

**Gifts from Babylon**

**A film by Bas Ackermann, Emiel Martens and Babucar Manka**

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

**Creative team**

Director: Bas Ackermann

Producer: Emiel Martens

Screenplay: Bas Ackermann, Amadou A Sillah and Babucarr Manka

Director of photography: Stef Kwinten

Production manager: Mariama Colley and Manon Zwaan

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

Offline editor: Bassiro Joof

Online editor: Gerwin Lucas

Story editor: Emiel Martens

Production companies: 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 dream becomes a nightmare.

When the European dream becomes a trauma.

When the European dream becomes an African trauma.

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 (50 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 phychological conflicts that arise when Modou, a deportee, returns to his home country after having lived illegally in the promised land of plenty, Europe.

**Short synopsis (75 words)**

Modou, a young Gambian, returns to his home country after having lived illegally in Europe for five years. Back home, his family and friends do not recognize him anymore. Modou’s detached and apparently indifferent attitude pushes 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 migrant journey, 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’](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2015/06/14/tiny-gambia-has-a-big-export-migrants-desperate-to-reach-europe/) 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.

**Narrative structure**

The story of *Gifts from Babylon* revolves around Modou, a 28-year-old West African who returns to his hometown after having lived illegally in Europe for five years. Upon arrival, Modou, who has adopted a ‘flashy’ Western lifestyle while in Babylon, is pushed away from his family and friends. During the film, we see the parallel story of his past life as an illegal migrant in Europe and his present life of as a rejected loner in the Gambia. The film shows the past and present situation of Modou in his community in Banjul. Besides being the capital of The Gambia, for many Gambians Banjul is the starting point of the *backway*, which is taken by over 200.000 Sub-Saharan Africans every year, among who about 70.000 Gambians.

While being back in his hometown, Modou is not only hunted by intense flashbacks of his travel to and life in Europe, he is also rejected by his community and on the run for Jimmy, the local gang leader, to who he owes some outstanding debts he thought he had left behind when taking the backway five years ago. Back then, Modou stole money from Jimmy to pay for his illegal trip to Europe across deserts and high seas. He is terrified about what Jimmy might do to him, so he designs ways to avoid any surprises. Modou makes sure he stays at different places, so he cannot be traced. He also avoids carrying cash, using his visa card only, which he carries in a small bag alongside his other documents. Ultimately, he is leading the same fugitive’s life he had while being in Europe.

Modou refuses to ‘fall back’ into the, in his eyes, ‘poor’ African lifestyle, with practices such as sleeping on the floor, drinking water from a jar and eating with your hands. However, paradoxically, this refusal only leads to more poverty and insecurity. Moreover, it reminds him of his past life as a refugee – the illegal journey, the threats in the refugee camps, and the tricks and lies he used to survive while living on the streets of Italy and the Netherlands. Then, one day, he goes out to party and meets Anita, his dream girl when he was a teenager.

However, his newfound luck is of short duration, as he loses his bag not long after he and Anita get together. With this, he not only loses his money and mobility, the reminders of a Western lifestyle, but also Anita, whose love for money is stronger than her love for Modou. Again homeless and poor, Modou has left no option than to sleep on the floor, drink water from a jar and eating with his hands while sharing a plate of food. That very moment, Aishatou, his wife, finds him. She decides to help him to regain his bag and, more importantly, his identity and sense of self rooted in his community and culture.

**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 form 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

**Period**

*Gifts of Babylon* is envisionedto eventually become a feature-length film of about 90 minutes. However, a first step into that direction is making a short film of it. In the independent film world, where production funding is scarce, a common strategy to pitch a feature is to make a short version of the film first. This short is then used to attract attention and raise funds for the full version. This is the path we intend to follow as well. With the crowdfunding and additional funds, we will be able to produce a short version of *Gifts of Babylon* of about 10-15 minutes long, mainly covering the present situation of Modou in The Gambia.

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| **Period** | **Phase** |
| February-March 2017 | Project proposal (writing, submitting, pitching) |
| March-July 2017 | Screenwriting and script development |
| September-November 2017 | Pre-production and crowdfunding campaign (as well as trying to attract additional funding) |
| December 2017-January 2018 | Principal photography in The Gambia |
| February-March 2018 | Post-production |
| March-April 2018 | Premiere of short film at film festivals |

**Cast and characters**

A local cast of known Gambian musicians and not-so-known Gambian actors will be used to secure the authenticity, creativity, and cultural responsibility of *Gifts to Babylon*. These musicians and actors will be largely drawn from the State of Mic network and particularly the cast of our previous film project, *Welcome the the Smiling Coast*, among who the musicians Royal Messenger and Jah Michael and some of the tourism workers featuring in the documentary. This local cast will be complimented by 2-3 professional actors from outside The Gambia.

Modou Gaye (28)

Modou is an insecure yet big-mouth type of guy. Before going to Babylon, his family and friends thought he was somewhat of a failure hanging on the streets without any purpose. One day he steals money to take the backway. Upon his return, he has an even bigger mouth, but now his insecurity has switched to arrogance. Wearing big tattoos and golden jewelry, he thinks is a real ‘topman’, as they say in the Gambia.

Jimmy the Fixer (31)

Jimmy the Fixer is a small-time gang leader who makes money by dealing ganja, ‘beach bumming’ (hustling tourists on the beach) and through relationship scams with old Western women. Jimmy is a good-looking and street-wise fellow, giving back to the community but misusing his knowledge, strength and behavior for crooked activities – the so-called ‘easy way’ to make money.

Anita (nickname, 22)

Anita is the modern gold-digger type of girl: hanging around the tourist area, opportunistic to hook up a wealthy Tubab (white man) or Gambian. Modou, who had a crush on her in his teens, always thought she is way out his league, but now his money can buy him love. He is so proud on his ‘conquest’ that he parades with his on the street and shows off with her in the dancehall – and all this while his family and friends can see him.

Aishatou (26)

As a child, Modou’s parents arranged a marriage with Aishatou at the moment she got born. In some traditional Gambian cultures a girl child can be assigned a future husband from birth as a way to strengthen the family ties. Modou was happy with this growing up as a child and into his teens, because he never had the confidence to talk to girls. Now Modou is back, he shows no more interest as he thinks she is too low for him. Aishatou is suffering the humiliation, especially since her mother keep blaming her for not doing enough to restore Modou’s love and safe her marriage.

**Budget (low-budget with many in-kind services)**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Specifics** | **Costs** |
| *Above the line* |  |  |
| Script & Rights | In kind service | - |
| Director (Bas) | In kind service | - |
| Producer (Emiel) | In kind service | - |
| Crew |  | €2.250 |
| Cast | Actors & extras | €1.750 |
| *Below the line* | *Subtotal* | *€3.000* |
| Travel | Airfare & local transportation | €1.500 |
| Hotel & Lodging |  | €1.000 |
| Food |  | €1.000 |
| Camera rental | Kit, crew & expendables | €2.500 |
| Sound rental | Kit, Crew & Expendables | €250 |
| Hard drives | Data storage | €500 |
| Locations | Fees & permits | €350 |
| Art Department | Props, wardrobe & make-up | €350 |
| Office Expenses | State of Mic, in kind service | - |
| Still Photos | Photographer, in kind service | - |
| Contingency |  | €200 |
|  | *Subtotal* | *€12.000* |
| Offline Post (Bas) | In kind service | - |
| Final Post Online | Conform, Color Correction, Online Montage | €1.250 |
| Final Post Mix | Sound mixing session | €750 |
|  | *Subtotal* | *€2.000* |
|  | ***Total*** | ***€14.000*** |
| **Category** | **Specifics** | **Funds** |
| Crowdfunding campaign | Cinecrowd | €10.000 |
| Matching money I | Movies that Matter / City of The Hague | €3.000 |
| Matching money II | Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis | €1.000 |
|  | ***Total*** | ***€14.000*** |

**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 30 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 thousands of West African refugees who risk their lives every year. Where Western news media often mainly shows the outcomes of migration for the host country, treating African refugees as a mass of unwanted people. *Gifts form Babylon* shows their poor living conditions at home, which are the cause of their departure, driving them to leave home and undertake such a dangerous and insecure journey. For me, *Gifts of Babylon* shows the disillusion that many African refugees experiencing when arriving in Europe and turning back home afterwards. The challenges they need to cope with are often the result of a difficult family situation, unemployment, financial difficulties, limited future prospects and unrealistic dreams. These people often don’t really want to leave home and their home country, but are forced due to all the pressures they face. *Gifts of Babylon* shows these pressures, many of them having roots in the colonial past. Decades after independence, many young Africans still find themselves trapped in a global economy that offers few options for sustainable development.’

[www.linkedin.com/in/bas-ackermann-b51236a](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bas-ackermann-b51236a)

<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 indeed the logical follow-up of *Welcome to the Smiling Coast*. While our documentary gives insight into the real lives of fifteen young West Africans and how they cope with their lives, fears and dreams, *Gifts from Babylon* will, as a fiction film, enable 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 humane and positive 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 possibly 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 was financed out of our own pockets and without any form of subsidy. We are very honoured that our film had its world premiere at the Pan African Film Festival, the largest black film festival in the United States, and has been shown at various film festivals and other events since. With all the experience, knowledge and network we have built by making and screening our documentary, I think we are ready for our first feature film together.’

[www.linkedin.com/in/emielmartens/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/emielmartens/nl)

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

[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 will function as the local production company for the pre-production and principal photography of *Gifts from Babylon*.

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>

**Screener**

<https://vimeo.com/183461831>

(password: wttsc12345)

For a list of all screenings of *Welcome to the Smiling Coast* at international film festivals and other events, see: [www.welcometothesmilingcoast.com/screenings/](http://www.welcometothesmilingcoast.com/screenings/).