

Lagos Film Review



iREP 2016 Daily Coverage Vol. 4

Decrying Deforestation

Perspectives on Tunde Kelani's PYROLYSIS OR PARALYSIS

AGOGO ÈÈWÒ

Drop your weapons

#7

A scene from Agogo Eewo, an earlier work by Kelani on deforestation.

Jite, Wome and Amarachukwu

In three minutes, Tunde Kelani tells a powerful story. Using a sequence of photographs and poetry as narration, PYROLYSIS OR PARALYSIS shines a light on a little spoken about aspect of deforestation: deforestation for the purpose of producing charcoal for exportation.

The words of theatre artist Segun Adefila portrays Mother Earth as a woman being undressed, and accompanying photographs provide the imagery: a lush forest, green and with chirping birds on trees; the cutting-down of these trees leaving stumps behind; the wood burnt

and parked into bags transported to a collection point from where they are carried away in trailers; a lone bird sitting on a dead tree stump.

The documentary is not just short; it was made in a short time, in a bid to meet up with the iREP Film Festival. This does not detract in any way from the message. The brevity makes it a punch in the gut and leaves the viewers shocked and with a lot of questions.

What leads a people to strip their lands of trees, down to the smallest species - fire doesn't discriminate against size - and expose it to all of the problems that follow deforestation? Can it be stopped? Who takes responsibility for stopping it?

Pyrolysis is the change of chemical and physical composition, an irreversible change: in this case from a living tree to charcoal. The title itself is a question: Is this just change or is it paralyzing the ecosystem?

Coming on the heels of the discussion on Documentary Funding with Steven Markovitz, the documentary also achieved something additional: the idea that even with meagre resources, African filmmakers can tell their stories.

- Jite Efemuaye

Nobody seated in the audience had an accurate inkling of what to expect from Tunde Kelani's PYROLYSIS OR PARALYSIS

the shortest documentary screened at the IREP Documentary Festival 2016.

The use of strong images, poetry and properly documented research is used to convey a powerful message about how the high demand of charcoal both locally and internationally is resulting in grave consequences of deforestation and environmental degradation of Kelani's beloved country, Nigeria.

Will the government ensure that the individuals involved in this mega-lucrative charcoal business are adequately educated in order to desist from

this occupation and probably start a new trade? What policies have been put in place to ensure a stop to this? These were some of the questions on everyone's lips at the end of the screening. Many understood the harsh realities of climate change and that cutting down a tree - with no intension of ever replacing it - and then burning it to produce charcoal did more harm than good. - Wome Uyeye

Late Kenyan activist Wangari Muta Maathai must feel vindicated in her grave when she learns of PYROLYSIS OR PARALYSIS, a three-minute documentary film by one of Nigeria's most prominent film-makers, Tunde Kelani.

PYROLYSIS OR PARALYSIS relies solely on still photographs in doing an exposé on the process of producing charcoal, a source of fuel for many impoverished Nigerians, who use it to *stories continue on P2.*

The War against Women

By Oris Aigbokhaevbolo



Perhaps the most important bit of Ishaya Bako's documentary *SILENT TEARS* comes at the start. We are told that parts of the film are dramatized. It is possible to think of this as affecting the acclaimed truthfulness of the documentary format. But that thought obscures a bigger concern: There are injustices that are essentially unknowable and cannot be documented. In the world we inhabit with its abundance of cameras, there still are episodes that go unattended: in this case, the plight of women in Nigeria's capital city

episodes that go unattended: in this case, the plight of women in Nigeria's capital city Abuja, specifically women who walk the streets at night.

SILENT TEARS introduces women who have been maltreated and sometimes molested by the Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB), a group that appears at night and whisks away women. The aim, ostensibly, is to rid the streets of sex workers. In practice though, no woman is safe alone or in company.

A 2007 law banning prostitutes empowered the group; a moral police encourages them. One of the more disappointing but hardly surprising parts of the film shows a young woman, probably Muslim from her dressing, saying on camera that it is only fair that these things happen. "It's not right for a lady to move around at night," she says.

And herein is the trouble with these things. Part of the problem must be from regular people who support the policing of women's bodies. It is hardly the same with men, who the absence of ovaries appears to impart an autonomy unshared by the other sex.

SILENT TEARS joins *FUELLING POVERTY*, Bako's banned documentary on the fuel crisis, as a portrait of a people confronting the government. Where that one showed the protesting; this one is the protest. By giving the victims of state abuse a voice and several faces—save for one victim whose identity is protected, *SILENT TEARS* itself becomes *the* protest.

"Is there a war against women?" the film seems to ask at every turn. It is probably a rhetorical question. But on evidence presented here, the answer is an undeniable yes.

Decrying Deforestation

Story from P1

cook either domestically (or commercially), iron clothes amongst other uses.

It is astonishing to see trucks loaded with charcoal, leaving the point of production and heading to the market on the one hand and the devastation left by deforestation in form of bare grounds on the other.

As Prof. Awam Amkpa remarked during the question and answer session with Tunde Kelani, "big budgets are not always needed for making films. Film-making is about composition and photography is fundamental in documentary film-making."

Kelani deserves accolades for his ingenuity in *PYROLYSIS OR PARALYSIS*, a 3-minute film, which does not necessarily deserve to be a minute longer, but which nonetheless tells a brilliant story. – **Amarachukwu Iwuala**

Songs of Freedom

By Wome Uyeve

Iara Lee's *LIFE IS WAITING: REFERENDUM AND RESISTANCE IN WESTERN SAHARA*, is a 59-minute film examining the four-decade long conflict between the Sahrawis and Moroccan authority, in the former's search for independence.

True freedom remains relatively elusive in Africa's last colony, which was at one time under Spanish rule.

Today's generation of young activists are deploying creative non-violent resistance for the cause of self-determination. Spearheading such change is rap artiste Flitook Craizy. Craizy is no stranger to Moroccan police brutality as he has been beaten up several times for speaking up for his people in his songs.

He is badly battered by the Moroccan authorities yet again, and the director's choice of sharing images of this in the

documentary, further raises questions of just how much torture Flitook Craizy thinks his slight body can take before the change he seeks for himself and his people will come.

While risking constant torture and detention at the hands of Moroccan authorities, he continues with the rapping and advocacy vowing to "...never quit since the ill-treatment of his people won't stop". Craizy is more than convinced that he leads a unique group of youth who have lost patience with the international community and are ready to launch another guerrilla war.

The tensions Lee is able to portray in *LIFE IS WAITING* cannot be overlooked and the fact that the Sahrawis need a true and lasting independence cannot be over-emphasized.



I'd wanted to title this "Kill Your Darlings", that is the advice I would have given to the makers of KIKI, a documentary that explores the drag ball culture of New York's youth of colour. It is correct to say that this movie feels somewhat long and drags a bit. However, this takes nothing important away from it. Co-written by the director, Sara Jordenö with Twiggy Pucci Garçon, this movie comes some 25 years after Jennie Livingston's *PARIS IS BURNING*, which explores the fascinating underground culture of drag and voguing contests in New York.

Vogue, or voguing, is a highly stylized urban House dance that evolved out of the Harlem ballroom scene in the 80s, inspired by models posing on the pages of *Vogue*. Dancers, affiliated to Houses (mostly named after fashion houses) gather to compete in voguing battles. Invented on the streets of Harlem, voguing became mainstream after it was "appropriated" by a pop icon, Madonna. But, it was Livingston's film that elevated it to cult status.

I had been fascinated the first time I encountered this scene in Livingston's *PARIS*... You wonder what new grounds a cinematic treatment of this culture could possibly tread. Jordenö's film pulses with energy and a driving rhythm. The one difference, probably, is the political context: KIKI takes place against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement; the entrance of trans- rights into the political spectrum, and passage of same-sex

bill in major U.S. cities. As an aside, it comes on the heels of anti-same-sex bills in major African countries, including Nigeria.

KIKI offers free entry into ball contests and behind-the-scene preparations for drag and voguing challenges among different "Houses" whose names seem as exotic as the contestants: House of Unbothered Carrier, House of Amazura. An endangered species, these drag ballers encounter rejection and ridicule, which they turn into personal and political statements. Forced to leave home, the Houses become the second home, a place of belonging where they are safe and accepted. The House Mothers become true surrogates. Exiles, they find each other, they roam an arid Sahara. Yet, each moment that passes spells the difference between living and dying - like Venus Xtravaganza who was murdered in a hotel room and Octavia St. Laurent, who succumbed to AIDS and cancer in *PARIS IS BURNING*. KIKI suffers its own AIDS-related death, too. As evidenced by the film's interview sequences, many of these youths are homeless, rejected by family and ostracized by their community when they come out as gay. The director cuts through their cultivated proud exterior to reveal ordinary human beings wanting nothing but to love and be loved without shame or fear. It is this rejection and ostracism, the absence of employment opportunities that forces most of these ball participants into prostitution and its inherent dangers and risks. (When the lights come back on in the arthouse atmosphere where the screening is

taking place, there is a scandalous admission: 70% of Lagos' gay community is HIV Positive. Rejection and ostracism also mean an absence of adequate health coverage.) But, there are also moving testaments, alongside the moments of agonizing loneliness and pain, of families, mothers who have embraced their sons as daughters.

KIKI keeps its political commentary just below the surface, with no desire to score overtly political points. There is a sense in which, beneath the outer bravado, this film also reads as a love story. But, it is a lonely kind of love, marked by tragedy. The love of these tragic figures seems a love like any other. In a way, the film seems to make the point that love can grow even in the darkest environment - all that is needed is room to blossom. There is, therefore, in this film an underlying attitude of defiance, affirmation of self. There is an exhilarating feel to the voguing sequences, it is the sheer joy of what the human body could be made to do, how seemingly effortlessly it could be made to perform beauty.

KIKI is a free invitation to take front row at Harlem's 1930s Rockland Ballroom - in 2016. I think one of the film's strongest points is the way it confronts gender as something that can be constructed, performed. And when it's pulled off, that's "realness."

iREP 2016 in Pictures



When Fiofori met Olaku...

By Dare Dan

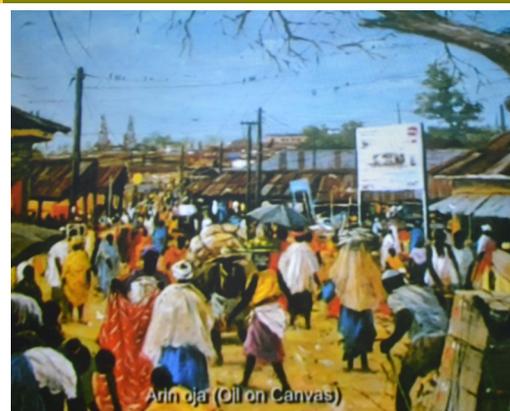
We are sure director Tam Fiofori met Biodun Olaku. What is not certain however is if filmmaking, at that point, met painting. Fiofori's *BIODUN OLAKU: NIGERIAN PAINTER* is a strictly an interview rendered by a Nigerian painter.

Before screening, the audience was implored to ignore technical hitches, and tap into "a philosophy of giving exposure to those who deserve it", although it was showing at an international film festival where people from different backgrounds all over the world have been invited to see a film. Does it not sound demeaning to use film for the sole purpose of giving exposure to the so-called people "who deserve it"? "It is an impromptu and surprise filming," Fiofori explained further. And I am asking why can't the film be left to say this?

In a sequential manner, Biodun Olaku talks about his paintings in and out of a place that could be guessed to be his house. The camera zooms in and out too on his

works as he narrates the ideas that birthed them. In a few cases, as it is with a piece titled 'Refugees', one can sense beauty but the filming and narration drowns every sense of aesthetics in the whole process. There is no escaping the languor as Olaku ends almost every thought on his works by addressing socio-political and economic issues with conclusive words and religious beliefs thereby drenching any other thought process on them.

The ability to integrate other genres of art forms with a taste of history and, of course, technological aesthetics has always been the edge that documentary film has over other forms of art. Filming is a hydra-headed art form that should serve audience's conscience with a guiding philosophy. *BIODUN OLAKU: THE NIGERIAN PAINTER* gives little or none of this. Thank you, Mr. Fiofori, for introducing Biodun Olaku and his work to me. But why would I want to see this film again?

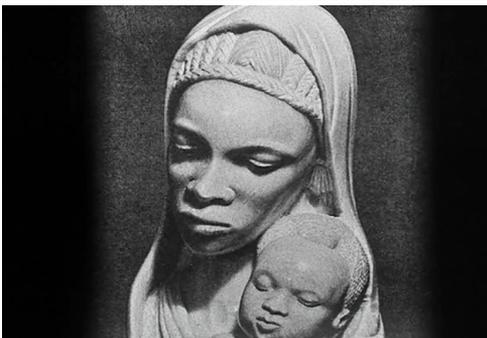


Stealing Art, Stealing Identity

By Adefoyeke Ajao

Filmed in 1953 by Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, and Ghislain Cloquet, *STATUES ALSO DIE* examines the corruptive influences of colonisation through art. It is a story of subjugation, oppression and cultural imperialism and its effects on the African's perception of artefacts of his cultural identity. *STATUES ALSO DIE* focuses on the submission of African culture to the hegemonic nuances of colonisation.

It focuses on the invasion of African countries by European superpowers and the plundering that reduced prestigious sculptures to mere inanimate trophies stripped of meaning and housed in foreign museums. The filmmakers draw attention to a bigger issue: It is not only the art that was plundered, but the people's self-esteem, identity and heritage. The people are reduced to slaves who are unable to define themselves (or their surroundings) apart from the colonialist perspective. It is obvious that the whites "project their own demons [on to anything African] as a way to purge themselves of them" labelling them as contaminated objects from "the kingdom of Satan" a view Africans also unfortunately subscribe to. It is not only the statues that die, but the cultural legacies of Africans.



Resnais, Marker, and Cloquet make good use of visuals: a short exhibition of various artworks stolen from different African countries against a dark background and still music; footage of festivals, dances and craftsmen and women at work give you a glimpse of the gracefulness of a culture that has been tagged "barbaric". This reveals the beauty of African art and heirlooms, for anyone in doubt to appreciate the skill and effort invested in their creation.

Despite being filmed over half a century ago, it is quite unfortunate that the cultural imperialism decried by the filmmakers is still present years after most countries have gained independence from their colonial masters.



The more subtle and repackaged form described as globalisation, is tailored to finish what colonisation has started: to create the belief that some cultures are superior to and more acceptable than others and replace a graceful and colourful culture with a degrading counterfeit.

For the trio of directors, African artworks are not meaningless, worthless dummies, designed to grace dainty museum shelves, they are objects that give insight into the idiosyncrasies of previous generations and civilisations. For them, no civilisation or culture is superior to another and it is disheartening that Africans choose instead to denounce their heritage for one that enslaves and alienates them from the beauty of their legacy.

Pitching with Andy Jones

By Adefoyeke Ajao

Anyone who has ever been in a classroom might have expected Andy Jones' session on pitching to be a drawn-out, one-sided regurgitation of textbook marketing principles. However that opinion changed when shortly before the session started, a member of the audience wanted clarification about the title of Jones' *I SHOT BI KIDUDE*, which was shown earlier in the IREP Documentary festival, considering that no gun shots were fired in the film. Jones responded that the only shots fired were from his camera and that he wanted the title to be as memorable as possible. Jones and his wit had already arrested the audience's attention although the session was yet to begin.

The session was anchored by young filmmaker, Lanre Olupona, who was curious to know how aspiring film professionals in a country like Nigeria could sell their ideas and stories to investors and obtain funding for their work. Drawing from his personal experiences, Jones explained that the essence of pitching is to get funding for a project. Funding in this case is not restricted to financials, but also includes "networks of love and support" that will facilitate collaboration and refinement of ideas. Pitches involve a lot of work and should be as succinct and interesting as possible to create immediate buy-in for the proposed idea. He suggested the use of attractive visual aids against tedious paperwork that might make a frustrating read.



In Jones' opinion, pitching is not restricted by walls as it could be done in formal or informal settings and he went ahead to make a case for crowdfunding as a fundraising option. For Jones, it is important for the filmmaker to surround himself with a team of experts from different fields who will help him speak the language of investors who are interested in aspects other than the story. He reasoned that people would only partner with those they trust and emphasised the importance of keeping the audience in mind while pitching. According to him, funding was the least important aspect

of film-making, as it was more important to have a story, a dedicated team and access to equipment. Regardless of a pitch's success (or lack of it), each pitch should be regarded as a learning experience.

The session rounded off with members of the audience such as film-makers Barbara Off, Chris Ihidero and Judith Audu corroborating the importance of relationships and collaborations. Ihidero advised young film-makers to "prostitute" their skills by participating in commercial projects, and gain appropriate exposure and credibility to develop pedigree within the industry.

More photos from iREP 2016



Standing Strong against Sickle Cell

By Jite Efemuaye

If one asks the average Nigerian what the life expectancy of a person living with Sickle Cell Disorder (SCD) is, the answer is most often put between twenty-one and twenty-five.

Joel Benson's *STILL STANDING* begins with the basic information about SCD: there is a 25% chance of having a child with SCD if both parents carry the sickle cell gene (both AS).

Toyin Adesola discovered she had sickle cell disorder when she was six. From then on, it became a battle for survival, one that became even more complicated when on one of her frequent visits to a hospital, her hip bone snapped out of the socket as she tried to roll herself over in a bid to avoid bedsores. The incident left her with a permanent disability, requiring her use of a stick to walk. The six months she was bed-ridden were, according to her, the worst of her life, and also the beginning. She found reason to do more than just be a statistic.

Adesola is the central subject of the 14-minute film, where she talks about how she was able to return back to school, run a



small baking business and start Sickle Cell Advocacy, a non-profit organisation. *STILL STANDING* however fails to expand on the work the non-profit does beyond a scene of her distributing drugs to SCD sufferers.

The climax of the film comes as a video clip of an event in Adesola's honour plays and she is revealed to be 50 years old.

Beyond depicting Adesola as a strong woman who is a motivation and an inspiration and is still standing despite society's

expectations, one does not get to see the other side of the divide. SCD is a condition that requires proper management and a strong support system. Only passing mention is made of these and Adesola's relative longevity - if one goes by what is shown - can be put down to determination and spiritual beliefs.

STILL STANDING could have benefited from more time, to, at the very least, balance the narrative with some realities.

Uplifting the Special Ones

By Jite Efemuaye

The director of *UPLIFTING DOWN: NIGERIA*, Steve Gaitlin became interested in Down syndrome in Nigeria after interviewing Rose Mordi at the National Down Syndrome Congress in Arizona in June 2015. The mother of a 28-year-old special needs daughter talked about the culture of silence that surrounds the disorder

What she says in the interview - being told her daughter was a snake and should be taken to a river, amongst other things -, caught Gaitlin's attention and with a team of three educators, he came to Nigeria to make his film.

Following Mordi, who started the organization Down Syndrome Nigeria, 18 years ago and runs a home for children with Down's, the film opens up a topic that is only beginning to get public attention in recent years due to the efforts of parents like Muyiwa Majekodunmi - who has a son with the disorder - and have taken it upon themselves to educate the society about the condition.

In the 18 years of running the home, 300

families have registered with Down Syndrome Nigeria, a small drop in a sea of close to 169 million people, where the pervading belief is that special needs children should be hidden away, and in some known cases, abandoned and/or killed.

The central focus of the film is people living with Down syndrome and a lot of time is dedicated to showing them in their element: in class, out playing, at social functions and giving interviews. It succeeds in not being a pity-party; these are people who are living their lives to the fullest and have strong support systems.

Beyond caring for their children or wards, we see parents also doing their best to move the society from ignorance to awareness. As Mrs. Mordi points out, when she first had her daughter, she had never seen a child with Down out in public but in recent years more and more families are opening up.

"Down is not a disease, it is not communicable and cannot be avoided," is a message constantly repeated in *UPLIFTING DOWN: NIGERIA*



These challenges and triumphs are the same for other parents with special needs offspring: autism and cerebral palsy get their share of film time.

Steve Gaitlin may have set out to make a film because of one woman's story that captivated him. His film's overall success is in giving a voice to people with special needs - some in their own words, others in the words of those who care for and love them.

An Ode to Good Music

By Agnes Atsua

Unapologetically Yoruba, FAAJI AGBA offers a beautifully-done intimate look into juju music and its everlasting effect on Lagos, Nigeria and the world. Not many people, especially millennials with their supposedly short attention spans, are truly aware of the beginnings of juju music, highlife, afrojazz, palmwine music and afrobeat. Most are familiar with Fela, Shina Peters, Ebenezer Obey - big names with big hits, and this is perfectly fine.

For the uninitiated or the unaware, Remi-Vaughan Richards' documentary offers "new" names with old faces; fingers callused by musical instruments; voices perfected by years of practice, and stories entwined tightly with music from a time when Nigeria appreciated her artists so the world had no choice but to follow suit. 91 minutes long, spanning a six-year documentation journey and there is still not enough time to pick the brains of the pioneers, the trail blazers, and to sit around the communal bonfire so to speak, and listen to the stories tinged brightly with the music of Fatai Rolling Dollar, Niyi Ajileye, Alaba Pedro, Eji Oyewole, Shina Ayinde-Bakare, S.F. Olowookere, Samson Adegbite, Taiye Ayanwale, Nureini Sumola, and Kunle Adeniran.

FAAJI AGBA follows superstars too long out of the spotlight but not lacking the charisma and the "yanga" of any popular musician of today. Vaughan-Richards' film is clearly a passion project as she uses an intimate style that allows these musical wonders to not only shine but express themselves in their individual ways. The use of still shots captures beautiful moments and character in a way only photography can and the soundtrack is a mix of music both familiar and new that makes dancing in your seat almost insulting. This film is a countdown and timeline not only of performances and festivals but of the colourful, engaging and absolutely relatable grandfatherly subjects ranging from 64 to 84 years old.

Through Fatai Rolling Dollar, Jazzhole Records owner Kunle Tejuoso met and assembled the members of Faaji Agba. Through persistence and more importantly patience - as old men honed in their chosen profession are not wont to learn new tricks - , Tejuoso brings them together through their love for music to revitalize not only their careers but their names as well. But learn new tricks they do as they perform twice at the Eyo festival (in 2009 and 2011), and learn from their



mistakes with seven of them even succeeding in travelling to New York to perform and remind the world of its indebtedness to Lagos and her gift of Afro music. Archival footage of a Lagos gone by is interspersed so well with the rest of the film that it is almost as though no time at all has passed and nothing has changed with Afro music still being blasted at street parties and every event.

Dialogue is mostly in Yoruba and there is perhaps no better way to experience the hilarious constant bickering and 'flexing' of these nine wonders. Kunle Tejuoso is not only a sponsor but also the glue that holds these celebrities together almost more so than their mutual love for music itself; his dedication to returning them to the spotlight that they so rightly deserve is laudable. FAAJI AGBA is not all laughs and cheeky proverbs though, as this film while showing an irrefutable love for music, also shows how easily it can be forgotten, left behind as a result of poor management and the country's continuous reluctance to honor her brightest stars.

The confusion at another old-timer's burial scene in a mostly empty church; one of the oldest, now dilapidated saxophone stores which had Fela as a major client, and the old boxing school in Lagos where Nigerian boxing stars learnt their trade, are constant reminders of the effects of disuse and abandonment.

FAAJI AGBA is a farewell and a gentle, nostalgic prod to remember, to renew interest and perhaps inspire even more than its featured music has since the 40s. The documentary takes one on a musical journey

that begins full of inspiration, hope, innocence and ends with the dousing of stars the world forgot but should remember and salute.

Lagos Film Review Newsroom

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