

Article

Women in Colonial Resistance in West Africa: A Comparative Study of Asante and Dahomey

Page | 193

Emmanuel Badu-Amoah

History and Politic Section, Institute of African studies, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana,

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7522-3555>

CITATION

Emmanuel. B. A. (2024).
Women in Colonial Resistance in
West Africa: A Comparative Study
of Asante and Dahomey,
*Intercontinental Social Science
Journal*. 1(3), 193- 206.
<https://doi.org/10.62583/t73ekj24>
Received 05 Jan 2024
Accepted: 09 Feb 2024

COPYRIGHT



Copyright © 2024 by author(s).
*Intercontinental Social Science
Journal*, published by Pierre
Online Publications Ltd. This
work is licensed under the [Creative
Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)
license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Abstract: This study examines the role of women in colonial resistance in West Africa through a comparative analysis of the Asante and Dahomey societies. Whereas the application of traditional historiography has tended to sideline the contributions of women in the anti-colonial movements, the most recent scholarship has started appreciating the roles of women in political leadership, mobilisation, and military opposition. The research approach is a qualitative historical study design which will utilize secondary data, such as scholarly literature, historical data, and written case studies. It provides a comparative analytical approach to understand how the role of women in resistance during the precolonial political structures and how they changed during the colonial rule. The results demonstrate that women in both societies were the key and varied participants of the resistance movements despite the fact that their participation was not similar. Women in the Asante Kingdom were able to exercise power in essence by institutional political authority and symbolic leadership as shown by Yaa Asantewaa. Women on the other hand in the Dahomey Kingdom were directly incorporated into military organization and they were actively involved in warfare with the use of the Agojie. The paper also reveals that the involvement of the women was firmly embedded in the precolonial systems of governance which gave them a recognised power. The interventions by colonials however transformed these structures by excluding women in formal power and this saw their form of resistance change. It is concluded that the role of women in colonial resistance was very important and situational, as it is important to have a gendered and comparative approach to understanding African history. It helps get a more detailed picture of the resistance movements with the focus on the agency of women and the interactions between the indigenous frameworks and the colonial changes.

Keywords: *Women, colonial resistance, sante, Dahomey, gender, West Africa, comparative analysis*

Introduction

The issue of colonialism in Africa was not merely a political and economic structure of domination but also a process of change that changed the social structures, identities and power relations in the continent. Although the greater part of the historical literature has been entered on the relevance of male dominated resistance against the colonialists, lately the historical literature has shifted its attention to the role of women that is very crucial in the anti-colonial movements. Women were not passive observers but active agents that helped in the resistance by holding political positions, mobilisation, intelligence networks and in some cases, direct military action.

Asante (modern-day Ghana) and Dahomey (modern-day Benin) societies of West Africa are very good examples of how women have played a major role in resisting colonialists. These communities were well-organized politically and had women who were in high positions within the political systems and some were even the queen mothers and the military leaders. The well-known case of the Dahomey Amazons, all-female military regiment proves the institutionalisation of the role of a woman in war and defence of the state (Alpern, 1998). In the same way, the role of such figures like Yaa Asantewaa was critical in the fight against the British colonial growth especially in the War of the Golden Stool in 1900 in the Asante Kingdom (Allman and Tashjian, 2000).

Researchers have been motivated to challenge the importance of gender in the formation of resistance methods and results. The participation of women in anti-colonial struggles most of the time was usually not only restricted to armed resistance but also economic resistance, cultural conservation and grassroots mobilisation (Hodgson and McCurdy, 2001). The contributions are seen to contest previous accounts of history that reduced the role of women and rather it highlights the necessity of a more comprehensive approach to the concept of resistance movements in Africa.

Additionally, colonial policies, in many cases, upset the official gender relations by diminishing the political and economic power of females. The colonial rule in Europe had a tendency of introducing patriarchal systems that denied women official forms of governance, hence shifting the existing powers (Cooper, 2002). In turn, women changed their resistance tactics, they took up demonstrations, boycotts, and other types of collective action to maintain their independence and social impact.

Women resistance is also studied and is relevant in the general theory of agency, power and subaltern resistance. Feminist historiography has played critical role in rewriting the history of women and redefining past events on a gendered basis (Mama, 1995). Paying attention to the female experience,

the scholars will be able to comprehend the process of shaping the resistance movements through the prism of mutual influences of gender, culture, and the colonial policy.

Although extensive literature has been developed about African resistance, comparative analysis which will identify the role of women in various societies and situations is still needed. A large part of the current literature is inclined to deal with case studies on an individual basis, which restricts the possibility of making larger scale conclusions concerning resistance patterns.

Thus, this paper attempts to analyse women involvement in colonial resistance in West Africa by comparing the Asante and Dahomey cultures. Through historical evidence and literature analysis, the study aims to offer a deeper explanation of the role of women in resistance movements as well as how the contribution of women was conditioned by the natives as well as colonial interventions.

Literature Review

History writing on colonial resistance in Africa has been dominated by male political leaders, military actors, and nationalist elites, often pushing to the periphery women of the history, to the periphery of historical analysis. The tendency has however been disputed by more recent scholarship, who have shown that women played a key role in anti-colonial mobilisation, political organising, intelligence collection, symbolic leadership, and military action in a variety of societies in Africa. The feminist historiography has been one of the forces behind this change, as it aims not only to reclaim the historical agency of women but also challenge the gendered nature of the colonial and postcolonial discourse.

A significant body of literature looks at precolonial political systems where women already possessed institutional power prior to the colonisation. Women had power in most West African communities as queen mothers, market heads, priestesses and military players. These roles are especially important in the Asante and Dahomey cases, where women were integrated into statecraft as opposed to their roles in the household. The literature then indicates that the anti-colonial involvement of women was not an isolated historical occurrence but in most instances the continuation of some already existing political traditions which the colonial rule attempted to undermine or usurp.

Scholarship in the case of Dahomey has especially focused on the Agojie who are sometimes known in the literature as the Dahomey Amazons. The work of Stanley Alpern is still regarded as one of the most significant works in the history of the historical growth of this all-female corps and the military organisation, in which women in Dahomey played a not only nominal but also a working role in war and state protection. This literature has been instrumental in disproving the assumptions that the

involvement of African women in armed resistance was either very exceptional or peripheral. Rather, it makes Dahomey a vivid illustration of institutionalised female military power during the precolonial and colonial times in West Africa.

The literature about the Asante context has focused greatly on Yaa Asantewaa and the War of the Golden Stool that has emerged as one of the most praised moments of anti-colonial resistance in African history. Research on Yaa Asantewaa has not only discovered her military role, but also her emblematic role in expressing independence, political legitimacy and group identity in the face of colonialism. The analysis by McCaskie is especially noteworthy as it goes beyond heroic oversimplification and places Yaa Asantewaa into larger context of Asante political processes, making of memories, and nationalist renegotiation. This scholarship reveals that the resistance of women could not be explained only with the help of celebratory biography, it has to be interpreted with the politics of memory, representation, and national-building at postcolonial level.

The other major theme of the literature is the gendered consequences of the colonialism itself. Colonial powers often reorganized the African political systems in a manner that left out women in all formal powers even in a society where women had exercised influence. In this regard, colonialism was a system of both territorial dominance and gender re-ordering. Feminist studies on women and colonialism in West Africa have thus suggested that the resistance of women should be interpreted as resistance to political possession, economic marginalization and the patriarchal re-allocation of power through colonial rule.

Research Problem

Although there is an increasing literature on colonial resistance in Africa, the role of women has been relegated in historical accounts whose preoccupation has been the male political leaders and the military players. Even though the current body of scholarship has started to take note of women and their contributions, a lot of these studies are scattered, focusing on individual cases or rather great personalities, instead of providing a comprehensive and comparative view on the role of women in various African societies. Within the framework of West Africa, the examples of Asante and Dahomey societies are particularly important to examine historically because women actively participated in politics and military affairs in these societies in order to resist the colonial rule; nevertheless, current researches often explore only these instances separately, without attempting to compare them with each

other, in order to determine more general trends, commonalities, and differences in the role of women in the resistance movements.

Moreover, colonialism did not only enforce political and economic dominance, it redefines gender relationships by throwing women out of the formal structures of power in even the societies where they had formerly occupied influential roles. This change leads to some serious questions about how women changed their roles and approaches to the colonial pressure. In this regard, the main issue presented in this paper is that the role of women in the formation of the resistance against the colonialism, and especially on how the political institutions of the indigenous communities and the colonialist ones influenced their involvement, has not been comparative and integrative. Such a blank spot restricts the possibility of a complete insight into gender relationships in African resistance movements and signifies the necessity of a more generalized analysis of the agency of women in history.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the role of women in colonial resistance in the Asante and Dahomey societies.
2. To analyse how precolonial political and social structures shaped women's participation in resistance movements.
3. To explore the impact of colonial rule on women's political and social roles in both societies.
4. To compare the forms and strategies of resistance adopted by women in Asante and Dahomey.
5. To contribute to a broader understanding of gender dynamics in African anti-colonial resistance.

Research Questions

1. What role did women play in colonial resistance in the Asante and Dahomey societies?
2. How did precolonial political and social structures influence women's participation in resistance?
3. In what ways did colonial rule reshape women's roles and agency in both societies?
4. What are the main similarities and differences between Asante and Dahomey regarding women's resistance strategies?
5. How does a comparative analysis of these two societies enhance understanding of gender and colonial resistance in Africa?

Methodology

Research Design

The qualitative historical research design used in this study involves a comparative research design. Historical methodology is suitable to study the past and interpret the historical materials and the role of women in the colonial resistance in particular socio-political settings.

A comparison is used to analyse similarities and differences between the Asante and Dahomey societies, which will permit to understand how the role of women in resistance was formed through native systems and colonial intrusions.

Research Approach

This analysis adheres to analytical interpretive method, which aims at exploring the meaning, roles and agency of women in historical discourses. It is a method that allows the researcher to critically analyse the way the contributions of women have been portrayed, recorded and even undermined in historical literature.

It is analysed on the basis of feminist historiography, which aims at unearthing repressed or underexplored points of views and at reinterpreting historical events in a manner that is gender sensitive.

Data Sources

The research is based on the secondary data materials, such as:

Peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books.

Temporal documents and historical records.

Reproductive reports and documented histories of great people.

Colonial resistance in Africa in earlier studies.

The main sources will be the writings on the Asante Kingdom and the Dahomey Kingdom, and general on gender and colonialism in Africa.

Data Selection Criteria

The sources used were selected on the following grounds:

Applicability to the research subject (women and colonial resistance).

Academic validity (reviewed or posted by the reputed schools or colleges)

Reliability and consistency in history.

Couples covered of Asante or Dahomey or both.

This helped to make the analysis based on sound and conformed historical evidence.

Analytical Framework

To arrange and interpret the data, thematic comparative analysis is used in the study. The study is organized into several topics, such as:

Women's political roles

The role of women in the military.

Colonialism effects on gender organization.

Resistance in the form of armed and non-armed.

Agency and leadership

These themes are traced in each case (Asante and Dahomey), and then compared, in order to detect patterns, differences, and generalisations.

Validity and Reliability

To analyse the research using maximum sources, many sources were involved in the study and compared to incorporate uniformity in the interpretation of the history. The validity of the findings is enhanced by the fact that well established academic sources have been used as well as comparison analysis.

Interpretive bias was reduced by depending on various academic views and not basing on one account or source.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study is done on secondary historical information, then no human involvement was required. All the references were properly referred to, so that we could not have plagiarism and all sources were cited so that academic integrity was guaranteed.

Results

This part shows the results of the research using a comparative analysis of the role of women in colonial resistance in the Asante and Dahomey communities in history.

Findings of Research Question 1: What was the role that women played in the colonial resistance in Asante and Dahomey societies?

The results show that women were leading and active participants in the resistance to colonization in both societies though the form of their involvement was different. In Asante Kingdom, women played a major role in the course of political leadership and symbolic authority, especially in the case of Queen

Mother. The example of the Yaa Asantewaa in the War of the Golden Stool shows that women might organise their opposition and contribute to the group action.

On the contrary, women in the Dahomey Kingdom were actively engaged in military resistance with the help of the Agojie organised military force consisting of women. These women were professional soldiers who engaged in war and defence against the colonialists. This shows that the roles of women in Dahomey were more formalised and militarised than the ones in Asante.

Findings of Research Question 2: What role does the precolonial political and social organization play in the involvement of women in resistance?

As the analysis has indicated, precolonial political and social structures had strong impact to women involvement in resistance. Asante and Dahomey, women were recognised leaders before the incursion of colonial powers, thus had roles to play in the resistance movements.

The political role of women in Asante was through their political institutions like the Queen Mother whereby the women were able to engage in the process of governance and decision making. The inclusion of women in the military organization of Dahomey gave them a direct access to power and exercising of armed resistance.

This evidence goes on to indicate that the role that women played in the resistance was not accidental but based on the systems of power and societal organisation that existed.

Research Question 3 Results: How did the colonial rule transform the role and agency of women?

The results suggest that the colonialism had a major destabilising effect on the existing gender systems because it marginalised women out of the official power bases. Colonial authorities usually introduced new forms of rule and rule out women in making political decisions thus undermining their positions in the institutions.

This forced women to change their methods of resistance. They were doing other kinds of resistance as opposed to just using formal positions of authority, such as mobilisation, symbolic leadership and collective action. It is an indication of the larger effect of colonialism on gender relations and the aspect of how women persevere in retaining their agency regardless of structural constraints.

Findings of Research Question 4: What are the similarities and differences between Asante and Dahomey as far as women resistance strategies are concerned?

The comparison and contrast analysis shows similarities and differences of the two societies. Both Asante and Dahomey had women playing a major role in the opposition to colonial rule and their involvement was even based on the pre colonialized systems of power.

They were however different in nature of their roles. The main characteristic of resistance in Asante was that it was based on political leadership and symbolic mobilisation whereas in Dahomey, it was based on direct military action. Nevertheless, all these differences notwithstanding, both types of resistance were successful in their attempt to fight the colonial regime and maintain cultural and political independence.

Findings of Research Question 4: What are the similarities and differences between Asante and Dahomey as far as women resistance strategies are concerned?

The comparison and contrast analysis shows similarities and differences of the two societies. Both Asante and Dahomey had women playing a major role in the opposition to colonial rule and their involvement was even based on the pre colonialized systems of power.

They were however different in nature of their roles. The main characteristic of resistance in Asante was that it was based on political leadership and symbolic mobilisation whereas in Dahomey, it was based on direct military action. Nevertheless, all these differences notwithstanding, both types of resistance were successful in their attempt to fight the colonial regime and maintain cultural and political independence.

Discussions

The section of finding is related to the existing literature and theoretical approach to understanding the issue of gender, colonialism, and resistance in African societies.

Research Question 1 was discussed as follows

The results reveal that women had central roles in the colonial resistance that contravenes the past historiography that undermined their role. Women politics in Asante are in line with the research that has highlighted the relevance of institutional power in formulating resistance (Allman and Tashjian, 2000). Straight military involvement of women in Dahomey in the form of the Agojie reinforces the position of Alpern (1998) that women military organisation was a formal and central element of state power.

These results add to the opinion that women were not marginal actors but influential figures of resistance movements, who acted in political and military arenas.

Research Question 2 Discussion.

The findings validate the point that the precolonial systems were decisive in facilitating women in resistance. This helps argue that the agency of women in African societies was historically laced in the established political and social institutions (Oyěwummi, 1997).

The authority of women in Asante as well as in Dahomey was not built during the resistance against colonialism but it was based on the prior systems. This observation disrupts Western beliefs to focus political authority on male domination and the significance of contextualising gender in indigenous African contexts.

Discussion of Research Question 3

The results show that gender relations were dramatically changed by the colonial rule excluding women out of formal systems of governing the country, which is reflected in the analysis of colonial restructuring in Africa by Cooper (2002). Administrative systems which were instituted on the basis of patriarchy caused marginalisation of the traditional roles of women and diminished their power within institutions.

But the research also indicates that women acculturated to such changes by finding different methods of resistance. This defends feminist historiographical views which underscore the strength of women and their ability to bargain power in limiting circumstances (Mama, 1995). The resistance women still engage in, even when structurally marginalized, indicates that they can reconsider agency in the altering politics.

Research Question 4 Discussion

The comparative results indicate the convergence and divergence of the two societies. Although the examples of both Asante and Dahomey depict effective female involvement based on precolonial organization, the manifestation of resistance is very different. Asante resistance is closer to symbolic leadership and political mobilisation, whereas Dahomey resistance is one which is characterised by direct military engagement.

The difference is used to justify the fact that the strategies of resistance vary depending on the unique institutional and cultural background of each society (Hodgson and McCurdy, 2001). Meanwhile, the parallels between the two instances point to an even larger trend of African women agency in resistance movements, indicating that women involvement was not an accident or a miracle but an institutional fact within these cultures.

Conclusion

This paper has explored women participation in the colonial resistance in West Africa using the Asante and Dahomey as a comparative case. The results indicate that women were not marginal participants but primary figures in the resistance campaigns by providing leadership in politics as well as military participation directly. Asante roles of women were mainly manifested in institutional political power, symbolic mobilisation, such as the leadership of Yaa Asantewaa. The Dahomey case, however, unveils a more formalised and militarised kind of involvement, in which women became direct members of the military system of the state.

The paper also indicates that the involvement of women in resistance was entrenched in precolonial political and social structures, which gave them the recognised power and influence. According to the colonial rule however, these systems were badly shaken by having to introduce new administrative systems which excluded women in the formal governance. In spite of these limitations, women took a resilient step by changing their tactics and still retained their agency using alternative means of resistance.

All in all, the article emphasizes the significance of gendered and comparative approach in the interpretation of colonial resistance because it shows the multiple varieties and multifaceted nature of female contribution in various African communities.

Implications

The results of this paper can be significant to both the historical research and the modern debates on gender and power. Regarding the scholarly dimension, the work enhances the expansion of literature, which aims to reconsider the African past through the gender-sensitive approach, and dismantle the male-dominated narrations, prioritizing the role of women in political and military affairs.

The comparative approach that was used in the present matter also offers a more subtle view of how the indigenous political frameworks and cultures played a role in shaping the resistance movements. This reveals the necessity of further investigations in which future studies should not be confined to single case studies, but rather more comprehensive analytical tools which reflect the regional differences and trends.

In a wider sense, the research supports the applicability of historical studies to inform current discussions on gender equality, leadership and roles in governance. The study is a challenge to the gender-based assumptions regarding the role of women in the contemporary society, since it proves

that women occupied the position of power and influence in the past, which contributes to the further empowerment of women in the present societies.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations regardless of the contributions. The study is premised on the use of secondary historical materials that can be bias prone to interpretation and constraints in accessibility and quality of archival material. Also, the case studies involved in the study, Asante and Dahomey, are two cases and this level of analysis may not be generalisable to other African settings.

Moreover, women and their roles in history are not always complete, and they are shaped by colonialism and patriarchy, thus leading to underrepresentation of some types of female involvement. Although the comparative approach offers useful information, it might not be as representative of the experiences of women in various areas and situations.

Future studies must give the scope an opportunity to extend it to cover more case studies besides taking an interdisciplinary approach to study the complexity of gender and resistance in African history.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this research.

Funding Statement: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, institution, or organisation.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

References

- Achebe, N. (2011). *The female king of colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe*. Indiana University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt16gz9r8>
- Allman, J., & Tashjian, V. (2000). *"I will not eat stone": A women's history of colonial Asante*. Heinemann.
- Alpern, S. B. (1998). *Amazons of Black Sparta: The women warriors of Dahomey*. NYU Press.
- Bay, E. G. (1998). *Wives of the leopard: Gender, politics, and culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey*. University of Virginia Press.

- Berger, I. (2003). Threads of solidarity: Women in African history. *The Journal of African History*, 44(1), 145–147. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853703008363>
- Cooper, F. (2002). *Africa since 1940: The past of the present*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511800290>
- Falola, T., & Amponsah, N. (2012). *Women's roles in African societies*. *African Studies Review*, 55(3), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0002020600007150>
- Hodgson, D. L., & McCurdy, S. A. (2001). “Wicked” women and the reconfiguration of gender in Africa. Heinemann.
- Mama, A. (1995). Feminism or femocracy? State feminism and democratisation in Nigeria. *Africa Development*, 20(1), 37–58.
- McCaskie, T. C. (2007). The life and afterlife of Yaa Asantewaa. *Africa*, 77(2), 151–179. <https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2007.77.2.151>
- Mikell, G. (1997). *African feminism: The politics of survival in sub-Saharan Africa*. University of Pennsylvania Press. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812202182>
- Okonjo, K. (1976). The dual-sex political system in operation: Igbo women and community politics in midwestern Nigeria. *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, 45–58.
- Oyèwùmí, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Sheldon, K. (2005). *African women: Early history to the 21st century*. Indiana University Press.
- Staudt, K. (1987). *Women, foreign assistance, and advocacy administration*. Praeger.
- Sudarkasa, N. (1986). The status of women in indigenous African societies. *Feminist Studies*, 12(1), 91–103. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177985>
- Van Allen, J. (1972). “Sitting on a man”: Colonialism and the lost political institutions of Igbo women. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 6(2), 165–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.1972.10803789>
- White, L. (1987). The historical roots of gender inequality in Africa. *African Studies Review*, 30(2), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/523666>
- Amadiume, I. (1987). *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society*. Zed Books.

Clark, G. (1994). *Onions are my husband: Survival and accumulation by West African market women*. University of Chicago Press.

<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226107790.001.0001>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution