



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

TAYTU BETUL

THE RISE OF AN ITEGE



UNESCO Series on Women in African History





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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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Comic strip
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School Assembly at Embu County Primary.
Photograph by Movie Montain Trust.



1 Introduction

Spotlight on women!

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

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

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

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

Visit and share the UNESCO website on Women Figures in African History:

www.unesco.org/womeninafrica



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



Photograph by UNESCO/M. Benchelah.



Photograph by Almanaque Lusofonista, 2013.

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

Taytu Betul, the Rise of an Itege

Taytu Betul (c.1851–1918), wife of Menelik (King of Shoa and later Negus Negast or King of Kings), was a formidable queen and empress of Ethiopia. She used her exceptional intelligence to strengthen and extend her power through an adroit blend of patronage, political marriages and leadership craft. Determined to resist imperialist designs on her country, she increasingly opposed any negotiations that would result in the loss of Ethiopian territory. When diplomacy gave way to war, she rode out at the head of her own army, at her husband's side.

It was she who devised the plan which led to the Ethiopian victory at Makalle, and her presence was crucial in the Ethiopian victory at Adwa in 1896, the most significant victory of any African army during the climax of European colonialism.

She founded Addis Ababa, which remains Ethiopia's capital city today, and the final decades of her reign witnessed a period of modernization, which gradually opened Ethiopia up to trade and greater technical expertise. She also provided the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian community in Jerusalem with dignified housing, and financed the construction of the dome of the impressive church Debre Genet. As her husband fell ill, she began to concentrate more and more power in her own hands. This eventually provoked public agitation against her, and forced her into retirement.



3 Comic strip

Taytu Betul, the Rise of an Itege

Foreword

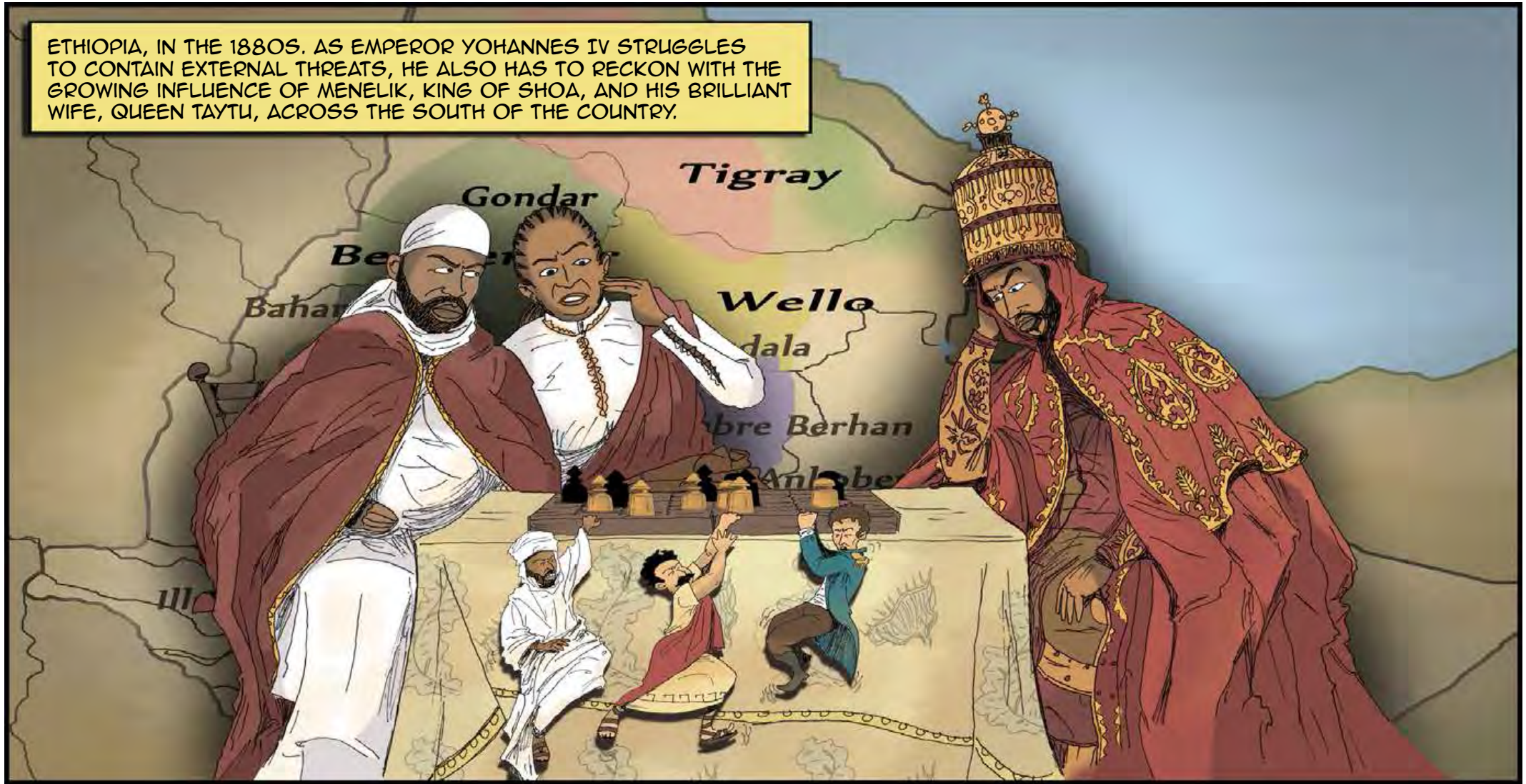
The following comic strip is an interpretation of certain periods of the life of Taytu Betul and Menelik II.

The illustrations are based on historical and iconographic research on Taytu Betul, Menelik II and the end of the nineteenth century Ethiopia. They do not claim to be an exact representation of the events, people, architecture, hairstyles, or clothing of the period.



Ethiopian monastery of Deir es-Sultan, Jerusalem.
Photograph by Flavio, 2010.

ETHIOPIA, IN THE 1880S. AS EMPEROR YOHANNES IV STRUGGLES TO CONTAIN EXTERNAL THREATS, HE ALSO HAS TO RECKON WITH THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF MENELIK, KING OF SHOA, AND HIS BRILLIANT WIFE, QUEEN TAYTU, ACROSS THE SOUTH OF THE COUNTRY.

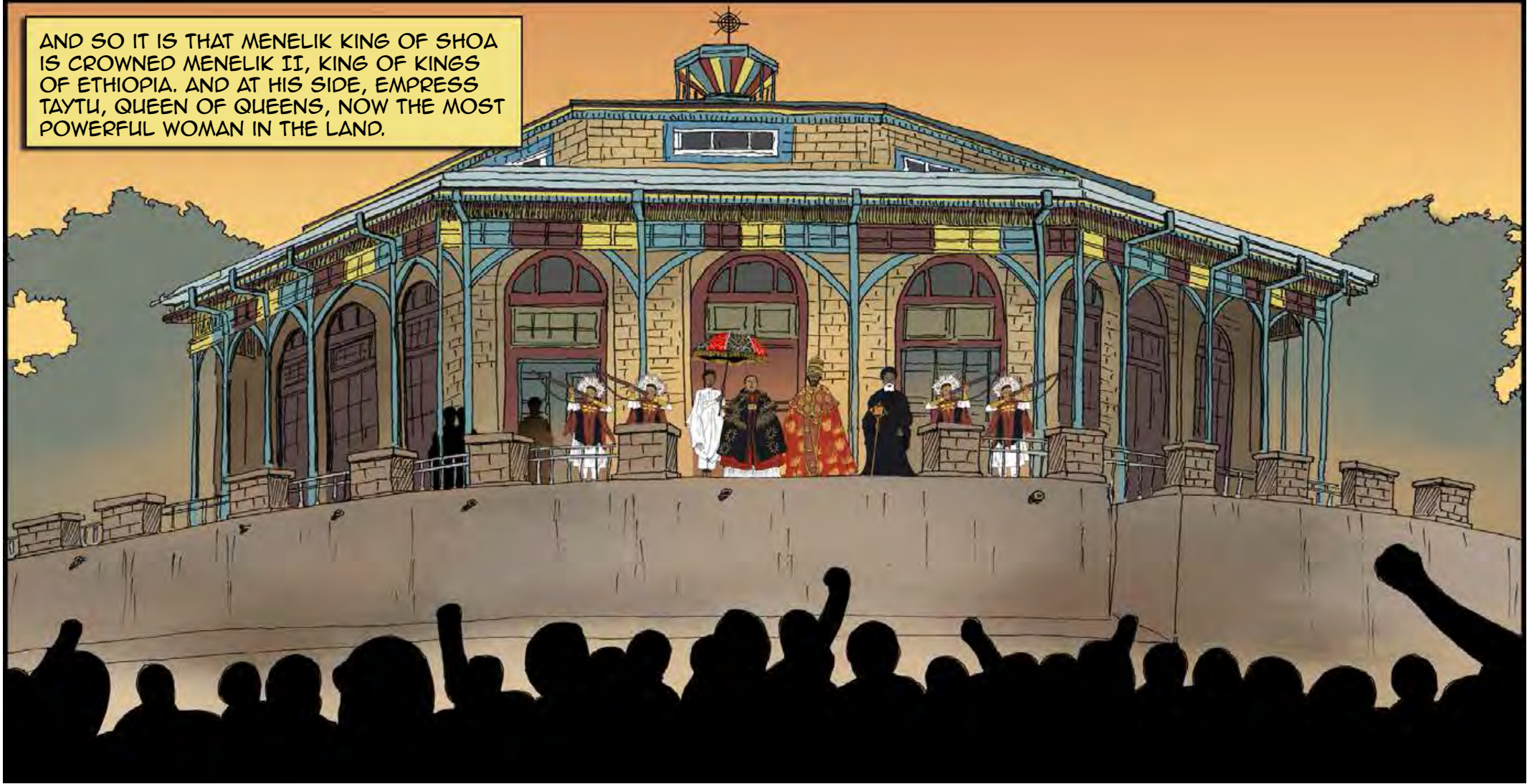




ONE DAY, IN THE YEAR 1889, EMPEROR YOHANNES IV, DESPERATELY TRYING TO PRESERVE THE INTEGRITY OF HIS EMPIRE FROM INVADING MAHDISTS IN THE NORTH OF THE COUNTRY, FALLS FROM HIS HORSE, MORTALLY WOUNDED.

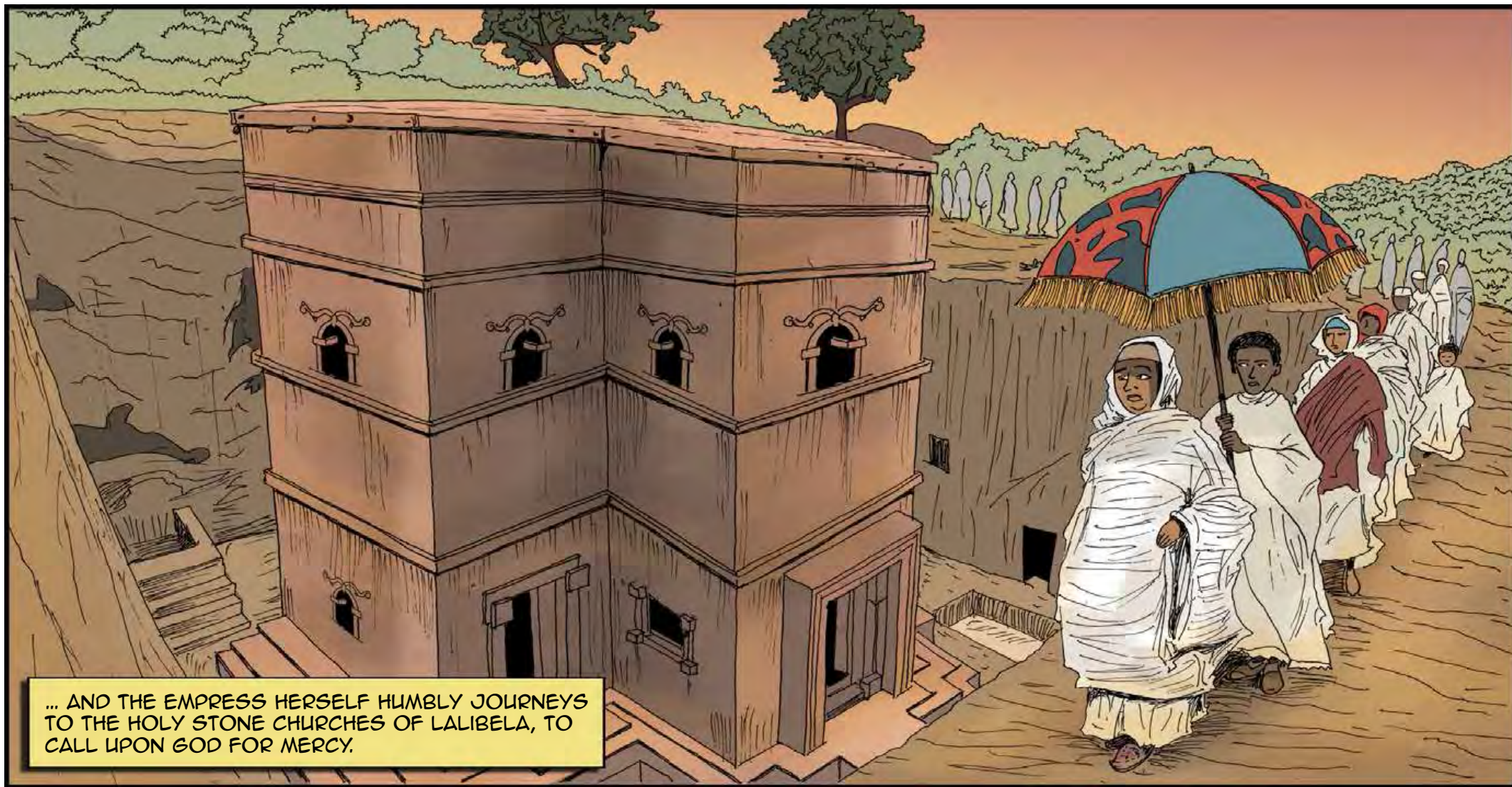


AND SO IT IS THAT MENELIK KING OF SHOA
IS CROWNED MENELIK II, KING OF KINGS
OF ETHIOPIA. AND AT HIS SIDE, EMPRESS
TAYTU, QUEEN OF QUEENS, NOW THE MOST
POWERFUL WOMAN IN THE LAND.

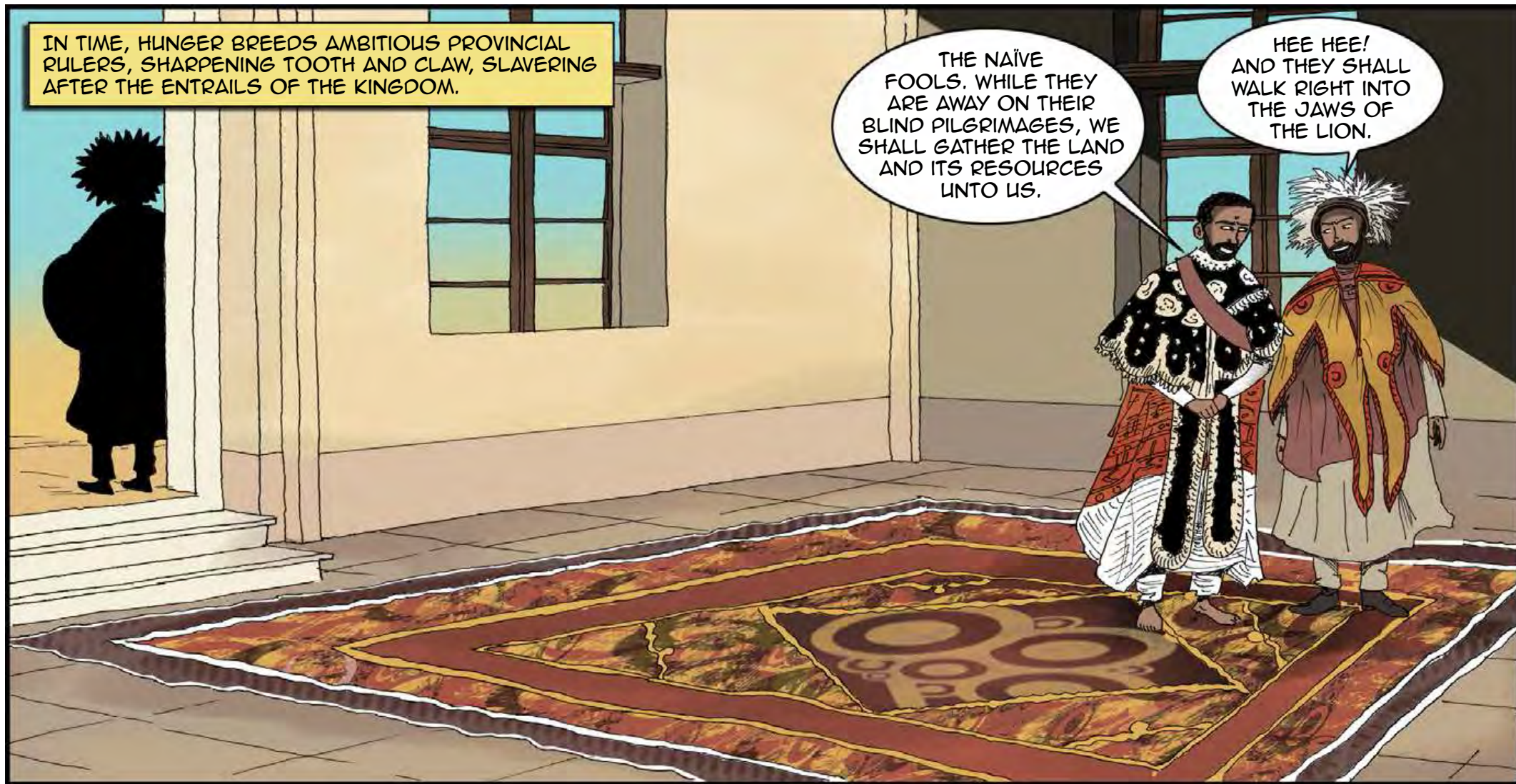


AND YET THE LAVISH CORONATION CEREMONY IS FOLLOWED BY YEARS OF FAMINE, WHICH CASTS A PALL OVER THE LAND. ALTHOUGH EMPRESS TAYTU HAD BEEN HAILED AS THE LIGHT OF ETHIOPIA, MANY POOR FAMILIES PERISH ...

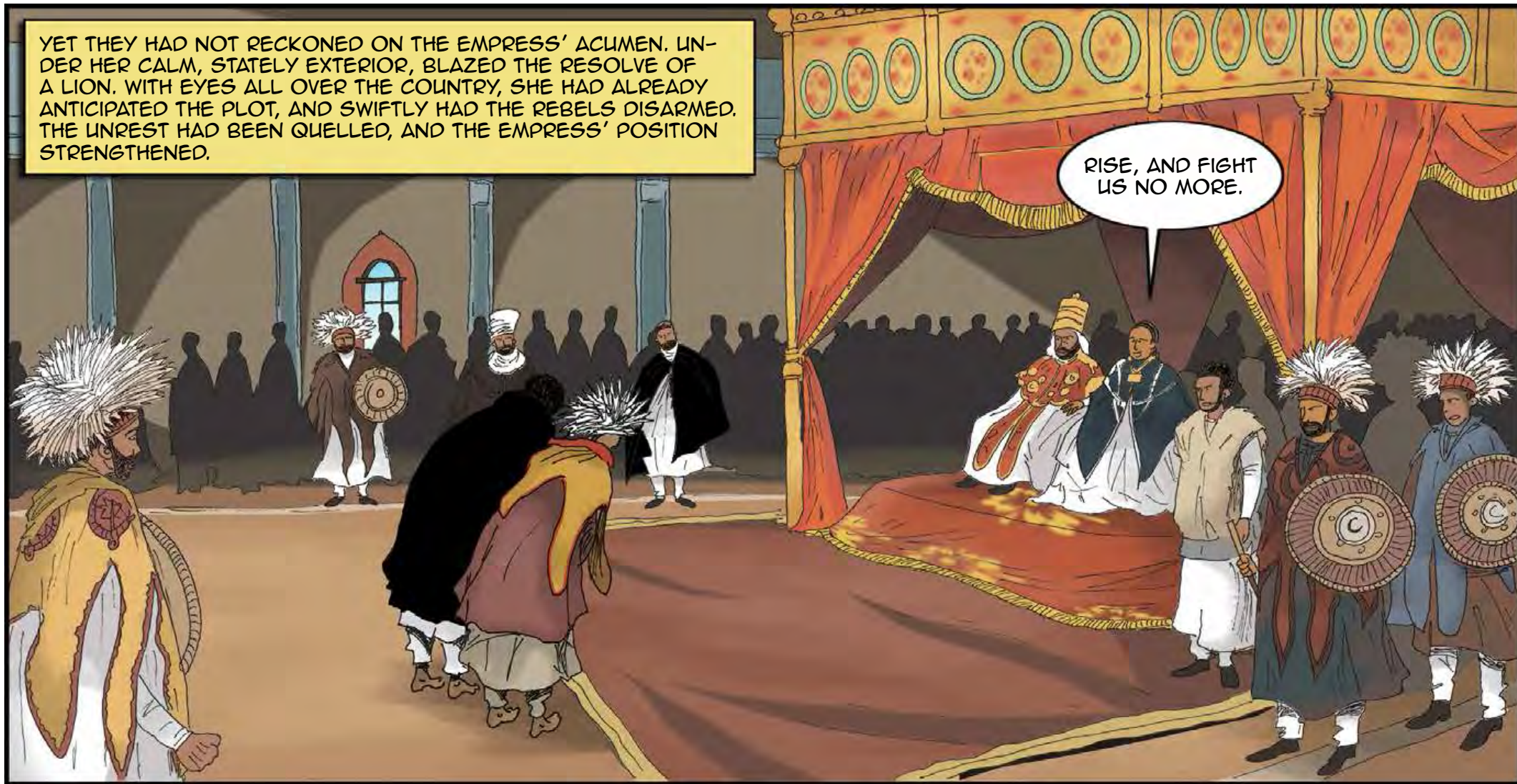


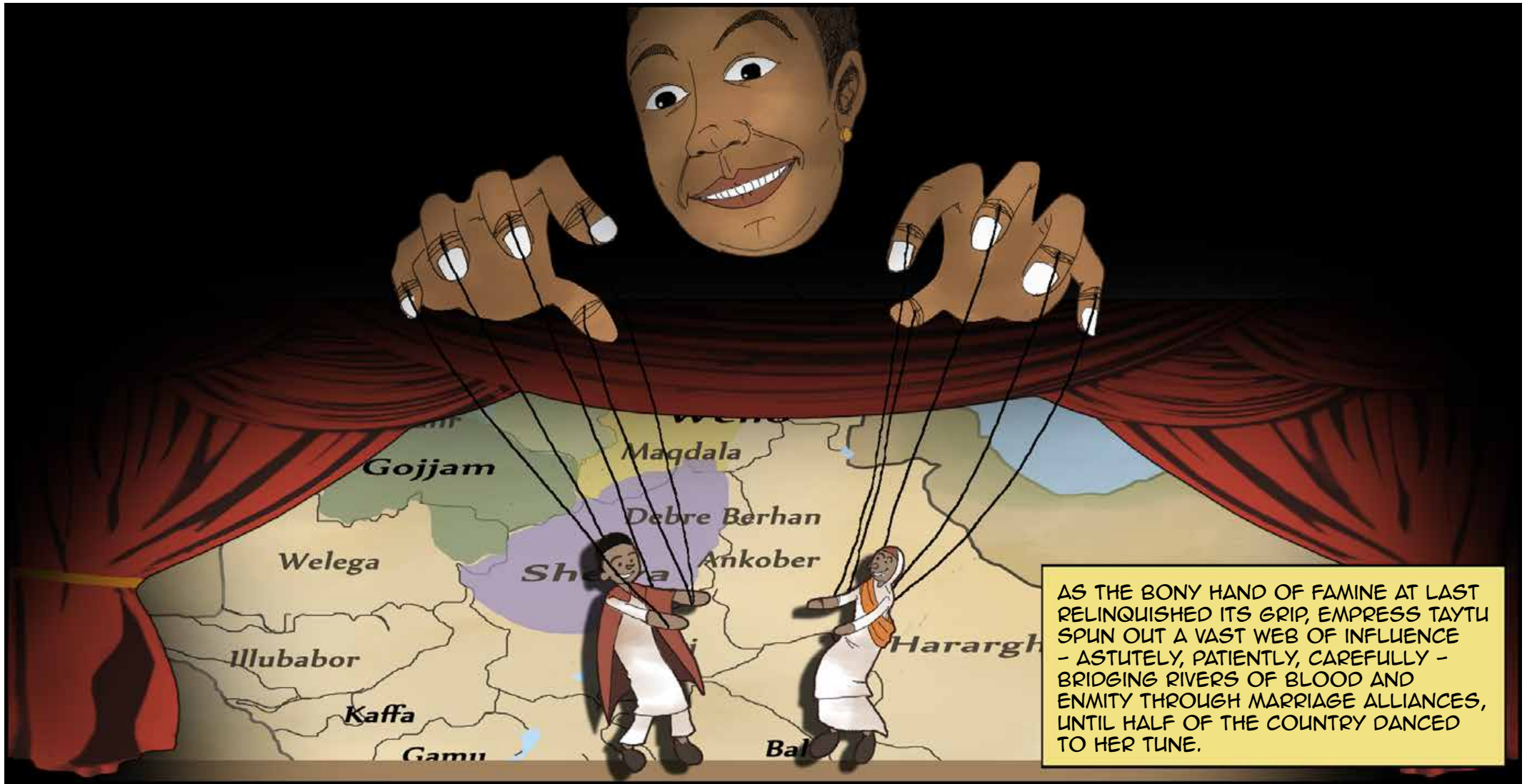


... AND THE EMPRESS HERSELF HUMBLY JOURNEYS TO THE HOLY STONE CHURCHES OF LALIBELA, TO CALL UPON GOD FOR MERCY.



YET THEY HAD NOT RECKONED ON THE EMPRESS' ACUMEN. UNDER HER CALM, STATELY EXTERIOR, BLAZED THE RESOLVE OF A LION. WITH EYES ALL OVER THE COUNTRY, SHE HAD ALREADY ANTICIPATED THE PLOT, AND SWIFTLY HAD THE REBELS DISARMED. THE UNREST HAD BEEN QUELLED, AND THE EMPRESS' POSITION STRENGTHENED.





MEANWHILE, BLIND TO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERNAL DEVELOPMENTS IN ETHIOPIA, THE ITALIAN GOVERNMENT HAD BECOME DRUNK ON THE FANTASY OF POSSESSING AN AFRICAN COLONY, AND FOUNDING A SECOND ROMAN EMPIRE.



I CAME,
I SAW,
I CONQUERED!

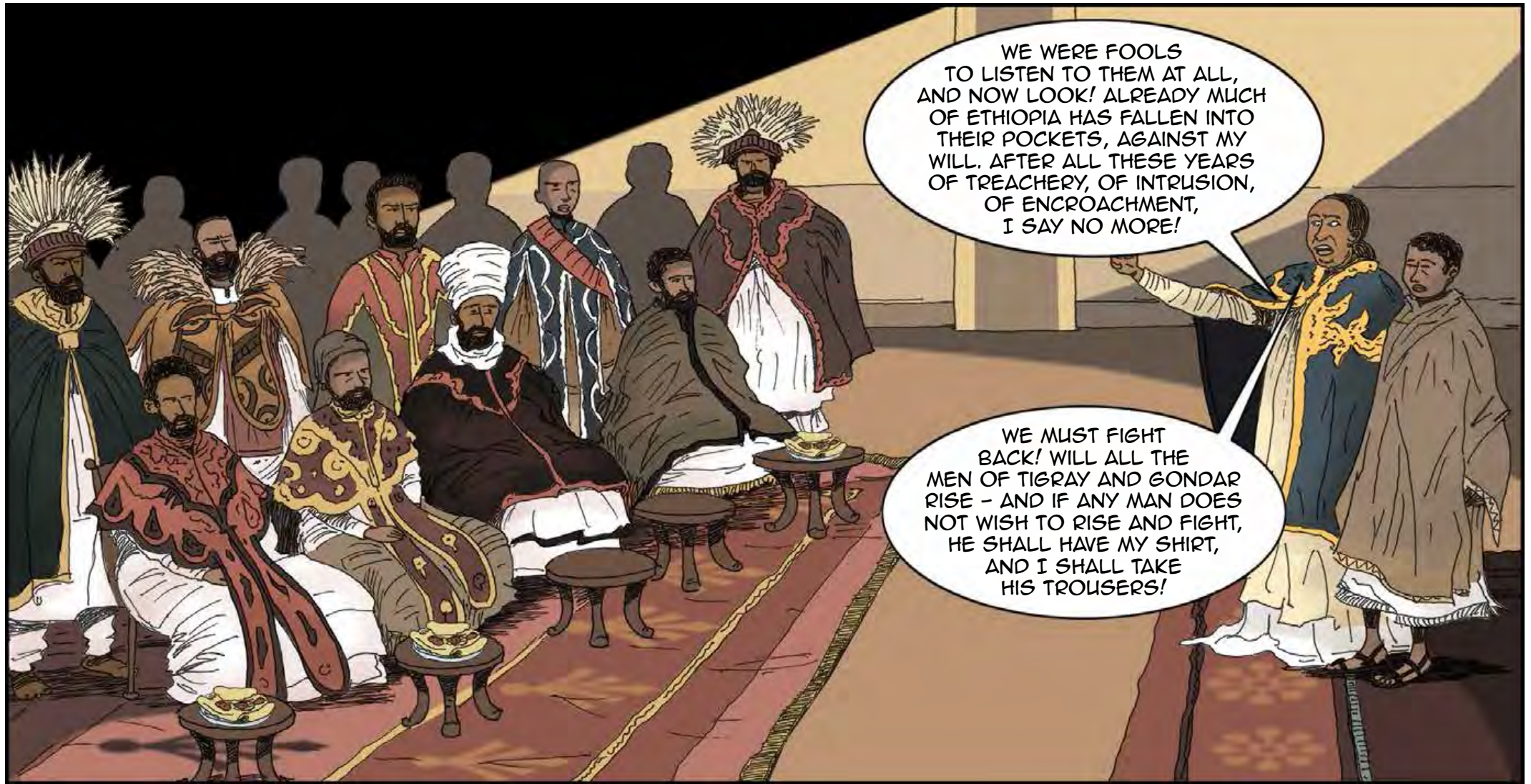


2 MAY, 1889. UNBEKNOWNST TO EMPEROR MENELIK, THE ITALIAN VERSION OF A FRIENDSHIP TREATY SIGNED BETWEEN ITALY AND ETHIOPIA IS CRAFTILY ALTERED, AND CLAIMS TO MAKE ETHIOPIA AN ITALIAN PROTECTORATE.



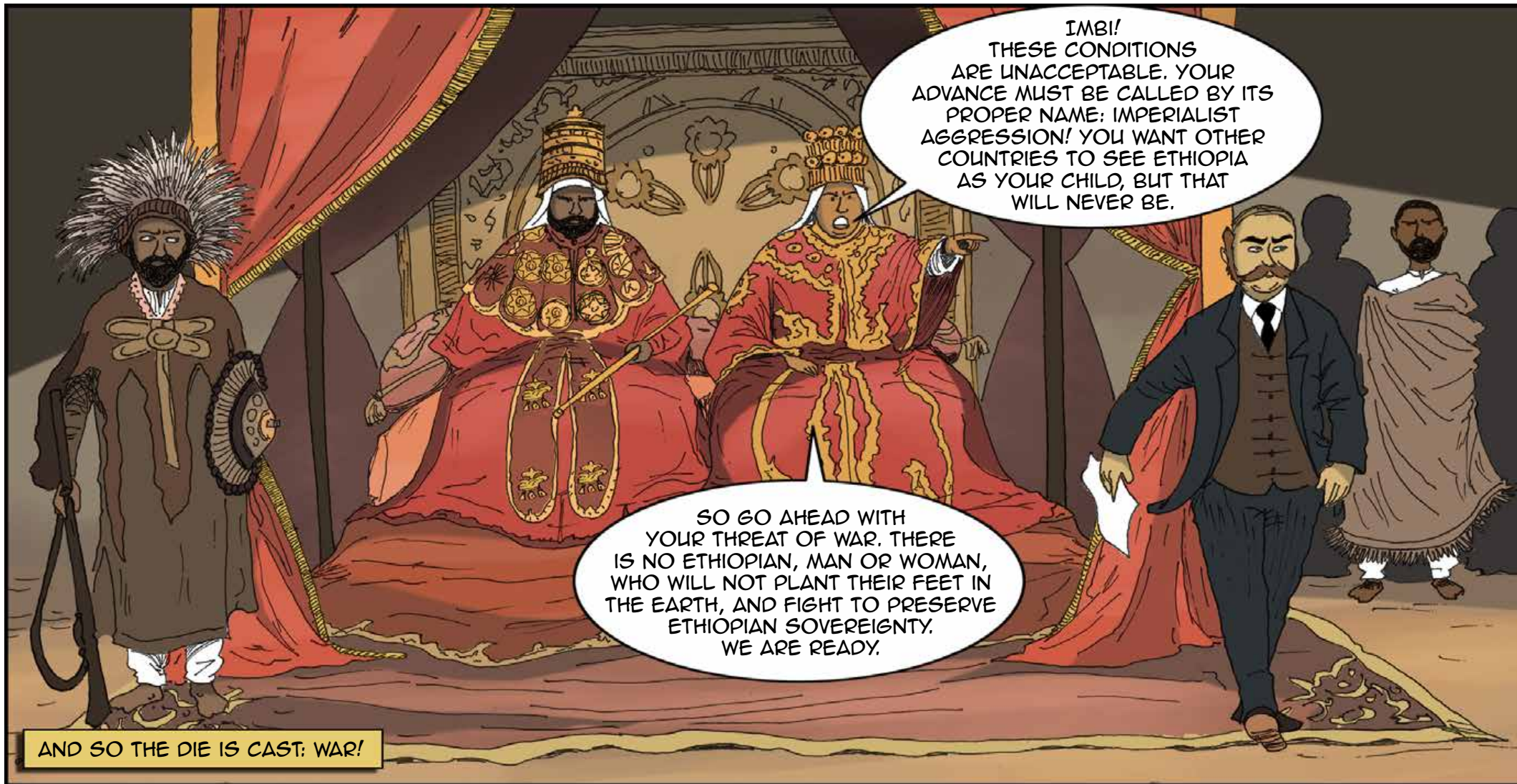
WHEN THE DECEIT IS UNCOVERED...





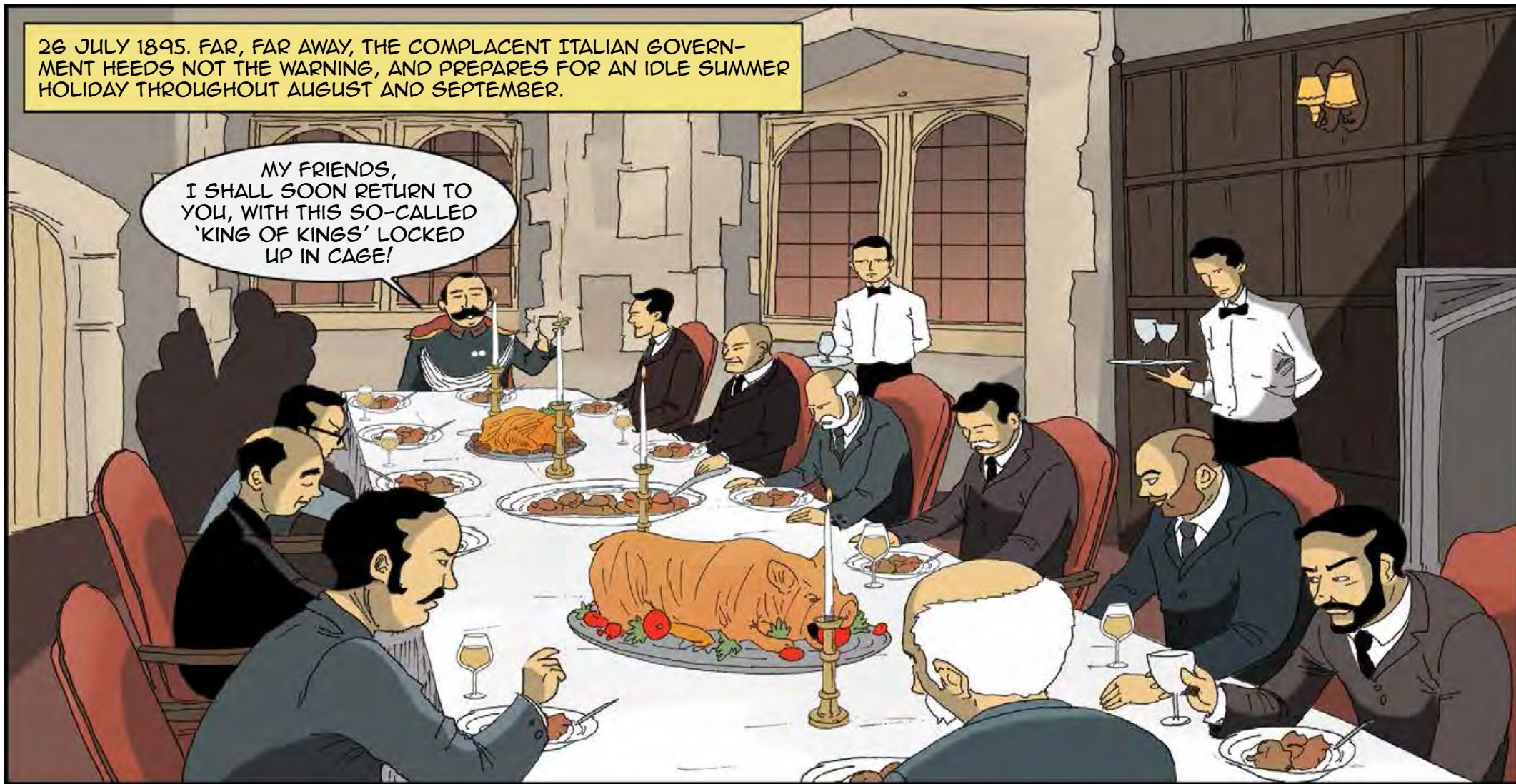
WE WERE FOOLS
TO LISTEN TO THEM AT ALL,
AND NOW LOOK! ALREADY MUCH
OF ETHIOPIA HAS FALLEN INTO
THEIR POCKETS, AGAINST MY
WILL. AFTER ALL THESE YEARS
OF TREACHERY, OF INTRUSION,
OF ENCROACHMENT,
I SAY NO MORE!

WE MUST FIGHT
BACK! WILL ALL THE
MEN OF TIGRAY AND GONDAR
RISE - AND IF ANY MAN DOES
NOT WISH TO RISE AND FIGHT,
HE SHALL HAVE MY SHIRT,
AND I SHALL TAKE
HIS TROUSERS!

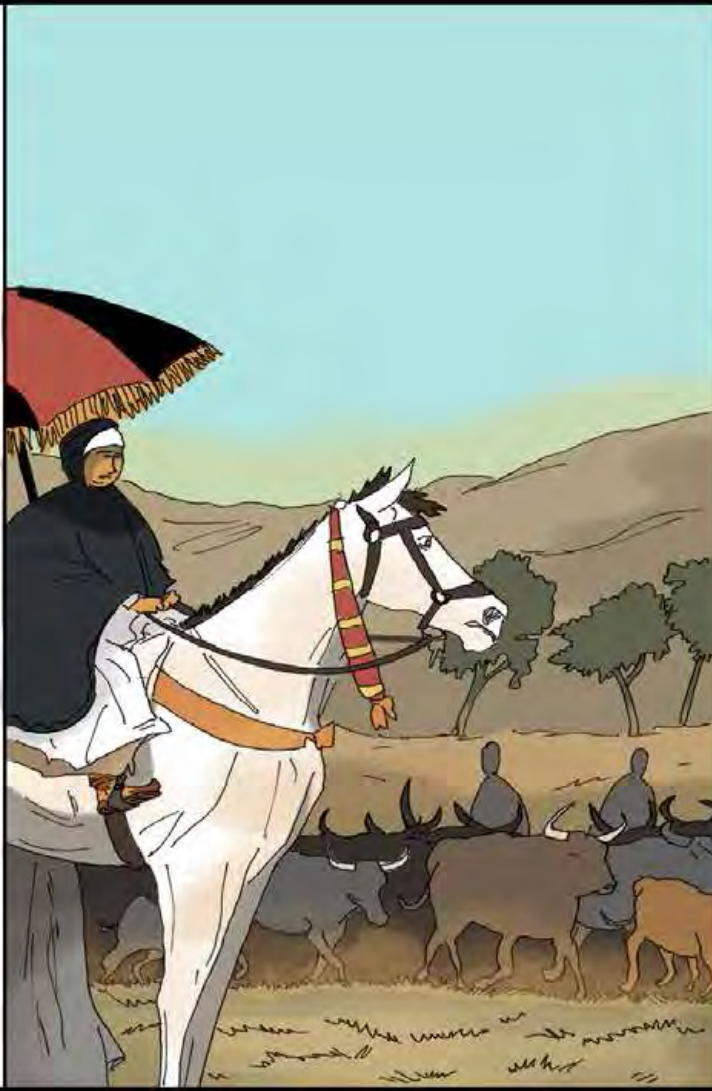


26 JULY 1895. FAR, FAR AWAY, THE COMPLACENT ITALIAN GOVERNMENT HEEDS NOT THE WARNING, AND PREPARES FOR AN IDLE SUMMER HOLIDAY THROUGHOUT AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER.

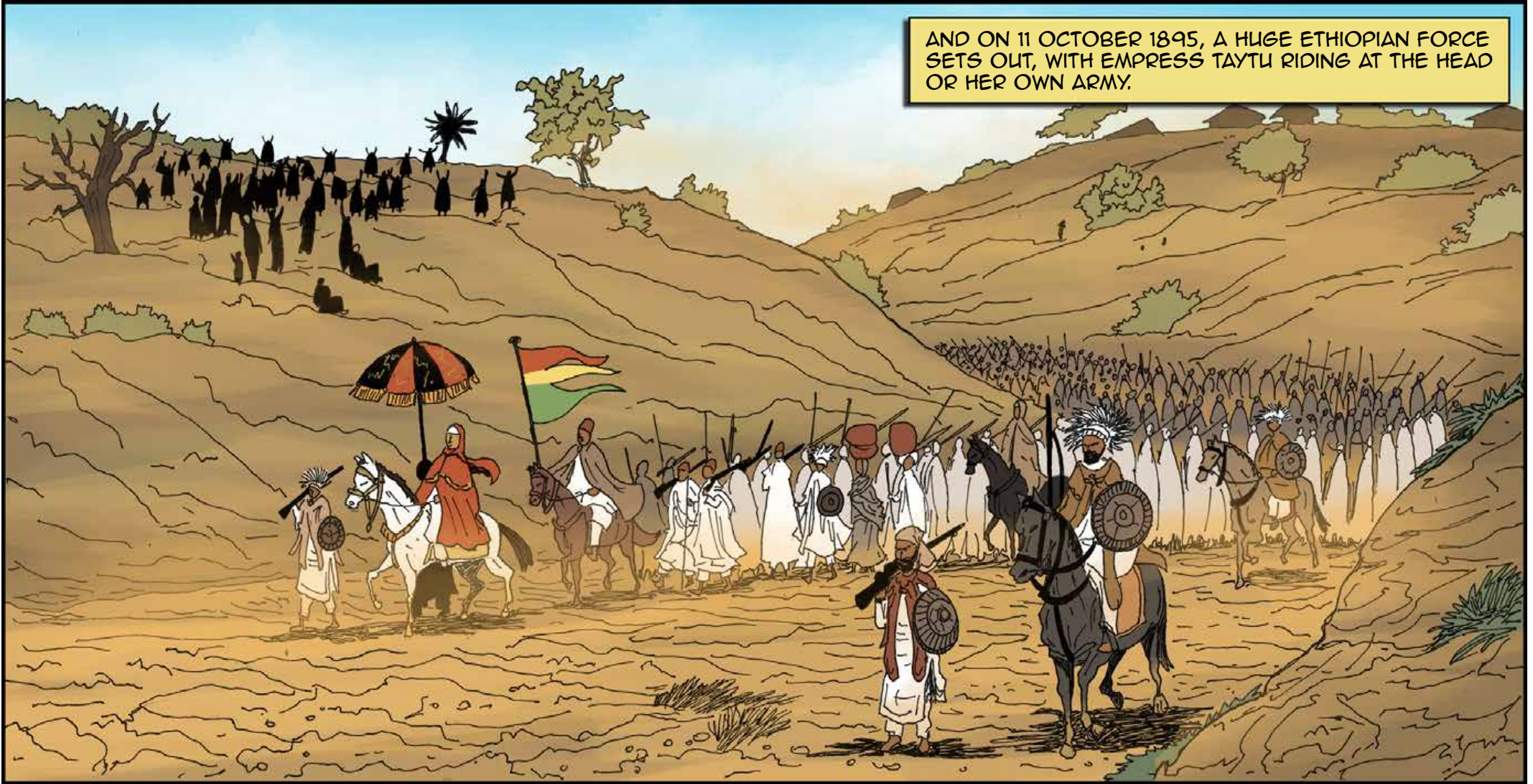
MY FRIENDS,
I SHALL SOON RETURN TO
YOU, WITH THIS SO-CALLED
'KING OF KINGS' LOCKED
UP IN CAGE!



IN ETHIOPIA, HOWEVER, METICULOUS
PREPARATIONS FOR WAR ARE UNDERWAY ...



AND ON 11 OCTOBER 1895, A HUGE ETHIOPIAN FORCE SETS OUT, WITH EMPRESS TAYTU RIDING AT THE HEAD OF HER OWN ARMY.

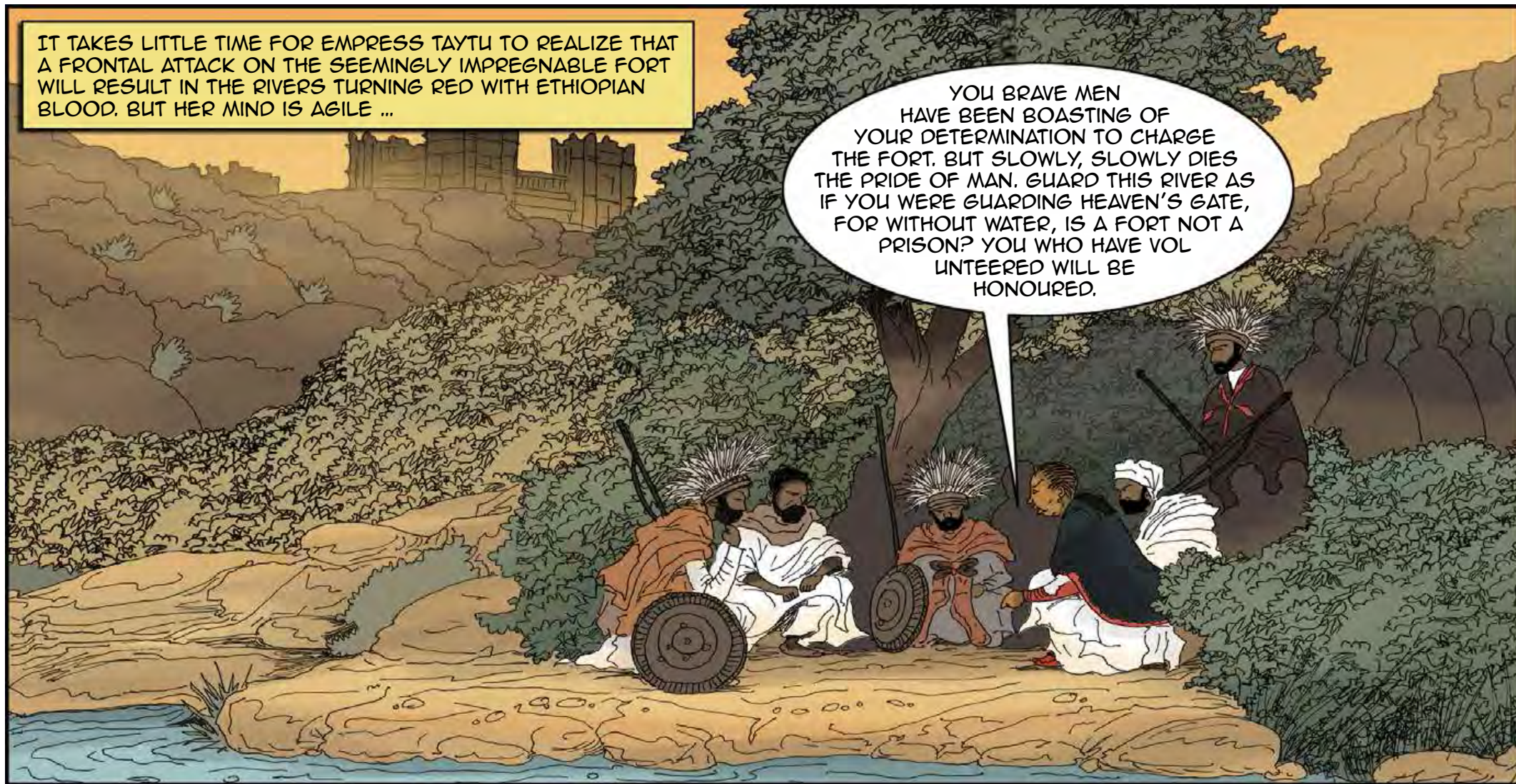




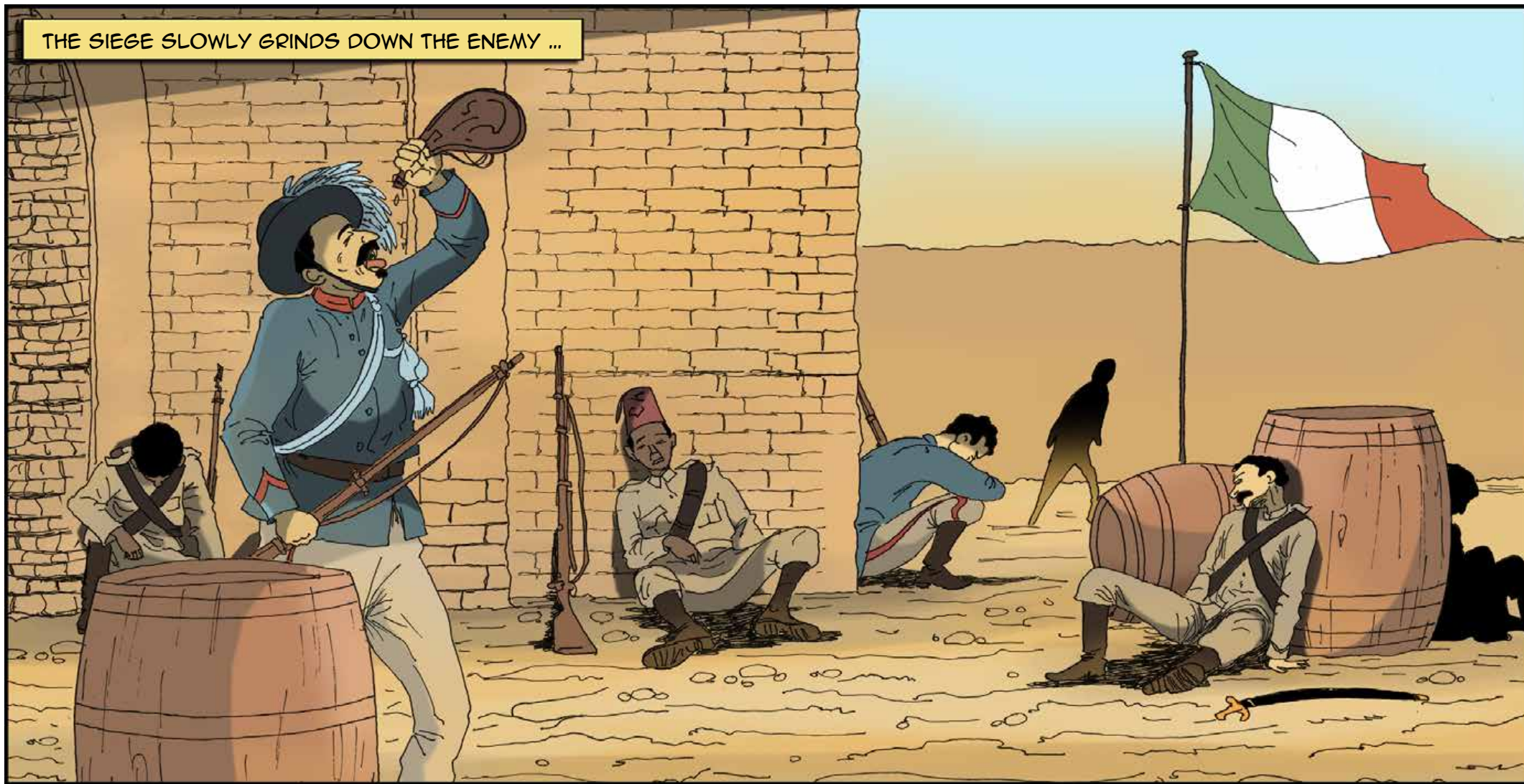
AFTER A LONG, GRUELING MARCH, THEY APPROACH MAKALLE,
WHERE THE ITALIANS HAVE ESTABLISHED A FORMIDABLE FORT.

IT TAKES LITTLE TIME FOR EMPRESS TAYTU TO REALIZE THAT A FRONTAL ATTACK ON THE SEEMINGLY IMPREGNABLE FORT WILL RESULT IN THE RIVERS TURNING RED WITH ETHIOPIAN BLOOD. BUT HER MIND IS AGILE ...

YOU BRAVE MEN
HAVE BEEN BOASTING OF
YOUR DETERMINATION TO CHARGE
THE FORT. BUT SLOWLY, SLOWLY DIES
THE PRIDE OF MAN. GUARD THIS RIVER AS
IF YOU WERE GUARDING HEAVEN'S GATE,
FOR WITHOUT WATER, IS A FORT NOT A
PRISON? YOU WHO HAVE VOL
UNTEERED WILL BE
HONoured.



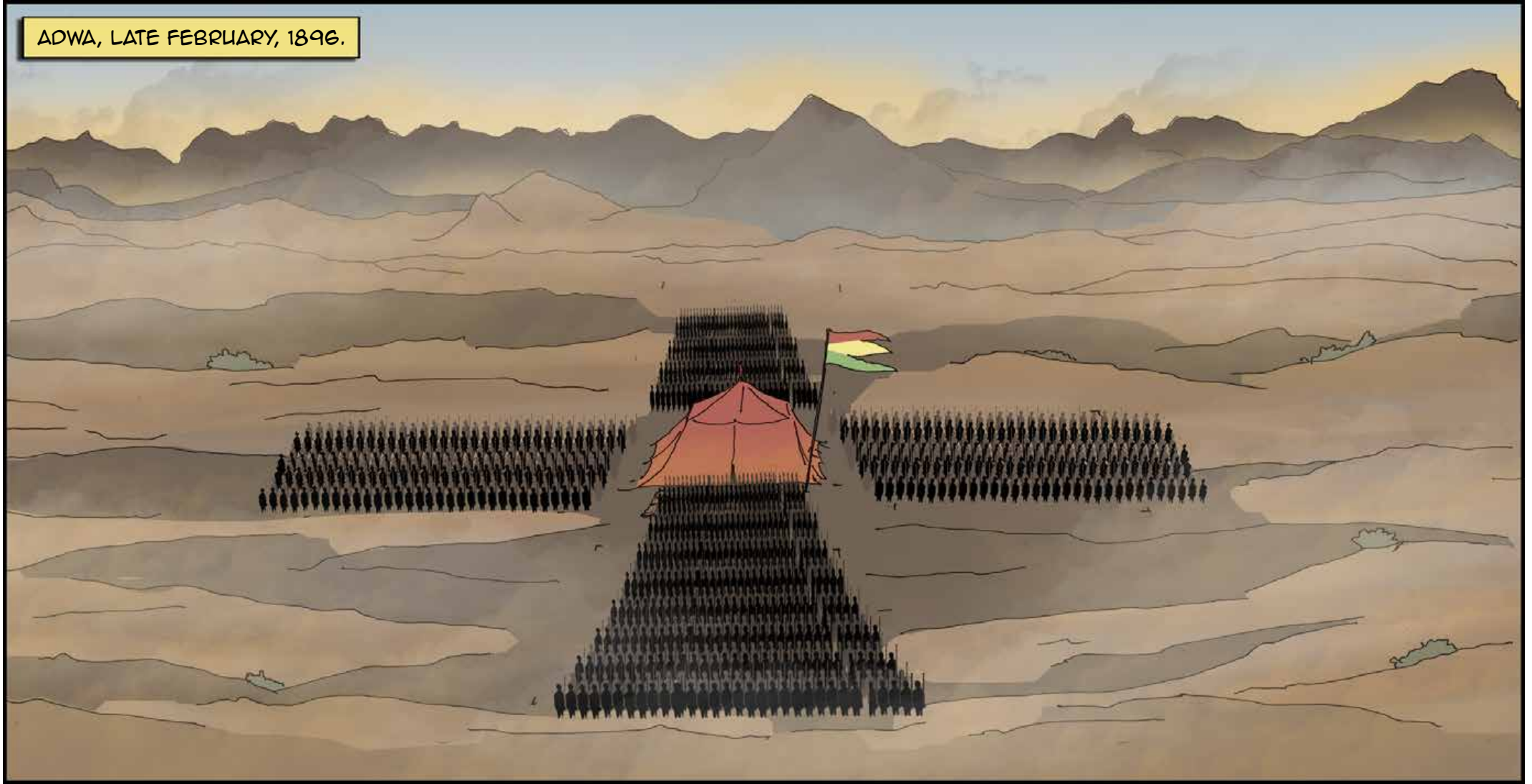
THE SIEGE SLOWLY GRINDS DOWN THE ENEMY ...



... UNTIL THE ITALIANS ARE FORCED TO SURRENDER THE FORT.
BUT THE LARGER BATTLE LOOMS LARGE ON THE HORIZON.



ADWA, LATE FEBRUARY, 1896.



1 MARCH 1896, AT 4 O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING, AS
THE EMPEROR AND EMPRESS PERFORM THEIR DIVINE
OFFICES, A MESSENGER RUNS IN WITH NEWS OF AN
ITALIAN ATTACK ...

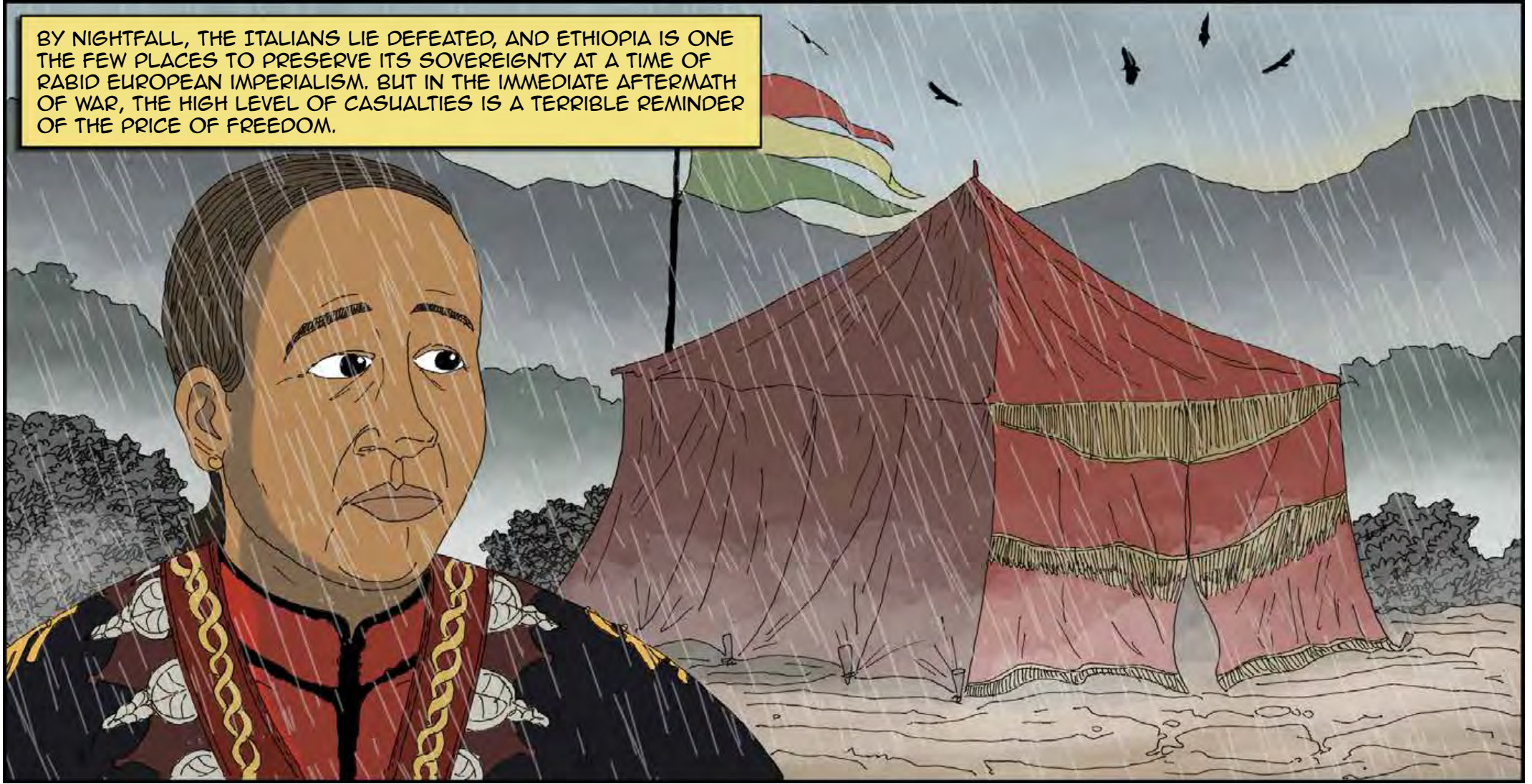


THE BATTLE QUICKLY TURNS THE WAY OF THE ETHIOPIAN ARMY, AND EMPRESS TAYTU AND HER WOMEN SOLDIERS ARE TIRELESS IN THEIR EFFORTS.

BRING WATER
TO OUR THIRSTY
LIPS ON THE BATTLEFIELD!
THE ITALIANS ARE IN OUR
GRIP - LET US NOT
RELEASE THEM!



BY NIGHTFALL, THE ITALIANS LIE DEFEATED, AND ETHIOPIA IS ONE OF THE FEW PLACES TO PRESERVE ITS SOVEREIGNTY AT A TIME OF RABID EUROPEAN IMPERIALISM. BUT IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF WAR, THE HIGH LEVEL OF CASUALTIES IS A TERRIBLE REMINDER OF THE PRICE OF FREEDOM.



NEVERTHELESS, THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ETHIOPIAN VICTORY AT ADWA RESONATED THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, AND ETHIOPIA BECAME A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE FOR ALL PEOPLES FIGHTING RACIST OPPRESSION.

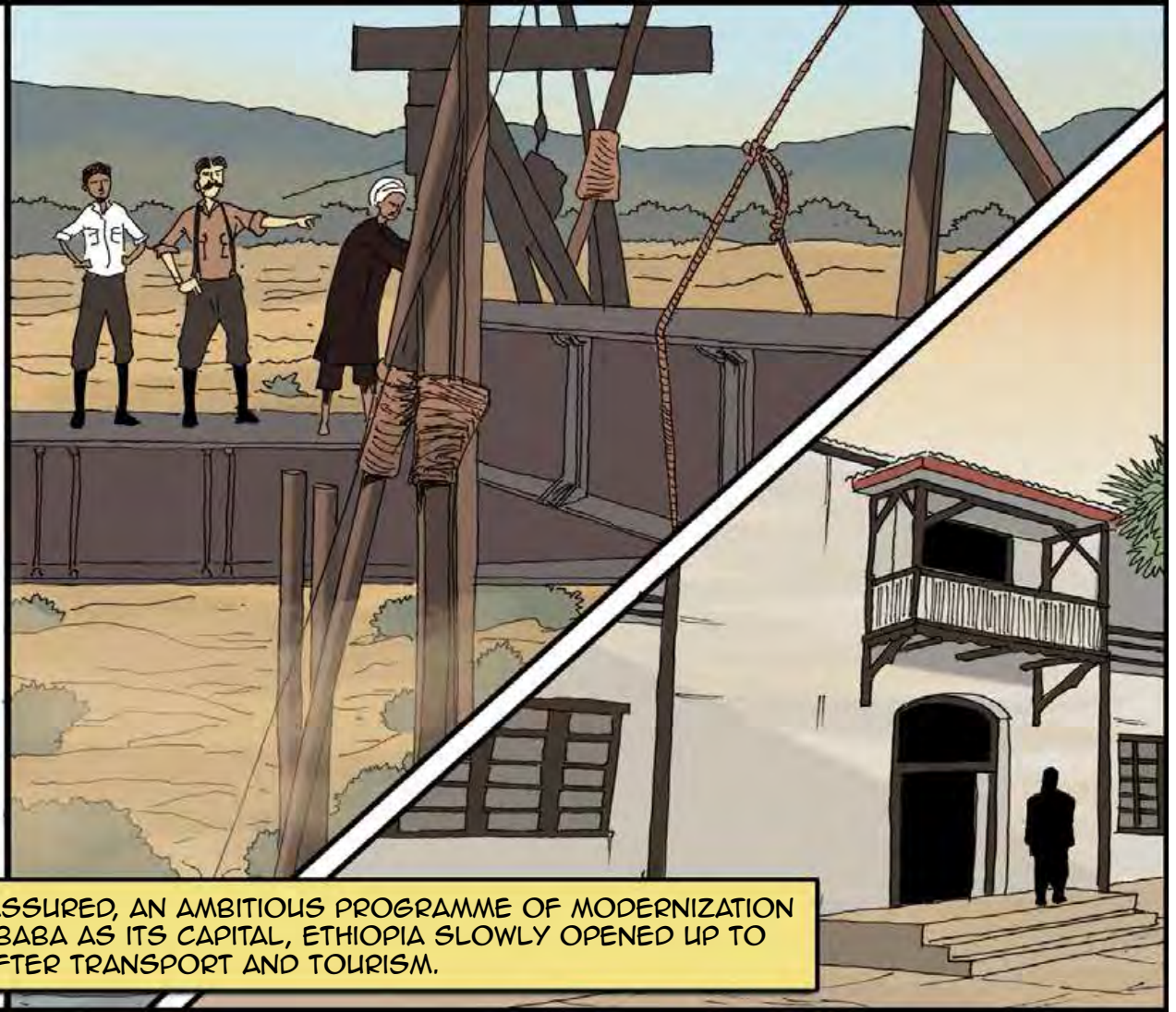
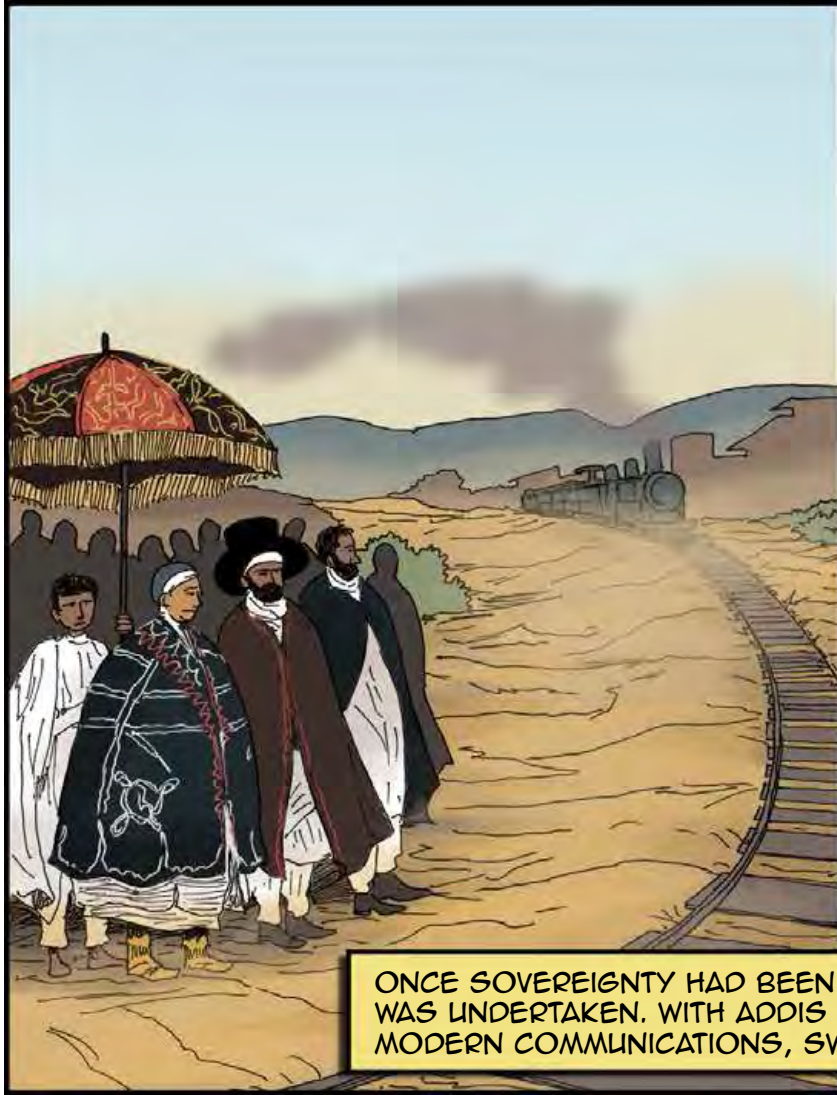
THE VICTORY
IN ADWA IS FOR THE
SONS AND DAUGHTERS
OF ETHIOPIA THE
WORLD OVER!

ETHIOPIA
UNBOUND

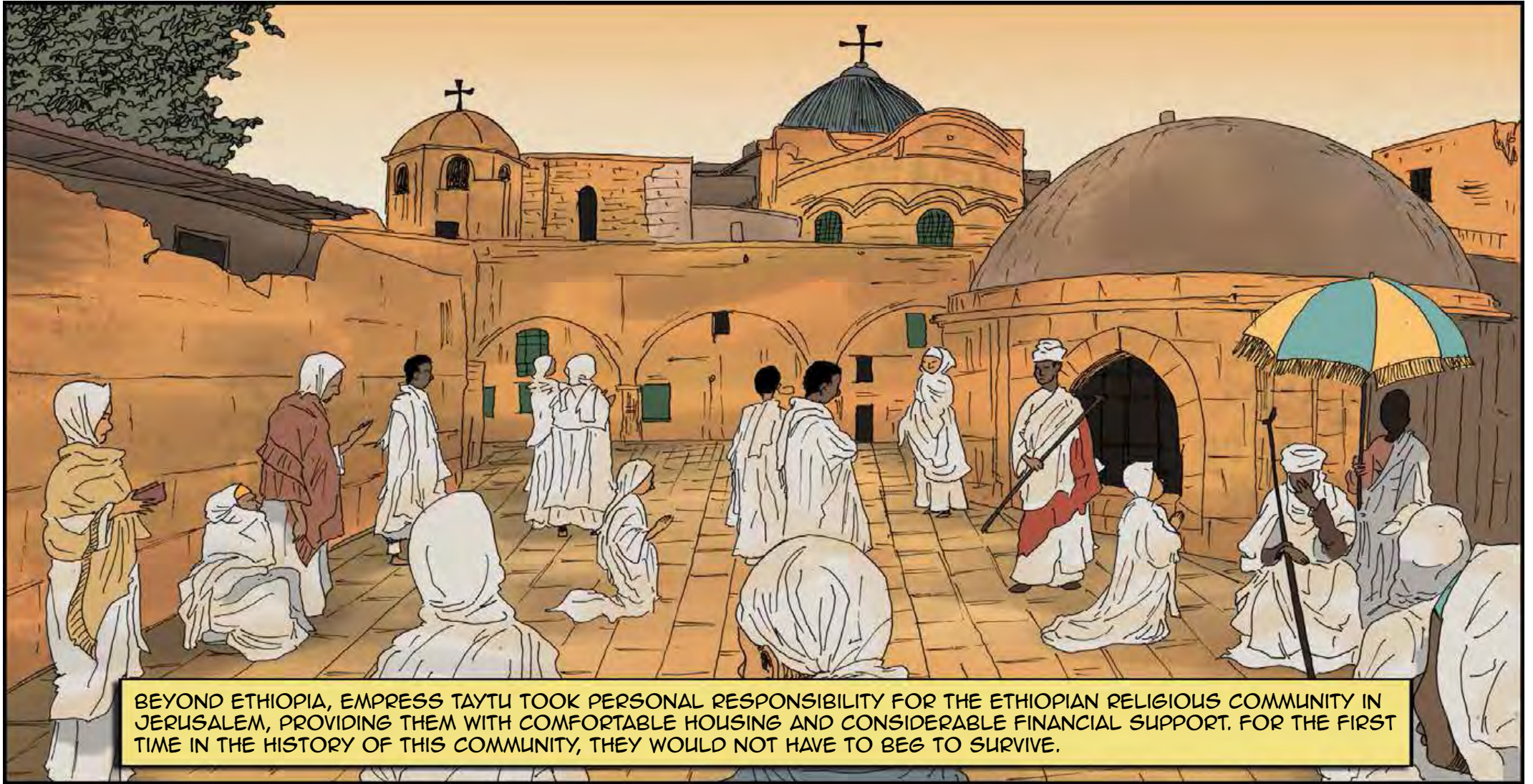
LECTURE TOUR:
ADELAIDE CASELY
HAYFORD,
FROM THE GIRLS'
VOCATIONAL
SCHOOL IN
FREETOWN

NOR, ALAS, WOULD ITALY FORGET THIS HISTORIC, CRUSHING DEFEAT,
TENDING ITS ANGER FOR ANOTHER CYCLE OF VIOLENCE, IN THE DARK
DAYS OF FASCISM OF THE 1930S ...

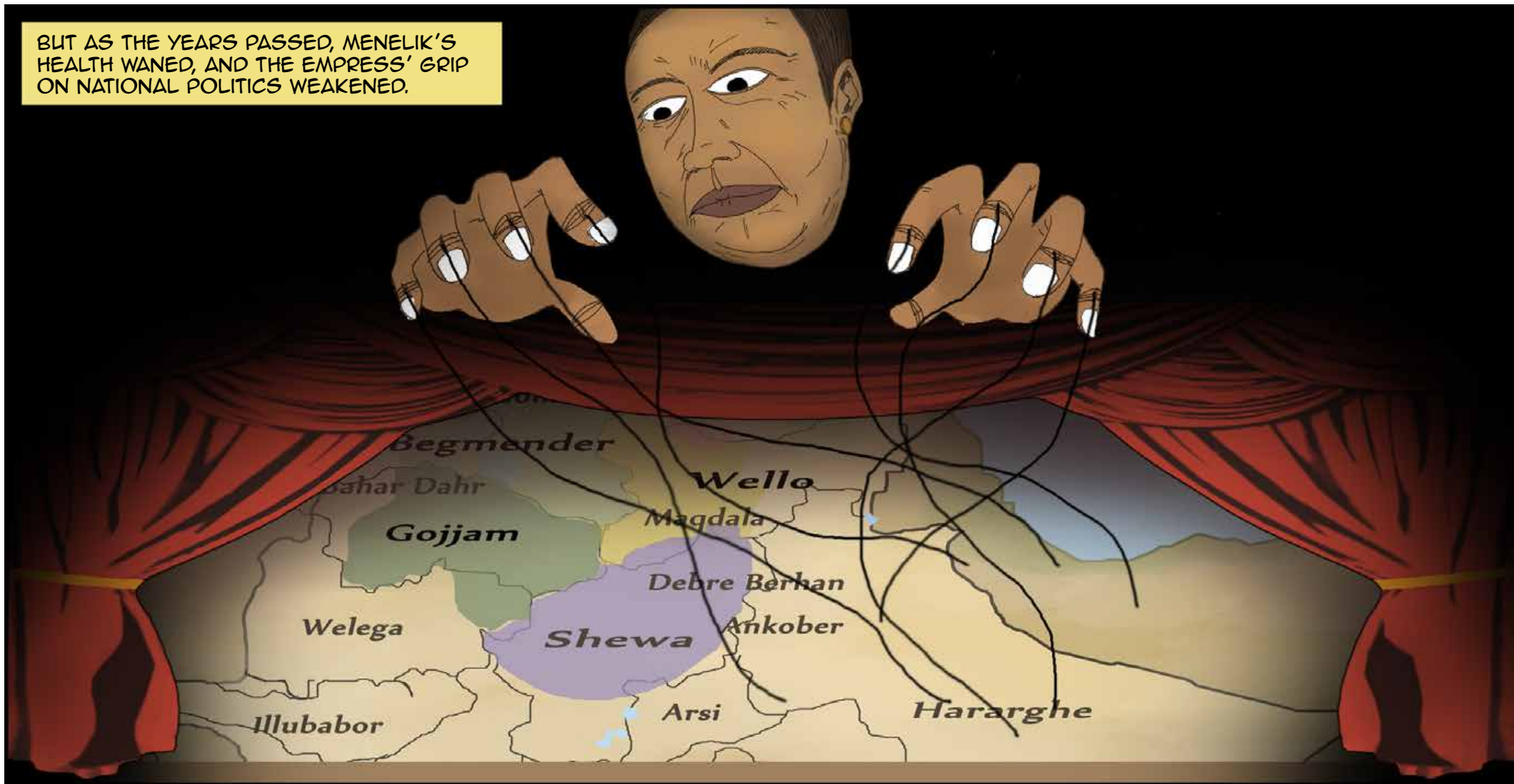


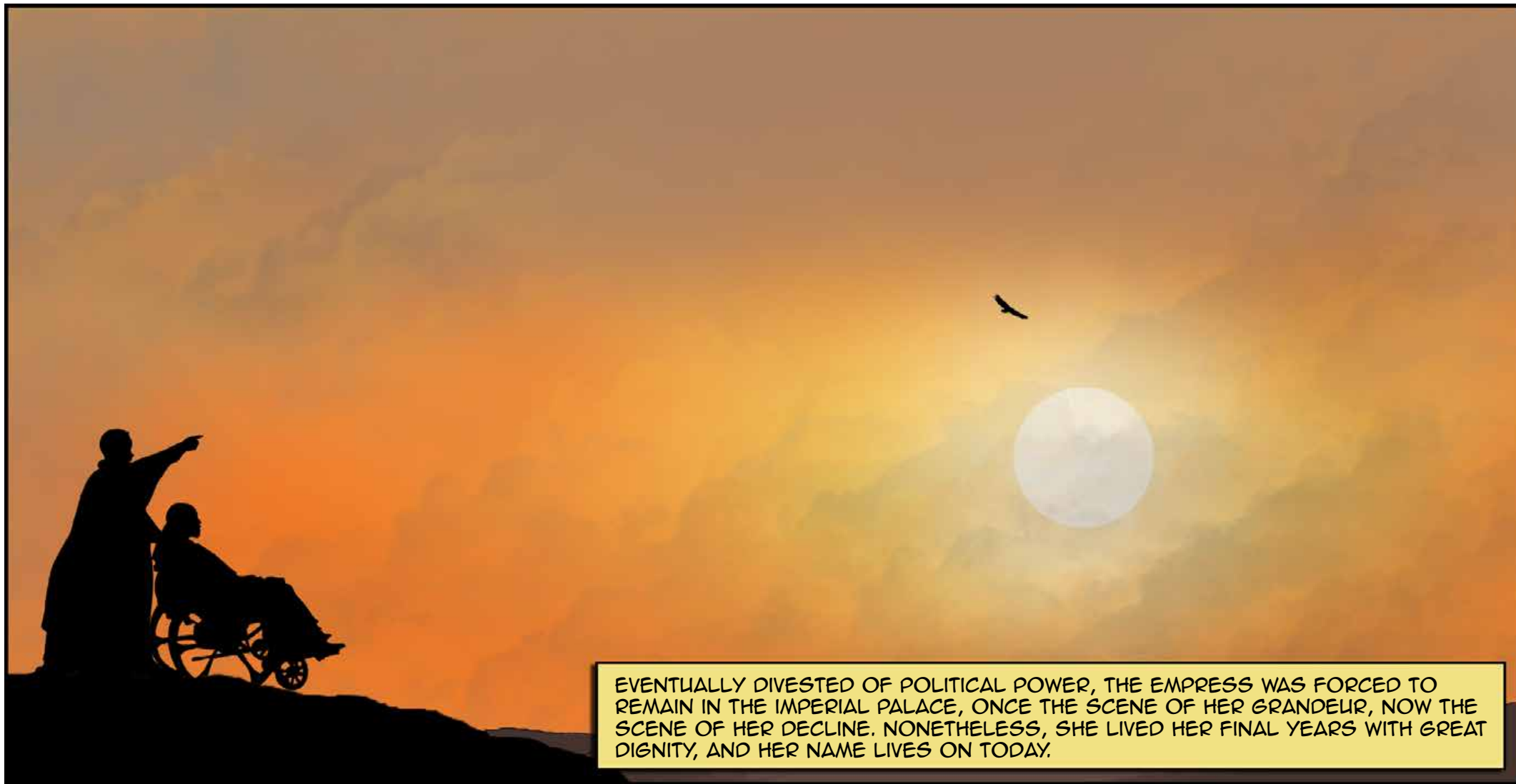


ONCE SOVEREIGNTY HAD BEEN ASSURED, AN AMBITIOUS PROGRAMME OF MODERNIZATION WAS UNDERTAKEN. WITH ADDIS ABABA AS ITS CAPITAL, ETHIOPIA SLOWLY OPENED UP TO MODERN COMMUNICATIONS, SWIFTER TRANSPORT AND TOURISM.



BUT AS THE YEARS PASSED, MENELIK'S HEALTH WANED, AND THE EMPRESS' GRIP ON NATIONAL POLITICS WEAKENED.





EVENTUALLY DIVESTED OF POLITICAL POWER, THE EMPRESS WAS FORCED TO REMAIN IN THE IMPERIAL PALACE, ONCE THE SCENE OF HER GRANDEUR, NOW THE SCENE OF HER DECLINE. NONETHELESS, SHE LIVED HER FINAL YEARS WITH GREAT DIGNITY, AND HER NAME LIVES ON TODAY.

4 Pedagogical Unit

SOMMAIRE

1. Empire and Marriage

1.1 Age of empire

1.2 Women and power

2. Taytu: the rise of an Itege

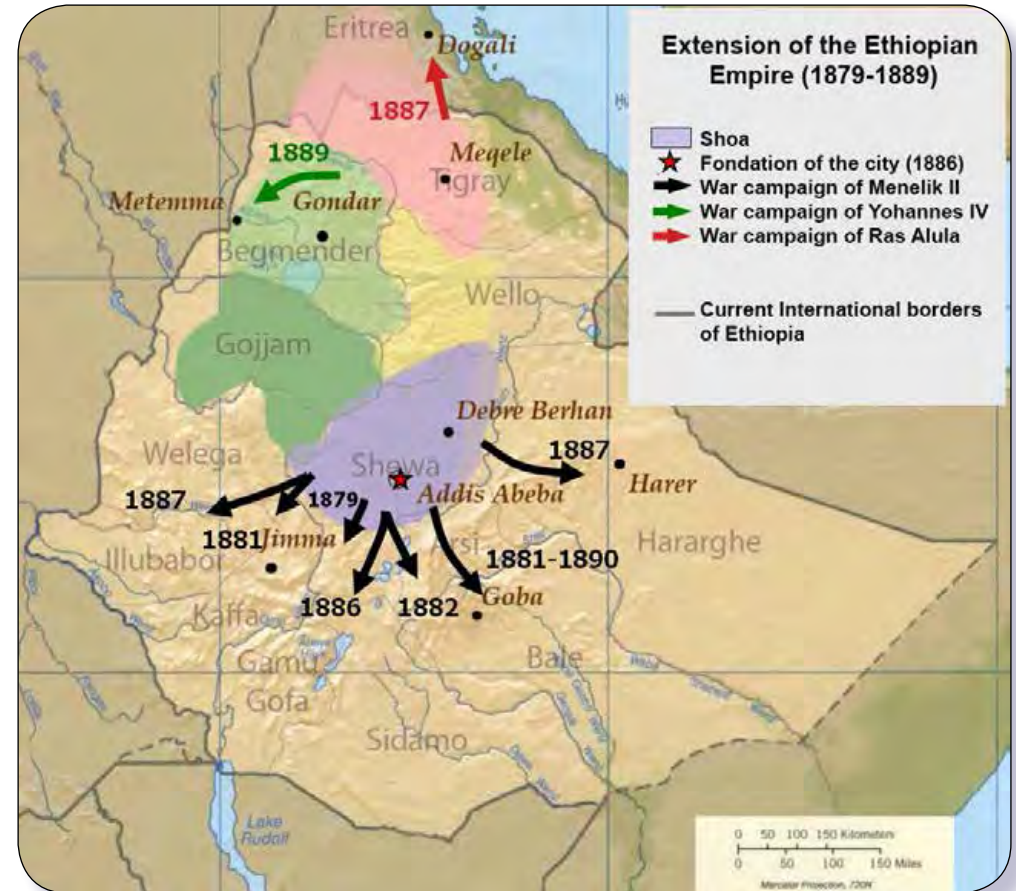
2.1 Education

2.2 An ideal husband

2.3 Itege

2.4 Early tests

2.5 Consolidating power



Extension of the Ethiopian Empire under Menelik II (1879-1889).



Article 17 of the Wuchale Treaty, 1889.



Italian victory of the war in Ethiopia, 1936.
Engraving by Achille Beltrame, 1936.
Published in "La Domenica del Corriere"
the 27 December 1936.



Railway in construction, Dirré-Dawa, Ethiopia.
Photograph by Alfred Ilg, 1902.

3. The external threat

3.1 A delicate triangle: Yohannes IV, Menelik, Italy

3.2 The Treaty of Wuchale

3.3 Diplomacy's end

4. The Italo-Ethiopian Wars

4.1 Women

4.2 Unity

4.3 Makalle, Adwa

4.4 The Italian fascist occupation (1935–1941)

5. The final years

5.1 The new flower

5.2 Modernization

5.3 Jerusalem

5.4 Decline

1. Empire and Marriage

1.1 Age of empire

Kasa Haylu's¹ coronation as Tewodros II in 1855² had important consequences in Ethiopian history. It re-established the title of Negus Negast ('King of Kings' or Emperor), as a single, supreme authority. As a result, the Zamana Masafent, or 'Age of Princes' (1769–1855), a turbulent period of warring provincial rulers, gradually passed into obscurity, as national themes emerged beyond divisions and regional isolation.

Tewodros II and his immediate successors, Tekle Giorgis II (r.1868–1871) and Yohannes IV (r.1871–1889), undertook to consolidate the power of the imperial centre, claiming descent from the biblical King Solomon. This process would reach its fullest expression during the reign of Menelik II (r.1889–1913), who led an expansionist drive through what he professed to be the historic lands of the ancient Christian Ethiopian Empire. As a result, many richly diverse peoples were gathered under a single, loosely organized political system, whose borders are recognizable today.

1 For Romanized transliterations from Amharic, the text generally follows the first edition of UNESCO's General History of Africa, vol. VII (Boahen, 1990).

2 The Ethiopian (Ge'ez) calendar year consists of twelve months of thirty days each, and one month of five days (six in leap years). It is dated seven years earlier than the Gregorian calendar (eight after January), due to differences in the calculation of Christ's birth. The Ethiopian calendar begins on 11 September (12 September in leap years). For ease of usage, the text follows the Gregorian calendar.



Tewodros II, Emperor of Abyssinia.
Engraving by Guillaume Lejean, 1865.



Ethiopian nobles during the coronation of King Edward VII of England, 12 August 1902.
Photograph by Lafayette Ltd., 1902, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1902.

1.2 Women and power

Both before and during this period, political marriage among the power elite was used:

- To breed new alliances;
- To afford, or gain access to, greater protection;
- To restore broken bonds; and
- And ultimately, to acquire and exercise power.

Given the right circumstances, astute women could acquire power through marriage, and exercise and maintain that power through political patronage (placing family and friends in positions of power in return for influence).

Historians are increasingly studying the discreet, subtle ways in which some women have been able to participate in power, despite innumerable barriers. In Ethiopia, marriage alliances among the ruling elite, in which women were often key actors, succeeded in forging a certain unity over and above regional and cultural differences, providing a frayed but lasting thread of continuity between the eighteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century.

2. Taytu: the rise of an Itege

2.1 Education

Taytu Betul was most likely born in 1851, with Ethiopia on the cusp of change. She was one of four children, all of whom – remarkably for a period in which birth conditions were difficult – survived into adulthood. Given the restricted educational opportunities available to women at the time, Taytu was exceptional: she could read and write Amharic, and understood Ge'ez, a language by then reserved for Ethiopian orthodox liturgy. She was also a skilled poet and chess-player, and played the begena, a stringed musical instrument.

2.2 An ideal husband

Taytu's aristocratic family held important positions throughout northern Ethiopia – in Simien, Gojjam, Yejju, Lasta, Wello and Begemdir – and Taytu grew up keenly aware that marriage could provide an intelligent woman with a road to power, however narrow.

In 1883, after four marriages, one of which left her with a favourable divorce settlement, Taytu Betul married the rising Menelik, King of Shoa. She had intelligently perceived the gradual, historic shift in economic and political power from north to south, as Shoa's expansion throughout southern Ethiopia, initiated in the 1840s under Sahle Selassie and pursued under Menelik, opened up key avenues for trade, and booty.



Portrait of Taytu Betul shot at the beginning of the 1880's



Portrait of Menelik II.



Saint Maryam Church on Mount Entoto.
Photograph by Vob08, 2008.

2.3 Itege

In March 1889, Emperor Yohannes IV was mortally wounded in a battle against the Sudanese Mahdists. Later that year, Menelik was officially crowned Menelik II, King of Kings of Ethiopia; two days later, Taytu was crowned Empress, or Itege (literally 'sister of the country'), and became the most powerful woman in the land.

2.4 Early tests

Taytu had displayed her leadership craft as early as 1886. During one of her husband's military campaigns in Harar, many soldiers had deserted the army and returned home expecting refuge. Feigning joy, Taytu had secretly prepared for them a deceptive welcome to punish their cowardice. The unsuspecting deserters rushed straight into the trap and were immediately chained, or put in stocks. A fearful precedent had been set.

In December 1889, Taytu's brother, Ras Wele, accompanied the newly crowned emperor, Menelik II, to Tigray to assert the new emperor's authority. In his absence, a rival named Zegeye sought to usurp his governorship in Weldya, the capital of Yejju. Informed of the danger, and aware that this would weaken her own budding authority, Empress Taytu skilfully drew on her family's eminent history in the area to persuade the local people to reject Zegeye, and swiftly had his key allies arrested.

2.5 Consolidating power

Over the next decade, Empress Taytu would seek to increase her personal influence and power, and reduce potential threats, through a cunning combination of marriage alliances and patronage. By 1900, one observer grandly remarked that she held over half of Ethiopia under her sway.

A few examples, with varying results, illuminate her strategy. In 1896, she arranged the marriage of her husband's Tigrean rival, Ras Mengesha, to her niece, Woizero Kefei, in an attempt to defuse tensions between Tigre and Shoa. Her nephew, Dejazmach Gesesse, governed Simien and Wolkait, while her cousin's husband ruled Kaffa. The influential Ras Makonnen agreed to marry her young niece, Mentewab Wele (he would dissolve the marriage soon after, saying she was too young); and one of her cousins was married to a nobleman who controlled the important wool-producing district of Menz. Most importantly, in 1900, her nephew Gugsä Wele married Menelik's daughter, Zewditu, and was given governorship over Begemdir province.



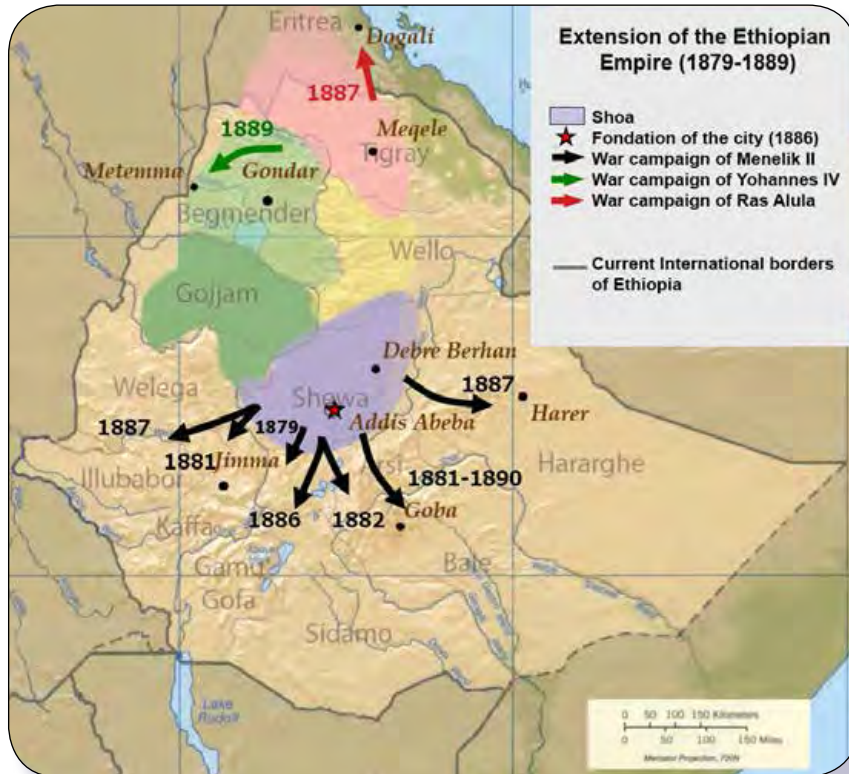
Ras Makonnen, August 1902.
Photograph by V&A Lafayette, 1902.

3. The external threat

3.1 A delicate triangle: Yohannes IV, Menelik, Italy

Throughout the 1880s, Emperor Yohannes IV had struggled to defend Ethiopia's sovereignty from external (Egyptian, Sudanese Mahdist and Italian) threats, and to strengthen his authority inside the country.

Although officially a vassal of Yohannes, the ambitious Menelik would only offer occasional, ambiguous support. For at the same time, he was intent on expanding Shoan territory to the south, using firearms acquired in secret treaties (1883; 1887) with the encroaching Italians.



Extension of the Ethiopian Empire under Menelik II (1879-1889).

3.2 The Treaty of Wuchale

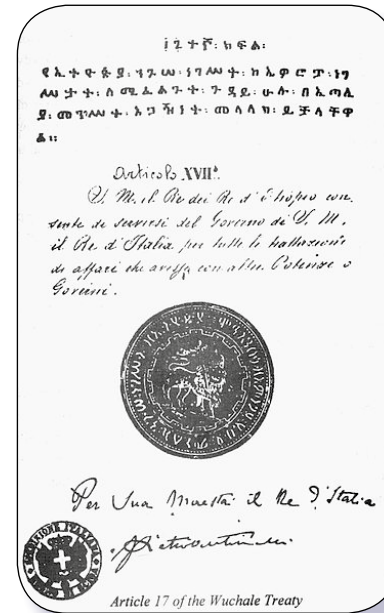
Menelik's high-risk strategy of giving away Ethiopian territory in return for firearms ultimately came to a dramatic end with the Treaty of Wuchale, signed shortly after Yohannes' death on 2 May 1889. Unbeknownst to him, Article 17 of the Italian version of the treaty obliged Ethiopia to go through the Italian government in all of its foreign policy dealings, a deliberate distortion of the Amharic version, which simply allowed for the option of seeking Italian diplomatic support.

What was officially called a treaty of peace and amity was in fact a deliberate attempt by the Italian government to dupe Ethiopia into becoming an Italian protectorate.

3.3 Diplomacy's end

Ever since the 1883 treaty, Empress Taytu had been wary of Menelik's dealings with the Italians, and alert to the threat they posed to Ethiopian sovereignty. When an outraged court discovered this latest act of treachery, Taytu took on a lead role. Resolutely rejecting the honeyed words of Italian diplomacy, she insisted that Ethiopia had her own dignity to defend, and that only a full abrogation (cancellation) of the Treaty of Wuchale would be acceptable.

Après une courte période consacrée au renforcement de l'armée éthiopienne, Ménélik accéda aux demandes répétées de son épouse et abrogea le traité en février 1893, malgré les protestations de l'Italie. La guerre devint incontournable.



Article 17 of the Wuchale Treaty, 1889.





4 The Italo-Ethiopian War

4.1 Women

Historically, Ethiopian women had played many important roles in war campaigns. As well as preparing supplies (food, drinks such as tej or araki, clothes, medicine), they were also known to encourage soldiers in the midst of battle, emboldening them to achieve greater feats. As laws governing land-tenure usually required at least part-time military service in times of war, widows of male soldiers could also be called upon to perform military duties.

Long military campaigns often entailed marches of up to 20 miles a day, particularly gruelling for pregnant women, or women recovering from childbirth, who were expected to keep pace with the rest. Women were also expected to carry heavy loads of provisions and supplies.

4.2 Unity

In late 1895, Empress Taytu and Emperor Menelik II set out on a campaign to reverse the Italians' steady encroachment over Ethiopian territory. Enjoying unprecedented unity among the ruling elite and vital popular support from the peasantry who provided food, the Ethiopian army swelled during the march, reaching up to 100,000 soldiers. The Empress rode at the head of her own army of 5,000 infantry and 600 cavalymen.

4.3 Makalle, Adwa

Ethiopian troops had their first taste of victory at the Battle of Amba Alage, where they defeated an Italian vanguard force well entrenched in a natural fortress. When they later arrived at the Italian fort at Makalle, Taytu immediately saw that the Ethiopians would lose countless lives in staging a frontal attack, despite their superior numbers. Yet her brilliant mind swiftly devised a plan to cut off the Italians' water supply, thereby transforming the fort into a prison. The parched Italians were forced to surrender after a short siege.

The main battle, however, took place at Adwa on 1 March 1896. Throughout the battle, Empress Taytu instructed the 10,000–12,000 women in the camp to fill jugs of water to reinvigorate tiring soldiers, and tirelessly urged the soldiers to fight to the last. By midday, the Italians had been comprehensively defeated, and were fleeing for their lives. The resounding Ethiopian victory left Ethiopia as the only African country to successfully defend its sovereignty at the height of European imperialism.



The fort of Makalle in 1896.



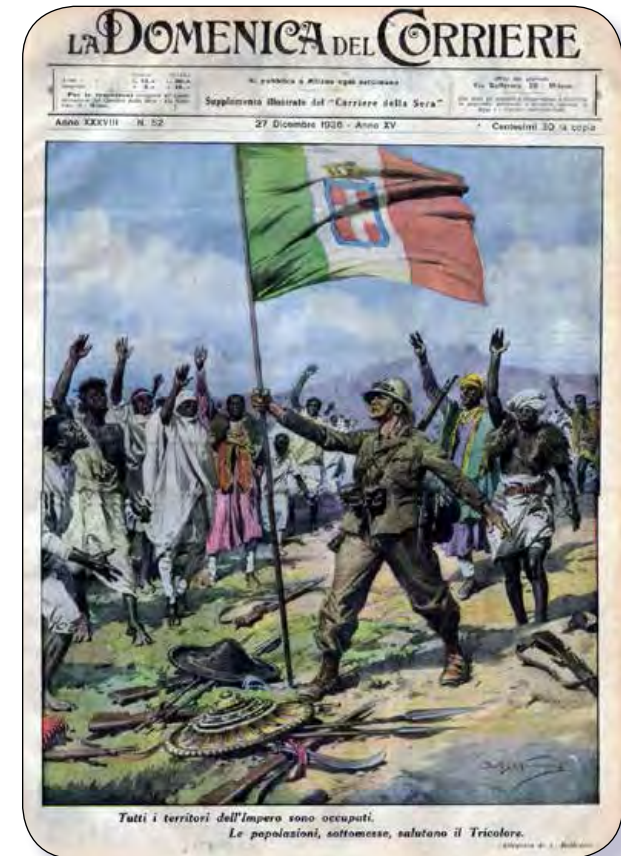
Battle of Adwa.

Unknown artist. British Museum, 1940-1949.

4.4 The Italian fascist occupation (1935–1941)

However, Italy (and its diaspora) nursed its scar, and with the rise of Benito Mussolini's fascist party, sought revenge.

Again, inspired by the memory of Taytu and the victory of Adwa, Ethiopian women rose to the challenge. Women fighters such as Lekyelesh Beyan, Kebedech Seyoum, Shewareged Gedle and Qeleme Worq Tiruneh are rightly singled out for admiration. However, many thousands of women, often forced to flee to the hills to escape Italian bombing and poison-gas campaigns, heroically participated in the resistance through underground networks, guerrilla warfare and intelligence gathering. The Italians were eventually defeated in 1941.



Italian victory of the war in Ethiopia, 1936.
Engraving by Achille Beltrame, 1936. Published in "La Domenica del Corriere" the 27 December 1936.

5 The final years

5.1 The 'new flower'

In the final decade of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, Ethiopia underwent a process of modernization. The new capital of Addis Ababa, or 'new flower', founded at Taytu Betul's behest in 1886, quickly became a stable centre of economic and political activity, attracting commercial interest and technical expertise. Colourful details, such as the arrival of a cinema, a hotel (the 'Itegue Taitu', which exists even today), and various luxury goods such as scarves, silk and scents, although restricted to a happy few, were symptomatic of deeper changes.

5.2 Modernization

Two key factors led to a slow opening up of the country under Menelik and Taytu. Firstly, gradual improvements in transport – macadamized roads, stone bridges and, above all, the railway line between Djibouti and Dire Dawa (which reached Dire Dawa in 1902 and the capital in 1917) – led to the expansion of trade, and greater variety in imports. Secondly, communication was improved by the rail-based telegraph-telephone system linking Addis Ababa to Djibouti, opening up business contacts with the rest of the world. The first national currency, postal system, hospital (named after Menelik) and newspaper publications also belong to this period.



The Swiss engineer Alfred Ilg (1854-1916), Councillor in the Emperor Menelik II's court and Ethiopian Ambassador to Europe, contributed to the modernization of Addis Ababa.



Menelik II inspecting the railway with his suite and a caravan of camels. Engraving by Louis Blomble, 1899.

5.3 Jerusalem

Empress Taytu also turned her eyes beyond Ethiopia's immediate boundaries. An Ethiopian Orthodox Christian community had long resided in Jerusalem, living in difficult conditions in the roof-monasteries of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre since the sixteenth century. Building on the important legacy of Emperor Yohannes IV, the Empress made sure that they received enough money to live in dignity, and commissioned comfortable housing outside the old walls of the city, which exists even today. She was also responsible for funding the completion of the dome of the impressive church, Debre Genet.

5.4 Decline

With Menelik's health deteriorating from 1906, the Empress's once formidable network began to unravel, and ultimately fell apart. In March 1910, public agitation against the power she had begun to amass following the incapacitation of her spouse forced her to relinquish her political position. Compelled to remain in the palace until her ailing husband finally died in 1913, she then retired to the mountains of Entoto, where she passed away in 1918.



Ethiopian monastery of Deir es-Sultan, Jerusalem.
Photograph by Flavio, 2010.

5 Bibliography

Empress Taytu is exceptional in Ethiopian women studies, in that there are many sources relating to her life. These include diplomatic reports, official chronicles, the rich resources of oral tradition (poetry, song, testimony), and pictorial representations (photographs, paintings). The broader challenge for historians is to describe the many ways in which millions of ordinary Ethiopian women have lived and moved over the centuries.

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Taytu Betul, the rise of an Itege

Taytu Betul (c.1851–1918) was a formidable queen and empress of Ethiopia. An astute diplomat, she proved to be a key figure in thwarting Italian imperialist designs on Ethiopia. Later, she and her husband Emperor Menelik II, led a huge army to battle at Adwa, where they won one of the most important victories of any African army against European colonialist aggression.

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