

A Bustrip to Postcoloniality

On African roads with the TGV-Express



Screenshot TGV-Express (source DVD Kairos)

by Michael Christopher

Summary:

The TGV-Express is a fictive bus which connects the two West African capitals Dakar and Conakry. The passengers in this bus mirror the society of Senegal. The journey with the bus tells us a story of the postcolonial history of the Senegal so far.

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A bus is a microcosm of African Life.
(De Bruijn/ van Dijk/ Foeken 2001:1)

If we think of African journeys we image two different reasons for travelling. Either we see migration, scores of refugees set in motion by civil wars, hunger or dreams of a better future, or we catch sight of Western tourists on adventure trips and safaris. On the one hand, pictures of misery dominate our imagination, on the other hand, exotic moments create a postcard-idyll. However, many African societies are highly mobile beyond from refugee movements or traditional nomadism of the Tuareg. Mirijam de Bruijn, Rijk van Dijk and Dick Foeken (2001:1) point out, that we need attention of movement and mobility to understand Africa.

Mobility is a frequently-used topic in African movies. In the last twenty years, a shift in development took place, away from traditional and rural stories towards modern and global depictions of African life. In the same way, the visual and narrative style of films and the choice of film locations have changed (Mbye 2000). Whereas formerly, there was a focus on the traditional African society, today, mainly current problems are shown. These films provide us an insight into many parts of African culture. Hence a close look on travels in African movies can help us to understand a culture in motion (cf. Shohat/Stam 1996:145).

There are several motives to go on a journey: tourism, research, homecoming, escape and a lot of other personal reasons, which are too many to specify here. Likewise, the filmic depictions of a journey in African cinema are multifaceted.

A journey through African movies

The number of productions of African films is larger as it often appear. The countries with a large output of films are mostly excluded when we look at the African film. Although Egyptian, Southafrican, Nigerian and Ghanaian films belong to the film culture of the continent just like films from the Senegal, Mali or Burkina Faso.

Looking at the relevant literature, we can notice a tendency to understand African film as a form of genre, which indeed is geographically fixed, but

rather defined through stylistic pattern. Mostly films from francophone Africa are represented in this context.

Jonathan Haynes (2000:9) describes that the African film theorists (and film critics) understand African movies mainly as Panafrican film because of some marketing and ideological reasons. For national cinematographies, respectively for films from different ethnic groups, the stylistic borderlines are soon too narrow, and the output of moving pictures are quite too low. However, I travel on this narrow path and take an exemplary look on films, which belong to the genre “African film.” I give an insight in several problems, without going into greater detail. First I give a short overview on how African films show different motivations for being on a journey, thereafter I analyze the film *TGV-Express* (Senegal/Frankreich 1997, Moussa Touré).

The film *Flame* (Zimbabwe 1996, Ingrid Sinclair) deals with escape and migration in consequence of the experiences of a civil war. Two women, who join the guerrilla, because of oppression in their country, are in the focus of the story. As a result of their fight, they have to hide themselves in rough terrain and move only between the guerrilla bases. The pictures show a barren but picturesque landscape: Savanna, bush and attractive rock formations give an impression of South-East-African geography.

The akin film *Daressalam* (France/Burkina Faso 2000, Issa Serge Coelo) includes a similar landscape. The camera-movements present extraordinary landscapes, which are shown in long shots and wide angle, often filmed in diffused lighting. These pictures have a particular significance, which moves between romance and “Heimatgefühl”. Thus, the fight for independence gets a new quality, which highlights the home. Whereas *Flame* settles its story in former Rhodesia, the location in *Daressalam* is vague and stands for an imaginary place in Africa. Thus, it refers to the Panafrican idea.

Souleymane Cissé's *Waati* (Engl. Time, Mali 1995) links this Panafrican idea with the search for an African identity. The film narrates the story of a woman, who escapes from his oppressor, a cruel boer. Her journey brings her out of apartheid South Africa via Zimbabwe to West Africa. She follows the quest for identity in different levels and visits several cultures of the Sub-Saharan Africa. On her Panafrican (culture-) journey, she meets the Tuareg on the

edge of the desert, sees woodcarved masks and celebrations of the Rastafarian cult. With this acquired knowledge, she returns to a South Africa in change.

Waati evokes an African identity, which includes its proud of the cultural diversity. The landscape takes a step back behind the symbols of the storyline. A lion establishes, in the form of cross-fadings or as an amulet, the bonds between the countries of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Cote d'Ivoire and Mali. The journey appears like a searching of the own identity, like a voyage of initiation of the continent. Jean-Michel Frodon (1995) describes *Waati* as a representative of the African film, which makes full use of the African history, geography and language. *Waati* emphasises the African, nevertheless Cissé has produced a modern, transnational film, which simply “overflies” national boundaries.

Already in his previous movie *Yeelen* (Engl. Light, Mali 1987, Souleymane Cissé) these themes exist. Time and space coordinates vanish during the film and step back behind the relations of the characters (cf. Diawara 1992:165). The travel shifts to the inside and ends in the glistening light of cognition. Magic actions are the trigger of motivation for an escape, which becomes a journey. Todd Sanders (2001:43-44) notices in his description of the Ihanzu people in Tanzania, that traveling in Africa can not only be assigned to general structural factors, rather magical occurrences and witchcraft often play the essential role. In *Yeelen*, the magic-initiated journey to the African identity leads via the way of pre-colonial rites and myths.

When migrants return home, they often search for the question of their belonging, for values, and the African culture. Many films deal with the consequences of migration and depict the postcolonial traveler (cf. Korte 2000:150). Mostly they tell a story of one person looking for his African roots. In the Guinean film *I.T.- Immatriculation Temporaire* (Frankreich/Guinea 2000, Gahité Fofana) a man, grown up in France, travels in search of his unknown father. Also in the film *Vacances au Pays* (Cameroon 2000, Jean-Marie Téo) a man comes back from his French diaspora, but he feels himself as a stranger in his old home Cameroon. Postcolonial travel and remigration are popular topics of many film directors. Usually their work is autobiographic. They betake themselves to personally shaped places of their memories, let it be a bar, a village celebration or a cinema like in *Bye Bye Africa* (Chad 1999, Mahamat Saleh

Haroun). These films take the spectator on an inner travel, on the search for the own roots and the reasons of the alienation to them.

Another path goes *Little Senegal* (France/Germany/Algeria 2001) of the Tunisian director Rachid Bouchareb. Alloune, an old tourist guide of a historic fort outside Dakar, follows the traces of the slaves, which were deported from the fort to America two hundred years ago. Today mainly Afro-American tourists visit the fort. Alloune tries to reconstruct his own family history and travels from Dakar via Louisiana to New York, where he searches the descendants of his family. In addition to the fact that the film shows the African cultural heritage on both sides of the Atlantic, it is a fascinating travel movie, which presents the western metropolis in another perspective.

Because of the African kind of movement of the Senegalese actor, New York appears quieter than usual and is set in a new context. The African view at New York is not equal to the fascinating, lively image of the city rather it seems grounded between the skyscrapers. In the foreground stands the individual in his social environment, not the crowd, traffic or architecture. The accentuation of the humanity seems exemplary. Alloune's touristic interest amounts to an old Afro American kiosk owner and her family. For him, this woman is the link to his relatives and ancestors. Nevertheless, New York as the site is crucial, owing to its image as a cultural melting pot and due to the neighborhoods of the former Senegalese slaves.

In the African film, visual reference points seem to step behind for the benefit of human relation. Ancestor worship, magic and symbols, like the lion in *Waati*, can amplify these relations on a metaphorical level, just as they keep the contact to ancestors and the own history with many rites.

When we turn our attention back on traveling it is obvious, that, among the many motivations for a journey, the mere touristic reasons for a travel are missing. However, the occasions to start a journey are numerous. The film *TGV-Express* combines various of them, as defined by the initial citation, which describes the bus as a microcosm of African life (de Bruijn/ R. Van Dijk/ Foeken 2001:1).

TGV Express

The TGV Express is an intercity bus in Senegal, who got its name from its driver Rambo, according to the French high speed train. The bus ride goes from Dakar to Guinea's Capital Conakry. First, it seems that the journey is a good deal for Rambo, but his business is already in danger before the departure. The military proclaims, that the Bijango rebels in the east of the country have started a revolution, because their totem was stolen for an exhibition in a museum. Since the bus route is tangent to the territory of the Bijangos, this potential risk leads to many cancellations of the journey. Only a small group of illustrious passengers goes with the bus on the risky trip. Just like in a road movie, on the way human problems are discussed and adventures experienced.

The starting point of the journey is a bus station, somewhere at the edge of Dakar. It shows a colorful mosaic of busses and different people with the same intention: to move away from this place. The position on the outskirts of the city is not unusual, but the place can not be located. It is a station of transit, not a place of stay. Unlike Little Senegal, in which the view over the ocean creates a feeling of wideness, bus stations mediate another dimension of space. The spectator prepares himself for an exhausting journey – the distance becomes a physical experience in virtue of the long travel time and the miserable road conditions.

The different travel motivations of the passengers stay hidden at the beginning of the film. Only over the course of the story line the film presents the diverse stories of the voyagers. It reveals absurd reasons, which are narrated with a banal serenity. The characters of the passengers are one-dimensional and act for different stereotypes of the Senegalese society. Next to the driver



Screenshot TGV-Express (source DVD Kairos)

Rambo and his assistant Djemba, a polygamist travels to his next wife with half a dozen goats on the roof of the bus. A recently fired minister and his wife are picked up on the road during the journey. While sitting in this bus, he is promoted to the forthcoming prime minister, whom the commander of the Bijan-gos eyes to kidnap for the enforcement of their aims. A dealer is on the flight, and two marabouts are on the way to a congress. Only the travel reasons of the two female passengers remain untold.

When we have a look on the different forms of traveling which *TGV-Express* presents, we notice that the pure touristic journey is not visible, even if it is the source of crisis in the country. The state interprets the highly profitable tourism business superior to the religious culture and decides to exhibit the totem in a museum. Tourism appears as a stranger; it is something that does not belong to the indigene culture. In parts, we can see this is in the indifference of the passengers towards this theme. Migration, escape and banishment (based on different reasons) are depicted parenthetically. Like the landscape, signs of refugees are passing by: the refugee camp, which is built up near the bus station, the refugee trek which they meet on the way, abandoned villages, or reports of hunger and death.

Adventure and cultural anthropology research travels, the film does not make a difference between them, are typified by a French ethnology couple. They travel through West Africa in the “footsteps of Abu Bakr.” The bus community does not like the two very much and snidely puts them on a level with “Indiana Jones.” An adventure for one person probably is normality for others. The other passengers see the journey in an ordinary personal context. Their motivation is the need to move from one place to another.

The magic journey is represented by two marabouts on their way to a conference. Although they belong to different religions - one follows the animistic belief, the other is an Islamic marabout - their later agreement is a sign of the religious syncretism in Africa.

Magic and magical travel play a special role in the African perception of this film. The marabouts accompany the travel with their rituals. They magically invoke rain and give a breakdown service, for which they souse the French woman with goat blood. The magical journey of the marabouts is not only

characterized by daily routines; it is also used as an element of power. One of the marabouts, in a bout of temper, relocates the bus to somewhere. A cattle herd appears and vanishes again in fume. In *TGV-Express*, magical traveling is a support of daily living, an element of power as well as a spiritual experience.

Pictures of traveling

Mostly the film presents pictures out of the side-windows of the bus. These views to the outside are floating. Cities and landscapes pass by without noteworthy geographic marks or distinctive buildings. In contrast to this fragmented pictures, the faces of the passengers in the bus are filmed in Close-Ups. The landscape is rarely shown in Wide Angle, and Long Shots are used in most parts for the moving bus. The outside views are always led back in the frame of the windows. For Karsten Witte (1989:56), the aesthetic of space in the African film is organized by a continues movement, which is conditioned by Long Shots. On the contrary, *TGV-Express* shows a change between the organic motion of landscape and portraits of the protagonists. The relevance of the Long Shot and the organic movement is replaced by Close-Ups of the travelers. The wideness of the scenery is guided in the limitedness of the bus.

The landscape glides by and forms a background scenario. It changes arbitrarily from forest to grassland, to savanna and back. Explicit touristic pictures are rare. The landscape does not present attributes; hence places cannot be identified. Only fragments of tree formations create a kind of African romance. There is an ambivalence of inside and outside. Stereotyped Long Shots show the bus in motion from the outdoor. The scenery around the bus does not seem to be impassable. The roads offer no real adventure qualities. There are not the great wonders of nature, rock prominences and extreme geographical conditions, but rather facets of Senegal, which are displaced of pathos and given back to the own culture.

Settlements and Wilderness

The nature in *TGV-Express*, despite its beauty and dangers, is shown as trivial. An encounter with the wilderness in the film appears hardly threatening. Only the poor quality of many roads - the bus drives over brown runways with holes, which are filled with water of previous rainfalls - is able to evoke a sense of exotic, but this thematic is not concretized in the film.

Settlements perform the task to give a short time shelter during the transit. They are no real destinations. Neither Dakar nor Conakry is presented in the typical manner of a travel movie. The tourist gaze is faded out. Merely at the first stop for an overnight stay the viewer gets an impression of the African nightlife. While the passengers go to their accommodation, one guest roams through the bustling colony. Hip-Hop music fills the air, performed by two musicians on a stage.

This brief episode of the journey is hidden for the bulk of the passengers. The one who goes out of the hostel, gets into trouble: drug dealers, whose he seemingly owes money, beat him up. There is a discrepancy between the security, which an accommodation in the city should provide against the wilderness, and the hasty escape of the travel group out of the city, back into the wilderness. Thus, the journey itself becomes a protection against the threat, which exists in the civilization.

The danger is embodied by the humans, like the drug dealers or the Bijangos. Nobody knows that amongst the passengers of the bus is the rebel leader Kalinga. He guides the bus to a camp of the Bijangos. The first contact with the Bijangos is amusing. We see the cliché of the barely clothed savages. They wear bast skirts, dance with spears and speak an unknown language. The savages escort the bus to the deepest bush. These ethnologic pictures and the feeling of adventure satisfy the western spectator. With the arrival at the camp, modern clothed rebels welcome the travel group. They have all the amenities of a modern society. The greeting by the savages in *TGV-Express* remains a funny episode. The rebels do not claim an own national identity, but only the autonomic power over their culture.

The map

- *The map is not very up to date.*
- *No, 18th century.*

(Film dialogue TGV EXPRESS)

Ramaswamy (2002:154) describes, for the Indian context, the image of the nation in the form of a map, the “National Geo-Body”, not only as power over the space, but also as a possibility and form of expression of patriotic sentiments. In *TGV-Express*, the map is in the hands of the Frenchman Roger. He considers that he knows the surrounding with the map, and he sets the direction for a part of the journey. The native passengers and Rambo allow Roger to guide them, if only they arrive where they want to go. But the map has crucial faults: It hails from a previous century, some roads are not marked or do not exist anymore, and some rivers are now small streams. The idea to orientate oneself with an over hundred years old map implies the assumption, that in Africa nothing changes fast. With the help of the map, Roger has the ability to become the master of the wilderness and the “savages”. That the European science, in the African opinion, get entangled itself in romanticized misapprehensions, becomes apparent by the misinterpretations of the researcher couple in the course of the film. Roger interprets the voting of the native passengers in the beginning, to decide whether they should take along the French ethnologists, as a greeting ritual. Also the misinterpretation, that Europeans would not be harmed, confirms his false image of the African society. Finally, the map leads him in the wrong direction. The couple is captured by the Bijangos and is left behind by the group of the bus. For Roger the map, as well as the life of Abu Bakr, played a decisive role for his orientation, even though neither the geography nor the history provided an indication for this purpose.



Screenshot TGV-Express (source DVD Kairos)

Edward Casey (2002:265) sees a link between geography and history. He describes geography as the knowledge about the world, which exists at places. He refers geography to cartography. In his opinion, history is the knowledge about the human past at these places. He explains further that “to be” means to be at the place. The representation of the world on a map adverts to the occupation of the landscape and a claim to leadership, which the French researcher as “ruler of the lore” about the places seemingly owns. Rogers tries to share his historic knowledge about the legendary Malian king Abu Bakr with the other passengers, who are not interested in his stories.

TGV-Express points also to another level in the context of geography and history. Rogers occupation of Africa bases on a historic knowledge about the continent. The orientation with the help of a map, which dates back from the 18th century, and the effort to continue a historic journey in a modern overland bus seems to be absurd. This reflects the criticism on the white-man, who comes to Africa with incorrect knowledge but a dominant behaviour. African history is different. It is passed down in an oral tradition, not as facts or topographic points on paper, but as stories about persons and social structures of societies. Thereby, in historical terms, mobility is deeply enrooted in the African society (cf. H. van Dijk/ Foeken/ van Til 2001:14), without that it has to be subsumable. That the French remain in the bush is a symbolic devaluation of maps in the wilderness. African mobility functions without their use. The only one who had faith in the map falls behind on the route. In this context, the link between geography and history is not relevant anymore, the human relations all the more.

The journey's end

On the way from Dakar to Conakry, the bus arrives at the international border between Senegal and Guinea. But the film gives little attention to the crossing of that border. It exists, not in the form of barriers and officers, but as a place of stopover and change. Only a small, unimpressive signboard refers to the existence of a border. Instead of the depiction of the bureaucratic procedures at the transit, the film allegorizes the crossing as a poem about the “guest”, spoken by an unknown person. Here, the passengers transact important business, change their clothes, and the time is used to clean the bus. There



Screenshot TGV Express, (source DVD Kairos)

exists a feeling of “borderlessness”, which can be understood in a global Panafrican context, that borders are irrelevant. In an anti-colonial viewing, borders are arbitrarily installed barriers. The film abolishes them by its nonobservance and reinterpretation.

When the TGV Express arrives in the capital of Guinea, it is welcomed by a parade. At first sight, this parade is directed towards the ex-minister, who presents himself as an emancipator. At second sight, it is not clear, to whom the triumphal procession is really directed. It seems similar to the ship-parades in Europe and America at the beginning of the 20th century for the welcoming of transatlantic ships. The passengers of the bus recur from an adventure and their “captain” Rambo deserves the honor to guide the bus in the front.

The terminal stop of the TGV Express is somewhere in the nowhere, outside of the city. The passengers go separate ways and disappear from the sight of the camera. The meaning of the bus station as a place of arrival gets a new emphasis. There is no real arrival. It is only the place of transit. The journey ends here, and the passengers slide out of the pictures, out of the frame. Only the story of the polygamist is narrated to the end before the TGV Express leaves again to Dakar, with women on the way to a conference about feminism. Alone the drug dealer boards the bus again for the way back. The travel stays an episode. We see an extract, which does not claim to be representative.

Conclusion

The oral told history of many African villages begins with the dangers and adventures, which their founders underwent “en route” on the way to the

present-day village (cf. van Dijk/Foeken/van Til 2001:14). *TGV-Express* queues itself in this tradition. Especially the West African cinema often incorporates itself in the context of oral tradition. Interesting is the film in regard of a culture in movement, in which the bus transports stories as well as histories. In doing so, traveling plays a crucial role. *TGV-Express* appears as an initiation travel of a continent, which wants to lay aside its faults like drugs, corruption or the oppression of women. The bus community stands together and learns to accept each other to reach the destination. The travel becomes to an inner travel of alteration.

Other forms of travel are less important. The tourism threatens the own culture from outside, and research expeditions are viewed with a lack of understanding. There is no recapture of the landscape through pictures or fixation of landmarks or geographic attributes on a map. The images of the film serve the transportation of stories. This reflects the self-conception of an oral culture. The culture creates an African identity (cf. Diawara 1992:159-160).

Let us return to our starting point of the examination of traveling in African cinema. The African film shows us many variations of travel motivations on the continent in the African point-of-view. Liberation- and anti-colonial films try to give the landscape a patriotic feeling. Panafrican movies present an Africa across borders, in which the ideas of identity are embodied through culture. The search for the history, for the traditions and values of an African society, as well as the integration of the role of magic, is in many cases associated with traveling. Especially, we discover that travel and movement are essential parts of a culture. Like de Bruijn, van Dijk und Foeken have noticed: A bus is a microcosm of African Life.

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