

...Preserving stories and memories

By Ikechukwu Obiaya



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THE iREP festival has played and is playing a most important role in putting documentaries on the front burner. Many people have an ingrained bias against documentaries, seeing them, in the words of one young person, as “boring and uninteresting.” But, to borrow Fulton Sheen’s phrasing, many people dislike what they *think* documentaries are, but relatively few people dislike what the documentary *is*. Over the years, iREP has introduced us to the world of excitement that exists with documentaries while emphasising their great importance. Many people see documentaries as merely a means for instruction, but they are a means of establishing one’s place in the world, of telling one’s stories and defending one’s reality while at the same time preserving the knowledge of one’s past.

Jonathan Kahana describes the documentary as “a notoriously slippery eel, perhaps the oldest and slipperiest concept in the history of cinema’s public and commercial modes and genres.”¹ Different approaches have been taken towards the documentary but, as Frank Ukadike states, “it is [the] connection between the documentary and the real circumstances depicted, between the filmmaker and the subject/audiences, that is the most distinctive characteristic of this genre.”² It is in this light that one must see the importance of the documentary and why any people that value their culture and history cannot afford to ignore this genre. If you want your reality to be adequately and truthfully captured, then you cannot leave the process to strangers. This has been proven time and again by the many distorted documentaries about Africa and the “Western jungle melodramas, where Africa was a mere backdrop – with stereotypically uncivilized, childish, or cruel natives – for triumphant acts by great White hunters and treasure seekers.”³ The documentary allows the voices of the subjects to be heard. It offers the filmmaker the opportunity to present and preserve his or her own stories – or that of others – with historical accuracy, with faithfulness to the truth.

The notion of preservation is very much linked to documentaries. The theme of the 2017 edition of iREP, *Archiving Africa*, emphasised this. Documentaries serve as archives while at the same time depending on archives. We cannot be custodians of our own stories or histories if we do not know how to preserve them. I am reminded of the photo albums of the pre-digital age. Those albums, with their snapshots freezing the captured moments in time, were like still documentaries of a family’s history. I

¹ Kahana, J. (Ed.). (2016). *The documentary film reader: History, theory, criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

² Ukadike, F. (2004). The other voices of documentary: *Allah Tantou and Afrique, je te plumerai*. In F. Pfaff (Ed.), *Focus on African films* (pp. 159-172). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

recently received the copy of a picture from one of such albums, that of my parents. To the indifferent eyes of a stranger, the 50-year-old black and white photograph merely portrays a group of persons, drawn from three different generations and dressed in rather dated outfits. To my eyes, however, it is a picture rich with memories and emotive details, a picture upon which many stories could be based. There I am, a five-year old cuddled in the arms of my grandfather, who is flanked by my grandmother, and the rest of the picture is populated by my uncles, aunts, siblings and cousins. As one of the owners of the history behind that picture, the stranger needs me, or another owner, to authentically interpret that picture, to point to the hidden details and draw out its richness – in other words, to tell the stories behind it. But I can only tell that story because that picture was carefully stored in an album, thereby preserving that memory from the darkness of forgetfulness.

This, for me, is the importance of good documentaries – they capture and preserve stories, faithful to the voice and the realities of the actors in those stories. In capturing and preserving reality, the documentary filmmaker plays the important role of chronicler. But it is not enough to produce such chronicles; attention must also be paid to archiving them. However, we cannot also stop at just archiving them; we must also promote them and keep alive the stories that they contain. This is what iREP is facilitating, and it remains a bright light for documentaries in the years ahead.

Pfaff, F. (2004). Introduction. In F. Pfaff (Ed.), *Focus on African Films* (pp. 1-11). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
