Asantewaa and her captains decided to drop that strategy in favour of traditional Asante strategies. As Montanaro reported:

Queen Asantuah, chiefs Kofi Kofia, Nentchwi, Quasi Bedu and other Ashanti leaders ... informed him with naive sim-

plicity that they no longer intended to fight behind stockades, as they were a bad juju, but they would surround any columns sent against them, shoot down the white officers and slaughter the black soldiers.<sup>41</sup>

This was the established or traditional Asante strategy, and that is precisely what they resorted to — as shown in the preceding chapter — at the last Battles of Dinasi or Esaase and that of Abasso or Bimso on 20 and 30 September respectively.

That Yaa Asantewaa decided on the strategies to be adopted, but in consultation with her field captains, is also evident from her reaction to the first night attack by the British on an Asante stockade on the Kumasi-Cape Coast road about the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1900. In Asante warfare, a night attack was a taboo and an ungentlemanly thing to do by Asante custom. As Biss wrote:

... It appears that this august lady [the Ejesu Queen-mother] had been so much upset by the night attack, that she had collected all her warriors for a big war palaver, to decide upon what was best to be done now that the siege of Kumasi had been raised, and to discuss further what the white man would be up to next after his erratic and unexpected behaviour of the previous evening.<sup>42</sup>

All this evidence leaves no room for doubt that the question of organization and strategies of the War were decided upon by Yaa Asantewaa in consultation with her field commanders and captains such as Kofi Kofia, Yaw Boadu, Kwabena Kyere, Akwasi Domfe, Antoa Mensa and Manwere Poku.

As overall leader and Commander-in-Chief of the Asante forces, Nana Yaa Asantewaa also did everything

to inspire and encourage the Asante soldiers, raise their morale and urge them on. She also supplied some of the contingents with gunpowder and invoked the gods and spiritual protection for the soldiers. According to Nana Osei Akwasi: "Yaa Asantewaa checked the chiefs during the war by going around to the villages and encouraging those who were weak. Yaa Asantewaa was a great moral leader".<sup>43</sup> Biss also reported that after each victory over the British invading forces, "the Queen-mother used to send trade gin as a reward to the War camps by which many of their warriors became intoxicated."<sup>44</sup> The octogenarian Kofi Afrane of Edweso, in answer to Lewin's question why Yaa Asantewaa was called a leader, stated: "The Edweso troops fought for her ... messengers brought news of the war to her. She gave advice to her troops".<sup>45</sup> Kwabena Baako also told Lewin that Yaa Asantewaa did not fire a gun but "she supplied gunpowder".

She acted as leader. The Asante military leaders came to her when they needed gunpowder. Then she found out how the troops were faring, Yaa gave orders to kill each man who ran away.<sup>46</sup>

She certainly sent instructions to the Asante soldiers through her own field captain, Akwasi Boadu. According to Fuller, "when the Asantees realized that the Governor and his party had slipped through their cordon by the Patasi road, Akwasi Boadu [Yaa Asantewaa's field captain] detailed Antoa Mensa with a large force to follow him up".<sup>47</sup> Finally, Yaa Asantewaa invoked the gods and spirit protection for the troops. As Osei Kwadwo told Lewin:

Yaa Asantewaa practised juju. The juju was in water with the roots of trees. Young girls went round with the juju in

pans and sprinkled it on the forces. This gave the Asantes the power to fight the British. The young girls carried the juju while Yaa Asantewaa sprinkled the water herself. Thus Yaa Asantewaa was never hurt in battle: she faced bullets and bombs.<sup>48</sup>

Did Yaa Asantewaa fight at the battlefield herself? Did she ever shoot a gun at the enemy? Was she ever on any battlefield? The oral traditions on these issues are contradictory. Nana Kwadwo Afodoo told Lewin:

Yaa Asantewaa never fought. Boadu took her place. There was no Edwesohehene. He was taken away with Prempeh. Yaa Asantewaa was Ohemaa of Edweso. The war was named after her.<sup>49</sup>

Nana Afodoo was fully convinced that Yaa Asantewaa never left Edweso but "she remained there for the entire war. She did not even know where the battlefield was."<sup>50</sup> Kwadwo Bo, aged eighty-two, also told Lewin:

[Yaa Asantewaa] was at Edweso during the whole war. She might have gone to Kokofu because she was a military leader. She did not shoot herself. She had her leather belt [riton] around her waist. She held a cutlass. Asante women do not fight in war.<sup>51</sup>

According to the ninety-year old Edweso woman, Amakoo, Yaa Asantewaa "did not shoot a gun. She did not fight in the War. Yaa stayed at the Edwesohehene's place called Asafiaso in the war".<sup>52</sup> But she admitted that she encouraged the men to fight. The oldest Edweso man and senior historian, Kwabena Baako, who claimed he was present at the meeting in 1896 at which Prempeh was ar-

rested, also reported that: "Yaa did not fight. She stayed in Edweso town", and the troops fought "on her behalf and in her name".<sup>53</sup> This is affirmed by Osei Kofi, an Edwesohehene's courtier, who reported that "Yaa Asantewaa herself did not fight in the war. She stayed at Edweso for the whole war. She sang songs of encouragement".<sup>54</sup>

Nana Osei Kwadwo placed Yaa Asantewaa at the scene of battle, though not an actual participant in the fighting. He leaves no doubt, however, as to Yaa Asantewaa's leadership role.

Yaa Asantewaa never fought herself but encouraged the Asantes to fight until the last man died. As an ohemaa she was compelled to go to the battlefield but not to fight herself. She had to be present at the battlefield to prove to her soldiers that she supported them in battle. All Asantes protected her. She was surrounded by guns at the battlefield ... Yaa Asantewaa was known by the Asantes as the woman who withstood bombs and cannons. [*Yaa Asantewaa obina basia a, odi aprenno anoo*].<sup>55</sup>

Mamunatu of Kwadaso, a ninety-seven-year-old woman, in answer to Lewin's question as to whether Yaa Asantewaa fought in the war, confirmed Yaa Asantewaa's visible presence at the barricades as a military leader:

She shot guns, she put on the gun belt like a man (*ho nton*). Yaa Asantewaa was ready to fight: she stayed with her people behind their own barricade, located up the Kejetia road in the Mbrom area.<sup>56</sup>

The Asante lauded Yaa Asantewaa as the invincible woman who withstood bombs and cannons.

Thus, there are three main positions on Yaa Asantewaa's

actual involvement in the progress of the War. The fist holds that she did not fire a shot or leave Edweso throughout the War. The second maintains that she appeared at battlefronts, fired guns and participated in battle. And the last informs us that she visited the various battlefields and stockades to encourage the soldiers, but never fought or fired a gun. Fortunately, the documentary sources throw considerable light on this question and support the third position above. It is absolutely clear from the accounts and despatches of Armitage, Montanaro, Biss and Willcocks that Yaa Asantewaa never stayed only at Edweso throughout the War but moved around the various stockades – especially her own at Amakom. She was present at some battlefields herself, for example at Kokofu and Fomasua. She in fact left Edweso after the decisive defeat which the British inflicted on her forces on 30 August 1900 and retreated to Ofinso. Yaa Asantewaa must have been present at or sent orders to the Asante forces at Dinase on 22 September and Abassa (Biemso) on 30 September under the command of Kofi Kofia, Boadu and Kwabena Kyere. After the last battle, she is reported, as seen above, by Armitage to have sacked Kofi Kofia and appointed Kwabena Kyere as the new Asante field commander or field captain. From Biemso, both Armitage and Biss reported that Yaa Asantewaa had apparently retreated with her forces into the forests and headed for Bekyem, Domase and Berekum. But, she rather retreated westwards into the Atwema areas and encamped at Sreso Timponumu. The popular view therefore that Nana Yaa Asantewaa never left Edweso or visited or appeared on the battlefront or battlefield or at a stockade is clearly wrong.

Moreover, from some of the oral traditions quoted above, from missionary reports that Yaa Asantewaa wielded a gun, and from the *batakari* (battle-dress) and *ntoa*

(war belt) which she wore – still preserved at Sreso Timponumu – it seems clear that Yaa Asantewaa went around in her full traditional Asante battle dress and bore a gun. However, none of the British captains ever reported seeing Yaa Asantewaa actually firing a gun and fighting at the battlefront. Surely, if she had done so, this would have attracted their attention and would have been reported upon. Secondly, as was often repeated above, Asante women do not fight in wars. Thirdly, and surely, no general or commander-in-chief anywhere ever appears and fights on the battlefront herself or himself. All this leads to the conclusion that though Yaa Asantewaa did appear on the battlefields, and at some battlefronts even in full battle array and with a gun, she did so not to fight herself but to encourage the Asantes.

It seems then that the words of the popular Nyonkoro song *Yaa Asantewaa obaa basia oko apremo awo* are appropriate and should be taken seriously though not literally. Indeed, according to Amakoo, Edweso women composed the song not during but after the War. Yaa Asantewaa's role in the War was to decide on policies and strategies; appoint and dismiss commanders and field captains; issue instructions; appear on the battlefields and battlefronts to inspire and encourage the soldiers; supply ammunition; consult the gods and obtain protective spiritual protection for the soldiers; and organise the women to sing *momome* or war chants. In short, she played the role of a veritable overall leader and Commander-in-Chief of the Asante forces.

Her significance in the War as leader and Commander-in-Chief, at least up to the end of July 1900, is clearly summed up in the following extract from a missionary letter of that month from Abetifi. The Basel missionary, Obrecht, stationed at Abetifi, had obtained his information from Asante refugees from Kumasi including one of

their own teachers called Preko, who had been stationed at Kumasi:

An old woman called Yaa Asantewaa lives in Adweso, the mother or the aunt of the chief there, a man who was sent into exile with Prempeh. Since then she has ruled the town. She has much influence in the whole of Asante and is the soul and the head of the whole rebellion. When the Governor invited the chiefs to negotiate with her, she sent to tell them 'I have loaded my gun, and not for nothing'. She is in fact sitting quietly in Adweso, but sends her orders out from there to the different camps around Kumasi. Her main representative in the army is Kwasi Boadu, chief of the village of Besease near Adweso.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, Yaa Asantewaa also had her own army. From the available evidence, it seems that during this War, the Asante did not form a single national army, which moved and fought together offensively and defensively as of old. Rather, for the first time, each state, district or town raised its own army, appointed its own commander and captain or leader (*osathene*), and built its own barricade with its own camp. But the activities of these forces were directed, organised and coordinated by a single overall leader and Commander-in-Chief and her field assistants or captains. As shown above, Yaa Asantewaa was appointed the Commander-in-Chief with Kofi Kofia, Kwasi Domfe, Antoa Mensa, Kwasi Boadu and later Kwabena Kyere as her deputies or field assistants and operators. It was not until after the decisive defeat at the Battle of Edweso on 30 August 1900, that the Asante abandoned the new strategy of fighting as individual groups or companies behind stockades and began to fight as a single national army. The battle at Dinase on 22 September was the first such

occasion, and then at Abassa (Biemso) on 30 September 1900, both of which ended in total defeat for reasons to be discussed below.

Yaa Asantewaa often accompanied her own army in battles, but which was led and commanded in the field by her appointed commander (*sathene*), Akwasi Boadu, the chief of her birth place, Besease, and Gyaasehene of the Edweso state. The Edweso troops were Yaa Asantewaa's subjects and she supplied gunpowder to her army. Eyewitness written accounts of some of the British officers in the War not only confirm that Yaa Asantewaa had her own army, but that her army was the largest and bravest of the Asante armies and bore the brunt of the fighting in all the major battles of the War. Armitage reported that Captain Houston, the then Acting Resident, after the Bare battle, "held several meetings with the kings, who insisted on their loyalty, and also met Yaa Asantewa, queen of Ejissu, who with her fighting men was encamped at a small village called Abercoom (Amakom) situated close to Kumasi on the other side of the swamp".<sup>58</sup> It was at the request of Armitage, who gave her a 24-hour ultimatum to leave her camp on 18 April, that she and her troops left Amakom and returned to Edweso. It was at or near Fomena that the first direct clash between Yaa Asantewaa's army and the British contingent under Captain Marshall took place on 23 April. The outcome was the defeat of the latter with heavy casualties, and from there Yaa Asantewaa's army joined by others entered Kumasi and attacked the Fort on 25 April.<sup>59</sup> According to Biss, the army that fought and lost at Gyaakye on 24 August "for the most part belonged to the queen-mother's personal army, and those who were not killed fled in disorder to Ejesu."<sup>60</sup> Biss again reported that at the Battle of Edweso on 31 August, Yaa Asantewaa "had beyond comparison the big-

gest following estimated at three thousand five hundred and about two hundred of them were picked men of the Queen's body guard".<sup>61</sup>

Willcocks also reported to Chamberlain on 25 December 1900 that Yaa Asantewaa "one of the rebel leaders had with her a considerable force" on 29 August. He added:

From 1<sup>st</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> September, many of the rebel leaders went into Kumasi and surrendered unconditionally ... but that Queen Ashantuah, Chief Kofi Kofia, and some others had great influence over them, and would not surrender so long as they could keep together four or five thousand fighting men. There is not much use in arguing with an Ashanti when he means fighting, and I therefore decided to follow up these obstinate chiefs and keep them incessantly on the move, so as to make their own people tire of them to give them up.<sup>62</sup>

It must have been part of this army that Kofi Kofia assembled first at Dinase (Esaase) 5 miles to Ofinso on 22 September and the strong army of 5000 that was assembled at Abassa (Biemso) for the final showdown with the British on 30 September. There is no doubt that Yaa Asantewaa did have her own army besides being the overall leader and Commander-in-Chief of the Asante forces, and that this army bore the brunt of the fighting that raged between 2 April and 30 September 1900.

### *Brokering Peace: Yaa Asantewaa as Diplomat*

Finally, Yaa Asantewaa led or took part in many of the negotiations that took place between the Asante and the British to end the war. Here, we have to rely on documen-

tary sources since the oral sources are completely silent on the issue of diplomacy. The first round of talks took place days after the shot at Bare and continued till it was broken off on about 18 or 19 April. During this period, Yaa Asantewaa had established her headquarters at Amakom where she had formed a large camp, and it was there that Captain Houston met with her for the first time on about 3 April. Houston went to interview Yaa Asantewaa again on 14 April, but she did not present herself this time but "sent a message to the effect that she wished for peace".<sup>63</sup> It was after the breakdown of the negotiations on 18 April that Armitage gave Yaa Asantewaa the 24-hour ultimatum to leave Amakom and return to Edweso, and Yaa Asantewaa left immediately.<sup>64</sup>

Secondly, when the British decided on 11 May to open negotiations for food with the rebel army through the intermediary of loyal kings, it was to the war camp situated on the Mampon road, the headquarters of the Edweso war captain Boadu (hence Yaa Asantewaa's headquarters), that the British delegation went.<sup>65</sup> Boadu reiterated Asante conditions already relayed through the Mamponhene and expressed his intention to call a meeting of the chiefs in command at the various stockades around Kumasi. Boadu's proposals were:

1. Ashantis in future to be exempted from carrying loads or building rest houses;
2. Slavery to be restored;
3. All Coast traders and civilians to leave the country;
4. The white men to return to the Coast and not to trouble the Ashantis further;
5. The Fort to be destroyed.<sup>66</sup>

On the following day, 13 May, representatives of the

loyal kings met the rebel chiefs' representatives on the road crossing the swamp near the Mampon stockade. An armistice was declared, and the Asante forces promised to send food up to the market, which they did. But the arrival at Kumasi of a British column under Major Morris from Kintampo on 15 May forced the Asante to terminate the negotiations.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, in September after the Edweso defeat and before the dispatch of two columns to Kintampo and Ofinso on 20 September, Armitage reported that:

The principal chiefs of the Ashantis, more especially Queen Ashantuah, had entered into negotiations with Colonel Willcocks with a view to a general surrender, and it was the popular belief that the war was at an end. Willcocks told the envoys who were sent by the Queen that he would give the chiefs four days in which they might come in to Kumasi and surrender ... The leaders of the rebellion, however, dreaded the consequences of their audacious attacks on the Great White Queen's representative, and preferred to fight to a finish. Instead, therefore, of surrendering at the end of the fourth day, Queen Ashantiwah, Chiefs Kofi Kofia, Nenchwi, Quasi Bedu (Boadu) and other Ashanti leaders sent a message to Colonel Willcocks to the effect that they would rather commit suicide than surrender.<sup>68</sup>

Biss has left an even more detailed account of this:

Numerous flags of truce kept coming in, and many chiefs surrendered. In fact, Queen Yaa Ashantiwah, the most important rebel leader, who had, beyond comparison, the biggest following, sent envoys tendering her submission, which she stated was due to want of food and internal dissension in her war camp. The Commandant gave her four days in

which to prove the truth of her message by coming in person. The period was regarded by him as an armistice, during which we made no aggressive movement. However, late on the 18<sup>th</sup>, shortly before the limit of time expired, instead of the queen, there came an insolent reply that she would fight to the end.<sup>69</sup>

It was the breakdown of these negotiations that led to the Battles of Dinase on 22 September and Biemso on 30 September 1900. Thus, throughout this War, Yaa Asantewaa was not only the instigator and leader but also the Commander-in-Chief of the Asante armies, Commander of the Edweso army, and principal negotiator and spokesperson for the Asante forces.

### *The Ending of the Yaa Asantewaa War*

After the defeat at Edweso on 31 August, Yaa Asantewaa and her forces retreated to Ofinso and sought refuge with her kinswoman Nana Afranewaa, the then queen-mother of Ofinso, who hid her at Akyyaa Pesikakrom, now known as Mmehame (opposite Du Paul's factory).<sup>70</sup> It was most probably from this hideout that Yaa Asantewaa directed the battles of Dinasi and Biemso, at both of which, her troops suffered disastrous defeats.

What happened after the battle of Biemso? According to the British officers, after this battle, "the most determined remnant, the flower of the Asante army, fled in panic and wildest confusion in every direction, so helplessly demoralised that they never rallied again".<sup>71</sup> They also reported that after that battle, Yaa Asantewaa deposed Kofi Kofia from the chief captaincy of the army and made Kwabena Kyerei, the powerful chief of Odumasi, her war

captain.<sup>72</sup> What actually transpired, however, was quite different. From the oral traditions collected at the time by Stewart and others at Kumasi, and at Domase near Sunyani in January 2000 by my research assistant, F. A. Cudjoe, it seems that soon after that disastrous battle, Yaa Asantewaa met with her captains and field commanders, who were Kofi Kofia, Okyeame Nantwi, Osei Kwadwo Krome, Kwabena Kyere and Akwasi Boadu, and decided on the new strategies to be adopted. They first of all decided not to surrender but to continue with the resistance. Secondly, they decided to send a delegation consisting of Yaw Deni, Appia Dekye and Kwaku Safo to contact the French in Côte d'Ivoire for assistance. As Osei Kwadwo Krome told Stewart on 28 December 1900:

We sent Yaw Deni, Appin Dekye and Kwaku Safo to the French in Gaman that we had fought the English and were unable to beat them, that they must come and help. £80 was to be sent to the French officer and a promise of more.<sup>73</sup>

It is interesting to note that Stewart reported that news was brought to him that the Asante "were seeking assistance from the French, and that they proposed retiring into the Kingabo district". Stewart feared that the Asante rebels would remain a permanent threat to British interests if they succeeded in contacting the French in the Côte d'Ivoire, and therefore organized four or five large parties with the assistance of the disloyal Asante chiefs to apprehend the rebels in the dense forests of Ahafo.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, the messengers were unable to reach Côte d'Ivoire.

Thirdly, the Asante fighters decided that Yaa Asantewaa in particular and the other leaders should avoid arrest by the British through the strategy of decoy. It was in

the execution of this strategy that Yaa Asantewaa announced the replacement of Kofi Kofia by Kwabena Okyere, who was to lead the retreat of the remaining of the Asante troops into Bekyem and Domase to Berekum, while she and her small band turned southwest into the Atwema areas. This strategy has been confirmed in the interview conducted by Cudjoe at Domase in January 2000. To the question whether Yaa Asantewaa came to Bron-Ahafo area, Job Kofi Nyame answered:

We have no history as to whether she came down personally to Bron Ahafo, but all that we were told was that, when the war ended in Asante near our border here at Bron Ahafo, Nana Kwabena Kyere planned a decoy according to which he gathered some strong and courageous soldiers and led them northwards toward Bekyem. When the whites saw this movement, they concluded that Nana Yaa Asantewaa was with them. Nana Kwabena Kyere and his men fought the British intermittently as they went along just to persuade the whites that Nana Yaa Asantewaa was among them, until they got to Domase. Meanwhile, as the elders say, Nana Yaa Asantewaa went the other way through the left route. This was done to prevent the whites from capturing Nana Yaa Asantewaa. It also enabled her to go into hiding and the whites never saw her again.<sup>75</sup>

This plan worked perfectly, for the British launched a hot pursuit of Kwabena Kyere as soon as they heard that he and the army were in Bekyem on their way to Berekum. The British dispatched two columns to Berekum: one under Major Montanaro, composed of one 75 mm gun and 750 men of the West African Force and the Central African Regiment; and the second under Major Brown with 500 men and two 7-pounder guns.

This enabled Yaa Asantewaa and her close confidants — Kofi Kofia, Kwaku Nantwi and Osei Kwadwo Krome and others — to leave Akyaa Pesikakrom and retreat southwards, unknown to and unpursued by the British. The party made its way through Adudwan and Kumso to Nyinahin, 50 miles from Kumasi, to meet the Atwema chiefs and Kwasi Boadu who never turned up. While at Nyinahin, according to Okyeame Kwaku Nantwi, they were told by the Atwema chiefs to go to Kumasi and surrender. But they refused. They later heard that the Nkwanta were coming to attack them, so they asked the Nyinahin people to show them a place to hide, and they were put in the village of Sarasu (Sreso Timponu). While there, Yaw Awuah's messengers came to Yaa Asantewaa and told her she must come to Kumasi. Kwaku Nantwi himself later decided not to stay in the bush and advised the party to go to Kumasi. He was caught by the Nkwanta people and brought to Kumasi probably late in December 1900 since he was interviewed there by Captain D. Stewart, the British Resident, on 3 January 1901.<sup>76</sup>

According to another version, Yaa Asantewaa left Nyinahin first to Kumso, where she was not accepted, then to Mpaasaaso, where she was again rejected for fear of the British. She made her way to Sreso Timponu, about fifteen miles from Nyinahin in the thick forests of the Nkwawie District, where she arrived accompanied by a girl of ten years of age carrying her box containing gold and other ornaments.

It used to be generally believed that Yaa Asantewaa stayed at Sreso Timponu for a long time until she was betrayed by Kwame Tua and Yaw Awua to collect the price-money that had been set on her by the British, and was arrested by a British contingent led by these traitors. But from the evidence now available to this writer, Yaa

Asantewaa was neither betrayed nor arrested at Sreso Timponu. She rather escaped from there further northwards to Tepa in the heavily forested Ahafo district. It was there that the chiefs of Edweso sent one of their war captains, the centenarian Kwabena Baako, who was interviewed by Lewin, to persuade Yaa Asantewaa to surrender herself to the British to save her only daughter and grandchildren who had been captured and were being held in ransom in the fort.<sup>77</sup>

These traditions have been confirmed by the eyewitness account by Captain Samuel Howard Hingley, who says that Nana Yaa Asantewaa was brought to the fort at 7 a.m. on 3 March 1901 and it was he who received and locked her up.<sup>78</sup> The submission and imprisonment of Yaa Asantewaa marks the end of the Yaa Asantewaa War. By that time, all the other 45 principal leaders of the war had already been arrested, and all of them were deported to Elmina in April 1901. Fifteen of them, including Yaa Asantewaa, were exiled to the Seychelles Islands. They set sail on board the "Dwarka" from Elmina on 22 May and arrived in the Seychelles on 22 June 1901. Yaa Asantewaa died there on 17 October 1921.<sup>79</sup>

### *Was it a "Yaa Asantewaa War"?*

How justifiable then is the designation of this War after Yaa Asantewaa? It should be quite clear, first and foremost, that almost all of the Asante, and Ghanaians in general, know and refer to the War as indeed the Yaa Asantewaa War or *Yaa Asantewaa Sa* or *Yaa Asantewaa Ko*. Secondly, it is quite clear from the published and unpublished contemporary sources that the British saw themselves as fighting against Yaa Asantewaa and her forces or against Yaa

Asantewaa and recognised her as the leader and Commander-in-Chief of the Asante forces. In his letter of 1 December 1900, Willcocks remarked: "after Queen Ashantuah was defeated at Ojesu", reflecting the British perception of Yaa Asantewaa as the force behind the Asante opposition.<sup>80</sup> The very fact that the reply to the petition sent to the British Governor by the 45 Asante political prisoners in the Elmina castle was addressed and forwarded to Yaa Asantewaa in the Seychelles for a reply is further evidence of the Colonial Office's and the local colonial government's view of her. Moreover, the fact that many of the Asante war leaders themselves did mention her as the instigator and leader of the War and so readily referred to her, that she could appoint and sack the commanders of the Asante field forces, decide on tactics and strategies and play a decisive role in the diplomatic negotiations, all further leave no doubt that Yaa Asantewaa was recognised in her day and is still recognised as indeed the instigator and Commander-in-Chief of the Asante War of Independence of 1900-01. It is not surprising then that her name became associated with the War and has remained so ever since.

It should be pointed out, however, that in all this Nana Yaa Asantewaa never acted alone but in close collaboration and consultation with the much older Nana Ama Afranewaa, the queen of Ofinso. Both were members of the Asona matrilineal clan and the related royal families of the states of Edweso and Ofinso. After her decisive defeat at Edweso, it was to Afranewaa that Yaa Asantewaa retreated. Indeed, the first shot of the War was fired at Bare, about five miles south of Ofinso. According to Nana Wiafe Akenten II the Ofinsohene who was interviewed by this writer in 1976:

However, the central figures who were greatly disturbed at that time, were the Ofinsohema and the Edwesoheema. The Ofinsohema was Amma Afranewaa. She was very very old, and at that time the stool was vacant so she was combining both offices of King and Queen. The Edwesoheema was Yaa Asantewaa, and both of them, you know, were sisters. So the two of them (Ama and Yaa) joined hands and decided to fight. Ama told her sister Yaa, that she (Ama) was old, so Yaa should muster forces for the fight. The whiteman first made his way to Ofinso. In the course of the war, the Edweso and the Ofinso army fought in the front of the fort, that is the area where we now have the bank building.<sup>81</sup>

As seen above, Armitage spent the night of 31 March at Ofinso and he says that he had "a palaver with the queen, and presented her with £20 as a present from the Governor". Surely Afranewaa must have ordered her troops out after receiving the instructions from Yaa Asantewaa and Poku Mensa to fight when the British went there to search for the Golden Stool. Indeed, according to some Ofinso oral traditions, it was Nana Amma Afranewaa herself who fired the gun at Bare. The British arrested both at the end of the War, though Afranewaa was eventually freed and not exiled.<sup>82</sup>

The question then is why did these two old women, and Yaa Asantewaa in particular, get so involved in this War, especially since according to Asante custom and practice women, even queens, never normally got so involved in wars? From the oral traditions, it is clear that three major motives propelled these two women into the roles they played in the war. Yaa Asantewaa and Afranewaa were angered by the exile of their grandson and son, Edwesohehe Afrane II and Ofinsohene Kwadwo Appia. The two women sought to expel the British, en-

sure the security of the Golden Stool and restore Asante independence. As the ninety-year old Amakoo informed Lewin:

Yaa Asantewaa told her people she was fighting to get the Asantehene back. The whites took Prempeh overseas. Yaa did not agree to this. The whites surprised the Asantes. The Asantes did not know the whites came to take Prempeh away. All happened by surprise. Asantes thought the whites would help to administer the nation. Kofi Tene [Afrane II] was the Edwesohene. He was taken away with Prempeh. When Afrane II was taken away, people in Edweso were very angry. They prepared to make war on the whites. When Prempeh was taken away, the elders in Edweso held secret meetings. They talked how they would fight to bring the Asantehene back. The meetings went on until the whites asked for the Golden Stool. This was the immediate cause of the War. The whites asked the Asante elders to meet them and turn over the Golden Stool. Yaa Asantewaa was at the meeting. She told the whites that this would never happen. She gathered the Asante chiefs together.<sup>83</sup>

Given the historical circumstances, the motivation and involvement of these old women are not at all surprising since they had a greater stake in the return of Prempeh and the security of the Golden Stool than probably any other Asante chief. It was the heroism of Afrane Panin, or Afrane I, the King of Edweso, and Apea Sea, the king of Ofinso, in the civil war between Prempeh and Atwereboana (1886-1888), which led to the defeat of the latter and the installation of Prempeh on the Golden Stool in March 1888. The royal families of Edweso and Ofinso thus played a major role in the preservation of the central authority of the Asantehene and therefore the Asanteman.

It was these two brave kings who were appointed as commanders of Prempeh's army and who defeated the Mampon, Nsuta and Kumawu forces. And it was in recognition of their brave deeds that both stools were elevated from the status of *obirempon* (chief) to that of *omantenc* (paramountcy). The Edwesohene was, in addition, appointed as the Asantehene's Atufoohene or keeper of the guns and given many lands.<sup>84</sup> The two kings became the main supporters and defenders of Prempeh throughout the late 1880s and the early 1890s and this role was continued by their successors, namely, Afrane Kumaa and Kwadwo Appia of Edweso and Ofinso respectively.

Indeed, in 1895, it was to Edweso that the Golden Stool was sent for safe-keeping. And from the arrest of Afrane II, it was Yaa Asantewaa who became the custodian of the Golden Stool until it was taken to Bare in December 1899, when it was suspected that the British were going to Edweso to search for it.<sup>85</sup> Thus from the late 1880s, Edweso and Ofinso became the greatest props to the Asantehene and the greatest defenders custodians of Prempeh, the Golden Stool, and the independence of Asante. These were the roles Yaa Asantewaa and her older cousin assumed. The arrest and deportation of Prempeh in 1896, the British determination to seize the Golden Stool and impose colonial rule on Asante, coupled with the rumours that the British were going to restore Atwereboana between 1899 and March 1900, therefore alarmed and provoked Yaa Asantewaa and her elder clanswoman probably more than any other Asante ruler. Perhaps, even more relevant, was the pain Yaa Asantewaa and Afranewaa suffered from the exile of their son and grandson. Significantly, both of them were recognized not only as queen-mothers but also as kings of their respective states by the Kumasi Committee following the deportations. It was in these dual ca-

pacities that they were compelled to sign the separate treaties of submission imposed on the Asante states by the British in January and February 1896.

Is it surprising then that both of them assumed the responsibility not only to ensure the security of the Golden Stool and preserve the sovereignty, independence and culture of Asante by driving away the British but also to secure the repatriation of Prempeh and their children? Being the younger of the two, it was only natural that Yaa Asantewaa should seize the leadership and command of the Asante forces and affairs as queen mothers do in Asante in times of crisis and ineffective or absence of male leadership.

Finally, since Prempeh did not allow the Asante to fight in 1896, both queen-mothers must have inherited the powerful military organizations built by their immediate predecessors. As has been noted above, Yaa Asantewaa's army was the largest and strongest of the Asante armies. Strongly provoked, infuriated and equipped militarily, Yaa Asantewaa was in a position to provide, and did provide the stimulus, inspiration and leadership for the Asante War of Independence of 1900-01. The two old women, Yaa Asantewaa and Afranewaa, instigated and raised the standard of revolt in March 1900 in the absence of male leadership. They were concerned with the security of the Golden Stool, the return of Prempeh and their sons, the expulsion of the British and the continued sovereign existence of Asante. But Nana Yaa Asantewaa was indisputably the real leader and Commander-in-Chief of that War.

## Endnotes

- 1 Lewin, "Structure of Political Conflict II"; oral traditions of Edweso collected by Agyeman Duah and F.A. Cudjoe, November 1998 and Jan. 2000.
- 2 Lewin, "Structure of Political Conflict II", p. 30.
- 3 Armitage and Montanaro, *Ashanti Campaign*, p. 3; Interview with Paul Boatin, 24 July 1971.
- 4 Edgerton, *Fall of the Asante Empire*, p. 238; Armitage and Montanaro, *Ashanti Campaign*, p. 3.
- 5 *Daily Mirror*, 5 June 1950.
- 6 Manhyia Archives (M. A.) Correspondence Book, 1916-1921, pp. 9-16.
- 7 Interview, 25 January 2000.
- 8 Aidoo, "Political Crisis", pp. 668-9.
- 9 Lewin, "Structure of Political Conflict II", p. 26.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 362, 205.
- 12 Fuller, *Ashanti*, p. 189; Edweso oral traditions.
- 13 Armitage and Montanaro, *Ashanti Campaign*, pp. 37, 178; Jenkins, "Abstracts", Obrecht to Basel, 30 July 1900.
- 14 GNA, Adm 11/1728, Stewart to Col. Secretary, 25 Jan. 1901.
- 15 Lewin "Structure of Political Conflict II", pp. 52-54.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 157, 115, 24.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 102, 401.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 423, 168, 213, 218.
- 19 Jenkins, "Abstracts".
- 20 Armitage and Montanaro, *Ashanti Campaign*, p. 111.
- 21 Lewin, "Structure of Political Conflict II", pp. 102, 306, 403.
- 22 GNA, Adm 11/1728, Nathan to Chamberlain, 19 March 1901; Lewin, "Structure of Political Conflict", pp. 179, 399, 404 and 402.
- 23 Biss, *Relief of Kumasi*, p. 288.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 310.
- 25 GNA, Adm 11/1728, Willcocks to Chamberlain, 25 Dec. 1900.
- 26 Armitage and Montanaro, *Ashanti Campaign*, p. 3; GNA, Adm 11/1728, Willcocks to Chamberlain, 25 Dec. 1900; Nathan to Chamberlain, 19 March 1901.