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"With the Exception of [Ali] Banana:" Second World War *Bildung* in the Burmese Jungle in Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy* (2007)

Cédric Courtois

- 1 In her debut novel entitled *Dust* (2014), set in 2007, Kenyan writer Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor stages a character called Nyipir, whose father and brother enlisted in the British army and went to Burma – present-day Myanmar – to fight against the Japanese during the Second World War. All his life, Nyipir has been particularly obsessed with Burma and has always wanted to go there because his father and brother have never returned; however, he has never found the opportunity to do so, and this represents a wound that has never healed. After his daughter asks him: "What's in Burma?," he answers: "Our people. Went for King George's war. Didn't come back" (Owuor 2014a, 69). The fragmented syntax reflects his own sorrow, pain and possibly trauma related to the loss of those who have never returned from this far-away land during this sombre period for the Kenyan people. In an interview with Michael Halmshaw, Owuor mentions the Burmese conflict and explains that "[d]ying away from home, away from the soil of your birth – and to do so unseen and unmourned – is a profound horror. As is the fact that we don't necessarily talk about this absence, even if the feeling of [...] loss looms large in different homes" (Owuor 2014b).¹ The secondary place granted to this conflict in conversations, not only inside family circles and nation-wide, but also in African fiction, mirrors its marginal position in both Western and African historiography. The pages historians devote to the Second World War in history books seldom or never evoke the Burmese conflict; when it is dealt with, it appears in mere footnotes. Instead, the emphasis is laid on the war zones in the USSR, the Pacific and Western Europe. The conflict in Burma has therefore been called "the forgotten war" (Latimer), the "forgotten conflict" (Thompson) or, more recently, an "unknown conflict [...] of the Second World War" (Murray).

- 2 In the Author's Note at the end of *Burma Boy*, Yorùbá/Nigerian writer Biyi Bandele explains that his father – a former "Burma boy" himself – "immersed" him in "stories of carnage, shell-shock and hard-won compassion [...] when [he] was little more than an infant" (2007, 216). The first-hand account of life in the Burmese war zone by Bandele's father, along with specific works which he mentions in the Author's Note,² have enabled Bandele to frontally address this issue in his fourth novel, *Burma Boy* (2007). The novel is itself a fictional account of the Burma Campaign which tells the story of Ali Banana, a 13-year-old Hausa boy who enlists in the British army in the name of "kingi Jogi" (Bande 2007, 39). It is exceptional since, to our knowledge, it is the first African novel to fully and directly deal with this part of the history of the Second World War.³ This appears unsurprising coming from a writer who is well-known for subverting both Western and African literary orthodoxies, as exemplified in two of his earlier novels, *The Man Who Came in From the Back of Beyond* (1991) and *The Street* (1999), which evidence crafty narrative manipulations and use of language. Private Ali Banana himself is a figure of exception, as shown in the following quotation – part of which is used in the title of this article: "With the exception of Banana whose face seemed to grow more baby-like by the day, a moon-like face that didn't need a shave because there was nothing on it to shave, the men's faces hadn't seen a shave in months" (175–76). The young Ali Banana is quite unlike the other soldiers as his physical appearance seems to prove; we will see that his character also sets him apart from the rest of the group to which he belongs. In *Burma Boy*, Bandele's literary – and, to some extent, historiographical – project seems to be dual. Firstly, he writes against the orthodoxies of canonical Western and African works and genres, among which and above all the *Bildungsroman*. Secondly, he introduces a representative account of the Burmese conflict in a fictional biographical narrative about a young Hausa private, thereby enabling the "[f]orgotten voices of Burma," to quote Julian Thompson's title, to be heard (again).

From *Bildung* to War *Bildung*: From the "Art of Living" to the Art of Surviving

- 3 In her review of *Burma Boy*, Emma Hagestadt argues that it is a "classic coming-of-age tale" (2008). Bandele's novel can indeed be considered as a *Bildungsroman* if one focuses on the genre's emphasis on the development of a specific character, on his "passage from innocence to experience" (Suleiman 1983, 65).⁴ Moreover, the *Bildungsroman* "examines a regular course of development in the life of the individual [...]. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary transit points of the individual on his way to maturity and harmony" (Dilthey 1985, 136).⁵ The concepts of "regular[ity]," "maturity" and "harmony" are central to the *Bildungsroman*'s project, as they represent the result of the *Bildungsprozess*. The protagonist learns from his experiences and, by the end of the novel, is ready to become a worthy member of society, whose values he had initially partly rejected. The journeys undertaken by the protagonist, a great many of which are articulated on a tripartite narrative structure involving departure, a journey – characterised by trials – and a return, also define the genre. The hero leaves his familiar environment and faces various situations that represent fruitful contexts for the construction of his identity, but they lead to personal conflicts. The encounter with such new environments shapes the

protagonist's character and influences him in his "process of becoming" an individual.⁶ As a teleological genre, the *Bildungsroman* insists on the importance of the social reintegration of the hero, thereby ensuring a form of stability for him. At the end of the novel, the protagonist has come to terms with his identity.

- 4 However, classic *Bildungsromane* have mainly featured Western, white, bourgeois, male protagonists, who had an easier access to these transformational steps.⁷ The *Bildungsroman* has indeed often been perceived as an androcentric genre, as the use of the masculine personal pronoun indicates in Wilhelm Dilthey's study (in Labovitz 1986, 2), for example. Pin-chia Feng also notes that "[t]he term *Bildung* [...] implies an endorsement of patrilineage" (1999, 3). However, half a century after the publication of Goethe's novel, *women* began to reconfigure the generic tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, which led to a broadening of the paradigmatic axis of the genre, a process furthered by post-colonial writers.⁸ Although Ogaga Okuyade's reference to the African post-colonial context is too general and simplistic, his argument is still useful when he explains that "African writers [...] adopt and reword the tradition of the *bildungsroman* form" and "that most third-generation African novels fall within the latitude of the [*Bildungsroman*] tradition" (2009, 1). *Burma Boy* is no exception to Okuyade's argument, yet it does not resemble a *classic* coming-of-age novel, as Hagestadt argues.
- 5 *Burma Boy* belongs to a series of child-soldier narratives, a particularly popular African literary phenomenon between 2000 and 2010. Warfare is at the core of these (auto)biographical narratives.⁹ It is all the more striking in *Burma Boy*, which, therefore, can be considered as an exceptional *Bildungsroman*.¹⁰ Franco Moretti describes the destructive impact of the war on the development of soldiers, proving that war and the *Bildungsroman* are, to a certain extent, antithetical: "faced with an increasing probability of being wounded, it is quite reasonable for the subject to try and make himself [...] smaller and smaller. Under artillery fire, the favourite position of World War I infantrymen was the fetal one" (2000, 234). The foetal position is the symptom of a regression to the mother's womb, as if development for the soldiers were completely impossible after the horrors they have been through. The *Bildung* of the individual therefore becomes impossible in a context of war, since the individual has become disintegrated, fragmented and incapable of growing up. However, Ericka Hoagland introduces the concept of "war *Bildung*," which is essential for studying *Burma Boy*. Hoagland explains:

'[W]ar *Bildung*' uses elements common to the *Bildungsroman*, including an emphasis on self-reflection, the role of mentors in the protagonist's development, and [...] the protagonist's relationship to the society from which s/he is separated and to which s/he may or may not be able to (or want to) return. Yet 'war *Bildung*' [...] also incorporates anti-war rhetoric as a part of the 'education' the protagonist [...] receives. Like the 'traditional' *Bildungsroman* protagonist, the 'war *Bildung*' protagonist is an 'everyman/woman,' hardly extraordinary but enmeshed in extraordinary circumstances. Mene [in *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten in English* by Ken Saro-Wiwa] serve[s] as [a] medium [...] through which the readers' own perceptions of war are challenged, extending the process of *Bildung* beyond the novel itself. (2006, 193–94)¹¹
- 6 "War *Bildung*" – growing up in a time of war – means putting in place strategies of survival in front of (sometimes great) forms of violence, and developing/learning an art of surviving.¹² Hoagland adds: "war *Bildung* [...] represent[s] a second, but not secondary, process of '*Bildung*' necessary to the protagonist's development" (12). To her, a form of development takes place even in wartime. This is partly what makes

Burma Boy an exceptional *Bildungsroman* in the sense that the conditions for the *Bildungsprozess* that are depicted are far from what the *Bildungsroman* classically stages. War has a considerable impact on the development of the subjectivity of Ali Banana. The following passage focuses on the training every soldier follows in India before he is sent to Burma to fight the Japanese enemy:

He [Ali Banana] learnt not so simple things such as covering tracks, the art of evasion, watermanship, river crossing, the open-eyed science of appreciating your terrain, night operations, defensive operations, stealth operations, initiating action on contact with the enemy; squad, platoon and column tactics, navigating the jungle, patrolling, scouting and map-reading, and preparing landing zones for airdrops. Together with every member of his unit, including the muleteers, he learnt to use every weapon in his section. [...]

He learnt things he thought he already knew, such as the proper way to clean a rifle. (Bande 2007, 58)

The learning process – or “war *Bildung[sprozess]*” – is emphasised through the listing of the countless skills the soldiers must learn, perform, and master on the battlefield. This is shown through the anaphora “He learnt,” which indicates that even in tragically difficult times, individuals/soldiers do learn something that contributes to their development. The use of the term “science” points to a perception of war as a complex “artform” and, as such, it needs to be learnt and practised. This training is part of the soldiers’ “war *Bildung*,” and the training conditions seem to be as difficult as the battles they will have to fight against the Japanese:

The next seven days went in something of a blur – the exercises were gruelling and all-consuming; by the end of each day Banana passed out as soon as he returned to the tent and staggered to his mat. Stand-to seemed to come increasingly earlier each day and the exercises seemed to go on for much longer. By the end of that week there had not been a night when he got more than three hours of sleep. (55)

- 7 The soldier who follows this training is no longer himself, and he even seems to lose the notion of time. The verbs “passed out” and “staggered,” as well as the adjectives “gruelling” and “all-consuming” emphasise the hardships faced by the young Ali in order to keep pace with the other men. Here, “war *Bildung*” consists in learning to control one’s body in order to survive in the Burmese jungle. “War *Bildung*” also comprises the remoulding of the soldiers’ identities, a sort of *unlearning* of previously acquired skills or intrinsic traits. They must not be exceptional in any way but have to conform to and obey a precise code of conduct. *Burma Boy* not only sabotages the individualist *telos* the *Bildungsroman* classically presents as one of its cornerstones, but also favours the development of collective ties. A sense of community increases progressively throughout the narrative. From a selfish and self-centred boy, Ali Banana becomes interested in his fellow-soldiers. The humility he acquires has been made possible by the context of the war. Soldiers, and child-soldiers in particular, do manage to learn in a context of conflict; yet it seems that the content of this “education” is linked to the practicality of the war. The fact that most of the narrative is set in the Burmese jungle is also an exceptional element that deserves a more thorough analysis because it affects the *Bildung* of Burma boys.

A Reversed *Bildung*? Going Down / Growing Down in the Burmese Jungle

- 8 The Burmese jungle that Ali Banana and his section cross in order to wage war represents an unusual setting in the context of the (war) *Bildungsroman*, whether it be Western or African.¹³ The narrator mentions this difficult "journey" across the jungle (Bandeled 2007, 204, 210). A similar environment, the *Indian* jungle – Burma/Myanmar shares a border with India, and Ali Banana and the other West African soldiers first receive a training in India (32) before heading to the war front in Burma – lies at the heart of Rudyard Kipling's own *Bildungsroman*, *The Jungle Book* (1894), which seems to be intertextually alluded to by Bandeled.¹⁴ Christie Harner explains that in *The Jungle Book*, "Mowgli progresses from a half-wild child into an appropriate servant of the British, utilizing his unique skill set for the benefit of the Empire" (2019, 144). Ali Banana is also making use of his "unique skill," in the eyes of the British authorities, i.e. becoming cannon fodder for the Empire, in order to wage King George's war. While Mowgli is developing a voice – supposedly thanks to the "civilisation" brought by the British – Ali Banana already had a voice before he went to Burma, a voice he is losing little by little in this hostile new environment.
- 9 This journey is both geographical and metaphorical, and is strewn with hurdles. Ali Banana goes down the Burmese jungle, to the "heart of darkness," in a descent into Hell, a katabasis that simultaneously evokes a downward movement and a military retreat.¹⁵ The jungle is presented as an uncivilised space that is at first frightening for Ali Banana. The other (downward) movement consists in a growing *down* process of the protagonist. The journey through the Burmese jungle therefore first seems to lead to a reversed *Bildungsprozess*, since Ali Banana's geographical mobility is not teleological – as would be expected in the *Bildungsroman* genre – but circular. This possibly indicates an incapacity to reintegrate society because of the psychological impact caused by the horrors of the war, and the experiences undergone in the jungle.¹⁶ This terrain is a space that affects the protagonist's subjectivity. The very first description of the jungle is given through the eyes of Ali Banana, in an omniscient third-person narrative. The passage seems to develop a poetics of the sublime with its essential elements detailed by Edmund Burke. In *Burma Boy*, the jungle is at first an extremely antagonistic environment, as shown in the first jungle scene:

A swirling inferno appeared in the distance, a blue pillar of fire roaring towards them. Farabiti Banana, near the back of the slow-moving column marching in single file, froze briefly then shuffled along, nudged forward by the man behind him. The fire cut through the pitch-dark night and lit up the dense thicket of moss-covered trees and the rocks wrapped in lichen that rose into great hills and fell into steep valleys along their path filled with strange plants and nameless wild beasts, and snipers real and imagined whose imminent appearance had kept them moving since they left their last bivouac just before dawn, trailed by pi-dogs, and up till now, long after dusk, when their shoulders had sagged, crushed under the unbearable weight of the kit that each man carried on his back.

As the mast of flames whooshed towards them, Farabiti Banana decided to run for his life. He felt [...] these flames [had] come to devour them [...]. He couldn't understand why they were all ignoring it, trudging on and ignoring it, consumed it seemed only by the sheer effort of will required to raise one foot in front of the other. (Bandeled 2007, 25–26)

- 10 Several elements recall aspects addressed in Burke's essay, among which the use of hypotyposis. The most striking image appears at the very beginning of this jungle scene, with a reference to a hellish place – an "inferno," the word itself recalling Dante's *Divine Comedy* – whose threatening presence is echoed in the term "fire" later on. The alliteration in [f] insists on the threat the jungle embodies. According to Burke, "[g]reatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime" (1823, 97). The dangerous flames Ali Banana sees at a distance, flames that can "devour" the soldiers, therefore giving the jungle a metaphoric capacity to digest, become an obsession for him and are once again a characteristic of the sublime: "the mind is so entirely filled with its objects, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (Burke 1823, 73).¹⁷ Among the elements that lead to sublimity, according to Burke, are "Terror," "Obscurity," "Privation," "Vastness," "Infinity," "Power," "Suddenness," all of them being present here. The fact that the jungle "rose into great hills and fell into steep valleys" offers a feeling of vastness, of infinity even, reinforced by the "precipice," the "fast-flowing stream," and the "shaggy hill," leading to the protagonist feeling overwhelmed.
- 11 Obscurity is also a defining characteristic of the Burmese jungle, the soldiers marching in a "pitch-dark night." The "dens[ity]" of the jungle metaphorically indicates the undecipherability of this unknown landscape for the young Ali. The jungle even triggers a confusion between reality and imagination. This gives a phantasmagoric quality to it – "snipers real and imagined." Moreover, Ali's main feeling is fear – "run for his life"; "impulse to flee." Time dilation also seems to be at stake in this jungle: "That was two nights ago. Two nights only and yet it seemed to Ali Banana [...] that it was such a long time ago" (Bandeled 2007, 79). Ali Banana and the other soldiers are almost petrified: "froze briefly"; "had kept them moving." In the context of *Bildung*, this fear is debilitating as it inhibits any attempt at mobility – hence, development. This recalls Burke's essay according to which "all [...] motions [of the soul] are suspended" in front of "the great and sublime in nature" (1823, 73; original emphasis).
- 12 However, there seems to have been a change in Ali Banana in this narrative which can also be read as a novel of "human emergence," to quote Bakhtin (1986, 21–22): "Banana's journey back to White City was painfully slow. It wasn't simply because he was totally exhausted, or just because the trek back was uphill all the way" (Bandeled 2007, 204). Here, the narrator describes an upward movement, which symbolises Ali's emergence. Despite his initial fear, Ali seems to become accustomed to some of the elements which initially constituted a threat to his life in the Burmese jungle. They no longer have an impact on his psyche: "It rained all through the night but he didn't once wake up" (208). An osmosis between Ali and nature even reaches a climax when, one morning, he wakes up covered with leeches, for which he feels empathy:
- He started pulling them out, but then he saw that once they'd had their fill, once their famished little bodies had swollen up with his blood, the leeches simply retracted their muscular, needle-sharp, flesh-puncturing snouts from his body and fell to the ground in a happy swoon. He could tell they were happy [...]. (208)
- These leeches are given human attributes. Ali does not consider them as a nuisance, but as "friends" (208), to which he offers a meal (his own blood). The young soldier is affected by hallucinations since, according to him, the movements of the leeches while they are feeding on his own body are akin to a "dance" (208). He even apologizes for hurting them.

- 13 There has been a change in Ali at the end of the novel, as explained in the following passage when he finally arrives in the camp where his platoon is based:

The sentries took one look at the naked African singing loudly as he approached the wire and rushed to help him inside. They couldn't make out who he was but they knew that any black man in Burma had to be one of them. All they could tell was that the man looked to be about fifty years old. (Bandeale 2007, 211)

However, if there is indeed a literal emergence of Ali in White City, he emerges as a madman after wandering in the jungle. When they see him back at the camp, the other soldiers acknowledge his madness: "Bloken's jaw fell wide open. He stared groggily at the mad man talking to him" (212). It is a physical change that has occurred in just a few days. The loss of his mentor (Damisa) is described as a major change in his relation to death and this completely derails *Bildung*.¹⁸ While Ali was considered as a naive and annoying young boy at the beginning, he is now compared to a fifty-year-old man whom nobody seems to recognise. His identity has been lost in the jungle in the process of the war: he is just an "African man." The use of "man," which contrasts with the titular "boy," indicates a physical change but also a psychological one. There has been a war *Bildung* and Ali has grown (old); he has also gone back to a state of innocence, as shown by his madness. Finally, what has become of the voice of this lively, talkative chap the reader met at the beginning of the novel?

Decolonising History: Giving a Voice to the West African Subaltern

- 14 First- and second-generation African writers have often linked poetics and politics, as literature is not produced in a void, and Bandeale, a third-generation writer, seems to be no exception.¹⁹ In *Burma Boy*, the voices of West African subalterns are put to the fore, partly enabling Bandeale to decolonise history.²⁰ In "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raises the question of the possibility and the capacity for marginal figures to become speaking subjects: she famously argues that Indian women in a subaltern position cannot speak.²¹ For Spivak, US and European intellectuals who aim to talk about marginalised subaltern subjects end up *speaking for* these subjects (82–83). One could therefore question the role of intellectuals in the representation of the deceased like the Nigerians who fought as Chindits – "long-range penetration groups trained to operate deep behind Japanese lines" (Bandeale 2007, 21) – and who have left little to no trace in history books.²² Fiction cannot speak for real soldiers, nor can it genuinely represent their experiences, but *Burma Boy* features a didactic component aimed at educating the reader.

- 15 In his *Guardian* article on *Burma Boy*, Giles Foden writes:

There have been some great memoirs of Chindit life, but the thousands of Africans who fought with the force – including Bandeale's own father – have not been properly memorialised. Though credited with great courage and resourcefulness, they have existed only in the margins of the official record, as cameos and asides. (2007)

West African soldiers have never been granted the place they deserve in the history of the Second World War. Despite the heterodiegetic narration used, Ali Banana, the subaltern of the Second World War, acquires a voice both through indirect and direct speech. Bandeale's project seems to be in line with *Subaltern Studies*, as introduced by

Ranajit Guha (see Guha 1996), whose aim is to integrate history-less figures into history. In "Chandra's death," Guha himself explains one of the objectives of subaltern studies:

How is one to reclaim this document for history? The ordinary apparatus of historiography has little help to offer us here. Designed for big events and institutions, it is most at ease when made to operate on those larger phenomena that visibly stick out of the debris of the past. As a result, historical scholarship has developed, through recursive practice, a tradition that tends to ignore the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths. A critical historiography can make up for this lacuna by bending closer to the ground in order to pick up the traces of subaltern life in its passage through time. (1997, 36)²³

- 16 By diversifying the voices in the history of the Second World War, by offering a larger picture of this period, Bandele also decolonises History. To quote Sophie Dulucq and Colette Zytnecki, "the histories of extra-western worlds are [...] almost never taken into consideration in global historiographical panoramas, for which they remain blind spots" (2003, 1; my translation).²⁴ The fact that we hear various Hausa voices in the novel – Damisa's, Danja's, Ali Banana's, Zololo's – is also part of Bandele's decolonial project since, according to Claire Gallien, decolonialism emphasises "a suspicion towards [...] any homogeneous understanding of identity" (2020, 31). Although, as we have seen earlier, *Bildung* is not satisfying in *Burma Boy*, this novel enables Bandele to shed light on subaltern soldiers who have long been ignored. By tackling this issue in a direct way, Bandele also writes back to *African* history as it has been written until very recently, and engages in a historiographical project. He is in line with his "writing back" predecessors of the 1950s and 1960s, like Chinua Achebe, who offered what he would have described as the lion's version of the hunt, something that made him write *Things Fall Apart* in 1958. The Nigerian writer famously declared:

There is a great proverb – that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. That did not come to me until much later. Once I realized that, I had to be that writer. I had to be that historian. It's not one man's job. It's not one person's job. But it is something we have to do, so that the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the travail – the bravery, even, of the lions. (qtd. in Brooks 1994)

It is possible to draw a parallel between the "agony," "the travail," and "the bravery [...]" of the lions" that Achebe refers to and the plight of the soldiers who are the heroes of Bandele's novel.

- 17 At first sight, early in the novel, the young Ali Banana shows great enthusiasm at the idea of waging war against the Japanese enemy.²⁵ His ardour is probably linked to the fact that he has not fought in the Burmese jungle yet. An analepsis also allows the narrator to underline the enthusiasm of the soldiers for the army uniform and the status attached to it:

Indeed when Ali and his friends marched, proudly, through the streets of Kaduna in these boots, they looked as if they were wearing a flotilla of shoe-sized boats and could set sail if they stepped into the River Kaduna and the wind was strong enough.

Ali, whose tiny feet had known no shoes before, wore them with great pride. (Bandele 2007, 43)

The use of the polyptoton "proud/pride" reveals a lot about these young men's impression regarding their enlistment and enables Bandele to emphasise Ali Banana's tragic disillusion-to-come. The young man shows impatience while he finds himself in a military hospital in Bombay, because he has caught chickenpox:

Banana [...] paid a visit to Staff Office every day without fail, begging, pestering and haranguing the non-commissioned officers there.

He haughtily informed the NCOs that he hadn't travelled all the way from Kaduna to Laagos, from Laagos to Preetown, from Preetown to Darban and all the way to India just so he could go back to Nigeria with tales of chickenpox conquered.

'I here to fight na Boma,' Banana declared. 'I here for to killi di Janpani.' (33)

- 18 The narrator sometimes relinquishes his prerogative of omniscience. For example, when the narrative deals with Ali Banana's personal matters, such as his origins and the portrayal of his parents, the narrator vanishes in order to let him express himself in direct speech. He does so for conversations between the soldiers that can cover several consecutive pages, thus allowing the reader to hear subaltern voices. In the afore-mentioned quotation (Bande 2007, 33), Ali Banana alters the names of the cities which are located on his sea trip to India. This transformation/deformation of topological names can be perceived as the mark of their pronunciation by the young Hausa speaking protagonist: for instance, the capital of Sierra Leone, "Freetown," is pronounced "Preetown."²⁶ Standard English is affected by a form of syntax which is influenced by the Hausa language. Moreover, although they are expressed in English, the cultural references are Nigerian or, to be more precise, Hausa. This is the case with the expression "Roast me a cassava and you can have the skin" (39) which is used by Ali Banana when he addresses a Sergeant.²⁷

- 19 The novel's use of dialogue provides opportunities to hear the singularity of Ali Banana's voice, and his recourse to quasi-neologisms which deviate from standard English. The use of "english" words (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002, 8) such as "Janpani" instead of "Japanese," "killi," instead of "kill," "Boma" instead of "Burma," or, elsewhere in the text, "Samanja" instead of "Sergeant," "kingi Jogi" instead of "King George," imposes a "sense of difference," a distinction "between the 'standard' British English inherited from the empire and the english which the language has become in post-colonial countries" (8). This english destabilises both "standard British English" and the narrative of the Second World War. Another passage also reveals this subversive aspect. In an exchange between a Hausa-speaking Japanese – an occurrence which the West African soldiers find surprising, as shown in the accumulation of adjectives before the word "Hausa" – and the Nigerian soldiers themselves, the Hausa language momentarily interrupts the narrative written in English. This destabilisation process is all the more visible as it is emphasised by italics:

'Black man!' rang the voice. 'The white man is no friend of yours. The white man is your oppressor. Why are you dying for him? Leave him now. Let him fight his own war by himself.' [...]

What startled D-Section that night was that the Japs were speaking to them not in English but in perfectly accentless, unhesitant, impeccable Hausa.

Once they got over their initial shock, Danja was the first to respond.

'Uwar ka!' he yelled. Your mother. [...]

Seconds later, the same Jap voice responded.

'Uban ka!' said the Jap. Your father. [...]

'Buran uban ka!' yelled Guntu. Your father's penis. [...]

'Durin uwar ka!' shouted Banana. Your mother's vagina. [...]

'Blaady fucker,' Bloken muttered. 'Blaady madafucker.' (165–66)

The use of stichomythia makes this exchange highly comical. The soldiers hurl grenades, in the same way as they insult each other. Contact is nevertheless established between the enemies. This is made possible through language, and the echo "mother"/"father," which draws attention to an exchange, albeit not a nice one. The

surprise also comes from the fact that a Japanese soldier speaks perfect Hausa; this perfection is conveyed through the impeccable English syntax in the first sentence in this passage, while it is the phonetic transcription of an insult launched by Bloken that is offered in order to conclude this dialogue. This hybridization of language points to a linguistic subversion that amounts to a political statement against history written by the victors, a strategy that is at the very core of the historiographical postcolonial strategy. The "classic" Second World War narrative has been momentarily interrupted. Moreover, in the epigraph to *Burma Boy*, Bandele quotes a passage from another novel entitled *The March Out* written by British writer James Shaw, in 1953, and he chooses to use a specific cue pronounced by a soldier called Ali Banana:

The gun arrived, and I checked it, wondering how much the men knew about the thing.

'Who's number one?'

'Me be,' exclaimed Private Ali Banana.

James Shaw, *The March Out*. (Bandele 2007, n.p.)

Ali Banana's answer seems to be a way to affirm his identity and his existence, but to confirm the great implication of the Nigerians during the Second World War, after the question asked by the other character (who is unknown in the epigraph): "Who's number one?", to which the answer is "Me be," which is grammatically incorrect but very powerful because of its concision. The use of the infinitive "be" emphasises the soldier's desire to impose his voice in the Eurocentric narrative of the Second World War.

- 20 Yet another paratextual element leads to the disruption of the historical and literary discourses of the Second World War. Indeed, Bandele ends his *Bildungsroman* with a sentence in Hausa, followed by its translation into English: "Kurunkus kan dan bera. / Off with the rat's head" (2007, 215). Although this could surprise a Western reader, it is not new to a North Nigerian one. In popular Hausa tales, it is usual to hear two sentences which constitute their framing. At the beginning, the sentence "A story, a story. Let it go, let it come," is usually uttered. The sentence "Off with the rat's head" is heard at the end of such tales. Furthermore, Ali becomes the griot of Hausa history as he also tells stories, in the manner of Hausa tales, as indicated in a sentence at the end of one of his stories: "'That is all,' I said 'Off with the rat's head'" (42). The pedagogical value of these tales echoes that of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre. As explained by Karl Morgenstern: "[the *Bildungsroman*] was to portray the hero's *Bildung* (formation) in all its steps and final goal as well as to foster the *Bildung* of the reader" (in Summerfield and Downward 2010, 1). *Burma Boy* highlights the importance of rewriting the history of the Second World War by focusing on the subaltern and it offers the possibility to correct the "single [hi]story" of Africa, to quote Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In that sense, Bandele's novel contributes to the *Bildung* of the (Western) reader.
- 21 By writing a historical novel about the Second World War and by choosing Ali Banana, a representative of subalternity, as his protagonist, Biyi Bandele has offered a novel in which poetics and politics converge. By opting for the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, which is ideologically charged, Bandele tells the story of a young boy who has to grow in terrible conditions in the Burmese jungle. What we have called "war *Bildung*" – as in "war training" – does take place. Yet, *Bildung* in the more traditional sense cannot occur: instead of shedding light on the emergence of a unified self, this *Bildungsroman* insists on the fragmentation and the madness of this young individual. Finally, even though *Bildung* might not be satisfying for Ali Banana, this novel nevertheless offers a

great opportunity to endow West African soldiers with an existence, a memory and possibly a voice.

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NOTES

1. Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1975) is an earlier example of an African novel dealing with the Burmese conflict through the memories of Second World War veterans.

2. Bandele expresses his "gratitude" to a number of sources that helped him write his novel, among which three biographies of Orde Wingate, two historical studies about West African soldiers during WWII, as well as a collection of Hausa stories.

3. In the "Introduction" to a recent study he published as editor, Chris Murray explains that there are "distinct approaches" to the study of the Second World War. Among them, the "micro-level" approach corresponds to what is presented in *Burma Boy*: "there is literature that fixates on the humanity of the war, the experiences of those who actually lived through the hell. Historians, such as the popular Max Hastings, retell individual experiences that are engrossing and incredibly important to furthering our understanding but in doing so can sometimes lose the forest for the sake of the trees – in some cases, so much so that we can almost be forgiven for forgetting exactly what war is being written about" (1–2). Although Bandele's novel does deal with the Second World War, it is true that no bigger picture of the war is offered in his book. Yet, it seems to be exactly Bandele's project, by solely focusing on the (in)humanity of these West African soldiers fighting in Burma.

4. The *Bildungsroman* – coined by scholar Karl Morgenstern (1819) – is originally a German genre, born at the end of the eighteenth century, with the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels* (1795–96), which is considered as the archetype of the genre, and which Morgenstern uses to define its main characteristics; see also Franco Moretti (2000, 3).

5. Other critics question whether Goethe's novel itself is a *Bildungsroman*. This leads to a confusion regarding what some critics consider as *the* archetypal *Bildungsroman* (see Amrine). The genre is no longer solely German, it has become international.

6. Mikhaïl Bakhtin writes: "[a] type of novel that provides an image of man in the process of becoming. [...] This type of novel can be designated in the most general sense as the novel of human *emergence*" (1986, 21–22; original emphasis).

7. Ericka Hoagland analyses the ideological significance and implication of the *Bildungsroman* which, for her, is linked to "imperialist patriarchal practice," and used to tell "a story [...] that was white, male, heterosexual, and middle-class" (2006, 3–4).

8. Tobias Boes observes that "[t]he rise of feminist, postcolonial and minority studies during the 1980s and 90s led to an expansion of the traditional *Bildungsroman* definition; the genre was broadened to include coming-of-age narratives that bear only cursory resemblance to nineteenth century European models" (2010, 231). It is also an element mentioned by Ralph A. Austen (2015, 215). Jarad Heath Fennel argues that "[t]he *Bildungsroman* genre is the perfect form for expressing the struggles of the emerging postcolonial subject" (2016, 24).

9. Among these novels, one can name the following examples, some of which are autobiographies: *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) by Ivorian writer Ahmadou Kourouma, *Child Soldier: Fighting for My Life* (2002) by Ugandan writer China Keitetsi, *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) by Nigerian writer Uzodinma Iweala, *Song for Night* (2007) by Nigerian writer Chris Abani, *A Long Way Gone* (2007) by Sierra Leonean writer Ishmael Beah, *War Child: A Boy Soldier's Story* (2009) by South Sudanese writer Emmanuel Jal, etc. This African transnational literary phenomenon might have given the impression that child-soldiers only exist in Africa. Biyi Bandele offers another story, through a new setting, as will be studied here.

10. Writing about the impact of the war on young soldiers is however neither new nor intrinsically African. German writer Erich Maria Remarque famously wrote an anti-war *Bildungsroman* entitled *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). The main character is a young German soldier during the Great War. Remarque's novel depicts the spiritual crisis of this (anti-)hero and his disenchantment with war. David M. Rosen explains that by giving details about the physical and psychological consequences of the war, a literary "critique of war" was born (2015, 103). Rosen also notices a "humanitarian" shift in the fictional representation of the child, from "heroic child fighter" to "the battered victim" (102). *Burma Boy* also develops an anti-war stance.

11. In *Burma Boy*, the character named Damisa is a member of the group of soldiers to which Ali Banana belongs. Ali Banana admires Damisa because the latter is older and more mature, and he embodies the role of the mentor for the young boy, the mentor being central in the process of identity construction of the hero in the *Bildungsroman* (see Feng 1999, 3). The narrator reveals that "Samanja Damisa was Banana's hero. He was twelve years older than Banana and had been to more places and done more things than anyone Banana had met" (Bandeled 2007, 30). First, Damisa is described as a "tall, broad-chested man" whose main characteristic is his missing "left ear" (29). The reader learns that he is a seasoned soldier, who has already fought on another war front, that of Abyssinia.

12. By using the expression "art of surviving," I aim to echo Franco Moretti who alludes to the *Bildungsroman* genre and the "art of living" (2000, 32). In most works dealing with child-soldiers, the focus is on survivalism and not on how these young protagonists live.

13. It is worth noting that in sub-Saharan African societies, the *Bildungsroman*'s function can be related to African initiation ceremonies, most of which are accompanied – as is also the case for the *Bildungsroman* – by didactic tales. For example, Yorùbá writer D.O. Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga* (1938) – translated into English from the Yorùbá by Wole Soyinka and central to Yorùbá (oral) literature and philosophy – together with Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) or *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), deeply inspired by Fagunwa's work, are early Nigerian works adapted from initiatory tales. This might explain why the *Bildungsroman* genre has particularly caught on in Africa, a natural terrain, or so it seems, for these tales of initiation and maturation. Different episodes are described in Fagunwa and Tutuola's works – monsters, descents into abysses, ascensions to the skies, harsh, if not impossible, tasks to achieve, symbolic death, rebirth, in the Bush – which represent trials for the hero. Similar episodes can be found in more recent novels, like in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005), for example. In *Burma Boy*, Bandele comes within the scope of a whole tradition of Yorùbá writers who are particularly interested in initiatory tales.

14. Elliott L. Gilbert and Don Randall read *The Jungle Book* as a *Bildungsroman*. Other critics, like Jessica Straley, argue that it "never was [a] *Bildungsroman*" (2016, 121).

15. In its general sense "katabasis" refers to a descent of some sort, and to a retreat in a military context.

16. For example, Ali Banana's mentor, Damisa, asks him to shoot him dead because he is wounded and does not want to be killed by the Japanese enemy (Bandeled 2007, 203). Another soldier named Danja warns Ali: "[K]illing men does not make a man of you" (190). This killing, and that of enemies, which, in the context of war *Bildung* alluded to earlier could be considered as an initiatory process, hampers – rather than contributes to – the development of the protagonist.

17. These flames are actually not fire, as Ali Banana explains later on: "The fire which earlier had frightened Banana and made him nearly flee had ceased to trouble him. That fire, which wasn't a fire at all, but a million fireflies fused together into one giant piercing flame, had long ago disappeared. But the fear had not left him. He no longer remembered the excitement he'd felt only three days earlier. That feeling was gone, replaced by this numbing, if not disabling, anxiety" (Bandeled 2007, 81; emphasis mine). Anxiety, or even fear, hamper mobility, as this quotation shows.

18. This could be compared to what happens to Damisa himself when Zololo dies: "He was only twenty-six; in Banana's eyes he'd always behaved like a man twice his age. But now as he rested his head against the teak tree, he looked like a little boy lost" (Bandeled 2007, 126).

19. For example, Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o deems that a writer should be politically committed: "Whether or not he is aware of it, [the writer's] works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles of his society. [...] Every writer is a writer in politics" (1997, 19).

20. Claire Gallien explains that "[d]ecolonial studies emerged as a university field [in the years 2000], largely under the impulse of predominantly male scholars from Latin and South America now working for US and European universities and research centers. [...] Both postcolonial and decolonial studies engage with global structures, experiences, and discourses of colonial domination. [...] Both fields focus on marginalized people, whose experiences, imaginations, and knowledge of the world count less, or simply do not count at all" (29–30). These scholars include Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, Argentinian semiotician Walter D. Mignolo, US researcher Catherine E. Walsh, among others.

21. The concept of "subaltern" refers to figures who are not represented historically. This conception was highly influenced by Antonio Gramsci's definition of cultural hegemony, that of a structural domination of a governing class – including intellectuals – vis-à-vis those deprived of any power of representation.

22. The memoirs of a former Nigerian Chindit named Isaac Fadoyebo, entitled *A Stroke of Unbelievable Luck*, were published in 1999 after they were found in the Imperial War Museum in London.

23. More recently, Gyanendra Pandey, one of the founding members of the Subaltern Studies group, put to the fore his willingness and (political) commitment to (re)writing history through his "defense of the fragment" (2005, 16), thereby acting against grand narratives. Bandele seems to share this project in *Burma Boy*.

24. "[L]es histoires des mondes extra-occidentaux ne sont [...] presque jamais prises en considération dans les panoramas historiographiques globaux, dont elles demeurent les angles morts."

25. The choice of an adolescent figure both depicts a historical reality – as Isaac Fadoyebo testified – and an interesting narrative choice, since adolescence represents an interstitial space between childhood and adulthood. However, Ali Banana and the other soldiers go back to a state of infancy, as explained earlier. The description of Damisa's dead body attests to this aspect: "[Banana] knelt down and lifted [Damisa's] body. Damisa, a towering giant of a man, was light as a suckling" (Bandele 2007, 202; emphasis mine). The passage from "man" to "suckling" – not even "toddler" – is striking in that respect. These two characters symbolically return to a state of infancy, the Latin word *infans* meaning the one who has no voice.

26. UCLA's "Teaching and Research: African Languages" website explains that "[t]he Hausa sound written 'f' is not pronounced like the 'f' typical of European languages such as English or French. [...] In Hausa, 'f' is a bilabial sound. The lips are brought near each other and air is blown between them. For some Hausa speakers, the constriction of the lips is so tight that 'f' sounds very much like English 'p'" (see <http://aflang.humanities.ucla.edu/language-materials/chadic-languages/hausa/hausa-online-grammar/pronunciation-writing/consonant-sounds/>).

27. No clear explanation of this expression has been found, but one can guess that in the context where it appears in the novel, it means that Ali Banana is not a person who takes advantage of a situation, he is "not mean" (Bandele 2007, 39), as he explains to the Captain. This use of a proverb once again reminds the reader of Chinua Achebe's relationship with proverbs when he wrote that "[a]mong the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (1986, 4). In the same way as his Igbo predecessor, Bandele adapts the English language as a means to provide access to a specific African culture. This grants more authenticity to this West African account of the Second World War, and imposes a vision of Ali Banana as a master of "the art of conversation." It also partakes of a decolonial objective whereby Bandele unveils an alternative epistemology, a different cosmovision.

ABSTRACTS

Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy* (2007) is exceptional in various ways. The novel deals with the Burma campaign, a series of battles fought in the former British colony of Burma during the Second World War. Bandele's novel is therefore exceptional in the context of the Nigerian war novel, which has mostly addressed the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70). This exceptionality is also found in the fact that Bandele rewrites the Eurocentric narrative of WWII and gives a voice to those who have long been silenced in history books, i.e. West African soldiers involved in a deadly conflict far away from their homes, fighting for a country with which they had little in common. The ultimate exceptionality of the novel lies in the rewriting of the *Bildungsroman* genre in a novel in which the self is fragmented; this contradicts the unified self found in the traditional version of the genre.

INDEX

Keywords: Bildungsroman, war Bildung, Nigerian literature, Second World War, History, childhood, jungle, subaltern, voice

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