

Transcript  
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 45  
Nana Yaa Asantewaa

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women both overlooked and iconic who achieved amazing things against the odds. And we do it through women's history storytelling live on stage, here in Berlin and beyond

I'm Susan Stone, and with me is Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire. Katy, it's Season 5 of our podcast!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Oh, it's so exciting!

SUSAN STONE: It is!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: The other exciting thing is that we had a live show again. Crazy! Yes. We went back to our beloved venue ACUD, and we did it outside, and it was gorgeous to be back with our friends and fans, and...

SUSAN STONE: Yes, it's been kind of strange. This is the start of another season, it's the start of another Covid-affected season of the podcast, like everybody. And when you have a live show in this day and age things have to be done a little differently. Here in Berlin we have some rules to follow that make it actually pretty easy to manage. It's called 3Gs in Germany, which doesn't work so well in English. You want to lay that out? [LAUGHS]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: [LAUGHS] So there's *geimpft*, which means vaccinated, *genesen* which is recovered, or *getestet* which means tested.

SUSAN STONE: That one's easier to figure out.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: So that would be [SPEAKING THE LETTERS IN UNISON, THEN BOTH LAUGH] V-R-T. That just doesn't trip of the tongue as well.

SUSAN STONE: Vtr. Vitter? No, it doesn't. Yeah. And we have three rules at the Dead Ladies Show, which some of you may or may not know. So the first rule is...

KATY DERBYSHIRE: They have to have been dead for a little while, you know, about least six months. We like the earth to have settled over their graves.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, the ladies, that is. [BOTH LAUGH] And the second rule does have to do with the ladies - they need to have identified as women while they were alive. And the third rule? Three, two, one: [BOTH SPEAK IN UNISON] NO FASCISTS!

SUSAN STONE: Yeah, which is a very important one that keeps us from celebrating people like Coco Chanel and Leni Riefenstahl.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yes, it came about because people kept saying, “I want to talk about Leni Riefenstahl,” and we said, “We don’t want you to!”

SUSAN STONE: No, we don’t, And interestingly, another group of ladies that we don’t usually talk about are royalty, but that is different today. And the person we will be hearing about was much more than your average queen. But first of all, I want you to introduce today’s wonderful presenter, fresh from our most recent live show.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I will! It is Sharon Dodua Otoo, who is a mother and a Black British author and a political activist living in Berlin. She’s been published widely in both English and German, and she edits *Witnessed*, an English-language book series written by Black authors who have lived in Germany. Her first novel, *Adas Raum, Ada’s Realm*, was published in Spring 2021, it will be available in English soon-ish, I believe. And she’ll be Schroeder Writer-in-Residence at Cambridge University for the academic year 2021/2022!

SUSAN STONE: Highly impressive! And Sharon is also just a lovely person. You have translated her work, right? Because she’s quite well known in Germany for winning maybe her first prize here, I’m not sure, for writing a short story in German that kind of blew everyone away?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Exactly. She won a big, big prize, which is kind of like a televised literary talent show, the Bachmann Prize, with this story, that I called in English *Herr Grötrrup Takes a Seat*, which is a crazy, crazy story, and actually it was published in English with another translation by two American translators called *Herr Grötrrup Sits Down*. It’s a beautiful publication that will share details about in the show notes.

SUSAN STONE: Wonderful. I have to admit I haven’t read it yet, though I want to I have to decide whether to read it in English, or German, and in which translation, so many choices, all I know is theres eggs involved.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: There’s *an* egg. Who plays a crucial role in this story, yeah.

SUSAN STONE: That sounds great. Well, for now we have Sharon from the courtyard stage at ACUD, to tell us all about Nana Yaa Asantewaa.

SHARON DODUA OTOO ON TAPE: Good evening everybody! [AUDIENCE REPLIES IN GREETING] Lovely to see you all. Thank you very much for the invitation. I’m super excited and proud to tell you today about one of my most favorite ever people in the whole wide world who ever lived, possibly my favorite person who ever lived, Nana Yaa Asantewaa

And I wanted to say why I chose her. I grew up in the UK and as a young Black woman growing up, there were not a lot of role models for me to aspire to, to be like. So Black people had had Martin Luther King, Jr. or Angela Davis, and in the UK

context at some point I learned about Mary Seacole, but I wouldn't have been able to name one person from the African continent as a female leader. And I also grew up at a time where being of African descent even amongst Black British people, was considered to be uncool. So there was like, comments about monkeys and things that weren't very nice. Additionally to that, my parents were also very strict and had very conservative ideas about gender roles. So, although I saw many hard-working Black women around me, including my mother, I don't remember any of them being leaders, or in a leading position. And then one day I heard about a West African queen who led a war against the British in pre-colonial times. So you can imagine how excited I was about that.

So, you must imagine there's a meeting of Asante men — a group of men from the group of people called Asante. And they're debating whether or not to go to war with the British. And in this room there's one woman. And she is quoted as having said:

"Is it true that the bravery of Asante is no more? I cannot believe it. It cannot be! I must say this: if you, the men of Asante, will not go forward, then we will. We, the women, will. I shall call upon my fellow women. We will fight the white men. We will fight till the last of us falls in the battlefields."

What an inspiring speech! So, the image on the right is of a statue in her honor in her birth town, which is called Ejisu, which is near Kumasi in present-day Ghana. The meeting I am talking about took place in 1900. And before I go into more detail about how the situation arose, and how the ensuing war ended, because they did go to war, I'd like to provide some context.

For hundreds of years before that, Europe had been pursuing a colonial agenda on the African continent. So right at the bottom of the map, on the left hand side where it's marked in red — sorry, for the podcast people, there's a map of Ghana on the left and the globe on the right that shows approximately where Ghana is.

So on the left we see a map with a red spot in the shape of a castle which is Elmina. And this was built by the Portuguese in 1482 and was the first trading post built on the Gulf of Guinea. This castle was later seized by the Dutch in 1637, and later by the British in 1872. So you can see the ownership of certain pieces of land and property was passed on between the Europeans. The current borders in Africa, by the way, were drawn up in 1884 during the so-called Congo Conference which took place right here in Berlin. European leaders were in attendance, but not one single African leader.

So, you can see in the left-hand picture how this affected the Asante, for example. When the empire was at its peak it was much bigger than the present day borders, which are slightly slimmer. You can see a star which says Kumasi, Kumasi is the capital of the Asante region. And the dotted white line is where the modern Asante region is now. Of course it used to be much, much bigger. The black area marks where the Akan-speaking people live. And Asante used to go way beyond those borders.

The eventual destruction of self-determination even applied to the name “Asante”. Mostly you will hear it pronounced “Ashanti” and spelt accordingly. This is the British name. In the Akan language however, it is pronounced “Asante,” and that’s what I’m using in this presentation.

The Asante Empire emerged in the 1600s as a subgroup of the Akan-speaking people. The state was established around the city of Kumasi shortly after the first encounters with the Europeans. The Portuguese traded with the Asante and the Asante grew stronger than their neighbors. So, what else was happening in pre-colonial West Africa?

The picture on the left depicts Kumasi in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the left I’ve quoted Thomas Bowdich, an English traveller and author, who was sent to Kumasi in 1817, to negotiate with the Asante king at the time, Asantehene. Apparently, it was during this time that he collected local crafts including for example the oldest-known surviving adinkra cloth. The items were subsequently donated to the British Museum.

I just wanted to briefly give some facts about the Asante Empire. A man called Osei Tutu became the first Asantehene, or King of Asante, and proceeded to unify the independent village states — so those little cities and towns and such all around the Asante area — that happened during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Asante became a powerful confederacy, and Kumasi the capital. Gold mines became royal possessions, so in that area there was a lot of gold, and still is. Gold dust became the currency, and hence the name of the area, Gold Coast, or Costa do Ouro. The Portuguese were most important trading partners at the time.

By the early 1800s, trade in enslaved people became more important than trading gold. So, in exchange for the people, the Asante received luxury items and manufactured goods including firearms from Europeans. Constant wars being fought at the time with neighboring groups, and this meant a steady supply of people, from the people who lost the wars, but also led to a weakening of the confederacy as a worthy adversary of the British Empire.

At this point I wanted to make a recommendation for a wonderful historical novel by Ayi Kwei Armah called *The Healers*, which is set precisely during this time and beautifully captures the process of colonization from an African perspective. The plot focuses on the betrayal of African people by their leadership. What I admire about the book is what I will call “the long breath” it takes. It is clear from the narrative that the white men are stronger and are going to win during the lifetime of the protagonists of the book. But then there is this beautiful section which I’ve quoted on the left.

These two protagonists are talking. Nyaneba asks, “You are saying our time is not now?” Damfo answers, “I am saying this is seed time, far from harvest time.” This turns out for Yaa Asantewaa and Ghanaians to be prophetic and I will come back to the this sentiment at the end of the presentation.

Another piece of context I really want to provide before I get to the main event was that I wanted to address something I will call the “product of their time” argument, which often gets made, when discussing colonial aggression and racist attitudes towards people of African descent. And it goes something like: the general understanding at the time was that people of African descent were not considered to be equal to white people. And we can’t judge contemporary philosophers, writers, colonial leaders according to the standards of today. And it’s a pet peeve of mine. Because it’s only possible to make that kind of argument because so little is known about the work of Black thinkers and thinkers of color living and working at that time. So, this evening I just wanted to mention the existence of one Joseph Ant enor Firmin.

He was a philosopher from Haiti and he’s best known for his book "On the Equality of Human Races", which he wrote in French, but I don’t speak French, I don’t want to butcher this language. Here you go, you can read it for those who can read French. And this book was published in 1885 as a rebuttal to Count Arthur de Gobineau's work "Essay on the Inequality of Human Races". Gobineau's book, published in the same year, also in French, asserted the superiority of the Aryan race and the inferiority of Black people and other people of color. Firmin was marginalized at the time for his beliefs that all human races were equal.

To understand the significance of the War of the Golden Stool, which was the war fought in 1900 after that meeting I mentioned at the beginning of the presentation, it’s important I provide one more piece of context: what exactly the Golden Stool was.

So, on this image we once again see a map of the territory of the Asante – this time at around 1700. It was at about this time, that Osei Tutu, I mentioned him earlier, became the first Asantehene or King of Asante. He proceeded to unify the independent village states with the support of a man called Okomfo Anokye, who was a high priest. So they fought for example with Denkyira and gained large amounts of land and power.

Legend has it that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Okomfo Anokye called forth the Golden Stool as a symbol of the Asante throne. It fell from the sky into the lap of Osei Tutu, confirming his ascendancy to the throne. The other Asante leaders or leaders around were told that the Stool housed the soul of the Asante nation. The leaders swore allegiance to the stool and from then on fought to defend it. So in the image on left we can see an artistic rendition of this symbolic event. There’s a statue of a man who’s reaching into the sky and grabbing the Golden Stool, and holding I think a knife in his other hand. The statue stands in present day Kumasi.

To this day the Golden Stool retains its significance. Apparently, it is displayed in public every five years. The Stool is made entirely of gold. It is not allowed to touch the ground and is considered to be so sacred that no one is allowed to sit on it. It’s so sacred, it even has its own throne! And each new Asantehene is lowered and raised over the Stool without being permitted to touch it. Only those in possession of the Golden Stool can be considered to be the legitimate rulers of the Asante. The Golden Stool is the most prized possession of the Asante.

Over the course of Asante history, many wars were fought. Some with the interest of expanding the confederation and capturing people in order for them to be sold to the Europeans. But some wars were fought against the British. There were five such wars in total, which isn't that well known. Yaa Asantewaa was probably born at sometime between the first and second war. Wikipedia gives her birthdate as 17<sup>th</sup> October 1840, but from what I understand, there is no record of when she was born exactly, so I think that's a mistake. During each of these wars the British gained territory and power. In part due to superior weapons. But in part also due to the exploitation of divisions and tensions within the Asante confederacy. The wars were by no means easy for the British. They were hard fought and many casualties on both sides were suffered.

This image on this slide shows an artistic rendition of the first Anglo-Asante war, and this image was published in 1824, I think in a British newspaper. We see here that the artist makes a great effort to show how strong, brave and intimidating the British soldiers are. You can see lots of men. Look at that, the white guys are wearing really clean white trousers. I don't know how your trousers stay so white in a war, but I think that's part of showing how easy this battle was for them. All the West African guys are kind of laying on the ground or in retreat somehow. I just want to point out that if the war had been so easy to fight there would not have been five in total.

At some point in the 1880s, civil war was raging in the Asante confederacy and Yaa Asantewaa was appointed Queen Mother by her brother. He was the Ejisuhene, so there was the Ejisu, which is a neighboring city or Kumasi, and he was the King of the Ejisu, a people who were part of the Asante Confederacy. His name was Nana Akwasi Afrane Opese. By the way, Nana is the title of a monarch, signifies that status of "King" or "Queen". That's why I call Nana Yaa Asantewaa *Nana* as a mark of respect in this presentation.

As the Queen Mother, it was specifically Nana Yaa Asantewaa's role to protect the Golden Stool. In 1893 the Asantehene, Nana Prempeh I, rejected an invitation to Asante to become a British protectorate. Initially the British did not attack. But then, Yaa Asantewaa's brother died in 1894, and her grandson became the Ejisuhene. In 1895 war broke out again.

By 1896, the British had won and the then Governor of the Gold Coast, William Maxwell, went to Kumasi and ordered the arrest of the Asantehene, Nana Prempeh I. At this point, a demand was made for the Golden Stool. Nana Prempeh refused, and therefore he was banished to the Seychelles along with several other key figures from the Asante, including Yaa Asantewaa's grandson. Therefore she became the regent of the Ejisu.

The event which triggered the fifth and final Anglo-Asante war of 1900 the meeting which was held in Kumasi by Sir Frederick Hodgson, Governor of the Gold Coast at the time. He summoned the remaining Asante leaders and demanded that they give him the Golden Stool. He is quoted as saying: "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 in this country. Why have you relegated me to this chair?" Some rubbish chair, I guess. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

The British were very keen to get the Golden Stool. Apparently, the so-called paramount power referred to in that quote, Queen Victoria, was very upset that it had not already been obtained. It had been attempted in the past to get hold of the Stool, and the Asante had simply created a replica and gave that to the British, and the British were furious when they found out that they had been tricked. The British understood that without the Golden Stool there would be no symbol to hold the Asante confederacy together. Apparently however, Sir Hodgson had underestimated how outrageous his demand had been. No one sits on the Golden Stool! This was unheard of.

So, a secret meeting of the remaining Asante leaders was called. And it was at this meeting that some of the men expressed their reluctance to go to war. Some of the men suggested instead that they beg the British to bring back their King from exile. Nana Yaa Asantewaa was present at this meeting. And she was furious.

I'd like to play a short audio file from a woman called Vanessa Danso. She is a YouTuber who made a short video called: "The Legendary Nana Yaa Asantewaa and the War of the Golden Stool". In this audio clip she quotes Nana Yaa Asantewaa both in Twi, the original language, which I sadly don't speak, and in English translation.

AUDIO CLIP OF VANESSA DANSO SPEAKING TWI AND ENGLISH WITH MUSIC IN BACKGROUND: "How can a proud and brave people like the Asante sit back and look while white men took away their king and chiefs, and humiliated them with a demand for the Golden Stool? The Golden Stool only means money to the white man; and that is why they have searched everywhere and dug everywhere for it. I shall not pay one predwan 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." It was safe to say she was quite pissed off!

SHARON DODUA OTOO: That was exciting! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Yes, she was really furious. So, how did the battle of Golden Stool turn out? Well, Nana Yaa Asantewaa convinced the men to fight. One of the methods she used was to call on women to go on sex strike until their husbands agreed to enlist. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] I think this is a popular method. She was chosen to lead the war against the British — probably because of that method. The first and only example of a woman to be given that role in Asante history. She led an army of 5,000 from her headquarters in Ejisu. She couldn't lead the army from Kumasi, which was the capital, because at that time it was heavily populated by the British. Around 3500 British people were trapped in the Kumasi fort without food or water for several months. They were forced to eat rats and mice. Many died of yellow fever and other horrible diseases. After 10 months Nana Yaa Asantewaa allowed the sick and women who wanted to, to leave the fort. Unknown to her, a note was smuggled out and therefore reinforcements were sent eventually to break the siege, which ended in 1901. In the end the War of the Golden Stool caused around 1000 casualties on the British side and around 2000 were suffered on the Asante side. The image I've used in this slide is from a game that is available on Google Play. I

haven't played it myself yet but I think it's very exciting. Asantewaa — Battle for the Golden Stool! Very good.

Initially Nana Yaa Asantewaa was not captured. But eventually she surrendered as the British arrested her daughter. She was stripped almost naked as we can see in the picture on the right, and forced to give up a gold waist band and surrender her chair, which was a symbol of authority of the Queen Mother of the Asante. Her final piece of resistance was to spit in the face of the captain arresting her. Nana Yaa Asantewaa was also sent into exile in the Seychelles, where other members of the Asante royal family were. Nana Yaa Asantewaa died in exile in 1921. However, three years later Nana Prempeh and the other Asante people in exile were permitted to return back to West Africa, present day Ghana. Her remains were reburied in 1924 in a ceremony fit for a Queen.

So what was Nana Yaa Asantewaa's legacy? One of the legacies was that a school established in Kumasi in 1960 — the Yaa Asantewaa Girl's Senior High School. A museum was also built in 2000 and opened in her hometown of Ejisu. Unfortunately, a fire destroyed the museum in 2004, destroying many items that were very valuable, including her shoes and battle dress. The British never found the Golden Stool. Eventually it was found by accident in 1920 by some road workers. And it was kept safely and is now with the Asante and only shown in public every five years, as I mentioned earlier.

One of the things that Nana Yaa Asantewaa would have been really elated about was the fact that her dream came true in 1957, that the Asante did gain freedom from the British as part of the new Ghanaian Empire. There's an image here on the right of, well... it's a popular image used to depict Nana Yaa Asantewaa and the one that I carry around with me on my phone as the screen saver. But I recently learned however, that this isn't her at all! It is a US-American Theatre Arts student posing as Nana Yaa Asantewaa in bulletproof war jacket and holding a gun. So anytime you see this image, you can tell people you heard it here, this isn't her at all! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

I just want to end by talking about the significance of this whole story for Berlin in 2021. This is a story of attempted theft. If it had been successful, no doubt the Golden Stool would have ended up in the British museum and perhaps even sold to the Germans and be residing in the recently opened Humboldt Forum — who knows? I mention this because of the huge number of other cultural artifacts which are in Western museums, some on proud display, but many simply gathering dust in depots and cellars across Europe and the United States. The current discussions around the Benin Bronzes, which are legally considered to be owned by the Stiftung Preußische Kulturbesitz, the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, are one very good example.

So, in summary, Ghanaians at home and in the diaspora owe a lot to Nana Yaa Asantewaa. And this song is in her honor. I also cannot sing the song. I didn't even find the tune, but if I add, you wouldn't want to hear me singing this. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]



Yaa Asantewaa  
A woman who fights before cannons  
You have accomplished great things  
You have done well

And thinking for example of the current state of restitution debates I've just alluded to, I can say thanks to Nana Yaa Asantewaa, we are no longer in seed time, we are in harvest time. Thank you very much.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

SUSAN STONE: Sharon Dodua Otoo on Nana Yaa Asantewaa. You can see some images this remarkable woman on our website, along with links to more information about her life and legacy. And if you'd like to read our show, we have transcripts of this episode and many others available, over at [deadladiesshow.com/podcast](http://deadladiesshow.com/podcast).

KATY DERBYSHIRE: You can follow us on social media @deadladiesshow and please share, rate, and review the show as it helps others to find our podcast. Thanks to our friends at ACUD, including the sound engineer Alonso Boniche.

SUSAN STONE: And we're actually going to be back in ACUD fairly soon in October. That's October 5th, and we're going to have of course three wonderful talks. I'll be talking about architect Zaha Hadid, Agata Lisiak will be speaking about Rosa Luxemburg, and we'll have a very special lady presented to German — who, we don't know yet. And we'll bring you most of those on the podcast very soon.

Now I have to tell you that the Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. And the podcast is created, produced, and edited by me.

We'll be back next month to introduce you to another fabulous Dead Lady. Thank you to Florian and thank you to Katy.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Thank you, Susan!

SUSAN STONE: And thanks to everyone listening. Bye bye!

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Support for this episode of the Dead Ladies Show Podcast comes from the Berliner Senat.