

African Movie Confronts African Complicity in Slave Trade

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"Adanggaman" confronts African complicity in slave trade

Editor's note –

The very first thought that comes to mind is when I stepped foot into my first university class on American history. I remember that experience to this day. I was an A student in high school, took everything they could throw at me, and was an honor student, so all that stuff was firmly in my head. In the very first hour, my American history professor in my freshman year told me in essence that everything I had learned in high school was rubbish, and we went from there to dig out the truth. The same is happening here.

Of course Africans were intimately involved in the slave trade. They still are today, and the motives are much the same--money, power and greed. We know whites are involved in enslaving other whites, that Hispanics enslave Hispanics, Asians enslave Asians, and that they each enslave the other. The issue is not so much what race is more or less to blame, the issue is that such a trade went on at all and that it still goes on today. It does not matter whether it's a white guy, a black guy, or an Arab guy who is involved, they are all criminals and need to be pursued, arrested, prosecuted and punished. Those involved on the periphery, same thing. This is the international rule of law, and we need to enforce it. Bravo to Roger Ngoan M'bala for sending out that message!

Adanggaman was produced in Côte d'Ivoire and directed by the Ivorian, Roger Ngoan M'bala. It has been shown in Toronto, Vienna and Ougadougou, the latter at the Fespaco Film Festival, Africa's version of Cannes. M'bala, criticized for raising the African complicity in the slave trade, responds, "Slavery is a wound that nobody talks about. Nobody. So we have to. Now that we have a powerful tool like cinema, we cannot keep quiet... Europeans could not have taken hold on a continent like Africa and stolen the strongest of our children if there had not been collaborators." Given the recent deluge of reports about the child slave trade in West Africa, the topic remains current and hot.

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The African slave trade is always on the minds of many Americans, and recently has shown its ugly face along the Bight of Benin with allegations of a Nigerian ship carrying child slaves for sale. Arabs holding and selling black African slaves has long been a hot

topic when viewing Sudan. Suffice to say that the slave trade is alive and well in Africa and elsewhere.

It is with this in mind that we noted a controversial African film produced in Côte d'Ivoire, entitled **Adanggaman**. It created quite a stir at the recent Fespaco Film Festival in Ougadougou, Burkina Faso, which is the African version of the Cannes Film Festival.

Isabella Matambanadzo reported for Reuters that the movie is about an "elite (African) army running slave raids for King Adanggaman, a powerful African monarch who seizes villagers to sell to European slave traders."

So this is the other side of what we Americans know as the African slave trade, the side in which Africans themselves were engaged. The film director is Ivorian Roger Ngoan M'bala and he is among those African directors who are courageous enough to take a new look at one of the continent's most painful chapters.

Matambanadzo reported, "As African cinema increasingly becomes a force to be reckoned with, film makers are multiplying efforts to use the big screen to tell stories about their politics and history." M'bala told Reuters, "Slavery is a wound that nobody talks about. Nobody. So we have to. Now that we have a powerful tool like cinema, we cannot keep quiet."

The film has already been screened at the Toronto and Vienna film festivals, and made its African premiere last month at Fespaco, the pan-African film and television festival held every two years in Burkina Faso.

Matambanadzo said that "Adanggaman" pulled large crowds at Fespaco. And the reason is, if you will excuse the expression given the topic, uplifting. Uplifting because Matambanadzo reported that "audiences were so hungry for an alternative approach to the slave narrative than offerings from Hollywood that many could only find space to sit on the floor of packed cinemas."

She added that the film evoked strong emotions, and drew criticism from some who feared the film absolved Europeans of guilt but also drew praise from those who have tired of whites taking all the blame.

Matambanadzo said Namibian documentary producer Ebba Kalondo told Reuters Television, "I wouldn't want white people to watch this film for the very reason that it is made by a black man. I really get the feeling that it's basically saying: 'Oh, but black people imprisoned each other all the time so they were quite ready for you when you came around.'" Of course, we know from the recent reports coming from Benin that black men are still enslaving black men, so this point seems moot.

Journalist Estelle Cornado had a different view, according to Matambanadzo. She said, "White people are always the guilty ones. It may sound a little bit selfish but it's reassuring to see that African film makers have started to acknowledge that history is not that simple."

IPS reported that Leon Da Bourdia, who attended the screening of the film, commented, "This film really fills a gap. It will be a useful tool to help our children understand an episode in our own history." A German film lover who also attended the screening commented, "I was dumbfounded by the attitude of the tyrant, who mistreated and sold his own subjects. But what can you do? That's what happened and we've got to accept it."

Whichever side you take, the director seems to have the most balanced perspective, saying, "It (slave trade) affects us. It's our history. We are the great victims. Three centuries of slave trade — we're talking of 280 million people, from Angola to Senegal. Where we are standing now, we're not far from the Atlantic. Slaves have certainly been shipped from here. We should never forget. Forgiving is one thing, but we should never forget."

The film has evoked debate about how it will affect the drive by some to seek reparations for the slave trade. Rodrigue Barry, a member of the Fespaco jury said, "It's altogether reasonable to demand reparations, since we know that the people who have suffered most in history have always been compensated. We're going to protest, but what do you think we'll get when there's the general feeling out there that Africans don't count for a lot on this planet? In fact, it's as if blacks were created to be the whipping boys of history."

M'balla retorted that demanding reparations from countries where slavery was practiced constituted an "ambiguous debate" because of the role some Africans themselves played in the trade. He said, "If there's compensation, should the seller or the buyer be held accountable? And it would have to be those who were taken away and sold who deserve the compensation, because some Africans who stayed colluded with the European traders. Europeans could not have taken hold on a continent like Africa and stolen the strongest of our children if there had not been collaborators."

Mafarma Sanogo, a journalist who organized the forums and debates on the films shown during the festival, seemed to agree, saying, "After having seen the film, we would embarrass ourselves to ask for reparations. We've just seen how slavery was not caused only by white traders, but that it existed even before the arrival of the whites. The Negro kings, who enslaved other black people, made the bondage of their own sons possible in the New World. Who is it we can compensate today?"

Adanggaman, which cost \$2 million, was a co-production of Burkina, Italy, Switzerland, Côte d'Ivoire, and France. The film starred Rasmane Ouedraogo, Albertine

N'Guessan, Ziable Honore Goore, and Bintou Bakayoko. It was produced by Tiziana Soudani of Côte d'Ivoire, the French screenplay was done Jean-Marie Adiaffi, Bertin Akaffou, and Roger Gnoan M'Bala, with the music produced by Louka Kanza. Five African languages were spoken in the film, although Fespaco's copy was subtitled in French. An English version is currently in preparation.

Adanggaman means "spiritual power", and was filmed in Marahoue National Park in central Côte d'Ivoire. And by the way, the film was fictional, though the director says it is "genuine."

He lamented that the film has not made much money, saying locals prefer to see fast-action American thrillers rather than the slower, well-crafted African style of film.