The following comic strip is a story inspired by the figure of Miriam Makeba. The illustrations are based on historical and iconographic research on her life and the 20th century. They do not claim to be an exact representation of the events, people, architecture, hairstyles, or clothing of the period.
COME ON GIRLS! SHE'LL BE HERE ANY MINUTE NOW.

NALEDI!

2002, MIDRAND, SOUTH AFRICA. THE MIRIAM MAKEBA CENTRE FOR GIRLS OPENED ITS DOORS A FEW WEEKS AGO AND WELcomed Zanele, Azana and Naledi* under the care of Hilda. The centre was created to provide a home to destitute or abused girls from 8 to 18 years old.

*ZANELE MEANS « WE HAVE ENOUGH GIRLS», AZANA « LAST ONE », NALEDI « BRIGHT STAR ».
I look at an ant and I see myself... a native South African endowed by nature with a strength much greater than my size. I look at a bird...

...and I see myself, a native South African, soaring above the injustices of apartheid on wings of pride, the pride of a beautiful people.

I look at an ant and I see myself... a native South African endowed by nature with a strength much greater than my size. I look at a bird...

I look at a stream and I see myself, a native South African flowing irresistibly over hard obstacles until they become smooth and one day disappear; flowing from an origin that has been forgotten toward an end that will never be.

She's here! Miriam Makeba is here!

Just call me Zenzi.
MY NAME IS AZANA.

I'M ZANELE AND THIS IS NALEDI.

ZANELE!
SHE CAN SPEAK
FOR HERSELF!

BUT SHE DOESN'T
WANT TO. I CAN SPEAK
FOR HER AND SHE DE-
FENDS ME WHEN I NEED
HELP. SHE'S TOUGH AND
I LOVE TALKING!

WELL, I'LL TELL YOU A BIT
ABOUT ME AND TOMORROW
YOU'LL COME TO MY CONCERT IN
JOHANNESBURG, AND I'LL SING
FOR YOU.

YOU HAVE TO
LEARN PATIENCE
YOUNG WOMAN!

CAN'T WE
GO NOW?
You fought well, you killed the cancer! But why do good people get sick!?

Were you ever about to give up fighting?

Oh, yes. When Bongi, my only daughter died, I couldn’t figure out how to go on. The pain was bigger than I could contain... or when I learned at 30 that I had a deadly cancer...

You fought well, you killed the cancer! But why do good people get sick?

What have you had to fight for?

My people, my life, my career. All my songs are born from the plight of my people. I have lived in exile from the outside for 31 years. My people were in exile from the inside.

It's an immense joy for me to meet you three. I created this shelter to give care and love to girls who did not receive enough so they grow up strong. I had my obstacles, but I'm not a victim. I take pride that I am a fighter.

My people, my life, my career. All my songs are born from the plight of my people. I have lived in exile from the outside for 31 years. My people were in exile from the inside.
My friend Harry Belafonte, whom I called tenderly Big Brother, kept repeating the same thing when I told him...

But why? Why?

I didn’t know how I was going to pick myself up this time. I was watching Reverend King on TV when I should have been marching next to him with Big Brother. But as I listened to Reverend King...

I know you will be with us in spirit, Big Brother

Something woke up inside me. A voice told me: “You have a dream too. You want to see your people free. You want to see all children of South Africa walk hand in hand, and to go home again! Your dream is something to live for.”
A few years later, I went to Europe to a festival I was invited to, and from there to London, where I met Harry Belafonte who liked my songs. He took me under his wing, asked me to come to New York to sing... Everything went so fast...

Well, I was 18 or 19 and part of a band called “The Manhattan Brothers” - not from Manhattan of course but from Johannesburg! We toured, and recorded music...

But courage isn’t enough. I lost my mother to AIDS, yet she was brave and strong!

That day, I found and embraced my courage, and I lived.

You’re right. Courage doesn’t create miracles but it helps us stay strong and without it, one can’t overcome obstacles or see and embrace happiness and love, despite living in exile...

Azana!

So how did you know you could not come back? And why did you leave in the first place?

Well, I was 18 or 19 and part of a band called “The Manhattan Brothers” - not from Manhattan of course but from Johannesburg! We toured, and recorded music...

A few years later, I went to Europe to a festival I was invited to, and from there to London, where I met Harry Belafonte who liked my songs. He took me under his wing, asked me to come to New York to sing... Everything went so fast...

But courage isn’t enough. I lost my mother to AIDS, yet she was brave and strong!

That day, I found and embraced my courage, and I lived.
I QUICKLY BECAME RESPECTED AND PART OF THE MUSIC SCENE. I DECIDED TO STAY IN THE USA FOR A BIT. ONCE, WHILE I WAS PERFORMING IN CHICAGO FOR A FEW WEEKS, I TRIED TO CALL MY MOTHER AND WAS TOLD SHE HAD JUST DIED. I HAD TO GO TO HER.

I WENT TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONSULATE TO GET MY VISAA.

IT MEANT I WAS NOT ALLOWED BACK HOME. THEY'D PUT ME IN JAIL, IF I TRIED. IT MEANT I WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO SAY A PROPER GOODBYE TO MY MOTHER.

I HAD BEEN CAUTIOUS UNTIL THAT DAY, AND NEVER TALKED OPENLY ABOUT POLITICS OR EXPRESSED MY OPINIONS OR DESCRIBED THE SUFFERING OF THE PEOPLE. NOTHING WOULD STOP ME ANYMORE.
I WAS SEVEN WHEN MY FATHER DIED AND I WASN'T TOLD RIGHT AWAY. AND NOW I WAS REFUSED THE RIGHT TO SAY GOODBYE TO MY MOTHER, TO TAKE COMFORT FROM MY PEOPLE. MY FIGHT TO GO BACK WAS LOST FOR A WHILE. TO SAVE MYSELF, I HAD TO SAVE MY PEOPLE. I HAD TO LOOK FURTHER THAN MY OWN PAIN.

BUT MY PEOPLE ARE HERE, RIGHT NEXT TO ME. I NEED THEM MORE THAN THEY NEED ME. I FEEL I DON'T HAVE MUCH TO OFFER SOMETIMES!

SIMPLY BELIEVE IN WHAT YOU CAN FIND IN YOURSELF. I WAS BORN INTO THIS WORLD WITH HOPE, DETERMINATION AND MUSIC. WE ALL WANT THE SAME THING: A DECENT LIFE, PEACE, LOVE. IT'S COMMON SENSE. I HAVE NEVER BEEN TO UNIVERSITY BUT I DO HAVE COMMON SENSE. I GOT IT FROM MY MOTHER, AZANA.
They answer us in dreams or through a medium like the medicine men and women we call isangoma. My mother discovered when I was still young that she was isangoma, and when she did, she had to start another life. Being Swazi, she went away to Swaziland for her training with elders, as isangoma do when they discover their gift.

Death does not separate us from our ancestors. The spirits of our ancestors are ever-present. We ask for their advice and guidance.

My mother died in 1960, yet she is still a very real part of my life. What is 1960? A number. In the West, the past is like a dead animal. But in our culture, the past lives...
Being at peace with being isangoma demands a lot of sacrifice. She was given the knowledge of what herbs and roots to give to treat certain illnesses, taught how to perform some cures, and to let the spirit guide her.

What did your mother learn there?

The spirits would sometimes take complete possession of her. First, she'd become very quiet. She's go into a trance and quickly the spirit would announce itself. My mother was no longer my mother.

She was the amadlozi who had come through her! If the amadlozi was a man, a man's voice would come out of her!
My favourite spirit was Mahlavezulu. He had once been a strong, young man. When she became him, my mother would put bracelets on over her upper arms, and because he was a warrior, she would often ask for a shield or a spear.

Each spirit would demand to be dressed a certain way; one would want a blue dress, another one a set of beads! It was my job as a dresser to dress my mother the way the spirit fancied... I got to know them...

He told me what a great swimmer he was and that he could help travellers cross the most dangerous rivers. I asked him how he had gathered so much knowledge...

He said: "I was strong but too lazy to gather any knowledge. Travellers just hopped on my back, I swam across and dropped them on the other side!".
Mahlavezulu, the spirit, did he ever come back after your mother died?

No but I never forgot the last time I saw him...

My mother was in the middle of a trance. I recognized Mahlavezulu right away. He said he had been waiting for me, which was unusual... he told me I'd leave South Africa to go on a long journey and that I'd never come back. You see, spirits too can be wrong!

Naledi was brought here by social services five days ago. She hasn't said a word since. Would you like to see the social service file?

I was wondering...

It won't be necessary. We connect. She's brave, she's observant, she seems used to making it by herself.

Yes?
They even gave her passports so she’d feel she had a home and for sure because they wanted to adopt her. I heard she has more than 10 passports!

She knew everybody! From the US president to the greatest musicians of her time, or civil rights figures. She became friends with many African leaders who were fighting for the independence of their countries. They all invited her.

Well, I have you two at least! Hilda showed me pictures from when she was on all the covers of the US magazines. She was so beautiful! Did you know she was friends with Marlon Brando? He was a famous actor!

If only she adopted me!

You’re living in her shelter and she’s here, what more do you want, that she’d tuck you in bed?
Hush now, my beloved. Hush now, my pride. Hush now, love of my heart...
Did you know you would become so big? It’s the first time I hear the sound of your voice Naledi! And it’s thanks to you Zanele. I take it as a gift.

Do you remember when you were seven like me?

I do! I was living on my grandmother’s compound in Pretoria with 21 of my cousins. I was a bit like you I guess; quite happy, looking for joy, singing. I used to love flying kites with my friends on Sundays...

Let’s go girls!

Ha ha ha ha!

Ha ha ha ha!
Yes my mother often sang it to me when I was small…

Did you sing the lullaby to your daughter?

You have a pretty voice! I knew you were all three still awake…

Hush now, my belooo-oooved…🎶

Yes my mother often sang it to me when I was small…
...it was 1932, one of the pre-apartheid but still racist laws said that blacks did not have the right to drink alcohol. We didn’t have much, so my mother made an African beer called umqombothi, in secret, to sell it to the neighbourhood and make a little extra money. She was creative...!

🎵 ~ Hush now, my beloved. Hush now, my pride. Hush now, love of my heart... 🎵

I spent several months in prison with my mother.

🎵 ~ Hush now, my beloved. Hush now, my pride. Hush now, love of my heart... 🎵

Please, don’t do this. I can’t leave my little girl, she’s too small.

You are both in trouble then, and you better make her stop!
YOU SEE. THE LOVE OF MY MOTHER
DID NOT UNDO THE PAIN BUT IT DID SHELTER
ME, KEPT ME WHOLE, LIKE THIS LITTLE SONG.
WHEN SHE SANG IT, SHE GAVE ME A SECRET
ESCAPE. AND I WAS ABLE TO OFFER IT TO MY
OWN DAUGHTER TOO, AND SHE, HOWEVER
FRAGILE SHE WAS, GAVE IT TO HER
OWN CHILDREN ALSO.

WELL I SING, DON'T I? BUT YOU'RE
RIGHT, I WANT TO SUPPORT YOU AND
HELP YOU FIND YOUR OWN VOICE! FOR
YOURSELF, AND ALSO BECAUSE SOME OF
YOU WILL BECOME MOTHERS AND
MOTHERS RAISE THE FUTURE...
You will eventually give back what you receive while you are here.

This shelter is the result of who it gives to and who makes it a warm, secure, lively, comforting place. Today, Hilda is the soul of the shelter. Each of you and everything you get from her makes the heart of the shelter.

That's why you made the shelter! Because nobody sings to us!
ON DECEMBER 1959, BIG BROTHER BROUGHT ME TO HARLEM TO GET MY HAIR DONE. I ALWAYS HAD MY HAIR SHORT AND WOOLLY. A NICE WOMAN STRAIGHTENED MY HAIR. I Couldn’T LOOK AT MYSELF IN THE MIRROR WHEN I CAME BACK TO MY HOTEL. I WASHED MY HAIR AND DECIDED TO KEEP IT NATURAL. BE ALWAYS PROUD OF YOURSELVES.

WELL GIRLS, SHE DIDN’T SAY THE SAME THING WHEN I CUT HER HAIR SHORT! WHEN I MET HILDA SEVERAL YEARS AGO, SHE WAS LOOKING FOR HER IDENTITY. SHE ALWAYS HID BEHIND HER HUGE HAIR...

IT’S THANKS TO YOU. I WAS LUCKY TO CROSS YOUR PATH.
In the USA at that time segregation was very strong. In certain states we were not allowed in most of the hotels' restaurants! Black people lived in segregated areas. We couldn't live where we chose or sit where we wanted in a bus.

But at least you were allowed to express yourself about it!

It's not that simple, Azana. Things have changed because of strong politicians defending their people, like the great African leaders who fought for the independence of their nations or in the USA great figures like Martin Luther King and President Kennedy. That night of 1962 I had been asked to perform for his birthday - me, little Zenzi!!

So who was the most handsome man, President Kennedy or Marlon Brando?
Marilyn was getting ready to go on stage. She gave me a real smile. She seemed fragile, like a young girl too dressed up.

I wanted you to know, Miss Makeba, how proud I am to have an African artist participate in my birthday celebration.

As for Mr Brando, I was performing in a small club in LA three times a day. One day, a girl working there came to tell me there was a man sitting in the back who wanted to meet me...

Was it really him?

Yes! He had stayed and listened to me throughout the day!
When we first met I told you to call me Zenzi, you remember? I want you to sing with us tonight! Miriam used to tell me when I was younger: there is one place where there is no exile - the concert stage!

We quickly became friends. That day he invited me to his home with friends of his. When they all left, he spent hours asking me questions about South Africa. He was very committed to defending civil rights.

The perfect man: beautiful inside and out!

He was brave!

Mama Africa!

When we first met I told you to call me Zenzi, you remember?
I was born so weak I was not supposed to live. My mother had been warned the risks were high if she had another child but she wanted me I guess! The day I was born she was by herself but being a nurse, she knew what to do.

My mother had just cut the cord that joined us. When she saw me, she was alarmed. I was a scrawny baby with a huge head, and way too silent! So, she slapped me!

I had made it! I was scrawny but I had a voice!

Lizenzile...
Now, I don’t know much about you, except your name is Naledi, which means ‘a bright star’. Never forget this name was chosen for you by your parents...

Because my mother had been warned that having a sixth child could endanger her life, my grandmother told her ‘Uzenzile’. It’s what you tell a child who is told not to play with matches, does it and burns himself...

...it’s like “you have no-one to blame but yourself.” So once she knew for sure I was going to survive, my mother decided she would call me Zenzi from Uzenzile.

...that’s what they saw – a new light!
I dedicate this concert to four special girls who are here tonight. I know they will find their own voice within themselves and use it to build and protect their freedom.

When I was just a bit younger, many African leaders used to invite me to participate to the independence celebrations of their countries.

My husband Stokely loved teasing me by saying: "Become free and invite Makeba to sing!". Let me play with his words tonight, and invite all of you to sing to speak up and become free!
A gift for you and

I Oh! Oh! Africa
is my hope... The
birthplace of my
heart...
I close my eyes and the past surrounds me. The faces, so many, are alive. I respectfully greet my grandmother once more. I laugh with my playmates at school. I feel the pain again from my 11 car accidents and I know I should stop keeping track at this point but I still do. I exult at the pleasure and hope of my wedding night. I curtsy to Emperor Haile Selassie, view with a warm gaze Mr Belafonte my big brother, who brought me to America and Paul Simon who brought me back to his country after so many years. I feel the warmth of the studio lights, and the warmth of my African sun, so much brighter. I see the cheering audience who from the stage look like heads of corks bobbing on a dark sea. I am thankful to have such a lively past. It gives me strength. And courage is what I, and all of us, must have always. I look at the past and I see myself.
Miriam Makeba

Zenzi Miriam Makeba (1932-2008) was a South African singer and a world-renowned symbol of the fight against apartheid. After beginning her music career in her home country, she goes into exile in the United States where she gains wide recognition. Following her marriage to the activist Stokely Carmichael, she is once again exiled – this time to Guinea where she embarks upon an African and international career. Her talent and her militant engagements make her an icon in the defence of human rights.

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 (Njinga 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 resources, please visit the web site www.unesco.org/womeninafrica