



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



FUNMILAYO RANSOME-KUTI

AND THE WOMEN'S UNION OF ABEOKUTA

UNESCO Series on Women in African History





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Cultural Organization

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Cover illustration: Alaba Onajin
Layout: Muyang Li

UNESCO wishes to thank Monike Ransome-Kuti and her family for having provided some rare photographs of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and authorizing UNESCO to use them in this publication.

A detailed historical map of West Africa, showing various regions, rivers, and coastal areas. The map is rendered in a light, faded style, serving as a background for the text. Key geographical features include the Gulf of Guinea (Golfe de Guinée), the equatorial line (Equinoxiale), and several major rivers and trade routes. The map is annotated with numerous place names and geographical markers.

FUNMILAYO RANSOME-KUTI

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

Comic strip
Illustrations: Alaba Onajin
Script and text: Obioma Ofoego

Pedagogical unit
Text: Obioma Ofoego
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1 Introduction

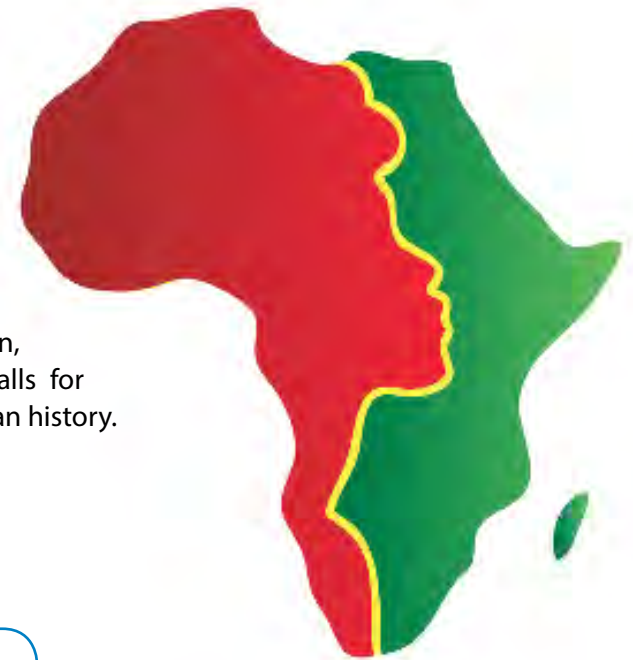
Spotlight on women!

The UNESCO Women in African History Series, and its corresponding website, aims to highlight a selection of key women figures in African history.

Through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the project showcases 20 African women or women of African descent. It demonstrates that historically, women have distinguished themselves in diverse fields such as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Njinga Mbandi), defence of women's rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti) and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

This list of 20 women represents only a small part of the contribution of African women, known and unknown, to the history of their countries, Africa and all mankind.

Through this project and by emphasizing the education, academic careers and main achievements of these exceptional women, UNESCO seeks to highlight their legacy and calls for continued research on the role of women in African history.



Visit and share the UNESCO website on Women Figures in African History: www.unesco.org/womeninfrica



Photograph by UNESCO/M. Benchelah, 2012.

Gender equality is one of the global priorities of UNESCO

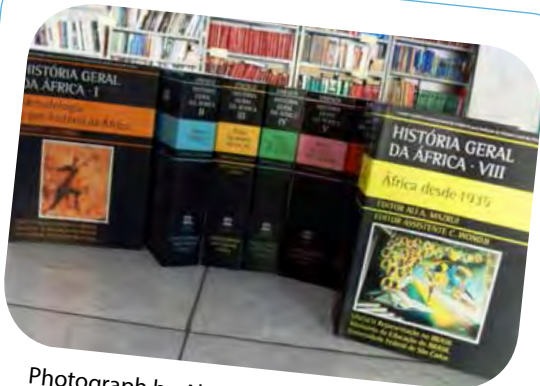
The Organisation strives to promote gender equality and women's empowerment by integrating these principles in all its programmes, notably in education.

Education makes possible the transmission of the essential value of gender equality: it provides leverage to enforce the fundamental human rights of women and highlights their central role in all societies.

As such, the teaching of history has a crucial role to play since it enables the understanding of cultural features, and highlights the social, political, and economic conditions in the lives of women in past societies.

translated into thirteen languages (including three African languages). A digital version available for download can be found on the UNESCO website.

Phase II, launched in 2009 and entitled The Pedagogical Use of the General History of Africa, aims to develop educational content in order to encourage the teaching of African history. The Women in African History project has been developed within the framework of Phase II.

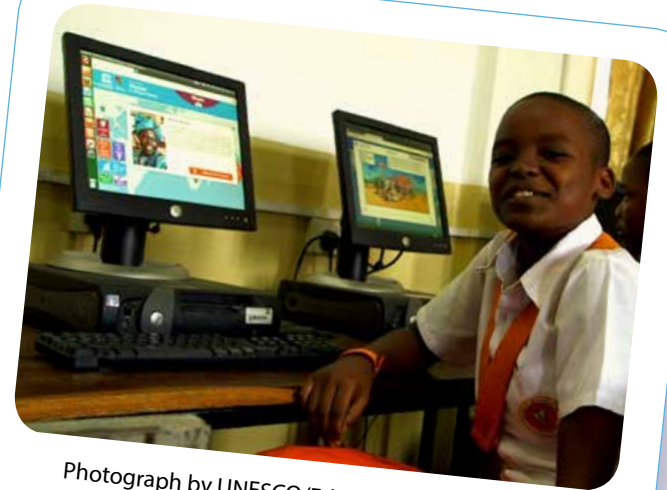


Photograph by Almanaque Lusofonista, 2013.

The General History of Africa

This publication is part of UNESCO's General History of Africa project.

Phase I of the project was launched in 1964 and completed in 1999. It resulted in the preparation and publication of a collection of eight volumes, a main edition, and an abridged version which have been



Photograph by UNESCO/Edouard Jouveaud 2015.

2 Biography

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900–1978) was born in Abeokuta, in present-day Ogun State, Nigeria. She was one of the first women to attend Abeokuta Grammar School in 1914, where she would go on to teach.

In 1919 she left for Wincham Hall School for Girls, Cheshire, England, to pursue her studies. By the time of her return to Nigeria in 1922, no doubt in reaction to the racism she had encountered in Britain, she had dropped her Christian name, Frances Abigail.

She soon became associated with some of the most important anti-colonial educational movements in Nigeria and West Africa¹, and fought tirelessly to further women's access to education and political representation.

Her children Beko, Olikoye and Fela, would all go on to play important roles in education, healthcare, the arts and political activism.

In 1944, she founded the Abeokuta Ladies' Club (later, the Abeokuta Women's Union), committed to defending women's political, social and economic rights, which became one of the most important women's movements of the twentieth century. Her unwavering commitment to cooperation, solidarity and unity led her to play an active role in politics, notably in the pre-independence constitutional negotiations of 1946.



Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti at her 70th birthday on 24 October 1970. Ransome-Kuti family archives.

¹ The Nigerian Union of Teachers, Nigerian Union of Students, West African Students' Union, and Nigerian Youth Movement.

3 Comic Strip

FUNMILAYO RANSOME-KUTI AND THE WOMEN'S UNION OF ABEOKUTA

Foreword

The following comic strip is an interpretation of certain periods of the life of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. The illustrations are based on historical and iconographic research on Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and mid-twentieth century Nigeria. They do not claim to be an exact representation of the events, people, architecture, hairstyles, or clothing of the period.





SCRIPT: OBIOMA OFOEGO
ILLUSTRATIONS: ALABA ONAJIN



THE ABEOKUTA WOMEN'S UNION

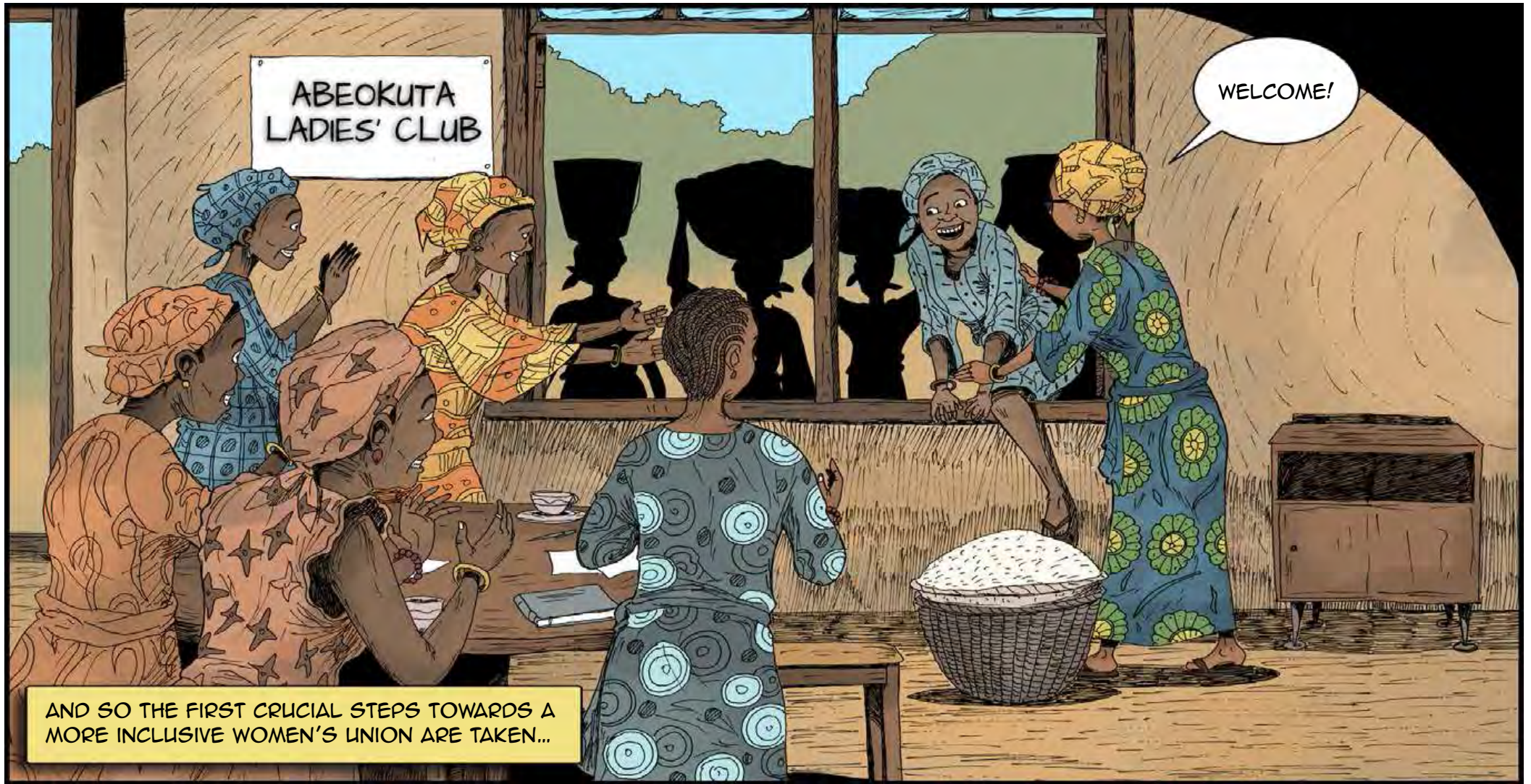
ABEOKUTA, NIGERIA, THE MID-1944.

ABEOKUTA
LADIES' CLUB

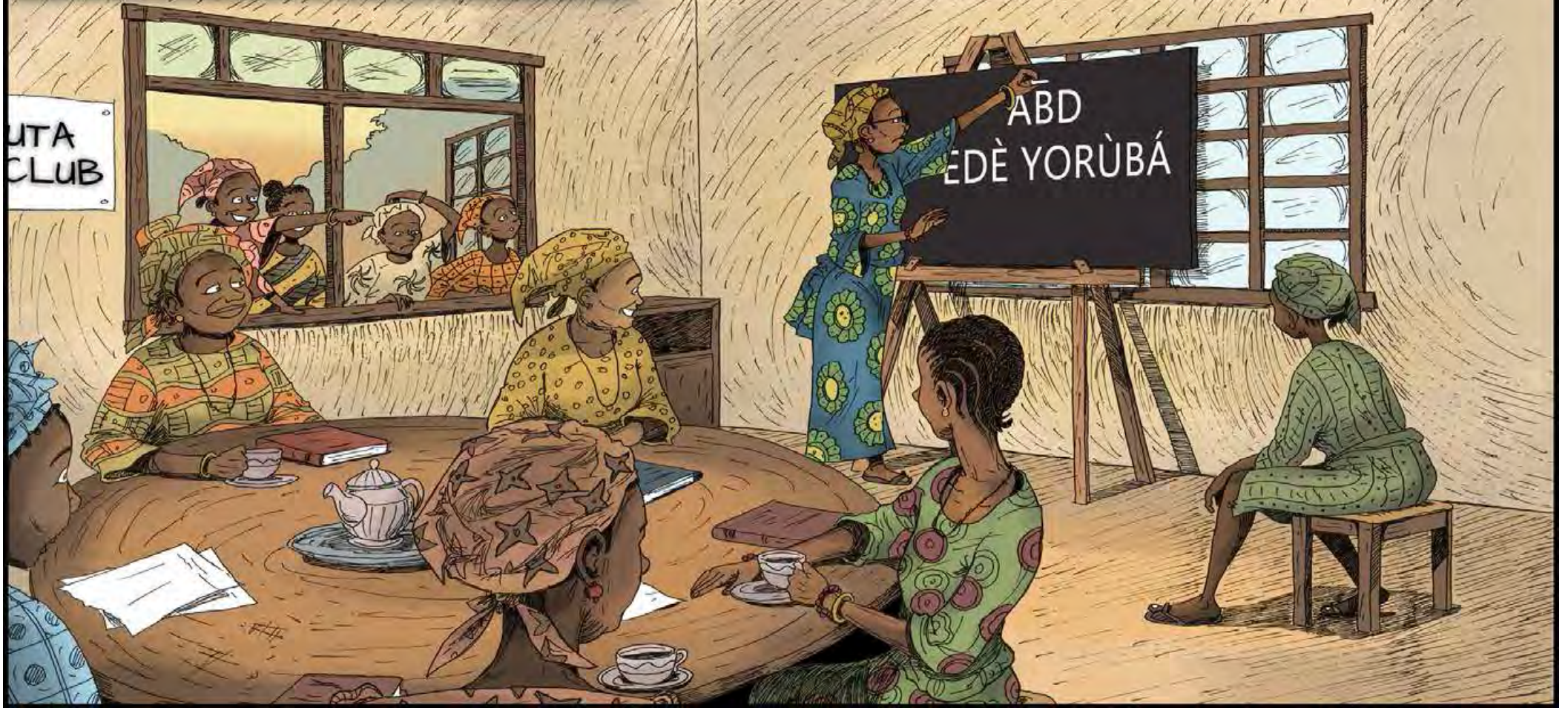


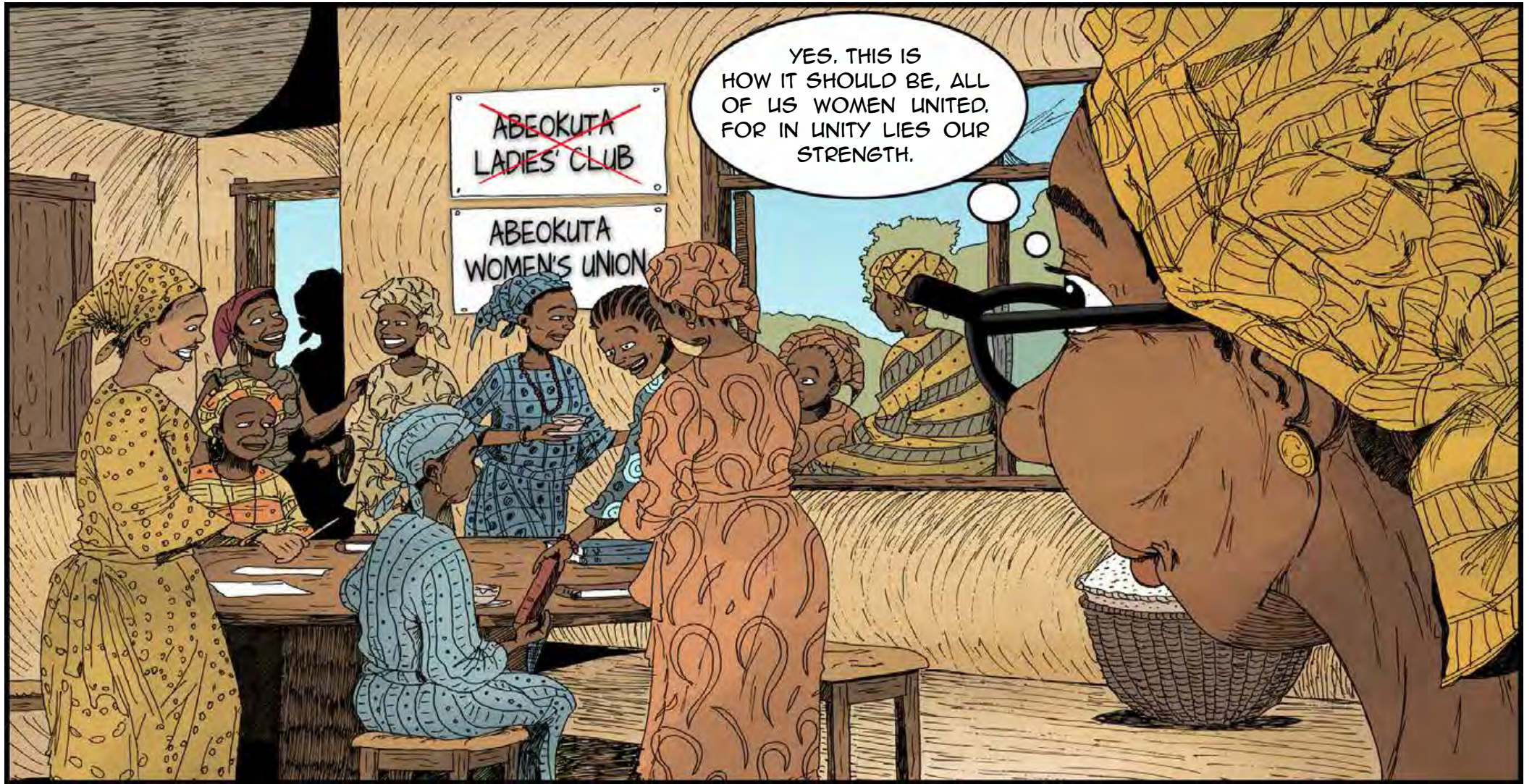


HMMM. ALL THIS MILD TALK OF SEWING AND ETIQUETTE IS SIMPLY NOT ENOUGH. WHAT ABOUT LITERACY? OR WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION? AND WE SHOULD START BY INVOLVING THOSE WHO MATTER THE MOST: THE MARKET WOMEN!

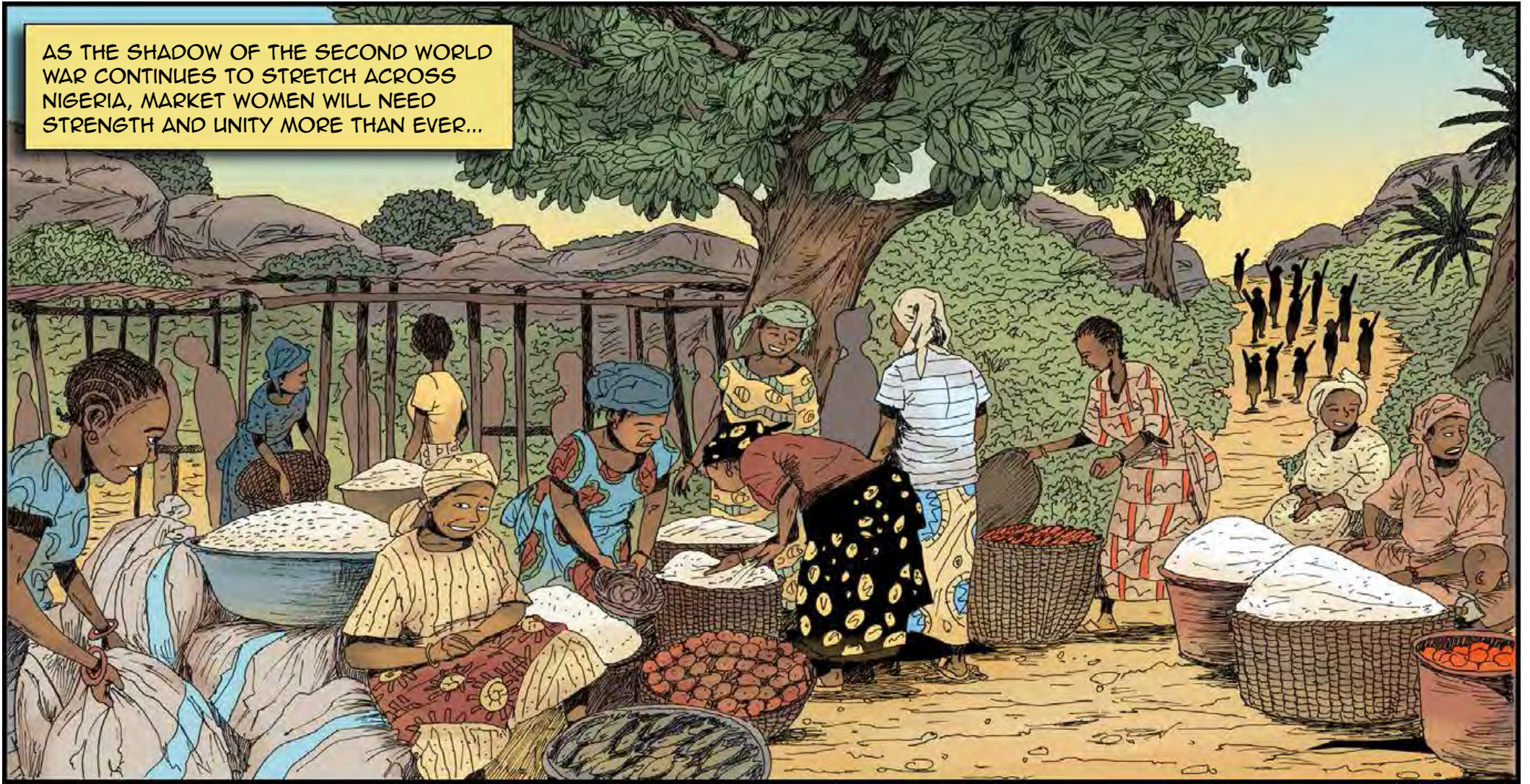


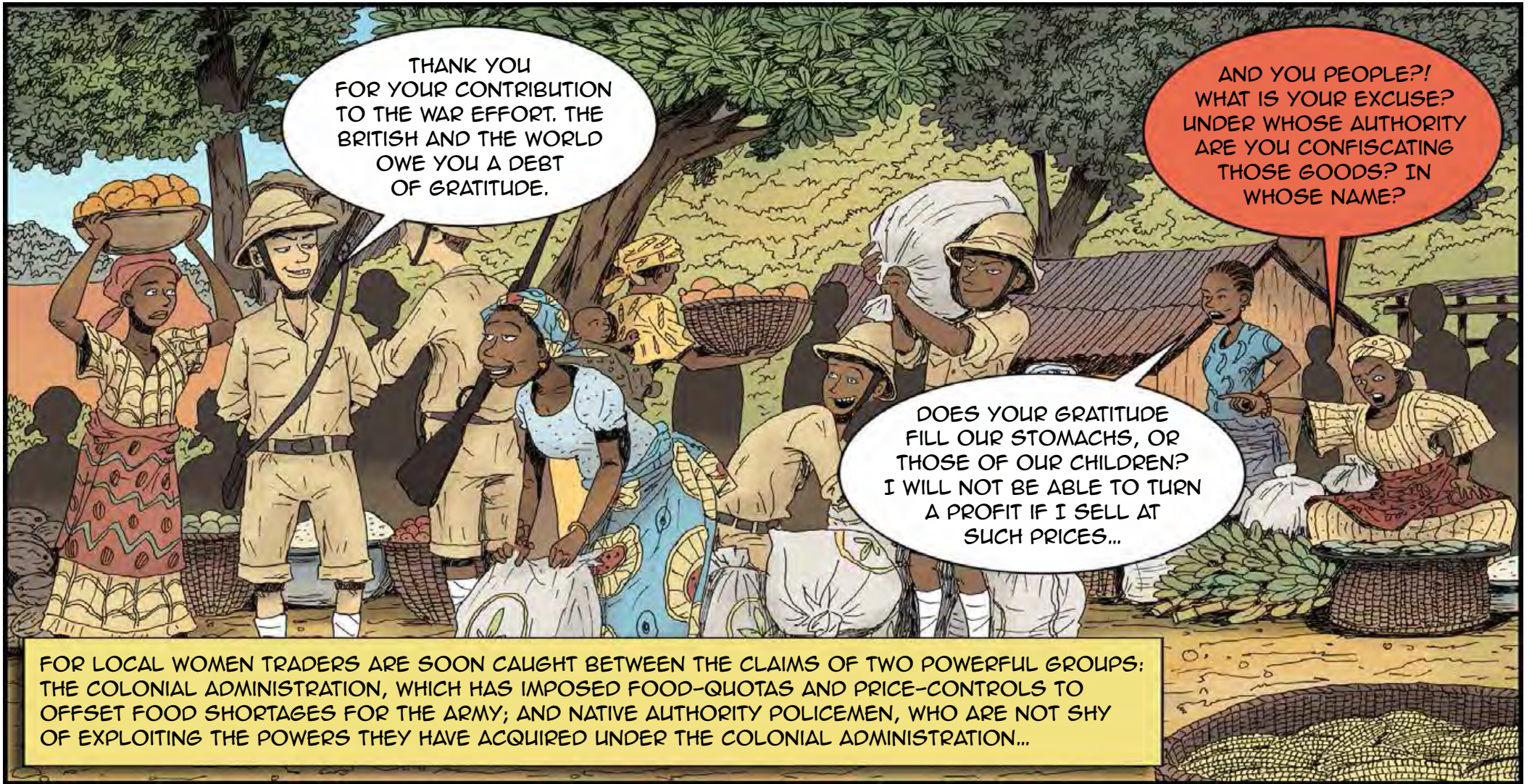
WITH FUNMILAYO RANSOME-KUTI LEADING THE WAY.





AS THE SHADOW OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR CONTINUES TO STRETCH ACROSS NIGERIA, MARKET WOMEN WILL NEED STRENGTH AND UNITY MORE THAN EVER...






THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE WAR EFFORT. THE BRITISH AND THE WORLD OWE YOU A DEBT OF GRATITUDE.

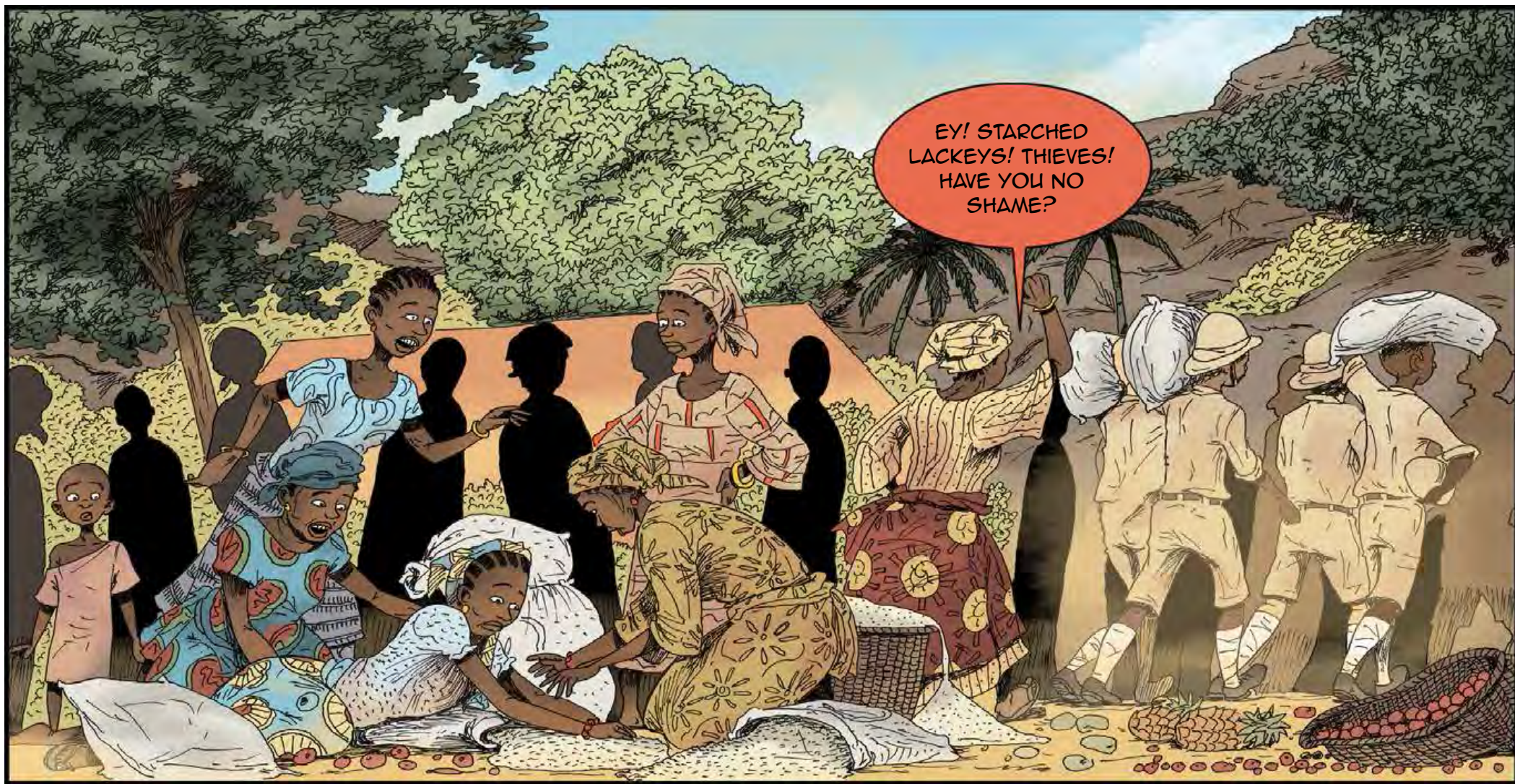
AND YOU PEOPLE?! WHAT IS YOUR EXCUSE? UNDER WHOSE AUTHORITY ARE YOU CONFISCATING THOSE GOODS? IN WHOSE NAME?

DOES YOUR GRATITUDE FILL OUR STOMACHS, OR THOSE OF OUR CHILDREN? I WILL NOT BE ABLE TO TURN A PROFIT IF I SELL AT SUCH PRICES...

FOR LOCAL WOMEN TRADERS ARE SOON CAUGHT BETWEEN THE CLAIMS OF TWO POWERFUL GROUPS: THE COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION, WHICH HAS IMPOSED FOOD-QUOTAS AND PRICE-CONTROLS TO OFFSET FOOD SHORTAGES FOR THE ARMY; AND NATIVE AUTHORITY POLICEMEN, WHO ARE NOT SHY OF EXPLOITING THE POWERS THEY HAVE ACQUIRED UNDER THE COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION...



AND SO THE MARKET WOMEN ARE LEFT WITH A
DESPERATE FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL ON TWO FRONTS.



NEITHER THE PRICE-CONTROLS NOR THE CONFISCATIONS SEEM TO BROOK ANY RESISTANCE. BUT WITH NEW-FOUND ORGANIZATION UNDER THE WOMEN'S UNION AND FUNMILAYO RANSOME-KUTI, THERE COMES GREATER UNITY...



GREATER STRENGTH...

I MAY BE ALONE NOW,
BUT THE WOMEN OF ABEOKUTA
SHALL NEVER ABANDON ME. AND WHEN
THEY COME IN THEIR THOUSANDS TO
SHAKE THE COMPLACENCY OF
POWER, I SHALL CLAP AND
SING FOR JOY.



AND SO IT IS THAT ONE FINE DAY...





AND SO THE WOMEN'S UNION BEGINS TO SEE JUST WHAT IT CAN ACHIEVE THROUGH COLLECTIVE ACTION!





ACTIVISM OF FUNMILAYO RANSOME-KUTI AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MOVEMENT

FUNMILAYO RANSOME-KUTI WORKS TIRELESSLY TO SUPPORT ANY CAUSE FOR JUSTICE. FROM PROTESTS AGAINST THE RICHARDS CONSTITUTION IN LONDON, TO ACTIVISM FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS THROUGHOUT NIGERIA...



FROM TEACHING WORKING WOMEN IN RUN-DOWN FACTORIES, TO THE BUILDING OF A NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL NETWORK...



...SHE ACTS WITH FIRE AND TRUTH, AND
WOMEN ALL OVER RESPOND TO HER CALL.

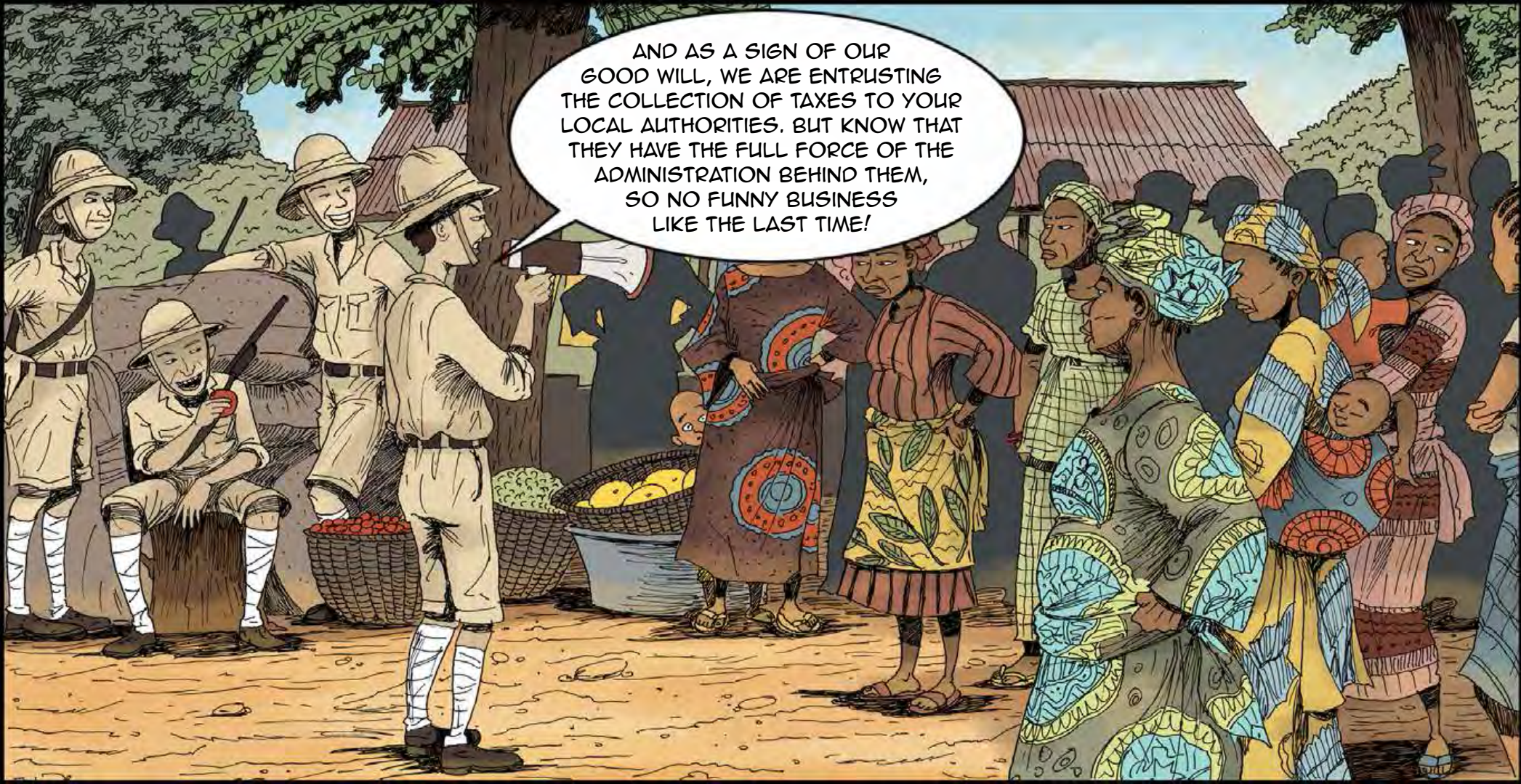




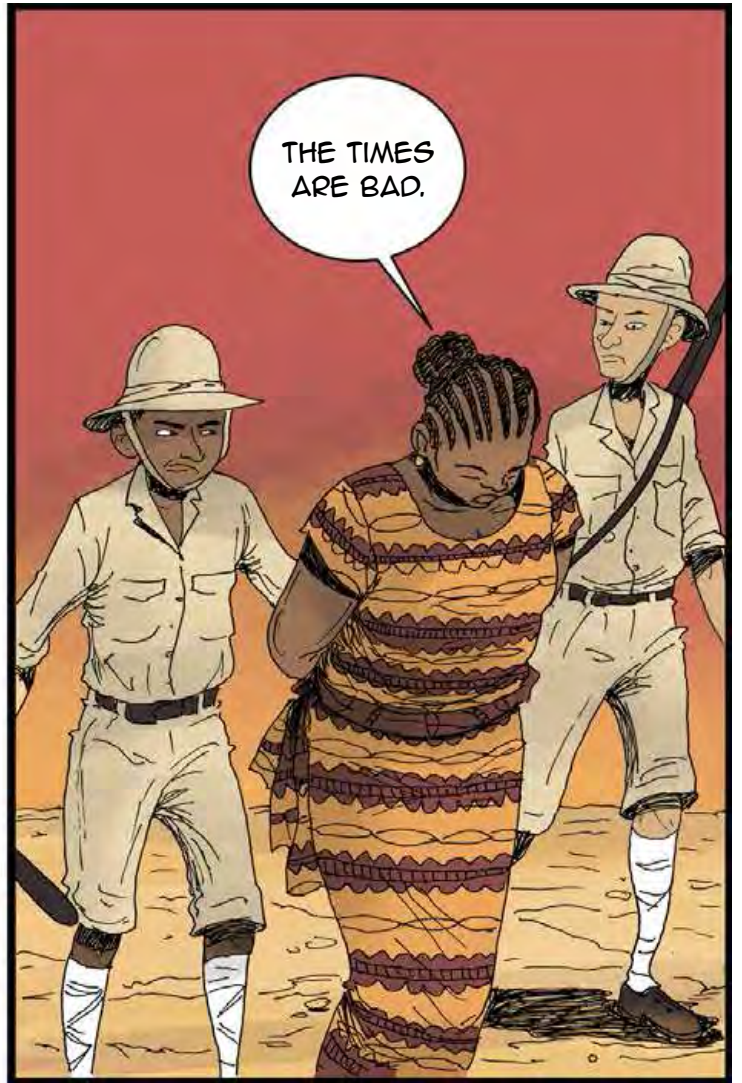
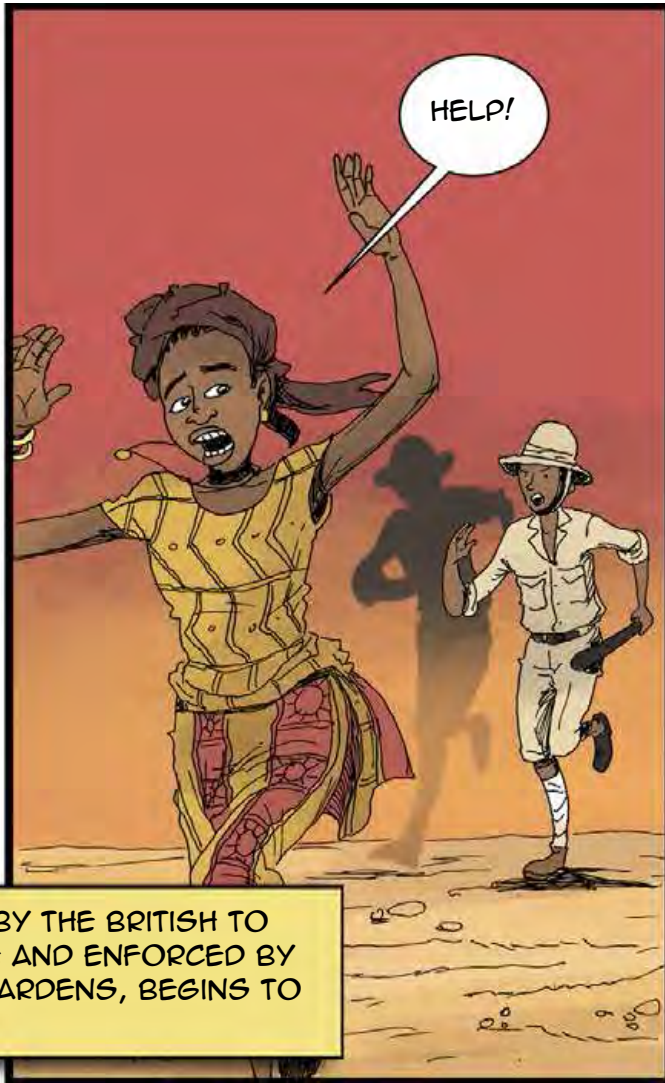
THE FLAT TAX ON WOMEN AND THE ABDICATION OF THE ALAKE



AND YET FOR EVERY VICTORY, ANOTHER INJUSTICE SPRINGS UP. FOR BACK IN ABEOKUTA, TROUBLE IS AFOOT. THE BRITISH ARE USING THE ALAKE, THE TRADITIONAL SYMBOL OF AUTHORITY IN EGBALAND, TO ENFORCE THE FLAT-RATE TAXATION OF WOMEN...



AND AS A SIGN OF OUR
GOOD WILL, WE ARE ENTRUSTING
THE COLLECTION OF TAXES TO YOUR
LOCAL AUTHORITIES. BUT KNOW THAT
THEY HAVE THE FULL FORCE OF THE
ADMINISTRATION BEHIND THEM,
SO NO FUNNY BUSINESS
LIKE THE LAST TIME!



AND SO THE NEW FLAT-TAX, INTRODUCED BY THE BRITISH TO RAISE REVENUE FOR THE COLONIAL STATE AND ENFORCED BY OFTEN UNSCRUPULOUS LOCAL MARKET WARDENS, BEGINS TO HIT WOMEN HARD...



'TAXES TAXES TAXES',
THEY CRY! AND FOR
WHAT? DO WOMEN SIT IN
THE COUNCILS AND
COMMITTEES PLANNING
POLICIES AND MAKING
DECISIONS?

NO! THEN WHY MUST WE
PAY, WHEN WE BARELY HAVE
ENOUGH MONEY TO REPAIR THE
THINNING CLOTH ON OUR
BROKEN BACKS!

NO TAXATION

...AND A GREAT ANGER GATHERS THROUGHOUT THE LAND.



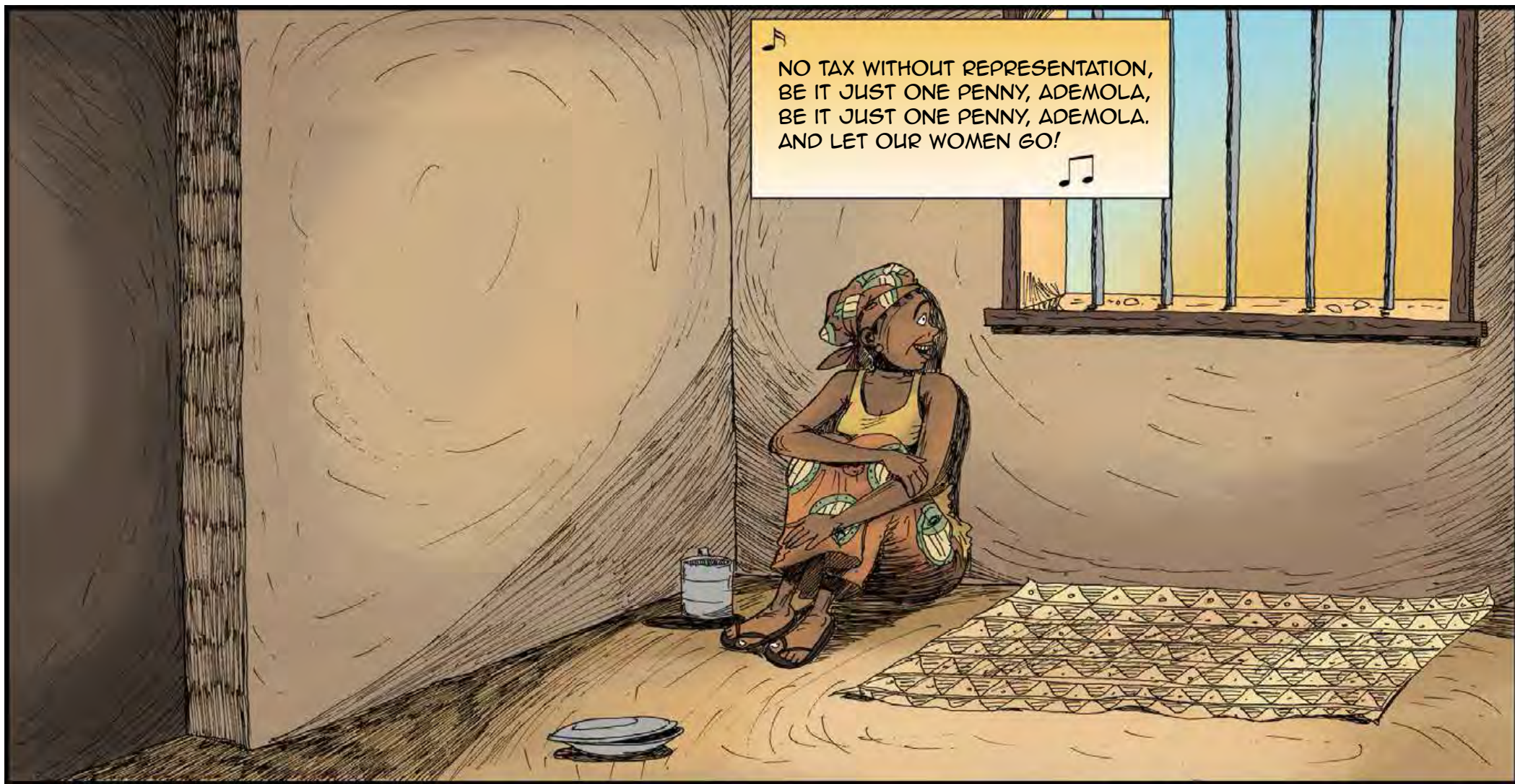
DID THEY NOT BRAND THE COLONIALIST'S FOREHEAD WITH THE PROUD MARK OF DEFIANCE? O LET US RISE UP, AND SHAKE THEM TO THE ROOTS OF THEIR BEING!

CAST YOUR MINDS BACK. DID OUR FELLOW WOMEN CITIZENS IN ABA NOT SHOW THAT FROM THE STRENGTH OF WOMEN A MIGHTY RIVER FLOWS?

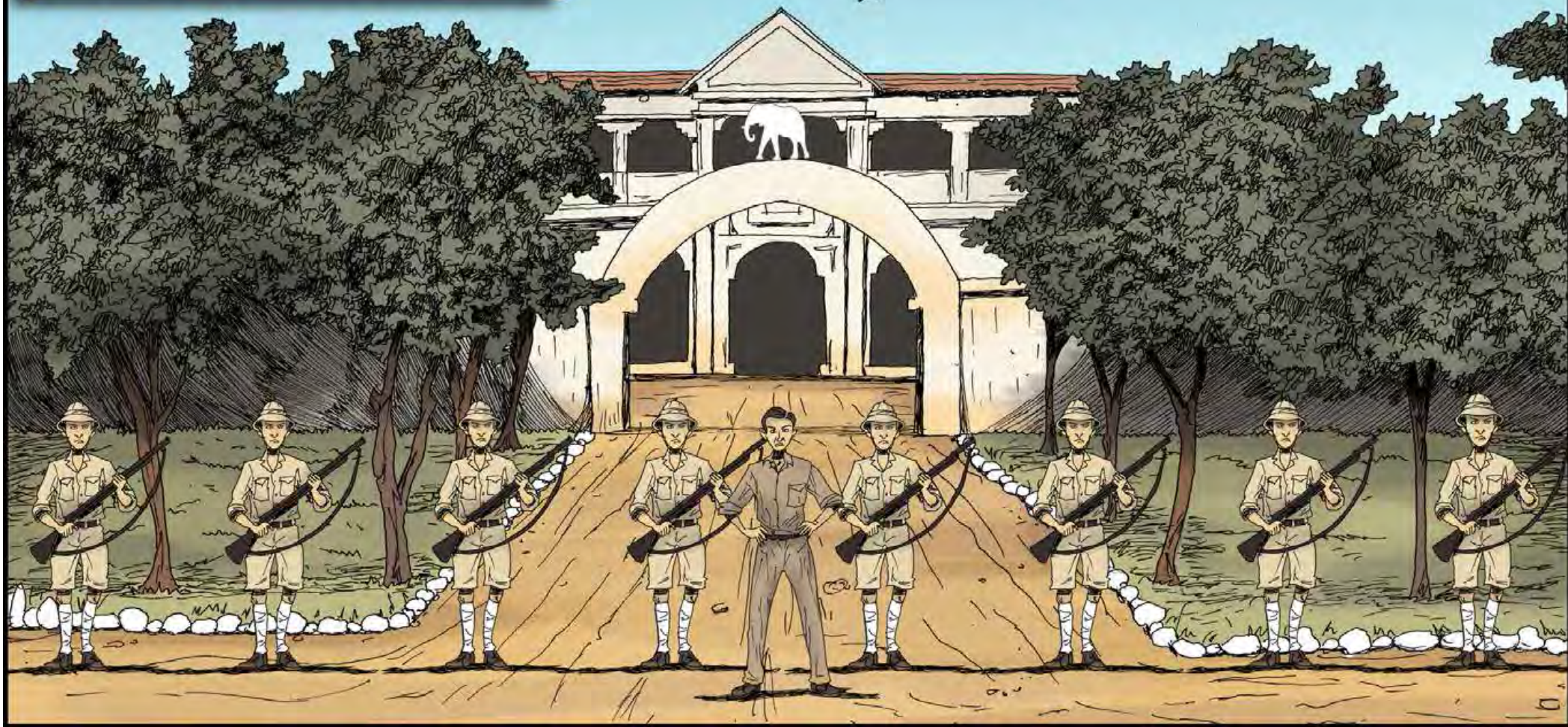


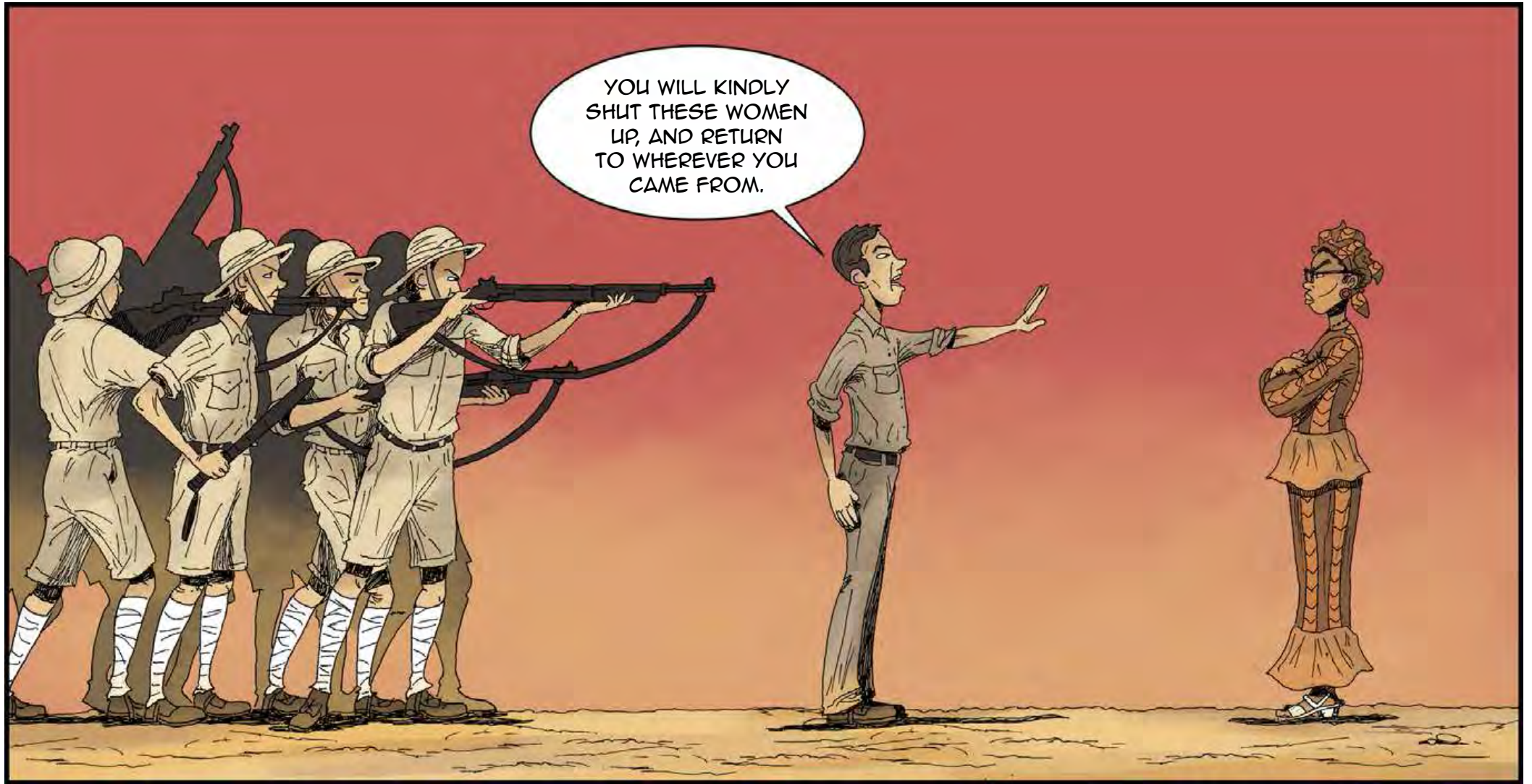
THE NEXT DAY...





THE DISTRICT OFFICER LOOKS UNRUFFLED...



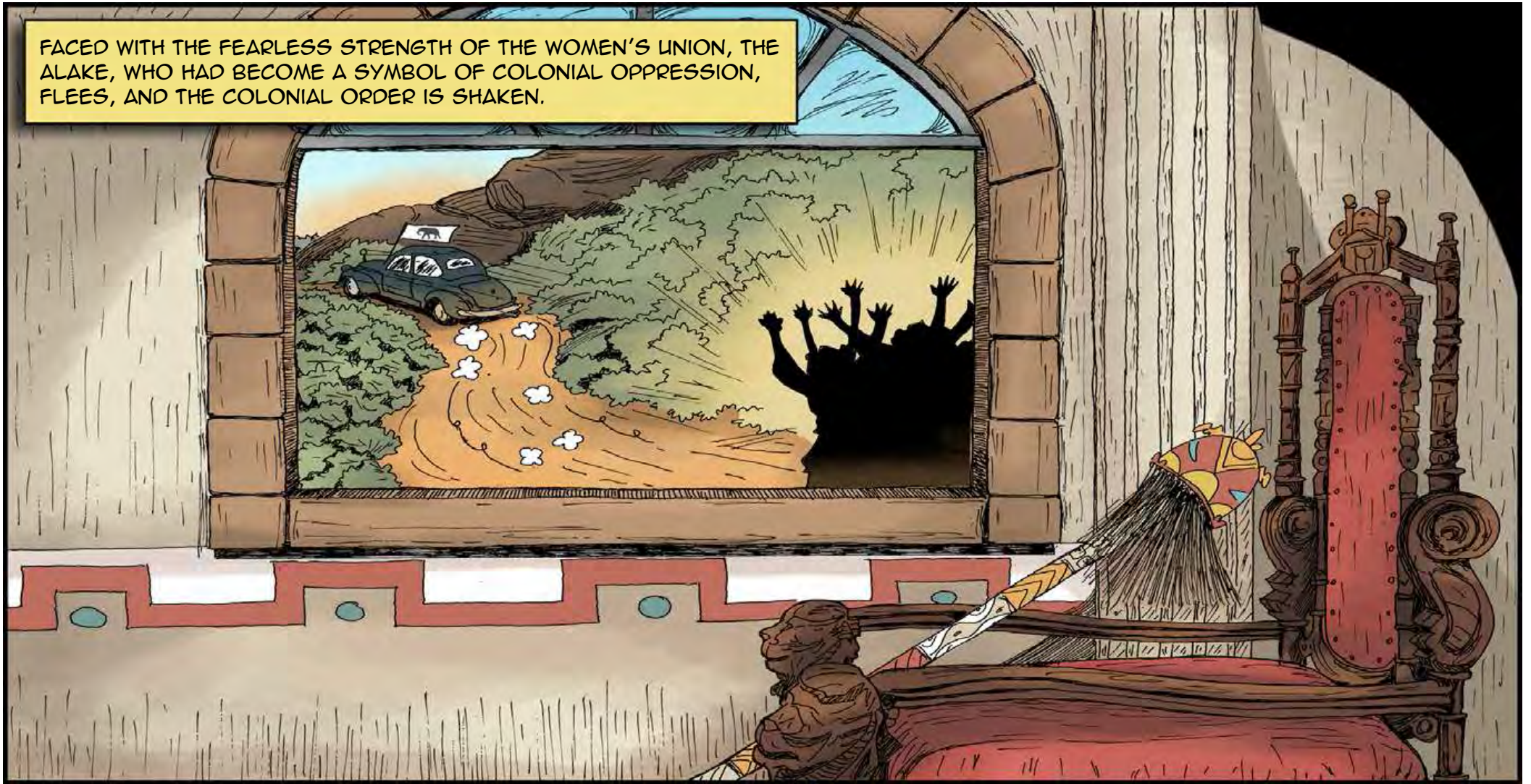


BUT HE DOES NOT KNOW
WHAT HE IS UP AGAINST...

YOU MAY HAVE
BEEN BORN, YOU WERE
NOT BRED. WOULD YOU
SPEAK TO YOUR MOTHER
LIKE THAT?



FACED WITH THE FEARLESS STRENGTH OF THE WOMEN'S UNION, THE ALAKE, WHO HAD BECOME A SYMBOL OF COLONIAL OPPRESSION, FLEES, AND THE COLONIAL ORDER IS SHAKEN.



NIGERIA

AFRICA

WORLD



UNDER THE INSPIRATIONAL LEADERSHIP OF FUNMILAYO RANSOME-KUTI, THE ABEOKUTA WOMEN'S UNION BECAME A MODEL ORGANIZATION FOR THE STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN NIGERIA... AFRICA... AND ACROSS THE WORLD.

4 Pedagogical Unit

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Aba women. Unknown photographer. Published in Margery Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, London, 1937.



Illustration by Adalbert von Rößler, 1884.



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1 The Yoruba, anti-colonialism and education

1.1 The 'Yoruba'

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900-1978), a leading activist during Nigerian women's anti-colonial struggles, belonged to the Egba subgroup of the Yoruba people¹. The people now collectively known as the Yoruba trace their origin to the sacred city of Ile-Ife, where, according to myth, the human race was created. The word 'Yoruba' perhaps of Hausa derivation, used to refer to the large Oyo subgroup, which existed alongside many other subgroups across modern-day Nigeria, Benin, Ghana and Togo. Although these subgroups shared a common language, there was astonishing variety in their political organization and local traditions.

At the end of the nineteenth century, several factors combined to provide these different groups with a more coherent, overarching 'Yoruba' identity, to complement their local identities. These factors included:

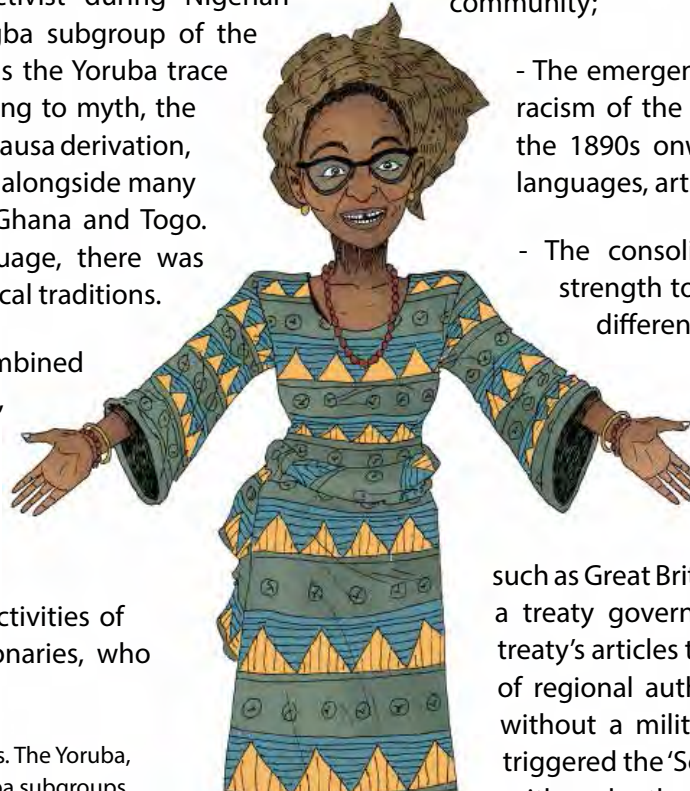
- The emergence of a standard orthography, to synthesize the many different spoken dialects to writing. This was inseparable from the proselytising activities of European and local Yoruba-speaking Christian missionaries, who first established missions in Yorubaland in the 1840s;

¹ Did you know? Nigeria has over 200 sociolinguistic groups. The Yoruba, along with the Igbo, the Hausa and the Fulani, are the largest. Yoruba subgroups, which include the Ijesha, the Oyo, the Egba, the Igbomina, the Ondo and the Ekiti, vary greatly in size, and political and social organization.

- The return of ex-slaves from the Americas, and from the freed slaves' colonies of Sierra Leone and Liberia, with a broader cultural identity and a wider sense of community;

- The emergence of Western-educated elite, who reacted against the racism of the British colonial administration, particularly acute from the 1890s onwards, by insisting upon the value and unity of local languages, arts and cultural practices; and

- The consolidation of Yorubaland's dynamic press, which gave strength to the idea of a single community that transcended local differences.



1.2 The Berlin Conference, British imperialism and Nigeria

At the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, European powers such as Great Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal and Germany, established a treaty governing their acquisition of African territory. One of the treaty's articles tied all signatories' territorial claims to the establishment of regional authority, which was impossible to achieve and maintain without a military and administrative presence, however slight. This triggered the 'Scramble for Africa', in which European powers competed with each other to annex as much African territory as they could².

² The political geography drawn up by European powers in the decades following the Berlin



Representatives of the European powers at the Berlin Conference. Illustration by Adalbert von Rößler, 1884.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the British had brought various formerly independent states within what is modern-day Nigeria under their control, despite widespread, varied and often sustained resistance³. Typically, defeated peoples and states were integrated into expanding protectorates. In 1914, the Northern and Southern Protectorates were amalgamated for economic reasons to form a single but vast, diverse unit, named the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. Across the south, as the 1920s drew to a close, resistance to British colonial rule in its many different

Conference was determined by rival European economic and political interests. Notwithstanding localized details, such as those arising from treaties brought to bear on local rulers, European powers paid no consideration to African political, socio-economic and cultural contexts. Despite their ambiguities and alien divisions, these colonial boundaries set the basic political framework of the continent.

³ In the last instance, the expansion of the British across the region depended on superior military weaponry (heavy artillery, long-range quick-fire rifles, machine-guns) and the threat and use of violence, such as with the defeats of the Ijebu (1892), the Kingdom of Benin (1897), the Aro (1902), or the Sokoto caliphate (1903).

forms began to resonate beyond strictly local concerns, to take on regional and national dimensions.

1.3 Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's family and names

Frances Abigail Olufunmilayo Thomas' family history is representative of these shifting horizons. Her paternal great-grandmother was a returnee slave from Sierra Leone, who would trace her home back to Egbaland; her paternal grandfather was one of the first Christians in his local community; and her parents were Christian-schooled but remained deeply attached to Yoruba cultural practices, and as such lived as brokers between European and African cultures.

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti was one of the first girls to be educated at Abeokuta Grammar School (where she would also teach), before continuing her studies in England. By the time of her return to Nigeria in 1922, she had dropped her Christian names, no doubt due to her contact with racism during her studies abroad.

On marrying Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti in 1925, she became Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. The names she juggled throughout her life would attest to her lasting commitment to Yoruba culture: Mrs. Kuti, *iyalode* (market women's administrative head, and representative on the council), *Bèèrè*, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. She also insisted that her pupils use their African, rather than European names⁴.

⁴ Did you know? Her son Fela, the famous musician and political activist, would replace "Ransome", the European half of his father's surname, with "Anikulapo", which means "One who has death in his/her pocket".

1.4 Education and educators

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti belonged to a generation of educators working at a time when local issues were beginning to take on wider regional and national dimensions. In collaboration with her husband, Reverend 'Daodu' Ransome-Kuti, she became associated with key educational and anti-colonialist organizations⁵.

Each organization, in its own way, fought to improve the quality of state education, to abolish colonial racial discrimination, and to unite Nigerians, and Africans, across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Through her experience in education, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti was able to develop her skills in connecting political issues at local, regional and national levels. Central to her activism was the struggle for greater educational opportunities for girls, and the defence of women's rights.

⁵ Such as the West African Students' Union (est. 1925), the Nigerian Union of Teachers (est. 1931), and the Nigerian Youth Movement (est. 1933).

2 Gender-differentiated taxes, colonialism and revolt

2.1 Indirect rule (rule through indigenous, rather than British, institutions)



The Ransome-Kuti family in the 1940's: L-R: Reverend Israel, Dolu (standing behind), Fela (standing in front), Funmilayo holding baby Beko, and Olikoye (standing on the right). Photograph by the Ransome-Kuti family.

With the extension of the system of 'indirect rule' across southern Nigeria from 1914, women were affected in two ways: they were subject to separate direct taxation (Benin, 1914; Oyo, 1916; Abeokuta, 1918; parts of the southeast from 1926 onwards), often at flat-rates, as the British sought to raise money from the colonized peoples; and they were steadily excluded from political institutions.

For although British indirect rule claimed to protect and maintain pre-existing political and judicial systems, it often altered them radically, concentrating power in the hands of select individuals, invariably men. These individuals were ultimately answerable to the colonial administration. This concentration of power in a single figure risked leaving women without forms of political representation and decision-making once open to them.

2.2 The 'Women's War'

The 'Women's War' of November and December 1929, which swept across Owerri and Calabar in the southeast, was triggered by the imminent threat of direct taxation on women. British colonialists

labelled the war the 'Aba riots', a term that failed to recognize the strategically executed nature of the revolt, which was aimed at redressing social, economic and political injustices.

In the face of fierce repression, market women successfully organized attacks on colonial buildings and property, eventually forcing a change in the indirect rule system of the eastern region. Approximately fifty-five women lost their lives.



The revolt eventually resulted in the abolition of the warrant chief system⁶ of indirect rule in south-eastern Nigeria. This was the first women's struggle to resonate with the common concerns of ordinary Nigerian women beyond the local context, and marked a turning point in the political organization of Nigerian women.

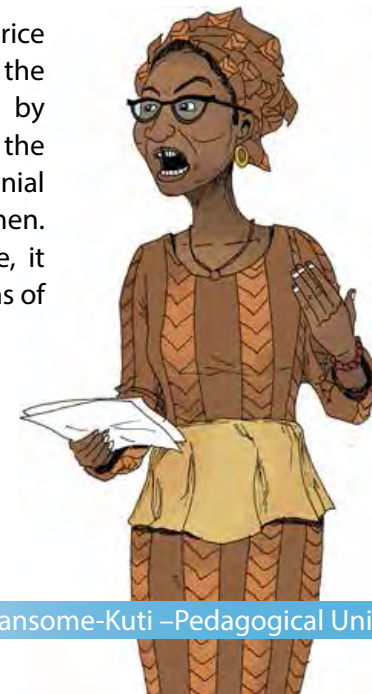
6 'In seeking to apply this policy to the I[g]bo and their neighbours, the British selected certain natives who they thought were traditional chiefs and gave them certificates of recognition and authority called warrants. The warrant entitled each of these men to sit in the Native Court from time to time to judge cases. It also empowered him to assume within the community he represented executive and judicial powers which were novel both in degree and territorial scope.' (Afigbo, 1972, pp. 6–7.)

2.3 The role of Yoruba women, trade and the Lagos Market Women's Association

Yoruba women were predominantly traders, rather than farmers, and possessed a long, recognizable tradition of organization and co-operation, particularly in the price-setting of market goods. Some women in the southwest were able to capitalize on new trading opportunities in the developing colonial economy, as a decline in food production, caused by the growth of the cocoa market and rapid urbanization, led to a greater demand for imported foodstuffs.

Nonetheless, many Yoruba market women would still face considerable challenges.

In 1920s Lagos, colonial policies such as external price controls and direct taxation triggered the creation of the Lagos Market Women's Association (LMWA), ably led by Madam Alimotu Pelewura. In the 1930s and 1940s, the LMWA had some success in overturning oppressive colonial laws, such as the separate income tax on Lagosian women. Although the LMWA did not enjoy national resonance, it made an important step towards adapting previous forms of organization to the new political systems.



3 Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and the Abeokuta Women's Union

3.1 Seizing the moment

Abeokuta possessed a long tradition of political independence⁷, and had a significant history of women's leadership. The formidable nineteenth-century figure Madam Tinubu – trader, king-maker, anti-colonialist, *iyalode* (women's chieftaincy title) and celebrated defender of Abeokuta – held a strong place in the imagination of many Yoruba women, and in certain ways provided a powerful model for Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. After the death of Tinubu's successor, *iyalode* Miniya Jojolola (c.1928), who had been a wealthy trader, women's political representation in the new order of things seemed to have declined into naught, and the women's chieftaincy title system seemed little but an empty shell.



Aba Women of Nigeria in the first half of the 20th century. Unknown photographer. Published in Margery Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, London, 1937.

3.2 The birth of a movement

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's Abeokuta Ladies' Club, later renamed the Abeokuta or Egba Women's Union (AWU), was grounded in local political practice, but was also adaptable to the requirements of the new, national politics.

Although it began as a rather elite club whose principal concerns – handicraft, charity, motherhood and social etiquette – were not conducive to mass political organization, the ALC quickly realized that no women's movement could succeed without the full participation of the majority, the market women.

3.3 The movement grows

Consequently, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti began to address market women – literate or not – learning from them, and integrating them into the organization's membership and leadership. An active policy of inclusion extended to language and appearance: Yoruba became the main language of communication, and Yoruba forms of dress, rather than European, became the rule. The organization was fully accountable and possessed its own detailed constitution. The Abeokuta Women's Union came to have an estimated membership of 20,000 women, and its influence extended to many parts of Nigeria.

3.4 Objectives

Under Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the AWU constantly tried to unite women's struggles across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Its stated objectives were:

⁷ It preserved its territorial integrity until the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914.

- To protect and preserve the rights of women in Egbaland;
- To encourage mass education among all women members through literacy classes;
- To draw together women of all classes and cultural backgrounds; and
- To support any organization fighting for the economic and political independence of the Nigerian people, or of any oppressed group of people.

4 Achievements

4.1 The market as a battleground

Britain's involvement in the Second World War (1939-45) had severe economic effects across its colonies, transforming what many had considered to be a remote conflict into an immediate reality. Market women across western Nigeria suddenly had to struggle against food quotas and price controls on their goods, an area they had historically controlled. Their goods were also exposed to indiscriminate confiscations, as certain local Native Authority policemen abused the wider powers they had acquired under the colonial administration. In Abeokuta, women united alongside Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti to protest.

Unprecedented numbers came together to demonstrate against the colonial authorities and their local representative, the Alake, who, under the British, had become the most prominent of the traditional figures of authority in the region. The press, long an important vehicle for criticizing the colonial government,

swelled the women's support. Shortly after, as a result of the organized protests, the confiscation of rice was ordered to end.



Yoruba women selling dried fermented cassava chips in a local market.
Photograph by ITAA Image Library, 2007.

4.2 The fight for democratic representation and the abdication of an Alake

The Alake was paid by the colonial government to enforce its gender-differentiated tax laws, first introduced in Abeokuta in 1918. If women failed – or refused – to pay tax, they were often beaten, arrested or even stripped, and their houses searched.



Participants at a women's empowerment rally in Nigeria. Photograph by Projekthope, 2010.

In November 1947, a huge crowd of women (The number is often estimated at 10,000), led by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti marched on the palace of the Alake, singing and dancing in protest against the authorities, and demanding an end to taxation without democratic representation.

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The AWU organized another demonstration in December, denouncing the multiple arrests of market women, and the corruption of the colonial legal system. This time, they also demanded the abdication of the Alake.

In April 1948, a march through the streets of Abeokuta led to the suspension of direct taxation on women, and to a tentative increase in women's political representation. On 3 January 1949, the Alake was forced to abdicate. Although later reinstated, the Alake would never receive the support of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti.

4.3 National and international expansion

Under Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the AWU, later renamed the Nigerian Women's Union (1949), became a model organization for the struggle for women's rights across Nigeria. It opened branches in Calabar, Aba, Benin, Lagos, Ibadan and Enugu, and even reached Kano in the north.

Its importance lay in drawing women together across linguistic and cultural differences, in efficient organization, and in insisting upon shared struggles and a shared humanity, at a time when national politics was collapsing into ethnic division. It also became a model for women's organizations in West Africa (Ghana and Sierra Leone), Asia (China) and Europe (the Soviet Union).



Photograph by the Ransome-Kuti family.

4.4 Politics

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's resolute opposition to the ethnic politics of division spawned by colonialism led her to work with the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), a political party in which she occupied several positions. She was the only woman who travelled to the United Kingdom as part of an NCNC delegation to protest against the proposals of the Richards Constitution of 1946. These proposals, such as the creation of three regional councils for North, East and West, had not been subjected to open debate in Nigeria. And yet she never allowed her involvement in the NCNC to compromise her own voice, nor her commitment to women's rights. She would go on to found the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies, and the Commoner's Party.

4.5 Awards

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti was named Member of the Order of the Niger by the Nigerian government for her contribution to the nation (1965). She was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria's premier university (1968), and the Lenin Peace Prize (1970), 'in recognition of [her] noble activities for many years in promoting friendship and mutual co-operation between Nigerian and Soviet peoples.



Photograph by the Ransome-Kuti family.

5 Bibliography

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Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's song 'Coffin for Head of State' is a powerful indictment of the military assault on his home, on February 18 1977, in which his mother, Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, was pushed down the stairs. She would later die of injuries sustained during the attack.

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United Nations
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Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900–1978) was a leading activist during Nigerian women’s anti-colonial struggles. She founded the Abeokuta Women’s Union, one of the most impressive women’s organizations of the twentieth century (with a membership estimated to have reached up to 20,000 women), which fought to protect and further the rights of women.

Women in African History

Through various pedagogical resources and the use of Information and Communication technologies (ICTs), UNESCO seeks to highlight the legacy of a selection of key women figures of African history and its diaspora. This project demonstrates that African women have always distinguished themselves in the history of their continent in areas as diverse as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Njinga Mbandi), the defense of women’s rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti), and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

This list of 20 women 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 resources, please visit the website www.unesco.org/womeninfrica

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