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Guardian writers  
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The world on screen: the best movies from Africa, Asia and Latin America



From feature-length films to documentary shorts, our writers have named their world film favourites of 2021. Composite: PR

From a Somali love story to a deep dive into Congolese rumba, Guardian writers pick their favourite recent world cinema releases

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The Democratic Republic of the Congo  
The Rumba Kings

The infectious groove, captivating guitar licks and smooth vocals that inspired jazz in New Orleans, zouk in the French Caribbean and Afrobeats in Nigeria – and which have just been inscribed into [Unesco's intangible cultural heritage list](#) – are captured in Peruvian director Alan Brain's first [feature-length documentary film](#).

Brain is also a salsa musician and was introduced to rumba by a fellow band member while he was documenting the humanitarian crises engulfing the DRC for the UN. What he discovered changed him. "I fell in love with rumba," Brain told [Peter Krausz of Movie Metropolis](#), "it began to dawn on me that there must be a documentary here."

Starring rumba stalwarts, including Papa Wemba, poet Lutumba Simaro and Manu Dibango – the artists who popularised rumba internationally and who died in 2016, 2019 and 2020 respectively – the riveting documentary concerns itself with Congolese beauty, creativity and resilience. But despite being stocked with musical sequences, it is not a concert film.



A love letter to Congolese people': The Rumba Kings, directed by Alan Brain, 2021. Photograph: Shift Visual Lab

Using archival footage of rumba and the DRC's colonial era, and commentaries from rumba scholars, including Antoine Manda Tchebwa and Lubangi Muniania, Brain traces the rebirth of Congolese people from King Leopold II's Congo Free State – which Joseph Conrad is thought to be referring to in *Heart of Darkness* when he described "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience" – to freedom and independence in 1960.

In *The Rumba Kings*, we meet not only the artists, musicians, producers and lyricists who made [rumba the soundtrack of pan-Africanism](#) but also people such as Le Grand Kallé, Papa Noel, Docteur Nico and Franco who, in the 1950s Belgian Congo, used music – not bullets, bombs or ballots – to end European colonisation in central and southern Africa. *The Rumba Kings* is a love letter to Congolese people.

**Vava Tamba**, a freelance writer focusing on Africa's great lakes, decolonisation and culture

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