YENNEGA

PRINCESS OF GAMBAGA

UNESCO Series on Women in African History
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.

UNESCO specialist responsible for the project: Sasha Rubel
Editorial and artistic direction: Edouard Joubeaud

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

© UNESCO 2014

This publication is available in Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/). By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccby-sa-en).

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Cover illustration: Yann Degruel
Layout: Dhiara Fasya, Maria Jesus Ramos
YENNEGA

PRINCESS OF GAMBAEA

UNESCO Series on Women in African History
Editorial and artistic direction: Edouard Joubeaud

Comic strip
Illustrations: Yann Degruel
Script and text: Sylvia Serbin
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, 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.
The young girl, dauntless and tireless, adapted easily to the world of combatants.

Raised as a boy by Nedega, Yennega became accustomed to hunting with her father from an early age.
She became a fearless rider and was taught to use a bow and a spear.

She was renowned throughout the region for her feats in hunting and fighting, which was a source of great pride to her father.
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.
Am I to devote my entire life to hunting and to war?

Could I, too, start a family one day?

Why does my father only want to make a chieftain of me...

...and refuse to find a husband for me?
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!
I must remain patient...

As was the custom, before Yennega could speak to her father, she had to wait until the end of her father’s afternoon audiences with the dignitaries and other visitors who called on him.

and, above all, stay calm...
...How can I convince him?

I must be careful not to give offence...

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 stay calm.

 Remain respectful, whatever happens.
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.

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.

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?

Father...

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

Father...

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

Get married!

When she is our best warrior!

We want her to succeed us one day in Gambaga and to become a great and respected chieftain.

We shall find a husband for her 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.
Why, my daughter, have you let your okra dry up in this way?

But what do you say about a girl of my age who is still without a husband?

So! You show concern when you see my okra grow old and dry!
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.
Who are you?!

My name is Riale, I’m an elephant hunter.

What do you want?
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.
For the first few days, Yennega remained on her guard and did not reveal her true identity. Riale took her for a traveller in search of rest.

Overjoyed at having found a hunting companion, he taught her how to track elephants.
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.
Visit and share the website
www.unesco.org/womeninafrica
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 (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 pedagogical resources, please visit the web site www.unesco.org/womeninafrica

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