

...A Bridge across Nations

By Emeka Mba



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WHILST serving as the Director General of the Nigeria Film and Video Censors Board, NFVCB in 2010, I got an email from Femi Odugbemi, informing or rather inviting me to participate in the maiden edition of the IREP Film Festival, with the theme: *African in Self Conversation – Can documentary change the world?*

Ten years later, in 2020, in the year of Covid-19, we are at the point where iREP has become a household name with footprints across not just across Africa, but the entire documentary film making world. So as iREP celebrates its 10th anniversary, I am humbled and indeed lucky to be part of its equally humble beginnings, and perhaps now, somewhat able to answer that question in some definitive fashion, with the help of some important anecdotes from past editions of the festival, my own experiences, and indeed with help from some of Mr. Odugbemi's writings.

SO yes, definitely, documentary films can change the world, and will hopefully continue to change our world for the better. So how, you might ask? Let's start with how documentary films have changed my world. I will explain why shortly, sharing my journey and relationship with iREP, and the realities of today's world, of diseases, jet planes, Netflix and the importance of good wine.

First the wine, my good friend and mentor, Oti Bazunu, who is an established connoisseur of the civilized life, never fails to remind me that "life, is best lived in snippets of moments, and the best way to share those snippets is through storytelling in the company of great friends and good wine: palm-wine, French, Italian or South African. Doesn't really matter. What matters is that you locate yourself amongst good friends who are willing to share stories in good cheer. For that is how the iREP Documentary Festival was born.

Story has it that the idea for the festival came about when three friends – Femi Odugbemi, Jahman Anikulapo, and Makin Soyinka sat drinking and sharing stories about the importance of documentaries and the lack of such a platform in Nigeria. At this point, let me confess that I have often been accused of being friends with these gentlemen. However, I am very proud of the conception and evolution of iREP platform.

I should also add that, over the last decade of iREP, I have had the particular honour and pleasure of participating, as keynote speaker, panel discussant, and even bagged an achievement award as proud supporter of the festival, as well as serving on the board of advisors.

BACK to how documentaries can change the world: today, thanks to digital technology, which Nigerians and our spirit of enterprise repurposed in the 90s to make movies, propelling Nigeria to third largest film making country in the world. Also true is that the average Nigerian, indeed all Africans

live in a changing world reflected by *Nollywood*; the average Nigerian also lives in a contemporaneous existence, dwelling in both the physical world whilst holding a resident permit in the spiritual world. Even as our films are able to capture and animate the “native imagination” of viewers across Africa, it is indeed documentaries that are able to cross the divide between both worlds, and present a reality that is both nuanced and contextual, feeding our imagination, yet balancing our reality.

Femi Odugbemi in a lecture to a group of US College students, had this to say, “Western colonialists in Africa used documentaries to shape group behaviour and manipulate perception and history. For Africa, the global information order presents a narrative of wars, death, corruption and diseases. The question is ‘who is telling the story of Africa and its realities and from what perspective?’ Can African filmmakers bring better understanding within and outside the continent with documentaries that give a more rounded definition of the African experience?”

Indeed, whilst *Nollywood* and our music continue to spread the soft power of Nigeria across the world, it will be documentaries that help us to bridge the divide and connect Africans who are living, often confused in both worlds. It is our documentary storytelling, which iREP is enabling that will help us construct a new shared vision, of a possible reality. For if in the meantime, we can’t build bridges, cars and new refineries, perhaps it is time we build new hopes, new inspirations new ambitions and new desires, and perhaps ultimately a new society.

From my own experience, it is clear that in an increasingly digital world where our reality is fragmented and relative, if you want to pass any information across you must encase it within a good story, otherwise it would be lost in the digital clutter. Again, Odugbemi: “the greatest power in any democracy lies not in their military or economic strength, but in the effectiveness of their storytelling.” Professor Yuval N. Harari in his book ‘*Sapiens*’, wrote, “...the church has survived for centuries, by passing on stories of the new testament and the catholic canon law” or perhaps as Harvard Prof. Joseph Nye noted, “it is not whose army wins, but whose story wins”.

AGAIN, the importance of iREP is located beyond the excitement the festival brings, where filmmakers from across Africa gather to share stories, ideas, and network, but more importantly for me, providing a platform for emerging and aspiring filmmakers to learn and upgrade their skills. For whilst we are not lacking in stories, we are often challenged by lack of resources or the skills to tell our stories in a compelling narrative.

I am honoured to have been invited to share this article celebrating ten years of IREP, and I sincerely believe that the iREP Documentary Film Festival, is already providing such a platform for African filmmakers to not only bridge the divide amongst African nations, but also begin the deliberate construction of conversations which can lead to real changes across various fields, from education, health, commerce, innovation and peace. Information is ever so important in today’s world, especially for us in Africa, as it is often the difference between life and death.

Looking forward to more stories from Africa that will change the world!

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