

...rests on good brains and good hearts!

By Jean Paul Colley



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IN 2012 I was invited to give the keynote as well as conduct a master workshop during the iREP Documentary Film Festival in Lagos. That was my first visit in Lagos and I shall never forget it. Far from the usual Conradian clichés about this large country, I keep as a souvenir not a darkness but a beautiful light. In Lagos, I felt like if I was suddenly diving in an Africa of the future. I was really struck by the amazing vitality and creativity that contradict all the afro-pessimistic diagnosis about Africa. Of course, I know that Nigeria has its part of problems, I know that it is a rich country with a large part of the population living in poverty, I know there are huge inequalities, but I met a bench of people socially committed, politically active and/or artistically very creative. Of course, I have been privileged: I had been introduced to the festival leading figures by my friends from New York University, Manthia Diawara, who is Malian, and Awam Amkpa, who is Nigerian. Thanks to them, I met wonderful people who rapidly became my friends and during my stay in Lagos, I was surrounded by music, sounds, human warmth, good conversation and, inspiring documentary films.

Since this 2012 venue of the festival, I keep on the wall of my office a wonderful photograph with Makin Soyinka, Femi Odugbemi, Emeka Mba, Jahman Anikulapo, a wonderful directorial team that symbolises for me the sense of brotherhood and humanism! I particularly admire their sensitivity for all the dimensions that define humankind: music, dance, language, religion, governance, dressing, food, imagination, ethics, etc. One of the first places they showed me was the Freedom Park, a former colonial prison that has been transformed into an outdoor art and Entertainment space. The pro-independence activists who have suffered there would be pleased to see musicians or actors working there, or to see a painter working in a former cell from which the ceiling has been removed.

Of course, Nigeria cannot be compared to the neighbouring countries because of its scale: its demography, its economy, but also the scale of the different “worlds” composing the Nigerian society: press, academy, art, fashion, and cinema. Even the hotel where I was staying had an art gallery! During the festival, I remember the wonderful cafeterias where discussions were as important as the food (although the cooking was really good). One day, next to my table, were sitting a few Nollywood stars I had seen on TV. They had just been part of a panel. It was so exciting to exchange with people coming from different places, culture, language, professions and generations. Very useful also were the panels and discussions between scholars, artists, filmmakers and producers.

The festival was so well organized with an alternation of screenings, forums, conferences, workshops and performances that, sincerely, it would be hard to do better in Paris or in New York. A good rapid test: look at the graphic quality of the iREP brochures and website! I have also a special thought for the young volunteers who were so nice with (sometimes) lost foreigners.

What is impressive in Nigeria is that people are not waiting for help: they act and use their imagination. Nollywood is a good example of this, but it is true in many fields. The festival is very open to new forms for documentary film, new aesthetical forms but also technical ones. The sincerity and courage of Femi, Jahman, Makin and their friends in promoting the full potential of documentary cinema can be an example everywhere in the world. This excellent spirit, combining ethical commitment and moral optimism, find its concrete form in fascinating film selections. All the profiles of documentary directors have their place in the festival, would they be explorers, reporters, observers, detectives, advocates, activists, painters or poets. I am also very pleased to have kept the contact with the leading team of iREP alive. In 2015, my research centre was organizing in Paris the European Conference of African Studies. As I in charge of a film program for this "cultural week", I called Jahman and he sent me some excellent films or contacts. That was the good connection! This paper gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to a festival that rest on the expertise, but also, above all, on good brains and good hearts!

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