



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# YENNEGA

## PRINCESS OF GAMBAGA



UNESCO Series on Women in African History





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Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

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# YENNEGA

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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)



Women of the royal court in Tiébélé.  
Photograph by Rita Willaert, 2012.



Photograph by UNESCO/M. Benchelah, 2012.



Photograph by David Blumenkrantz, 2010.

## 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.

## 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

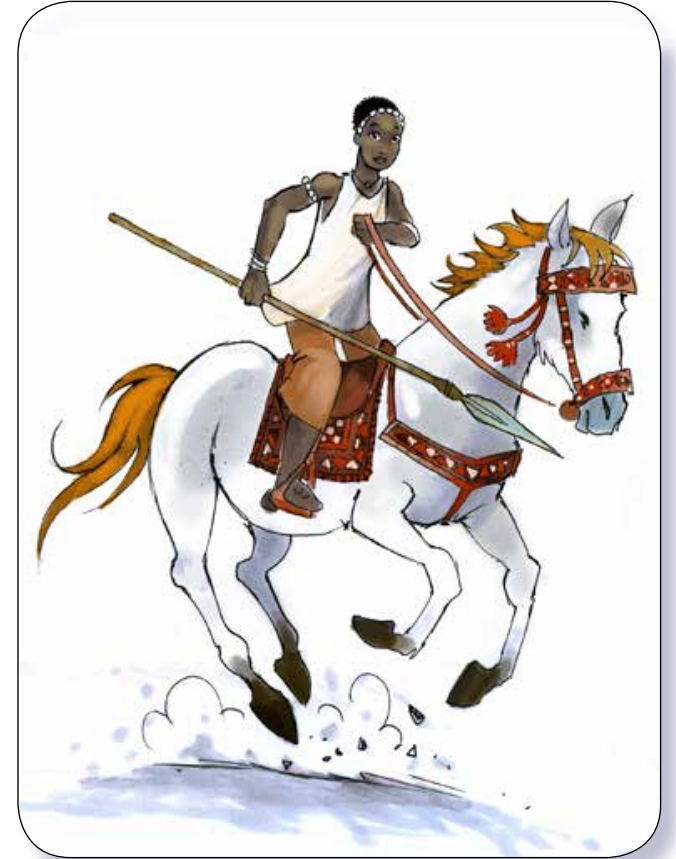
### Yennega, Princess of Gambaga

Yennega, an emblematic figure in Burkina Faso, is the mother of Ouedraogo, the first Moaga\* chieftain and founder of the dynasties of the Moose\* chieftains.

She is thought to have lived between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Yennega was the daughter of the King of Gambaga, an area in the northern part of the present-day Republic of Ghana. One day, weary of the role of warrior chieftain in which her father had cast her, she decided to leave and rode off by horse into a forest, far away from her village, where she lost her way. She met a young elephant hunter, a lone figure from a different community from her own, whose name was Riale. They had a son, whom they called Ouedraogo ('male horse' in Moore, the language of the Moose), as a tribute to the horse that had brought Yennega to Riale.

Ouedraogo and his sons founded the prestigious, centuries-old lineage of the Moose chieftains. Their descendants still to this day embody political power among the Moose in Burkina Faso. Yennega has become a legendary figure and a national emblem in the country. A personification of the female warrior and the independent woman, she is often portrayed defiantly on horseback as if nothing, neither society, tradition nor paternal authority, could stand in the way of her freedom of spirit.

\*'Moose' is the plural of 'Moaga' in Moore, one of the main languages spoken in Burkina Faso. Moose people account for a large part of the population in the country today.



Yennega, Princess of Gambaga – Biography

# 3 Comic strip

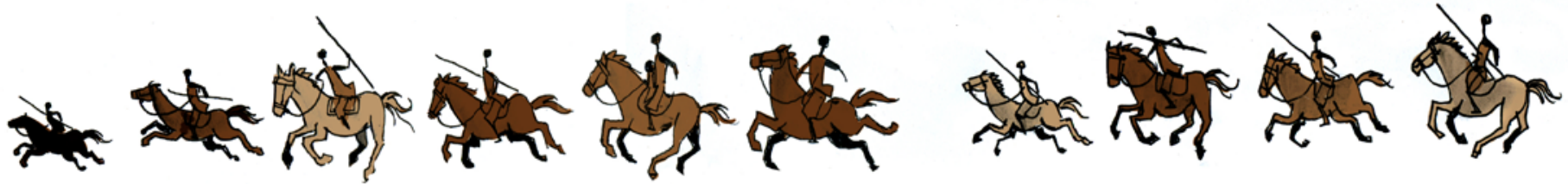
## Yennega, Princess of Gambaga

### Foreword

Knowledge about Yennega has been gleaned from Moaga oral tradition (e.g. origin tales, dynastic timelines, etc.) and contemporary documents written by researchers who conducted population surveys at the time.

In this comic strip, Yennega meets Riale, as recounted in the dominant Moaga oral tradition.

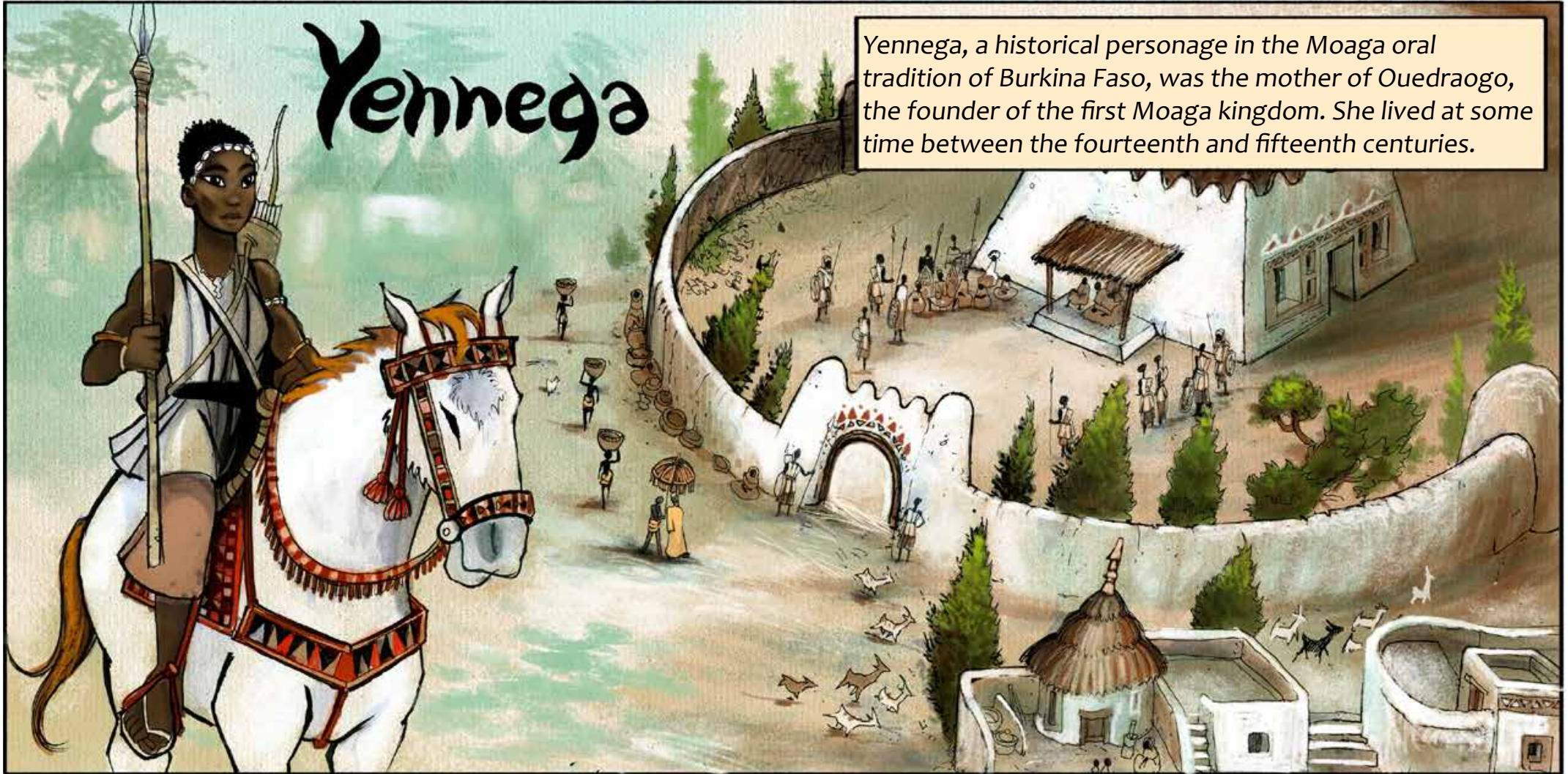
The illustrations are based on historical and iconographic research into Moogo, the Moose and Burkina Faso. These portrayals do not claim to be, in any way, an exact representation of events, persons, architecture, clothing, hairstyles or accessories of the period.





# Yennega

Yennega, a historical personage in the Moaga oral tradition of Burkina Faso, was the mother of Ouedraogo, the founder of the first Moaga kingdom. She lived at some time between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.







*Yennega's family lived in Gambaga, the northern of present-day Ghana. The town of Gambaga exists to this day in Ghana.*



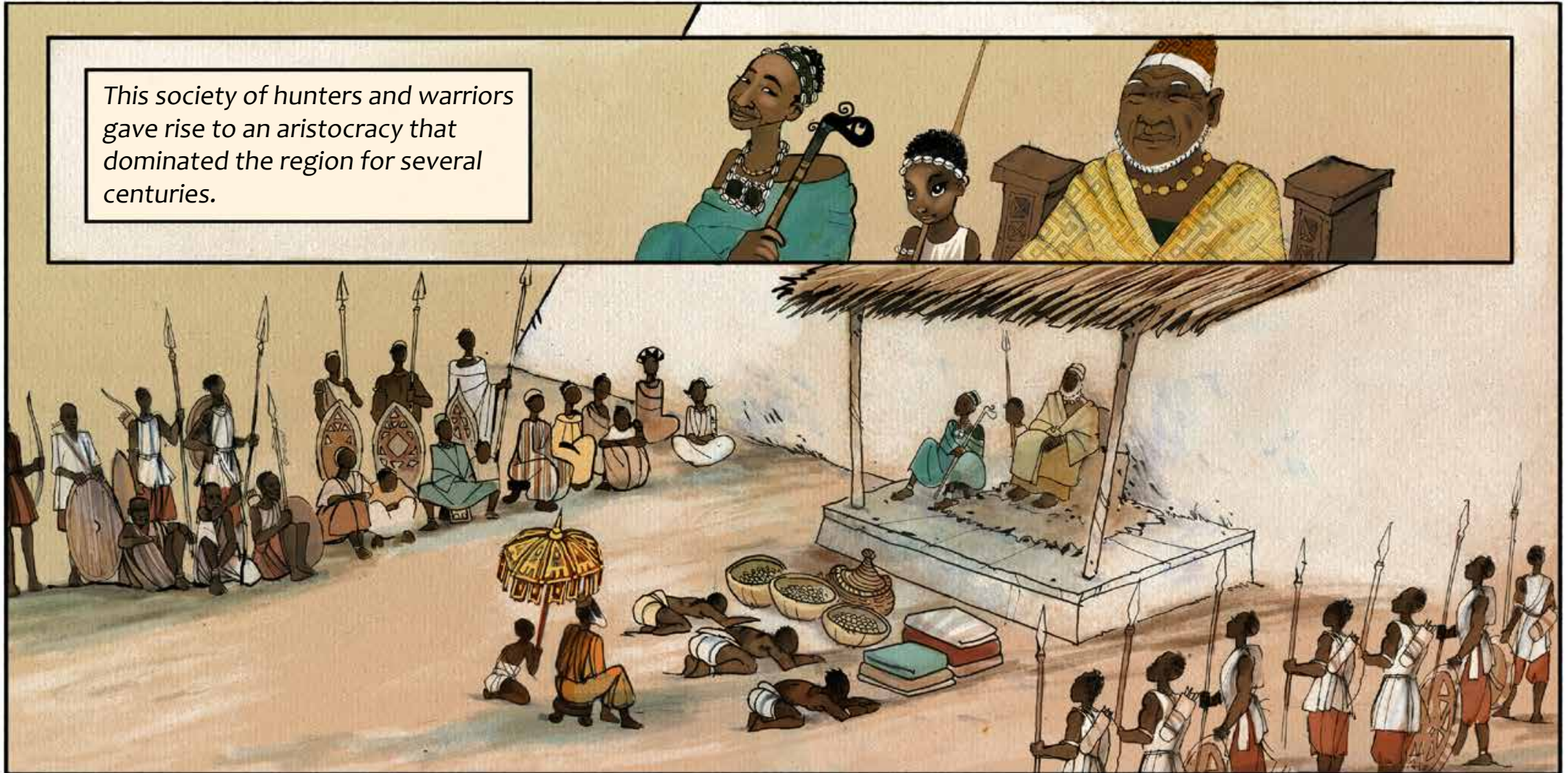
*Yennega's father, Nedega, was the chieftain of a conquering people from the East.*



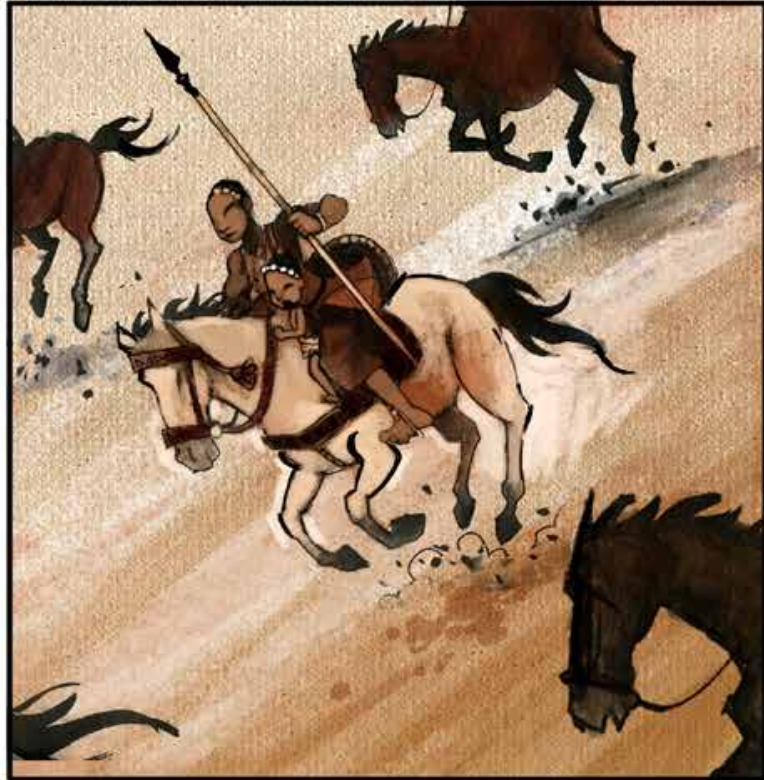
*Nedega succeeded in bringing various population groups in the region under his sway.*



*This society of hunters and warriors gave rise to an aristocracy that dominated the region for several centuries.*







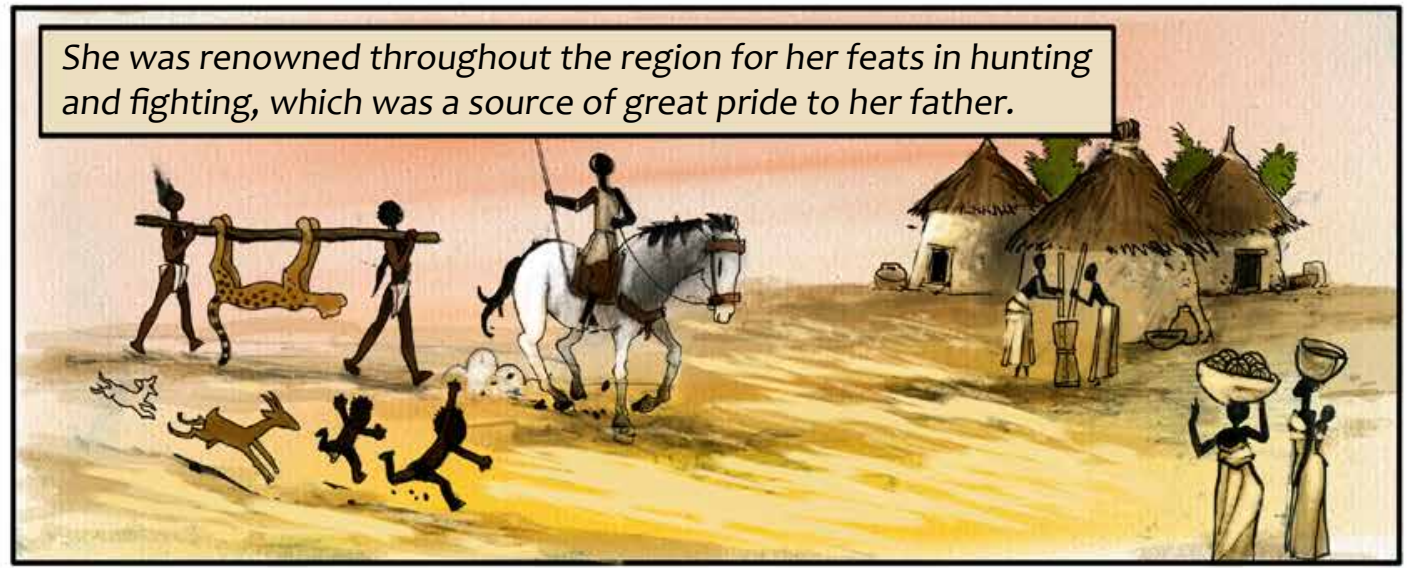
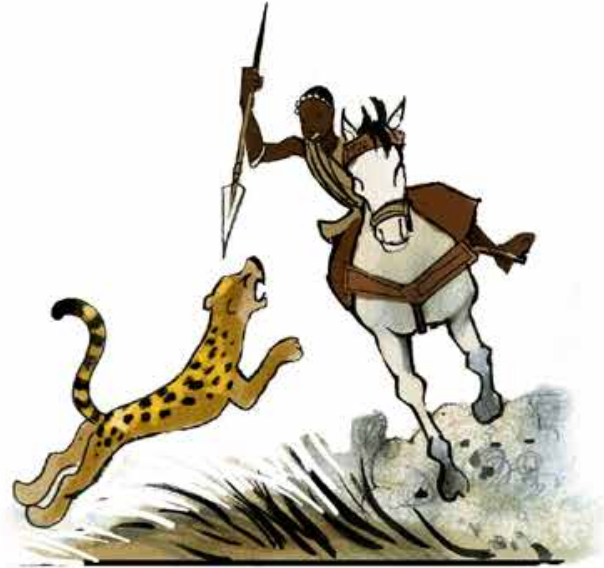
*Raised as a boy by Nedega, Yennega became accustomed to hunting with her father from an early age.*



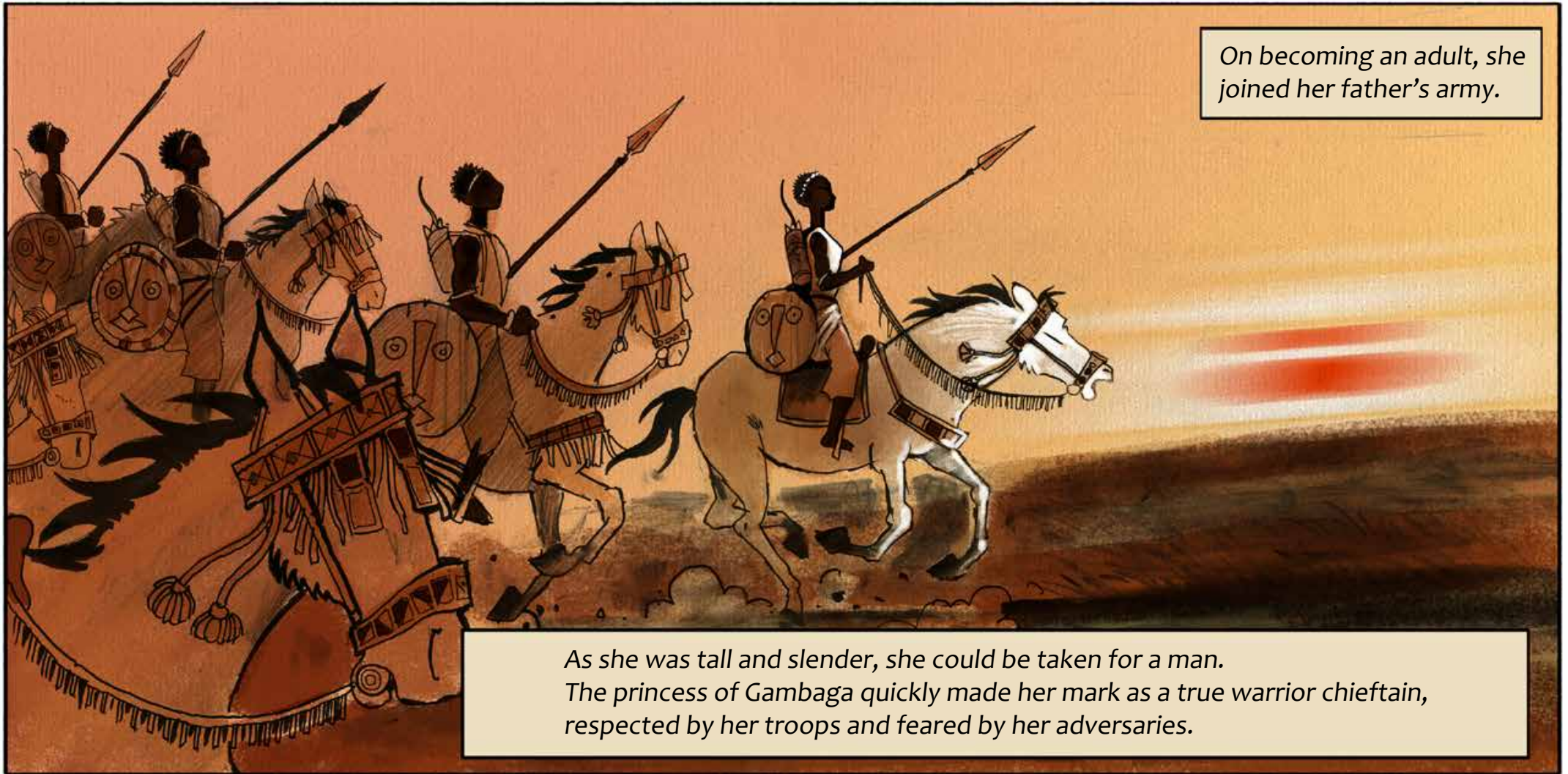
*The young girl, dauntless and tireless, adapted easily to the world of combatants.*









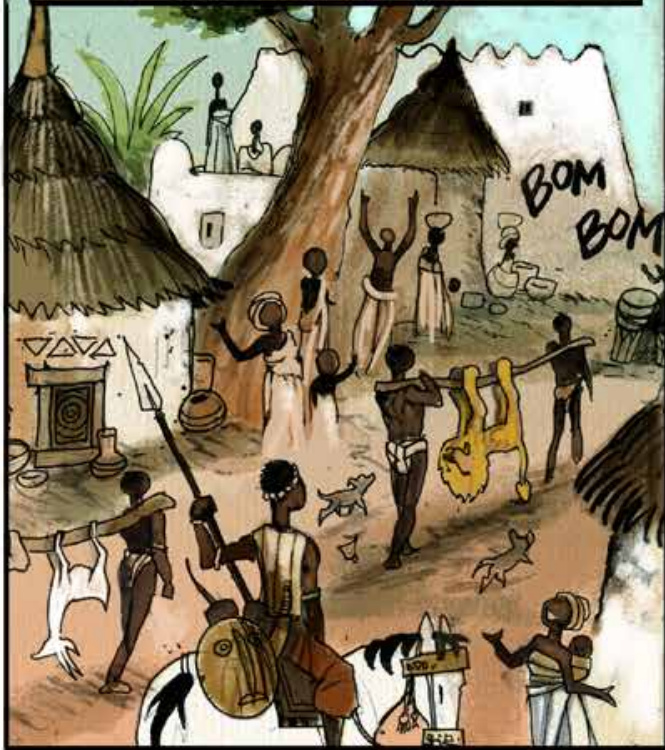


On becoming an adult, she joined her father's army.

As she was tall and slender, she could be taken for a man. The princess of Gambaga quickly made her mark as a true warrior chieftain, respected by her troops and feared by her adversaries.



When Yennega returned from hunting, the villagers would rush out to greet her as she passed and to admire the game that she and her men had brought back.



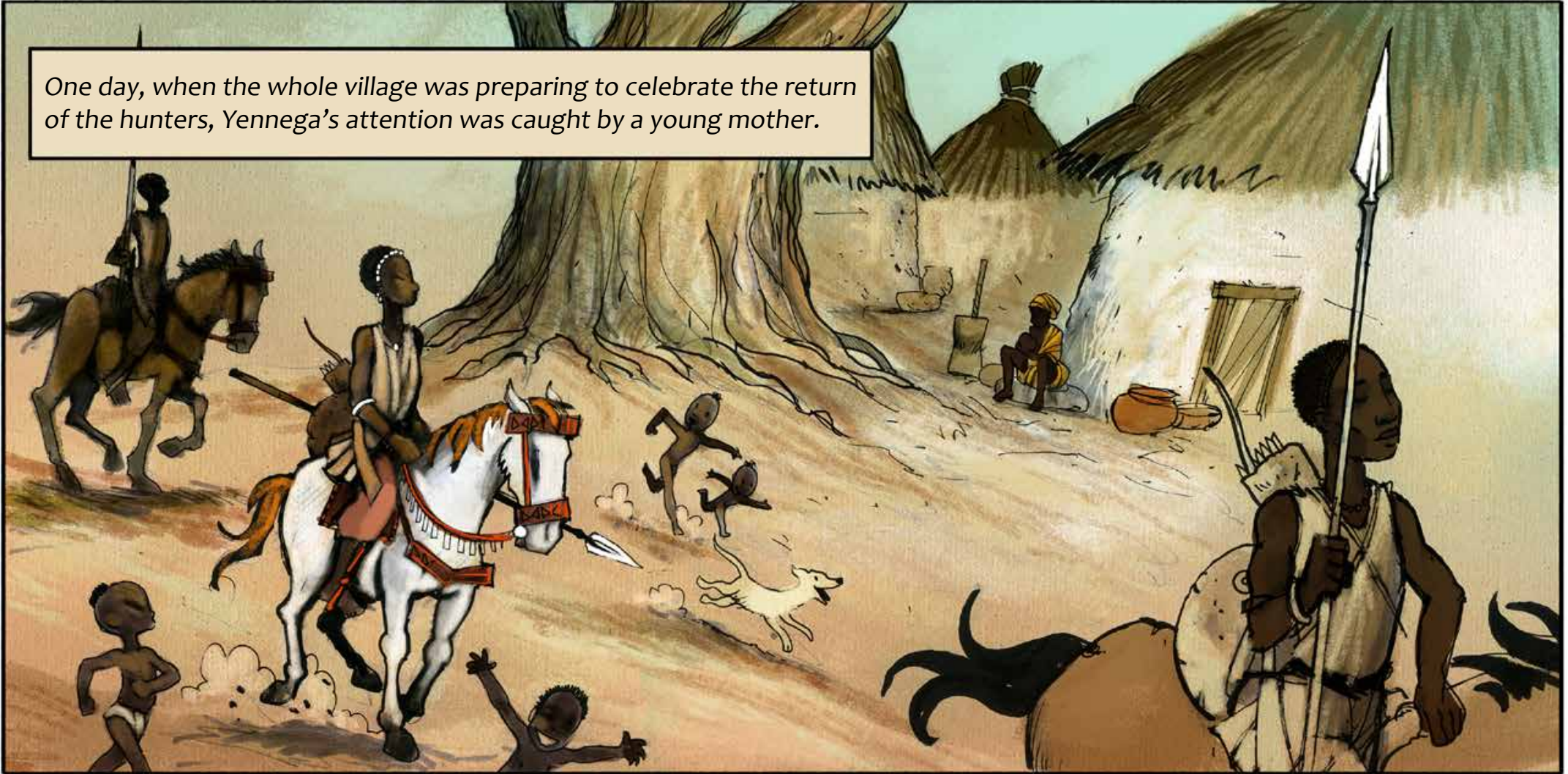
Everyone then set about their particular tasks: the men distributed the game among the various families.



The women smoked the meat, either for the evening meal or to preserve it.



One day, when the whole village was preparing to celebrate the return of the hunters, Yennega's attention was caught by a young mother.





The young mother was wholly absorbed.



Feeding her child tenderly and affectionately.



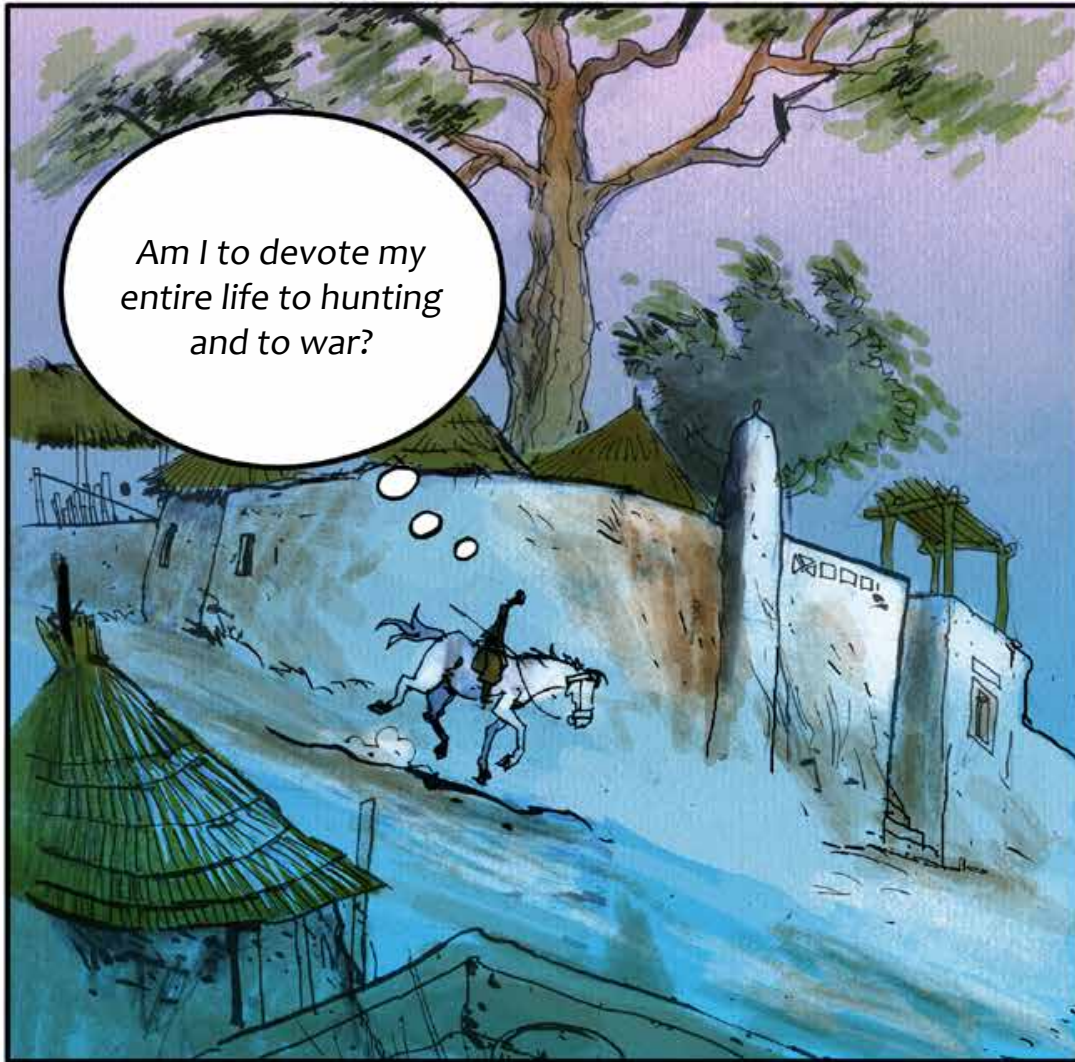
This display of maternal love stirred feelings that lain buried deep inside Yennega.



She was much troubled.

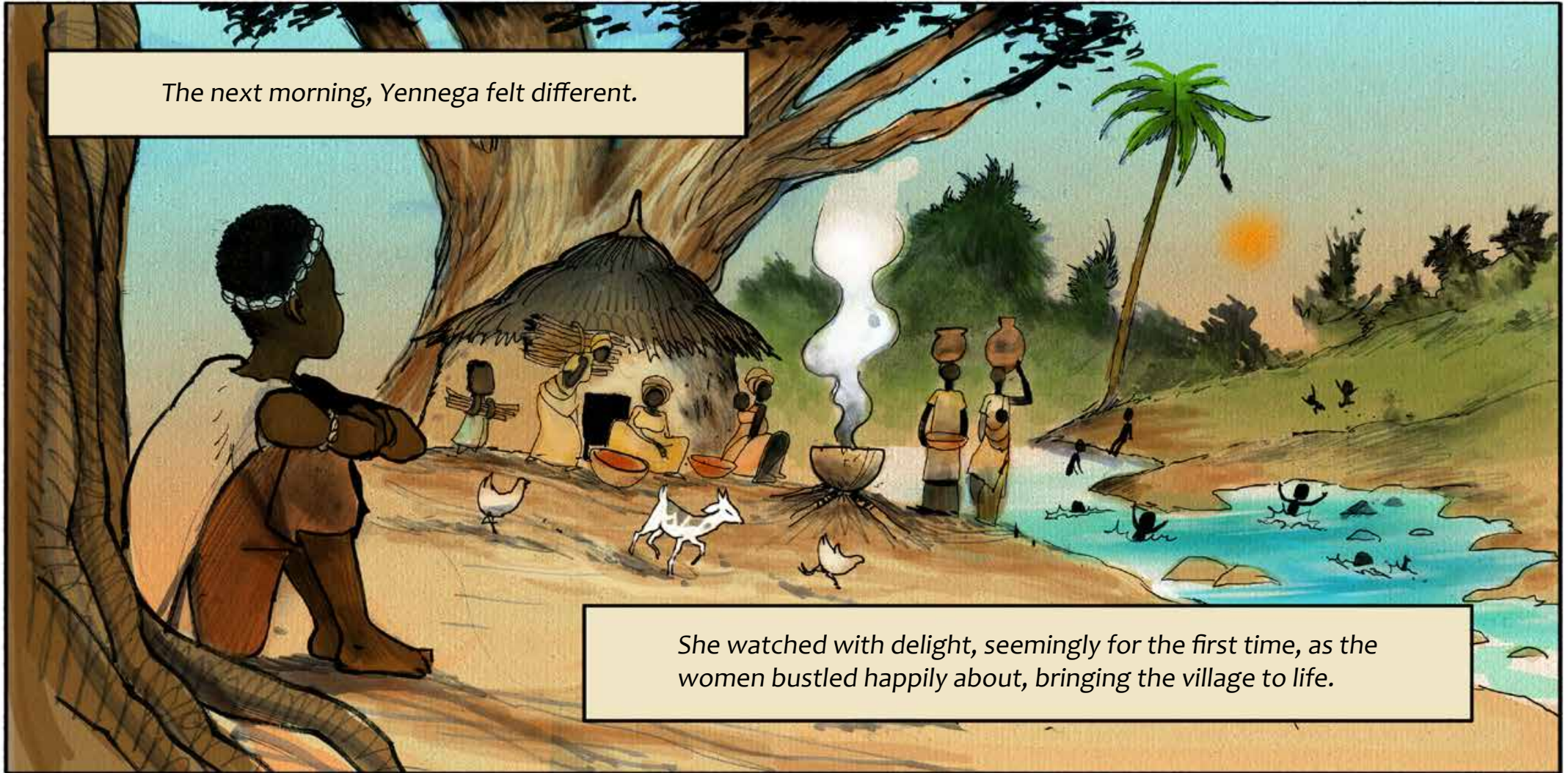








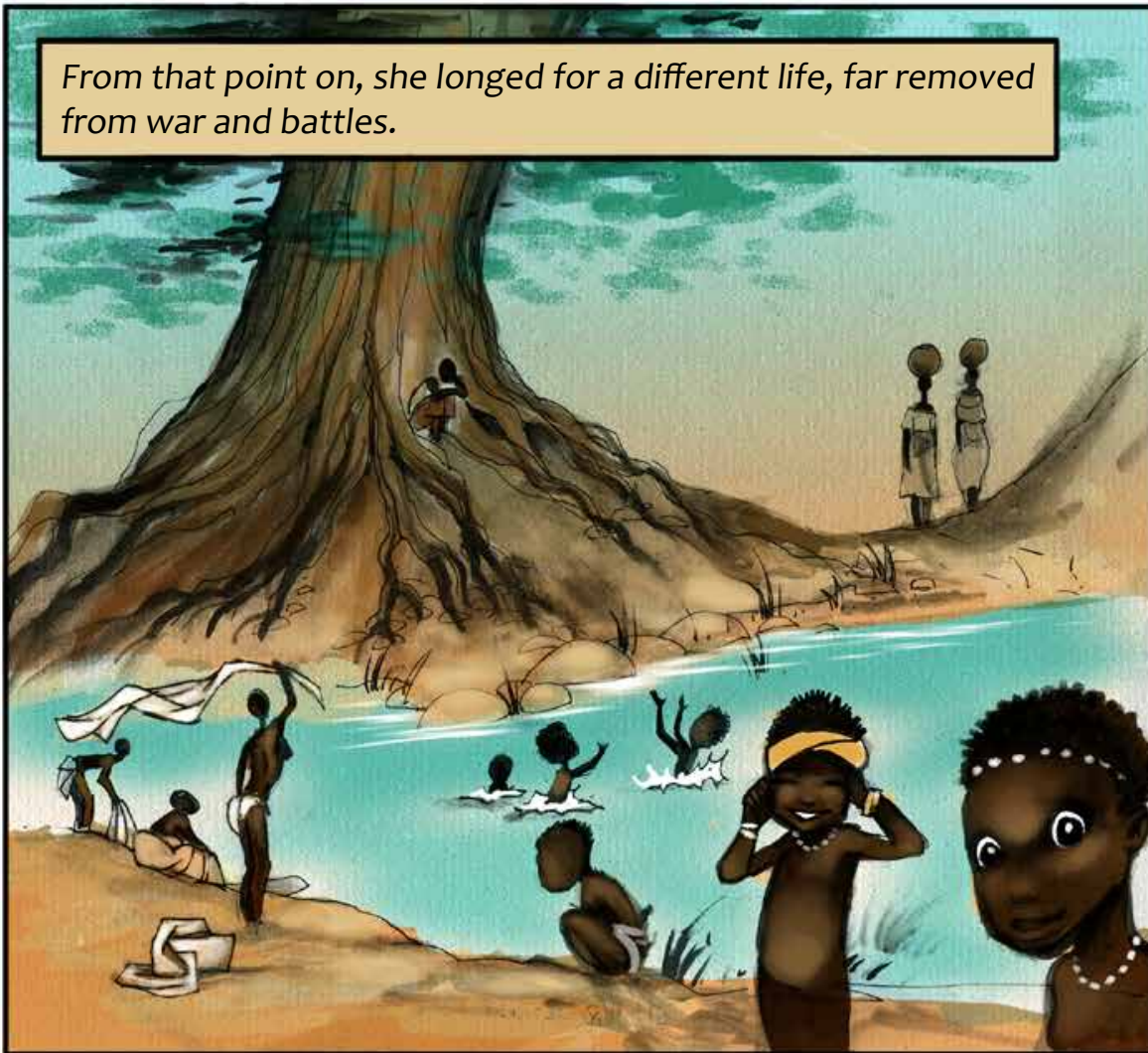
*The next morning, Yennega felt different.*



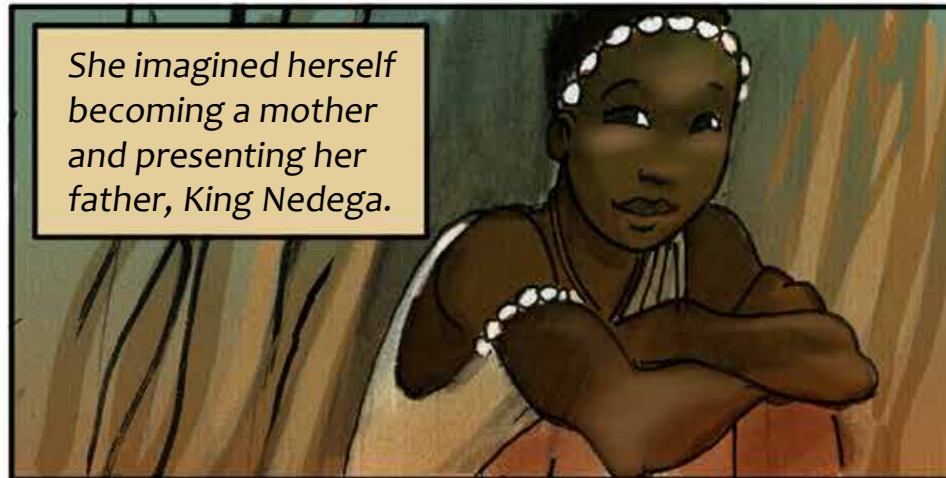
*She watched with delight, seemingly for the first time, as the women bustled happily about, bringing the village to life.*



From that point on, she longed for a different life, far removed from war and battles.



She imagined herself becoming a mother and presenting her father, King Nedega.



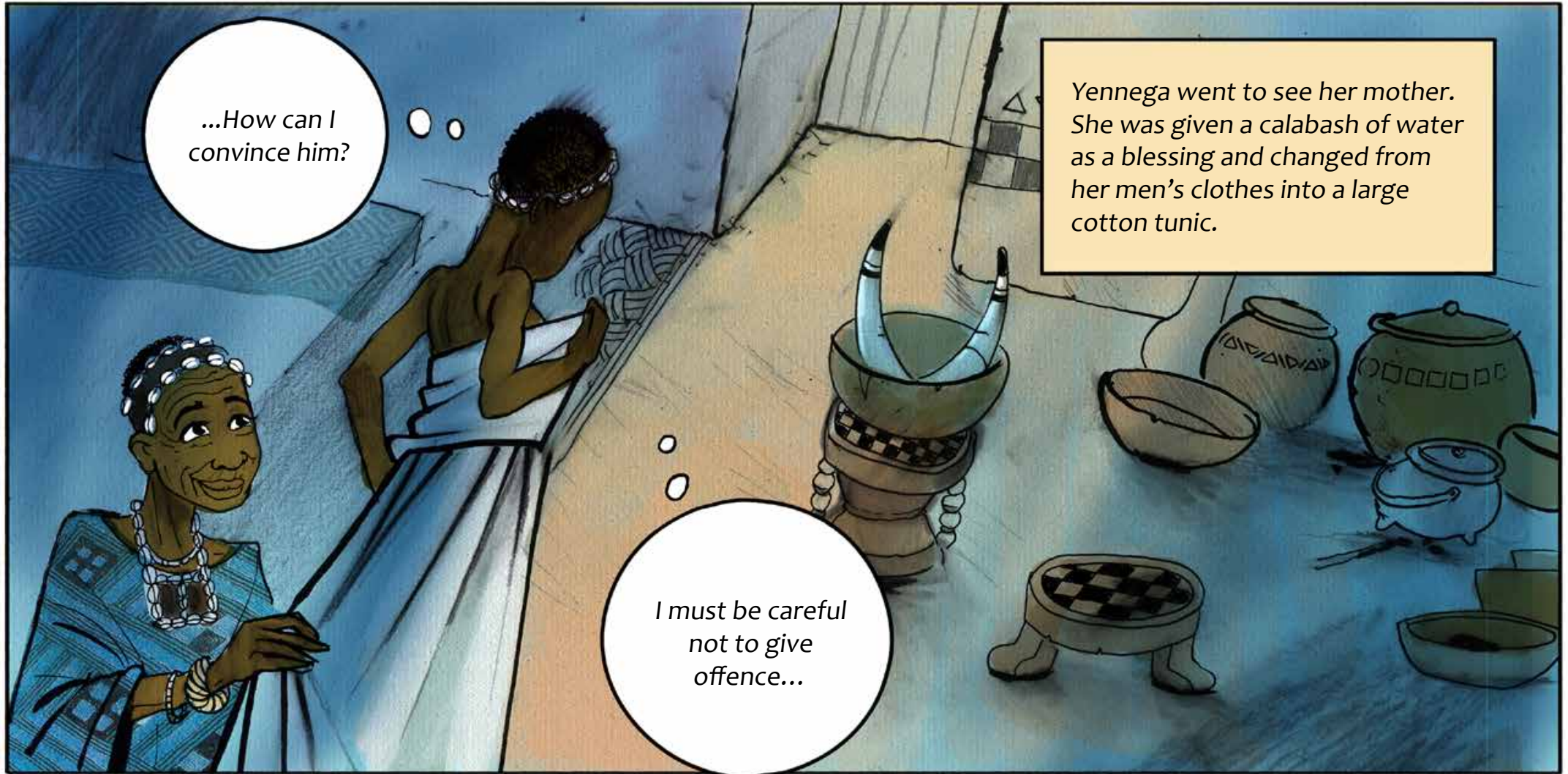
That's it!  
I will speak to  
my father and  
persuade him  
to find me a  
husband!











...How can I convince him?

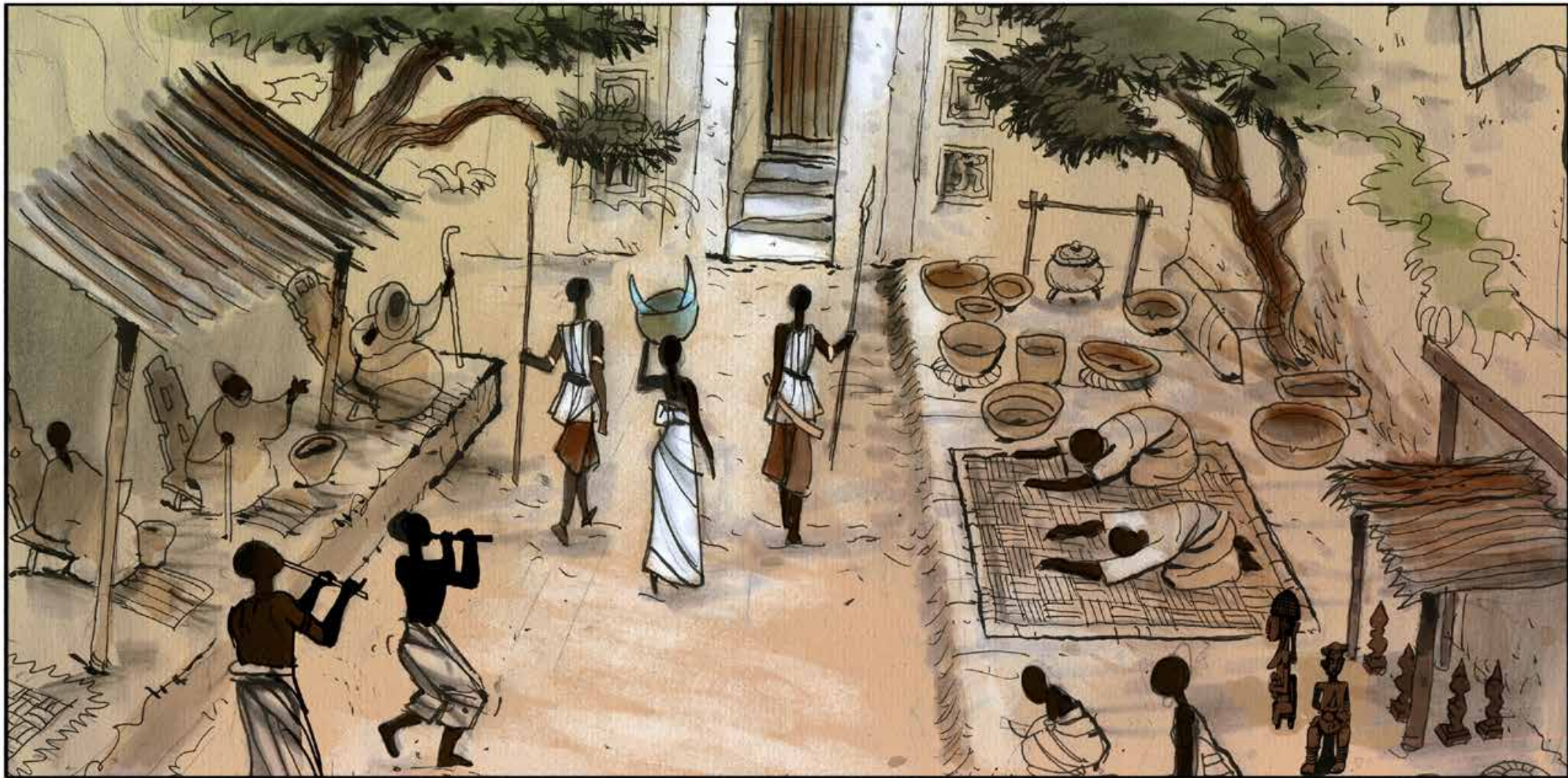
Yennega went to see her mother. She was given a calabash of water as a blessing and changed from her men's clothes into a large cotton tunic.

I must be careful not to give offence...









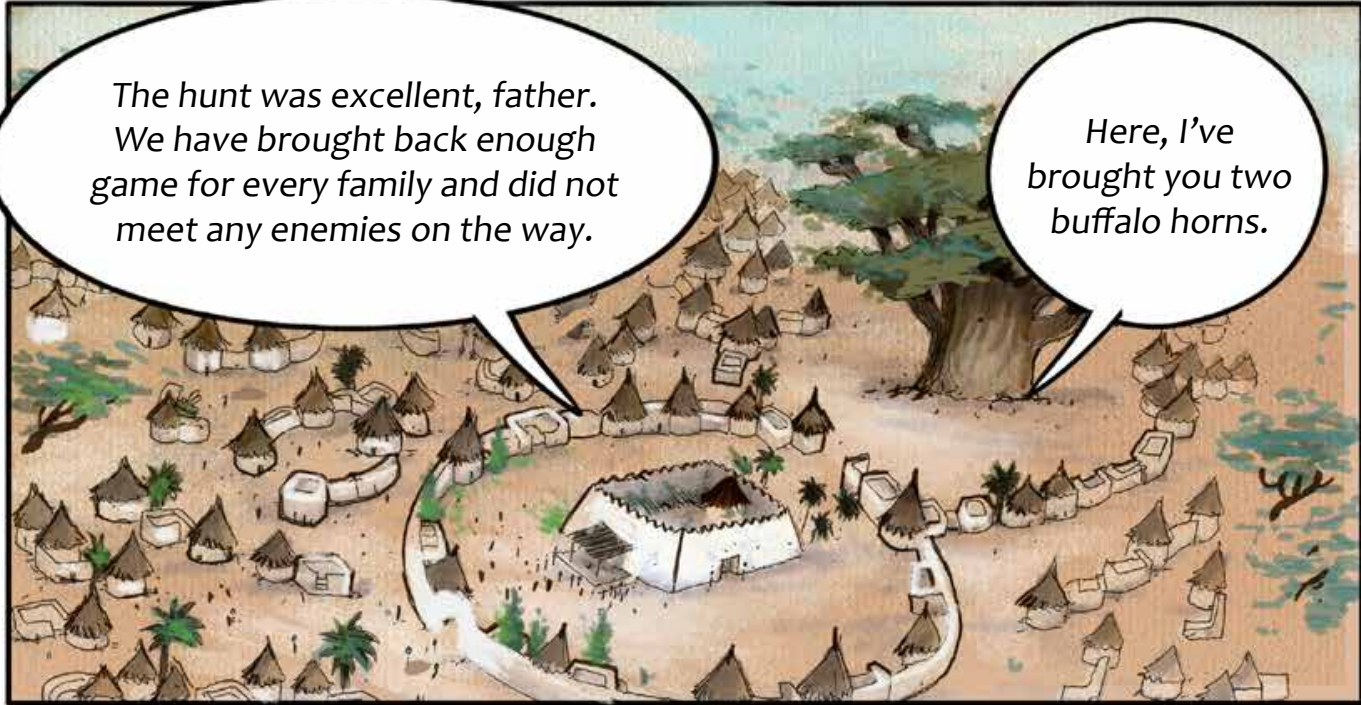




My daughter!  
We are so  
happy to see  
you.



Tell me, how  
was the hunt  
today?



The hunt was excellent, father.  
We have brought back enough  
game for every family and did not  
meet any enemies on the way.

Here, I've  
brought you two  
buffalo horns.



After a moment's silence, Yennega grasped the nettle.

Father...

forgive me, but I must speak to you...

I see girls of my age becoming mothers, while I spend my days training with the men, leading the hunt and taking our soldiers into battle.

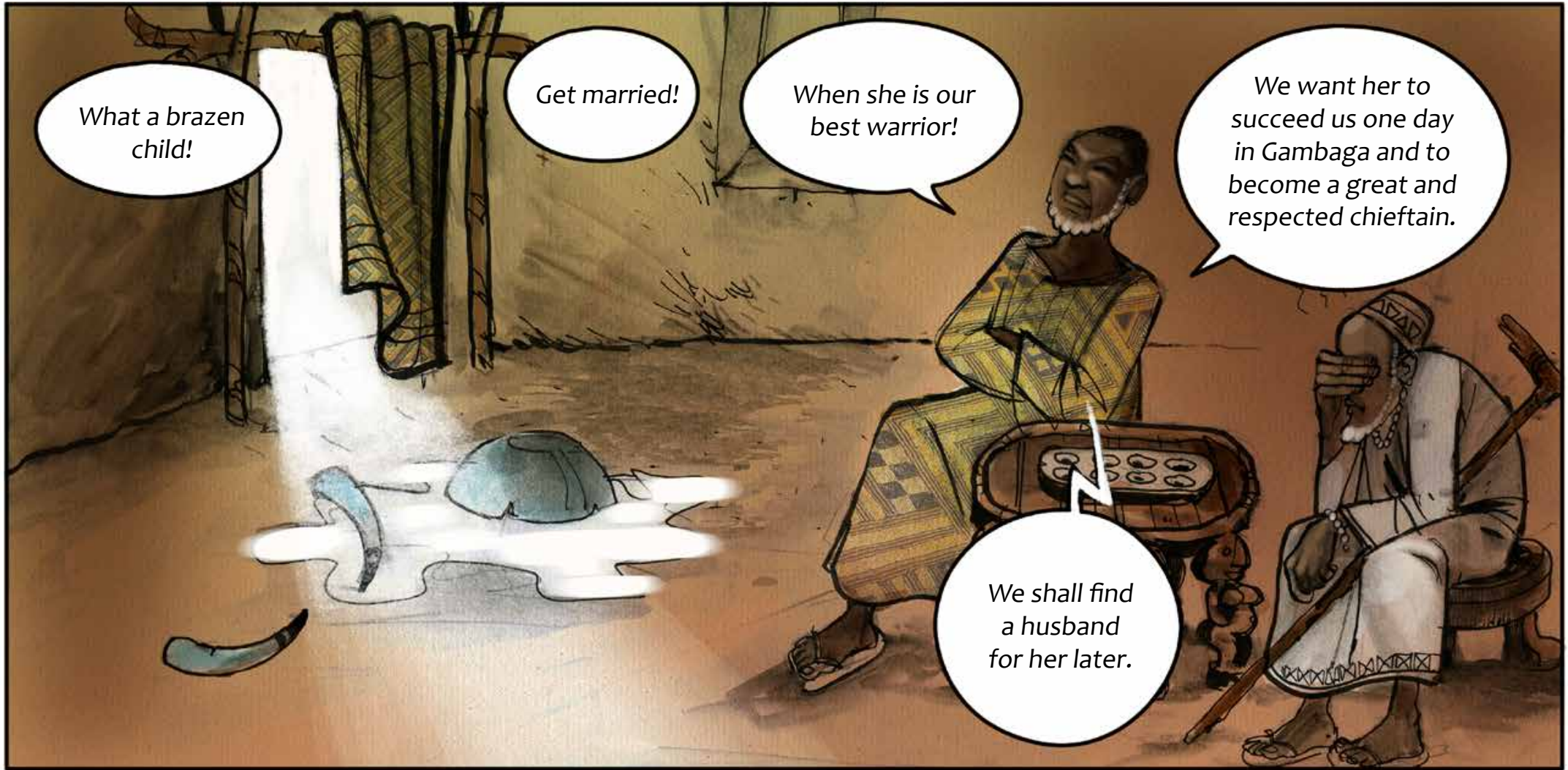
Father...

I long for a son In due course, he would succeed to you and rule the kingdom.

Will you, then, consider finding a husband for me?

A husband! You have enough to do as it is! There is no hurry, my daughter. We can think about that later.





Yennega swallowed her sadness and continued to lead the life of a warrior as if nothing had changed.

It was forbidden for her to go against her father's wishes.





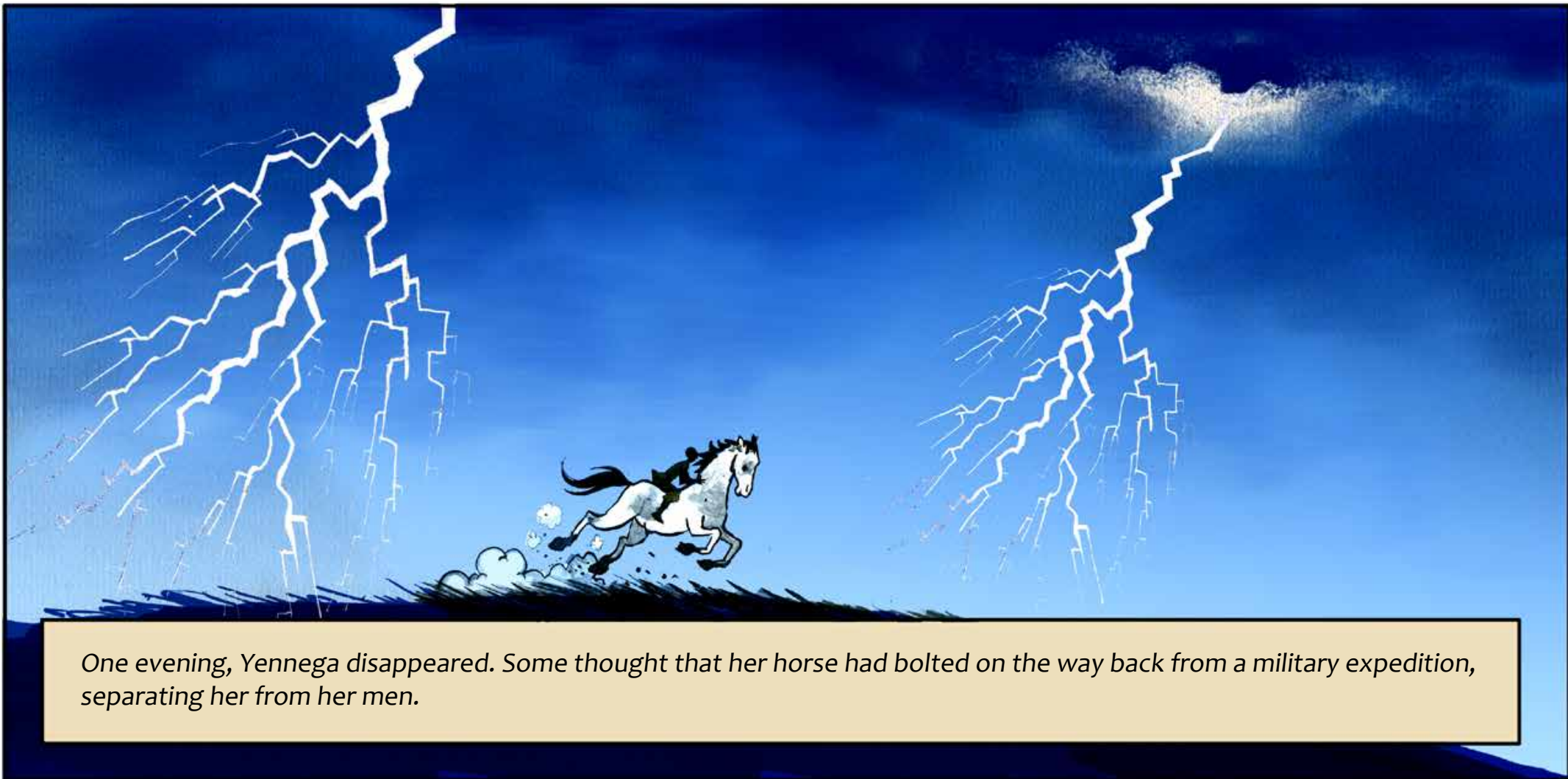


*Then one day, in a gesture of defiance, she planted some okra in front of her father's house. When the time came to pick the okra, she allowed the crop to dry up and the okra pods to die uncut.*

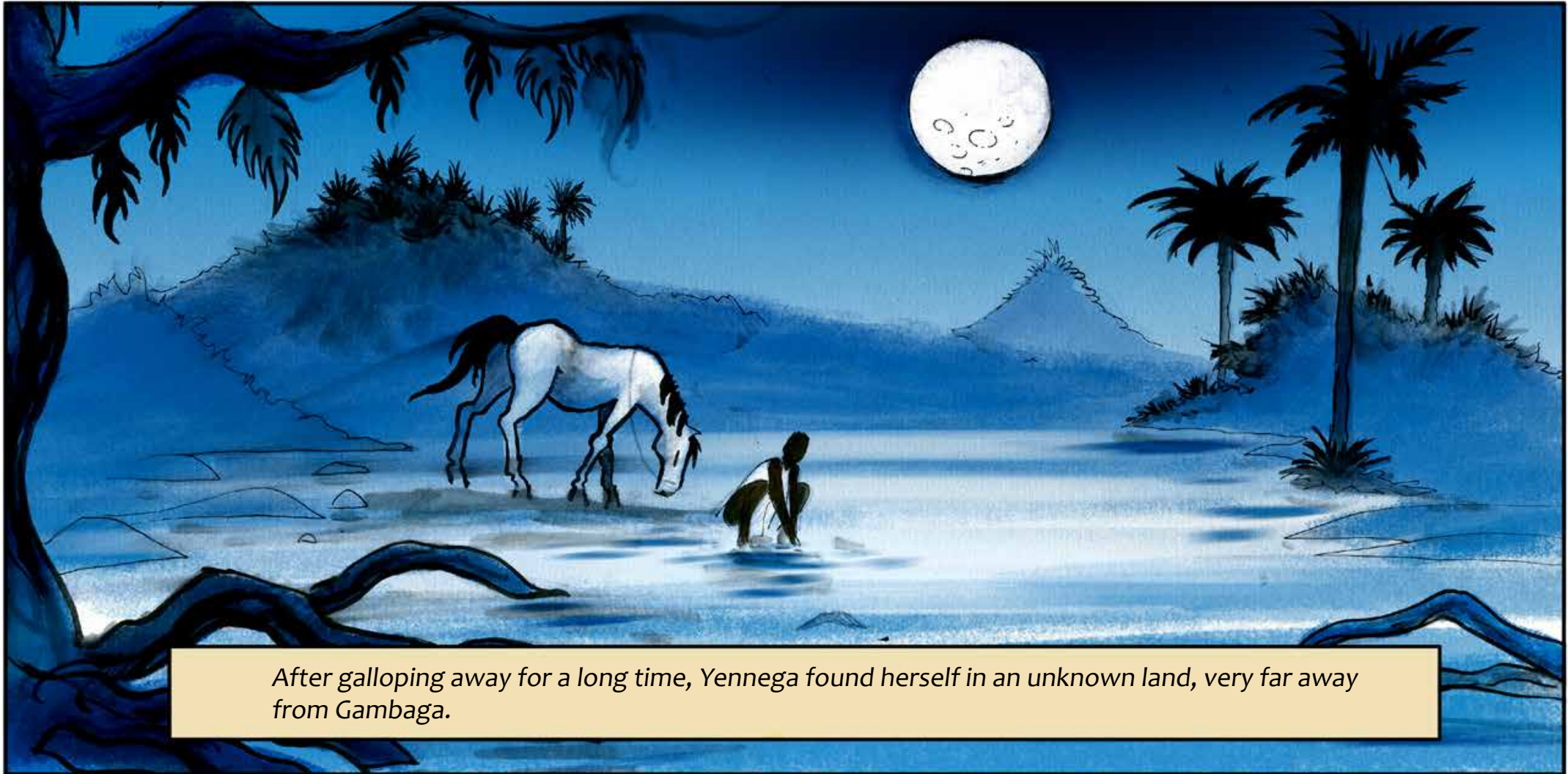






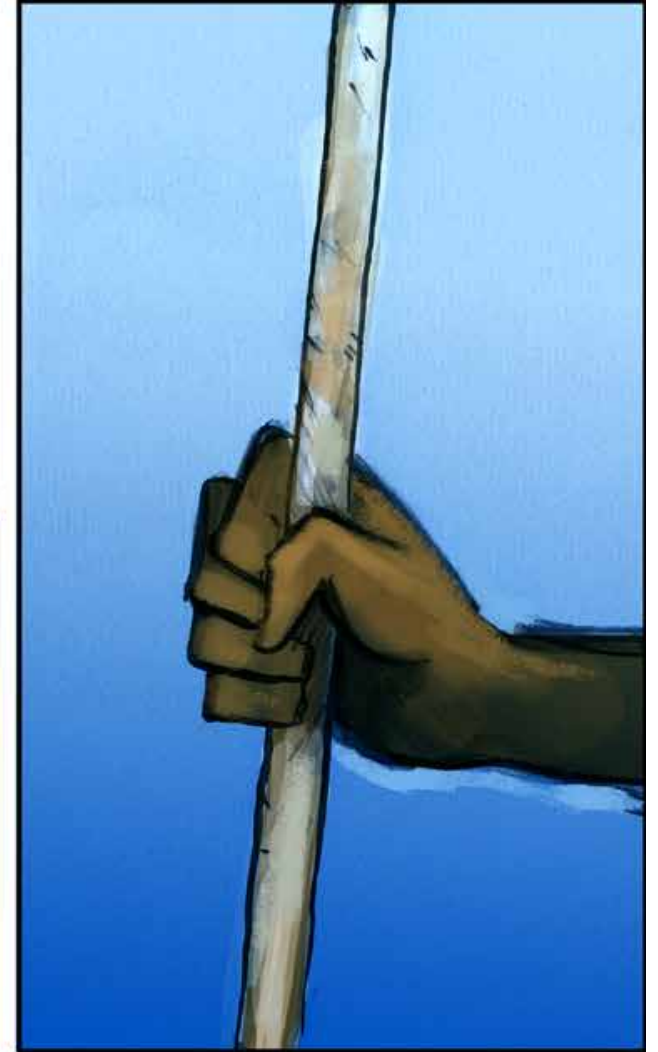


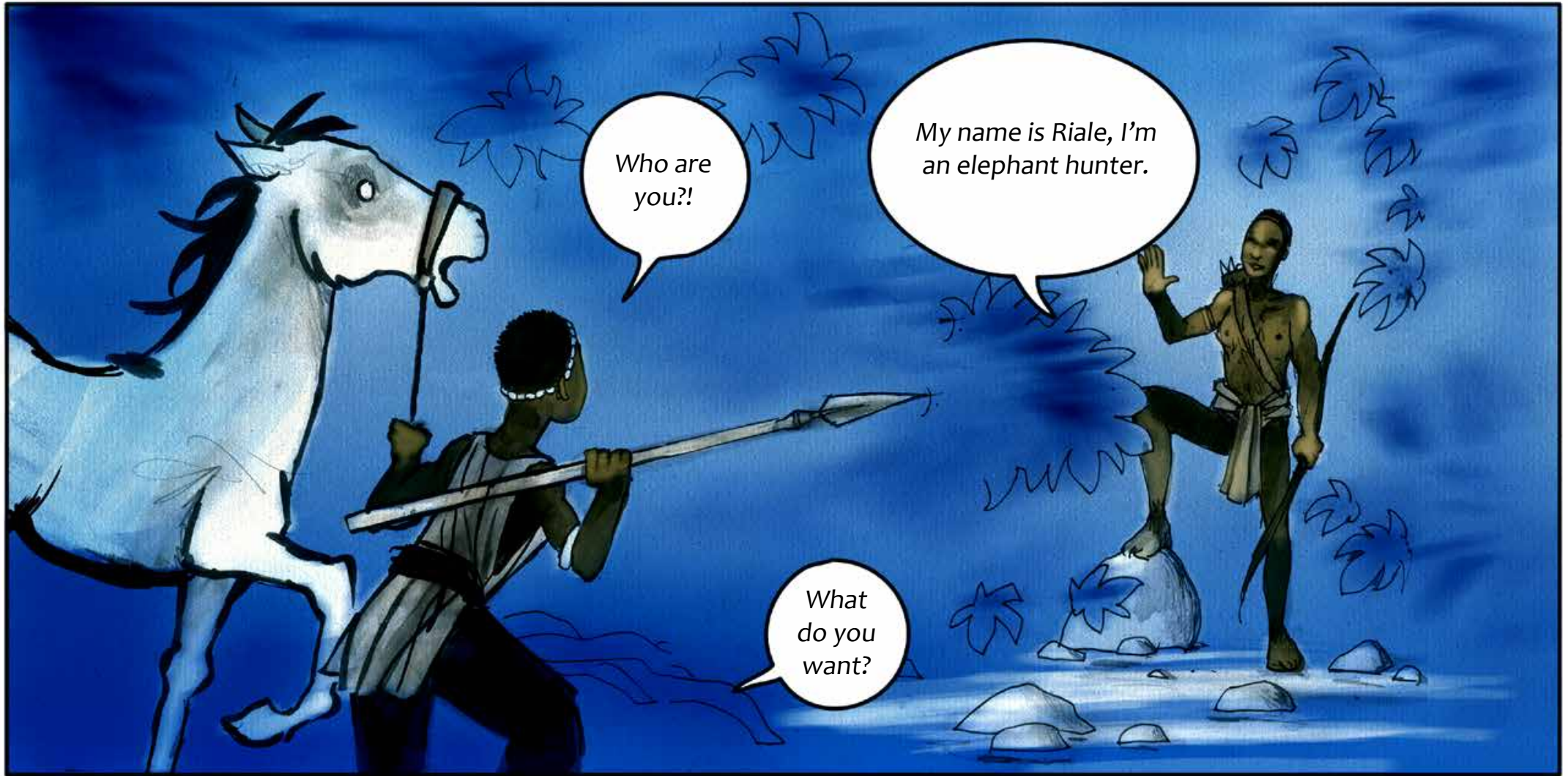
*One evening, Yennega disappeared. Some thought that her horse had bolted on the way back from a military expedition, separating her from her men.*



*After galloping away for a long time, Yennega found herself in an unknown land, very far away from Gambaga.*









Riale told Yennega about himself and how he lived alone in the forest of Bitou, in the south west of today's Burkina Faso.

I travelled here...

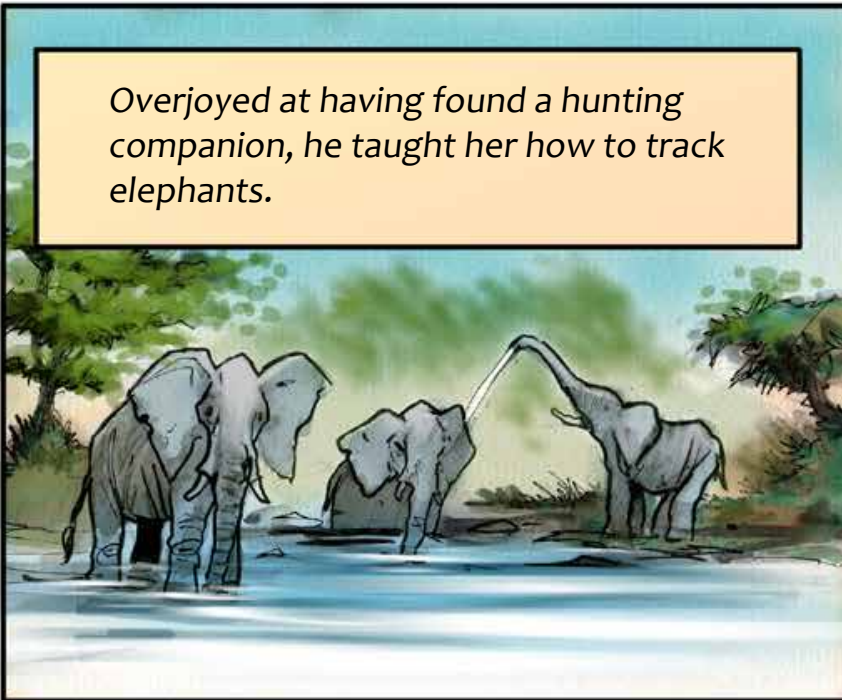


...from a land very far away, from the Malinke region.



I left my family when I discovered that my brothers had stolen my family's entire inheritance when my father died.





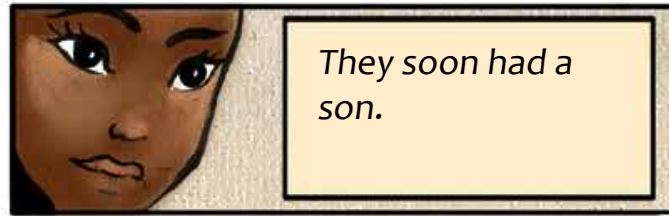




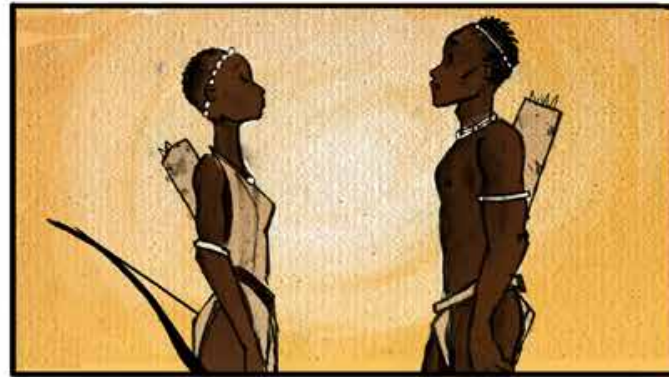
As time passed, the princess was moved by Riale's generosity and integrity. She revealed her identity to him.



Riale did not hide his own feelings for long.



They soon had a son.





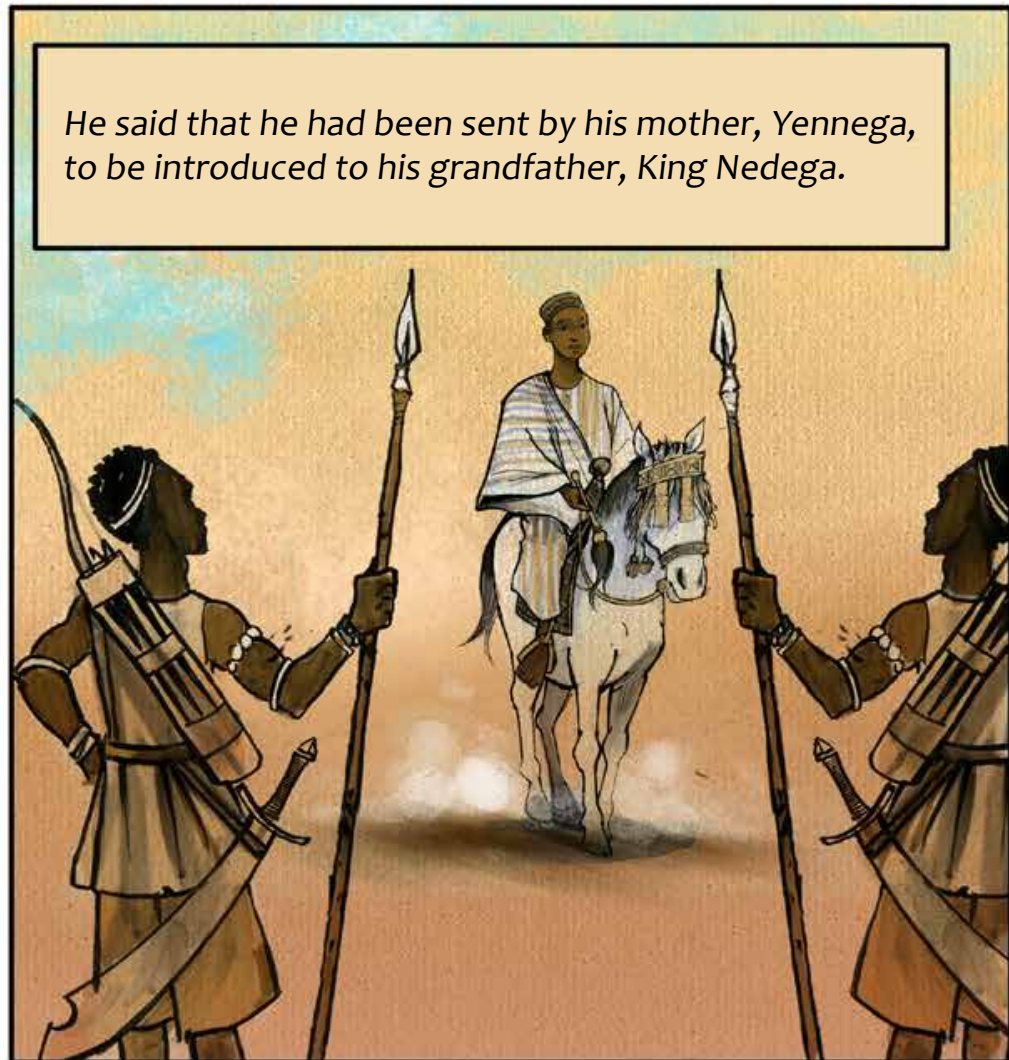
*Yennega, completely absorbed in her happiness in the forest of Bitou, forgot all about her kingdom. Throughout this time, the king had his men search everywhere for Yennega, but in vain. Gambaga mourned its valiant warrior and Nedega sank into the deepest despair.*







Years later, a handsome youth arrived in Gambaga. His name was Ouedraogo.



He said that he had been sent by his mother, Yennega, to be introduced to his grandfather, King Nedega.

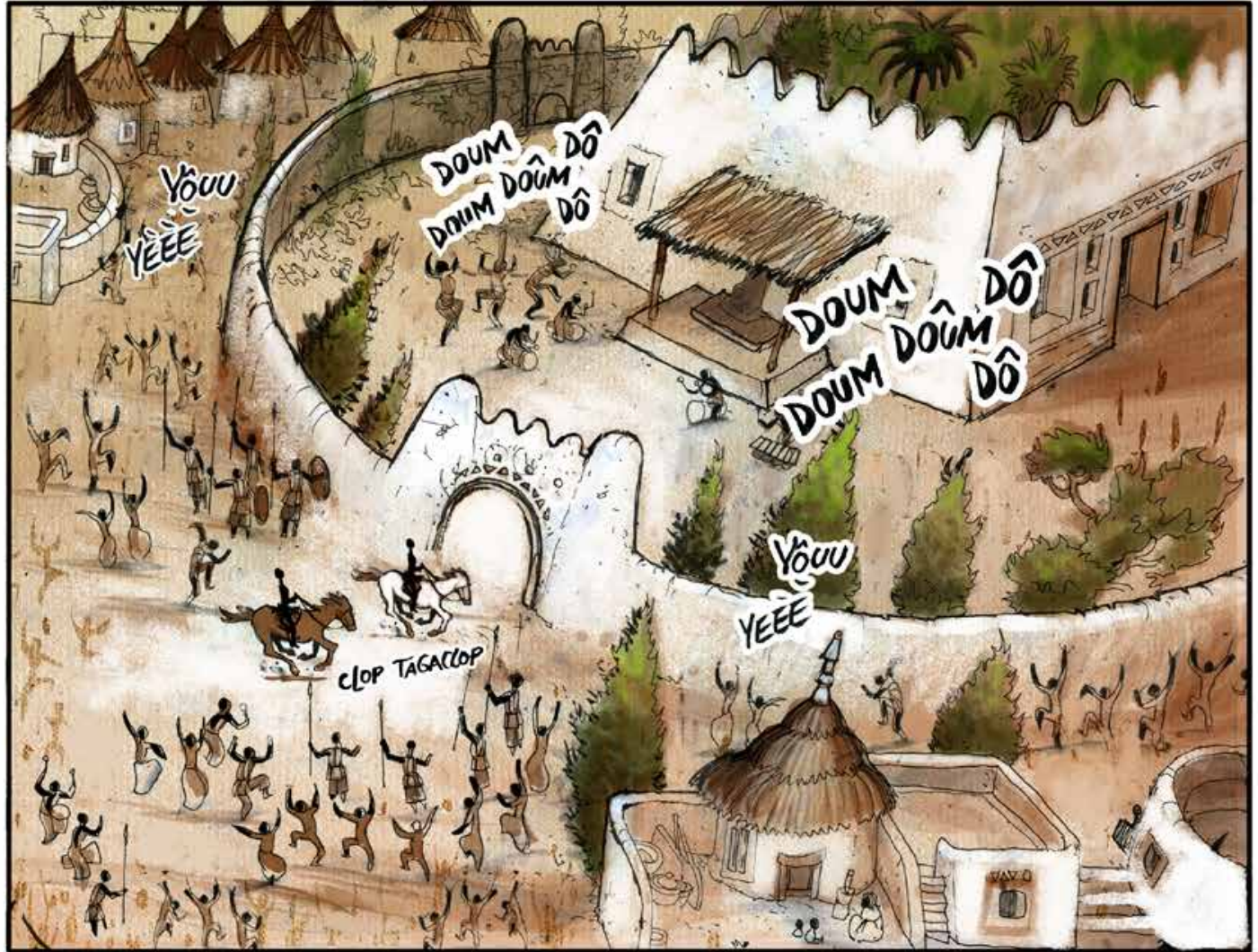




*The elderly king was so happy to learn that his daughter was still alive and that he now had a grandson that he gave the order for lavish celebrations to be prepared in Gambaga. The very next day, he sent envoys to Bitou to request his daughter to return to the family fold.*



There was much rejoicing at the Yennega's return to Gambaga accompanied by Riale. Overjoyed at finding her again, Yennega's parents forgave her for having run away and welcomed her back most affectionately.





*Yennega subsequently returned to the forest in Bitou and lived there happily with her husband.*



*Ouedraogo stayed with his grandfather to complete his learning.*



*Then Ouedraogo, too, returned to the region of Bitou. His grandfather gave him a cavalry, cattle and other goods. Many young men travelled with him to settle down away from their homeland.*





*Ouedraogo and his sons became leaders of a powerful army and conquered many lands around Bitou, setting up the first Moose kingdoms and mixing with the local people. They continued to expand their rule down through the centuries. The Mousse oral traditions still keep the memory of Yennega, her son Ouedraogo and their many descendants alive to this day.*

# 4 Pedagogical unit

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Maimouna Dembelé.  
Photograph by Brenda Gael McSweeney, 1975.





Women of the royal court in Tiébélé.  
Photograph by Rita Willaert, 2012.

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Yennega, Princess of Gambaga – Pedagogical unit

# 1. Writing Yennega's story: the importance of oral tradition

## Introduction

Each people, each society has its own means of transmitting collective memory.

In Burkina Faso, as in neighbouring countries, oral tradition (encompassing tales about origins dynastic timelines, etc.) is crucial to such transmission. As with archaeology, sociology and linguistics, it constitutes an essential source of knowledge about the history of peoples. Oral tradition should nevertheless be interpreted with caution. Only after the various sources have been painstakingly compared and checked against other disciplines, can the history of peoples be traced and their common origins identified.

Knowledge about Yennega has been gleaned from the Moaga oral tradition and ancient documents written by traditional storytellers.

### 1.1 The many versions of Yennega

There are many variations on the story of Yennega found in Moogo, the country of the Moose. Furthermore, her name varies from one version to the other – from 'Yennega' in the main Moaga tradition to 'Poko' (Dela-fosse, 1912) or 'Yalanga' (Frobenius, 1924) in other versions.

In addition, similar characters are present in the folktales of neighbouring peoples – 'Kasyogo' among the Dagomba and 'Yantaure' among the Mamprusi (Izard, 2003).



A woman of Burkina Faso.  
Photograph by Eric Montfort, 2012.





Yennega's father's name, too, varies from one oral tradition to the other – from 'Nedega' in the Moaga tradition to 'Na Gbewa' in Dagomba and 'Na Bawa' in the Mamprusi tradition. He has now been acknowledged as the common ancestor of the Mamprusi, Dagomba and Nanumba dynasties.

The lore common to the various dynasties and peoples can be identified from a close comparison of the different oral traditions.

## 1.2 Comparing stories: a common core

The various accounts of Yennega's story in Moaga culture have a relatively common core, which consists of the following:

- She is identified as the daughter of the King of Gambaga, an area in the northern part of present-day Ghana;
- She is portrayed as a warrior, a horsewoman and an outstanding combatant; and
- She meets an elephant hunter from a different community and gives birth to a son, the very first Moaga chieftain.



### 1.3 Comparing stories: discernible differences

Comparison of the various Moose oral traditions has revealed variations in the lore. For example:

- The names and genders of characters vary;
- According to some sources, Yennega mounts her horse and deliberately rides away from Gambaga after quarrelling with her father; according to others, her horse bolts and carries her off into the forest, where she meets a hunter, the future father of Ouedraogo; and
- The identity of the hunter also varies – in some versions he is a Bisa (Carrière-Moulins, 1909; Prost, 1953) and in other accounts a Mandinka (Tauxier, 1917).



### 1.4 A story yet to be written

Tales about Yennega are directly connected to the origin of the Moose, but are not vehicles of absolute historical veracity. These stories are useful to historians, who compare various sources (e.g. oral traditions, genealogies and publications on local population survey findings) relating to the respective periods and socio-political contexts.

There are some excellent studies on the subject (see bibliography p. 56). Owing to innovative and multidisciplinary approaches, historians can now be more specific in recounting the history of the Moose.







## 2. The historical context: the emergence of royalty and the intermingling of West Africa peoples

### Introduction

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the period during which Yennega and her father Nedega, the King of Gambaga, lived (Lambert, 1907), according to some theories their story dates back to the arrival of migrants in the northern part of present-day Ghana, at some time between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

### 2.1 Migrants from the Lake Chad region

According to the dominant theory, the original inhabitants of the Lake Chad region arrived in northern Ghana after passing through present-day Niger. Their migration would have lasted several centuries. Their leader at the time of their arrival was the great warrior Tohazie (Kawada, 1985; Tamakloe, 1931), whose name means 'red hunter' in the Mampruli language.

If the Dagomba and Mamprusi traditions are to be believed, Tohazie was the ancestor of a great chieftain. His name, according to Dagomba oral tradition, was Na Gbewa (Ki-Zerbo, 1972; Tamakloe, 1931). In the dominant Moaga tradition, Na Gbewa and the King of Gambaga, Nedega, are actually the same person.



## 2.2 Mingling with local peoples

On arriving in northern Ghana, the migrants encountered local peoples such as the Fulse, Kibse, Mande and Yoyoose, who had long settled there and lived in small communities. Owing to their consummate horsemanship, their control of trading routes and the establishment of a new form of power, the newcomers gradually developed links and intermingled with these peoples.

## 2.3 The Dagomba, Mamprusi, Moose and Nanumba

The oral traditions of the Dagomba, Mamprusi, Moose and Nanumba all refer to an important figure, the chieftain of migrants, who came to present-day Ghana from the north. This same figure is known as 'Nedega' in the dominant Moaga oral tradition (Vadier, 1909), and is referred to as 'Na Gbewa' by the Dagomba and 'Na Bawa' by the Mamprusi.

Nedega, the father of Yennega, is therefore held to be the last common ancestor of the Dagomba, Mamprusi and Nanumba peoples. He became the first Moaga ruler in present-day Burkina Faso, and his children and descendants established the Dagomba, Mamprusi and Nanumba kingdoms.

Owing to their common origin, the people of Burkina Faso and northern Ghana share aspects of their cultural heritage. In particular, common features are found in their languages, cultures and power structures.



Chief of the village of Gambaga, Ghana, (left).  
Chief of the Kingdom of Nanumba, Bimbilla, Ghana, (center).  
King of Mamprusi, Nayiiri Naa Bohagu Mahami Abdulai Sheriga, (right).  
Photographs by Alfred Weidinger, 2012.



## 2.4 The princess and the hunter

Yennega met a foreign hunter who some say was Bisa (Carrière-Moulins, 1909; Prost, 1953), or a Mandinka (Tauxier, 1917). Yennega and the hunter gave hunter to a son named Ouedraogo (Wedraogo), formed from the Moore root «wed» (horse) and «raogo» (male). The union and the child born from it – the first in a new lineage of chieftains – symbolized the intermingling of two peoples of different cultural origins.

According to the dominant Moaga oral tradition, Ouedraogo was trained by his grandfather until reaching adulthood, whereupon he left Gambaga with a gift of horses, cattle and sheep. The accompanying party of men probably comprised persons from different ethnic groups such as the Dagomba, Mamprusi, foreign conquerors and local peoples.

As illustrated by the union between the princess (the quintessential migrant) and the hunter (a quintessential local dweller), the origins of the Moose are seen to epitomize the intermarriage of migrant and sedentary peoples.



### 3. The female warrior, free woman and cultural icon

#### Introduction

Often portrayed on horseback, controlling her steed with a firm hand, Yennega is a cultural icon in Burkina Faso, West Africa and even further afield. She exemplifies resistance, strength of character and independence of mind. She therefore projects a powerful and positive image for women fighting to win acknowledgement of their aspirations.

#### 3.1 The epic of a free woman

In some oral traditions Yennega's epic marks the beginning of Moose history.

Yennega left Gambaga, furious at her father's refusal to find her a husband. She unites with a foreigner, thus displaying great independence of mind and a resolute determination to pursue her own aspirations. As a result of her free and positive actions, she gives birth to a son, Ouedraogo, the first in a new line of chieftains.

Yennega's actions changed the course of history by breaking radically with the age-old chieftom model. Her spectacular actions led to the rise of the first Moaga chieftain, a key personage in the history of the Moose.







Poster of the 2011 edition of the FESPACO.



Carving tree of Yennega, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Photograph by Brenda Gael McSweeney, 2009.

## 3.2 A cultural icon and a source of inspiration

To this day, Yennega's story is transmitted through oral tradition in the form of origin folktales, dynastic stories and so on, children's books, plays such as *Naba Ouédraogo* (Kolin Noaga, 1979) and films.

Moreover, Yennega has become an icon for international NGOs, sporting associations (e.g. Faso-Yennenga, Ouagadougou) and major cultural institutions named after her. For example, the Ouagadougou Pan-African Cinema Festival (FESPACO) awards a trophy known as the Yennega Gold Stallion. The trophy features a female warrior on horseback, brandishing a spear, thus identifying Yennega as a cultural icon of Pan-African identity.

## 3.3 Yennega, the horsewoman and warrior chieftain

Yennega is portrayed in oral tradition as a horsewoman without equal and a fearless chieftain. She stands as proof that women can perform high-level military roles in some African societies.

In the lore of those victorious chiefdoms, spearheaded by cavalry, Yennega is indeed depicted as one of the pillars of her father's army. She commanded men and led her troops to victory.

## 4. Moogo: the beginnings of statehood

### Introduction

According to the dominant Moaga tradition, Yennega's son, Ouedraogo, left the Gambaga region and headed north. He founded Tenkodogo, situated some 200 kilometres to the south-east of Ouagadougou, as the capital of his kingdom and the hub from which the Moaga socio-political system expanded slowly across the central plateau of Burkina-Faso.

A variety of Moose political entities developed gradually from a single chiefdom and a single dynasty to form a state, controlled by the Moose aristocracy and known as Moogo.

### 4.1 The rise of Moogo

Moogo grew with the rise of a number of political units based on the same hierarchical system. Some of those units evolved into large kingdoms, including the Kingdoms of Yatenga and Ouagadougou. After many internal wars, the growth of Moogo (Moose territory) stabilized in the nineteenth century with the unification of a score of political units of varying sizes (Izard, 2003).

The stability of Moogo was of vital importance for two reasons. Firstly, some form of unity was required after several centuries of expansion and, secondly, external dangers such as invasions by the powerful Songhai Empire and conquest by the French had to be faced.





## 4.2 Moogo, Naba and Mogho Naba

The state of Moogo was governed by the Moose aristocracy and comprised a number of political units of various sizes in the late nineteenth century.

Within this socio-political organization, *nam*, which means 'power', was vested in the *naba*, meaning 'chieftain'. The *naba* transmitted power to his eldest son, which often sparked conflicts over succession.

The supreme ruler of all of Moogo's political units was the chieftain of the kingdom of Ouagadougou, the Mogho Naba, or 'chieftain of Moogo'. His retinue comprised many dignitaries.

Even today, the Mogho Naba enjoys great prestige in Burkina Faso society. He is the traditional symbol of power in the Republic.



Naaba Sagha, Interim of Mogho Naaba Sagha, Ouagadougou.  
Photograph by Brenda Gael McSweeney, 2009.

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### **Yennega, Princess of Gambaga**

Yennega, an emblematic figure in Burkina Faso, was the mother of Ouedraogo, the founder of the dynasties of the Moose chieftains. She is thought to have lived between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Weary of the warrior role in which she had been cast by her father, the King of Gambaga, she ran away and met a solitary hunter. A legendary figure in West Africa, Yennega is the epitome of the female warrior, a free and independently minded woman.

### **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 (Nzinga 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](http://www.unesco.org/womenin africa)**

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