

## ...A profile in dream, courage, resilience

By Zik Zulu Okafor



*iREP is today deconstructing Nollywood, showing the redoubted practitioners that there is no edict or decree that stops a feature film maker from making documentary films. And the uptown kids, the upscale cut of iREP and its visible international success are now drawing some of the acclaimed Nollywood players to tune their minds toward documentary films.*

*"Who even came up with this foolish idea to start a documentary film festival? It must be you, Jahman."*

*"No, I think it's you Femi because you like to think and imagine all sorts of impossible things."*

*"No, no, it is Makin; Makin, I remember you were sipping your wine when you came up with this foolish idea. And then, as usual, you turned to your phone leaving us to worry about it..."*

*"Femi, I don't know what you are talking about. You are the culprit, period!"*



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And the comical blame-game went on in cycle.

The trio was actually teasing themselves in a mock frustration after the inaugural edition of the *iREPRESENT International Documentary Film Festival*, iREP, in 2010.

Ten whole years ago.

Yes, still like yesterday. They had pulled out every Naira in their bank accounts and every kobo in their pockets to activate and actualise this first edition. And now, not even a kobo to buy a bottle of wine to shout "hurray, we made it". And this was in spite of the fact that they didn't even pay for the venue of the event. Three good days of the docu film genre-specific festival at Terra Kulture, Victoria Island, Lagos, came free of charge. This was courtesy of a visionary young but iconic lady, Bolanle Austen-Peters, a creative entrepreneur cum practitioner passionately committed to the cause of arts, culture and the motion picture industry.

Despite this critical support, these guys still didn't have a dime to show for this venture that put them literally through a creative crucible. "

Damn crazy," they must have moaned.

Yet, Femi Odugbemi, Jahman Anikulapo and Makin Soyinka were not guys you could dismiss as putting up a show by caprice. You know, just a show for show's sake. But I could see some intimidating irony to their seeming audacious choice. Because these guys had met in Ghana, again and again, at the *Real Life Documentary Film Festival* curated by eminent theatre and culture scholar, Professor Awam Amkpa, they saw the excellence of *Real Life*; the embellishments of the arts and the aesthetics of the organisation. Despite this cut of professional statement, attendances remained below their expectations, perhaps lending a pathetic credence to the unscientific and warped notion that Africans pay scant attention to whatever demands even lame intellectual rigours.

So, having witnessed all these negatives, why would this bohemian trio decide it was this same creative storm they want to plunge into. They ought to have been even more dissuaded by the smug body language and deprecating voice of *Nollywood* practitioners whose feature films had already held the Nigerian audience captive.

"iREP docu what?"

"Who is going to sit down and watch documentary films?"

"Those boys *too do sef*."

"Ah ah. How can you gather serious people to come and sit down just to watch documentary?"

"Those boys just like to speak English".

Those were the unintended slur, even comic teasers from a section of *Nollywood* as the news of the plans for the inaugural *iREP International Documentary Film Festival* snuck into the Nigerian motion picture space. I, personally, must confess Jahman, my good *ol'* mate in the university muted this to me. I saw the courage of their conviction, their granite-cast faith, more than confidence. I even saw the promises of the festival. What I could not readily see, however, was the possibilities. Because in a Nigeria where the organised private sector and financial institutions pay only lip service to sponsorship, many brilliant ideas like iREP still remain comatose.

But what these corporates, even *Nollywood* and all did not see was the fact that this trio is made of the sterner stuff. And so, with a robust will, without a robust wallet and driven by sheer creative ingenuity, iREP happened in 2010. I remember strolling in casually to see what these dream-walkers had done. Inside a hall of perhaps 120 capacity, I was staggered to find close to a hundred people. But it was not the turnout that shocked. It was the highbrow youth bulge. And then the upmarket aura of the event, plus a fresh, palpable ethos that points to a nascent creative culture with a different mindset. I found myself applauding the genii of my gypsy friends.

And pronto, I began to look beyond the first edition despite the stark paucity of funds. And today, we are talking of ten years of this atypical creative odyssey. From Terra Kulture to Freedom Park, all in Lagos, iREP in crystal terms is now writing a new story for the factory of practitioners called *Nollywood* nay African creative bloc.

**FROM** inception iREP set out to create a platform for young, aspiring, and established documentary film makers to showcase their political-economy and socially relevant docu films to impact their world. In 10 years, it has done this and more. It has extended the frontiers of hope for young documentary film makers. It has become a confluence of international documentary scholars, film makers and these young ones. And these youthful, creative clan could see their works being subjects of fiery intellectual conversations, painstaking and even pedantic analyses. I have seen their ecstasies and those moments they cringed at some caustic remarks that pointed out some flaws but with the intent to help them grow. But their greatest thrill is the possibilities of tomorrow that iREP is tacitly showing them. I am particularly enthralled that iREP is today deconstructing *Nollywood*, showing the redoubted practitioners that there is no edict or decree that stops a feature film maker from making documentary films. And the uptown kids, the upscale cut of iREP and its visible international success are now drawing some of the acclaimed *Nollywood* players to tune their minds toward documentary films.

Even the international documentary film eminent figures, scholars and personalities that have graced iREP still decorate the aisle of our memories and indeed enunciate the global impact of iREP.

Some of these most treasured professionals include Professors Manthia Diawara, Awam Amkpa, Femi Shaka, 'Niyi Coker and Jonathan Haynes. There is Jane Mote, Jean-Paul Collyn, Jihan El-Tahri and Paul Ugor among others. These international figures are not only the deities of the documentary pantheon but the totem of inspiration and economic hope for an upcoming generation that iREP has given a thriving platform to launch their career.

At 10, I can only confess that Makin, Femi and Jahman have proved themselves to be pilgrim souls. And iREP beyond creative arts now has spiritual resonance as every edition seeks not only to entertain but to embark on a journey of unravelling the truth about us, a self-discovery about Africa, our democracy, government and governance and key social political and economic issues.

For the curators, for those that joined hands to keep this creative enactment aglow in the last 10 years and for the special guests and attendees, I can only say you epitomise profiles in courage.

- *Okafor, theatre artist, filmmaker, and art administrator, is a former President Association of Movie Producers*