

...The echo of every voice

By Manthia Diawara



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[Manthia Diawara - Wikipedia](#)

FIRST of all, congratulations to the founders of iREP on the 10th anniversary of this singular documentary film festival, which takes place in an emblematic site, Freedom Park, and in the most vibrant African city, Lagos. To put it in Fela's words, "*Mek we hear how people different in this our Lagos town.*" To say that iREP is the most important documentary film festival in Africa is not enough, even though iREP has developed a film culture in Lagos by specifically focusing on the documentary genre, with master classes debating its history, rules of engagement and hybrid forms.

iREP is blessed with four powerful curators —Femi Odugbemi, Makin Soyinka, Jahman Anikulapo and Theo Lawson— who are known for their love of cinema in Nigeria and in international film circles; and are capable of bringing important films, directors and scholars to Lagos. The conceptual work of these indefatigable programmers has been awarded with massive audiences at the screenings, followed with robust debates. Year after year, and now with the monthly screening, they have proved that documentary films can be as popular as fictional ones, regardless of the subject matter.

But, iREP is more than an excellent documentary film festival, showcasing local and international films, and creating a media buzz in the city. The curators are also lovers of art, architecture, literature and fashion. They are public intellectuals who love Lagos, their city; and they make sure to share that love with their international guests. I feel lucky to have screened some of my films and lectured on the African documentary tradition at iREP. But the most unforgettable moments, for me, were the architecture tours of Lagos with Theo; visiting Fela's shrine with Makin and Jahman; wine tasting with Makin; visiting art galleries, books and video shops with Jahman; and attending the screening of Femi's film, *Bariga Boy*, on the guerilla theatre of Segun Adefila and the Crown Troupe. I could not help but notice that the mesmerized audience in the packed space was made up of young women and men from the streets, well-known artists, as well as professors and theater producers in Lagos.

Undoubtedly, iREP gets its magic aura also from its location, Freedom Park, and from Lagos, itself, where you can meet people from every corner of the planet. At least, from where I originally come from, that's the reputation of the city. They say that in Lagos, the normal people and the supernatural ones come out in daylight to do transactions in the marketplace.

Freedom Park is a former prison compound built by the British colonizers. It has been refurbished, remodeled and repurposed by Theo, who earns his living as an architect. The frame of the colonial architecture is preserved, as are some of the prison cells, as sites that festival goers can still visit. Most of the spaces have been transformed, however, into cultural and social sites like amphitheaters for film screenings or big seminars, a cafeteria, and gardens. To top it all, Wole Soyinka, the Nobel laureate and former prisoner during the Biafran war, has an office at Freedom Park.

Every trip to iREP also illustrates a unique trip to Lagos, a city that's ever changing and changing those who visit it. As can be seen in the Fela song, *"Ikoyi Mentality Versus Mushin Mentality,"* Lagos is as much a "character" as the people it brings together from different parts of Nigeria and world. The sharp visual contrasts of colonial and modern African architecture, of lively colors, layers of sounds and "surreal and marvelous" images of mosques, churches and shrines juxtaposed in certain neighborhoods are what make Lagos unique to a distant observer, like me.

If everything seemed chaotic at first, to me, it was because my consciousness and my eyes had not yet adjusted to such a vivid confluence of so many people, so different in their cultural and stylistic outlooks; the convergence of pre-modern, modern and digital technologies rubbing seamlessly against each other.

Unlike any other city in Africa and in the world, Lagos brings together seemingly irreconcilable differences; reassembles them and reproduces unpredictable models. Like in Fela's song, I see these differences live together in this Lagos town; differences coming together to create new socialities in this Lagos town; differences engendering new differences in this Lagos town, where every voice demands the right to be heard, like the iREP documentaries.

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