

ROSTOV-LUANDA

Notes for Viewing the Film

Before the film . . .

Read the essay on [Rostov-Luanda](#).

Rostov-Luanda is a film about disillusionment and the recovery of a kind of hope. To understand the origins of this disillusionment we must briefly remind ourselves of the expectations that came with African independence. Not surprisingly, young African intellectuals were predisposed to believe that as soon as the evil of colonialism was uprooted, African states would start a process of rapid economic and political development. They underestimated the economic and cultural damage done by the colonial regimes, and the fact that their countries, though politically independent, remained increasingly dependent on a global capitalist economy. Perhaps even more significantly, African states attempted to develop almost overnight the type of political institutions, civic society, and sense of nationhood, which it took centuries to evolve in Europe. The numerous political and economic setbacks which African states have faced since liberation - whether of indigenous or foreign origin - necessarily tarnished the overly optimistic hopes originally associated with independence.

African independence was also made more difficult because it occurred in the shadow of Cold War politics. The U.S. often supported right-wing authoritarian regimes because it feared that the popular opposition would side with the Communist camp; this, of course, guaranteed that the opposition would turn for arms and assistance to the Soviet Bloc. The Soviets invited many young Africans to be trained in their country with the skills useful for development. At the same time, they attempted to win converts to Communism among these future leaders; Sissako, for example, studied film in Rostov-on-Don. The collapse of the Soviet bloc and the repudiation of socialist economics put left-wing intellectuals in the difficult position of opposing capitalism but having no viable economic alternative. Thus both independence and socialism failed to provide an adequate vision for Africa's post-colonial development. The resulting disillusionment even received a name, "Afro-pessimism," the notion that Africa was so maimed by history that it would never become a truly autonomous, technologically advanced continent. This feeling found eloquent expression in such films as Djibril Diop Mambety's [Hyenas](#) or Flora Gomes' [Udju Azul di Yonta](#).

Few countries in Africa have had a more dismal post-independence history than Angola. After years of guerrilla war, the left-wing military coup in Lisbon in 1974 (the "Revolution of the Carnations"), Portuguese authority was precipitously withdrawn from Angola. At that time there were three separate independence movements, none of which controlled the whole country. The MPLA, led by Augustino Neto, was supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba, which eventually sent ground troops to fight the war after a South African invasion. UNITA, led by Jonas Savimbi and associated primarily with the Ovimbundu ethnic group received support from China and was ultimately supported by

South Africa and the U.S. Finally the FNLA, led by Holden Roberto, was supported by some Western forces (and, some said, the CIA,) and based in Zaire. Of the three, the MPLA probably had the best claim to form a national government since its membership came from urbanized, Portuguese speaking people from all the nation's ethnic groups and had been in the forefront of the independence struggle.

The civil war between these factions has raged on and off since 1975. Even after the U.S. and South Africa shifted their support to a more pliant, post-Marxist MPLA government in Luanda, UNITA has been able to continue the bloodshed by selling diamonds found in abundance in their territory. As a result of these 25 years of civil war, what little the Portuguese left behind has been destroyed. The country is littered with landmines and paraplegics have become a familiar site on its streets. Subsistence farming is the source of livelihood for 85% of the population, but unemployment and underemployment affects more than half of the population particularly in the few urban areas where this film is set. If one wants a test case for the future of Africa, Angola surely is the most challenging.

Sissako does not make any pretense that his film is about all of Angola but only *his* Angola, the Angola which touched him. Viewers should notice that the film is focused on urban centers like Luanda and Huambo and generally confines itself to the Portuguese speaking minority of comparatively well-educated Angolans. Similarly these are the areas where there is a much higher percentage of *mestiços*, people of mixed Portuguese and African heritage, perhaps explaining their prominence in the film. Many Angolans, of course, still live in traditional communities little changed by the colonial experience.

Rostov-Luanda is the only documentary in the Ubuntu Video Club collection, but it is a documentary with a distinct difference. Most viewers will be familiar with documentaries whose primary interest is their subject matter - to which, of course, they bring their particular point of view. In contrast, *Rostov-Luanda* is a personal documentary, so the focus shifts to the filmmaker's changing relationship to his material, here to his loss and recovery of faith in Africa. Viewers therefore should not expect to find an unambiguous political argument or uniform point of view in this film but the filmmaker wrestling with his doubts and only partially overcoming them. Some will find Sissako's own resolution of the problem unsatisfying, impractical or overly subjective. The important thing to notice is that he no longer roots the solution in abstract ideology or grandiose movements but in the personal resilience of ordinary Africans leading their ordinary lives.

Rostov-Luanda is one of a number of personal documentaries by younger African directors in the Library of African Cinema collection, most notably: *La vie sur terre*, also by Sissako, *Allah Tantou* by David Achkar, and *Afrique, je te plumerai* and *Chef!* by Jean-Marie Teno. These directors, who have lived almost entirely in the post-independence era, no longer feel the need to speak as the single, authoritative voice of Africa. While obviously deeply engaged with their continent, they speak as individual Africans encountering Africa through their own individuality and inventing their own unique version of contemporary Africanness.

After the Film . . .

1. The premise of *Rostov-Luanda* is that the director, Abderrahmane Sissako, has gone to Angola in search of a long-lost friend from his student days, Baribanga. Do you find this premise convincing? If not literally to find Baribanga, why do you think he went to Angola and what might the country represent for him?
2. *Rostov-Luanda* is very much a film about returning home; but it begins with Sissako leaving his boyhood home of Kiffa in Mauritania. After seeing the film, would you suspect that Sissako is living in Paris or has returned to Kiffa? (He is living in Paris making film exclusively about Africa.) What do you make of Sissako's answer to his uncle's question about why he is going on to Angola, that his destiny is to travel, to be an adventurer. Can rootlessness be a source of identity as well? Could Sissako say that he had returned to Africa because he now accepted Africa on its own terms? In what sense can going home sometimes mean returning to someplace unfamiliar?
3. Sissako's interview with the young woman sitting in the black chair is given special emphasis because it both begins and concludes the Angolan section of the film. Who do you imagine she is? (A former MPLA militant now holding a professional position.) Do you find her a persuasive voice for Afro-pessimism? Why do you think she stayed?
4. In this film, we meet a cross-section of Angolans whose lives have been uprooted by the war: an orphan, a taxi driver, a tailor, an alcoholic mechanic, a schoolteacher, a businessman and a building contractor. All are trying to make their future in Angola but what do you think their reasons are for staying?
5. One character is the older woman who people thought was paralyzed by the war, but began to dance when she heard music from her youth. How does she come to be Sissako's ultimate symbol for Angola itself?
6. The ulterior motive of *Rostov-Luanda* was to find Baribanga. But when Sissako finally tracks him down in the former East Berlin, we are quite deliberately given no more than a glimpse of him. Why does the film end just when it seems to have reached its goal? Could Sissako already have found in Angola whatever he had been looking for in Baribanga?
7. What does Sissako mean when he says, "I heard him (Baribanga) pronounce in the language we learned together in the name of an old illusion, the word 'return' just like an accomplishment." What was the language? (Russian) What was the old illusion? (Communism) Do you think it's possible to make changes without some kind of ideology? Is there a sense in which it can sometimes be an accomplishment to return to the beginning, without benefit of ideology or presuppositions, simply with a renewed commitment to explore the possibilities of reality?
8. Do you find *Rostov-Luanda* sentimental, inspiring or both? Do you think the people in the film are more optimistic and resilient than other people or is this a rationalization for minimizing Africans' suffering over the centuries?

Country facts in brief:

ANGOLA

Location: Southern Africa, bordering the South Atlantic Ocean, between Namibia and Democratic Republic of the Congo

Capital: Luanda

Independence: November 11, 1975 (from Portugal)

Population: 10,864,512 (1998)

Ethnic groups: Ovimbundu 37%, Kimbundu 25%, Bakongo 13%, mestiço (mixed European and African) 2%, European 1%, other 22%

Languages: Portuguese (official), Bantu and other African languages (Kimbundu, Umbundu and Kikongo)

Economy/Labor: Subsistence agriculture 85%, industry, mining and services 15%

GDP per capita: \$800 (1996)