



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

The UNESCO Series on Women in African History, produced by the Knowledge Societies Division of UNESCO's Communication and Information Sector, was conducted in the framework of the Priority Africa Intersectoral Platform, with the support of the Division for Gender Equality. This initiative was realized with the financial contribution of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Supervision: Sasha Rubel

Editorial and artistic direction: Edouard Joubeaud

Published in 2014 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

© UNESCO 2014



This publication is available in Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>). By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (<http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en>).

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Cover illustration: Pat Masioni

Layout: Dhiara Fasya, Maria Jesus Ramos



THE WOMEN SOLDIERS OF DAHOMEY

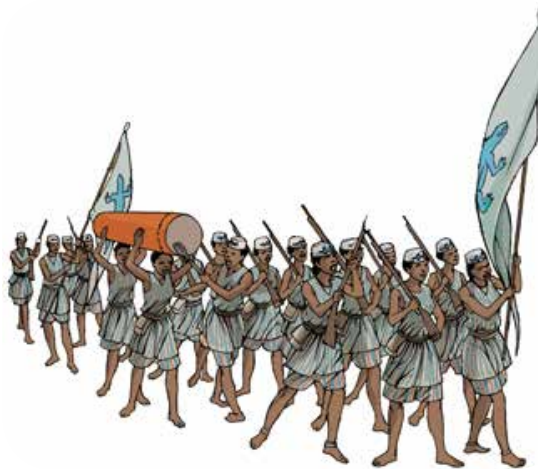
UNESCO Series on Women in African History
Editorial and artistic direction: Edouard Joubeaud

Comic strip
Illustrations: Pat Masioni
Script and text: Sylvia Serbin

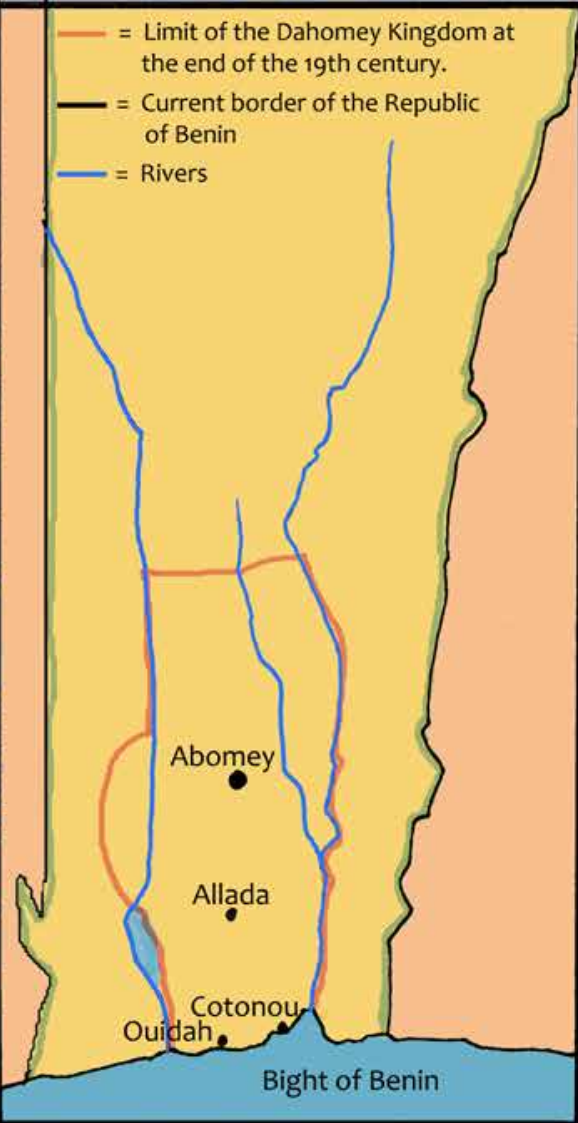
The women soldiers of Dahomey

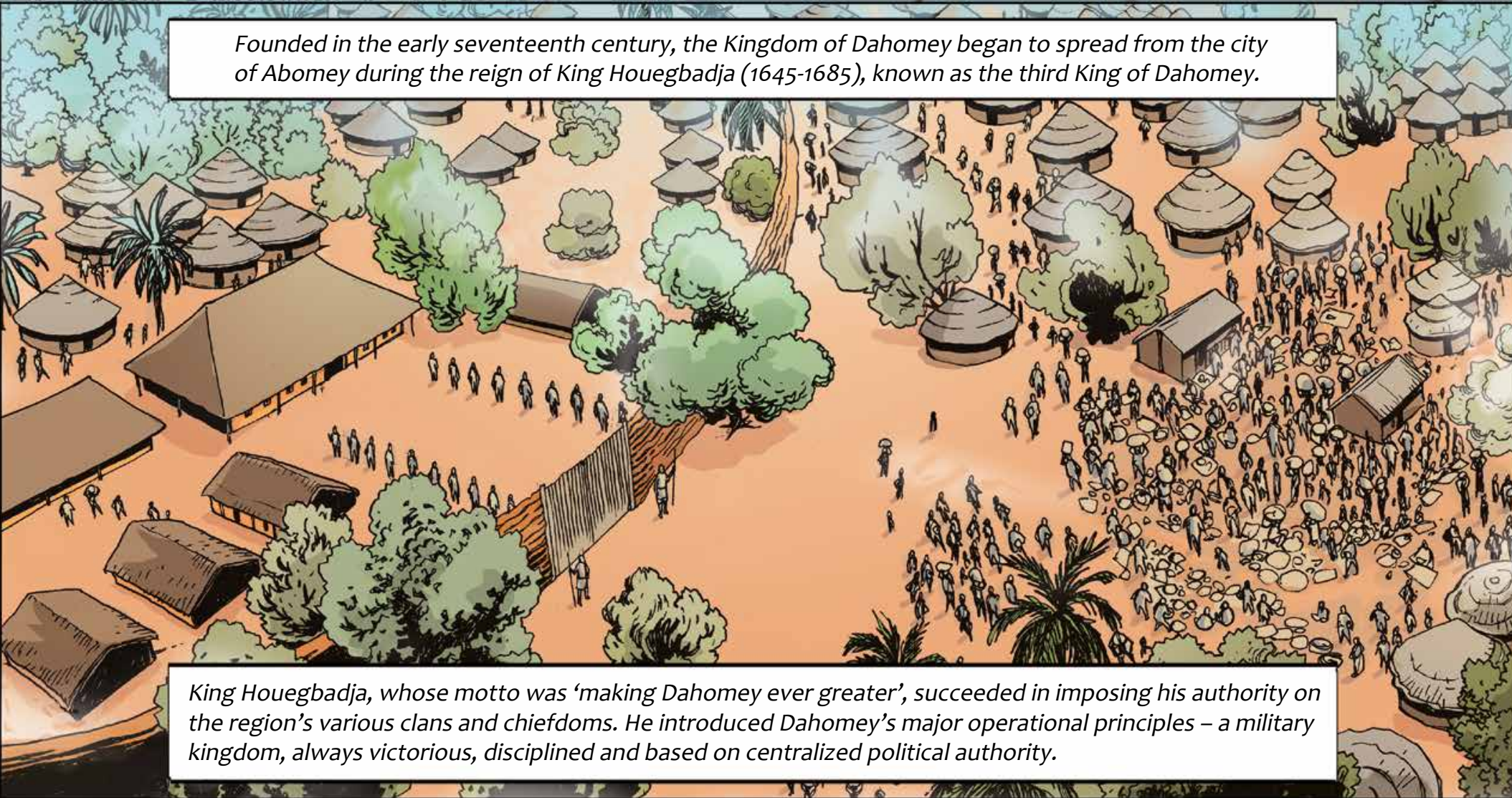
Foreword

The illustrations presented in the following comic strip are drawn from historical and iconographic research undertaken on the female soldiers of Dahomey, as well as the Kingdom of Dahomey and its rulers. Nonetheless, this work constitutes an artistic and visual interpretation and is not intended to be an exact representation of events, persons, architecture, clothing, hairstyles or accessories of this period.



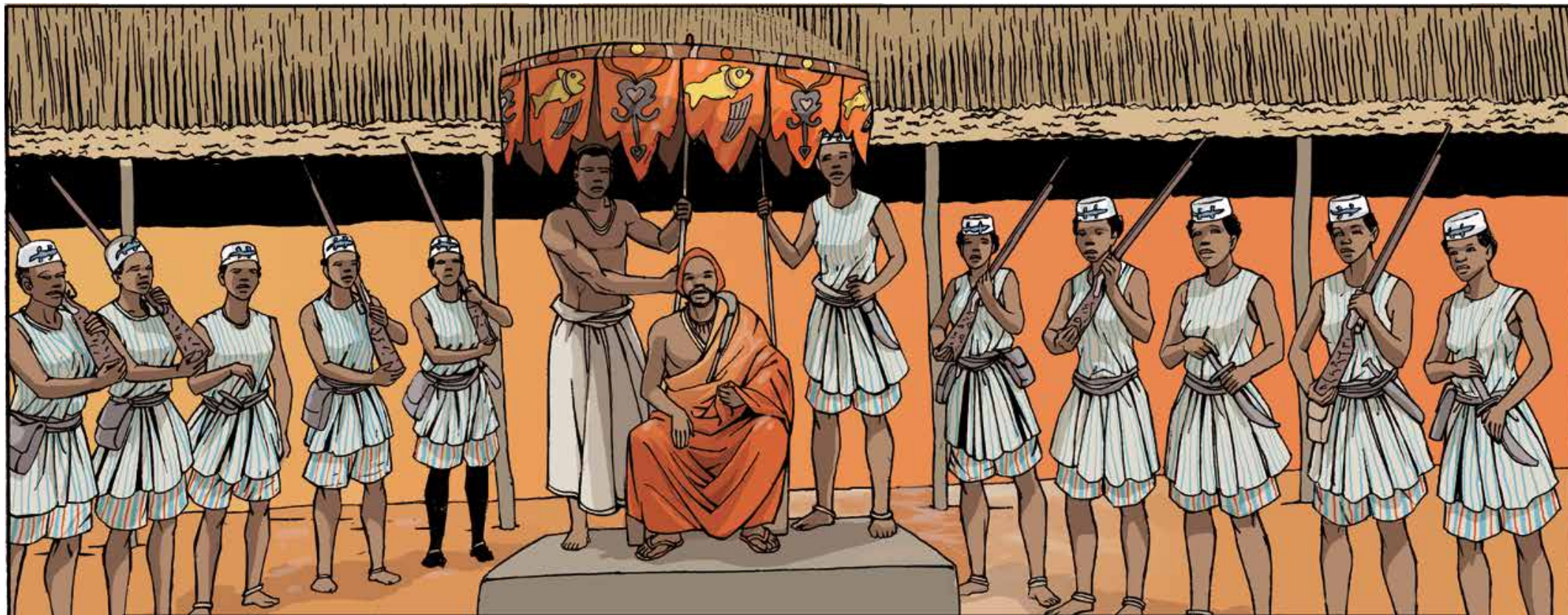
Between the mid-eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, Dahomey's famous women soldiers were the elite troops in the kingdom's army, in what is now the Republic of Benin.





Founded in the early seventeenth century, the Kingdom of Dahomey began to spread from the city of Abomey during the reign of King Houegbadja (1645-1685), known as the third King of Dahomey.

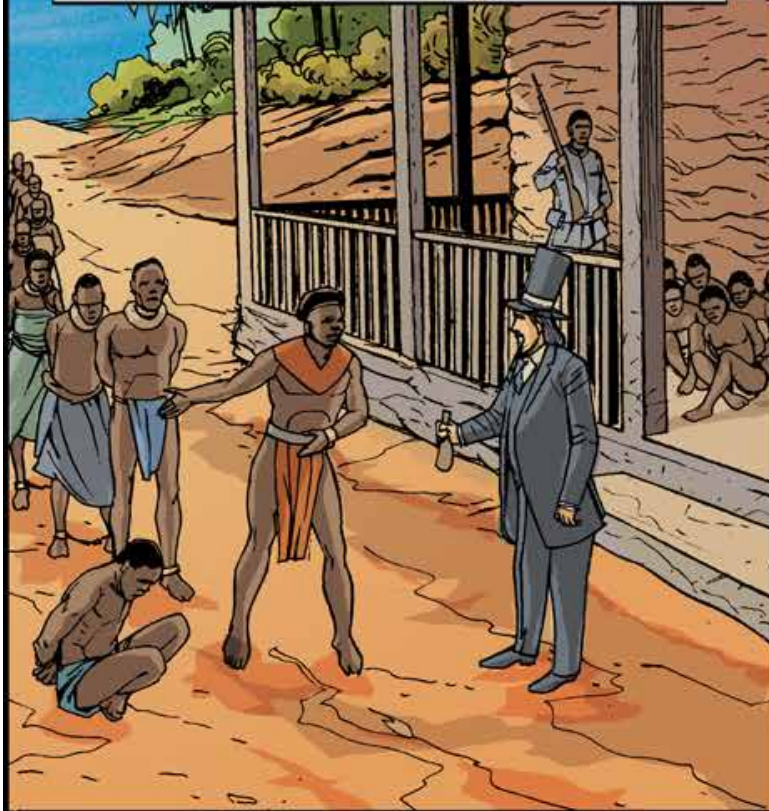
King Houegbadja, whose motto was ‘making Dahomey ever greater’, succeeded in imposing his authority on the region’s various clans and chiefdoms. He introduced Dahomey’s major operational principles – a military kingdom, always victorious, disciplined and based on centralized political authority.



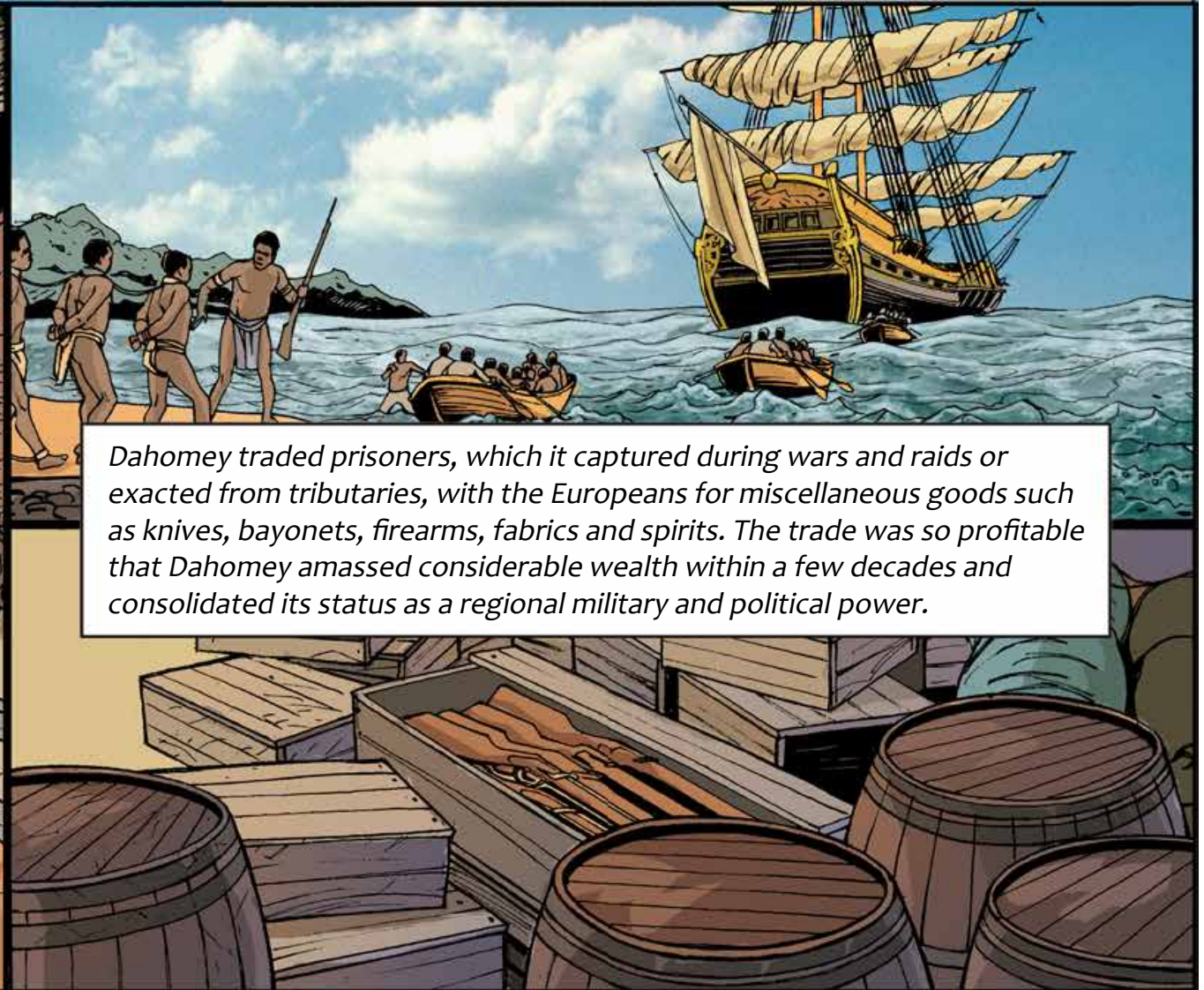
When did the Dahomey women soldiers first appear? It is difficult to specify an exact date, but women became part of the entourage of King Houegbadja's bodyguards in the seventeenth century. He assigned to them the tasks of ensuring his personal protection and guarding his royal palace.

According to some sources, the first women soldiers were selected from among huntresses, known as gbeta in Fon. According to others, they were selected for their physical abilities from among the King's numerous wives.

Owing to its military conquests, Dahomey successfully extended its domination to the maritime coast – a region dubbed the Slave Coast by the Europeans, because of the many slave-trading posts operating at the height of the transatlantic slave trade.

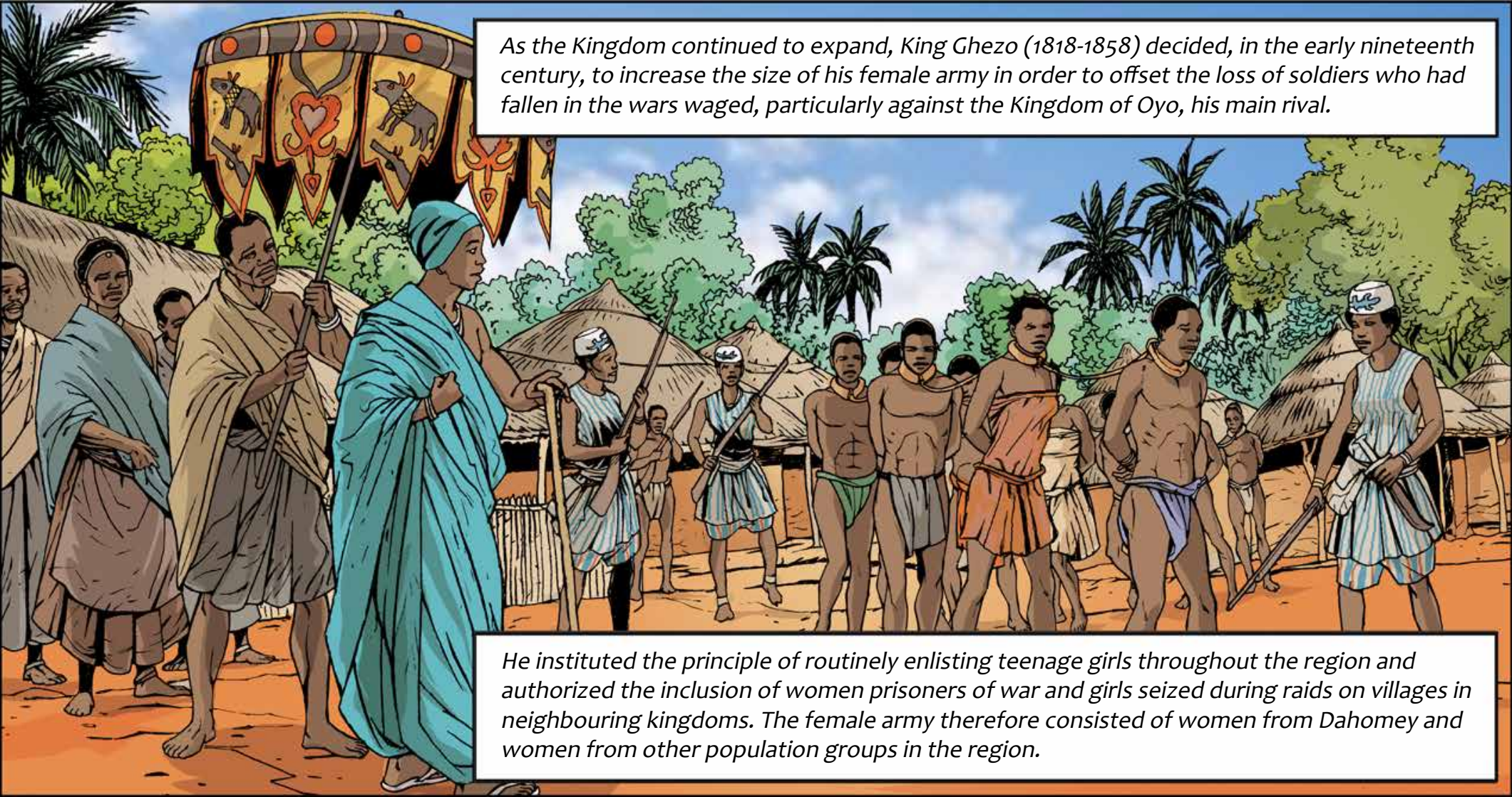


Dahomey traded prisoners, which it captured during wars and raids or exacted from tributaries, with the Europeans for miscellaneous goods such as knives, bayonets, firearms, fabrics and spirits. The trade was so profitable that Dahomey amassed considerable wealth within a few decades and consolidated its status as a regional military and political power.



As the kingdom continued to expand, King Ghezo (1818–1858) decided to increase the size of his female army to offset the loss of soldiers in recent wars, particularly against the Kingdom of Oyo, the main rival to Dahomey.

He enlisted many more women into the army. In 1727, they fought in the war through which Xweda, a coastal kingdom that was strategically placed for the development of trade with the Europeans, was conquered. The women soldiers subsequently became the spearhead of Dahomey's army.



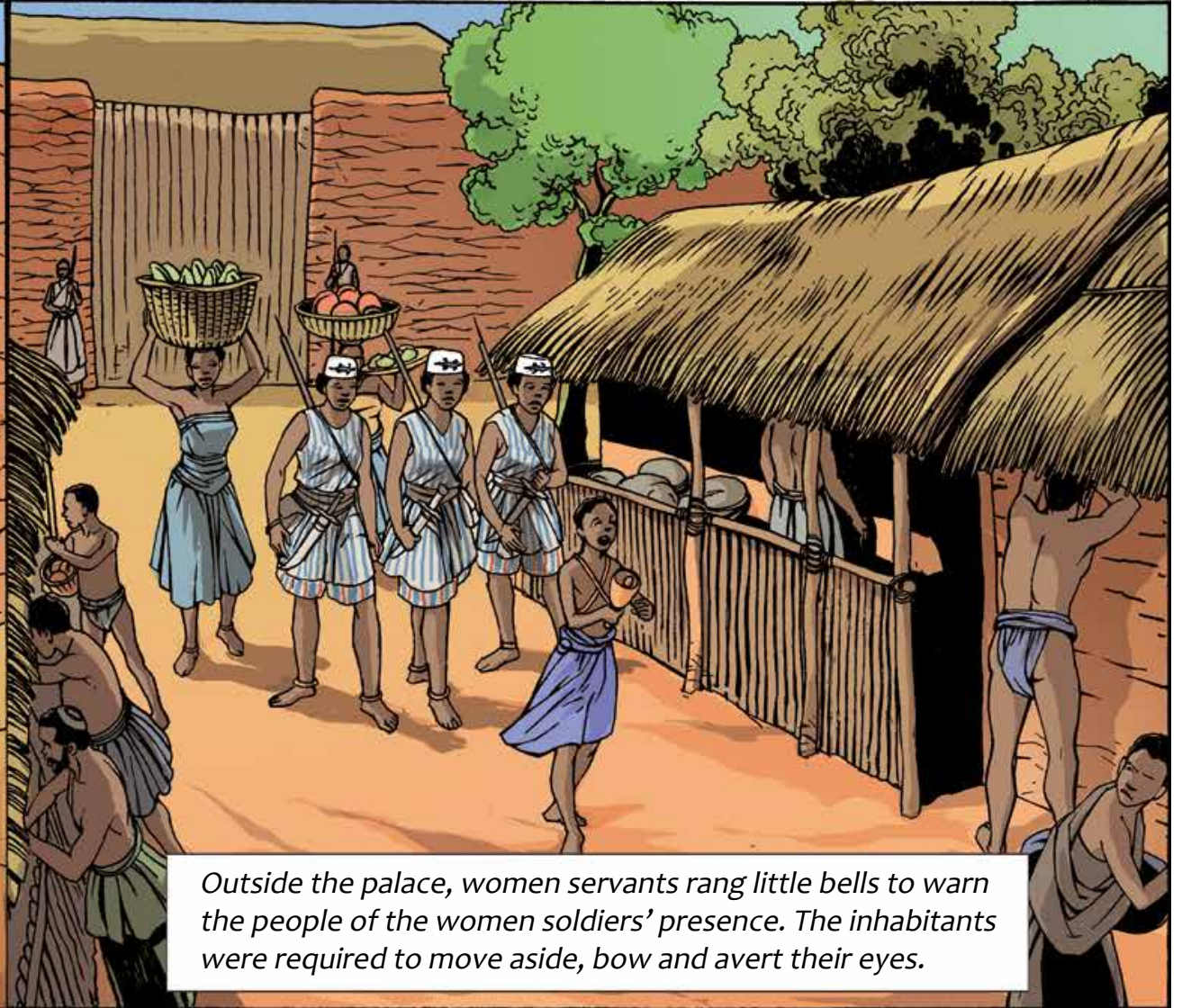
As the Kingdom continued to expand, King Ghezo (1818-1858) decided, in the early nineteenth century, to increase the size of his female army in order to offset the loss of soldiers who had fallen in the wars waged, particularly against the Kingdom of Oyo, his main rival.

He instituted the principle of routinely enlisting teenage girls throughout the region and authorized the inclusion of women prisoners of war and girls seized during raids on villages in neighbouring kingdoms. The female army therefore consisted of women from Dahomey and women from other population groups in the region.

Women soldiers had privileged relations with their rulers. They lived in royal palaces into which no man, apart from the King and some eunuchs, was allowed to enter, except during special celebrations.



They were sworn to celibacy. Only the King was able to take some of them as wives or give them in marriage, in very special circumstances, to the Kingdom's dignitaries, warlords or soldiers who had distinguished themselves by their bravery in combat.



Outside the palace, women servants rang little bells to warn the people of the women soldiers' presence. The inhabitants were required to move aside, bow and avert their eyes.

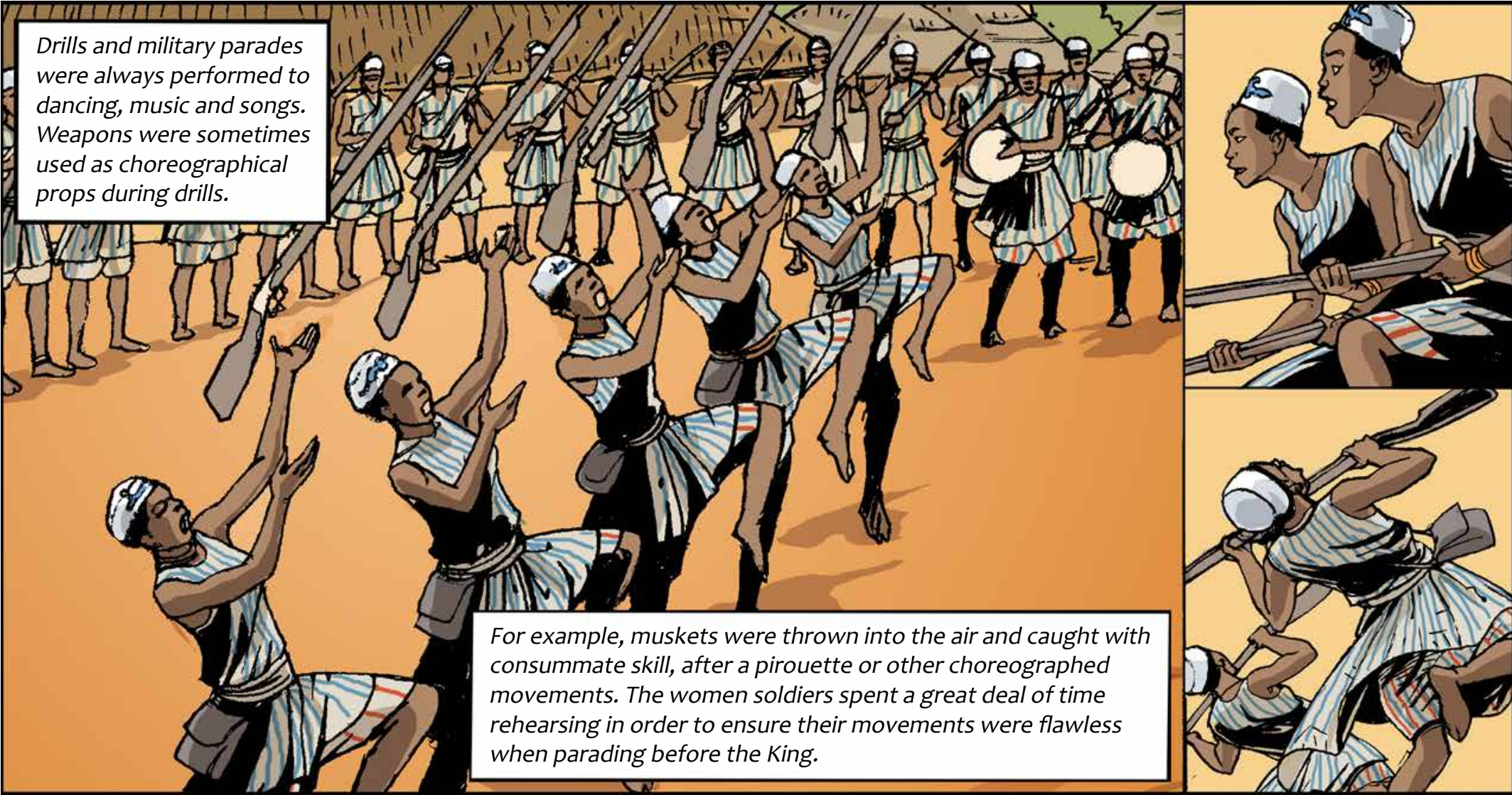
They underwent very intensive training, comprised of drills and large-scale simulated attacks, in particular during the nineteenth century. The women soldiers thus became stronger, more flexible, more resilient and iron-willed.



One of their goals, often expressed in their songs, was to outshine men in every respect. They succeeded in that endeavour for, according to accounts by European travellers, they were better organized, swifter and much braver than male soldiers.



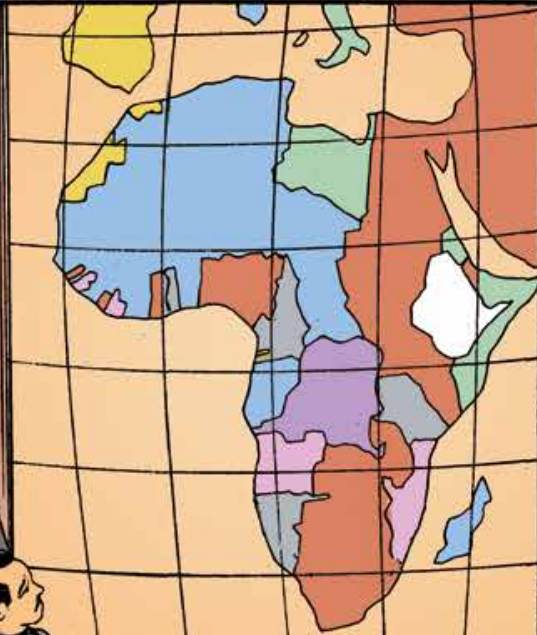
Furthermore, they performed magico-religious rituals and were trained to kill without hesitation.



Drills and military parades were always performed to dancing, music and songs. Weapons were sometimes used as choreographical props during drills.

For example, muskets were thrown into the air and caught with consummate skill, after a pirouette or other choreographed movements. The women soldiers spent a great deal of time rehearsing in order to ensure their movements were flawless when parading before the King.

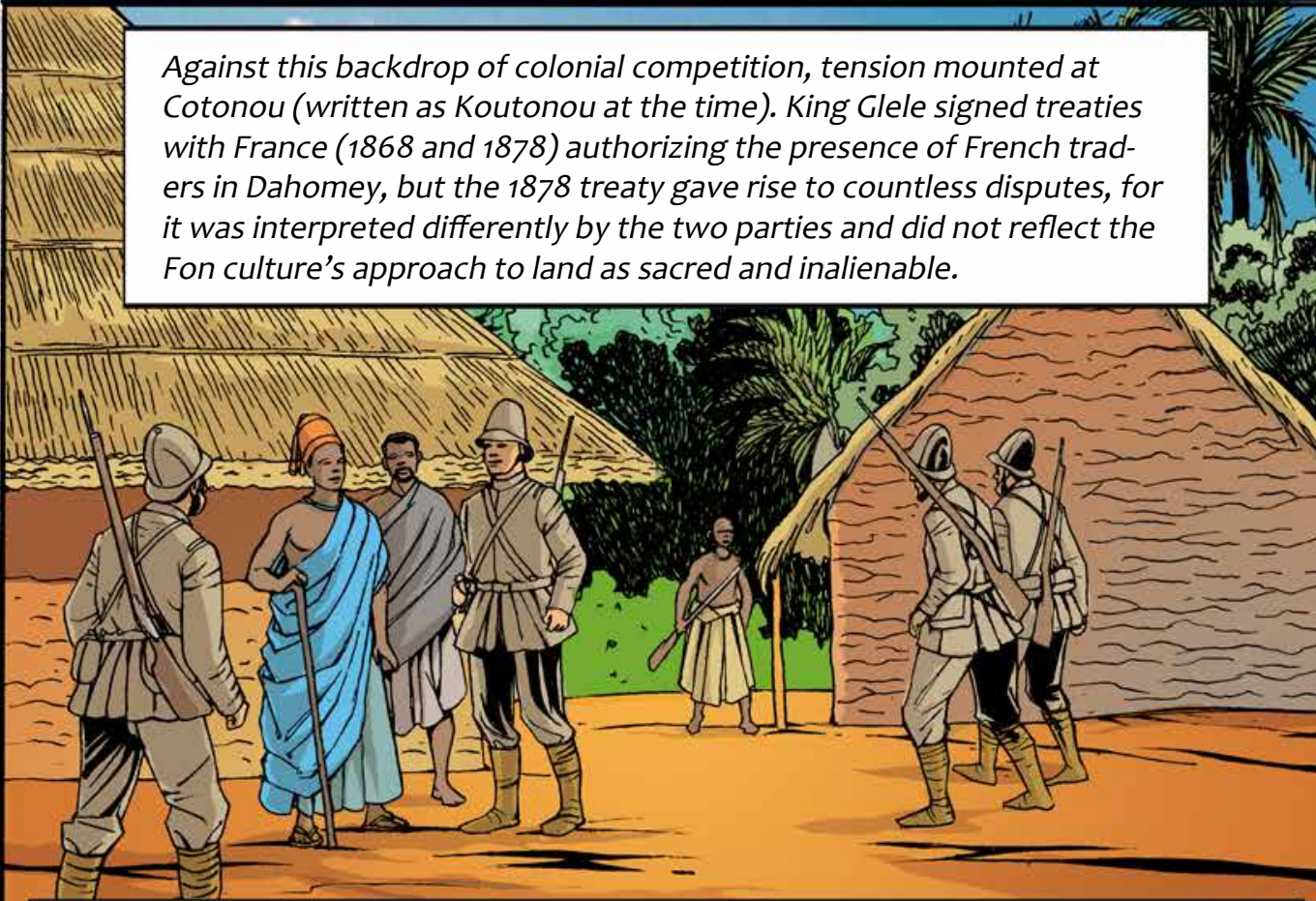
In the nineteenth century, after abolishing the transatlantic slave trade, and slavery, the European powers began the race to colonise Africa. Their goal was to seize the African countries' immense natural wealth.



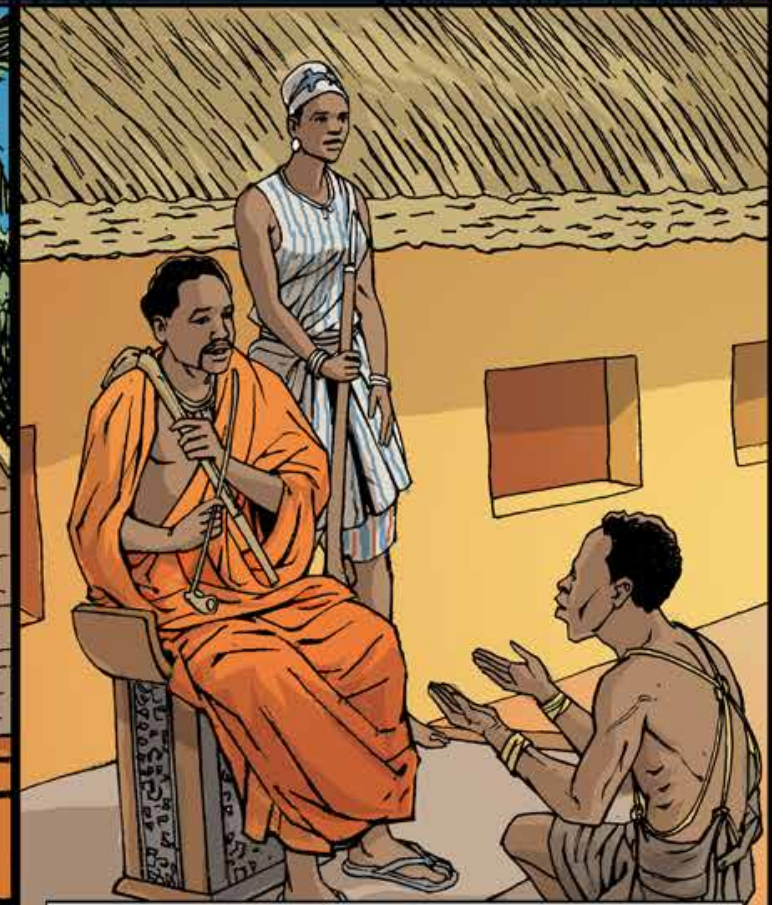
Africa was carved up among Europeans on conditions agreed upon at the 1885 Conference of Berlin, attended by the major European countries. African rulers and peoples were excluded from all of the negotiations.



Against this backdrop of colonial competition, tension mounted at Cotonou (written as Koutonou at the time). King Glele signed treaties with France (1868 and 1878) authorizing the presence of French traders in Dahomey, but the 1878 treaty gave rise to countless disputes, for it was interpreted differently by the two parties and did not reflect the Fon culture's approach to land as sacred and inalienable.



With an ingrained colonialist mind-set, the French government continued to extend its control over the port (by establishing a customs post, digging the Cotonou channel and military occupation) in order to maximize profits from this trading hub.



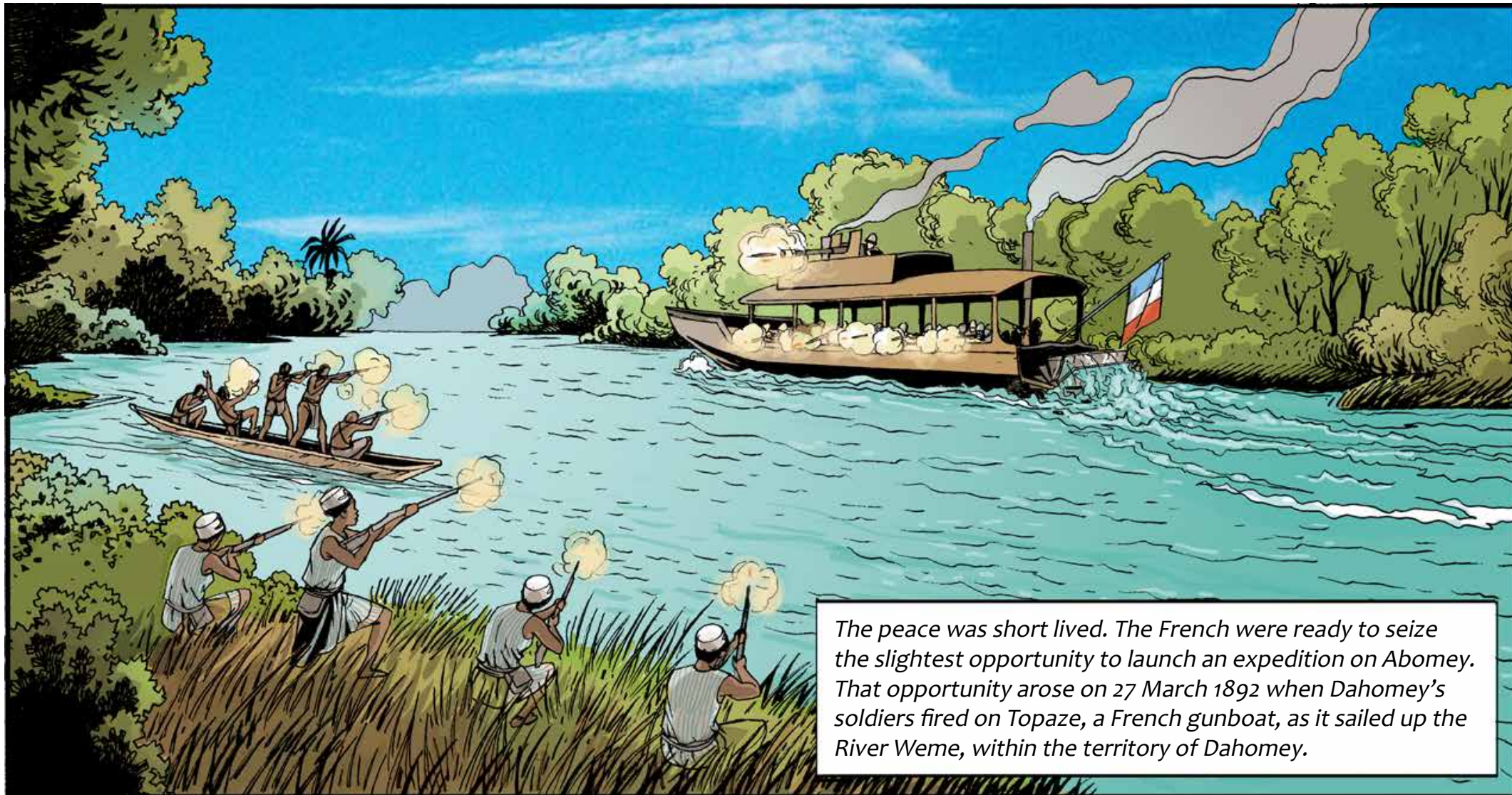
King Behanzin, the successor to King Glele, considered the actions of France to violate his sovereignty and reacted swiftly. War was inevitable.

In the early hours of 4 March 1890, King Behanzin ordered his troops to attack Cotonou. Despite being under fire from the French, some women soldiers were able to penetrate the interior of the stockade protected forts.

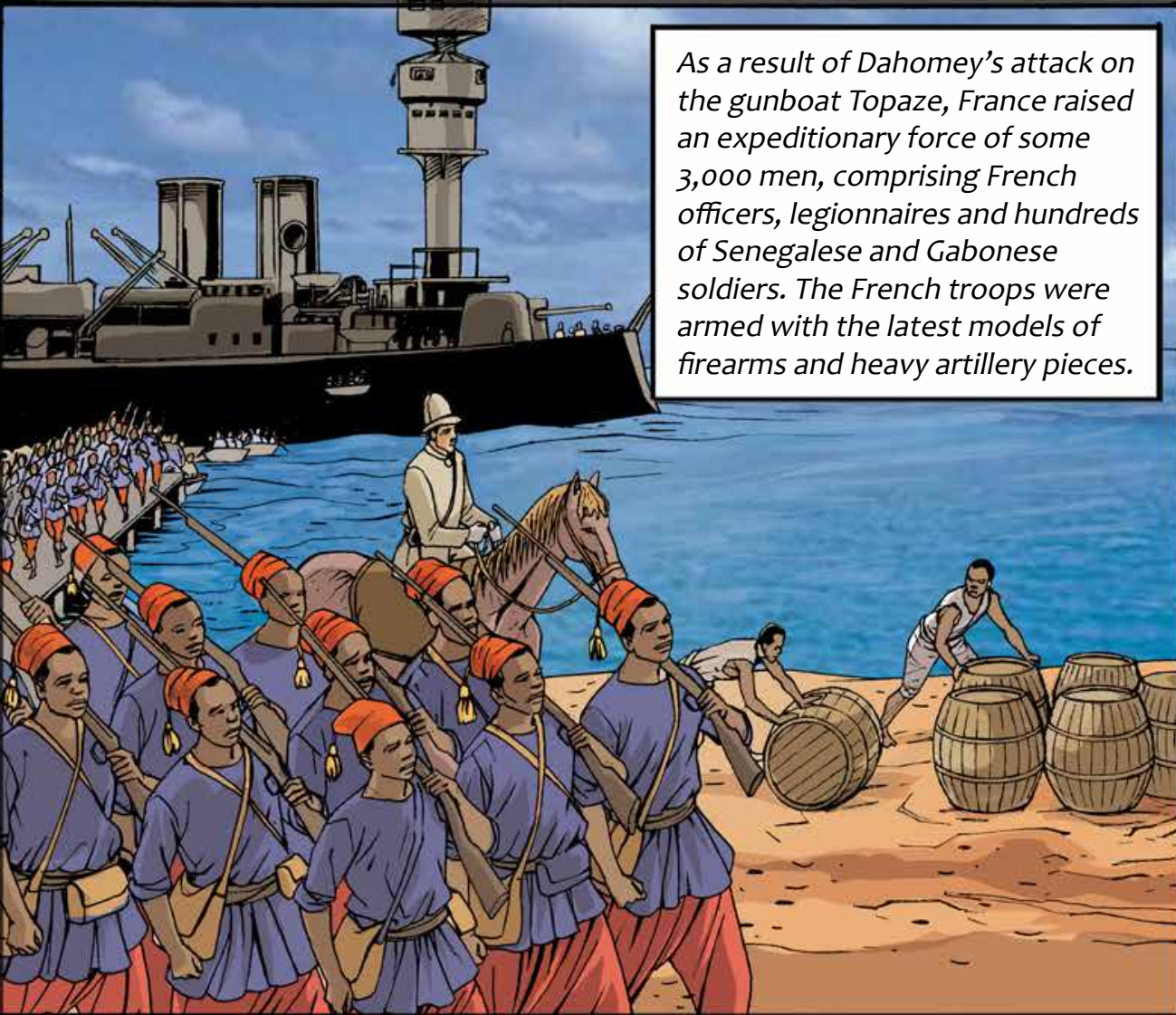


Taken by surprise, the bayonet-bearing French soldiers dared not attack the women, some of whom were barely 16 years old. The women soldiers leaped on them to force them into hand-to-hand combat. After fighting for four hours, Dahomey's troops withdrew. A few months later, a peace treaty was signed and King Behanzin ceded Cotonou and Porto Novo to France.

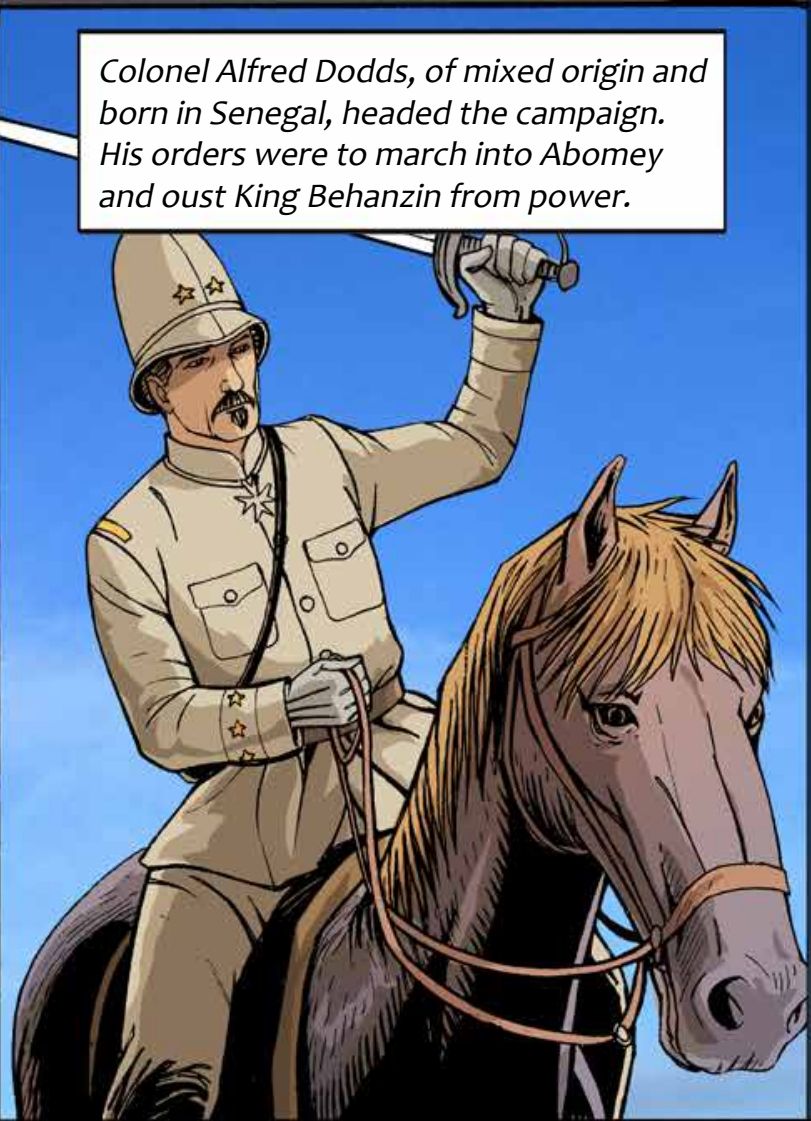




The peace was short lived. The French were ready to seize the slightest opportunity to launch an expedition on Abomey. That opportunity arose on 27 March 1892 when Dahomey's soldiers fired on Topaze, a French gunboat, as it sailed up the River Weme, within the territory of Dahomey.



As a result of Dahomey's attack on the gunboat Topaze, France raised an expeditionary force of some 3,000 men, comprising French officers, legionnaires and hundreds of Senegalese and Gabonese soldiers. The French troops were armed with the latest models of firearms and heavy artillery pieces.

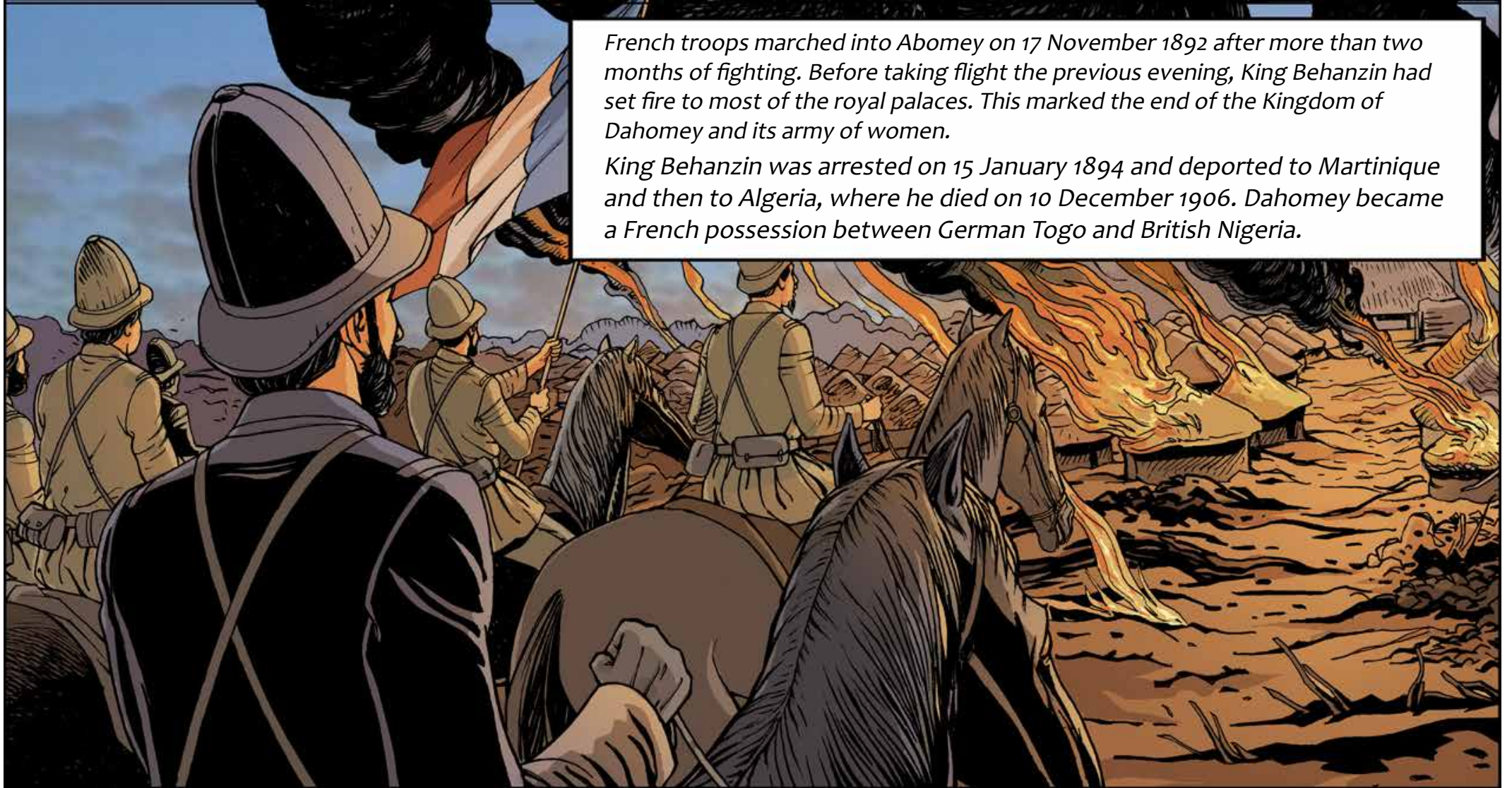


Colonel Alfred Dodds, of mixed origin and born in Senegal, headed the campaign. His orders were to march into Abomey and oust King Behanzin from power.

As the French troops drew closer to Abomey, King Behanzin launched numerous surprise attacks to slow down and weaken them. Women soldiers were often in the frontline of these ambushes.



The French expeditionary force, much better armed with artillery pieces and repeating rifles, continued to advance inexorably. Many women soldiers perished.



French troops marched into Abomey on 17 November 1892 after more than two months of fighting. Before taking flight the previous evening, King Behanzin had set fire to most of the royal palaces. This marked the end of the Kingdom of Dahomey and its army of women.

King Behanzin was arrested on 15 January 1894 and deported to Martinique and then to Algeria, where he died on 10 December 1906. Dahomey became a French possession between German Togo and British Nigeria.

Throughout the history of the Kingdom of Dahomey, its women soldiers were considered illustrious because of their boldness, their skills at combat and absolutely devotion to the King. If they had not sacrificed themselves to warfare, the Kingdom of Dahomey would doubtless never have risen to such fame.



In addition to the imprint that they have left on the collective memory, the women soldiers bequeathed to the Republic of Benin dances that are performed to this day in Abomey, songs and legends. There are many women soldiers in Benin's armed forces today. They keep the memory of the women soldiers of the Kingdom of Dahomey alive.

Visit and share the website
www.unesco.org/womeninafrica



Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

The women soldiers of Dahomey

Elite troops of women soldiers contributed to the military power of the Kingdom of Dahomey in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Admired in their country and feared by their adversaries, these formidable warriors never fled from danger. The troops were dissolved following the fall of Behanzin (Gbêhanzin), the last King of Dahomey, during French colonial expansion at the end of the nineteenth century.

Women in African History

By way of various artistic and pedagogical resources available online, this UNESCO project highlights a selection of historical female figures, from Africa and of African descent, who have distinguished themselves in the history of the continent in areas as diverse as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Njinga Mbandi), defence of women's rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti) and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

The selection of women figures proposed in the framework of this project is not exhaustive and represents only a small part of the contribution of African women, known and unknown, to the history of their countries, Africa and all mankind.

For additional pedagogical resources, please visit the web site www.unesco.org/womenin africa

The UNESCO Project *Women in African History* was realized with the financial contribution of the Republic of Bulgaria.



Republic of Bulgaria