

The Freedom Park As A Site For Creative Explosions

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ONCE upon a time in Lagos just before the Independence, there existed a notorious prison established by the colonial overlords. Those colonialists who created the prison were incredibly callous to the nationalists who were demanding for freedom and justice for their people and country. And they were arrested and put in fetters; the colonial lords incarcerated the natives whom they believed were making trouble by demanding freedom from political bondage. Among these freedom fighters, who became inmates of the so-called penitentiary, were Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Chief Anthony Enahoro, Alhaji Lateef Jakande and others.

Today, the iron bar gates of the colonial prison stands ajar for anybody and everybody to stroll in and explore the vast compound, which is now a green-theme park. The jail cells have disappeared (though the designers have created representational cells specific to the dimension of the old ones) and prison guards no more existed. Although the concrete fencing walls are still present, there are no broken glasses and electrified barbed wires on top as is typical of security devices around Lagos, ostensibly to prevent inmates from escaping. Now present is an ambience that exudes vista of freedom for everyone. Different types of flowers and plants bloom in multiple colours. Ponds of varying shapes and sizes intersperse with mini bridges; and manicured lawn and various trees growing with well-paved pathway running through the landscape.

Also available are modern buildings of Hall and Club and a stage facility with space for outdoor party.

Governor Babatunde Raji Fashola's kind largess has given the old Prison a new breath of life, which has transformed a part of the usually tough and rough central business district area of Lagos to a place of leisure and outdoor pleasure.

As one of the organisers of the recent literary event there noted, the park is "a recovered treasure from a darkly history of shackles and suppression of the will of the people... FP is for us in a way our own Hyde Park where we are individually and collectively free to showcase our diverse creativities; exhibit the quality of our thoughts; and flaunt the wealth of our shared humanity"

THE 13th Lagos Book and Art Festival (LABAF) 2011 organised by Committee for Relevant Art (CORA) was last weekend staged at the Freedom Park on the *theme "I Vote to Read; The Book as the Voice of the People"*. The festival, which featured book and art exhibition, music, drama and dance performances, poetry readings, seminars, book parties, workshop for children and students, author's assemblies and an Art Stampede attracted large turn-out of visitors and participants.

Much of the three-day festival was a colloquium broken into several segments and focused discussions on works by several authors both home and abroad. And these discussions gave participants and audience ample opportunity to interact with writers and as well interrogate fiction and non-fiction writings drawn from around Africa and the West.

The participants were able to read and review different books that had been carefully chosen by the organisers. The theme of the first panel was; *Documenting the Governance Challenges: Africa In the Eyes of the Others* and it featured such books as *A Swamp Full of Dollars* by Michael Peel; *Dinner With Mugabe* by Heidi Holland, and *A Continent For The Taking* by Howard French. The second discussion deals with *Arrested Development: Why Can't 'They' Get it Right* and in discussion were *The State of Africa* by Martin Meredith; *Nigeria: Dancing On the Brink* by John Campbell; *It's Our Turn To Eat* by Michaela Wrong. *The City As A Key Character In Fictional Narratives of The Continent* was third panel and it discussed *Good Morning Comrades* (Luanda, Angola), by Ondjaki, *The Yacoubian Building* [Cairo, Egypt) by Alaa Al Aswany; *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (Ibadan , Nigeria), by Lola Shoneyin; *Tropical Fish* (Entebbe, Uganda), by Doreen Baigana; and *Under The Brown Rusted Roofs* (Ibadan, Nigeria) by Abimbola Adunni Adelokun.

Probing further on issues germane to Africa's developmental issues was the fourth panel on the second day of the festival, on the theme: *Challenging the Present: African Authors and the Global Discourse On Governance*, and discoursing such books as *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working And What Can Be Done About It*, by Dambissa Moyo; *When Citizens Revolt: Nigerian Elites, Big Oil and the Ogoni Struggle for Determination* by Ike Okonta. Aid is important the discussants agreed in some areas but not at the expense of human dignity and equality of races. It is important that foreign donors and aid agencies give without conditions, without interest and they should help the countries stand on their technical and scientific knowledge.

It is frustrating, observed some of the panelists that the aids from so-called foreign donors and western powers actually made Africans lose sense of their economic and political values. People are groaning in sorrow because the government and its officials do not implement

policies; and everyday the people of the receiving countries are inundated with the news of billion dollars loans by one foreign nation or the other coming in.

Also worrisome to panelists is the fact that when leaders of receiving countries are provided with easy money they forget that they have to pay back with astronomical interest later; so, they increase their non-developmental expenditures and they become corrupt. The participants also looked at the generated oil revenues and asked where the resources have all gone. Is it on the economy, they asked.

Same second day, the participants and audiences went through a routine of physical exertion as they were made to actively partook of a contemporary dance presentation. This was a collaboration between African and European choreographers from France, Germany, Togo, Republic of Benin and Nigeria as facilitated by the Alliance Française and the Goethe Institut. The concept was to make use of the entire ambience of the Freedom Park in a wild expression of freedom of movement. It started with the dancers perched on the gigantic ramp that is under construction in the northern part (Broad Street end) of the park; the audience, including such eminent artistes and scholars as Prof. Eburn Clark; Mrs Taiwo Ajayi-Lycett and the octogenarian musician, Fatai Rolling Dollar, were settled in the green lawn by the Museum building in the park; then as the dancers moved through the lawn to the amphitheatre further down the northern part of the park, the audience trooped after them; the dance ended up in the southern part on the beautiful little garden towards the Igboere Street end.

Renowned dancer, choreographer and leader of Ijodee Troupe, who was one of the facilitators of the workshop, Adedayo Liadi, said that the movement simply instructed the audience on how to improve themselves and “showing yourselves without showing off”.

“Dance is spontaneous and active, we want the audience to move with the dancers. The dancers are performing on the stage while the audience relax by standing or sitting on the ground. This is what happens to us everyday. It is about dealing with our inner selves.”

In the evening of the second day, the audience were treated to beautiful, mellifluous musical performances that had the gorgeously-clad Adunni Nefertiti troupe serenading ‘icons of the Culture sector,’ whose landmark birthdays were celebrated as has become traditional with the festival every year. With Nefertiti thrilling the audience even as they compelled the septuagenarian actress, Ajayi-Lycett to take the dance floor, the venue turned into a party atmosphere. Performance poet Iquo Diana Abasi-Eke took the stage and rendered her powerful but emotionally-charged verses of pain, passion and womanhood.

Fatai Rolling Dollar, reputed as the oldest (85) performing musician in Africa, who was among the 16 ‘icons’ celebrated in the combined birthday party, mounted the stage and thrilled his fellow celebrants and the audience to an unforgettable night of entertainment. He soon got all the other celebrants present to join him on the dance floor. These included Prof. Eburn Clark, Benson Idonije, Taiwo Ajayi-Lycett, Richard Mofe-Damijo, Femi Akintunde-Johnson, and Sola Olorunyomi. They were joined by such eminent guests as the ex-producer of Fela Kuti, Odion Iruoje and a culture patron Chief Odesanmi and others.

The three day festival ended on Sunday, with the Arts Stampede.

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