

...A link between generation of African storytellers

By Michel Deelen



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I REPRESENT, you represent, we represent. iREP is never just about yourself. It is a melting pot of different backgrounds, different stories, different people gathering around a film and afterwards gathering around a table in Freedom Park Lagos Nigeria with the necessary food and drink to continue the conversation deep into the night.

My first encounter with iREP was in August 2014. Not during the festival itself, but at the monthly screening. I had just arrived in Lagos and decided to have a look at this place called 'Freedom Park'. A documentary about South Sudan was showing, *We Were Rebels*. I'll never forget that after the film I was interviewed by Toyin Fajj, who pinned a microphone on me and put me in front of her camera: my first encounter with iREP. This was also the first time I saw Jahman Anikulapo in action.

From that moment on I became a regular at Freedom Park and soon I met the other members of the illustrious pack -- Makin Soyinka, Femi Odugbemi and Theo Lawson. Not to forget of course, Prof Awam Amkpa, the force from New York.

iREP 2015 was the first in a series of five iREP Festivals that I attended. I met Cameroonian director, Jean-Marie Teno and Anja Goebel from Germany. We talked about the engagement of documentary makers, about French anthropologist filmmakers, about Dutch documentary maker Joris Ivens (whom I had studied at film school) and; with Makin and Jahman we talked about the Africa Shrine; they about Fela's one and how it was to drive from Abeokuta to Lagos in the night in those days and me, about Femi Kuti's New African Shrine.

The next year I saw the documentary, *"Negritude"*. A dialogue between Sengor and Soyinka. It was about many things, but I considered this to be a documentary about humanity. Although I could never see as much of the programme as I had intended, I would leave the office early on Friday to see documentaries and enjoy the Saturday morning screenings, where I sometimes found myself alone with the projector.

Apart from the great atmosphere and the wonderful people that one meets at iREP, there is, of course, also the essence of documentary: storytelling. As a young boy growing up in Europe, I saw the story of Africa being told by European filmmakers, who -- in those days -- filmed with great surprise what they saw and might not always understand.

The beauty of iREP is that it offers a platform to African filmmakers who talk about their own experience. And that might sometimes be in a bit clumsy or too framed, but at least there is a voice. iREP creates this link between experienced African, European and American documentary makers and the next generation. It exposes this next generation also to the best there is to find in the global world of documentary.

iREP brought me to the buildings of the Nigerian Film Corporation in Ikoyi, not just to watch *Statues also Die* by Alain Resnais, but also to discuss; because iREP can also mean vehement polemic about the documentaries we saw. And if you want to know where you are heading to, it might be useful to know where you come from. History did not start on the day when you moved to Lagos. The documentary on the Yoruba diaspora, from the US to Brazil to Cuba was a great eye-opener.

iREP in 2019 ended in a *vaudeville* chase. At the end of the festival, I drove back home and dropped off a sound engineer on the way, only to realise when I got home that my phone had disappeared. The culprit had however forgotten that such a phone can be traced, which led us through a nightly chase on V.I. Real life drama, it ended well.

The only thing I regret is that I never linked iREP with the IDFA festival in Amsterdam. That still remains to be done.

But bottom-line: iREP is a feeling, like all forms of poetry, iREP tries to involve and engage. iREP is friends. iREP is Star Beer. iREP is the world coming to Lagos. I truly hope to join you again next year.

- *Michel Deelen was Senior Political Counsellor of the Netherlands embassy in Lagos till 2019.*
