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## Adanggaman

**Roger Gnoan M'bala**

IVORY COAST, 2000

90 minutes ■ Colour/35mm

Production Company: **Amka Films Productions S.A.**

Producer: **Tiziana Soudani**

Screenplay: **Jean-Marie Adiaffi, Bertin Akaffou, Roger Gnoan M'Bala**

Cinematographer: **Mohammed Soudani**

Editor: **Monika Goux**

Production Designer: **Jean-Baptiste Lerro, Jean-Francois, Fernand Toba Koutouan**

Sound: **Jean-Pierre Fenie**

Music: **Louka Kanza**

Principal Cast: **Rasmane Ouedraogo, Albertine N'Guesan, Ziable Honore Goore**

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A film as powerful and intriguing as it is controversial, *Adanggaman* courageously exposes the untold story of slavery in Africa and the despotic rulers who fed the transatlantic slave trade. This subject is so taboo and painful that even the griot, the keeper and teller of the people's history, leaves such episodes out of the collective memory.

Director Roger Gnoan M'bala is recognized for speaking the unspoken, and this time he tells the African story of slavery, warts and all. It is a film of historical fiction that is designed to tug at the collective conscience of humanity rather than to apportion blame.

Every period of conflict around the world has had its collaborators, and in this story, it is the ruthless, despotic King Adanggaman who terrorizes and enslaves his neighbours. He does so with the help of an army of female warriors, the amazons. Although slavery provides the framework for this story, the narrative focuses on Ossei and his desire to marry against tradition, then on his love for Mo Akassi, one of the amazons who enslaves him and captures his heart.

Village life co-exists in the shadows of tyranny, and the presence of the European traders in this scenario is alluded to but not made explicit. They provide the commercial rationale for the greedy tyrannical rulers to flourish, but their stories have been told elsewhere. Here, the African experience of slavery is emphasized, and the resonances of that period for parts of present-day Africa are starkly present.

Some of the most striking qualities of this film are its poetic choreography and tableaux, which effectively set off the brutality of slavery. Despite the horrific images of branding, chaining, beating and humiliation, the film restores the humanity of the characters and preserves their sense of hope for survival. *Adanggaman* is a disturbing and provocative mix of political comment and emotional drama that compels us to face uncomfortable truths about the African holocaust.

■ **June Givanni**

**Roger Gnoan M'Bala** was born in the Ivory Coast in 1941. His filmmaking career spans almost 30 years. M'Bala made three shorts before his first feature *Le chapeau* (75). Ten years and a few shorts later, he released his second film, *Ablakon* (85). *Bouka* (88) was followed by the award-winning *Au Nom du Christ* (93), and his latest film *Adanggaman* (00).

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and awkward encounters in the park. We have a fine funeral, at which Mme. Verdurin (Marie-France Pisier) ruptures the Gallic pomp by complaining of a dropped earring; as the mourners peer and poke at the sacred ground, we are reminded how briskly Proust could bring himself to violate the very decorum that earned his pedantic respect. Ruiz's film, for all its loveliness, is like an antidote to costume drama; why else would his arrangements of furniture and foliage glide and shove so weirdly within the frame, if not to puncture the settled plush of the genre, and to hint that the beau monde, like its favorite possessions, is little more than an elegant prop to be dragged in and out of the wings? Far from being inveigled into the hauteur of that world, we are encouraged to view its noble protagonists as poor players who strut and fret their hours—their whole lifetimes—upon the stage. When they strike attitudes, Ruiz holds them fast; early in the movie, a crowd of onlookers is suddenly stilled, with their faces caked in white powder, while they watch the young narrator at play—as if everyone present were preparing to be a statue in his imaginary museum. Watching the movie again, I wondered whether all of it unfolds within the cranium of the expiring Proust, whether his bedroom is as much a greenhouse of memory as Charles Foster Kane's, and whether Gilberte, like the other young girls in flower, is just one of his innumerable Rosebuds.

"Time Regained" may be a French production of the greatest of French novels, but somehow the Frenchness doesn't swamp you; the ludic Ruiz is a Chilean, his Proust is an Italian, and his Charlus is an American, John Malkovich. In fact, Proust has been served more widely and respectably by the movies than you would think—far more so than Henry James, say, who at first blush would seem to be twice as filmable. The German director Percy Adlon made "*Céleste*," a dazzling sidelight on genius, with Eva Mattes as the author's devoted servant. Another German, Volker Schlöndorff, went to the

front of the novel and came up with "Swann in Love": hardly an unqualified success, but braced by the stiff, stricken glamour of Alain Delon. His Charlus makes for an alluring comparison with Malkovich's; the Frenchman is numb with tragedy, the American more amused and fetishistic—observing his fellow-diners with a mirror concealed inside his top hat, and refusing to allow his appetites, however jaded, to die in the mouth of time.

If Ruiz's Proust is not as wrenching as the original, it compensates with the elastic reach of its comedy, and its unpredictable patchwork of shadows. Non-Proustians, who may have been put off by the silken, somewhat feminine reputation of the book, will be surprised by the violence of the film. It is all there in Proust, but you tend to hear less about it: the air-raid sirens moaning over the restaurant, or the Croix de Guerre left on the floor of a male brothel, where the sheets are sauced with blood from a recent whipping. Why on earth, you might ask, should we bother with the scandals and satisfactions of this ruinous crowd, the kind of people who demand "strawberries in ether," when Ruiz shows us newsreel footage of the First World War, in which thousands were dying every day? It is not enough to claim that Ruiz brings Proust to life; rather, the film confirms our suspicion that Proust brings us back to life—that, in its son et lumière of minute sensations, "Time Regained" echoes the heed that he paid to the stage directions of ordinary existence. Listen for the rattle of Mme. Verdurin's jewelry (a little too much, like the rest of her), the tap of spoon on teacup, and the repellent sound of Saint-Loup, back from the front, chewing militantly through his steak. These are not the things that history will remember us by, if it remembers us at all; but the asthmatic Proust, forever short of breath, knew that we would remember them at our last gasp. He was not fond of the cinema; but if he, and not merely his work, were alive today, he might well change his mind. ♦

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