

The Benevolent Dictator: Love and Masculine Performativity in *Stay with Me*¹

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Abstract. This article analyzes the male protagonist of Ayòbámi Adébáyò's *Stay with Me* (2017) as an embodiment of the internal contradictions that customary laws and masculine performativity exert upon Nigerian men. The novel retells Yejide and Akin's relationship and their struggles to conceive as Akin hides his erectile dysfunction from Yejide and his family. I analyze Akin under Elnathan John's satiric label of "the benevolent dictator" (2020) exploring how this term engages with the idea of masculinity and male performativity in contemporary Nigeria. For this, I take as a point of departure Patrick K. Uchendu's study on Nigerian masculinity (2008) and Daniel J. Smith's notion of "performativity" in Nigerian men (2016). The role of the family in the imposition of customary practices is underlined as essential in Akin progressively becoming a "benevolent dictator". Akin's trust in the potential of love and intimacy is measured against the weight of the pressures exerted by the Nigerian family as an institution. In turn, I delve into the role of fear and shame as "prevent[ing] the subject from betraying 'ideals'" (Ahmed 2014, 106). Ultimately, I claim that the actions of the benevolent dictator in the private sphere echo Adébáyò's narration of Ibrahim Babangida's military dictatorship (1985-1993).

Keywords: Nigerian Masculinity; Performativity; Shame; Benevolent Dictator; Ayòbámi Adébáyò.

[es] El dictador benevolente: amor y performatividad masculina en *Quédate Conmigo*

Resumen. Este artículo analiza al protagonista masculino de *Quédate Conmigo* (2017) de Ayòbámi Adébáyò como un reflejo de las contradicciones internas que las leyes consuetudinarias y la performatividad masculina ejercen sobre los hombres nigerianos. La novela cuenta la relación de Yejide y Akin y sus esfuerzos por concebir mientras Akin oculta su disfunción eréctil a Yejide y a su familia. Se analiza a Akin bajo la etiqueta satírica de Elnathan John de "el dictador benevolente" (2020) explorando cómo este término se relaciona con la noción de masculinidad y performatividad masculina hoy en día en Nigeria. Para ello, se toma como punto de partida el estudio de Patrick K. Uchendu sobre la masculinidad nigeriana (2008) y la noción de "performatividad" de Daniel J. Smith en los hombres nigerianos (2016). El papel de la familia en la imposición de prácticas consuetudinarias se destaca como esencial para que Akin se convierta progresivamente en un "dictador benevolente". La confianza de Akin en el potencial del amor y la intimidad se mide con el peso de las presiones ejercidas por la familia nigeriana como institución. A su vez, el artículo profundiza en el papel del miedo y la vergüenza para "impedir que el sujeto traicione sus 'ideales'" (Ahmed 2014, 106). En última instancia, el artículo sostiene que las acciones del dictador benevolente en la esfera privada se ven reflejadas la narración de Adébáyò sobre la dictadura militar de Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993).

Palabras clave: Masculinidad nigeriana, Performatividad, Vergüenza, Dictador benevolente, Ayòbámi Adébáyò

Contents. 1. Introduction. 2. Masculinity, Nation, and Performativity: The Genesis of the "Benevolent Dictator." 3. One Is Not Born but Becomes a Dictator: The Family and Nigerian Masculinity. 4. The Point of No Return: The Fall of the Benevolent Dictator. 5. Conclusion

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1. Introduction

Nigeria has not passed a Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill since 2010, as a new and improved Bill was rejected in 2016 and 2021 by senate members claiming that the new "Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill is not compatible with Nigerian culture and religious beliefs" (BBC News 2016). As a result, gender inequality is perilously persistent in Nigeria despite the socio-political changes and improvements brought about by the rise of African feminisms (Akanji

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et al. 2019; Okeke 2000). Analyzing the impact of customary laws on gender inequality, Nigerian philosopher Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu claims that much of what today is referred to as “‘ordinary customs’ had, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, been invented, reshaped, or affected by the patriarchal ideology of colonial rule” (2006, 101). Present-day Nigerian men “are skeptical of the idea that their tradition was once astonishingly liberal and progressive” in gender terms (102)³. Colonial laws passed off western patriarchal ordinary customs as Nigerian and contributed to creating a “masculine myth-making” (102) which still today fosters a sense of “cultural amnesia” (102). Ironic proof of this is that by the late 1960s the new generation of Nigerian women “had no memory of [female-inclusive] political structures and organizations” (82). They were born in an era in which western patriarchal norms and educational experience, together with the newly acquired Christian dogmas, promoted that “educated male members of the families upheld marital rules and regulations for wives, daughters, and sisters” (82).

Stemming from Nzegwu’s remarks, this paper analyzes the male protagonist of Ayòbámi Adébáyò’s *Stay with Me* (2017), Akin, as an embodiment of the internal contradictions that customary laws and the masculine myth-making exert upon Nigerian men. *Stay with Me* recounts the story of Yejide and Akin’s relationship and their struggles to conceive as Akin strives to hide his erectile dysfunction from Yejide and his family. Adébáyò delves into Akin’s scheme to have his brother, Dotun, seduce Yejide to give her a child, and into the sorrow and anguish they experience after losing their children to sickle-cell disease. Although Yejide’s voice dominates the narrative, both Akin and Yejide alternately present their sides of the story. This allows for an exploration of Akin’s first-person narrative perspective. I aim to analyze Akin under Elnathan John’s satiric label of “the benevolent dictator” (2020, 5) exploring how this term engages with the idea of masculinity and male performativity in contemporary Nigeria. In the first section, I focus on the notions of “masculinity” and “performativity” in Nigeria stemming from Patrick K. Uchendu’s case study on Nigerian masculine ideologies (2008) and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity (1990). Subsequently, I analyze how Akin and Yejide start their relationship. I argue that this process runs parallel to Akin becoming a “benevolent dictator” as he engages in performing Nigerian masculinity. In section two, the focus turns to Akin’s need to respect and abide by family values and customary practices. Akin’s trust in the potential of love and intimacy is measured against the weight of the pressures exerted by the Nigerian family as an institution. In the third section, I examine how Akin faces direct threats to his lies as a benevolent dictator and whether it is possible to end the cycle of performativity. As part of my analysis, I claim that the actions of the benevolent dictator in the private sphere echo those of Nigerian dictator Ibrahim Babangida in the novel, which narrates the historical development of Nigeria from 1985 to 2008.

2. Masculinity, Nation, and Performativity: The Genesis of the “Benevolent Dictator”

Chimamanda N. Adichie tackles the issue of gender difference in “We Should All Be Feminist” (2012), where she denounces that “the problem of gender is that it prescribes how we should be” within that expected performance, “socialization exaggerates [gender] differences” (Adichie 2012). Referring to masculinity, Adichie sustains that it is narrowly defined in Nigeria: “we teach boys to be afraid of fear, we teach boys to be afraid of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true self, because they have to be [...] hard men” (Adichie 2012). Adichie’s words hint at the relevance of context-dependent lessons in teaching how to be a man. It is undeniable that the implications of modern masculinity were first introduced in African countries during the colonial era (Olorunfemi Jaiyeola and Isaac 2020, 5; Uchendu 2008, 14). Specifically in Nigeria, Ifi Amadiume claims that “the masculinization of religion and government” taking place under colonial rule brought forward “the exclusion of women from the colonial political administration” (2015, 239), thus marking Nigeria’s future political landscape. Despite such undeniable colonial influence, scholars delving into African masculinities have underlined that a notion of an ideal or “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2005, 77) is too western-oriented and thus does not suffice to describe the multiple cultural and social practices that different notions of African masculinities encompass (Cornwall 2003, 244; Miescher and Lindsay 2003, 21; Olorunfemi Jaiyeola and Isaac 2020, 5; Uchendu 2008, 15). In this respect, the notion of masculinity I deploy in this paper stems from Uchedu’s claim that “masculinities scholars [must recognize] men and masculinities as social and cultural productions that differ within contexts, nations and continents” (2008, 14). Although Uchedu’s study underlines that it is fundamental to acknowledge “the existence of varieties of masculinity within a society, across societies and across continents” (2), it also subscribes that similarities may exist among different forms of African masculinities (14). Uchedu posits that men’s engagement and compromise with different African masculine ideologies depends on their adherence to values stemming from “the family, mass and audio-visual media, religion, education and interpersonal interactions [, which are among] the factors that contribute to the development of any particular brand of masculinity” (15). Andrea Cornwall claims that the similarities in what concerns the ideals of African masculinities may be referred to as a spectrum of masculinities which “can be actively deployed to maintain,

³ Precolonial social order generally granted women more autonomy, for they were seen “as co-leaders, as achievers, as counselors who had clearly defined respected and noble roles in their societies” (Nwosu 1999, 1). Until the colonial era, Nigerian women had a more than relevant function in economic transactions and activities such as farming, which was performed both by men and women who distributed tasks according to their individual skills (Uchendu 1995, 18).

challenge, or defend particular positions of power” (2003, 244). In this line, there is an ongoing “active negotiation of ideals of masculinity to evaluate men’s performance that has framed the most insistent challenges and changes over time” (244). Against this backdrop, I seek to analyze Akin as a character whose evolution is subjected to the different and at times competing ideals that influence Nigerian masculinity.

Of course, when referring to masculinity in Nigeria and the subjectivity it is object of, Butler’s research on gender performativity must be acknowledged, for it considers gender as a mechanism which “operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates” (2010, xv). With this claim, Butler subscribes that what we consider an “internal feature of ourselves” is naturalized and “produc[ed] through certainly bodily acts” (xv-xvi). Such a definition of gender leaves room for different context-dependent interpretations of what Butler refers to as performativity, a ritualistic process “which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (xv). Butler’s theoretical approach to performativity is arguably flexible and encompassing enough to describe the different forms in which African men engage with and adopt expectations of proper masculine performance. In this sense, my use of performativity borrows from Stephan F. Miescher and Lisa A. Lindsay’s idea that African men “*consciously* grappled with different forms of masculinity, engaging with, adopting, and discarding various, expectations and images of proper male behavior-images of both local and foreign origin” (2003, 7; my emphasis). That is to say, throughout the analysis of Akin’s evolution, I shall emphasize his conscious engagement in the customary laws and practices which rule his masculine performativity.

Interestingly, the notion of performing has a specific dimension in the Nigerian context. Daniel J. Smith’s study on masculinity in Nigeria reveals that the concept of “performing” is

a telling one in Nigerian pidgin English. It captures a wide spectrum of expectations and behaviors associated with masculinity in contemporary Nigeria. Men (and women) use it to describe everything from success (or failure) in politics and the workplace to providing for one’s family and satisfying one’s sexual partner. The ubiquitous use of the verb is indicative of the extent to which men’s performance as men is under constant scrutiny in Nigeria. (2016, 51)

The polyvalent meaning of the word reveals a deep interdependence between the public and the private, since performativity is loaded with expectations which cover and interconnect cultural, social, political, and sexual spheres. The public dimension of performing gender in Nigeria is tightly related to traditions, customary laws, and how they nurture the idea of a united nation. This is how gender performativity orients Nigerian citizens towards certain actions —marriage and reproduction— as it deviates attention and punishes other behaviors —homosexuality, disobedience to the family, and sterility. In this manner, emotions such as fear, shame, love, and happiness become intrinsic to nationalism through a collective game of reward and punishment. Performing can thus be linked to affect theory if we consider Sara Ahmed’s description of performative or regulative social norms as “repetitive strain injuries” (2014, 145). Through the reiteration of certain gestures and actions, bodies are oriented in a particular direction as they “become contorted; they get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of action” (145). It thus becomes evident that affect, as the intensification of feelings, can indeed be forced or induced into repetition, especially if the ultimate aim is to feel happiness stemming from love. In this respect, “the science of happiness could be described as performative: by finding happiness in certain places, it generates those places as being good, as being what should be promoted as good” (Ahmed 2010, 6). As a result of the manipulation of affects, the family, as a metonymy of the Nigerian nation, much like heterosexuality and civilization, are social forms that exist due to the effect of repetition (Ahmed 2014, 12). This shall constitute my focus of attention when analyzing Akin as increasingly becoming manipulative as a conscious process encouraged by her mother, and enforced by so-called traditions and customary laws that perpetuate Akin’s performance.

The connection between traditions, romance, and performativity is pivotal to understanding the internal contradictions that Akin has when it comes to choosing between supporting Yejide or fulfilling traditional expectations. The link between the public and private spheres is promptly introduced in the novel, since the bond between Akin and Yejide is established during a revolt against the Nigerian government. The scenario for the consolidation of this Yoruba couple is a real event which took place in 1981, the protest to demand justice for Bukola Arogundade.⁴ The failure to find those responsible for Arogundade’s murder underlines the corruption and inefficiency within the police department compromising “security, peace, and order in the country” (Okoosi-Simbine 2011, 164). Accordingly, the march is described in the novel as a “pure [demand] propelled by a collective anger that shivered in bloodstreams, an unspoken assurance that if we just got to the place and screamed loud enough, someone would pay attention” (Adébáyô 2017, 94). The march of 1981 ended with the violent dispersal of the civilians who ran into a barricade of anti-riot policemen (Fayokun 2012, 2). Directly associating politics and love, Akin describes marching with Yejide as follows:

⁴ Bukola Arogundade was a student of the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) found headless on June 7, 1981, “suspected to have been a victim of ritual murder” (Fayokun 2012, 1). The protest, which involved around 10,000 students, demanded “the local police authority to produce [his slain body] and offer an explanation on the circumstances surrounding the death of the young man” (1).

I caught the feverish anger from her enchanting words. [...] I agreed with everything that came out of her mouth; it was as if she was reading my mind. It was new, strange, exciting: the way she mirrored me in those moments, mirrored my passion and dreams for a better country. I was convinced more than before that I had found my soulmate. [...] The police were waiting in Mayfair. Gunshots rang out. People started running all around me, screaming as they dashed into the bush [...]. Then she was there beside me, rapping on the car window. I'd never been so happy to see another human being, wanted to strap her in the seat next to me, live with her in the car, forever. [...] 'Marry me now,' I said. (Adébáyò 2017, 95)

Akin's association between the passion felt towards the country and Yejide is equated with love towards "the one and only," his "soulmate" (95), a term which can refer both to Yejide and Nigeria. In like manner, Adébáyò speaks of the destiny of the relationship as depending upon the socio-political fate of Nigeria. In fact, the novel compares the ecstasy felt by the lovers with the description of police gunshots and chaos, events which Akin dreams about during their first year of marriage (97). In that moment Akin's affect towards Yejide becomes too powerful to contain, to the extent that he asks her to marry him in that precise moment, in the midst of a national havoc, which shall mark the course of their relationship.

After meeting the love of his life, a national and customary component of masculine performativity is ignited in Akin, since romance and falling in love become monitored actions. Family and friends become social agents controlling whether or not a romantic relationship follows the performatively recognized stages of courtship, marriage, and descendants. It is for this reason that Akin refuses to share the disgraceful secret of his impotence when Yejide asks him directly: "'so, Akin. You can confess all your secrets to me now, dirty or clean. [...].' There were things I could have told her. Should have said to her. I smiled. 'I've got a few dirty socks and underwear. How about you?'" (43). This lie underscores his awareness of the masculine performativity he must measure against. Aware of his inability to perform masculinity in "biological terms" (Uchedu 2008, 3), Akin consciously chooses to lie to try and grant himself an emotional happily ever after. This is how he starts his path as a "benevolent dictator", a term described by essayist Elnathan John in *Be(Com)ing Nigerian: A Guide* (2020). John equates Nigerians' trust in the lies of former dictators and current politicians with the process of falling in love and defines the relationship between Nigerian citizens and their rulers as a toxic one:

love keeps no records of wrongs, whether those wrongs happened in 1984 and are being repeated⁵ or those wrongs lead to hundreds of people being secretly buried. [...] Love rejoices in the truth: and the truth is what the benevolent dictator says it is. Love always protects the interest of the dictator and blames only his ministers for things that go wrong. (2020, 5)

John's satiric term emphasizes a link between emotions and power in Nigerian politics. In this line, Smith underlines that Nigerian

masculinity is pivotal to understanding issues of power and political economy. [...] In so many ways, articulations of manhood in Nigeria are profoundly shaped by the specter of a corrupt state and society, and by the imperative that men participate (both in response to external pressures and to satisfy their own sense of pleasure and manhood) in practices of sociality and politics that are frequently perceived to be immoral or ethically questionable. (2017, 4)

My use of John's notion of the benevolent dictator aims to present Akin as a metonymic representation of the deep interrelation between the personal and political spheres in Nigeria. Embodying the corrupt spirit of Nigerian dictators, Akin's first lie during their courtship shall not be the last. As a consequence, Yejide, Akin's wife, acts as a proxy of Nigerian citizens placing their faith in the dictator in the hope of a better future.

3. One Is Not Born but Becomes a Dictator: The Family and Nigerian Masculinity

This section revolves around the role of the family in Akin becoming a benevolent dictator. I discuss his initial adherence to a model of masculinity based on intimacy and how this changes to accommodate the needs of Nigerian masculine performativity. I analyze how Akin's performative acts are encouraged by his own mother, who monitors, assesses, and at times jeopardizes his role as husband. I seek to prove that his identity as a benevolent dictator develops as a result of his performativity, and more specifically as a result of lying in an attempt to hide his inability to meet expectations of Nigerian masculinity.

Until he meets Yejide, Akin successfully completes his first masculine challenges, those which are considered signs of postcolonial modern manhood⁶ in Nigeria: completing a formal education (Smith 2017, 36); "the periodic

⁵ With this reference, John's satirical work aims to criticize Muhammadu Buhari, who ruled Nigeria between 1983 and 1985 as a dictator and was elected president from 2015 to 2023.

⁶ Amadiume specifically refers to how pre-colonial ways of proving masculinity no longer apply in contemporary Nigeria. Such tasks involved carrying out "violent and courageous ventures" (2015, 175), "participat[ing] in the war dances to display his treasures of war or from hunting wild beasts, [or] boasting of [their] strength and courage, and wrestling with other brave warriors" (177). Likewise, Cornwall sustains that "where once a man acquired status by virtue of lineage and generation, there are now other routes to success" (2003, 232).

return to one's village of origin [...] showing off their success" (35); and proving to be wealthy enough to sustain a potential partner, as a "primary medium for the performance of power" (3-4). In fact, Akin's mother proudly compares him to his half-brother, Juwon, who stays in the village and becomes a carpenter instead of attending university (Adébáyò 2017, 22). Praising Akin's development, her mother directs her son towards embodying a common stereotype in West Africa: "the wealthy and powerful patriarch, with business and government networks in the city and perhaps some rural links to 'his people' as well, perhaps only one wife but certainly eyes for many" (Miescher and Lindsay 2003, 18-19). In this respect, Akin is also compared to his brother, Dotun, who is presented as unable to manage his savings, invest his money, and sustain his family (Adébáyò 2017, 57).

Akin is reassured in his masculine privilege until he starts courting Yejide and a new set of requirements are to be fulfilled. As part of his husbandly duties, Akin must be a "financial provider" and "insatiable lover" (Miescher and Lindsay 2003, 20). Consequently, his first lie to Yejide reflects that he sees his infertility as a drawback in his relationship, for not only marriage but also parenthood "remain the most imperative and taken-for-granted dimensions of social adulthood in southeastern Nigeria" (Smith 2017, 78). Indeed, Smith's study reveals that customary laws in Nigeria perceive marriage as "an economic, social, reproductive, and reputational project [as much as] a sexual and emotional endeavor" (2010, 146). Yet, aware of his inability to perform at a sexual level, Akin marries Yejide claiming to love her and believing that love itself should be enough. Here, my use of "love" stems from Lauren Berlant, who describes love as "the embracing dream in which desire is reciprocated: rather than being isolating, love provides an image of an expanded self" (2012, 6). Due to his condition, Akin finds in Yejide a partner to spend his life with, someone who reciprocates his feelings. Akin develops and reassures his romantic attachment to Yejide sustaining that "[he] loved Yejide from the very first moment. No doubt about that" (Adébáyò 2017, 21). His love towards Yejide can also be read in terms of Eva Illouz's conception of love as "a flight from social responsibility" (1997, 1). As it will be subsequently developed, at this point of this evolution, marrying Yejide grants Akin certain protection before the demands of his family, as he fulfills his mother's wishes in becoming a husband.

Prioritizing love, Akin adheres to an alternative model of Nigerian masculinity based on intimacy instead of reproductive duties. Smith specifically refers to intimacy in relation to Nigerian masculinity as what "signal[s] the importance of face-to-face, personal relationships in men's lives" (2017, 4). The relevance of intimacy in Nigerian masculinity stems from "how much of Nigerian economic, political, and social life is still characterized and influenced by the importance of close personal ties—in short, by intimacy" (4). Correspondingly, Nigerian men increasingly confer more importance on their "expectations of intimacy" (6). In turn, this change comes hand in hand with the idea that "more men and women in Nigeria have come to see love and romance, as well as trust and communication, as elemental to sexual relationships, and especially to courtship and marriage" (6). Proposing to Yejide, Akin envisages a prospective romantic happily ever after in which love will supersede the difficulties stemming from his infertility. Aware of the burden that having a wife entails at a performative level, he specifically claims: "before I got married, I believed love could do anything" (Adébáyò 2017, 21). His attitude exemplifies that "while the conflation of 'man' and 'husband' seems to have been constant over time, life histories of different generations point to significant changes in expectations of men as husbands and of men's abilities to realize such expectations" (Miescher and Lindsay 2003, 20). In turn, his adherence to a model of masculinity based on intimacy signals that, after fulfilling masculine expectations related to money and education, Akin has been empowered into believing that as a man he can choose to confer more importance on emotional intimacy and personal connection with a partner than on his duties as a procreator.

His romanticization of love as allowing them to overcome any obstacle soon comes to an end when he comes to realize that, without actually engaging in so-called traditional masculine performativity acts, love proves not to be enough:

there are things even love can't do. [...] I learned soon enough that it couldn't bear the weight of four years without children. [...] After four years nobody else cared about love. My mother didn't. She talked about responsibility to her as first son. (Adébáyò 2017, 21)

His statement proves his realization of having underestimated customary laws. After their marriage, Akin's mother becomes a big brother figure keeping a watchful eye on the couple. Her main role is that of cultural enforcer, forcibly guiding Akin and Yejide towards the path dictated by customary laws, particularly that of having descendants, for that is indeed "the most vital aspect of the performance of masculinity" (Smith 2017, 78). In this manner, the intimate process of sexual intercourse is imposed upon Akin, even if he is not able to perform or enjoy it. As he tries to hide his erectile dysfunction and leave a peaceful life with Yejide, his mother ensures his never forgetting that he is to be a father, either with Yejide or with a second wife: "after I'd been married to Yejide for two years, my mother began to show up in my office on the first Monday every month. She didn't come alone. Each time, she brought a new woman with her, a potential second wife" (Adébáyò 2017, 22). This action demonstrates that marriage is a social and even national process. The control that Akin's mother exerts upon the young couple evinces that, as part of such a process, "ties to kin and community remain strong, and the projects of marriage and parenthood continue to be embedded in the relationships and values of the extended family system" (Smith 2017, 73). Akin's realization that love is not enough underscores that those citizens unable or unwilling to conform to the demands of the institution of marriage and the subsequent familial obligations are socially punished and deemed deviant. Those who cannot perform their

role of good citizens become unproductive agents who “cannot reproduce the national ideal” (Ahmed 2014, 108). As a result, “concerns about the collective expectations of wider social networks permeate young men’s stories of modern courtship, the resolution of marital disputes, and decisions about childrearing” (Smith 2017, 73). Against this background, Akin’s refusal to confess his deviancy is meant to protect him from the punishment.

Akin comes to realize that he must choose between confessing his shameful secret, which would reinforce her intimate bond with Yejide, or preserving his manly status, thus consolidating his position as a benevolent dictator. Akin proves to be aware of the implications of his decision when he underscores the emotional implications of telling the truth to her mother: “I knew it would have finished her. This truth” (Adébáyò 2017, 224). After this turning point, he will do whatever it is required to fulfill traditional expectations involving his manhood. When words are not enough to persuade his mother that he and Yejide will at some point have descendants, he lies about having been tested at the hospital about his fertility with satisfactory results (46). This decision recalls corrupt politicians seeking to remain in control of the country by deviating attention from their faults. In turn, his lies reflect that it is not frequent that Nigerian men’s infertility is made public (Smith 2017, 99).

Adding to external pressures, Akin’s role as husband head of the household is challenged by Yejide, who is not a housewife but rather has her own business. These circumstances indeed reflect what Smith describes as yet another set of difficulties in performing masculinity in contemporary Nigeria:

men commonly feel their capacity to provide adequately is under threat. A combination of high unemployment, low incomes, rising costs, and increasing expectations—for greater consumption and longer, and more expensive, schooling for children—has put many men at risk of being perceived as “useless.” (50)

Although Yejide and Akin do not struggle at an economic level, Akin is not the main provider, since Yejide owns a hair salon which makes her economically independent. In this manner, Akin cannot live up to the expectations of the Nigerian saying “money makes a man” (3), which equates wealth with successful masculinity performativity based on the idea of “men as financial providers in their families” (Miescher and Lindsay 2003, 20). Since Yejide is economically independent, all his performativity efforts must concentrate on granting her mother the wished heir. Eventually, his performance of masculinity depends mostly upon letting his family blame Yejide for her incapacity to procreate. This takes him to reinforce the position of a benevolent dictator as he participates in the pressure his family exerts against his wife. This act recalls the “endless transition programmes” from military to civil rule (Okuyade 2013, 1) that the Nigerian government promoted in the 1980s.⁷ Claiming to reform and improve Nigeria’s situation, such political strategies were but schemes for Nigerian dictators to hold on to power. Likewise, Akin permits and engages in her mother’s control of her relationship with Yejide, sacrificing Yejide’s well-being to hide his secret. As a result, his performativity has a devastating psychological impact on Yejide. Blamed and shamed for her supposed inability to conceive, Yejide endures a psychological pregnancy that lasts for a year.

When Akin becomes aware of Yejide’s mental decay, a sense of guilt provokes him to stop talking to her (Adébáyò 2017, 71). Yet, he passively chooses to continue with the charade until he learns that the institution of the family shall find new ways to question and challenge the fragile stability the benevolent dictator builds with his lies. One day cultural forces push him a step further in his performance:

when my mother threatened that she would start visiting my wife each week with a new woman if I didn’t choose one within a month, I had to make a decision. I knew my mother was not a woman who made empty threats. [...] Funmi was the obvious choice because she didn’t want much from me. Not in the beginning. (23)

Akin’s words can be read in tune with Cornwall’s claim that Nigerian men believe that “being a man [is] not enough to maintain authority; much [come] to depend on a more performative identity as a man” (2003, 244). His anxieties also echo Smith’s idea that “expectations and practices of sociality, including the nature and meaning of male privilege and power, are seemingly up for grabs. These changes in sociality are at the heart of men’s anxieties about the challenges of manhood” (2017, 6). Akin’s economic, scholarly, and courtship triumphs do not make him untouchable before her mother. Far from being perceived as a figure to be respected, his mother further pushes his performance as if his previous achievements were but rehearsals for the final task of engendering a child. Accepting his mother’s imposition, the benevolent dictator takes a step further in his emotional dictatorship that will determine the rest of his life: he accepts his family’s imposition of a second wife, Funmi (Adébáyò 2017, 10). Akin’s acceptance of a second wife represents an internal treason towards the intimate and emotional basis of their marriage.

Akin’s action reflects how the Nigerian nation encourages performativity in men to the extent that personal intimacies are to serve the benefit of nation building. This is achieved by creating the fantasy that one’s personal well-being contributes to that of the family as a metonymy of the nation, ultimately benefitting the nation building project. Akin’s premarital promise to Yejide of never becoming a polygynous husband needs to be reshaped. For the family needs him to perform his reproductive and social roles according to traditional social norms.

⁷ “The political transition programme beginning from 1986, with its numerous weaknesses, inconsistencies and impure motives, catalysed and generated a considerable upsurge in the formation of civil society. In particular, the annulment of the 12 June presidential elections radicalized [civil society] groups” (Ikelegbe 2001, 8).

To further intertwine national and political events, after Funmi appears as a new member of the family, the novel introduces the news of a military coup that took place in 1985. This event gathers Akin and Yejide before the TV as they watch how Babangida takes control of the Nigerian government. Referring to Babangida in his sketch of the benevolent dictator, John describes Nigerians' relationship with the benevolent dictators as a marriage in which citizens and dictators are united "in sickness and in health" (2020, 22). In this line, Adébáyò's narrative of these historical events echoes that "at the time, Nigeria was still in the honeymoon phase of her relationship with Babangida, and like most new brides she wasn't asking probing questions" (Adébáyò 2017, 73). A parallelism can thus be established between Yejide's attitude towards Akin and the passivity of Nigerian citizens not questioning Babangida's actions. In this regard, the following section will revolve around Akin's reaction when he is indeed questioned, and around his progressive inability to sustain the artificial reality based on lies he has built.

4. The Point of No Return: The Fall of the Benevolent Dictator

This section delves into Akin's most dreadful action, finding a sexual partner for his wife, and into his reactions before the threats to publicly expose him as a benevolent dictator. First, the focus will be on Akin's self-justification symbolizing a point of no return in his path as a benevolent dictator. Then I will discuss the threats that Akin's performativity suffers as a result of this choice and the anger with which he answers such threats. In this context, I will delve into Akin's conscious choice of anger over shame when his secret is threatened. Concurrently, Akin and Yejide's disagreement on political grounds will be analyzed as a metaphor for their emotional disentanglement. In this context, I will trace the end of their relationships against the background of Adébáyò's narration of the last years of Babangida's military dictatorship.

When Yejide gains consciousness of her mental weakness and starts seeing a psychiatrist to overcome her psychological pregnancy, Akin threatens her recovery claiming to have now "accepted the fact that [he needs] someone else to get [his] wife pregnant" (Adébáyò 2017, 186). He then asks his brother Dotun to seduce Yejide despite knowing that "it could never be just sex for [Dotun] because a part of him had always wanted her" (188). In this manner, Akin asks Dotun to perform for him the biological part of masculinity that he lacks. This petition recalls a customary practice which is now infrequent in Nigeria: asking the brother of one's deceased husband to perform as a husband for a childless widow (Hollos 2003, 49; Whitehouse and Hollos 2014, 129). In this case, Akin is not literally but rather metaphorically dead, as he is unable to biologically perform to continue with the family legacy. Aware of the brutality of his petition, Akin admits that he is not able to stop performing and confesses to the reader his belief that "having children who called [him] Baba [...] would cleanse [him]" (Adébáyò 2017, 249). His decision proves that Akin cannot disentangle himself from the burden of Nigerian masculinity to the extent that he has now come to believe that arranging Yejide's pregnancy will solve the situation and somehow redeem him. Dotun accepts Akin's petition not only because he is now complicit in his lies but because he is aware of Nigerian men's "anxieties about satisfying women's sexual and material desires" (Cornwall 2003, 232). Ironically, Akin and Dotun come to have complementary roles, while Akin is wealthy but cannot sexually perform, Dotun gambles his money away and cannot provide for the children he has engendered.

From this moment onwards, Akin fully embraces his status as a dictator and becomes progressively cynical in his self-justifications. The man who once believed in the potential and restorative power of love, ends up wondering: "what would be left of love without truth stretched beyond its limits, without those better versions of ourselves that we present as the only ones that exist?" (Adébáyò 2017, 87). Hence, Akin convinces himself of having taken the right path without questioning the emotional and moral consequences of his actions. This is reflected when he sarcastically narrates that he "thought about what [Dotun] did for [him as a] sperm donation" right after lying to him about Yejide being aware of his plan: "I just wanted him to agree to the plan so I could go to bed and forget the discussion" (186). These statements reinforce the link between the public and the private, for the lies and self-justification of the benevolent dictator resemble the deceitful actions carried out by Babangida during his military dictatorship (1985-1993), inciting anger in citizens until they decide to rebel. With Dotun's help, Akin continues manipulating Yejide with an action which eventually incites her rebellion.

Akin himself plays a pivotal role in Yejide's acceptance of Dotun's advances, as he directly shames his wife for her crisis and psychological pregnancy:

'your brain is melting, Yejide. It is melting,' Akin said.

[...] Sometimes I think my husband's words made it easier for me to let Dotun comfort me. I think they made me weak enough to lean against him as he held me while I wept, as he kissed my earlobes and took off my clothes. (Adébáyò 2017, 110)

In this manner, Yejide describes her decision as a weakness triggered by Akin. The birth of Baby Olamide is the ultimate result of Akin's decision to continue performing at all costs. His obsession with becoming a father can be read through Ahmed's perspective on the idealization of a person or an object as "an effect of the ego. That is, the ideal object, as with the ego ideal, is an effect of the ideal image that the subject has of itself" (2014, 127). The impli-

cation is thus that Akin does not want to put Yejide's mind at ease but project himself as an ideal Nigerian masculine figure. In this sense, Akin demonstrates being conscious of the consequences that his performativity can have both upon him and Yejide: "it was the lie [he]’d believed in the beginning. Yejide would have a child and [they] would be happy forever. The cost didn't matter" (Adébáyò 2017, 253).

Echoing the attempt of a coup against Babangida that took place in 1986, the peace of the benevolent dictator is destined to be perpetually challenged by those he is manipulating. Once he has become a father, Akin is at ease until he realizes that Funmi, his second wife, knows his secret:

'Do you think I'm a fool? Your lies and the fake nonsense you've been doing in bed, you think I don't know? Is it because I've not decided to expose you?' [...].

'Tell me,' she said. 'Tell me how a penis that has never been hard makes a woman pregnant? And don't tell me again that it only happens when you are with me.' (Adébáyò 2017, 254)

Through this direct humiliation, the lies of the benevolent dictator are made evident and his secret is threatened to be shamefully exposed. When Akin's fragile masculinity is poked at, he loses control and accidentally kills Funmi in an act of rage: "I turned around to cover her mouth with my hand. And my palm did touch her face, cover her mouth, for a fleeting moment before she staggered, fell backwards, and tumbled down the stairs" (255). This violent act reflects the unstable nature of Akin's character, who becomes enraged when his lies are made visible. His reaction bears witness to how "the fear of shame prevents the subject from betraying 'ideals'" (Ahmed 2014, 106). Unable to challenge customary laws, Akin fears that Funmi exposes him as unable to follow such precepts. In turn, his killing of Funmi recalls Babangida's execution of the ten officers plotting a coup against him in 1986 (Oredein 1986).

Always conscious of the consequences of his actions, the benevolent dictator ponders how "anger is easier than shame" (Adébáyò 2017, 243). His choice of anger over shame is in tune with Ahmed's description of shame as the result of not adhering to certain values and ideas which create an 'ideal self' that would of course differ depending on the context (2014, 106). In this manner, "shame has been seen as crucial to moral development; the fear of shame prevents the subject from betraying 'ideals'" (106). Akin's choice of anger over shame underscores his refusal to believe that he is betraying the social, cultural, and national morals his mother has taught him. Since "shame as an emotion requires a witness" to impress shame upon the subject (105), Funmi's sudden exposure prompts Akin to exert unplanned violence against her in order to hide the much-feared sense of shame.

Funmi's tragic death takes place in the middle of Olamide's name ceremony, serving as a prolepsis for Olamide's destiny, since the baby dies some months after being born as a result of the sickle cell disease⁸. Olamide's death marks the beginning of a cycle of anguish and anger from which neither Akin nor Yejide shall recover. In turn, he is increasingly aware of his having lost control: "I realised that the ground under our feet had just been pulled away, we were standing on air, and my words could not keep us from falling into the pit that had opened up beneath us" (144). As a result, after losing her baby Olamide, Yejide becomes progressively lethargic, to the extent that she does not even mention her second pregnancy to Akin, who deduces that Yejide is once again pregnant when he sees her belly grow, and thus gathers that Dotun is still sleeping with his wife, an event which Akin tries to ignore. Their lack of communication bears witness to their love being in crisis, as it does not "work to stick others together in the absence of the loved object" (Ahmed 2014, 130).

The birth of a second child, Sesan, brings new threats to Akin's performativity when Dr Bello informs him that Sesan has sickle cell syndrome, which means that the child cannot be his:

I made sure I seemed angry enough to Dr Bello. Behaved the way I imagined a man would when discovering that a child wasn't his. I punched a wall, yelled and slammed the door as I left the office. [...] 'You mean that woman has been cheating on me? Are you serious? You mean this? Oh, my God! I'm going to kill her. I swear to God.' I allowed my voice to rise to its highest pitch and pounded my fist on the doctor's table. 'Calm down, sir, you need to handle this like a man, OK? Please calm down. Be a man, sir. Be a man.' (185)

The manufactured rage which Akin performs for the doctor can be contrasted with that felt against Funmi. While Funmi surprisingly threatens and shames the web of lies the benevolent dictator has built, Dr Bello does not shock Akin with new information. This is why he can easily remain in control by performing the aggressive masculinity that is expected of him before such a situation. In turn, Akin stops his act when the doctor asks him to behave like a man and contain his emotions. Akin's decision emphasizes that, when it comes to endangering his masculinity, it is worse to be impotent than to have been cheated upon. Additionally, it is easier for Akin to lie to the doctor and continue the performative cycle than to reveal the truth and present himself as a dictator.

Echoing Akin and Yejide's progressive disentanglement, the novel introduces another national crisis that echoes the matrimonial crisis: the news of the Orkar coup against Babangida in 1990. As Yejide teaches baby Sesan to walk,

⁸ "Sickle cell disease is the name for a group of inherited health conditions that affect the red blood cells. [...] People with sickle cell disease produce unusually shaped red blood cells that can cause problems because they do not live as long as healthy blood cells and can block blood vessels" (NHS 2021).

she learns about Major Gideon Gwaza Orkar's attempt to topple Babangida's government. During Lt-Colonel Ghandi Tola Zidon's announcement of the coup (162), Akin and Yejide disagree about politics for the first time:

'didn't [Babangida] promise there would be elections and we would go back to a democracy? Where is the democracy now?' [Akin asked.] 'Not possible in this Nigeria.' [...] 'This is not some banana republic.' (160)

Interestingly Akin opposes Babangida, the actual dictator who is ruling Nigeria, while he has become a dictator of the private sphere himself. While Akin is convinced that Nigerians will not allow the dictator to continue with his false promises, Yejide justifies her passivity before the situation "not because [she] like[s] the way he was running the country, but because the status quo [is] the devil [she knows]" (162). This is the result of the personal suffering she has undergone to fit customary practices and expectations. Akin and Yejide's ideological disagreement is a symbol of the progressive loss of intimacy and passion associated with the conjoined ideals for a better Nigeria that first united them. After the death of her second child, Sesan, to sickle cell, full of pain and anger, she loses hope in Akin in the same manner in which she loses faith in Babangida's promise of a gradual transition to democracy: "as far as I was concerned, 1993 would come and go" (236). Yejide is then on the verge of deciding whether her loss of passion both towards Akin and towards Nigeria is to lead her to rebellion, or whether she is to remain a wife who does not ask questions.

What prompts a change in Yejide is her witnessing how Akin violently attacks Dotun when Yejide becomes pregnant for the third time and Akin discovers his brother and wife having sex without his consent. This episode is narrated by Akin:

I always assumed I was the instigator, the one who decided when it was time for them to go into a room and make babies. After Rotimi [their third child] was conceived, [...] I told Dotun that our arrangement was over. And I never thought that I would return one day to find him thrusting into my wife without my permission. [...] I marched towards Dotun, armed with the only weapons I really needed – my raging anger, my clenched fists. (222)

Echoing the execution of those trying to throw a coup against Babangida in 1990, the benevolent dictator exerts violence toward his brother upon discovering that he is not being obeyed and in control anymore. The situation recalls his unplanned violence towards Funmi, which materializes when he loses control of the performance he is orchestrating. Aware that his secret has been exposed before Yejide, Akin admits that "all the rage had been an affectation. Something [he]'d reached for to use as a defence against shame" (243). His claims that anger and rage are an attempt to fight against shame represent that he accepts and chooses "the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence" (Ahmed 2014, 107). Conscious at all times of engaging in performativity, the benevolent dictator chooses anger, as a form of denial, over shame. His refusal of shame and embracement of anger is the result of his wanting to preserve the privileges of masculinity, as "emotions are bound up with the securing of social hierarchy" (4). Having enjoyed the perks of male privilege, Akin chooses to perform anger before Dr Bello and also to experience it before Funmi's and Dotun's betrayal.

After this display of violence, Yejide recognizes why she, echoing those Nigerians living under Babangida's rule, had not wanted to question the benevolent dictator: "I did not want to know the answers" (265). A week before the 1993 presidential elections, Yejide comes to accept that Akin, very much like Babangida, "would have spent the rest of our lives lying to [her] if he had found a way to get away with it" (263). It is then she decides to question the dictator:

'So, Akin, is it true that you can't... that you can't... Are you impotent?'

I wish I could say he respected me enough to answer my question directly when I finally confronted him. He smiled and leaned back in his chair until he was staring at the ceiling. He did not say anything for a long time. [...] 'When did Dotun tell?' (264)

Instead of answering Yejide's question with a truthful answer, the benevolent dictator answers with his own question. His reaction recalls Ahmed's description of shame as "an exposure [which] involves an attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject to turn away from the other and towards itself" (2014, 103). Akin thus cannot but remain silent. Before Yejide's impassive look, Akin eventually "slid[s] his hands from his face and wrap[s] them around his neck as though he wanted to strangle himself" (Adébáyò 2017, 264). Nonetheless, by this moment, Yejide is not able nor willing to show compassion for him: "I felt no pity for him [...] How could I?" (264). What ensues is Yejide's complete disentanglement from Akin at an emotional level, as Yejide admits to herself that the direct consequence of the lies of the benevolent dictator is that she "doubted the love [she] had been once so sure of" (263). As a result, she ultimately abandons Akin and her third child, Rotimi, in favor of her emancipation.

The fall of the benevolent dictator coincides with the civil protests against Babangida's annulment of the 1993 elections. War is recalled in descriptions of the crowd gathered in Lagos "protesting without placards, burning tires," and in the barricades built by protesters "with large tree branches, scraps of metal, nails and broken bottles" (275). A parallelism is thus established between the beginning and the end of their emotional journey, which started with a march in which they protested together against injustices in Nigeria's judicial system. In this case, Akin witnesses

the protests alone, while Yejide remains at home packing in order to leave before he comes back. Ultimately, the benevolent dictator is left alone with Rotimi, the only surviving child and proof of his machinations. With this ending, Adébáyò exposes the sham of masculine performativity in Nigeria as echoing the lies of actual male dictators that take advantage of the faith and trust of Nigerian citizens in seek of national union. In turn, if riots are read as “a disturbance that disturbs the national ideal as they reveal that love has failed to deliver its promise of harmony between others” (Ahmed 2014, 138), Adébáyò’s ending can be interpreted as a denouncement of the dangers of performing and abusing both Nigerian citizens and women. Such violence is the result of a lack of love. In turn, riots can be read as “a demand for love” (138) and thus of reparation.

5. Conclusion

This article has delved into the complexity of Nigerian masculinity both in the private and public domains as represented in *Stay with Me*. I have analyzed how Akin’s attempts to hide his erectile dysfunction entrap him in a cycle of compulsory masculine performativity that turns him into a “benevolent dictator.” This term has been introduced as a reflection of how Akin’s lies and manipulations in the personal sphere echo Babangida’s schemes during his military dictatorship in Nigeria from 1985 to 1993 as represented in the novel. The Nigerian family has been introduced as a social institution that plays a fundamental role in Akin’s personal decay and in his becoming a benevolent dictator. That is the result of Akin’s mother and brother encouraging, expecting and even aiding him in his lies and performative attempts to conform to social expectations regarding Nigerian masculinity. As part of his conscious performativity of the benevolent dictator, I have discussed his choice of anger and rage over shame when facing threats of exposure. As a result, I have attempted to demonstrate that Akin experiences a progressive disengagement of his ideals of love and intimacy toward Yejide as forces that could supersede expectations regarding marriage and descendants. The discussion of Akin’s most devastating acts as a benevolent dictator—accepting a second wife and asking Dotun to seduce Yejide—has proved his willingness to risk Yejide’s mental health in his attempt to continue performing. This has brought to the forefront Adébáyò’s critical perspective towards certain customary practices that perpetuate the oppression of Nigerian women as a metonymic representation of Nigerian citizens enduring Babangida’s dictatorship. Ultimately, Yejide’s abandonment of Akin has been introduced as a successful reparative attempt to emancipate herself from societal pressures to perform and conform to customary laws at the expense of personal and emotional well-being.

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