

Hope Is The Anthem That Runs Through No U-Turn

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In 1997, a young Ike Nnaebue, along with free of his friends, left Lagos, Nigeria for a journey across West Africa, hoping to get into Europe by road (and ultimately) by sea, but a fortuitous encounter at Mali's capital city caused him to make a detour, one that would change the trajectory of his life forever.

Nearly 25 years later, Nnaebue is now a thriving movie director, with films like *False* (2013), *Sink or Swim* (which won Best Narrative Feature at the 2017 Newark International Film Festival) and *Loving Daniella* (2018) under his belt. For his latest venture *No U-Turn*, a documentary film produced by French film production company Arte France in collaboration with South African NGO Steps, he embarks on a trip across the West and North African sub-regions that not only takes him down memory lane, but also draws him deeper into the cultures of the places where he sets foot. This seems like a missionary journey as he traverses the Sahara, eager to relive a distant past, but this time he counters people who are even more eager to follow the same path he dared a century earlier.

Due to lack of footage from his first attempt to enter Europe, there is no use of flashbacks or flash forwards, but Nnaebue's narrative voice-over provides a mental sketch of what played out many years earlier. When he sets out from the bustling city of Lagos - captured beautifully in crane and tracking shots by Jude Akinleminu, the film's cinematographer - his intention is to retrace his "coming of age", but his story soon unfolds into a collage of experiences and encounters that take the narrative way beyond his initial projections.

An unemployed Nigerian graduate wants to leave Lagos and try out hustling in a neighboring African country. A woman in Cotonou is traveling with three other young girls in a manner that

arouses suspicion from co-passengers, some of whom share stories to buttress their distrust. A Sierra Leonean aspiring rapper hopes to cut it as a makeup artist. An Ivorian woman recounts how love halted her European dream and pinned her to the streets of Burkina Faso's capital city. A Nigerian woman in Bamako admits that her faith in God is wearing thin. Two Nigerian women take to begging on the streets of Tangier so they can buy a boat headed for Spain. These people and their experiences, described in detail by their respective narrative voices, elevate this documentary from just another nostalgia ride to a moving story about hope, identity, culture, the search for home, and the chase for gold in the rainbow.

The film does not shy away from the possible dangers that come with migrating along these routes. As he hops from Ouagadougou to Bamako, he is regaled with stories of men who are sold into slavery, women who are forced into prostitution, and people whose bodies succumb to the unforgiving conditions of the desert. But what intrigues him, and what should intrigue everyone else, is how these characters whom he interacts with allude to the kind of hope that transcends all adversity. In many ways, too, he acknowledges his own privilege, even as he sees people yearning to take a big leap across the seas, determined to move beyond their current station, even at the cost of their lives.

Nnaebue's journey also celebrates African culture, even if that was not the primary intention of his voyage. Food and music are two integral components of African life, and with each stop, he is able to experience each country with his palate, even finding his favorite local cuisines in unexpected places. The music of Ikwan Onkha filters through the cuts, stirring enough to pique curiosity, but thanks to film editor Matthieu Augustin, carefully layered enough not to distract from the stories being told.

With dialogue conveyed in English, French and Igbo, Nnaebue succeeds in crafting a film that is authentic, if not anything else. His narrative voice-over sounds a tad dour and self-absorbed at certain parts of the film like he is reading from a paper, but the depth in the stories of the people he meets more than makes up for that. In them, Nnaebue is reminded of the same motivation that spurred him to try out migration many years earlier. For many of them, the hope of a better tomorrow is what keeps them going, even when they don't know how that is going to come about.

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