



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# GISELE RABESAHALA

WALK TO THE ROYAL HILL OF AMBOHIMANGA



UNESCO Series on Women in African History





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Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

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Cover illustration: Sleeping Pop  
Layout: Dhiara Fasya, Maria Jesus Ramos  
Design of the logo: Jonathas Mello

The background features a light-colored line drawing of a multi-story building with arched windows and a balcony. The drawing is rendered in a sketchy, hand-drawn style. In the foreground, there are faint outlines of trees and foliage, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall aesthetic is clean and educational.

# GISELE RABESAHALA

## WALK TO THE ROYAL HILL OF AMBOHIMANGA

UNESCO Series on Women in African History  
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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 (Nzinga 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/womeninafrica](http://www.unesco.org/womeninafrica)



Woman of the royal court at Tiebele, Burkina Faso.  
Photograph by Rita Willaert, 2012.



Photograph by UNESCO/M. Benchelah.

## Gender equality: a global priority 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.

## 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 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.



## 2 Biography

### Gisèle Rabesahala

A celebrated Malagasy woman politician of the twentieth century, Gisèle Rabesahala (1929-2011) devoted her life to her country's independence, human rights and the freedom of peoples.

Born in Madagascar in 1929, Gisèle Rabesahala spent her childhood between France, Tunisia and what is now Mali, where her father was a non-commissioned officer in the French army. When he passed away in 1942, she returned to Madagascar with her family. The island was then a French colony.

As a child, Gisèle Rabesahala dreamed of becoming a nun. In her adolescence, she pictured herself as a “defender of the innocent”, which encouraged her to continue her education at a time when few Malagasy women were able to do so. Gisèle eventually earned her Preparatory Certificate and trained as a shorthand typist.

At 17, she ventured into politics for the first time, as secretary to the Democratic Movement for Malagasy Renewal (MDRM), which campaigned for the country's independence. She soon made a name for herself as a female politician of exceptional ability in a political world dominated by men. She was the first woman to be elected as a municipal councillor (1956) and political party leader (1958). She was also the first woman appointed minister in 1977.

Through her personality, her commitment and her exceptional career, Gisèle Rabesahala established herself, over the years, as a true pioneer and a major political force in Madagascar's political history. At the international level, she ranks among those historical figures that are at the forefront of development, having worked for the freedom of the peoples of Madagascar, human rights, independence and the progress of humanity.



Portrait of Gisèle Rabesahala in the 1970s.  
Rabesahala family archives.

# Timeline

Dates	Events
1810-1828	The Kingdom of Madagascar is established under Radama I
1895-1897	The <i>Menalamba</i> ("Red Shawls") Movement against the French occupation
6 August 1896	Colonization of Madagascar by France
9 March 1913	Creation of the intellectuals' opposition movement <i>Vy Vato Sakelika</i> , the "Iron and Stone Ramification"
7 May 1929	Birth of Gisèle Rabesahala in Ambohimanga, Antananarivo
19 May 1929	First demonstration demanding independence for Madagascar
1945	Participation of two Malagasy representatives in the French Constituent Assembly
1946	Creation of the MDRM, Democratic Movement for Malagasy Renewal Gisèle Rabesahala becomes secretary to the movement's leaders
29 March 1947	Uprising of the Malagasy people suppressed by force Gisèle Rabesahala becomes secretary to the French lawyers defending the accused at the 1948 trial
1950	Creation of the <i>Fifanampiana Malagasy</i> , "Madagascar Solidarity Committee"
1956	- August: creation of the FISEMA trade union - November: Gisèle Rabesahala is the first woman to be elected a municipal councillor in Antananarivo
1958	Creation of the AKFM, Congress Party for the Independence of Madagascar
26 June 1960	Madagascar becomes independent
1960 - 1972	The AKFM joins the opposition within the First Republic
1975	Formation of the Second Democratic Republic of Madagascar
1977-1991	Gisèle Rabesahala occupies the post of Minister of Culture and Revolutionary Art
2001- 2003	Gisèle Rabesahala is appointed Deputy Speaker of the Senate
2002	Advent of the Third Republic
2009	Demise of the Third Republic Gisèle Rabesahala is appointed to the mediation body <i>Ray aman-dReny Mijoro</i>
27 June 2011	Death of Gisèle Rabesahala



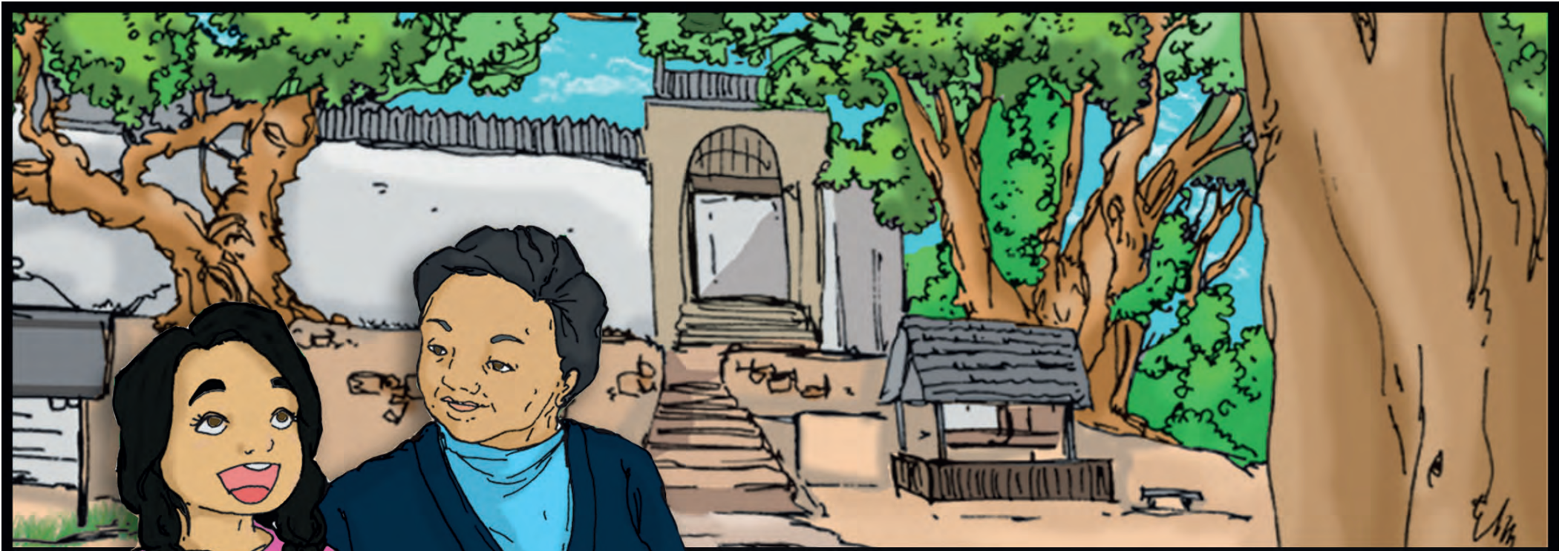


# 3 Comic strip

## Foreword

The following comic strip is a story inspired by the figure of Gisèle Rabesahala and certain parts of her autobiography entitled "Let freedom come to us!". The illustrations are based on historical and iconographic research on Gisèle Rabesahala, the Royal Hill of Ambohimanga and twentieth century Madagascar. They do not claim to be an exact representation of the events, people, architecture, hairstyles, or clothing of the period.





# **GISÈLE RABESAHALA**

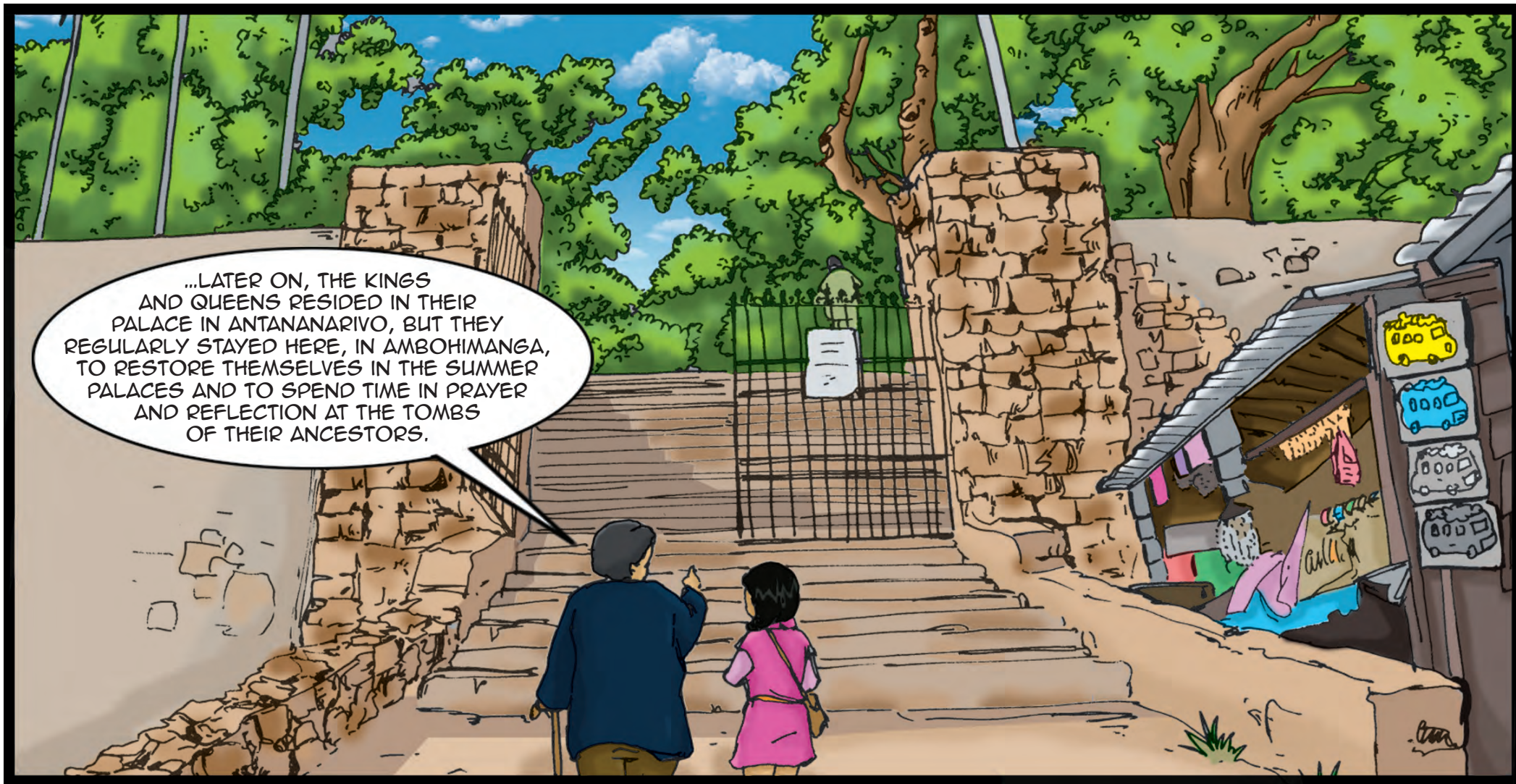
**WALK TO THE ROYAL HILL  
OF AMBOHIMANGA**

ON A FINE APRIL DAY IN 2006, GISELE RABESAHALA GOES TO AMBOHIMANGA WITH HER GREAT-NIECE, GABRIELLE ...

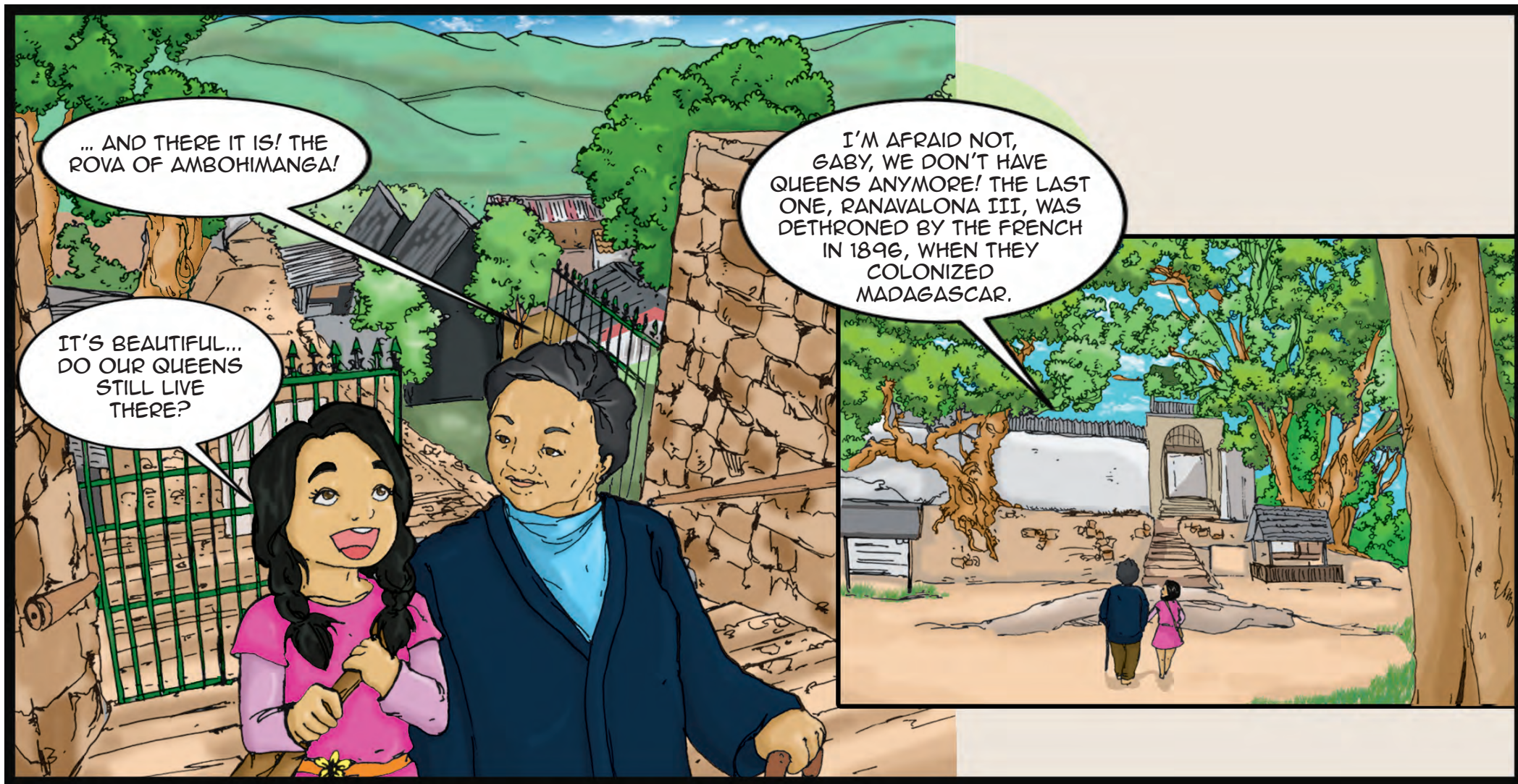
HERE WE ARE, DARLING: AMBOHIMANGA AND ITS SACRED HILLS. LOOK UP THERE! THOSE ARE THE SUMMER PALACES OF THE LAST RULERS OF THE ISLAND.

SO IS THIS WHERE THE GREAT KING ANDRIANAMPOINIMERINA LIVED?

YES, AMBOHIMANGA IS A SACRED PLACE, ONE OF THE CRADLES OF THE KINGDOM OF IMERINA...



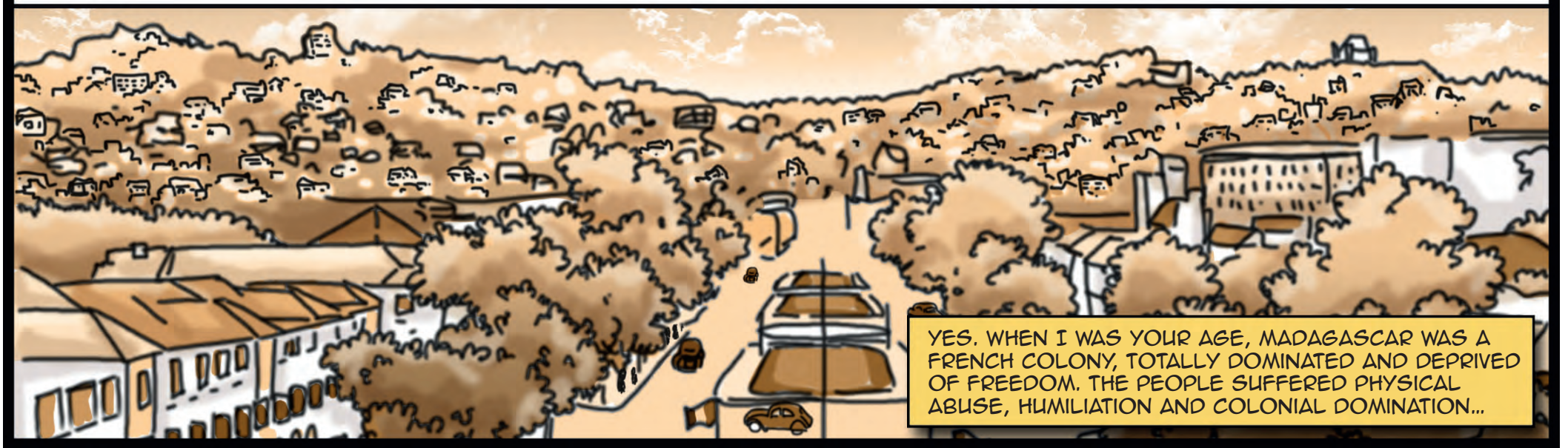
...LATER ON, THE KINGS AND QUEENS RESIDED IN THEIR PALACE IN ANTANANARIVO, BUT THEY REGULARLY STAYED HERE, IN AMBOHIMANGA, TO RESTORE THEMSELVES IN THE SUMMER PALACES AND TO SPEND TIME IN PRAYER AND REFLECTION AT THE TOMBS OF THEIR ANCESTORS.





AFTER OUR QUEEN WAS DEPOSED, TIMES WERE HARD FOR THE MALAGASY PEOPLE.

DID IT ALL HAPPEN A LONG TIME AGO, GISÈLE? WHEN YOU WERE A LITTLE GIRL?



YES. WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE, MADAGASCAR WAS A FRENCH COLONY, TOTALLY DOMINATED AND DEPRIVED OF FREEDOM. THE PEOPLE SUFFERED PHYSICAL ABUSE, HUMILIATION AND COLONIAL DOMINATION...

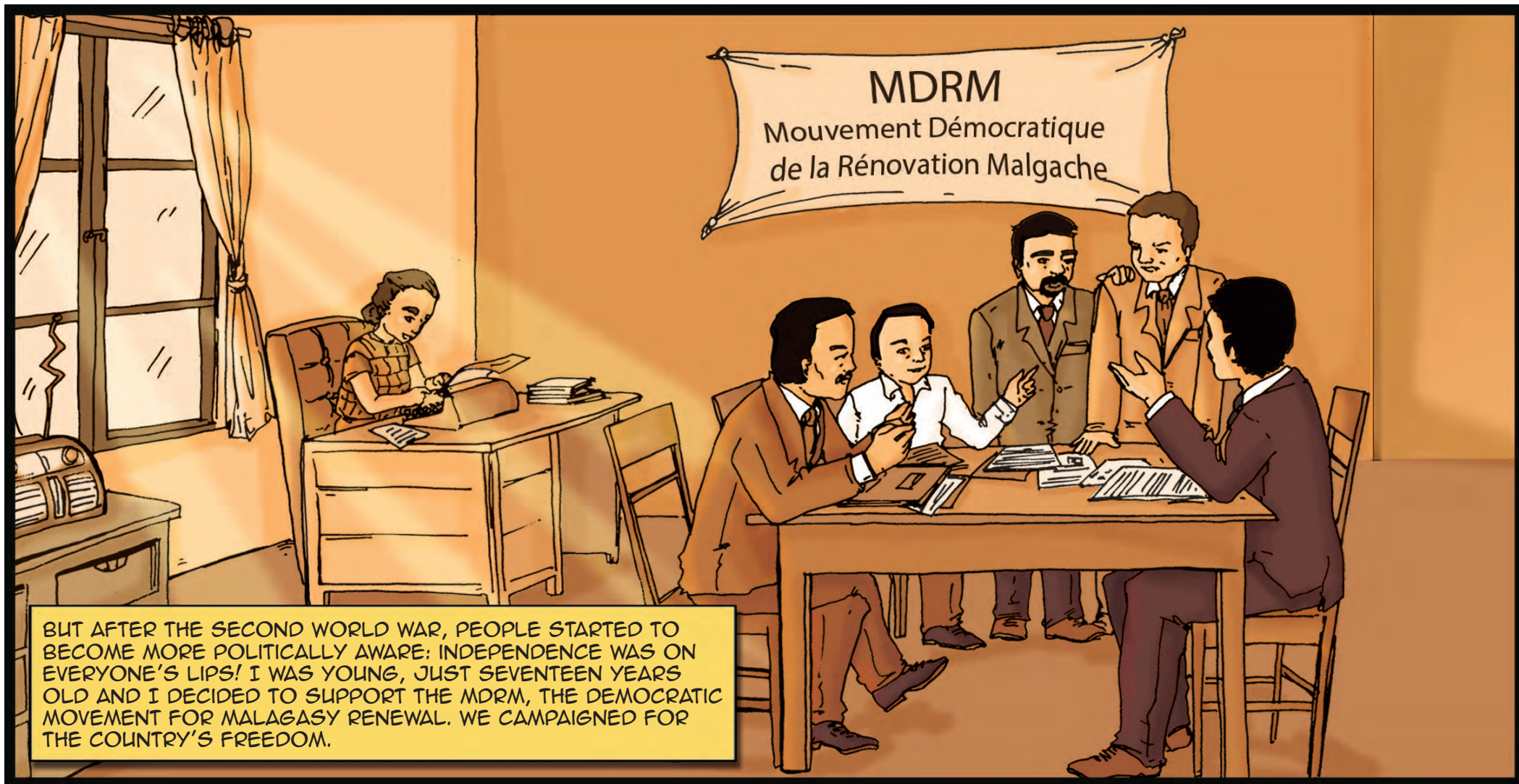






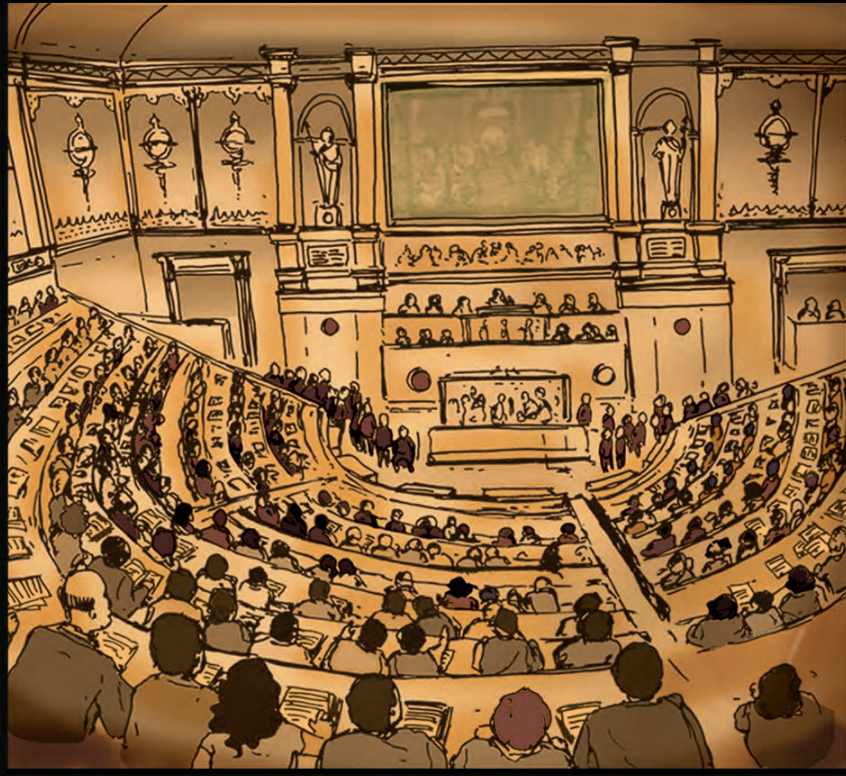
...AND THEN THE TWO WORLD WARS, IN WHICH THOUSANDS OF MALAGASY SOLDIERS WERE CALLED UP TO SERVE IN THE FRENCH ARMY AGAINST THE GERMANS...





BUT AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR, PEOPLE STARTED TO BECOME MORE POLITICALLY AWARE: INDEPENDENCE WAS ON EVERYONE'S LIPS! I WAS YOUNG, JUST SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD AND I DECIDED TO SUPPORT THE MDRM, THE DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT FOR MALAGASY RENEWAL. WE CAMPAIGNED FOR THE COUNTRY'S FREEDOM.

IN 1946, THE MDRM PUT UP CANDIDATES FOR THE FRENCH GENERAL ELECTION AND THEY WERE ELECTED. WE WERE OVERJOYED! THREE MALAGASY INTELLECTUALS SAT IN THE FRENCH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY: RAVOAHANGY AND RASETA, WHO BOTH HAD DOCTORATES, AND THE WRITER RABEMANANJARA.

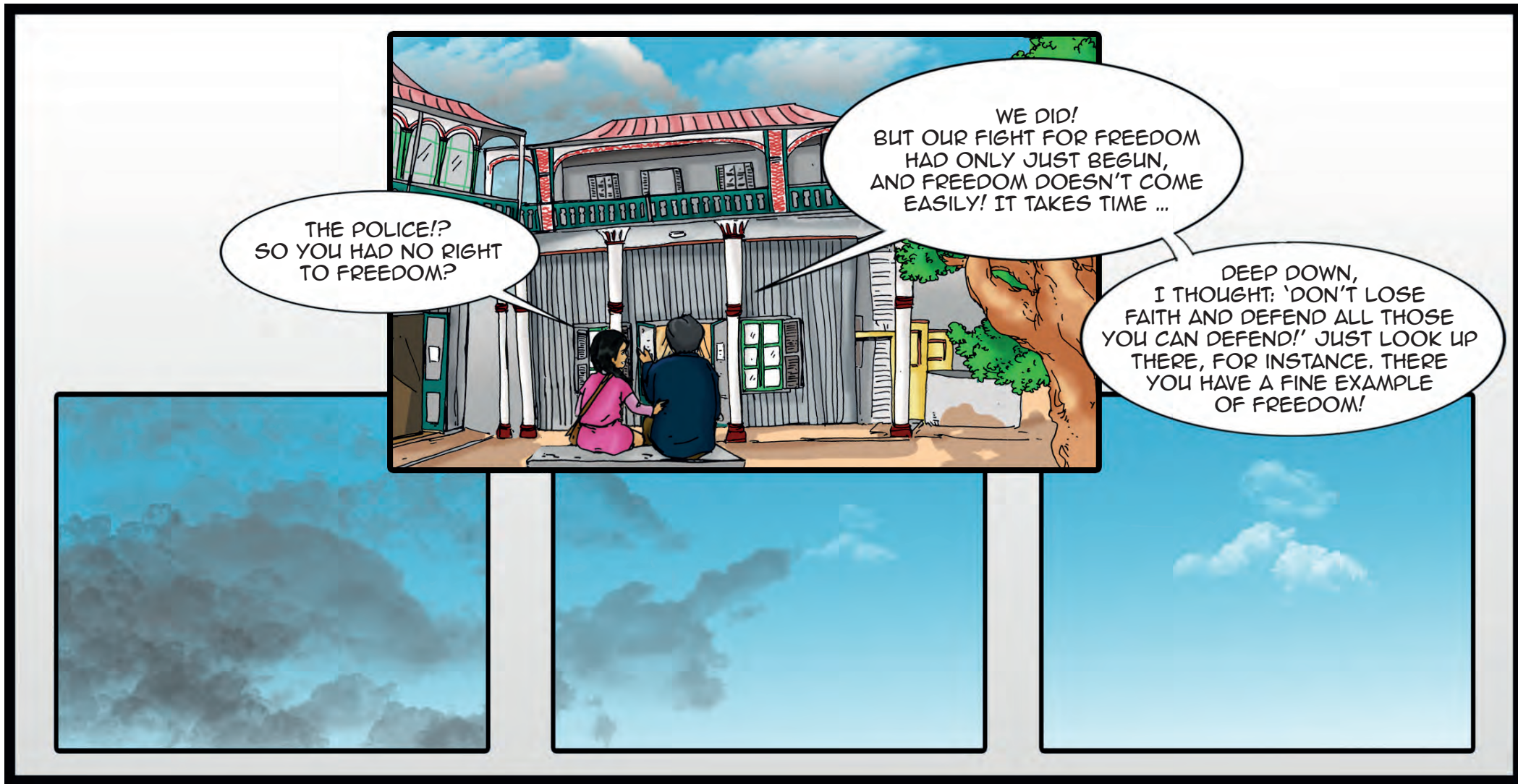


SADLY, IT ONLY TOOK THE SLIGHTEST INCIDENT FOR THE MDRM TO BE ACCUSED AND HARSHLY REPPRESSED BY THE COLONISTS. SOME OF MY OWN FRIENDS AND FAMILY MEMBERS WERE IMPRISONED.

MDRM  
Mouvement Démocratique  
de la Rénovation Malgache

HERE IS A NEWS FLASH! MEMBERS OF THE MDMR WERE TAKEN FROM THEIR HOMES FOR QUESTIONING BY THE POLICE AT SIX O'CLOCK THIS MORNING. THEY ARE NOW IN PRISON FOR PUBLIC ORDER OFFENCES!

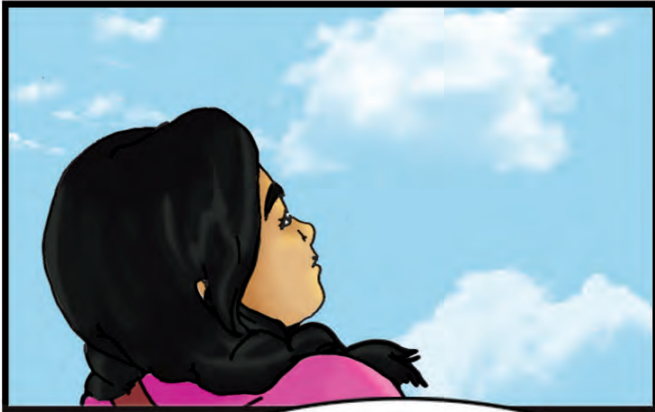
I WAS UNDER POLICE SURVEILLANCE MYSELF.



THE POLICE!?  
SO YOU HAD NO RIGHT  
TO FREEDOM?

WE DID!  
BUT OUR FIGHT FOR FREEDOM  
HAD ONLY JUST BEGUN,  
AND FREEDOM DOESN'T COME  
EASILY! IT TAKES TIME ...

DEEP DOWN,  
I THOUGHT: 'DON'T LOSE  
FAITH AND DEFEND ALL THOSE  
YOU CAN DEFEND!' JUST LOOK UP  
THERE, FOR INSTANCE. THERE  
YOU HAVE A FINE EXAMPLE  
OF FREEDOM!

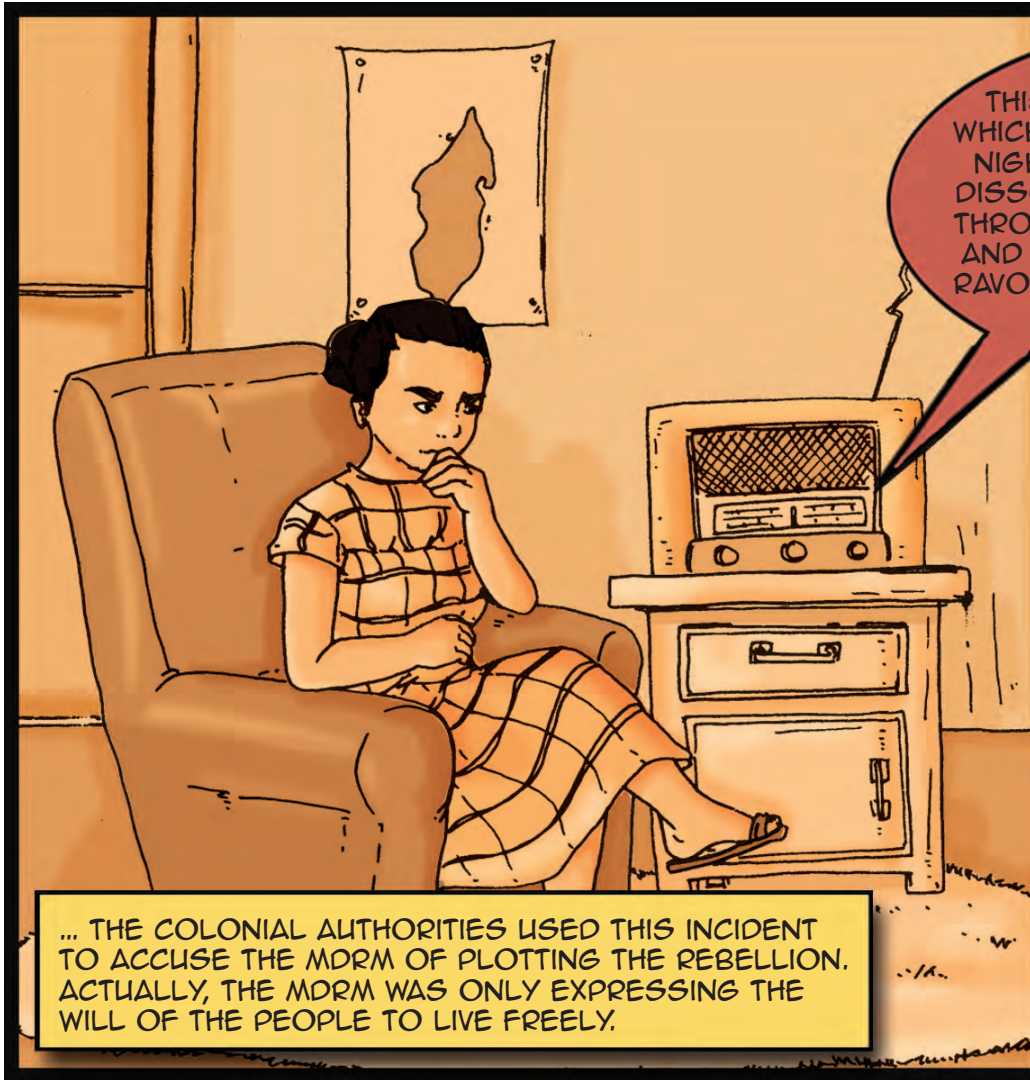


UNFORTUNATELY,  
WE DIDN'T KNOW JUST HOW  
BLOODY AND HOW LONG THE ROAD  
WOULD BE. IN 1947, THE SITUATION  
WAS BECOMING INTOLERABLE. THE  
COLONISTS COULD NO LONGER  
CONTAIN THE PEASANTS'  
ANGER AND THERE WAS  
AN UPRISING ...



... AT MIDNIGHT ON 29 MARCH 1947, HUNDREDS OF MALAGASY INSURGENTS, ARMED WITH GUNS AND MACHETES, ATTACKED COLONIAL MILITARY CAMPS AND BUILDINGS. THE ATTACKS BEGAN IN THE EAST OF MADAGASCAR AND SPREAD TO VIRTUALLY THE WHOLE ISLAND...





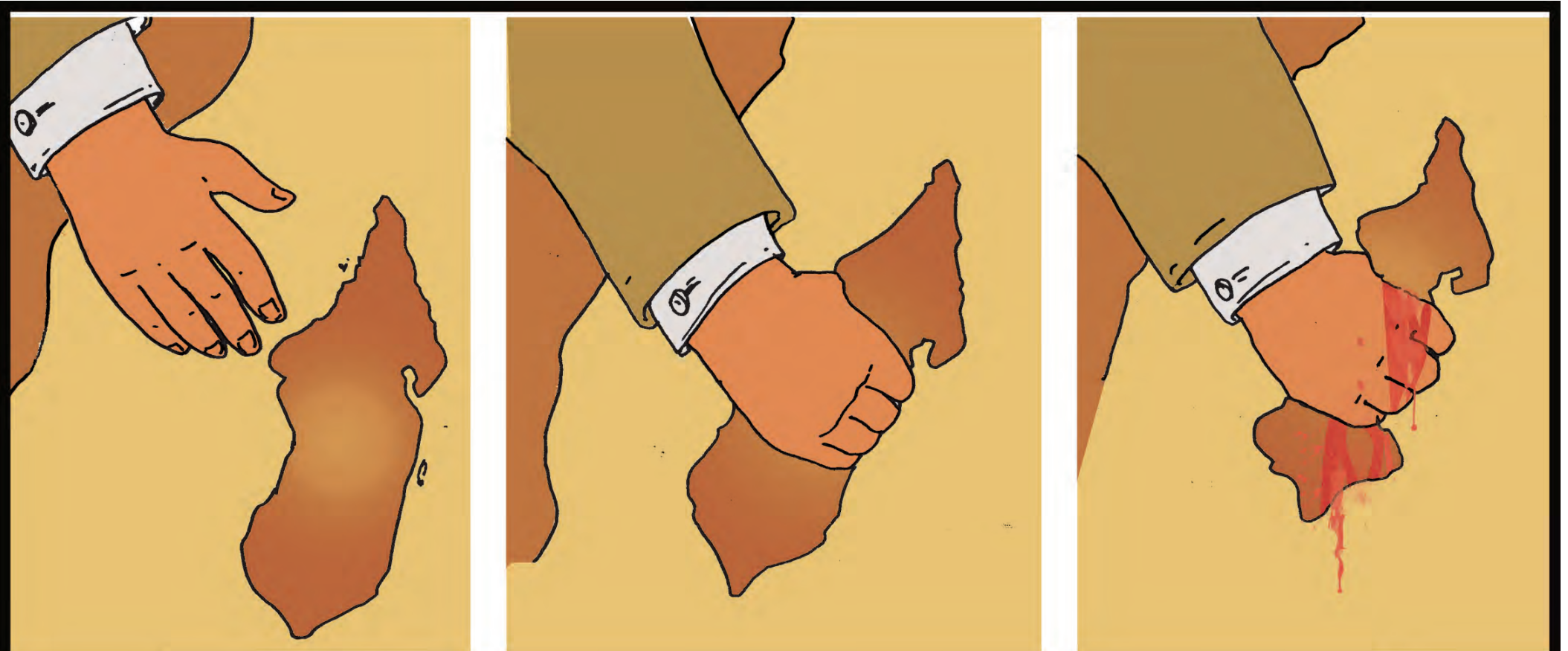
RADIO-TANA,  
THIS IS RADIO-TANA! THE MDRM,  
WHICH WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR LAST  
NIGHT'S EVENTS, HAS JUST BEEN  
DISSOLVED! NEWS HAS JUST COME  
THROUGH THAT THE PARTY MEMBERS  
AND THE MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT  
RAVOAHANGY AND RABEMANANJARA  
HAVE BEEN ARRESTED  
AND IMPRISONED.

... THE COLONIAL AUTHORITIES USED THIS INCIDENT  
TO ACCUSE THE MDRM OF PLOTTING THE REBELLION.  
ACTUALLY, THE MDRM WAS ONLY EXPRESSING THE  
WILL OF THE PEOPLE TO LIVE FREELY.



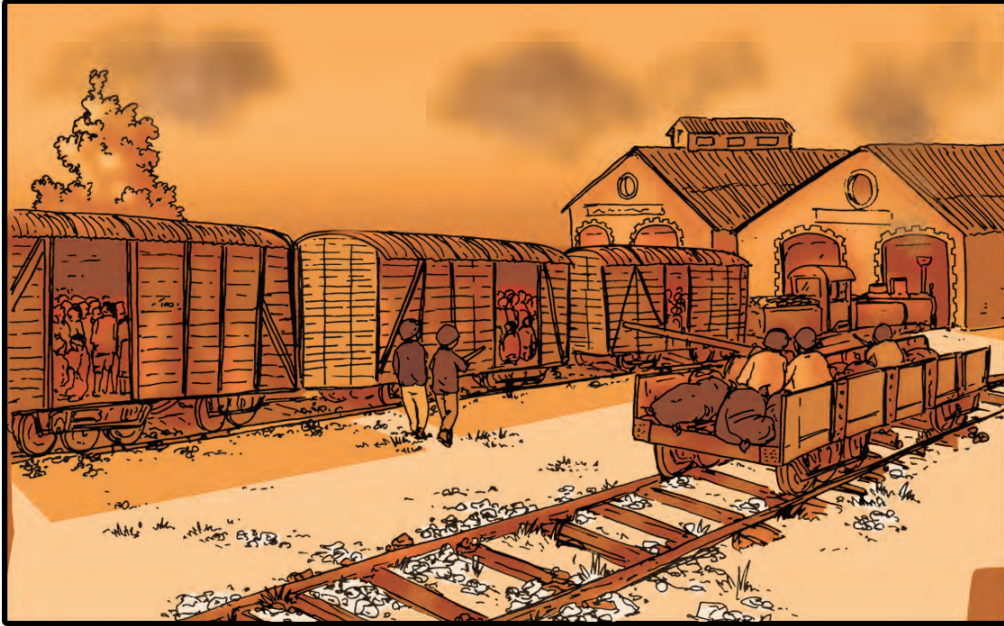
HOW DARE THEY! OUR  
PARTY STANDS FOR PEACE  
AND FREEDOM!



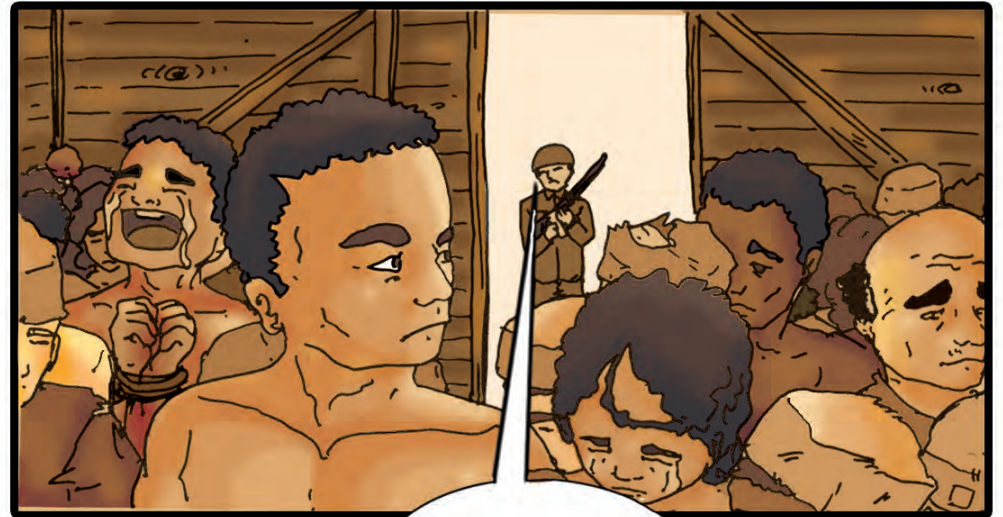


THE REPRESSION WAS TERRIBLE. IN AUGUST 1947, THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT SENT REINFORCEMENTS TO MADAGASCAR TO SUPPRESS THE MALAGASY UPRISING BY FORCE: SOLDIERS, PLANES AND ARMOURIED VEHICLES ARRIVED ON THE ISLAND. THE COLONIAL FORCES BRUTALLY ATTACKED CIVILIANS. MORE THAN 89,000 MALAGASY WERE KILLED DURING THIS REPRESSION IN 1947.

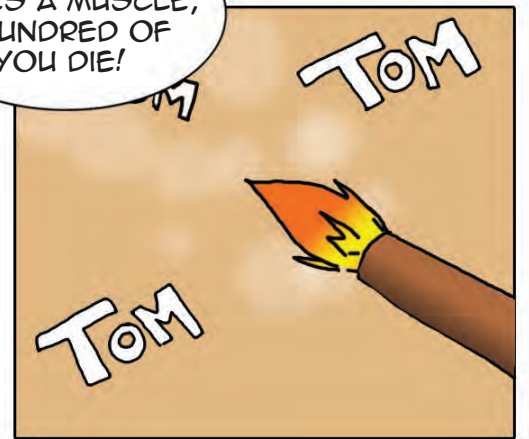
THERE WAS THE TERRIBLE MORAMANGA CARRIAGE INCIDENT, FOR EXAMPLE ...



ALTHOUGH I AM DEEPLY ATTACHED TO FRANCE, I WAS HORRIFIED THAT THE COUNTRY SHOULD BE REPRESENTED IN MADAGASCAR BY SUCH CRUEL AND CONTEMPTUOUS SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS: ARBITRARY ARRESTS, MASSACRES, SUMMARY EXECUTIONS, TORTURE, DEATH SENTENCES...



IF ANYONE MOVES A MUSCLE, A HUNDRED OF YOU DIE!



THERE WAS SO MUCH TO BE DONE: RESISTING, CARING FOR THE WOUNDED, HELPING THE VICTIMS AND THE VICTIMS' FAMILIES. SO WE GOT OURSELVES ORGANIZED. IN 1950, ALONG WITH OTHER MDRM MEMBERS, I SET UP THE MADAGASCAR SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE OR FIFANAMPIANA MALAGASY (FIFA) IN SUPPORT OF POLITICAL PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES, AND THE VICTIMS OF REPRESSION.



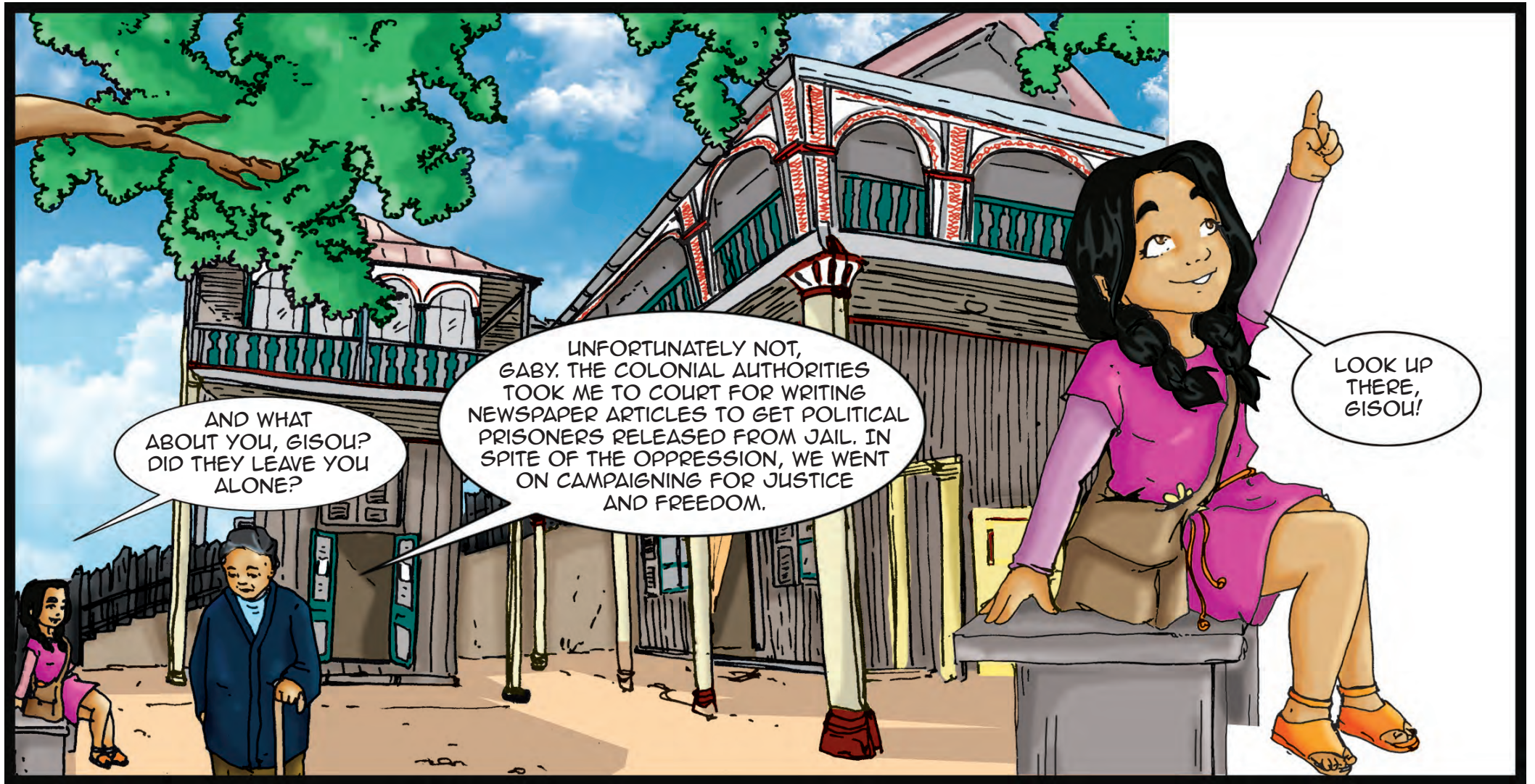
DON'T GIVE UP!  
WE ARE HELPING  
YOUR FAMILIES AND  
ARE DOING ALL WE  
CAN TO GET YOU  
OUT OF HERE.



TELL MY WIFE  
I'M ALL RIGHT!



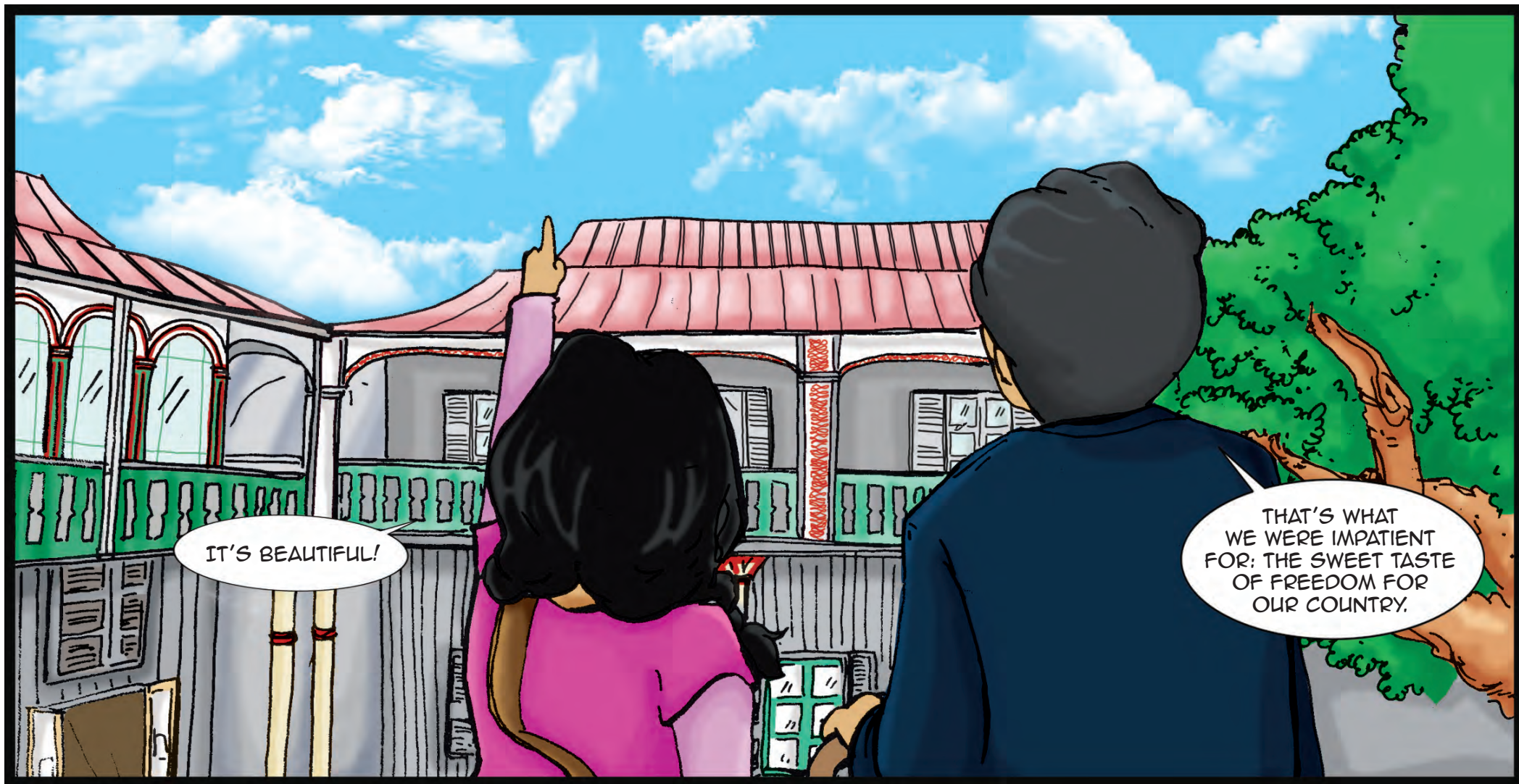
GIVE MY  
CHILDREN THIS  
MESSAGE!

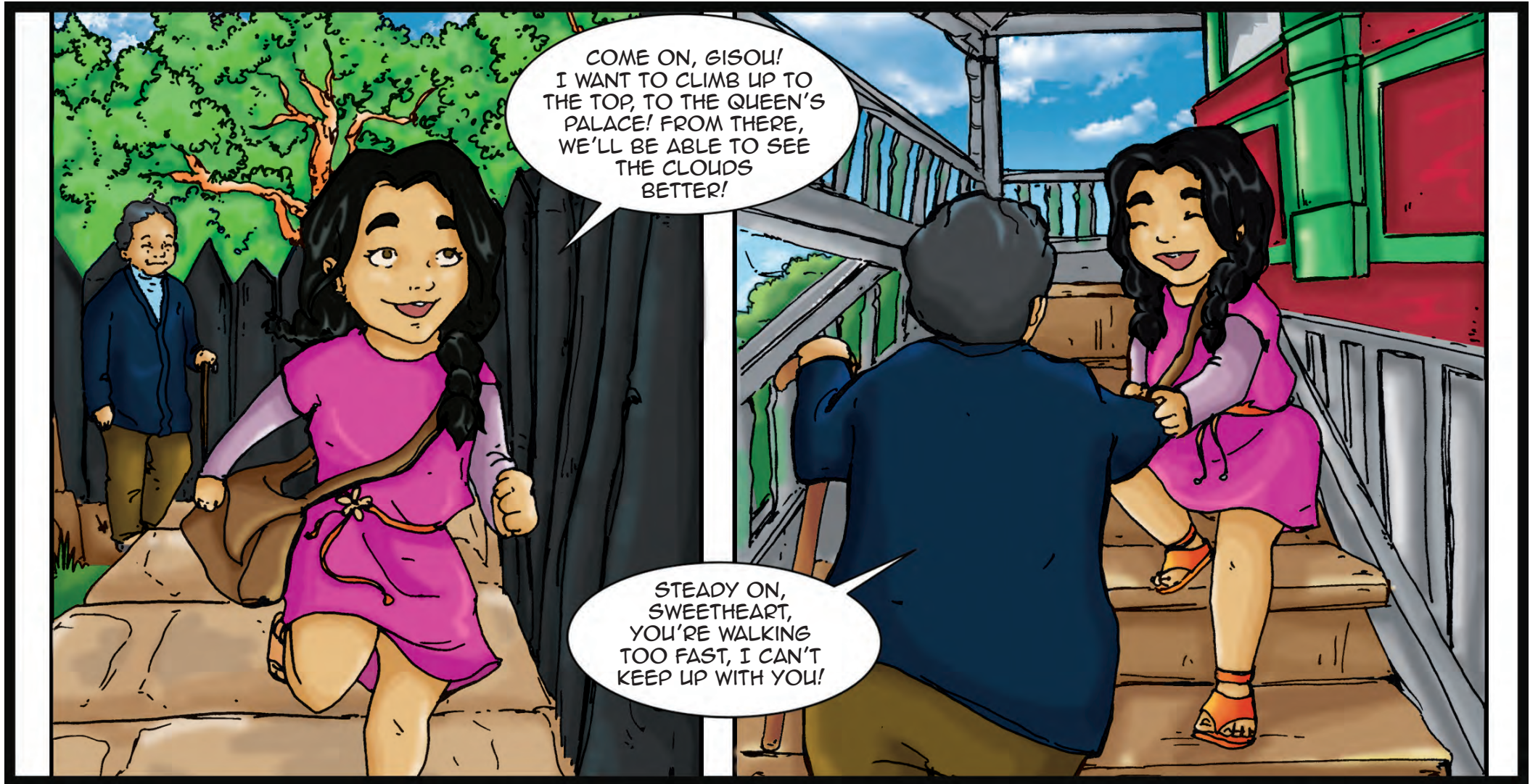


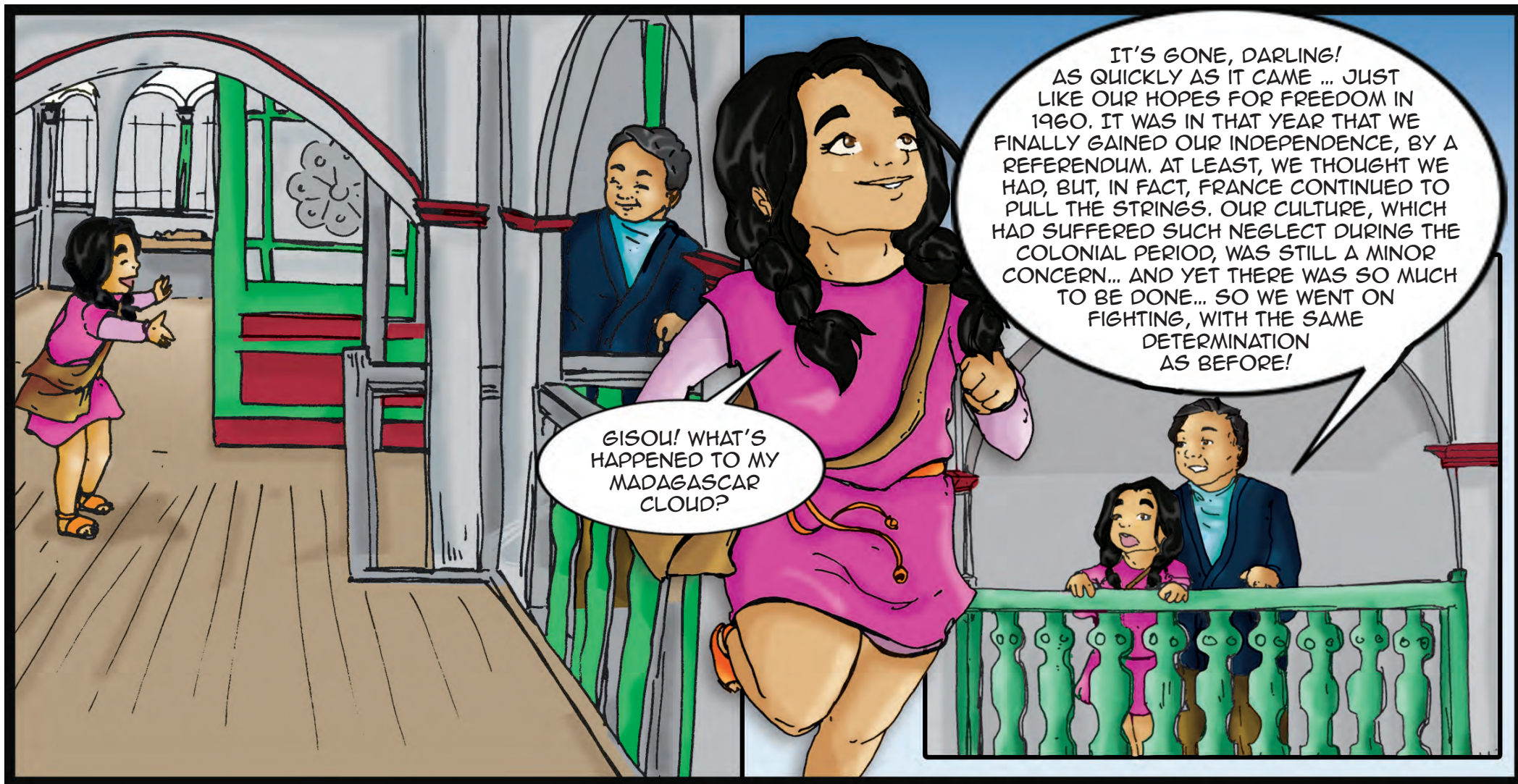
AND WHAT ABOUT YOU, GISOU? DID THEY LEAVE YOU ALONE?

UNFORTUNATELY NOT, GABY. THE COLONIAL AUTHORITIES TOOK ME TO COURT FOR WRITING NEWSPAPER ARTICLES TO GET POLITICAL PRISONERS RELEASED FROM JAIL. IN SPITE OF THE OPPRESSION, WE WENT ON CAMPAIGNING FOR JUSTICE AND FREEDOM.

LOOK UP THERE, GISOU!

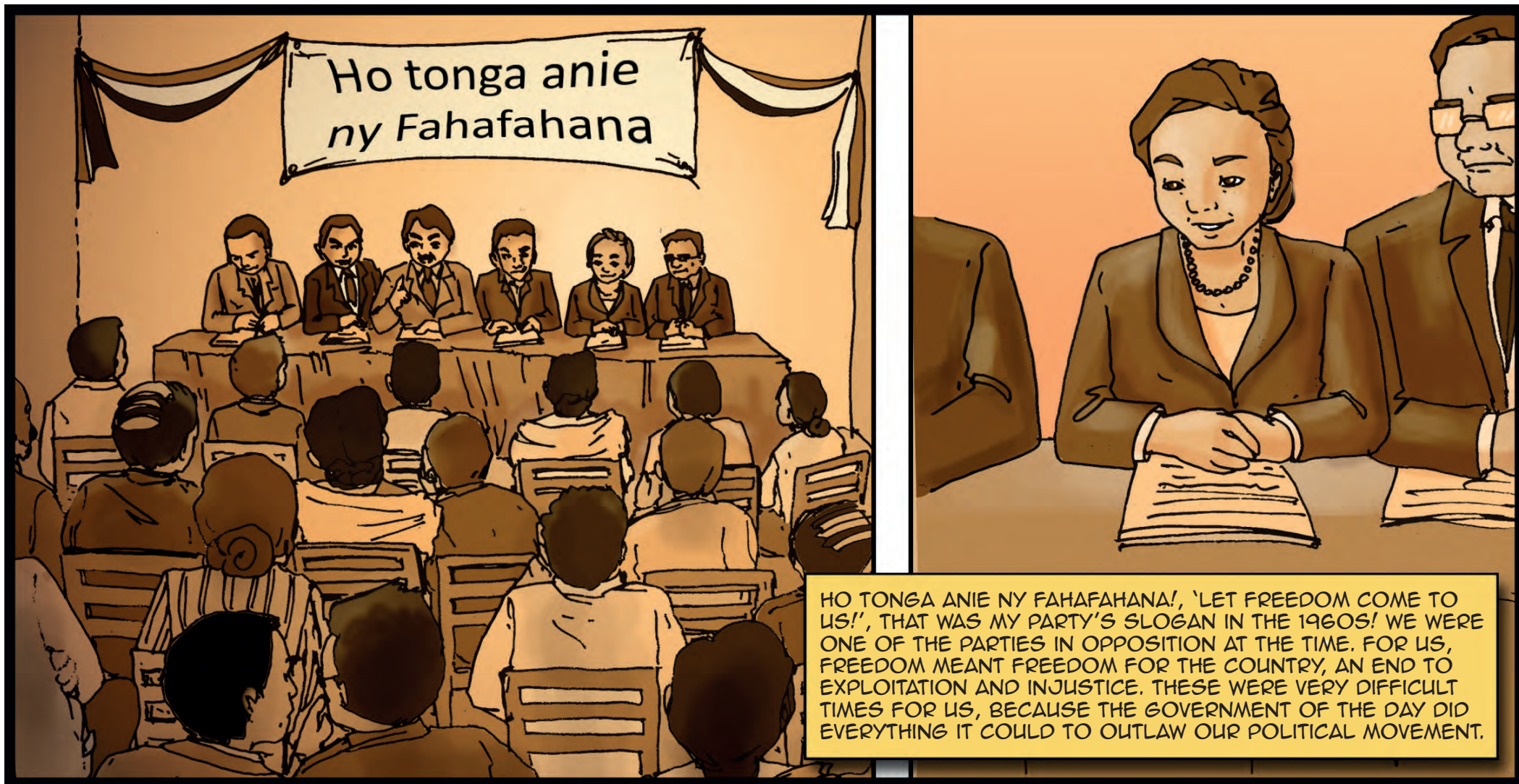






GISOU! WHAT'S HAPPENED TO MY MADAGASCAR CLOUD?

IT'S GONE, DARLING! AS QUICKLY AS IT CAME ... JUST LIKE OUR HOPES FOR FREEDOM IN 1960. IT WAS IN THAT YEAR THAT WE FINALLY GAINED OUR INDEPENDENCE, BY A REFERENDUM. AT LEAST, WE THOUGHT WE HAD, BUT, IN FACT, FRANCE CONTINUED TO PULL THE STRINGS. OUR CULTURE, WHICH HAD SUFFERED SUCH NEGLECT DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD, WAS STILL A MINOR CONCERN... AND YET THERE WAS SO MUCH TO BE DONE... SO WE WENT ON FIGHTING, WITH THE SAME DETERMINATION AS BEFORE!

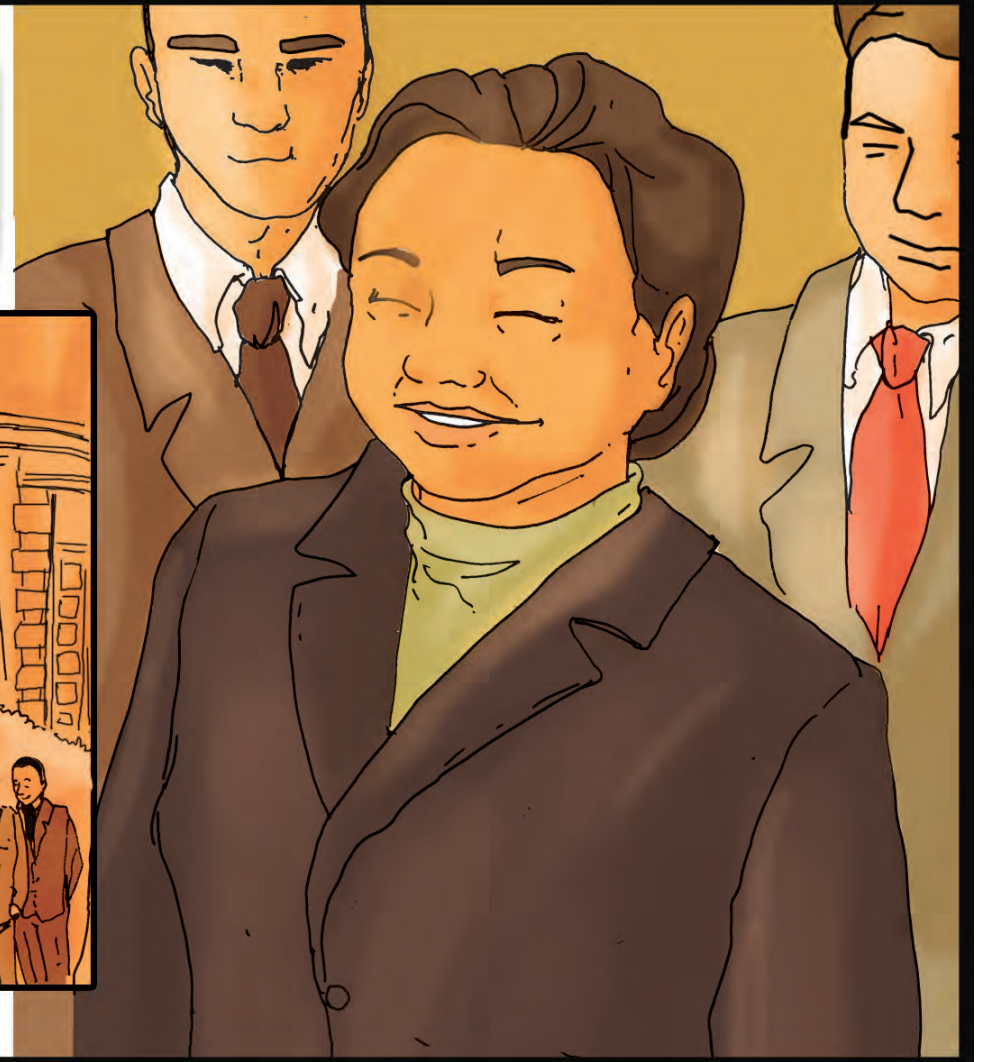


Ho tonga anie  
ny Fahafahana

HO TONGA ANIE NY FAHAFAHANA!, 'LET FREEDOM COME TO US!', THAT WAS MY PARTY'S SLOGAN IN THE 1960S! WE WERE ONE OF THE PARTIES IN OPPOSITION AT THE TIME. FOR US, FREEDOM MEANT FREEDOM FOR THE COUNTRY, AN END TO EXPLOITATION AND INJUSTICE. THESE WERE VERY DIFFICULT TIMES FOR US, BECAUSE THE GOVERNMENT OF THE DAY DID EVERYTHING IT COULD TO OUTLAW OUR POLITICAL MOVEMENT.



AFTER YEARS OF CAMPAIGNING, OUR WORK AND PERSEVERANCE WERE REWARDED: IN 1977, I WAS APPOINTED MINISTER OF CULTURE AND REVOLUTIONARY ART. I WAS CONVINCED THAT, FOR THE PEOPLE TO FULLY REGAIN THEIR DIGNITY, MORE THAN ANYTHING, THEIR IDENTITY, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE HAD TO BE RESTORED.



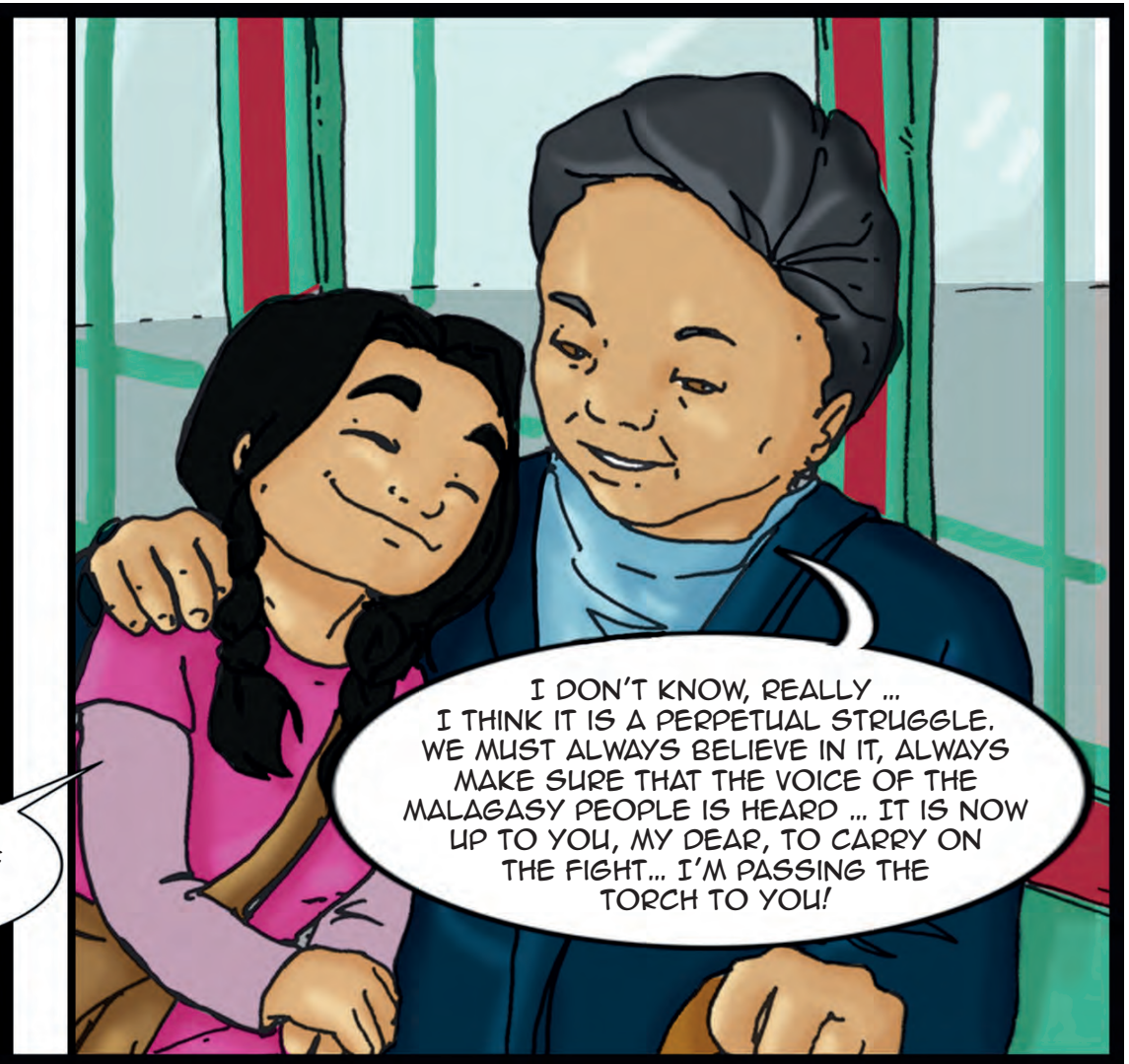
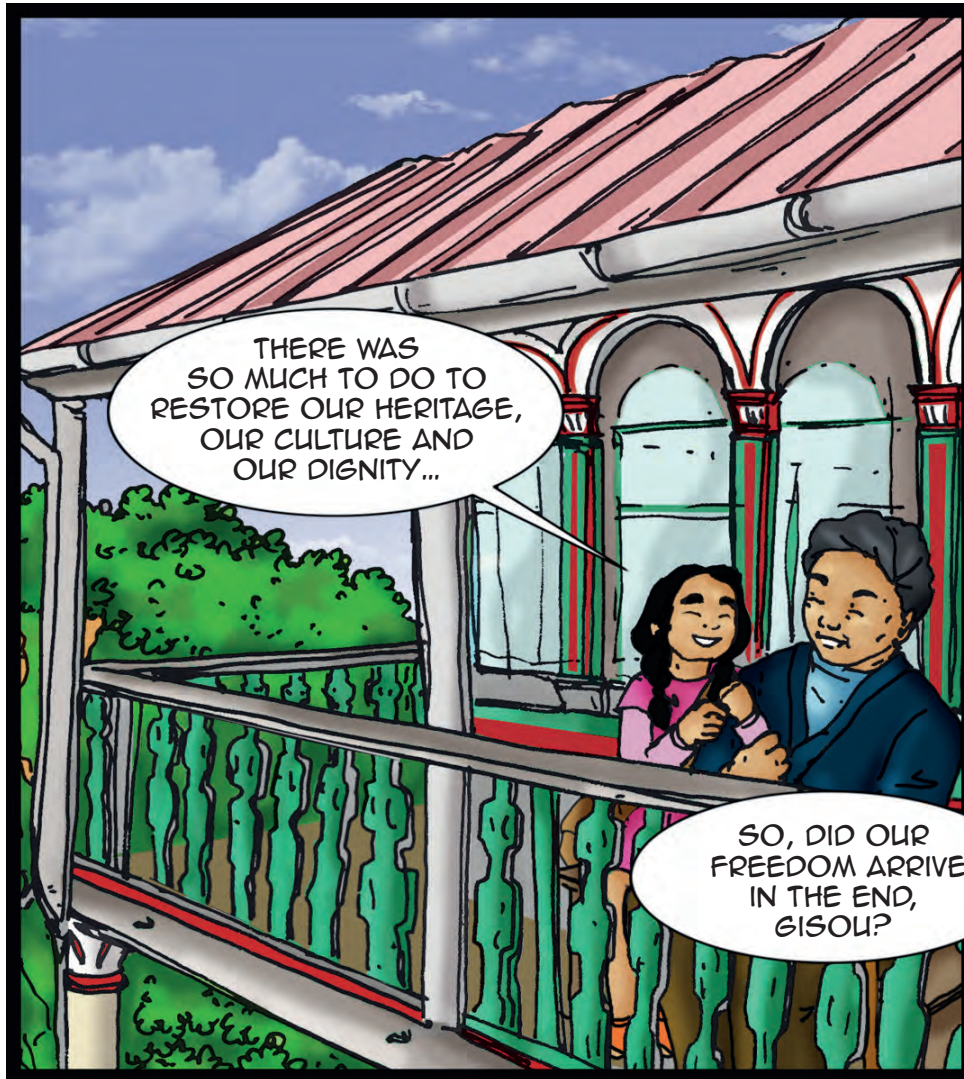


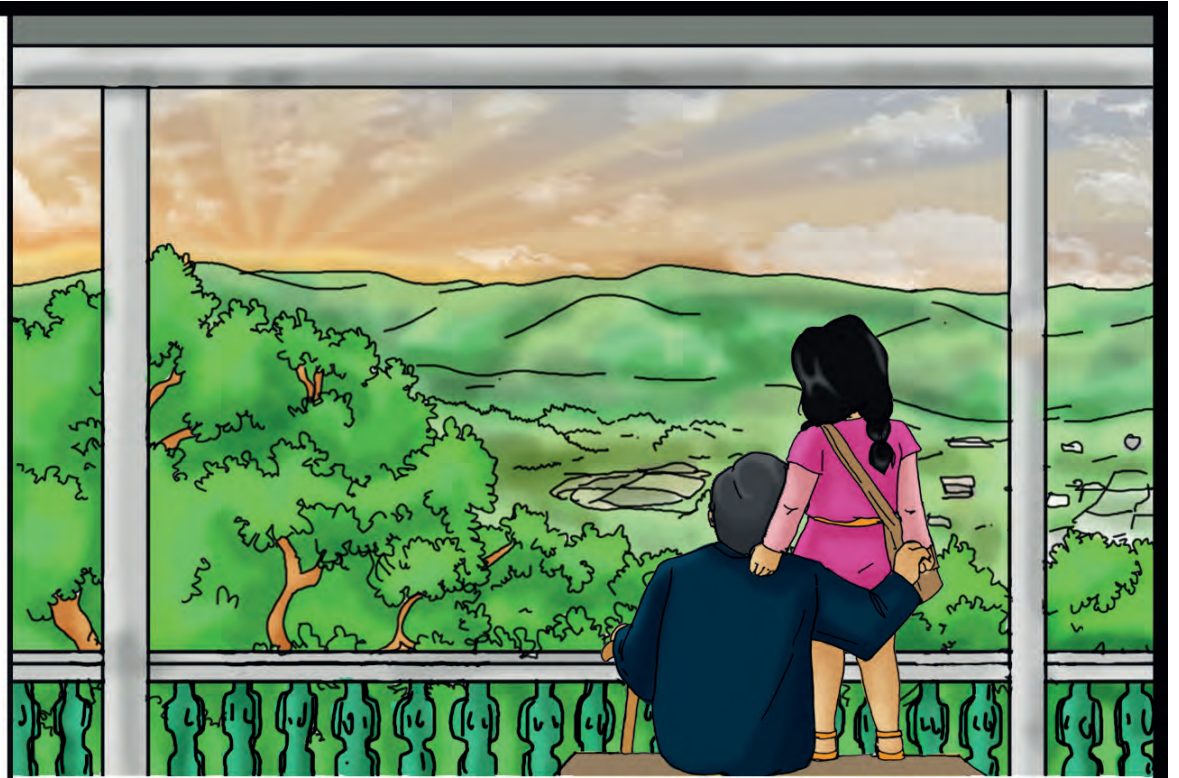
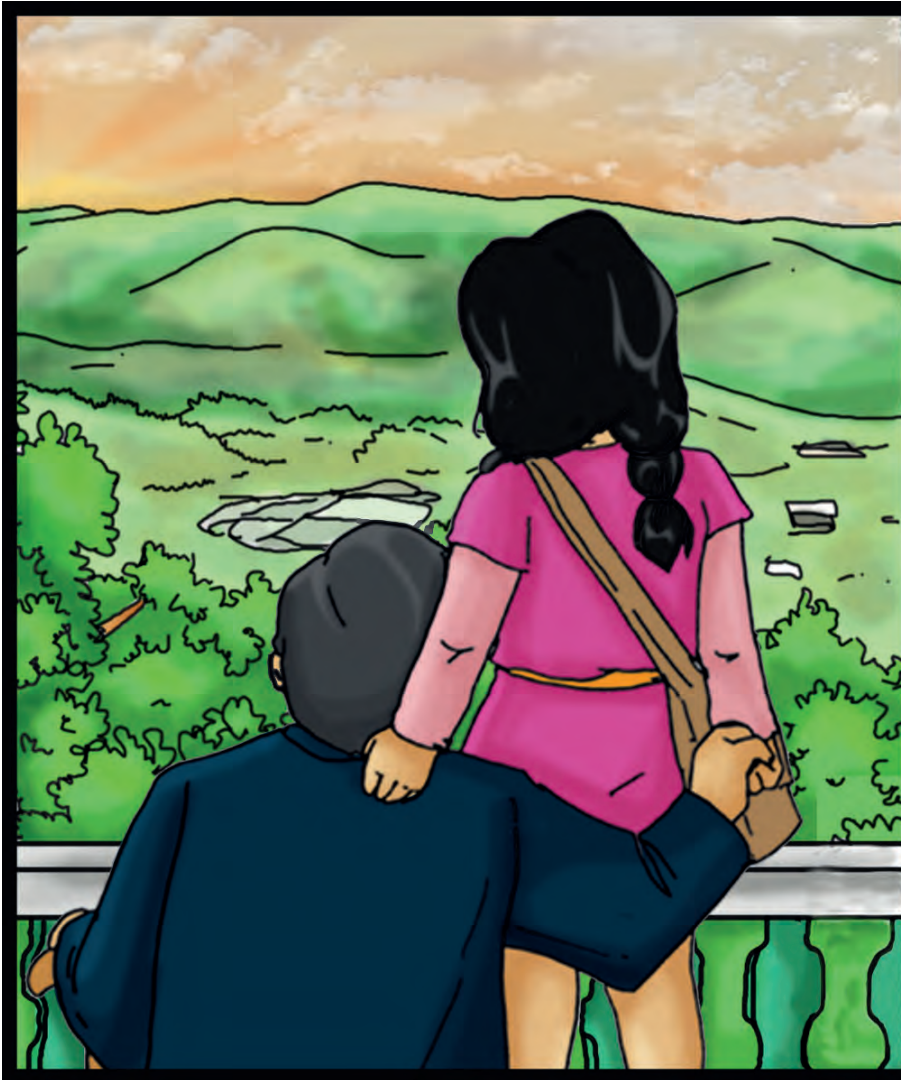


...WE RESTORED HISTORICAL SITES SUCH AS THE ROYAL PALACES AND THE TOMBS, SINCE THEY ARE POWERFUL SYMBOLS OF OUR CULTURE...



... WE PROMOTED OUR INTANGIBLE HERITAGE AND MALAGASY ARTISTS BY ORGANISING PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND BY CREATING OMDA, THE ORGANIZATION RESPONSIBLE FOR AUTHORS' RIGHTS IN MADAGASCAR.





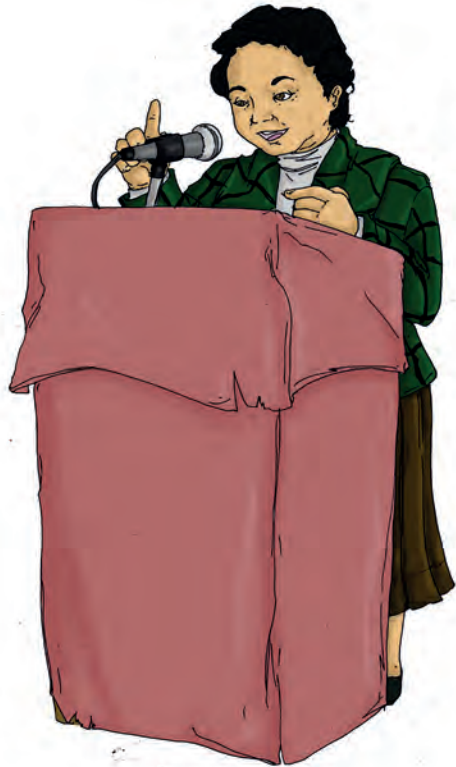
A CELEBRATED MALAGASY WOMAN POLITICIAN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, GISÈLE RABESAHALA (1929-2011) DEVOTED HER LIFE TO HER COUNTRY'S INDEPENDENCE, HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE FREEDOM OF PEOPLES. THE FIRST MALAGASY WOMAN TO BE AN ELECTED REPRESENTATIVE (1956) AND A POLITICAL PARTY LEADER (1958), AND TO BE APPOINTED MINISTER (1977), SHE IS REGARDED AS A PIONEER IN MALAGASY POLITICS.

# 4 Pedagogical unit

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# 1. French colonization of Madagascar and resistance

## Introduction

Gisèle Rabesahala campaigned all her life for the emancipation of individuals, the freedom of the Malagasy people and the independence of the nation. She fought tirelessly and vigorously in a political world largely dominated by men.

It was during a public demonstration in Antananarivo on 19 May 1929, a few days after Gisèle was born, that Malagasies would, for the first time, demand independence for their country. Gisèle Rabesahala's progressive and humanist fight would be part of that same current of demands for independence.

## 1.1 The fall of the Kingdom of Madagascar and French colonization

The unification of Madagascar was completed in the nineteenth century, during the reign of King Radama I (1810-1828). On 12 September 1862, during the reign of King Radama II, a Franco-Malagasy treaty of friendship was signed, recognizing the kingdom's sovereignty. However, certain clauses authorizing the takeover of land, natural resources and the use of the labour force, put this sovereignty at risk.

These privileges conceded to France gave rise to several protest movements, which the French at first tried to squash by violent means. Eager to expand and anxious to make its conquests secure, France finally annexed Madagascar by force. It officially became a French colony on 6 August 1896.



Radama I.

Painting by Philippe-Auguste Ramanankirahina, 1905.

“

If we don't know where we come from, we don't know where we are going", in Raharimana P.M, 2011, Portrait d'insurgés de Madagascar 1947 [A Portrait of insurgents in Madagascar in 1947], Editions Vents d'ailleurs.



Forced labour for the construction of the railways: tamping ballast under the sleepers.

Throughout the colonial period, France exercised total control over the economy, the administration and the army. The living conditions of the Malagasies declined and the people's rights and freedoms were violated (hard labour, taxation, etc.). The Malagasy people saw themselves reduced to a work force (for the construction of roads, railways and ports, the cultivation of tropical crops, etc.).

## 1.2 The first resistance movements opposing colonization

From the very beginning of colonization, and although the power relationship was an unequal one, some Malagasies resisted the regime by meeting force with force. To begin with, acts of resistance were isolated and undertaken by underground peasant organizations like *Ny Menalamba* – the “Red Shawls” – (1895–1897), the *Sadiavahy* fighters (around 1915) in the South, and an opposition group of intellectuals, *Vy Vato Sakelika*, the “Iron and Stone Ramification” (1913-1915). These movements would be crushed by the colonial power.

With the Second World War (1939–1945), the living conditions of the Malagasy deteriorated further:

- the peasants and workers were exploited (this was a time of forced labour);
- rice was requisitioned for the war effort and the country found itself in the grip of a famine, especially the south of the island;
- Thirty-four thousand Malagasies were called on to serve in the French army.

### 1.3 1946: a first venture into politics with the MDRM

After the war, in Paris in February 1946, Raseta and Ravoahangy, two members of parliament elected to represent Madagascar at the first French Constituent Assembly, along with the writer Jacques Rabemananjara, founded the Democratic Movement for Malagasy Renewal (MDRM), which brought together nationalists engaged in the fight for the country's independence.

At 17 years of age, and having qualified as a shorthand typist, Gisèle Rabesahala was recruited as a secretary to write down the speeches of the Movement's leaders in Madagascar.

### 1.4 The 1947 uprising: the MDRM stands accused

After the uprising in 1947, the colonial government decided to put an end to MDRM ambitions. Party leaders were accused of having organized the uprising. Gisèle Rabesahala volunteered her services as secretary to the group of French lawyers assigned to defend the accused members of the MDRM.

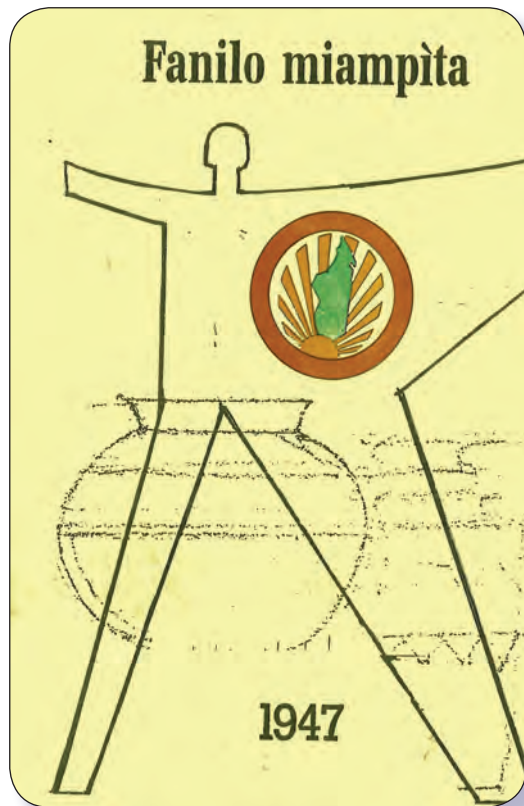
Through these early experiences, Gisèle became involved in the fight for her country's independence and against the oppression of the Malagasy people. However, the colonists stepped up their repression: the leaders of the MDRM (parliamentarians and activists) were arrested, tried and sentenced, either to death or to hard labour. The MDRM was finally dissolved in June 1947.



Gisèle Rabesahala (around 25 years old).  
Rabesahala family archive.



Protest of the Solidarity Committee of Madagascar for the liberation of Raseta and the amnesty for prisoners in 1947.  
Rabesahala family archives.



Cover of the book *Fanilo miampita* (Passing the torch), 145-page booklet produced by the Solidarity Committee of Madagascar, prefaced and presented by Gisèle Rabesahala, 1947.

## 2. Independence and the fight for freedom

### Introduction

Gisèle Rabesahala's involvement in the MDRM's struggles awakened her nationalist and patriotic sentiments. She joined a number of progressive organizations.

In May 1950, together with her fellow-activists, she founded the *Fifanampiana Malagasy*, the Madagascar Solidarity Committee. The Committee worked for amnesty for all political prisoners who had participated in the 1947 uprising and their release from jail. It supported the victims' families, especially the wives and daughters of political detainees. It also denounced the acts of violence committed by the colonial administration during the people's protest movements.

### 2.1 Involvement in the progressive movements

A few years later, Gisèle Rabesahala worked as a secretary for a commercial company and joined the local trade-union movement. In August 1956, the political situation inspired her and other activists to establish the General Confederation of Workers' Unions of Madagascar (FISEMA), another channel for denouncing social injustice. FISEMA advocated the unity of trade-union action in Madagascar and the solidarity of workers throughout the world.

In October 1956, she was the first woman to be elected as a municipal councillor in Antananarivo. In 1958, Gisèle helped to found the Congress Party for the Independence of Madagascar (AKFM). Successor to the MDRM, it brought together different nationalist tendencies and campaigned for the country's independence. Gisèle Rabesahala became its General Secretary the same year and occupied the post until 1998.

## 2.2 1960: Independence for Madagascar

The advent of communism, two world wars and the creation of the United Nations (1945) completely reshaped international geopolitics. The fight for independence, justice and the freedom of dominated countries drew new strength from this new context.

France thus found itself obliged to grant political autonomy to its African colonies. On 26 June 1960, Madagascar's independence was proclaimed. Philibert Tsiranana's Social Democratic Party (PSD), supported by France, came to power and the First Republic came into being. Through this new regime, France continued to maintain its influence and interests in Madagascar.

“

You and me, all of us, we have only one objective: the fatherland” in Rabesahala G. 2006, *Let freedom come to us*, Océan Editions, p. 257

## 2.3 After independence, the fight continues

The AKFM and its satellite organizations assumed the role of opposition movement to the regime and campaigned against this new form of French domination.

Gisèle Rabesahala saw those first years of independence (1961-1965) as one of the most difficult periods for her party: AKFM activists were the target of persecution and arrests; all the opposition parties were subjected to repression; in 1965, a wave of anti-AKFM violence swept through the town of Andapa, in the north-east of the island, and 116 houses were burned and the properties of the local population pillaged.



Gisèle Rabesahala in the late 1950s.  
Rabesahala family archives.



Philippe Tsiranana, President of Madagascar from 1960 to 1972.  
Photograph by Wegmann Ludwig, 1962.

## 2.4 Campaign strategies: social actions and international support

In spite of the difficult political situation, the AFKM stepped up its training of supporters and its efforts to raise the awareness of the population. The party kept a critical eye on the governance of the country and denounced any action that was likely to undermine national sovereignty or social justice.

At the social level, the trade-union movement FISEMA defended workers' interests. At the same time, the Madagascar Solidarity Committee set up a social programme to promote education and health: schools were created, health centres were opened, there were nutritional aid programmes, aid for the victims of cyclones, etc. In her humanitarian activities, Gisèle Rabesahala received support from the French charity Secours populaire français, from the island of Réunion and from the solidarity committees of communist bloc countries.

At the international level, the allies of Gisèle Rabesahala's party were left-wing – mainly communist – parties, regardless of whether they were in power. The AKFM adhered to the principles of scientific socialism and Marxism. Gisèle Rabesahala attended political conventions, meetings and international conferences all over the world.



Gisèle Rabesahala and Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, heroine of the French resistance, during a congress of the French Communist Party in 1980. Rabesahala family archive.

### 3. From opposition to a role in government

#### Introduction

After campaigning for a long time in opposition and being subjected to the pressures of the ruling party, Gisèle Rabesahala and her party saw a new era dawning when Didier Ratsiraka came to power in 1975. The aim of the Second Republic was to build a new kind of State that took the interests of the people into account and applied socialist principles. Gisèle Rabesahala immersed herself in this project of political renewal.

#### 3.1 Gisèle Rabesahala in the service of the opposition, and the demise of the First Republic

Because of its ideology and the nature of its links with foreign countries, the movement led by Gisèle Rabesahala (party, trade union, association) was accused of working for the Soviet Union.

A lack of good governance and respect for democratic principles meant that the elections held between 1960 and 1972 were marred by irregularities, to the detriment of the opposition parties, the AKFM in particular.

Imongo Vaovao, a newspaper that had ties with the AKFM, was seized on a number of occasions or else prevented from publishing, because of its critical attitude towards the regime. The opposition movement spearheaded by the AKFM was a victim of acts of sabotage during election campaigns. Its supporters,



activists and leaders were threatened with physical attacks and imprisonment. Gisèle Rabesahala, frequently banned from leaving the country, was a victim of slander and threats.

From 1971 onwards, localized tensions, student strikes and peasant demonstrations began to occur in the south of the country, in protest against the regime's policies. In May 1972, the popular uprising against neo-colonial domination became widespread and culminated in the demise of the First Republic.

### 3.2 The creation of the Second Republic and a role in government

The country then went through a period of turbulence, faced with the challenge of establishing a new model of development while safeguarding national unity. Proponents of renewal, the AKFM among them, suggested setting up a democratic socialist republic. The general population approved this choice through a referendum in 1975. The Second Republic came into existence.

The AKFM participated in the governance of the country. New structures were put in place to ensure that power was exercised by the people:

- the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC);
- the National People's Assembly (NPA), to which Gisèle Rabesahala was elected;
- decentralized local authorities, to which thousands of AKFM party members were elected as communal or provincial councillors, mayors, etc.

The Socialist Revolution Charter advocated the nationalization of the economy. The State took control of the banking system, insurance, water, electricity, trade, etc. The land taken over by the colonists on the east coast was nationalized: 27,000 hectares were then redistributed to 1,700 Malagasy families.



The newspaper *Imongo Vavoa* in 1968.





### 3.3 1977: for the first time, a woman is appointed minister in Madagascar

In 1977, Gisèle Rabesahala, who was General Secretary of the AKFM, was appointed Minister of Culture and Revolutionary Art, a post she kept until 1991. The policies she implemented sought to promote culture as a factor in development.

- She founded the National Library in 1979 and set about decentralizing the public libraries in 58 towns.
- She introduced a 'book' policy, with the publication of some 50 works, many of them in the Malagasy language.
- She was instrumental in restoring more than 25 national sites and historical monuments.
- In 1985, she created the Malagasy Copyright Office (OMDA). She promoted creativity and artistic expression, established cultural centres, organized literary and artistic competitions, reorganized the music schools, etc.

In May 2001, Gisèle Rabesahala was appointed Deputy Speaker of the Senate for two years. This was the last office of State she held.

## 4 Gisèle Rabesahala: activist, humanist and patriot

### Introduction

During the last 20 years of her life, Gisèle Rabesahala was active in managing Madagascar's political crises. Thanks to her qualities as a mediator and her stature on the international stage, she was able to defend the interests of her country as well as those of the most oppressed peoples throughout the world.

#### 4.1 Malagasy political crises and mediation

The period from 1991 to 2009 was a time of instability for Madagascar: there were demonstrations by the people and election results were challenged; it was a period of transition that was both stormy and bloody. After the advent of the Third Republic, in 2002, a post-electoral crisis severely tested national unity. The AKFM, led by Gisèle Rabesahala, encouraged dialogue between the different political parties, but also their participation in the platform for crisis resolution that had been initiated by parliamentarians (Parliamentarian Solidarity for Development and National Unity) and the Committee for National Reconciliation.

In January 2003, international institutions recognized Marc Ravalomanana as the new President of the Republic of Madagascar. A fresh crisis occurred in 2009 and interrupted his second term of office. At 80 years of age, Gisèle Rabesahala, with her long political experience, was then approached to sit on the advisory committee *Ray aman-dReny Mijoro*, a mediation body.



Protest during the 2009 Malagasy political crisis.  
Photograph by Fanalana Azy, 2009.

## 4.2 An international stature

Gisèle Rabesahala's activism reached beyond Madagascar's borders. She supported all independence movements on the African continent. Her commitment to the liberation of Africa was, moreover, recognized by the Angolan Agostino Neto, the Namibian Sam Nujoma, the Mozambicans Samora Machel and Edouardo Mondlane, the South African Oliver Tambo and the Guinea-Bissauan Amical Cabral.

Gisèle Rabesahala took forward the initiatives of the World Peace Council (WPC) by creating, within the organization, the Malagasy Committee for Peace and Friendship between Peoples in 1962. The Committee gave its support to the people of Vietnam at the time of the Vietnamese War. Gisèle Rabesahala was also an enthusiastic director of the standing commission for the defence of women's and children's rights within the WPC, which also worked to promote development and peace.

Gisèle and her Madagascar Solidarity Committee were, moreover, privileged partners of the French Association of Friendship and Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa (AFASPA) from its foundation in 1973. In 1980, Gisèle received the Ana Betancourt Medal, awarded in memory of one of the important figures in the Cuban and Latin American women's movement.



Gisèle Rabesahala at an international conference. Rabesahala family archives.



Logo of the French Association of Friendship and Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa (AFASPA).

“ I promoted the idea that the development of society would be sufficient to transform the situation of women (...) I came to realize that this was a serious error, and that the starting point for women's development was their education” in Afaspa, 2005, Elles font bouger l’Afrique [They are getting Africa moving], Editions Tirésias, p. 130

### 4.3 Gisèle Rabesahala: “Mother Courage, mother of the nation”.

Today, Gisèle Rabesahala remains the symbol of a woman capable of rising to pre-eminence as a major political figure in an environment largely dominated by men.

In her book *Ho tonga anie ny Fahafahana!*, “Let freedom come to us!”, published in 2006, she recounted the political history of her country and expressed her opinions.

As a humanist, she deplored injustice, intolerance and exclusion; she called for the solidarity of peoples, regardless of borders and political regimes. As a woman politician, she lamented the fact that power goes to those who have more charisma than ideas. As a patriot, she was convinced that a country’s future must be based on its cultural and historical heritage.

A symbol: Gisèle Rabesahala passed away on 27 June 2011, the day after the fiftieth anniversary of Madagascar’s independence. The media paid tribute to her by describing her as ‘Mother Courage, mother of the nation’.



Cover of the book “Que vienne la liberté!” by Gisèle Rabesahala. Ocean Edition, 2006.





Mission of Gisèle Rabesahala at Antalaha, Madgascar, with her fellows activists (around 1950).  
Rabesahala family archive.



Gisèle Rabesahala (on the left inside) during a mission in Paris in 1954. Rabesahala family archive.

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### **Gisèle Rabesahala**

As a celebrated Malagasy woman politician of the twentieth century, Gisèle Rabesahala (1929-2011) devoted her life to her country's independence, human rights and the freedom of peoples. The first Malagasy woman to be elected as a municipal councillor (1956) and political party leader (1958), and to be appointed minister (1977), she is regarded as a pioneer in Malagasy politics.

### **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 (Nzinga 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.

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