



# Gifts from Babylon

A film by Babucarr Manka, Emiel Martens & Bas Ackermann

[www.giftsfrombabylon.com](http://www.giftsfrombabylon.com) | [www.facebook.com/giftsfrombabylon](https://www.facebook.com/giftsfrombabylon)

## Creative team

Director: Bas Ackermann

Producer: Emiel Martens

Screenplay: Bas Ackermann, Amadou A Sillah, Emiel Martens & Babucarr Manka

Director of photography: Stef Kwinten

Line producers: Mariama Colley & Manon Zwaan

Assistant director: Amadou A Sillah, Modou Joof & Babucarr Manka

Offline editor: Bassiro Joof & Gerwin Lucas

Online editor: Bas Ackermann

Story editor: Emiel Martens

Production companies: 100 Dalasie Film, State of Mic & Dudes in your Face

## Taglines

When an African migrant returns home.

Everyone wants to go to paradise, but nobody wants to die.

When the European dream becomes a nightmare.

Boy, this is not Europe.

## Logline (15 words)

After five years of living illegally in Europe, Modou, a young African deportee, returns home...

## Logline 2 (20 words)

When Modou, a young African deportee, returns home, he keeps being haunted by the traumatic flashbacks of his journey.

## Logline 3 (30 words)

When Modou, a young African deportee, returns to his home country after five years of living illegally in Europe, he keeps being haunted by the traumatic flashbacks of his journey.

### **General summary (53 words)**

*Gifts from Babylon* is a short film exploring the psychological impact of illegal Africa-EU migration through the lens of a Gambian return-migrant. The film captures the personal conflicts that arise when Modou, a young West African, returns to his home country after having lived illegally in the once promised land of plenty, Europe.

### **Short synopsis (85 words)**

Modou, a young West African, returns to his hometown after having lived illegally in Europe for five years. Back home, his family and friends do not recognize him anymore. Modou's flashy lifestyle and bling-bling attitude push him away from his family. On top of that, the debts he left behind years ago have not been forgotten by local fixer Jimmy. Suffering from intense flashbacks of his 'Babylon' life in Europe, and experiencing African ghetto life all over again, he wonders what has become of him...

### **Long synopsis**

*Gifts from Babylon* is a short film showing the complicated return of an African migrant after having lived illegally in Babylon for five years. Babylon is the name that is often used in West Africa when referring to Europe – and the idealized destination of many young West Africans when taking the 'backway', the dangerous and illegal journey to Europe across deserts and high seas. The main character is Modou, a 28-year old Gambian who took the backway when he was in his early twenties. Back then, he stole money from local gang leader Jimmy, crossed the desert by truck and ended up in a smuggler's boat to Europe. Five years later he returns to his home country, with the aim to reunite with his family and friends. After a harsh life of hustling on the streets of Italy and the Netherlands, Modou comes back to the Gambia as a changed man – a bluffing man his family and friends can't get along with. On top of that, the debts he left behind have not been forgotten by local gang leader Jimmy. While suffering from intense flashbacks of his Babylon life in Europe, and experiencing the poverty and insecurity of African ghetto life all over again, he wonders what has become of him...



## Historical background

The Gambia is the smallest country on the African mainland. Located on the west coast of the continent, and entirely surrounded by Senegal except for its coastline, this tiny nation is the home of 1.5 million people. The Republic of The Gambia got named after the Gambia River by the British. In colonial times this major river was the principal trade route in the region. Besides for shipping resources such as gold and ivory, it was used for bringing enslaved Africans to James Island during the transatlantic slave trade. Today, The Gambia, which achieved its independence in 1965, is probably best known in Europe for its tourism. Just a 5-hour flight away, the hotels and beaches give European visitors the ultimate 'Triple S' adventure of sun, sea and sex. Being considered the Smiling Coast of Africa, The Gambia usually offers over 100.000 tourists each year an affordable, safe and exciting holiday experience.

However, looking behind the glitter of the Smiling Coast, the West African country has long faced severe political and economic challenges. Although The Gambia has a long record of peace, the nation's democracy has been questioned ever since Yahya Jammeh came to power in 1994 by toppling the democratically elected Jawara regime. Practices of unlawful imprisonment, occurrences of mysterious disappearance, and other human right abuses to repress political dissent earned Jammeh a reputation as ruthless dictator – a reputation he lived up to for 22 years, until he finally stepped down last February under great national and international pressure after losing the elections from opposition leader Adama Barrow.

Despite the new and hopeful democratic movement in The Gambia, more than fifty years after its independence, the country is still one of the world's poorest nations. With the majority of the population living below the poverty line, Gambian youngsters do not have many future prospects. While seeing the comforts the tourists enjoy during their holidays, they often think of Europe as a paradise. Many Gambian youngsters therefore consider taking the illegal and dangerous *backway* to Europe across deserts and high seas. Those who are desperate enough to take their chances, risk their life in the rickety migrant boats, as often shown on the evening news. In fact, a disproportionately high number of Gambians take the *backway*, usually via Libya and Italy, making the small West African nation a 'big contributor' to the flow of illegal African migrants. At the same time, return-migration seems to have become more attractive with the beginnings of the restoration of democracy under the new president. *Gifts of Babylon* aims to become a catalyst for understanding, awareness and dialogue about migration and return-migration among Africans and Gambians in particular.





### **Cinematic style**

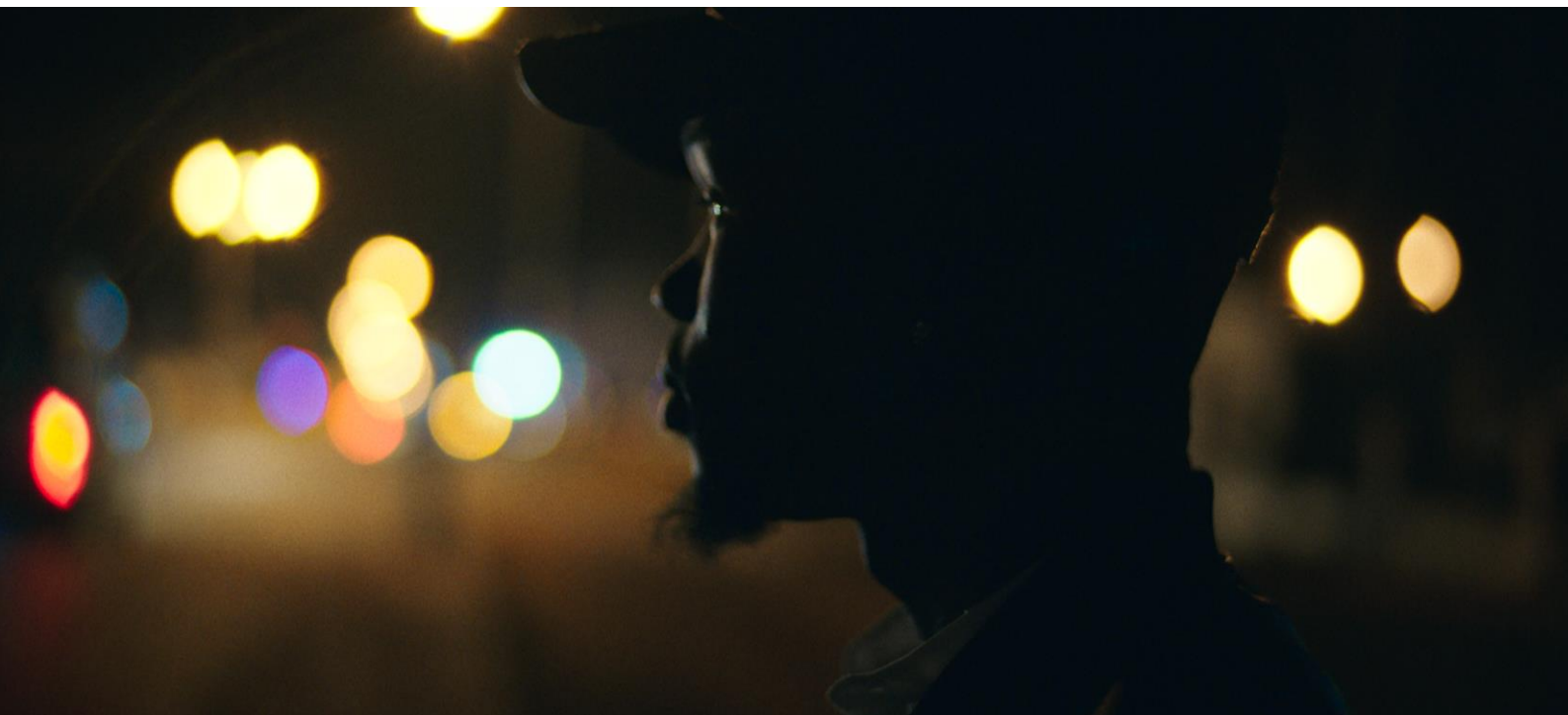
*Gifts from Babylon* is a social realist film with a funky cinematic style and music score, known from other black urban films as well as *Welcome to the Smiling Coast*, the documentary director Bas Ackermann and producer Emiel Martens previously made (see below). Using original settings in and characters from the Gambia, we create a colorful but authentic look and feel. West Africa's youth culture, with its rich music, fashion and language, will play an important role in the film. The vibrant, organic and raw African environment will be put in contrast with Europe's organized and managed society. This contrast reflects the conflict many young Africans are experiencing: the hot and 'easygoing', but poor and insecure life in Africa or the promise of a better life in Europe?

The contrast between day and night scenes and sceneries will also play an important role in *Gifts from Babylon*. Nightlife stands for meditation, silence and social interaction. When sunset hits, the ghetto youths come outside and get together, having a 'chat session' at the front gate or going partying in the local dancehall, away from their daily struggle to make ends meet. Daytime, on the other hand, represent for many Gambian youngsters the constant insecurity, the constant hustle for work, the constant struggle for survival. The daytime feels heavy, with the everyday stress of family responsibilities and financial pressures appearing at the very moment the sun rises. In Europe, daytime is usually the moment that people go out on the street, for school, work or leisure, for opportunities. For Modou, however, European daytime reminds him of Africa, all the time searching for money, most of the times rejected, sometimes being lucky. And nighttime there is the time that homesickness kicks in, thinking of back home – and going back home once he has made it in Europe. To forget his pain, he starts drinking, which lead to stupid actions that push home even further away.

Inspiring narrative structures and cinematic styles ('look and feel') for *Gifts from Babylon* can be found in the following films:

- *Ceddo* (1977, Senegal, directed by Ousmane Sembene)
- *Xala* (1975, Senegal, directed by Ousmane Sembene)

- *Rockers* (1978, directed by Ted Bafaloukos)
- *Clockers* (1995, United States, directed by Spike Lee)
- *Belly* (1998, USA/Jamaica, directed Hype Williams)
- *De ida y vuelta (To and Fro)*, 2000, Mexico, directed by Salvador Aguirre)
- *City of God* (2003, Brazil, directed by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund)
- *Home Again* (2012, Canada, directed by Sudz Sutherland)
- *Akounak Tedalat Taha Tazoughai* (2015, Niger, directed by Mdou Moctar)
- *Black* (2015, Belgium, directed by Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah)



### **Location**

The Gambia, West Africa

### **Cast and characters**

A local cast of known Gambian musicians and not-so-known Gambian actors has been used to secure the authenticity, creativity, and sensitivity of *Gifts to Babylon*. These musicians and actors were largely drawn from the State of Mic network and particularly the cast of our previous film project, *Welcome the the Smiling Coast*.

### **Director and scriptwriter's bio and motivation**

Bas Ackermann (1979) is an art director and filmmaker hailing from The Hague, The Netherlands. He is the writer and director of the internationally acclaimed feature-length documentary *Welcome to the Smiling Coast* (2016), which had a sold-out try-out screening at Movies that Matter in 2015. At the time, Alhagie Manka, the film's local producer and the managing director of State of Mic (see below), attended the festival as an invited guest. After the screening at Movies that Matter, and many more months of editing and finetuning, *Welcome to the Smiling Coast* received its world premiere at the Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles in February 2016 – and the film has been shown at more than forty other film festivals and specialized film events since then. The idea of making *Welcome of the Smiling Coast* started in 2007, when Bas, together with a group like-minded friends, set up State of Mic, a multimedia studio aimed at empowering Gambian youngsters by facilitating and teaching them in film and music

production. Within five years, a group of fifteen local youths became professionals within Gambia's rising media industry. At present, the studio, now under managing director Alhagie Manka, has become a leading training center and media production house in the Gambia. State of Mic represent the new generation of Gambians who have the motivation, flexibility and creativity to make it in the country's emerging media industry. After almost ten years of experience, network and friendship, Bas has in State of Mic a solid media team ready to enter into fictional social impact filmmaking. With this team, and with *Welcome to the Smiling Coast* as both a practical and conceptual base, he considers *Gifts from Babylon* as a logical follow-up in his early career as a human rights and social impact filmmaker.

Bas: 'I find it important to give a human face to the young West African migrants who risk their lives every year. Youths who are desperate because of the lack of future perspectives and trapped in corrupted politics. For me, ***Gifts from Babylon*** shows the disillusion that many young African refugees experiencing when arriving in Europe and turning back home afterwards. These people often don't really want to leave home and their home country but are forced due to all the pressures they face. There is a whole new generation of Africans so ready, so creative and so motivated to enter and join today's world, and because of my own small contribution, effort and successful project, I noticed what still lacks and what young Africans are capable of. *Gifts from Babylon* will show how European culture clashes with African culture and where we, as human beings, should create transparency to avoid unrealistic dreams and dogmatic fear.'

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<https://vimeo.com/171106427> (show reel)



### **Producer's and scriptwriter's bio and motivation**

Emiel Martens (1980, PhD) is a film lecturer, researcher and producer based in Amsterdam and working in the Randstad. Emiel works as lecturer and researcher at the Department of Media Studies of the University of Amsterdam as well as the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication. His research interests span the fields of postcolonial film studies and critical tourism studies, with a particular focus on (the representation of) social inequality and cultural difference in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Besides his posts at UvA and EUR, Emiel is also the founding director of Caribbean Creativity, a non-profit media arts organization dedicated to promoting, programming and distributing Caribbean and other diversity cinema in the Netherlands and beyond, board member of NALACS, the Netherlands Association of Latin American and Caribbean Studies, and co-owner of Gasten in je Gezicht, a small media agency specializing in web and graphic design, social media, photography, film production and event organization. As such, he has worked on various film productions in the capacity of business consultant, story editor and (executive) producer, including *Welcome to the Smiling Coast*, the project that kicked off his collaboration with Bas.

Emiel: '*Gifts from Babylon* is the logical follow-up of *Welcome to the Smiling Coast*. While our documentary gave insight into the real lives of young West Africans and how they cope with their fears and dreams, *Gifts from Babylon*, as a fiction film, has enabled us to create a more compelling story with emotional resonance and visual sensitivity. In times of much negative imaging around the European refugee crisis, we tried to give a more human face of Africa and Africans in *Welcome to the Smiling Coast*, and with *Gifts from Babylon* we want to take it one step further, showing the 'backway' – and its possible causes and consequences – from the inside out and on an individual, emotional level. Bas and I made *Welcome to the Smiling Coast* with a minimum budget and without any form of subsidy – and it is now time to take it to the next level. With all the experience, knowledge and network we have built by making our documentary, we are more than ready for our first feature film together.'

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[www.gasteninjegezicht.nl](http://www.gasteninjegezicht.nl)

### **Co-producer and co-executive producer's bio and motivation**

State of Mic is an independent creative studio and registered organization in The Gambia focusing on media production and education. Since its establishment in 2007, it has contributed to the country's emerging media industry by increasing the level and quality of audiovisual and multimedia productions in the country. In addition, State of Mic played a crucial role in the media coverage surrounding the recent elections and its aftermath. Alhagie Manka, managing director of State of Mic, served as the main photographer and video producer of president-elect Adama Barrow throughout this period. As such, he was in charge of all the news updates during this turbulent and vital period of political change. With its experience and engagement, State of Mic has functioned as the main production company for the pre-production and principal photography of *Gifts from Babylon*. In addition, Babucarr Manka served as co-writer and assistant director of the film.

Babucarr: '*Gifts from Babylon* is inspired from the stories of my childhood friends. Those that are still hoping for means to finance their journey, those that lived (or died) from torments of the journey and those that are still trying to integrate themselves into the realities of Europe. Living in The Gambia, I see the dreams

that attract our youths to the perilous journeys to Europe through desert and sea every day. I live in a ghetto environment with youths that look at the daily stories of deaths and sorrows with this journey and still hope for light at the end of the tunnel. Beyond the tormenting seas lies a land filled with opportunities. Frustrated by the pressures from family, lack of employment, and poor youth development schemes, they hope for the life they see from the few that made it through this journey. *Gifts from Babylon* portrays the life that follows after a long journey of chasing the European dream. The past that is still hunting, the present that is not in consonance with what you pictured, and the continuous struggle of keeping up with life in the Smiling Coast after the lessons from the so-called promised land.'

For a video on the story behind State of Mic, see: <https://vimeo.com/21131993>.





### ***Welcome to the Smiling Coast (2016, 72 min.)***

#### **Short synopsis**

*Welcome to the Smiling Coast* is a feature-length documentary that captures the daily struggles of fifteen youngsters moving within the informal economy of the Gambian tourism industry of sun, safari and sex. With the lure of a better future just around the corner, do they try their luck abroad or find their peace at home?

#### **Long synopsis**

*Welcome to the Smiling Coast* offers a rare insight into the lives of fifteen youngsters moving within the bounds of the informal sector of the Gambian tourism industry. Although the smallest country on mainland Africa, the Gambia has become a popular tourist destination due to its warm climate, abundant wildlife and cheap intimacy. Each year over 150.000 tourists, predominantly older European women, visit the Smiling Coast of West Africa in search of this exotic blend of sun, safari and sex.

Most tourists are staying within the comforts of all-inclusive resorts, far removed from the everyday experience of ordinary Gambians. In fact, with a third of its population living below the poverty line, the Gambia is at present, fifty years after its independence, one of Africa's poorest nations. Ironically, many poor Gambians, particularly youngsters, are residing only a few steps away from the tourist hotels and beaches. Here they are trying to survive in the margins of the omnipresent leisure industry. With this lure of a better future just around the corner, the dangerous 'back way' across deserts and high seas to Europe, is always lingering in their minds. Do they eventually try their luck abroad or find their peace at home?

*Welcome to the Smiling Coast* shows the varied and often creative alternative strategies Gambian youngsters employ to secure their livelihood. Capturing their struggles, hopes and dreams, this documentary puts a human and positive face on the informal economy that lies behind the glitter of the Smiling Coast.

#### **Website**

[www.welcometothesmilingcoast.com](http://www.welcometothesmilingcoast.com)

#### **Teaser**

<https://vimeo.com/121875574>

