

## ... A natural part of the flow of culture

By Jonathan Haynes



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I'M delighted and honoured to have been asked to preface this volume that celebrates the first 10 years of the iREPRESENT International Documentary Film Festivals. In these years, iREP has established itself among the very best arts organizations on the crowded Lagos scene. Few festivals have done so much to transform the status of the art they promote: Documentaries have been made in Nigeria for a long time, but 10 years ago they barely registered as an art form to be taken seriously in the Nigerian cultural scene. Now they do, thanks in large part to the vision and dedication of iREP, its heroic directors, and all those associated with it.

A labour of love, iREP continues to be starkly underfunded and the work required to produce it each year still falls mostly on a few shoulders. But the love still burns bright and is shared by a steadily expanding constituency. There is every reason to hope that in another 10 years, iREP and the filmmaking it champions will have continued their remarkable growth and deepened their mission to record Nigeria's past and present and to shape its future.

According to an attractive myth of cinema's founding, documentary and fiction filmmaking have always divided the world between them. In the beginning were the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, and Georges Méliès. The Lumières were inventors, who in 1895 were the first to project motion pictures, their own proto-documentaries such as *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* and *Arrival of a Train at a Station*. Méliès, on the other hand, was a stage magician—an "illusionist"—who immediately (starting in 1896) grasped cinema's power to create experiences of what was not real: fantasies and dreams and whole new genres like the science fiction film, which begins with his *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), featuring a rocket ship crashing into the face of the moon --a moon with a grimacing face -- and insectoid moon creatures who capture the visiting astronomers.

The Lumières's films, as their titles indicate, represented as well as sprang from the industrial revolution. This was also the age of European imperialism, and cinema was always global. The mechanics of cinema cameras uncannily resemble those of the machine guns which, in these very same

years, were allowing British forces to finally defeat the Ashantis and the Sokoto Caliphate. In 1896, immediately after the invention of cinema, the Lumière brothers took their invention to Bombay, Palestine, and Buenos Aires as well as to London, New York, and Montreal; shortly afterwards the Lumières and their American competitor Thomas Edison sent their representatives all around the world.

The first film screening in Lagos took place in 1903. In those days of whirring steel sprockets, the basic mechanisms for recording and projecting moving images were so similar that the same simple machines did both things. So, the travelling film exhibitionists not only projected images filmed in Europe and the United States, they also recorded rudimentary documentaries of exotic foreign locales. Even Méliès made a couple of short films in Dakar. During the silent film era cinema technology remained relatively simple and cheap, and film industries quickly sprang up around the world: in Mexico from 1898, Brazil from 1900, China from 1905, India from 1913, and so on.

After the Russian Revolution, Lenin declared “that of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema.” Philosophers had described the world in various ways, and filmmakers had filmed it, but the point was to change it. Sergei Eisenstein’s theory and practice of montage sprang from a Marxist, dialectical mode of thinking that made of film an instrument of critical thought and feeling, at the moment that Hollywood was perfecting the arts of emotional identification in a seamlessly-represented fictional world.

Meanwhile, in Africa, colonial repression was too strong and local resources too weak for Africans to be able to make their own films, even as they embraced the new medium as spectators. While the British were deeply anxious about the potential effects of fictional feature films on their colonized subjects, they invested in an infrastructure for making as well as screening documentaries. As the mobile vans of the Colonial Film Unit circulated through the countryside, fictional films —by Charlie Chaplin, for example-- were the lure to draw Africans to the propaganda meant to change how they lived and thought: an instructional film on hygiene, or a newsreel about the role of the colonies in the war effort. The first generation or two of Africans to get their hands-on filmmaking equipment —Adamu Halilu in Nigeria, for example— did so in this context. After independence, this documentary filmmaking infrastructure, human and material, was taken over by the independent Nigerian government on the federal, regional, and then state levels, as part of the machinery of nation building. In the 1960s and 70s, it expanded into television.

Ola Balogun, the most prolific and conspicuously talented Nigerian director of the celluloid film era, wrote his doctoral thesis in France about documentaries, and made nearly 30 of them himself in addition to his many fictional films. These documentaries ranged from *One Nigeria* (1969, sponsored by the Nigerian Ministry of Information) to a film about a Shango festival, *Thundergod* (1972, sponsored by the University of Ife’s Department of Black Studies), to *Nigersteel* (1971), a publicity film commissioned by an Enugu steel mill.

Like Ola Balogun, a number of the most talented and highly-trained Nigerian filmmakers -- Mahmoud Ali-Balogun is an example-- have earned a living and kept themselves in the film business by making documentaries for corporations or other organizations in preference to relying on the working and aesthetic conditions that Nollywood has offered.

The other main dimension of Ola Balogun’s documentary output, the preservation and celebration of Nigerian arts and culture, has long been the strongest element of the Nigerian documentary tradition. Tunde Kelani, as always, is a leading example, from his film about the Osun Osogbo festival, *Oroki* (2009), to the film he screened at the 2019 iREP, *Yoruba Beyond Borders*, a portrait made with Bola Bello of a Yoruba town. This last, in characteristic fashion, is both radical in its demonstration of the latest,

revolutionary film technologies —it was shot on a couple of iPhones— and deeply conservative in its rooted Yoruba modes of understanding history and community that would not necessarily have occurred to a foreign documentarian, such as interviewing elders about the town's foundation and incorporating extensive footage of masquerades. The documentary impulse has always been strong in Kelani, who for decades has maintained his credentials as a BBC cameraman and journalist. Some of Kelani's fictional film projects, such as *Saworoide* (1999) began as documentaries, and others have scenes (such as the lecture on oral rehydration therapy in *Arugba*, 2008) that descend from the instructional character of the colonial era films.

When Femi Odugbemi was scrambling for current Nigerian documentaries to show at the inaugural iREP in 2010, he ended up programming several of his own films on cultural subjects: *Oriki: What's in a Name*, *Bariga Boys*, and *Ibadan: Cradle of Literati*. iREP has programmed too many films chronicling Nigerian arts and culture to begin to name them.

Sandra Mbanefo Obiago and her organization Communicating for Change, founded in 1998, deserve mention here for decades of persistent activism through making films with socially progressive purposes on subjects from human rights and democratization, women's empowerment, the environment, art for social development, and HIV and AIDS. These films were generally designed for television broadcast in Nigeria and beyond, and were by and large sponsored by foreign embassies, foundations, and NGOs. In recent years, a rapidly growing number of filmmakers have made films about women's issues.

More radical and directly political films have been rare, a weakness related to that of Nigerian political movements, though there have been dramatic exceptions such as Ishayo Bako's *Fuelling Poverty*, which came out of the Occupy Nigeria movement of 2012 and won prizes from Africa Movie Academy Awards and other festivals in spite of being banned by the government.

The work of foreign documentarians has always been broadcast on Nigerian television and might serve as potential examples, but for the most part they seem to have been purchased as filler that competes on price with the most worn-out Brazilian and Mexican telenovelas. Nothing kills the prestige of an art form more than that.

And so, we come to the world-historical importance of the iREP Film Festival. It certainly did not invent documentary filmmaking in Nigeria, and it is not the only Nigerian film festival to show and award prizes to docs. The Africa International Film Festival (AFRIFF) has particularly distinguished itself for bringing inspiring foreign examples to the attention of Nigerian filmmakers. But iREP provided the documentary form with the rare opportunity to be the main event and centre of attention, showcasing and recognizing it as an art form, a major branch of filmmaking, and a powerful tool for social intervention. iREP gave Nigerian documentary filmmakers a home, a local community and international connections, a nurturing, educational matrix, and even a measure of glamour.

Documentary filmmaking everywhere has been growing rapidly because of two interlocking forces: the breathtaking proliferation of media outlets and digital bandwidth, and the right of representation felt by "digital natives" the world over that makes every young person with a cellphone a documentarian, if only with a selfie stick, and makes a career working with audiovisual media seem natural. But historical forces don't manifest themselves automatically, by themselves: someone has to make history. iREP came along at an opportune moment.

Support for iREP's launching came neither from the government side nor from Nollywood, which has done a tremendous amount to build capacity for filmmaking but never had a place for documentaries. The real energy and inspiration came from a collection of individuals who loved documentary film and saw the unrealized potential for them in Nigeria. What became iREP began as a festival in Ghana that

failed; the original three directors of iREP saw that its proper home was in the more dynamic arts environment of Lagos. They represented that general dynamism more than a professional filmmaking community *per se*.

Only Femi Odugbemi, the executive director, is primarily a filmmaker and, while a documentary filmmaker at heart, he is better known as a soap opera producer, feature film director, television industry leader, and lately educator. Makin Soyinka is a film producer and many other things besides: newspaper columnist, consultant, and a high-level broker in various cultural fields. Jahman Anikulapo morphed from a preeminent Lagos arts journalist to a producer of cultural events. Nearly thirty years ago he cofounded (with Toyin Akinosho) the Committee for Relevant Art (CORA), which has remained a mainstay of activist arts of all kinds.

These three men are all practical, astute, accomplished professionals, who live intensely in the present as they rush from deadline to deadline. But they also think on a broad historical scale: the past is very much alive and precious to them, and everything they do is pitched toward the future. They are truly visionaries and dedicated to their vision. To call iREP a non-profit organization hardly begins to suggest how it operates. If you have money, dear reader, please donate some of it to them. Of course, Femi, Jahman, and Makin never worked alone —one of their essential tasks and skills has been to mobilize others, to whom credit and honour is due. I will mention only Awam Amkpa, now the chair of the festival's mothership organization, the Foundation for the Promotion of Documentary Films in Africa, but who since the beginning has been a fountain of ideas and connections.

A few years into the festival's history a fourth director was added: Theo Lawson, the architect and Chief Warden of Freedom Park. It is hard to imagine iREP apart from Freedom Park, but at the beginning Bolanle Austin-Peters helped to give the festival shelter in her Terra Culture. The infrastructures, physical and human, of iREP and Freedom Park are intertwined, and their values are the same. They both are capable of glitter, but their focus isn't red carpets and preening celebrities; they are about assembling a community, welcoming strangers, and providing a haven for the arts. The film festival is a natural part of the flow of culture on Freedom Park's stages and in its galleries —music, drama, fine arts, theatre, poetry and fiction, and cultural debates. The DNA of CORA also seems inextricable from iREP— its activist belief that the arts are agents of social justice, and its undying faith that if one persists in casting seeds, some will land on fertile ground.

Of course, first and last, we must thank the documentary filmmakers themselves, who have swollen the number of submissions for the festival many folds since its first days, for their talent and dedication and the trials through which they have had to persevere. At ten, in Kongi's Harvest and in its shadow, iREP is reaping a great harvest indeed.

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