The village of their dreams

Kabaté, a hamlet in the west of Mali, lives by its migrants. A story of success - with a definite end

By Charlotte Wiedemann

After the rain, the Sahel zone has a volatile charm with a green so intense it blinds the eye because the rest of the year all they see is yellow land burnt by drought. This is the North West of Mali, flat barren land. Here, for half a century young men have packed their bags in the first light of morning, and set out to seek work in other parts of the world. Because that was what one did… and because the green is ever fading for an increasingly drier yellow. On the horizon the silhouette of the village Kabaté: two Minarets and a water tank. A donkey cart driven by children rumbles towards us. Then the first men approach wearing wide flowing robes called Bubus. We stop. You can't simply turn up in a Malian village you have to respect the traditions, introduce yourself, explain your reason for coming, first to the Elders, the authorities. The faces of the men light up when we tell them we want to write a report about the contribution of migrants to the development of the village. In Kabaté almost everyone over 50 is a former migrant.

Ibrahima Traore has been working on the field, he brushes the dust off his striped Bubu. His rural appearance is deceptive; Traoré has been mayor for several years his demeanor almost worldly against rural backdrop of mud huts and clay roads. Without hesitation he moves a few plastic chairs into the courtyard and starts to talk in perfect French about financing their own development package by working in other counties.

He was 17 when he left Kabaté in 1967. Almost all his peers from the village went to Paris legally. The economy in France as well as in Germany was booming, foreign workers were needed. In May 1968 in Paris Traoré was already immersed in the hubub of the great strike – a Black dustman who only spoke broken French. "It was like an initiation. We knew nothing about the the world". Later he worked in factories, became an electrician. "The work climate was good, there was little hostility. We Africans were welcome". A comment from a completely different era, long forgotten – for a moment it hangs in the air accompanied by a coarse cry of a village donkey.

Traoré came back in 1988 with a head full of ideas. He had worked in France for 21 years and like almost all other Malians he had sent whatever money he could spare back to his home village. He founded his own organisation to further development so that the money from the migrants could be invested directly into the future of Kabaté and its neighboring villages. "The most important things were water and education," he says. So they dug wells, dammed the nearby river, built a small school, and campaigned to teach literacy skills to women. A small Health Centre opened a few miles away where the women of the surrounding villages can come to give birth.

Later Traoré managed to get support from other sponsors. The German banking group Kreditanstalt fuer Wiederaufbau (KfW) for instance helped with the supply of drinking water but the migrants had to put the money upfront.

The small school in Kabaté is now called the "Old School". It stands between fields of maize and sorghum and consists of two classrooms with a corrugated metal roof. This is how education started in the village in the early 90's. The money for the building of the school was raised by migrants who when they were children themselves had to walk for hours to get to the nearest

school. For the first time girls were allowed to attend classes. The “Old School” has now been replaced by a bigger school with six classrooms, again mainly financed by migrants. Of the six teachers three are paid by the Malian government, the other three are paid by the village – and that means the money from the migrants.

Two thirds of Kabaté’s 4,000 inhabitants rely on the aid that is sent from abroad. Africans don’t have a passion for statistics so all numbers that are given out have an element of inaccuracy – the bare village office of Kabaté being no exception. The village is still without electricity so all documents are hand-written, a cardboard-box covered with dust is marked “Archive”. Currently there are 200 people “out there”, says the village clerk, it sounds as if they were at sea. 200 is less than in the past, it has become difficult to get a visa. According to the clerk those 200 pay the taxes for everyone in the village as well as the school fees.
Special occasions are also paid for by the migrants, for instance at the celebration at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan there is food for all – even for the families who have no relatives abroad.

Once a month, or at least every other month someone from France comes to visit. He brings money, Money for all. 7000 or 8000 Euros in cash in a bag strapped to his body. The messenger doesn’t get any sleep during the overnight-flight to Mali, not even during the eight-hour bus ride to the village. In the bag is a list of names and amounts stating how much money people will get. This way bank charges are avoided especially the high commissions of transfer agencies such as Western Union. Last year 122 million Euros have been sent home from Europe by the Malians and people from other African countries – more than the official development aid. And unlike the official aid the money from the migrants reaches the people at home directly without loss because of corruption along the way. The Malians in France are known for their well-functioning collective structures. The money that is transferred to Kabaté uses a network of people with a high level of trust called “Marenkafo”, a word from the Soninke language meaning the closest fraternal bond. In the village or in Kayes which is the nearest town, some old people have been going into a store for years without ever paying. They take rice, cooking oil, sugar, salt, and everything is settled by the son in France through a middleman. The old people often don’t know how much these things cost, they have hardly any idea how expensive the rice has become in the past twelve months, how much more their son in Europe now has to work and save for it.

Moussa Konaté spent 32 years in France. Now he is retired, a sick man with a bloated face returning home. 32 years he has washed clothes in laundries and plates in restaurants. He speaks with self-respect and passion about this time even though the talking is very tiring for him. When he left the village for the first time there had been three very bad rainy seasons in a row leaving the village with hardly any harvest. “Being a migrant was never easy,” he says, “but compared to today it was much easier then. Europe used to be more open. Today, everything is blocked. They don’t like the Muslims anymore”. He receives a pension of about 600 euros which feeds the extended family, more than 35 people. “This is what it’s like for most pensioners here,” says Moussa Konaté and then he is silent, exhausted.

Many have left Kabaté maybe for three years or for three decades – but no matter how bad the drought, giving up the village never crossed their mind. The men always came back. Maybe after working on the peanut fields in Senegal for a season, maybe at the end of their working life like Moussa Konaté. The survival of the village is crucial, especially for the ones “out there”. They want to think of their village, want to see it in their dreams, want to be proud of it and therefore be proud of themselves.

The thoughts of the many people back home make those that have gone far away feel stronger

– and some even feel curiously protected.

The men in Kabaté don’t like to talk about all this. Older people from Mali don’t show what they feel inside, certainly not to strangers. No matter how many years they have spent in foreign countries back at home the patriarchal structure has survived at least in the public life of the village.

Many men only saw their families during the holidays, fathered a child, saw the child for the first time on their next holiday. Sending money also compensated lost family time. For years two or three people shared a place to sleep in a migrant hostel in the Parisian suburb of Montreuil which the Malians call their “second capital” while their prestige in the village grew.

There are different ways to better your reputation. To look after the village is one way, to build a big mosque is another. To give everything just to the family so they can show off with the most magnificent new building in the village? In Kabaté a second mosque has already been built by migrants. The first one was a collective effort but the new mosque was solely financed by four brothers, its high minarets are visible from a long way away. It did not please everyone in the village that one family is now monopolising the religious prestige.

The painter Mahmadou Kébé earnt the money to start up his business in Cameroon. Now he paints the new buildings of the families of his fellow migrants in bright colours, generously decorated with large flowers, sometimes animals, and quite often an aircraft. The painter gladly accompanies us in his white overalls through the village, guides us here and there to show off his works: “Look at my art!” Now his children have also started painting. One of his sons has made a mural with a kind of disco scene, you can see a singer with microphone – in a village without electricity. The youth of Kabaté grew up with pictures of aircraft and visits from the money couriers of their fathers. Now it dawns on the boys that they have no chance to gain the same prestige as their fathers did. The doors are closing – our village in the Kayes Region in the North-West of Mali mirrors European migration policy. Previously Malians from other parts of the country moved here especially in order to get the sought after migration papers from this region renown for migration. The embassy knew they only want to migrate in order to work. Today it is the opposite: When someone comes from Kayes the embassy is suspicious: Careful, they want to migrate in order to work!

So the story of the village of Kabaté which could have been a story with a happy ending does not have a happy ending after all. How are the young people in the village supposed to understand that a system that has been beneficial to all involved is coming to a sudden end in front of their very eyes? We managed to talk to some of them outside a kiosk in Kabaté. None of the old people are nearby to overhear our conversation. The kiosk is decorated with pictures from Mekka. Religion is becoming more and more important for the youngsters. They seem torn. At first they praise the school, the water-well, the waterpipes, the achievements of the village as would be expected from them. The next moment they bitterly admit: “There’s nothing here for us”. They think about leaving, leaving for good. Mali doesn’t have a coast but the coast of Mauritania isn’t far away. Here the boats go off into the land of dreams and tragedies of the so-called illegal migration.

Our departure from the village is like our arrival. Customs demand to meet the Chief of the village. The Chief of the village is the traditional leader, a man with a stick and fogged glasses and a number of grandchildren – he himself unsure as to how many. He was also a migrant once – but, alas, only for nine short months. Then the message from his family reached him in Paris: He had to come home to take on the hereditary role of Chief. This was now 40 years ago. A wave of regret passes behind his clouded glasses. The old man still lives in a house made of

rammed earth. He is surrounded by the owners of new colourful buildings with aircraft painted on them. His neighbours give him a nod, respectful and benevolent. Did he not opt for the love of the village and the traditions? The young of the village, they will have to cultivate their love for the village. While the green of the Sahel zone is ever fading for an increasingly drier yellow.

Source: Publik, 2008