



Yorùbá Boy Running

Biyi Bándélé

'A true artist.
A brilliant writer.
An original thinker'

Chimamanda
Ngozi Adichie

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On p. 271, Anglican bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther and his son
Dandeson, c. 1870 (photographer: Sydney Victor White)

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This novel is typeset from the revised manuscript sent by the author Biyi Bándélé to his editor Hannah Chukwu, following their last editorial discussion, on the eve of his death in August 2022. Apart from some standardisation of names and signposting of times and places as part of our copy-edit, the text is as we believe the author intended it.

*Dedicated with warmth to the memory of
my grandmother,
Victoria Táíwò Ìbírónkẹ́ Thomas,
matriarch, businesswoman, cat-lover,
who went to sleep, and joined the ancestors,
on July 19th 1981.*

*And to my grandfather,
John Adéníjì Babátúndé Thomas,
engineer, avid hunter,
who took wing, of a snakebite, and hastened,
far too young, to the realm of the ancestors,
on April 1st 1944.*

*And to Adéníjì's father, recaptive and returnee,
a liberated slave who came back home,
much like the hero of the narrative
you are about to read.*

This morning when I arrived at the working place, I met a woman who was waiting for me with her little boy about eight years of age: she requested me to take the boy under my care altogether as she was willing to give him up to be brought up by me. I told her I was not in a condition to receive him just now as I was busy building, but when I have removed to my new house and the school shall be opened, she might send him to school as other children . . .

This is an evidence that the faith of the people is being shaken in the gods of their forefathers, which cannot be better shown by anyone in this country than by asking the priest of a foreign God to look after the life of one of these children whom they almost idolise.

Reverend Samuel Àjàyí Crowther (c.1809–1891),
journal entry, Abẹ̀òkuta, January 31st 1847

INTRODUCTION: A TRIUMPH OF RESILIENCE

Among the framed homilies and early black and white photographs on the sitting-room walls of my childhood home was the unsmiling portrait of a black figure in Victorian attire. As was customary at that time of British colonial occupation, the subject struck the formula pose beside a desk, looking slightly sideways, almost with a hint of defiance, at what would have been the hooded camera. It all signalled membership of a select coterie of men of culture and learning, business or profession of a colonial era. A short walk from that missionary home located in Aké, Abéòkuta, within an enclave known as St Peter's Parsonage, was the Anglican church to which that compound owed its name, the Anglican church of St Peter. That edifice also had its portraits, only this time as implants on stained-glass windows. Dominating the altar was St Peter himself, and he was flanked by two prelates, complete with names, resplendent in clerical robes, crozier and other symbols of the Christian order. One was the Reverend Henry Townsend, the other one Reverend Hinderer – that grouping is faithfully acknowledged in my childhood biography, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*.

The first-mentioned figure was not featured among the stained-glass icons. That was the Archbishop Samuel Àjàyí Crowther, a black prelate. The other two – Townsend and Hinderer – were, of course, European. All were prominent actors in the Christian mission in my hometown Abéòkuta, and of course further afield, in the

great evangelising mission of the Christian church across my Western bulge of the African continent, prelude to the even more imperious mission of colonisation.

As a child, attending St Peter's School, and even warbling as a chorister in St Peter's Church, I had not the slightest knowledge of the intertwining of the careers of those three figures – Townsend, Hinderer and Crowther. Christians all, serving the same deity, but evident occupants of different rungs in the hierarchy of godly service – including its politics. As confessed in my childhood biography, however, my fertile imagination never failed to spin fantasies around those images, most persistently that last, Àjàyí Crowther. That was predictable, from the moment I learnt that he actually once occupied the adjoining compound to ours, a two-storey colonial structure that, at least, was a concession to his status within the Anglican church. The other two – Hinderer and Townsend – became fused with the colourful ancestral masquerades against whom, ironically, all three were united in demonising as products of pagan superstition.

We all knew the Àjàyí story, of course – right from elementary school. Kidnapped as a child and sold into slavery. Rescued by British warships and deposited on a settlement called Sierra Leone. Eventually restored to his home in present-day Nigeria a quarter of a century later, after life-and-death escapades plus, thankfully, immersion in intellection waters. That last produced numerous translations and original works, such as *The History of the Yorùbás* – a pioneer work on that subject, and still a seminal reference work for scholars and students.

Biyi Bándélé's literary thrust – a mix of the anecdotal, archival and inquisitional – in this posthumously published work, parts company with the slave narratives to which we are more accustomed. It

disorients, yet inducts one, at a most primary level of intimacy, and even self-identification, into the realities of capture, enslavement and displacement; eases one deftly into a milieu of the slaving occupation as an existential norm, and one that was near inextricably intertwined with the trajectory of colonialism in West Africa. This was Bándélé's last work, and I find it highly commendable that his publishers have opted to leave it exactly as rendered by that vividly reconstructive mind and its creative empathy. Penetrating through to character retrieval from time past, in the context of nations in the making, takes history out of dry pursuit and immerses us in the passions, motivations and even banalities of men and women of power and influence. This joins other works in the endlessly fascinating drama of the imperial adventure in its motley guises, a phase over which, one would wish, a final curtain has been drawn.

Alas, today, what we are confronted with is nothing less than its resurgence, albeit under different guises, at the hands of new players, and powered by both subtle and crudely violent mechanisms. For us in this part of the world, there is a grave resonance of a historic replay, near eerie, provoked by several incidentals and perspectives of this narrative. Here is a quick sample that must send shivers down the spines of today's inhabitants of the West African subregion, from Burkina Faso to the creeks of the Niger Delta:

from hamlets on the Atlantic coast and villages and towns in the rainforests and the savannah and cities at the edge of the Sahara Desert, thousands – tens of thousands – had been abducted and sold into slavery by marauding squads of Filani soldiers, mercenaries whose most versatile weapon was stealth and surprise. In the early days, such raids had been carried out in the name of God, but the raiders themselves, most of whom

were not yet born in those early days, had long ceased to use the pretext of jihad as justification. They were born into plunder as a way of life and bred with beggar-thy-neighbour as the first rule of survival, as were their fathers and their fathers before them. To these men, being a plunderer was a trade no different than being a weaver or a cattle-rearer; it was just a lot more rewarding.

Now place that passage beside the following:

The kidnapping of school children, wholesale traumatization of community and nation appear to be their core concept of spiritual submission – indeed, to them belongs the discredit of the inauguration of a twenty-first-century slave trade. These are the seasoned practitioners of commercial partnership by direct coercion; by this I mean straightforwardly that these new slavers force others – governance and the governed, you and me – into partnership, whether we like it or not. In my view, they even imbue their centuries-old predecessors with a spurious respectability. Those past practitioners took risks in their hunt for that human commodity. Today's raiders simply wait until defenceless children are gathered together in one place at the behest and/or compulsion of governance, parents and guardians, for the purpose of learning. The hyenas swoop upon the unsuspecting prey, cart them off, sequester them in forest and other holding pens, then call on families and governments to come and negotiate for them. The world, including its global institutions, had better wake up to the fact that the slave trade is back on African soil with a one-sided ferocity, all the more obscene and blasphemous for being camouflaged as a religious mandate.

The first passage, from Bándélé, refers to 1821; the latter, from a 2022 publication in my Nigerian series, *Interventions*, narrates the present: that is, a full two centuries after Àjàyí's capture and sale, commerce does not appear to have faltered, and aspiring nations – dedicated to the enthronement of godhead in sublime perfection – thrive on this defilement of the human essence. It would be an affront to our human sensibilities to adopt the solace, albeit sometimes offered by some of the enslaved themselves, that, despite the trauma and degradation, the slave experience has nonetheless produced distinguished men and women of global stature – Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano, Wilhelm Amo, etc. – indeed an endless list of manifested talent, even genius. The answer to that is obvious – men and women of acknowledged accomplishment have emerged even more robustly from the norm of freedom. However, the extraction of the heroic virtue, and the capacity for resilience and survival despite inhuman odds, captured in such narratives, dedicated to the triumph of the human spirit, do not pall. Even as Àjàyí ran and ran, arriving eventually in freedom, as long as the ensuing narratives succeed in compelling us to keep in step with his strides, humanity remains an ultimate beneficiary of such inspirational passages.

The humanity hidden behind the unsmiling portrait in the Aké family parlour comes to life for this reader – combative, learned, warmly human, even with a touching sense of humour. It has taken a writer armed with a matching diligence to flush him out.

Wole Soyinka

PART ONE

1821

Run, Àjàyí, Run

One

On the night before the Malian swordsmen swept into Òṣogùn, chanting, ‘God is great, God is great, God is great,’ as they laid waste to the town and corralled its inhabitants into barracoons, all twelve thousand of them, and herded them down to a mosquito-infested backwater on the coast, an obscure fishing village christened Lagos by the Portuguese merchants whose trade in human cargo had brought them there, Àjàyí had a dream in which he saw the god Òsanyìn hunched over, his notched and scarified, weather-beaten face drawn and dejected, gathering herbs in the dank forests sprawling beyond the six gates of the town’s encircling walls.

In Àjàyí’s dream, the healer god was blind in one eye, and had just one leg and but one arm. The god’s left ear was big as a cassava leaf, but he was deaf in this ear. If he was deaf in his left ear, which wasn’t quite as big as a cassava leaf, truth be told, spare a thought for his right ear, which was no ear at all. It was a dimple. Where others would seek out their right ear, Òsanyìn had a dimple. Where some had a dimple, Òsanyìn had his right ear. Needless to say, he was deaf in this ear too. And yet all he had to do was cup the dimple with the mud-encrusted fingers of his stubby hand and he could hear a moth on the wing.

In place of hair, a wild constellation of tousled beads on the òrìṣà’s misshapen head shone like night light from a distant place. Beads of

every hue sparkled on his head, and each time he plucked a healing herb on the forest floor it was as if he were harvesting the very beads on his head.

When Àjàyí arose from his mat the next morning, he knew exactly what to do about the dream. He would ask Ìyá what it meant. It was the only thing to do. There was certainly no point asking his sister, Bólá. Bólá would simply stare him down and say, ‘Go away, child,’ without actually saying ‘child’ or even ‘go away’. She would simply stare him down.

There was a time when he could count on Bólá as an ally, a partner-in-crime. But those days were long gone. Any such understanding between them ended the day Àkànní the hunter came asking for her hand. Since the day she became betrothed to the most revered elephant hunter in the land, Bólá had taken to treating everybody – namely, the boys – like something Àkànní’s dog Konginikókó dragged in from a hunt. It was not so much that Àjàyí faulted Bólá’s choice of husband. What was hard to stomach was that his own sister would choose to treat him, her flesh and blood, like a wastrel and a fool.

Better to ask Ìyá, he decided. Ìyá knows best.

In the unlikely event Ìyá didn’t know, she would bring the matter to the attention of Ìyálóde. She would go to Ìyálóde’s shrine and ask her. Ìyálóde was the òrìṣà of purity. There was hardly a question on the Maker’s earth that Ìyálóde could not answer. She was, after all, the First Lady of the Universe.

Ìyálóde knew all there was to know about the land of the living, which is everything under the sun, and beneath the sea, and in the realm of the stars. And she knew all there was to know about the land of the ancestors, where all must go who depart the land of the living, as all mortals must do to reach immortality. And she

knew all there was to know about the land of the unborn, the womb of all wombs through which the ancestors, deathless all of them, must navigate their way to the land of the living, where they occasionally must go because even immortals sometimes need a break.

Two

With the dream of the òrìṣà vivid in his mind, Àjàyí sprang up from his mat and headed to his mother's hut.

He stretched out flat on his face and bid Ìyá good morning. He would have gone to his father's workshop and done the same thing, but Bàbá had left home well before cockcrow that morning to tap his palm trees.

As he lay at Ìyá's feet, flat on his chest on the earthen floor, Àjàyí quickly sensed that his mother was in no mood to hear about his dream. Only the week before, he had told her about a dream in which the goddess Oya had appeared to him with tears streaming down her face. 'I'll make tears stream down your face,' Ìyá had responded, 'if you don't go and fetch water for your father's morning meal.'

He knew he wouldn't fare any better today, but there was no harm in trying. As he opened his mouth to speak, Bólá, who was running a comb through the dense thicket of Ìyá's shimmering black hair and palming òrí into it, took one look at him through the corner of her eyes and stopped him dead in his tracks.

'Mother,' she said, without once taking her eyes off Ìyá's head, 'your son has had another one of his dreams. I can see it clearly in his eyes' – she said this without even looking at him. 'He looks like a haunted rat. He always looks like a rat when he's had one of those dreams.'

Àjàyí swallowed hard, doing his best not to cast a spiteful look her way.

‘If you do that again—’ Bólá warned him, even though Şàngó knew, and Ògún knew, and all the òrìṣà knew, that he’d done no such thing.

He’d had enough of her for one morning.

‘I don’t look like a haunted rat,’ he muttered as he turned to leave, his eyes clouding with tears.

‘Forgive me,’ said Bólá. ‘You’re right. You don’t look like a haunted rat.’ She waited until he was by the door, before adding, ‘But you do bear more than a passing resemblance to the grasscutter Lánre caught in the palm grove last night. Are you by any chance related?’

‘Tell her to stop calling me a rat, Mother!’

‘How dare you call my bàbá a rat, Bólá’ – Ìyá called him her father because Àjàyí was the spitting image of his grandbàbá. ‘How dare you. My bàbá is a prince, not a rat.’ Her eyes were twinkling with laughter. ‘Come here, my father,’ she said. ‘Don’t mind your sister. Blame it on ojú kòkòrò.’ Envy, sheer envy. ‘I’m all ears. Tell me about your dream. Tell me all about it. Spare no details.’

And so, sitting at her feet, he told his mother about his dream of the healer god who looked sorely in need of healing and about his missing leg and his sawn-off arm and his sightless eye and his deaf ears and his hearing dimple and his many-coloured beads and his speckled herbs and, most of all, about the depthless sadness in the god’s lonesome eyes.

Ìyá listened with rapt attention. Bólá did, too, until he mentioned the dimple. The dimple. Did he actually say dimple?

‘Did you actually say dimple?’ she asked him.

When he mentioned the dimple, Bólá’s eyes narrowed down to a

squint, the better to contemplate his lips, which were surely not lying.

‘We have heard of white men who turned the ocean into a highway,’ she gravely declared. ‘But did you just say the òrìṣà could hear with his dimple? Is that what you said?’ And now she bent over and began to make a strange sound, the sound of throttled laughter. ‘Did your son actually say that,’ she asked Ìyá, ‘or have I lost my dimples and gone deaf?’ And now she held her sides and shook, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Ìyá patiently waited for her to finish laughing.

‘Have you finished laughing?’

‘But I’m not laughing, Mother.’

She waited until Bólá had stopped laughing before turning, once again, to Àjàyí. ‘You saw Òsanyìn.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ Àjàyí replied.

‘Òsanyìn, the gods’ own sorcerer.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘Òsanyìn, the òrìṣà of health and well-being.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘And he looked unwell.’

‘He looked as if he had ibà.’

Bólá’s eyes widened in disbelief.

‘The òrìṣà Òsanyìn has ibà?’

Ibà, the fever malaria.

‘I didn’t say he had ibà,’ retorted Àjàyí. ‘I said he looked like he had ibà.’ He addressed this information to Ìyá, even though it was Bólá who had asked him the question.

‘Was Òsanyìn pouring with sweat?’ Ìyá asked.

‘He was drenched in sweat, Ìyá.’

‘That’s a dead giveaway. He must have ibà.’

Àjàyí tapped Bólá on the shoulder.

‘Did you hear that? Ìyá thinks I’m right.’

‘If you come anywhere near me again,’ Bólá said threateningly, speaking to the hand Àjàyí used to tap her on the shoulder as if the hand was a being separate from and independent of its owner. The hand beat a hasty retreat.

Àjàyí nodded in eager agreement to something their mother had said while his sister was threatening his hand.

‘And he looked haggard and unhappy,’ she had said.

‘Yes, Ìyá,’ he replied. ‘He looked unhappy.’

Bólá’s sceptical eyes measured him from head to toe.

‘Mother,’ she pleaded. ‘I must ask you at once to stop indulging this child. How could you tell it was the òrìṣà himself?’

‘It was him,’ Àjàyí insisted, his voice rising.

‘You keep saying that,’ said Bólá, ‘it’s your word against Òsanyìn’s dimple,’ and that set her off again.

‘Don’t you mind her, Àjàyí,’ Ìyá told him. ‘Don’t mind her at all. Did the òrìṣà speak to you?’

The blank stare in Àjàyí’s eyes was all the answer Bólá needed.

‘Of course the òrìṣà didn’t speak to him,’ she sniggered. ‘They never speak to him. They keep turning up in his dreams. And then they don’t say a word. They ignore him.’

Ìyá ignored her.

‘Did the Lord of the Leaves speak to you, Àjàyí?’

Àjàyí shook his head. ‘No.’

‘Not a word?’

‘Not a word, Ìyá.’

‘But he looked unhappy.’

‘He looked unhappy,’ Àjàyí said, looking unhappy, and wishing he’d had the presence of mind to ask the òrìṣà why he looked so unhappy.

Bólá, who had a knack for reading his mind with unerring precision, now read his mind.

‘It’s no use being sad,’ she told him. ‘Next time you fall asleep and find yourself in the presence of an òrìṣà, open your mouth. Talk to them. They won’t bite you. They might even talk to you.’

Àjàyí fixed his eyes on Ìyá and tried to pretend Bólá didn’t exist.

He clenched his lips firmly so that all the rich insults he so badly wanted to rain on her dried up in his throat.

Three

Ìyá looked off into the distance, her face clouded with worry. When she finally spoke, all she said was, ‘I don’t know the meaning of your dream.’

Then she drifted off again.

‘See what you’ve done to Ìyá?’ Bólá said to Àjàyí. ‘Your dream boggles the mind.’

Àjàyí ignored his sister. He shifted from one foot to another and waited for Ìyá to speak.

Finally, she came to a decision and said what he’d been hoping she would say: ‘We shall have to go and ask.’

He knew precisely what that meant, he knew it could only be Ìyálóde, but he still had to ask.

‘Who are we going to ask?’

Nudging him in the ribs, Bólá asked, ‘Who else would Afàlà, the high priestess of Ìyálóde, seek answers from? Your dimple?’

In all the land, Ìyá, whose name was Afàlà, was renowned as the chief priestess of the òrìṣà Ìyálóde. Devotees seeking favours of the goddess came to her from as far afield as Ilé Ifẹ and Òyó and Ìjẹṣà and Ègbá and Ìjẹbú and from as far away as Èkó and Badagry and Kétu and even Dahomí further down the coast.

‘Go and fetch your morning water,’ Ìyá said to Àjàyí. ‘We shall pay Ìyálóde a visit when you return.’

The prospect of visiting Ìyálóde's shrine, his favourite deity of all, lit a fire in Àjàyí. A foolish grin settled on his face as he stood watching Bólá braid Ìyá's hair.

'Shouldn't someone be somewhere fetching something?' Bólá wondered out loud.

Àjàyí snapped out of his reverie and bounded out of the hut. In the compound he perched a pot on his head and set out for the river. He was almost out of the compound when he suddenly turned around and headed straight back into Ìyá's hut.

'He had a high-pitched voice,' he told her.

Bólá stared at him.

'That's good to know, Àjàyí,' Bólá said. 'Who has a high-pitched voice?'

'He means the òrìṣà Ọsanyìn,' Ìyá said. 'Did you mean the òrìṣà Ọsanyìn?'

Àjàyí nodded. Bólá stared at him, arms akimbo.

'I thought you said he didn't speak to you.'

'He didn't,' Àjàyí replied. 'But I heard him cry.'

Bólá and Ìyá exchanged looks.

'You heard Ọsanyìn cry,' Ìyá said, slowly. Àjàyí nodded.

'What else did he say to you?' Bólá asked.

'He didn't say anything.'

'He just cried.'

'He simply sat there, hunched over, and cried.'

'Twice this month,' Ìyá said, thoughtfully, 'I put a question to Ìyálóde. And twice she has refused to answer my question. But now I realise I may have misread her response. She hasn't refused to answer my question. I mistook silent despair for mere silence. My father,' she said to Àjàyí, 'the god Ọsanyìn has revealed himself to you for a reason. You know that. He is your guardian òrìṣà. Are the