

...A space for young filmmakers to meet international professionals

By Alessandro Jedlowski



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OVER the past 25 years, Nigeria has witnessed the tremendous development of its popular film industry, *Nollywood*. In such a context, where filmmaking has been inextricably linked to its commercial dimension, the documentary form struggled to find an appropriate place. In 2010, I was a PhD student starting my research on Nigerian films when Jahman Anikulapo, a unique friend and an invaluable resource person for my research, mentioned to me that the first iREP film festival would soon take place. Many of the people I had interviewed since the beginning of my research had told me that they were not producing documentary films because of the lack of commercial viability of this format, and Jahman's invitation to the festival made me wonder, "What future can a festival like this have in a country dominated by commercial filmmaking?". Here we are, 10 years from that day, and iREP has grown to a size and reputation that was hard to imagine back then.

In the history of African cinema, documentary films have long occupied a secondary position. Across the continent, this format has long been looked at with suspicion, if not disdain, because of its role as a tool for colonial political and religious propaganda. Things had not improved after independence, as the format was adopted for similar uses by newly-formed independent governments, and by NGOs and international humanitarian organizations, thus confirming the opinion of many African audiences, filmmakers and broadcasters, who considered local documentary films as synonyms of either foreign-funded, message-oriented films, or equally boring government-funded propaganda products – good only as a 'bread winning genre', more similar to commissioned films than to artistic products. Despite this situation, a number of great African documentary filmmakers emerged throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s – think of the works by Samba Félix Ndiaye, Safi Faye, John Akomfrah, and Jean-Marie Teno for instance – but their work struggled to circulate in Africa and was distributed quasi-exclusively through the international film festivals circuit.

The situation has been similar in Nigeria, despite the fact that the introduction of new recording and editing technologies, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, radically transformed the landscape of film production and circulation. Jahman and his accomplices (Femi Odugbemi and Makin Soyinka) were among the first to sense the impact that these transformations might have brought also to the field of documentary filmmaking. Since the late 2000s, in fact, new documentary film festivals had begun to appear around the continent, new training initiatives were being created and a new generation of young, dynamic African documentary filmmakers had started to emerge. This phenomenon has been welcomed with enthusiasm by many (both local and international) stakeholders who consider documentary films as a privileged tool to foster the formation of a more dynamic and politically engaged civil society. Nevertheless, the challenges facing the process of creation and consolidation of a viable and solid documentary film production environment in the continent are still numerous, and their analysis constitutes the necessary starting point for a thorough discussion about how to transform the global narrative about the African continent by giving more space to African voices.

Since its creation in 2010, iREP has been precisely the place where this kind of discussions takes place. The festival has allowed young, aspiring filmmakers to meet international professionals who have marked the field of African cinema and documentary film production over the past decades, such as Manthia Diawara, Jihan El-Tahri, Jonathan Haynes and many others. This is an invaluable resource, as it participates in creating a conducive ecosystem in which creativity becomes a convivial enterprise. As the Cameroonian scholar Francis Nyamnjoh reminds us, conviviality “encourages us to recognise our own incompleteness, it challenges us to be open-minded and open-ended”, pushing us toward fruitful collaborations and productive encounters with others.

The memory of the warm, convivial atmosphere of the festival is probably the single strongest memory I bring with me of the first edition of iREP in 2010: an experience of connection and sharing which opened many doors for me. It is indeed in this occasion that I met a number of people who have become, over the years, my closest friends in Nigeria. It is only thanks to them that my research on Nigerian films and contemporary visual culture could progress over the years, and I believe that, like me, thanks to iREP, many young Nigerian filmmakers have gathered the support to pursue their ambition and participate in the emergence and affirmation of new generation of Nigerian documentary filmmakers.

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