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Film: *Children of the Mountain*. Priscilla Anany (Dir./Writer), Country: Ghana, 2016. 1h 30 mn.

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Set in colorful landscapes of modern-day Ghana, *Children of the Mountain* (Ghana, 2016) narrates the struggle of a young mother, Essuman (Rukiyat Masud), fighting hard to keep her epileptic child. The father, Ejah (Adjetey Anang), and many neighbors have rejected the child as a materialized “curse”: a curse that the locals see as a divinely-ordered punishment to Essuman’s “sin” of snatching another woman’s man. Essuman’s baby boy, Nuku – played by actress Jessica Dablo – was born with a cleft lip. Fate hits even harder when the father/lover, though happy at the first sight of the newborn’s male sex, chooses to refuse paternity after realizing that the baby’s mouth was deformed. Abandoned by her boyfriend, Essuman endures solitude and temptations to discard her own child.

Two years later, Essuman is struck again, when she learns at Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital (KBTH) that Nuku also carries cerebral palsy and Down syndrome. There, a sympathetic nurse informs her of the child’s possibility to obtain free surgery through one of the medical campaigns held occasionally by foreign-based Ghanaian doctors of the Graft Foundation. Too desperate to wait, however, Essuman chooses to place hope in spiritual-mystical medicine rather than awaiting the professional services of said doctors. At this point, both Essuman and her childhood friend, Asantewaa (Akofa Edjeani Asiedu), have bought into the hostile neighbors’ belief that Essuman was “cursed” and that she bears an “unclean womb.” Essuman’s life becomes one of constant stress as she begins a desperate search for the child’s cure. With Asantewaa, she seeks cure via spiritual purification. They try several traditional and religious practitioners but in the process, Essuman is constantly disappointed and abused. A crooked, traditional pharmacist scams her of 1000 Ghana Cedi at the market. Later, she is lured and ultimately raped by a Christian pastor.

A significant moment in the film’s progression is when Essuman decides to visit Zevor, an elderly man who is a traditional healer living back in her village in Ghana’s Volta Region. This trip is meaningful because it creates two aesthetic shifts in the narrative. On the one hand, the setting moves from city to countryside as Essuman and Asantewaa travel northeast from Accra to the village. New characters and life activities populate the film, exposing the viewer to aspects of contemporary Ghanaian rural life and culture. Additionally, a decisive turn emerges in the plotline. Hitherto desperate, Essuman meets fisherman Gyamfi (Agbeko Mortty). The two show mutual love, and they shyly but surely move toward a promising relationship. Unlike urban womanizer Ejah, Gyamfi is portrayed as the epitome of a caring man. Quite antithetical to Accra’s urban noise and “rot,” the village is also where Essuman regains quietude and finds a symbolic solution to her life problem (Armah). The solution comes not from far-searched old-man healer Zevor, but from the metaphoric words of an old wise woman whom Essuman met while escaping her ‘crime scene’ – the river shore where, again, she has abandoned Nuku for the

second time. Emphasizing the film's eponymous metaphor, the old woman looks into fugitive Essuman's guilty eyes and says:

"There are mountains everywhere. ... They're filled with spirits of the unborn who come out at dawn in search for mothers. ... They say a woman who chews too much kola-nut will give birth to a blind baby. But a baby who is meant to be blind will find itself a mother who chews too much kola. Everybody will blame the mother, yet she's not at fault. Just like you, it's not your fault. You've drunk the poison they fed you. It's not too late to poke your finger in your throat and vomit it... He must live to tell his story."

The words reach deep into Essuman, just as they capture the crux of the film's ubiquitously feminist undertone. A question arises: on what basis does tradition hold the African woman responsible for every misfortune that befalls the couple – be that barrenness, child malformation, or the inability to conceive a male child?

Indeed, this central question is what drives Anany's plotline. The outcome is an activist-feminist narrative aimed at unma(s)king, the masculinist tapestry undergirding marriage-based gender inequity in 'tradition'-backed parts of contemporary Africa. Thus, *Children of the Mountain* joins a category of such African feminist fiction films as Sembène's *Faat Kine* (2000), *Moolaadé* (2006), Moussa Sene Absa's *Madame Brouette* (2002), Joseph Gaï Ramaka's *Karmen Gei* (2001), Dani Kouyaté's *Sia* (2002), Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi's *Sisters in Law* (2006), and even Diamo's short *Softly One Saturday Morning* (2012). These feminocentric films stage anti-patriarchal heroines; in defying traditional normalcies, they carry allegories of a pressing social change.

Further, like some of Sembène's films, *Children of the Mountain* presents a seemingly simple plot, yet technically rich enough to explore several layers of women's subjectivity in Ghana and Africa at large. The portrayal of the double-edged feminist struggle that the characters wage daily against the opportunist husband and the dominant voice of the latent patriarchy provide a glimpse into societal gender dynamics. Yet, although Anany's film is more recent, it hardly distances itself from the stylistic traditions of what Harrow refers to as "first-wave African feminism". Unlike the second wave, this style shows women "caught in the struggle for equality within the rigors of male dominated, heterosexual, sexist, masculinist economy" (p. 19). Clearly, Essuman's struggle to free herself from the patriarchy's suffocating "poison" is evidence of how the film remains framed within a masculinist historicism. Despite this pattern of creative monotony, however, *Children of the Mountain* is a great story, whose embodied activist-feminism leaves us to expect more from the young Ghanaian director.

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