Interview with Biyi Bándélé

Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún
August 11, 2022

[NOTE: I first learnt of Biyi Bándélé thanks to Ayọ̀ Arígbágbù, who never stopped gushing over *The Man from the Back of the Beyond*. I took interest and sought out the writer. When his book, *Burma Boy* was published in 2007, I reached out to him that I had written a review of the book and would like to interview him. The following conversation came from an interview we eventually had at Bogobiri in Ìkòyí in 2008. It was first published in *The Guardian Newspaper* on June 3, 2008]

———

The setting for Biyi Bándélé's interview begins like a vignette that leaves you wondering, "What next?" It is in a slightly lit room, and a few people in the bar have light and serious chats until a man with a C guitar walks up to a stool, sits down, and drowns the room in his croaky voice and poorly tuned guitar. Some people in the room give him warning glances and resume their talk, hoping the noise will stop. Finally, after a few attempts at talking over our head, we left the room for the din-manufacturer to someplace slightly quiet.

"I'd like to tell him to shut up," Biyi says light-heartedly. His complaint about music is charming; the guitarist might have passed it off as a compliment.

Bándélé has a good sense of humour hidden in his polite and plain-spoken sentences, or nearly so, but he could be distracted yet manage some attentiveness depending on where the question is going. But really, Bándélé would not let a word pass.

Born in Nigeria but now living in London, he has written several plays, radio dramas, screenplays for television and four novels. He has also worked with the Royal Court Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company and facilitated many workshops. Bándélé's latest book is *Burma Boy*, the never-really-narrated experience of the Chindits during WW2.

Bándélé was born to parents from Abẹ́òkuta, but he grew up in the North, in Kafanchan, where he grew up with people from different tribes because the town was a terminal. He explains that his early dreams floated in several languages, "Yorùbá and Hausa, English, pidgin and Keje." He could speak some Igbo too, all the languages around him." He spoke like perfect Hausa, "so that outside of the home, it was possible to think of him as Hausa, until he mentioned his name, and then become the other. "And I was very conscious of being the other. So, he developed the feeling of "I have the right to be here, just as you."

There was, however, the feeling of the Other. When he was 10, his dad took him back to Abẹ́òkuta, where he spoke Yorùbá with a "very subtle, but discernible Hausa," and the other kids nicknamed him Mala. "But it wasn't in any way spiteful. It was kind of loving. I was a kind of mascot. And so again, in Abẹ́òkuta, I became an outsider. And then I moved to England…" But he has become comfortable in "occupying that space." Because, "It has kind of shaped me as a person, and possibly shaped me as a person, it has possibly shaped my writing."

His books have a twist in their telling some of those who attended his reading when he was in Lagos expressed, and could that make him one of the "crazy writers." He's careful with words as usual. There is a slight pause before he says, "I think I can describe myself tongue-in-cheek, but I don't think I am crazy. You know I am a writer, but…." Then he bursts into a long laugh. OK, it's in the choice of word? He shrugs and laughs again before he explains, "You know in Nigeria, people think that writers and artists are crazy, and sometimes you go along with it, so far, and then you have to stop because you realize that they do mean it."

He explains that writing for him is not exactly a profession, "I call it a trade. Because I think you have to apprentice. You apprentice by reading, and then you realize that you like this genre and that style of writing, that you preferred it to that style." And you find your preferred genre. "And then you go into the university acknowledged masters of that genre, and then you go beyond the university acknowledged people, to those you discover, who are very good, who might not be cult figures. And then you are probably highly influenced by your mentor, your masters, and then you go on to this journey where you begin to find your voice, which is the toughest. And when you are trying to find your voice, people begin to call you crazy because your voice sounds like no one else's. It seems odd to people later, it might become part of the mainstream, part of the furniture, and then it becomes as ordinary as everything else. I think that it is a trade because you have to learn the craft. Not as a form of mercantile."

Bándélé is passionate about his writing, but there's some modesty to how he pretends himself. He explains that his intention to be a writer was not a "do-or-die thing." "I didn't know of any writer who came out of Kafanchan, so the idea of taking up writing as a vocation was not exactly striking. Maybe, the thought of working with a newspaper or work with a magazine, not necessarily as a reporter, but just something that had to do with art, but I kept writing. I wrote my first novel when I was about 16. And I put it aside because; I thought it was a good novel then, compared to a number of books I was reading at the time, by new writers. And I put it aside, went to the University of Ifẹ̀ now (Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀ University)."

A few of his lecturers would remember, "Kọ́lé Ọmọ́tọ́shọ́," he mentions, "would remember that when I ran into him, I gave him that manuscript, and he read it sometime later, and it became some mentor."

At 16, he had written a novel, which later got published. "I had been writing for like 7 years. I have my first short story published when I was about 12, and it was in a newspaper in Jos."

His first novel *The Man Who Came in from the Back of Beyond,* started as a short story, and then he realized when he was 20 pages into it, that he needed to find a structure for it. "And I must say of all

my novels, and it is the most intensive form. The most daring, in ways I am not interested in anymore, like experimenting with form. That bores me and sends me to sleep. But at the time, it just seemed like, *yeah!* I was writing at about 10. But when I say writing, I mean just childish writing. I still remember the first story's title; I think it was called "The pickpocket." It was a Sunday version of one of those daily papers."

For many aspiring writers, Bándélé is where they want to be. He's got a long list of books to his credit and several workshops in different countries, but is he where he wants to be as a writer? "As a writer, I'm still on a journey. As a creative person, I am still on a journey with so many ideas that I just want to explore. You know, I am a traveller in a metaphorical sense. "

Presently, Bándélé is working on the film script of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's award-winning novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. He explains that the script has got the go-ahead from the financiers, but several other things are involved. Hence, he still needs to keep up working on it until the film is produced. "You know, with film, it is different."

Fiction is assumed to be a purely improbable account of a writer's imagination by many. Still, Bándélé thinks there is more to this: "Fiction is sometimes more truthful than factual writing. Some of the most memorable accounts of WW2 are the novels. And that is because "Fiction is quite often able to go into the essence of the theme; it takes you right there, with that history, with its suffix of fact. The intellectual and literary critic wrote a book called *The Truthful Lie.*

Asked if he was reporting some story his father told him in his newest novel, *Burma Boy*, he avers, "He told me about Burma, but there isn't a single story in *Burma Boy* that was told by him." Bándélé said he felt the need to narrate the story of the Chindits because, from memory, his father "talked about his experiences in Burma virtually every day, "and I didn't consciously think at the time that I wanted to write a novel based on him. I wanted to write a novel based on him. And when it was time to write the book, I couldn't remember a single story he told me. The book was inspired by him rather than based on him. However, some reviewers, for some reason, had assumed that… "

While growing up, his older brother, Olúmidé, was the one who actually wanted to be a writer, Bándélé said. "He had the most amazing books and the most amazing record collection. My father played Fẹlá, and he introduced me to Bob Marley's and some other music from West Africa, and then for some reason, he gave up."

So many writers get so passionate about writing that they want to live off their writing. As a Nigerian and at this present time, Bándélé would like to remain skeptical of a writer who decides to take that decision. "I don't know, the economy seems pretty robust at this time. There are a lot of things that are happening now." But even in the UK, where he lives, only a small number of writers live on their writing. "So, it is not easy anywhere in the world. I don't teach, I write screenplays. But I love writing screenplays. I actually enjoy saying, 'I am working on a screenplay,' because it is not a day job, but it is my day job. I think it is absolute rubbish to think poverty is inspiring. If you worried about paying your rent and worried about where the next meal was going to come from, you certainly wouldn't be inspired. Toni Morrison worked as an editor for years as a single mother, raising 2 or 3 children, and she could only write before her children got up from bed. And that was how she wrote her first novel; and it took her a long time to become a full writer, and she became a disciplined writer. I think it just takes discipline and determination. Just set aside two hours and one hour every day."

"Why do you write?" I asked. "Writing is a vocation," he responded. "It is something I would do anyway if it wasn't a way of life. It is something I just have to do. For me, it is a compulsion."

“So, if you are left alone on an island, you’ll like to have a pen and a paper?” I asked, tongue-in-cheek. “No,” he responds, laughing, “I’d like to have a gun and a bullet.”

—

Jumoke Verissimo is an award-winning poet and novelist. Her latest work is a novel, *A Small Silence*.