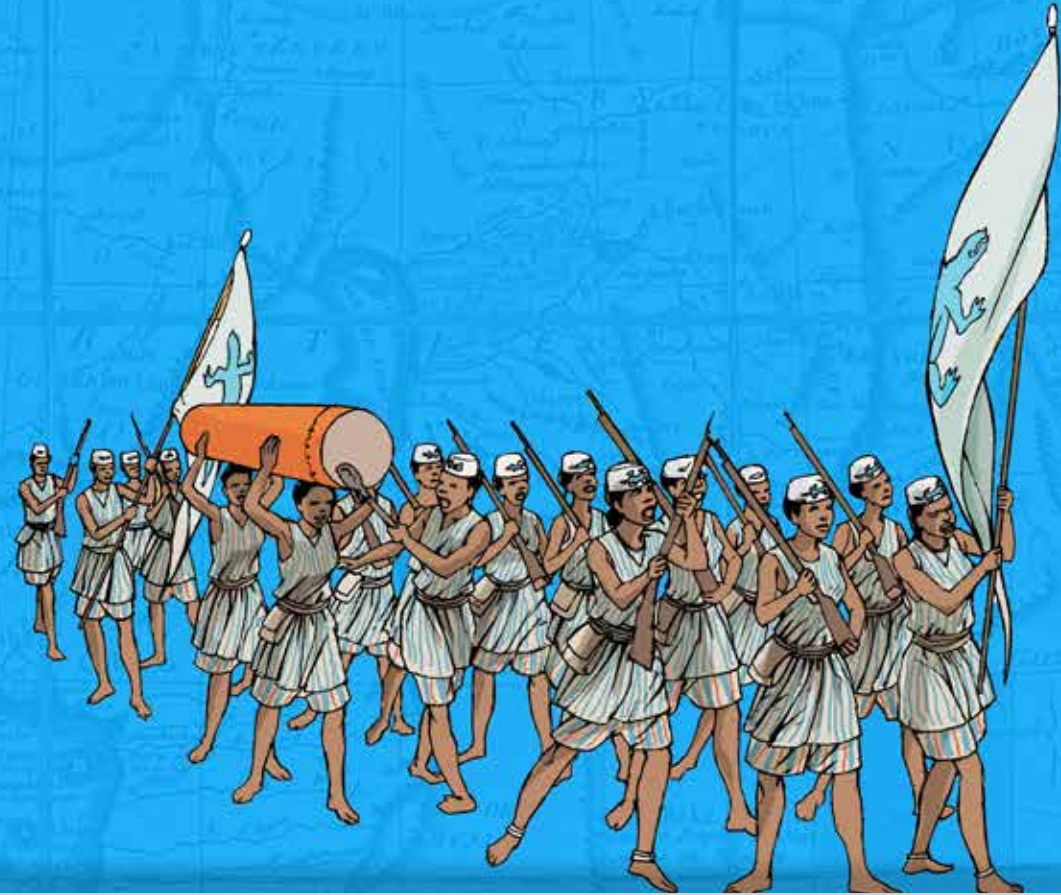




United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

THE WOMEN SOLDIERS OF DAHOMEY



UNESCO Series on Women in African History





United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

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

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

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THE WOMEN SOLDIERS OF DAHOMEY

UNESCO Series on Women in African History
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Pedagogical unit
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School in Adja-Ouere, Benin.
Photograph by Bruno Demeocq/UNICEF.



Benin children. Photograph by Cordelia Persen.

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



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

The women soldiers of Dahomey

Elite troops of women soldiers, probably established in the early eighteenth century, contributed to the military power of the Kingdom of Dahomey in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Often recruited as teenagers, the women soldiers lived in the royal palace, isolated from society. Their lives were devoted to weapons training, fighting wars of conquest and protecting the King. By the end of the nineteenth century, 4,000 women soldiers could be mobilized in the event of conflict. They were divided into different units, each with its own uniform, flag, battle songs and dances.

These fearsome women soldiers surpassed their male counterparts in courage and effectiveness in combat. Women soldiers distinguished themselves on many occasions in the history of the Kingdom of Dahomey, particularly in the battles of Savi (1727), Abeokouta (1851 and 1864) and Ketu (1886), as well as during the two wars against the French, until the fall of Abomey in 1892. This final battle resulted in the dissolution of their army.

They were particularly formidable in close combat and participated in Dahomey's strategy of intimidation of its opponents.



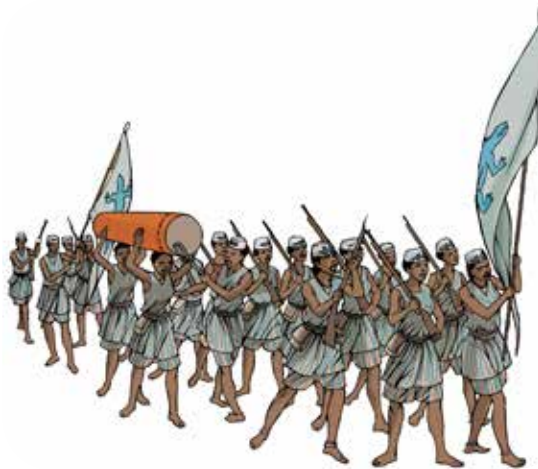
Seh-Dong-Hong-Beh, leader of the Dahomey Amazons.
Drawing by Frederick Forbes, 1851.

3 Comic strip

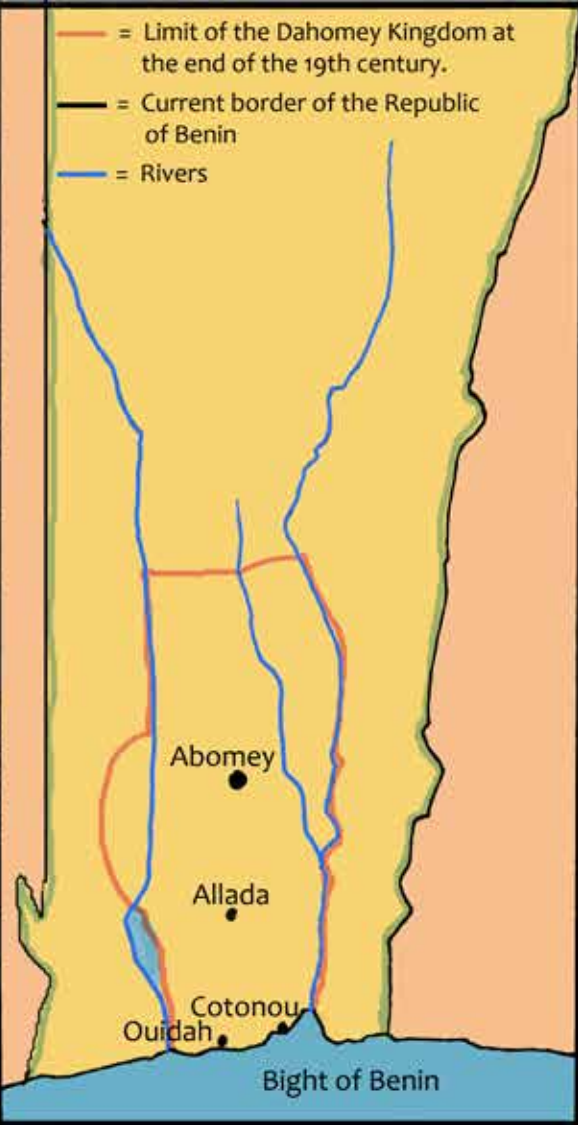
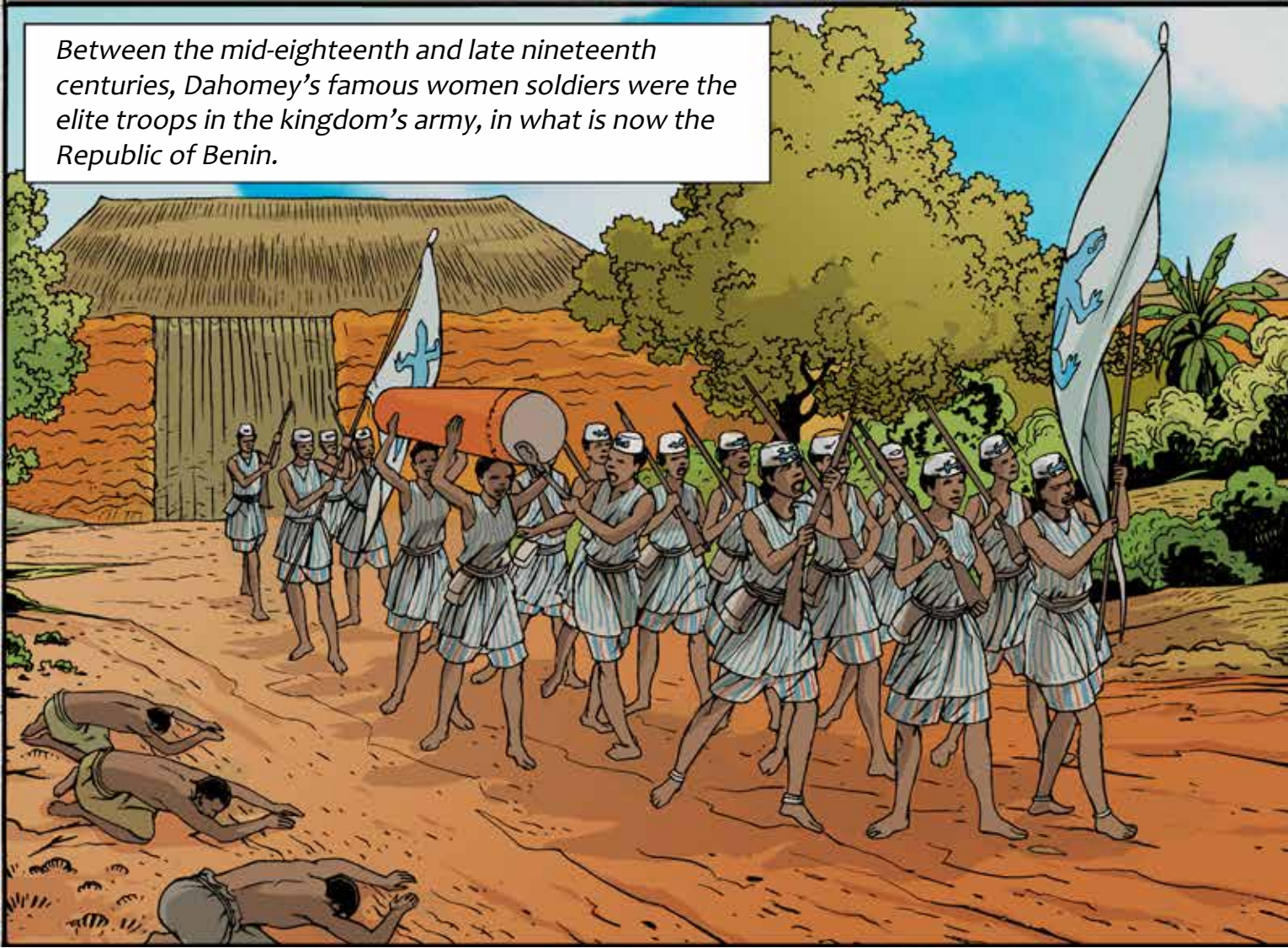
The women soldiers of Dahomey

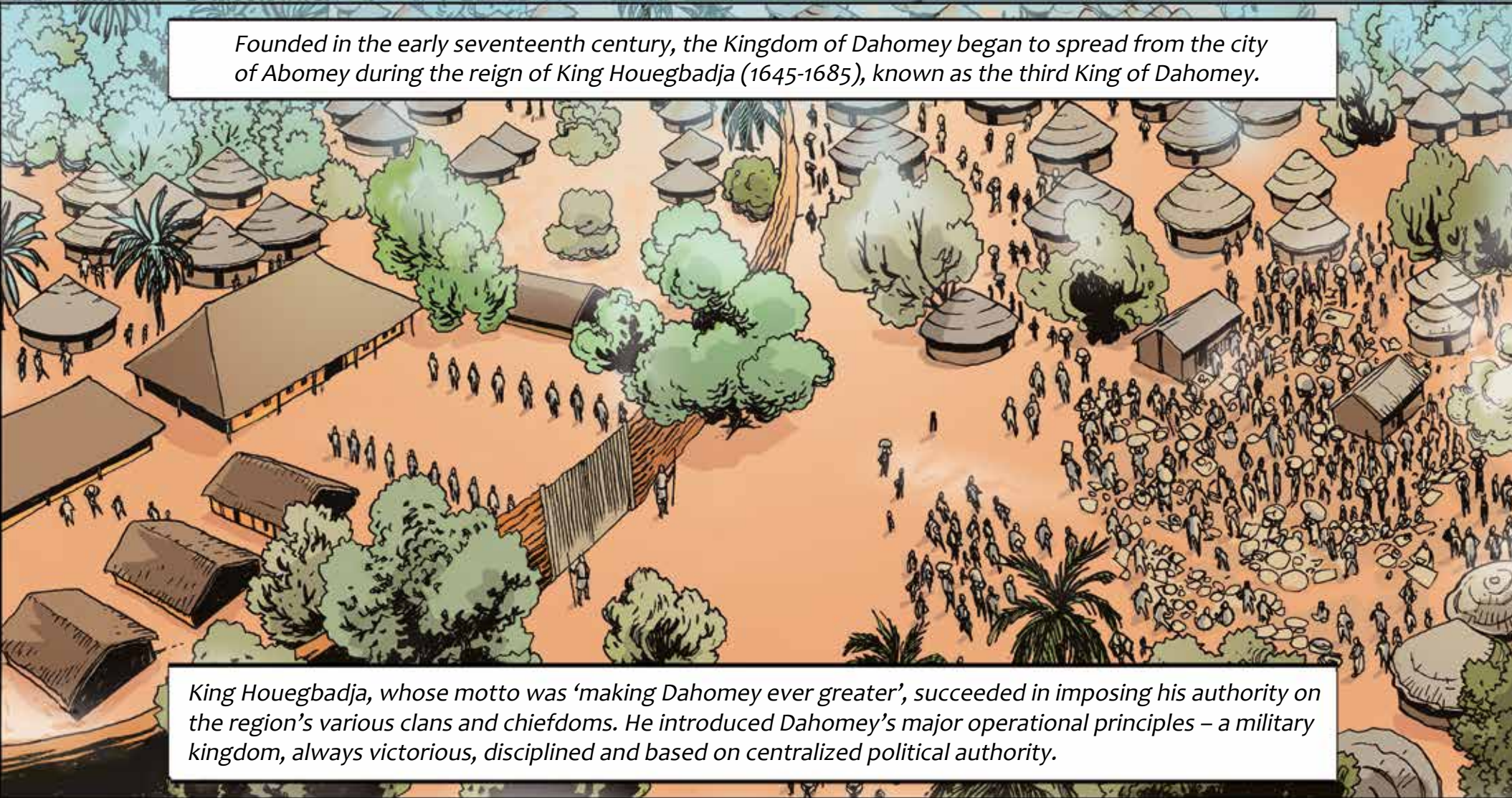
Foreword

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



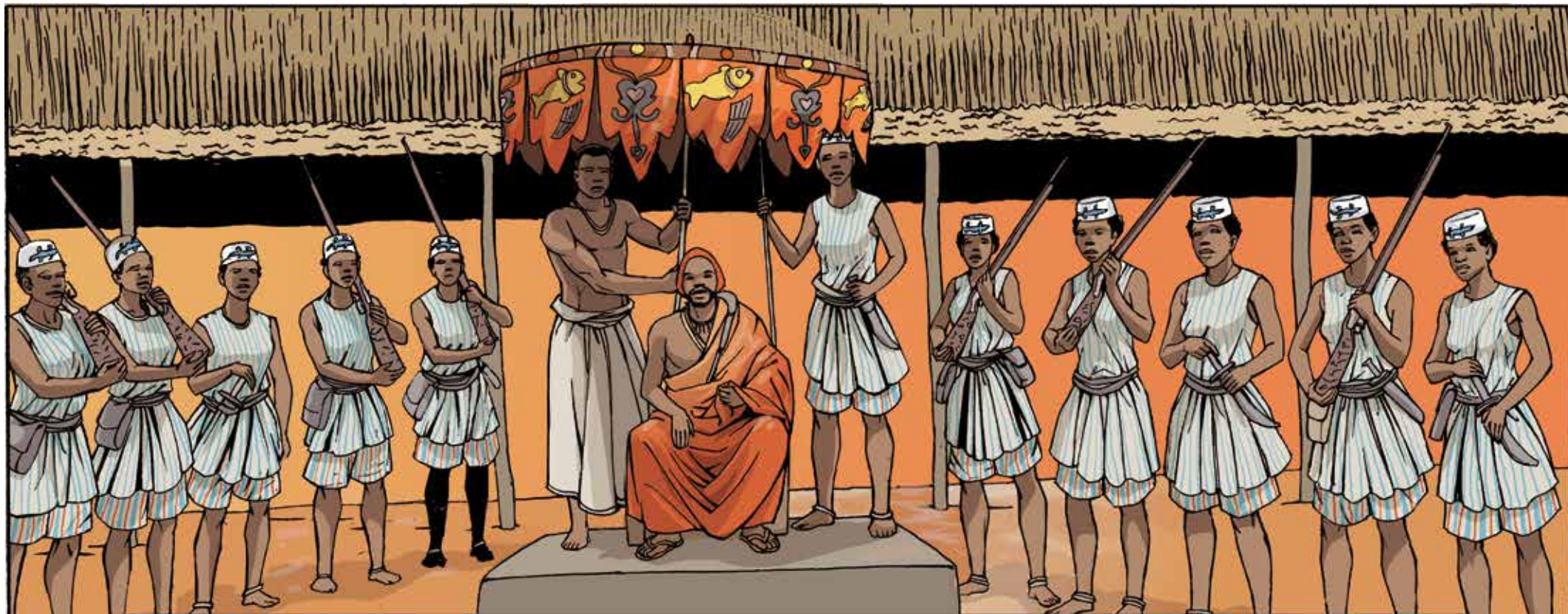
Between the mid-eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, Dahomey's famous women soldiers were the elite troops in the kingdom's army, in what is now the Republic of Benin.





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

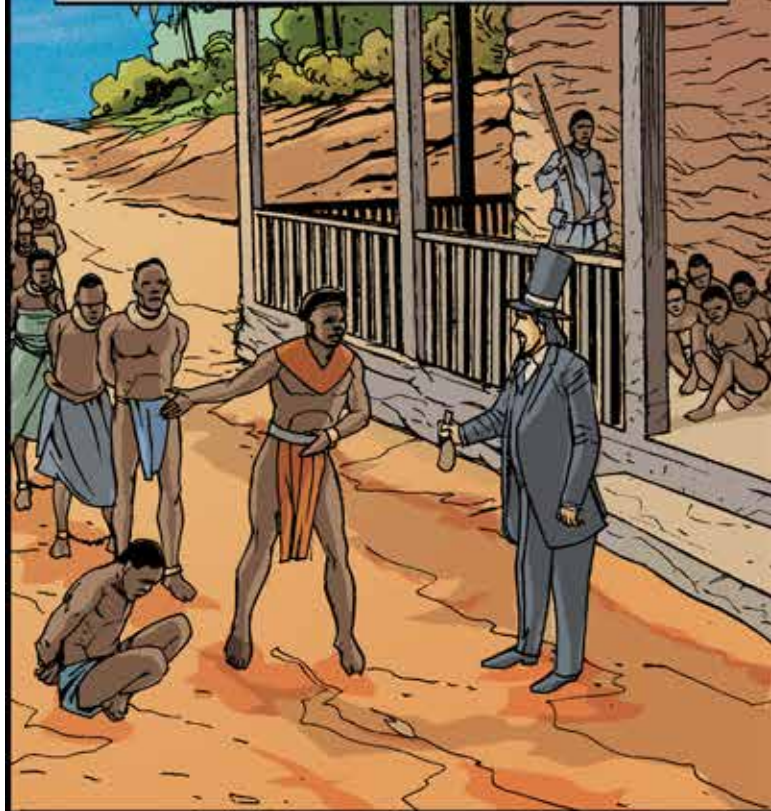
King Houegbadja, whose motto was 'making Dahomey ever greater', succeeded in imposing his authority on the region's various clans and chiefdoms. He introduced Dahomey's major operational principles – a military kingdom, always victorious, disciplined and based on centralized political authority.



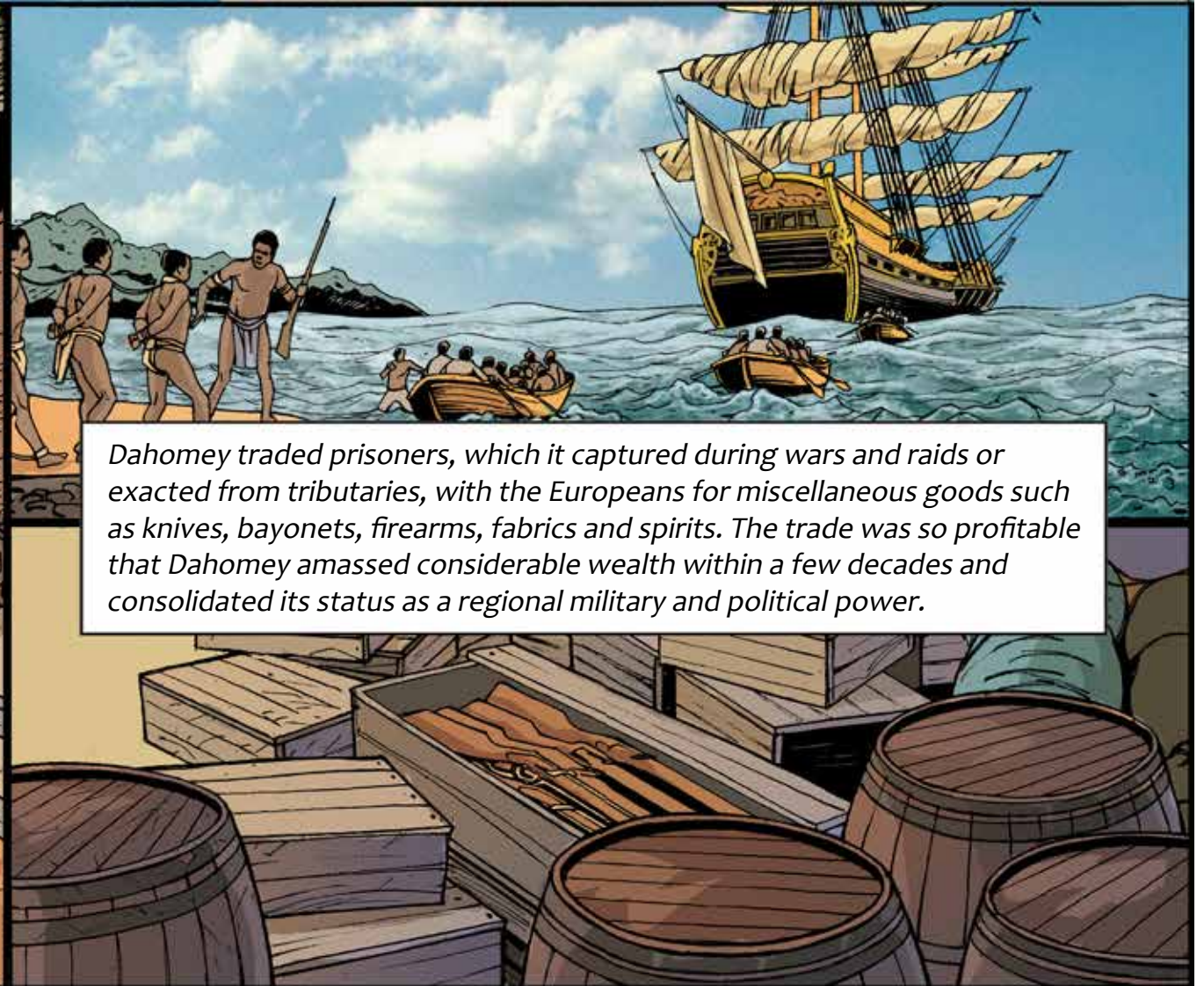
When did the Dahomey women soldiers first appear? It is difficult to specify an exact date, but women became part of the entourage of King Houegbadja's bodyguards in the seventeenth century. He assigned to them the tasks of ensuring his personal protection and guarding his royal palace.

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

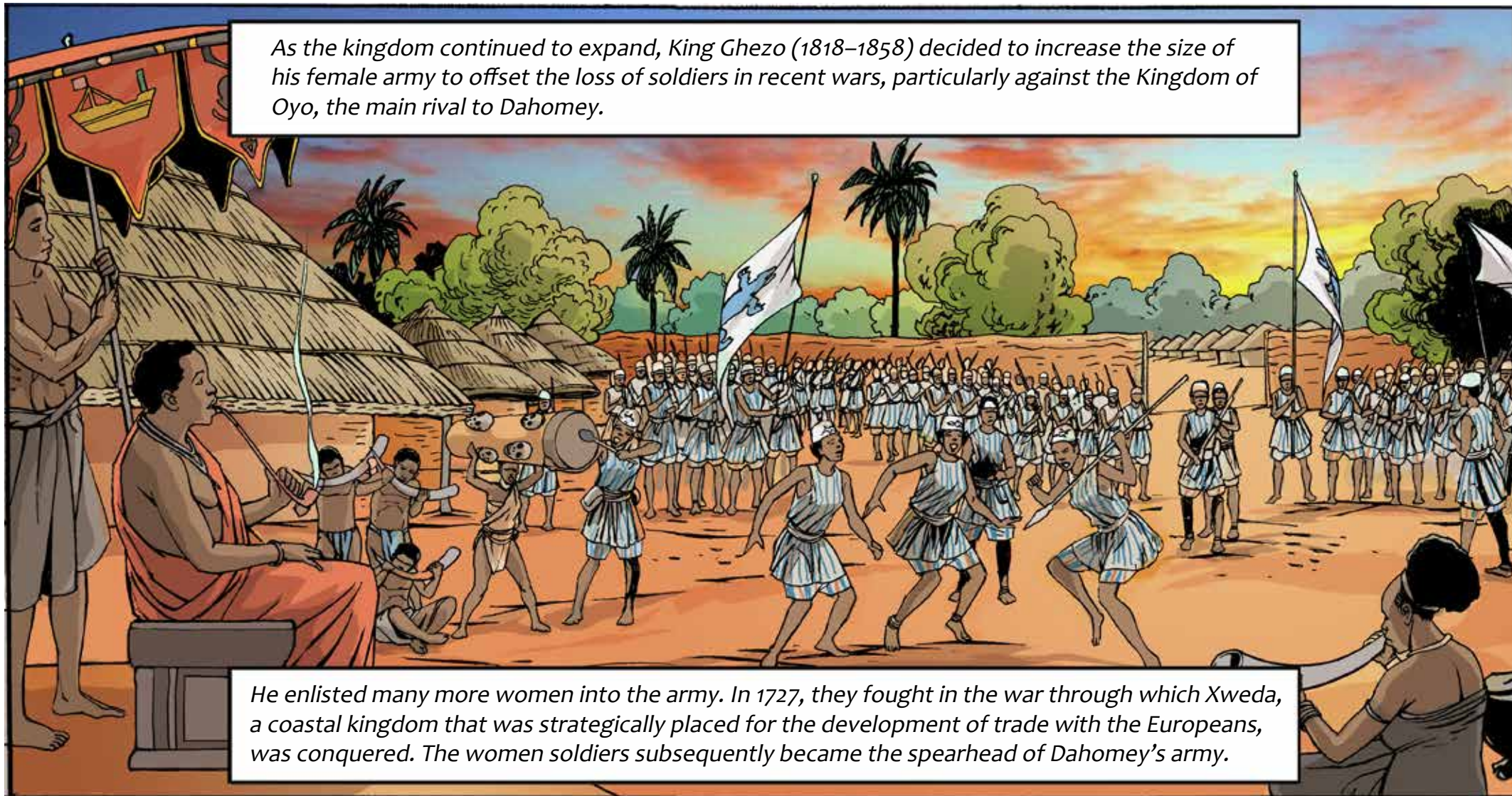
Owing to its military conquests, Dahomey successfully extended its domination to the maritime coast – a region dubbed the Slave Coast by the Europeans, because of the many slave-trading posts operating at the height of the transatlantic slave trade.



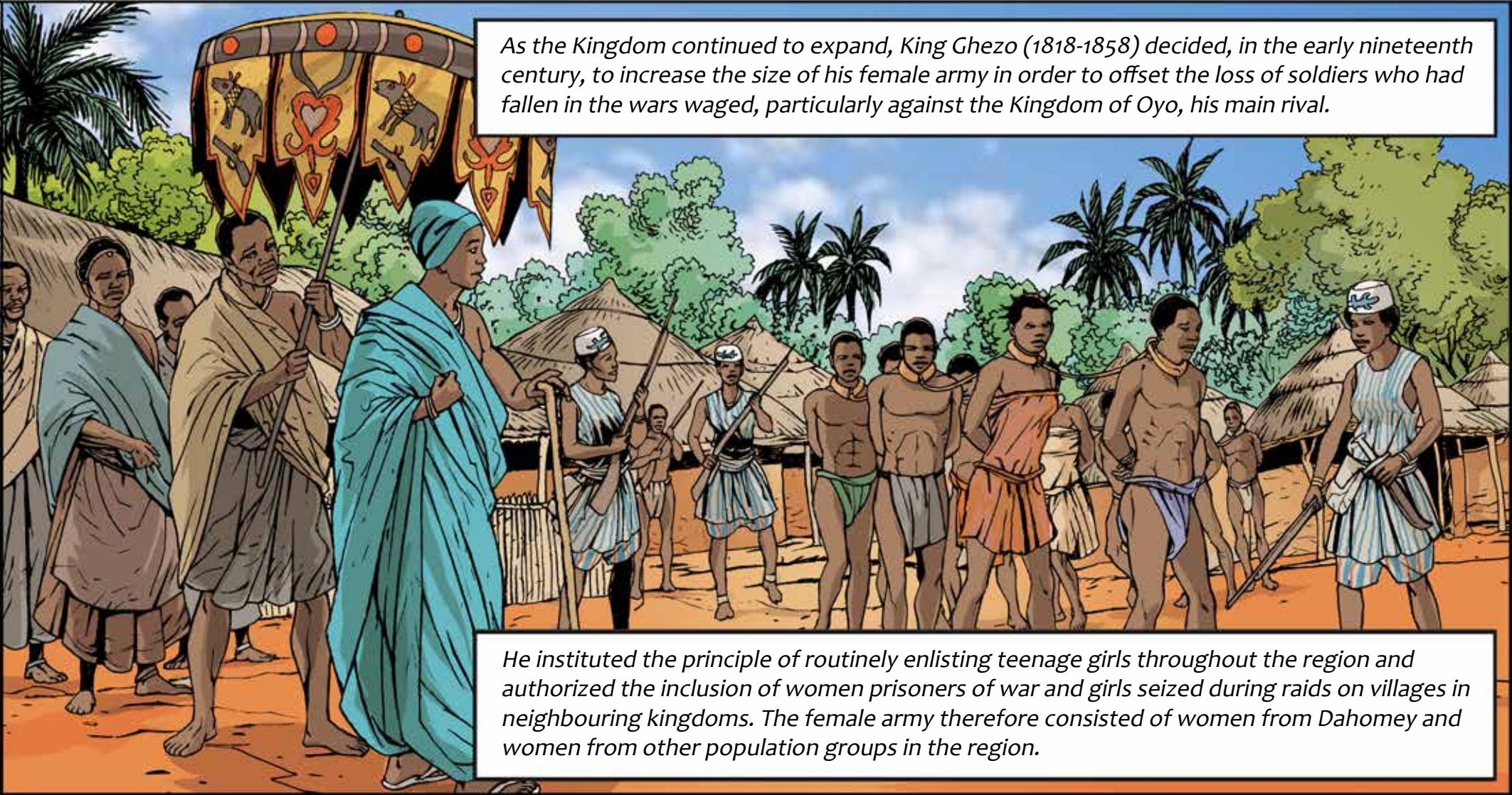
Dahomey traded prisoners, which it captured during wars and raids or exacted from tributaries, with the Europeans for miscellaneous goods such as knives, bayonets, firearms, fabrics and spirits. The trade was so profitable that Dahomey amassed considerable wealth within a few decades and consolidated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



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



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



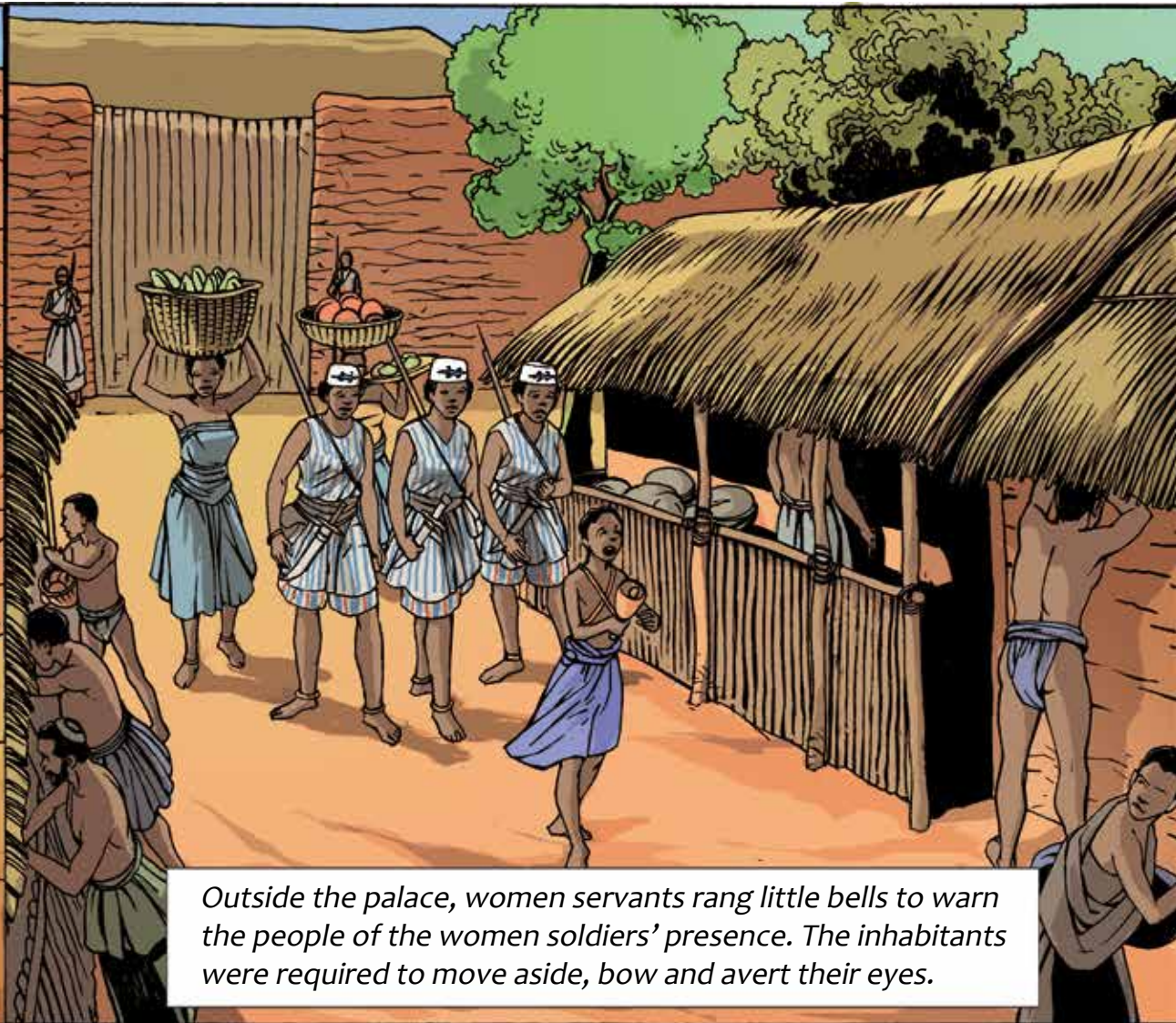
As the Kingdom continued to expand, King Ghezo (1818-1858) decided, in the early nineteenth century, to increase the size of his female army in order to offset the loss of soldiers who had fallen in the wars waged, particularly against the Kingdom of Oyo, his main rival.

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

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



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



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

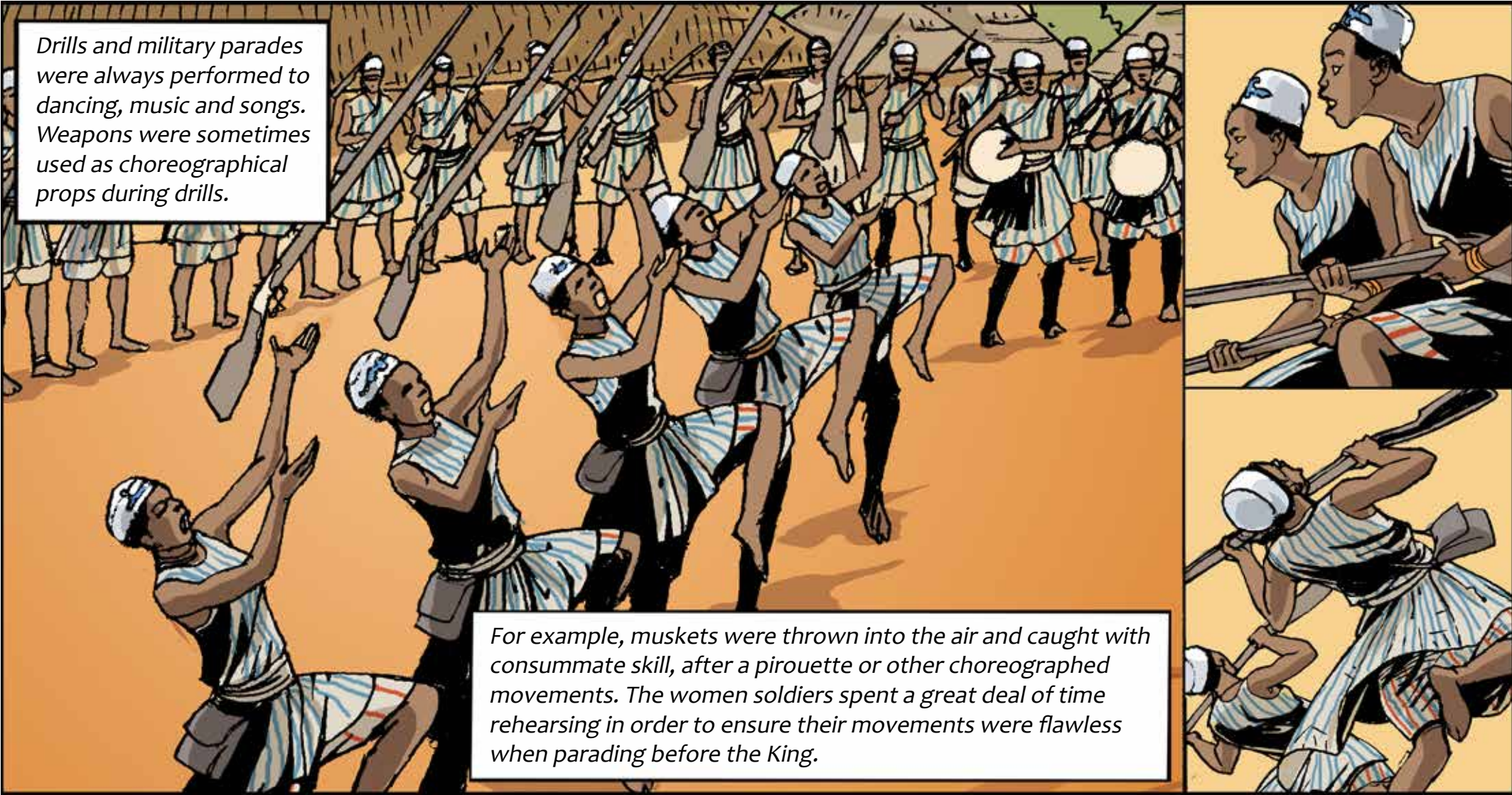
They underwent very intensive training, comprised of drills and large-scale simulated attacks, in particular during the nineteenth century. The women soldiers thus became stronger, more flexible, more resilient and iron-willed.



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



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

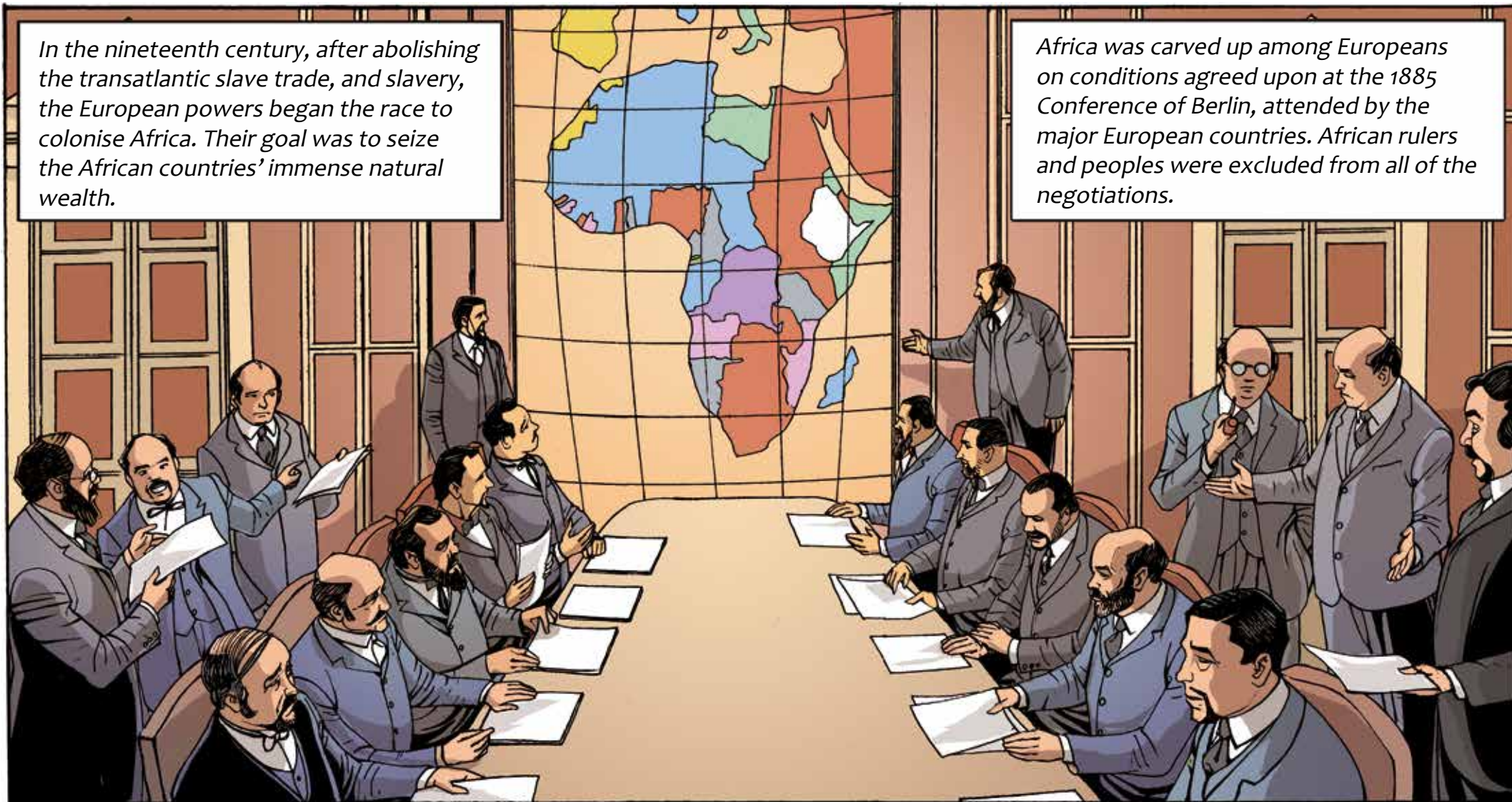


Drills and military parades were always performed to dancing, music and songs. Weapons were sometimes used as choreographical props during drills.

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

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

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



Against this backdrop of colonial competition, tension mounted at Cotonou (written as Koutonou at the time). King Glele signed treaties with France (1852, 1868 and 1878) authorizing the presence of French traders in Dahomey, but the 1878 treaty gave rise to countless disputes, for it was interpreted differently by the two parties and did not reflect the Fon culture's approach to land as sacred and inalienable.



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



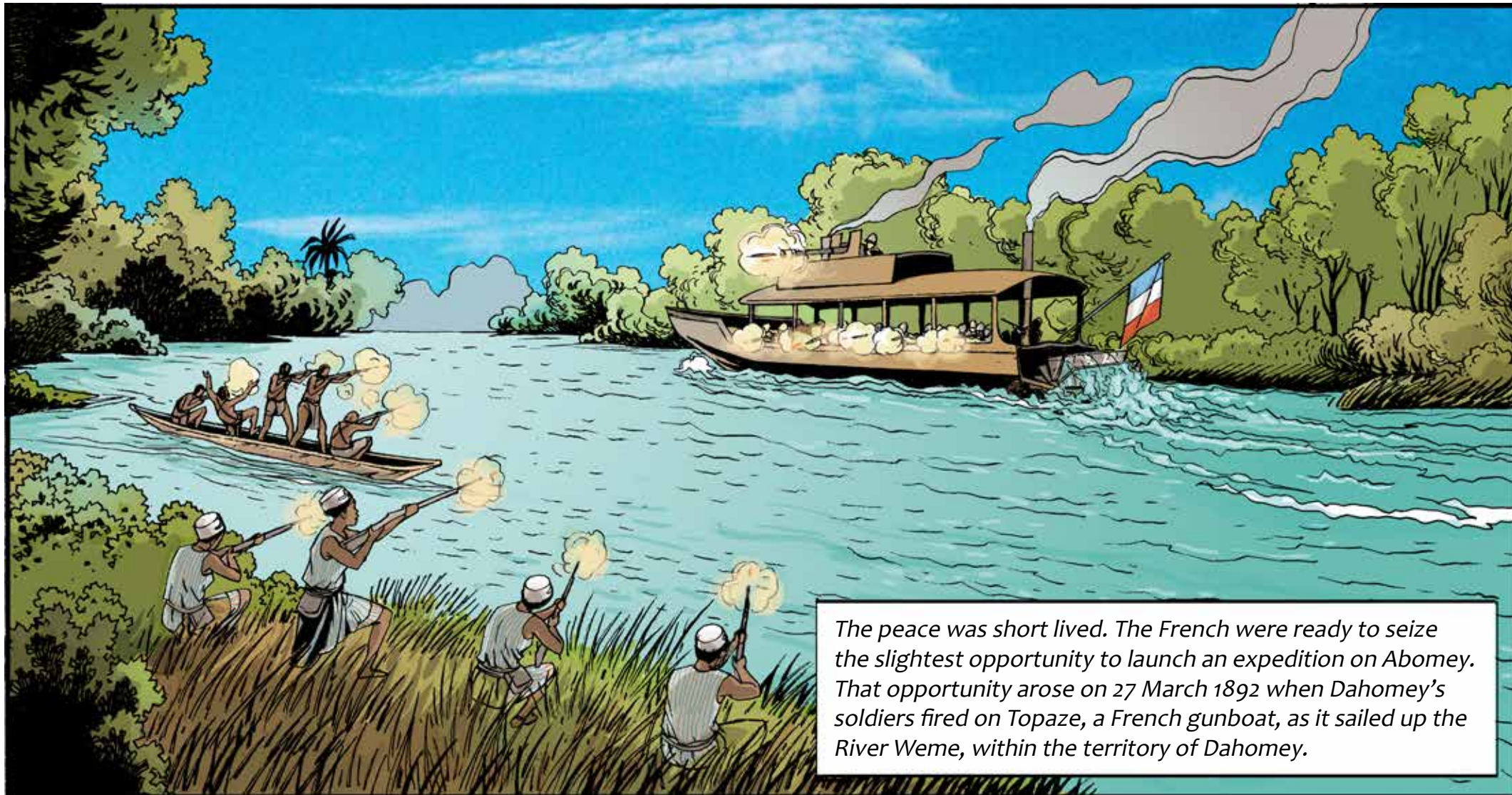
King Behanzin, the successor to King Glele, considered the actions of France to violate his sovereignty and reacted swiftly. War was inevitable.

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

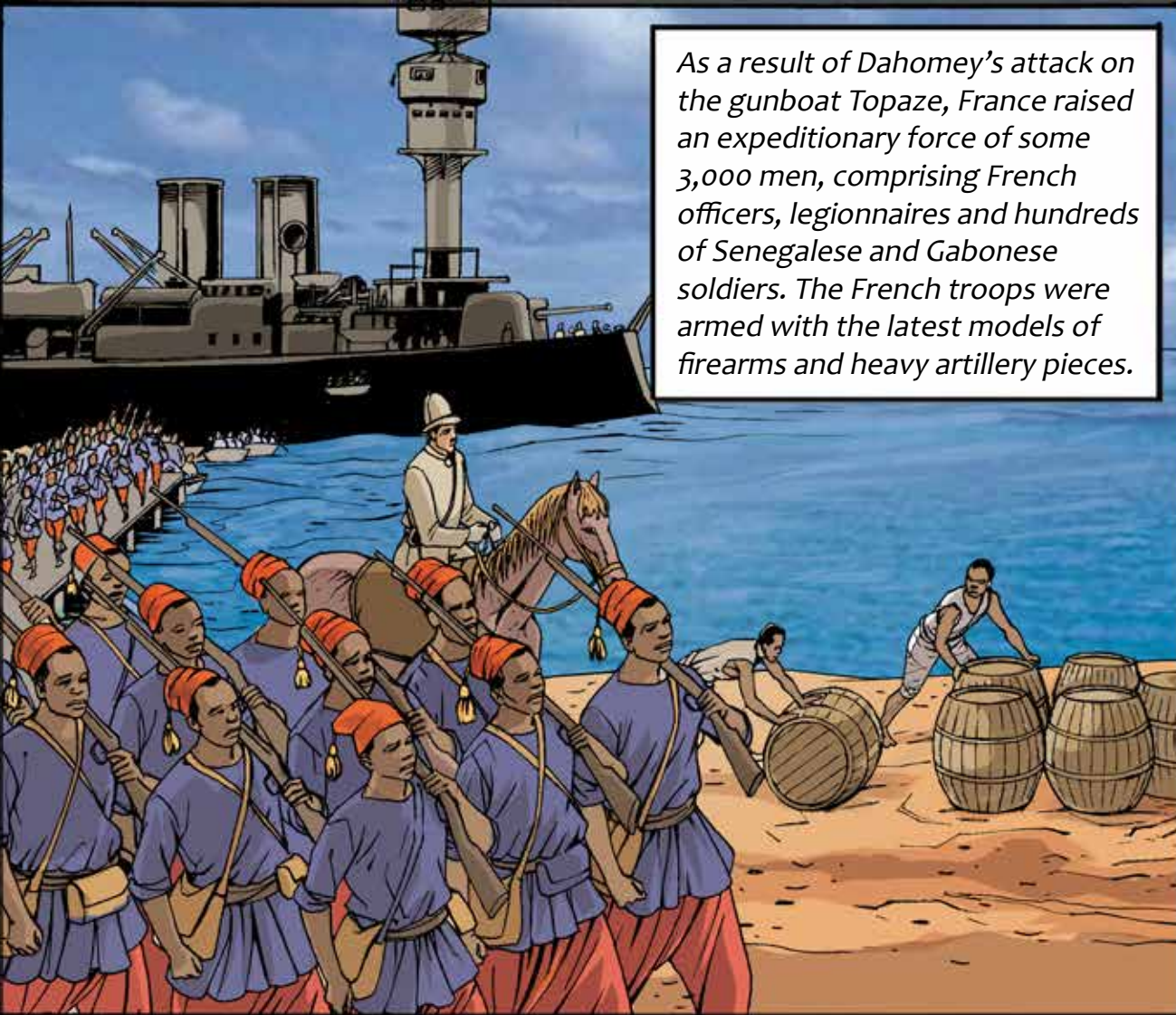


Taken by surprise, the bayonet-bearing French soldiers dared not attack the women, some of whom were barely 16 years old. The women soldiers leaped on them to force them into hand-to-hand combat. After fighting for four hours, Dahomey's troops withdrew. A few months later, a peace treaty was signed and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

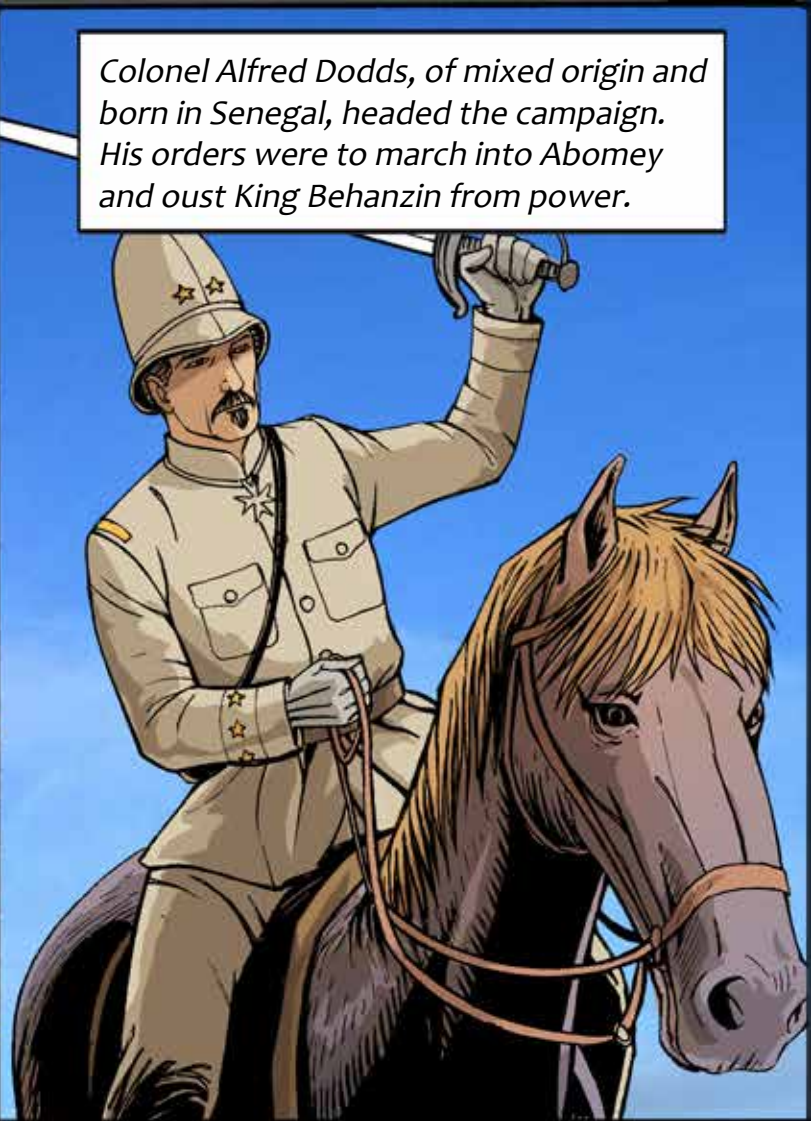




The peace was short lived. The French were ready to seize the slightest opportunity to launch an expedition on Abomey. That opportunity arose on 27 March 1892 when Dahomey's soldiers fired on Topaze, a French gunboat, as it sailed up the River Weme, within the territory of Dahomey.



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

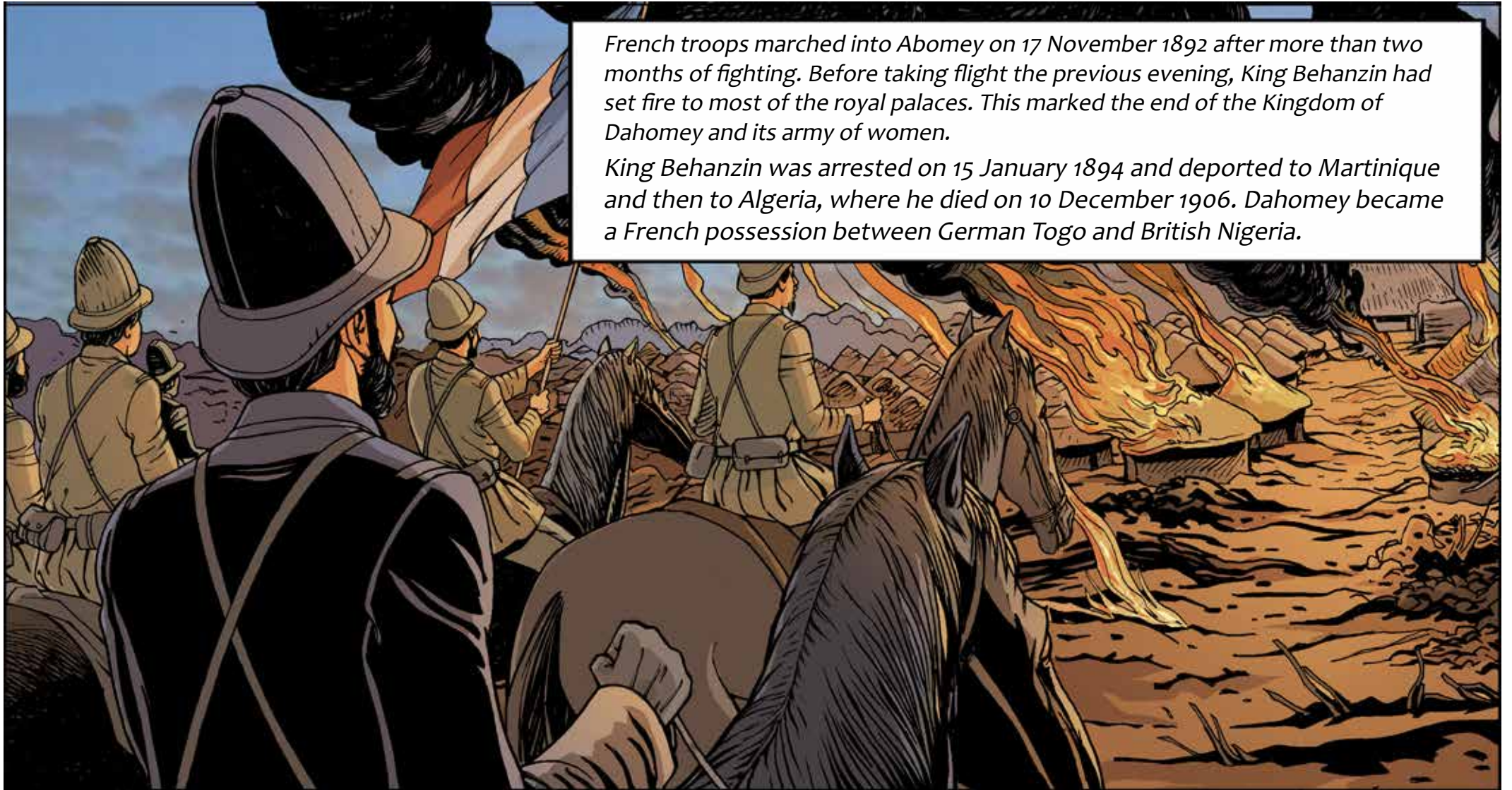


Colonel Alfred Dodds, of mixed origin and born in Senegal, headed the campaign. His orders were to march into Abomey and oust King Behanzin from power.

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



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



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

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

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



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

4 Pedagogical unit

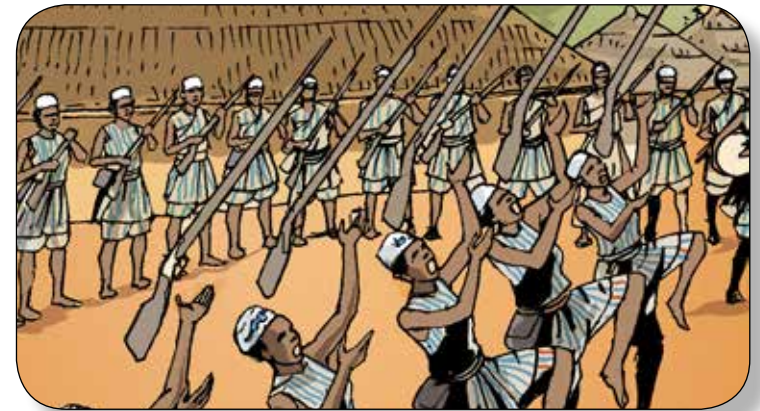
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Dahomey Amazons, around 1890.

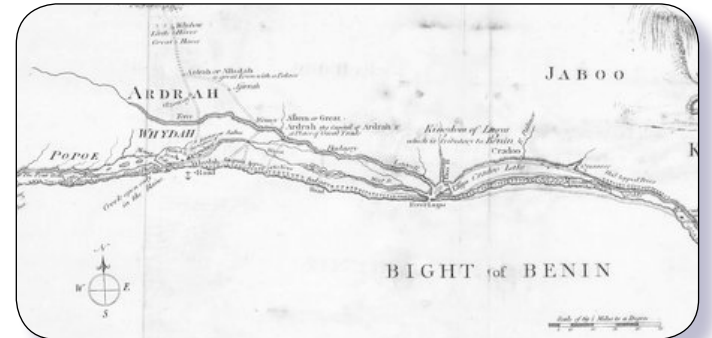
1. Historical context: the slave trade and political rivalry in West Africa

Various oral sources, confirmed by historical archives, attest to the emergence of the Kingdom of Dahomey in the seventeenth century and its consolidation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at the same time that the slave trade was developing in West Africa. From the mid-sixteenth century, trading posts on the coast gradually evolved into slave trading posts to meet the demand for slave labour in the American colonies and Caribbean islands.

The most powerful rulers of the West African kingdoms then started to trade prisoners of war for goods imported by Europeans, deriving prestige and power from them. Thus, the transatlantic slave trade, which peaked in the eighteenth century, changed the region's and indeed the entire continent's demographic, political, cultural and economic landscape. In the space of three centuries, between 12.5 and 14 million Africans were deported to the Americas and the Caribbean.

1.1 The Slave Coast

In the mid-sixteenth century, the Bight of Benin became the main hub for the transatlantic slave trade at its height. Until the nineteenth century, Europeans referred to this 300-kilometre-long coastal region, which stretched from the mouth of the River Volta in present-day Ghana to the Lagos Channel in today's Nigeria, as the Slave Coast. Millions of children, women and men were shipped out by Portuguese, Dutch, British, French and Danish traders on a journey with no return, in order to provide slave labour to plantation owners in the colonies of the American mainland and the Caribbean.



Dahomy and its environs. R. Norris, 1793.



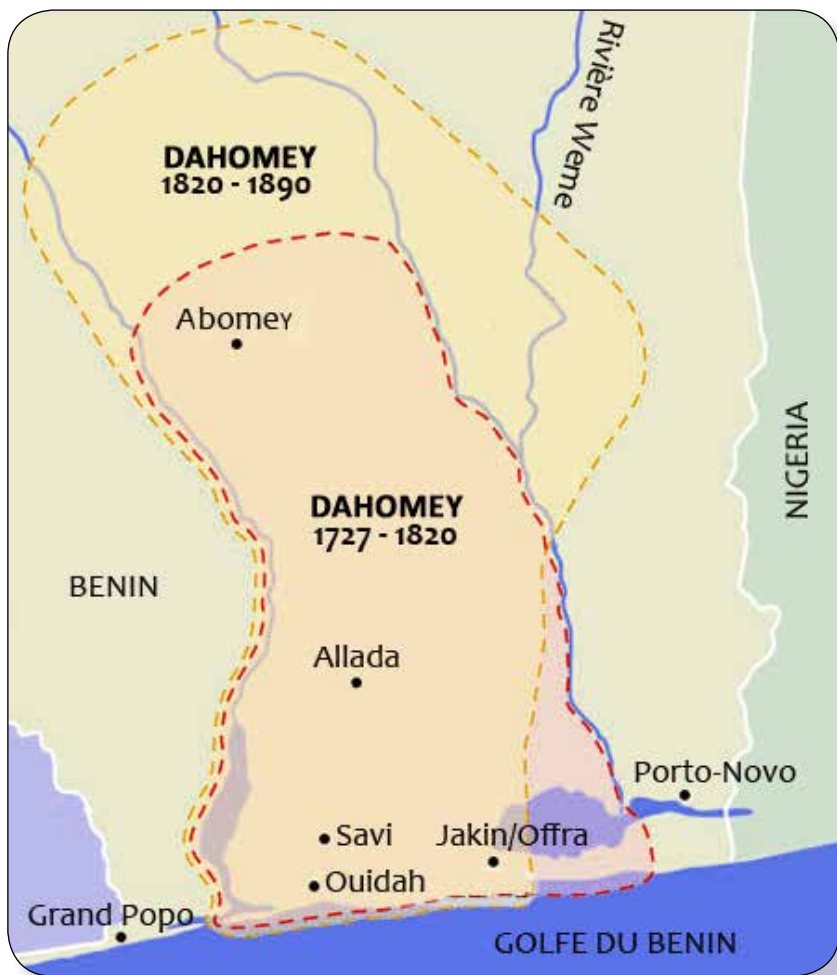
Political map of the Bight of Benin in 1724.

1.2 Rivalry among African kingdoms

The development of the slave trade on the Slave Coast fuelled rivalry among African kingdoms in the region, in particular between the Kingdoms of Allada, Xweda and Dahomey, which rose to prominence successively between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

The royal elites gained prestige and consolidated their authority by monopolizing the trade in European merchandise in exchange for captives generally seized by their army in raids on neighbouring enemies (Monroe, 2011). Foreign goods (rifles, gunpowder, fabrics, cowrie shells, spirits, tobacco, pipes, etc.) traded for captives enabled the African kingdoms to consolidate their political power.

The goods were displayed and distributed in Abomey during public ceremonies and they strengthened the links between centralized authorities, local dignitaries and chiefs. The firearms helped to strengthen military power with regard to rival kingdoms and obtain new captives for the slave trade.



Expansion of the Kingdom of Dahomey (1727-1890).

1.3 The Kingdoms of Oyo, Allada, Xweda and Dahomey

In 1716, wishing to engage alone in international commerce, and with the advantage of centralized political and military authority, the Kingdom of Dahomey rebelled against the powerful Kingdom of Allada, which controlled the coast and monopolized the slave trade with Europeans.

Dahomey attacked and conquered Allada in 1724, followed by Savi (Xweda), Allada's vassal, in 1727, thereby gaining control over the main trade route to the coast. It transformed the slave trade into a royal monopoly and strengthened the centralized state in Abomey, the kingdom's capital.

Over the following decades, and until the nineteenth century, the wealth accumulated from slave trade allowed the Kingdom of Dahomey to dominate the region, despite internal power struggles, constant threats from the powerful Kingdom of Oyo, and fluctuations in the transatlantic trade.

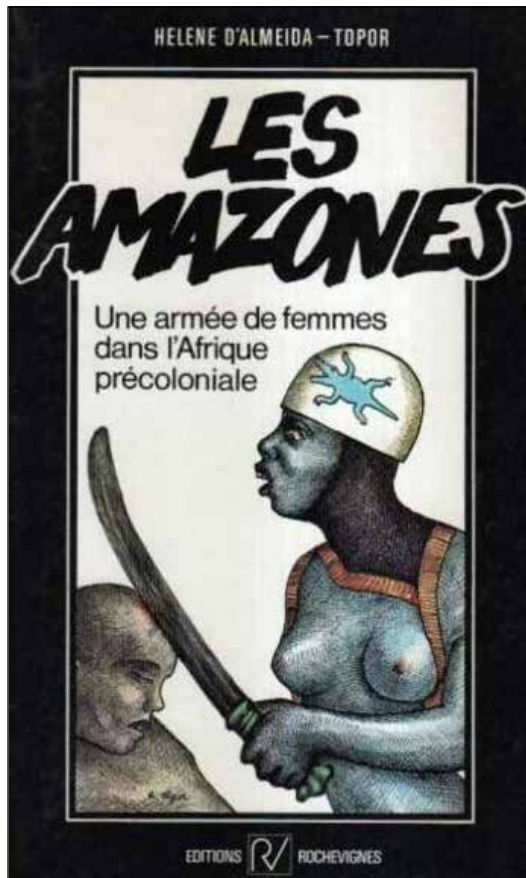
1.4 The gate of no return

Between 1670 and 1860, the largest port in the region for the deportation of slaves was Ouidah (previously known as Glewe or Glehue). More than 1 million Africans were deported from its shores during the transatlantic slave trade. The monument is now visited frequently by tourists, in particular Africans and people of African descent from the Americas and the Caribbean islands.

In memory of all the deported Africans, the Republic of Benin, in partnership with UNESCO, erected the Gate of No Return on the beach at Djegbadji, Ouidah, in 1995, at the very spot where slaves once stood on African soil for the last time before boarding.



Gate of no return, Ouidah, Benin.
Photograph by Rgrilo, 2006.



Coverpage of H. D'Almeida-Topor's book «The Amazons». R. Topor, 1984.

2. Emergence of women soldiers, enrollment and symbols

The development of the slave trade and rivalry between the region's African kingdoms played a key role in the emergence of a female military corps in the Kingdom of Dahomey. The methods for enrolling women soldiers evolved over the years: some were delinquents, outsiders or captives from other communities in the region, and some were princesses attracted by weapons; some were drawn by lot, some volunteered and others were conscripted by force. The slave trade increased considerably in the eighteenth century, in particular in the ports of Ouidah and Lagos, and drastically changed the entire region's demography.

2.1 The Dahomey 'Amazons'

European visitors to Dahomey in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were astonished by the spectacle of this army of women, in particular its organization, various units and the military parades organized by the Kingdom's rulers. This is how they have been known ever since, especially in Europe. However, the title of 'Dahomey Amazons', given by Europeans and still used widely in books on them, has no meaning in Benin or among the Fon, where the women were named depending on the weapons they used and the contingent they belonged to (see part 4.)

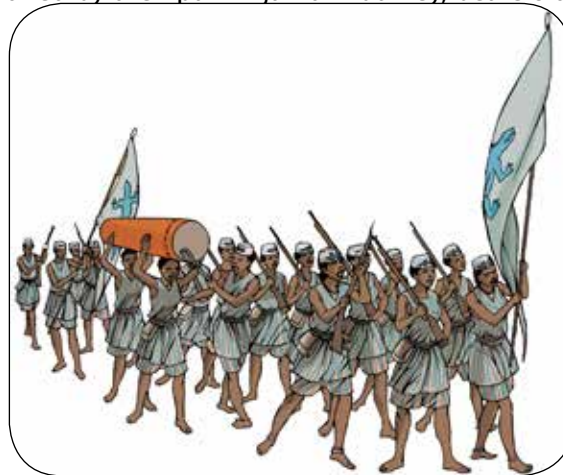
In most of the writings left behind by the Europeans, the women soldiers are referred to as Amazons, a reference to the legendary women soldiers in Greek mythology.

2.2 Probable reasons for the emergence of an army of women in Dahomey

The following are the probable reasons for the lack of men in nineteenth-century Dahomey:

- Male casualties in the wars waged by the kingdom;
- Raids by neighbouring kingdoms on the villages of Dahomey to stock up on male prisoners; and
- Tributes paid in male captives in the eighteenth century by Dahomey to the Kingdom of Oyo.

In 1863, a British naval officer, Arthur Parry Eardley Wilmot, noted a strong demographic imbalance in favour of women (Alpern, 1998). It was likely the lack of men combined with the threat of invasion from the Kingdom of Oyo, which had the strongest army (Alpern, 1998), led the rulers of Dahomey to use women to reinforce their army. Furthermore, according to certain oral traditions, the rulers of Dahomey enrolled women soldiers to appease the spirit of Queen Tasi Hangbé, twin sister of King Akaba (1685–1708), who is said to have ruled the kingdom singlehanded between the years 1708–1711. She is not mentioned by the Kpanlingan of Abomey, bearers of oral tradition in Abomey, who are supposed to recite the royal lineage.



2.3 Enrolment of women soldiers

Originally, enrolment was reserved for young Fon women who either volunteered, were drawn by lot or were forcibly conscripted after committing crimes. Enrolment was then extended to other communities in the region, and from the early nineteenth century young women captured in raids were recruited. Under the reign of King Ghezo (1818–1858) enrolment campaigns took place every three years, increasing to once a year in the reign of his successor, Glele (1858–1889). Representatives of the King went from village to village, selecting the most physically apt (tall, strong and agile) girls aged between 12 and 15.

When they arrived in Abomey, a council examined the young recruits. These enlistment campaigns were daunting for communities. In order to avoid them, some families managed to hide their daughters before the royal representative came round. For the girls selected, enrolment meant leaving their family and village, forced celibacy and bearing arms to wage war.





2.4 Training and priming

Most of the women soldiers' time was spent in training. This involved wrestling, target practice, obstacle races, large-scale simulated attacks, forest trails and initiation in the bush lasting several days.

Furthermore, they readied themselves through many magico-religious rituals, reciting magical incantations to increase their strength, wearing protective amulets and consulting Bokovon, the seer, who told them which sacrifices to make and rites to accomplish before setting forth into battle.

2.5 Combat effectiveness

The women soldiers of Dahomey distinguished themselves in the history of Africa as a symbol of courage. However hard the fighting, they never withdrew, while male soldiers were often punished for retreating (Alpern, 1998). King Behanzin, the last great king of this monarchy, relied on their unfailing devotion to resist the French colonial conquest. A very large number of women soldiers gave their lives for that cause. According to many historical accounts the women soldiers outshone their male counterparts in all respects, namely discipline, fighting spirit, bravery and devotion to the King.



Battle of Dogba, September 19th, 1892.
Illustration by Alexandre d'Albéca, 1895.



3. A life apart, close to the ruler

In the seventeenth century, the women soldiers of Dahomey probably constituted the King's bodyguard; they became an elite corps in the army from the mid-eighteenth to late nineteenth century. Today, they remain one of the most famous women's armies in the history of humanity. Their collective spirit and war-readiness were based on a strict and unique lifestyle: they were often recruited in early adolescence and lived apart from men in the royal palaces. Their rigorous training was punctuated by military exercises, rituals, dances, songs, war cries and military parades, which, according to historical testimonies, they had mastered to perfection.

3.1 A status of their own

By becoming soldiers, these women, whatever their background, adopted a specific way of life and were kept apart from the remainder of the population. During royal ceremonies, for example, they were physically separated from their male counterparts by a line of plaited raffia leaves (referred to as the 'bamboo line' in the literature on Dahomey).

In the town they were preceded by a female servant ringing a small bell to alert people to their arrival. The inhabitants were required to give way to them, stand aside and avert their eyes.

3.2 A life in the royal palaces

The women soldiers of Dahomey lived in the royal palaces in Abomey, Cana, Zagnanado, Hoja and Zassa. Men were denied access to these palaces other than during public festivities, and only women servants and eunuchs could move freely inside. The women soldiers were sworn to celibacy. However, in practice, the oath was not always kept. Some had lovers whom they were obliged to conceal, ensuring that they left the palace in the early hours.

They used contraceptive plants to avoid pregnancy and herbal abortives if necessary. Women soldiers who did become pregnant risked punishment, imprisonment or death. In addition, some women soldiers were given in marriage by the King to dignitaries and officers.

3.3 The women soldiers and their King

The King of Dahomey never appeared in public without his escort of women soldiers, who were thus closely linked to the King's official and private life, especially those women in his bodyguard corps.

In the eyes of the Dahomey people, the King's image was therefore linked closely to the women soldiers. The same held true for foreign visitors, who never failed to remark that, during their visits, the King was always surrounded by armed women (D'Almeida-Topor, 1984). In battle they were the last line of defence between the enemy and the King, and were prepared to sacrifice their lives to protect him.



Royal Palaces of Abomey.
Photograph by Dominik Schwarz, 2008.

3.4 Music, song and dance

At military parades, the women soldiers performed every movement to songs and dances before, during and after the drill. On such occasions, weapons were used as props.

The music was produced by different kinds of drums, flutes, whistles and iron hand-bells, and was punctuated by the war cries of the women soldiers. The lyrics of their songs spoke of their devotion to the King, their superiority over men and their exploits in battle.

«We were created to defend Dahomey,
the honey pot Object of desire. Can the country where so much courage flourishes
Give up its wealth to foreigners?
As long as we live, how mad the people
Who would try to impose their law on us.
Song in *Les récades des rois du Dahomey*» (Adandé, 1962).



Music instruments: pesi, hong, asassan, guitare.
In «La France au Dahomey», by Alexandre d'Albéca, 1895.

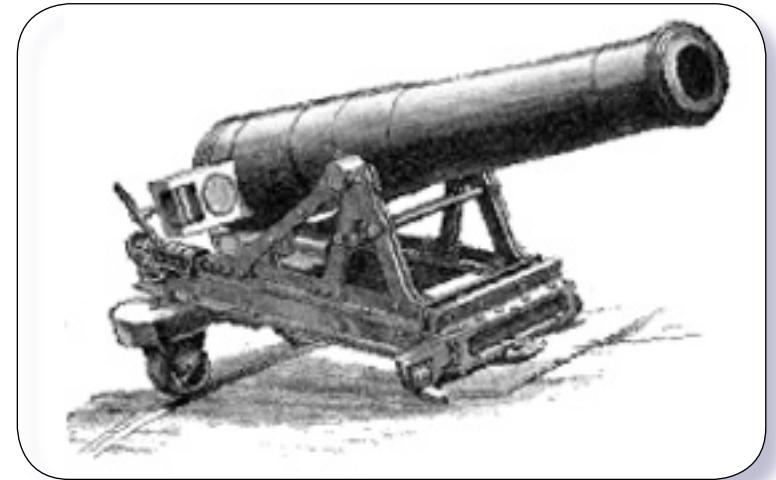
4. The army of women soldiers at the end of the nineteenth century

Throughout its existence, the women's army of Dahomey expanded its structure into several regiments and gradually modernized its equipment through the acquisition of firearms. The women's army was strengthened particularly during the reign of King Ghezo (1818–1858), who instituted the principle of regular recruitment and created new regiments. His successors, Glele (1858–1889) and Behanzin (1889–1894), continued this policy of modernization.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the number of women soldiers of Dahomey was estimated at several thousand (D'Almeida-Topor, 1984), accounting for 30–40 percent of the army. At the end of the nineteenth century, under King Behanzin, for example, the army of women soldiers was composed of the following regiments:

- Huntresses («Gbetó» in the Fon language);
- Rifleshooters («Gulohento»);
- Reapers («Nyekplohento»);
- Archers («Gohento»);
- Gunners («Agbalya»).

They were organized into several regiments, each of which had its own female commanders and specific uniform and weapons, as well as its own guardian spirits, dances, songs and military parades. The names and types of regiments varied over time under the different rulers.



Krupp canon.

4.1 The huntresses (Gbetu in the Fon language)

The oldest military unit of women soldiers, dating back to the army's origin, was the huntresses. The Gbetu hunted all kinds of game, including elephants, the most valuable and difficult of animals to kill.

Elephants were almost completely wiped out from the area in the mid-nineteenth century. The Gbetu were then integrated into the army of women soldiers. They were dressed in brown blouses and brown and blue knee-length shorts.

Around the head they wore a band of iron crowned with two antelope horns symbolizing power, strength and flexibility. They were armed with long rifles and curved daggers attached to their belts.

4.2 The riflewomen (Gulohento)

The riflewomen accounted for the largest proportion of women soldiers. They each had a long rifle and a short sword and were formidable fighters in close combat. Some were armed with spears and short swords.

Their uniform consisted of a belt made of banana leaves equipped with cartridges. The Gulohento also wore a blue blouse tied at the waist with a belt and white and blue striped culottes. Their headdress was a white skullcap decorated with a blue caiman.



Female soldiers, Dahomey, around 1890.

4.3 The archers (Gohento)

The archers, who were fewer in number than the riflewomen, were experts in handling bows and arrows. Selected from the most able young girls, their hooked and poisoned arrows rarely missed their targets. They also carried a dagger in their belt. As the women soldiers' weapons were modernized with firearms, the archers' role declined. In the nineteenth century, they were primarily responsible for transporting weaponry and collecting the dead and wounded, intervening in combat only on rare occasions. The Gohento wore a short blue tunic and the same white skullcap decorated with the same blue caiman as the riflewomen.

4.4 The reapers (Nyekplohento)

The reapers were few in number but particularly feared. Their razor-sharp knives, which could slice a man in two with a single blow (Froy, 1890), inspired great terror. The weapon, which weighed some 10 kg, with a 45-cm blade and a large wooden handle, was held with both hands. The fearful reputation of the reapers contributed to the intimidation strategy of the Kingdom of Dahomey, giving them the psychological upper hand over adversaries.

4.5 The gunners (Agbarya)

There were a few hundred gunners in the nineteenth century, accounting for around one-fifth of all women soldiers. They were involved in the use of the army's artillery, including old seventeenth-century iron guns and German Krupp guns sold to the Kingdom of Dahomey by Europeans. The old guns and large calibre blunderbusses that the women used had a short range and were very loud. The artillery mainly contributed to the Kingdom of Dahomey's intimidation strategy. The Agbarya wore a red and blue blouse and culottes.



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The women soldiers of Dahomey

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

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



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