

POPULAR MUSIC AS VEHICLE FOR CULTURAL CHANGE INTERVENTION: TAKUN J'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN POST-CONFLICT LIBERIA

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Abstract

Hiring local artists to collaborate on efforts intending to change values and alter behavior is an approach used by aid organizations in international development. Soft-power campaigns targeting local attitudes are often seen by the development institution as positive collaborations between foreign humanitarians and local artists. "Song for Hawa," a 2013 collaboration between Liberian artist/rapper Takun J, and the international NGO PCI Media Impact, is a cultural diplomacy campaign intending to engage Liberians about the difficult topic of child rape. This paper discusses concerns with this instrumental approach to culture in development, and difficulties with the impact evaluation of using art to affect social change.

Keywords: cultural diplomacy, international development, instrumentalization, Liberia, impact evaluation

"Song for Hawa," a 2013 song written and performed by Liberian colloquial-English rapper Takun J (Jonathan Koffa) with support from the international NGO PCI Media Impact, is a pop/rap song, a video, a story, and a message, self-described as *entertainment-education*.¹ It is an instrumental use of culture intended to influence behaviors and attitudes towards the practice

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¹ Koffa, Jonathan (2013), "Song for Hawa," Liberia, PCI Media Impact, [<http://mediaimpact.org/song-for-hawa/>], accessed 29 November 2013.

of child rape. This paper will look at reasons why this case is a good application of the emerging term *cultural diplomacy*. It also examines the difficulties in measuring and proving any immediate impact as well as possible negative consequences for Liberian artists from such instrumentalization-of-art in service of development goals. These worries must be dealt with when trying to determine: is this sort of cultural diplomacy a good idea in humanitarian development?

Defining Cultural Diplomacy

The word *cultural* refers here not only to the intervention itself being an art product (delivered in varying formats as an audio recording, a video, and a live performance). The attempt to educate and influence behavior is itself *cultural* in approach. It communicates via an exchange of ideas, values, and traditions through storytelling and narrative example. It is more sophisticated than an imperative or instructional approach. It hopes to encourage dialogue on a subject difficult subject.

Diplomacy usually is associated with international relations. The second meaning, however, is that *diplomacy* is "skill in dealing with people without offending or upsetting them."² Non-state actors such as trans-national organizations, corporations, communities, institutions, and even individuals can be said to engage in diplomacy (as well as propaganda, informational diplomacy,³ etc.): "Cultural diplomacy is not restricted to nation states."⁴

Since the topic of child rape can be difficult and uncomfortable for Liberians to speak openly about, "Song for Hawa" is an example of raising the topic diplomatically, rather than confrontationally or in an overtly pedagogic manner.⁵ It is a clever approach to a painful topic, and it appeals to a moral view on the topic that the agents believe is a universal view.

² Cambridge Dictionaries Online, s.v. "diplomacy"

[<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/diplomacy>], accessed 29 July 2015.

³ "Informational diplomacy uses the techniques of public relations (and sometimes psychological warfare) while cultural diplomacy is rooted in education and example." Feigienbaum, Harvey (2001), "Globalization and Cultural Diplomacy," *Center for Arts and Culture*, Washington D.C., pp. 30-31).

⁴ Nicolas J. Cull, *The National Theatre of Scotland's Black Watch: Theatre as Cultural Diplomacy*, USC Center on Public Diplomacy and the British Council, 2008, p. 12.

⁵ Due to space, the actual text of the song will not be examined here. Lyrics are available where the video is posted at [<http://mediaimpact.org/song-for-hawa/>].

Cultural diplomacy is occurring between Takun J and PCI Media Impact (the agents) and the Liberian populace (the target audience). This encounter could also be viewed symbolically as one between the international community and the Liberian population. To avoid framing the encounter between an international institutional moral code and traditional local ethical standards, it is important to refer specifically to the particular agents and the target audience, rather than symbolic representations.⁶

“Song for Hawa” is designed to pull the target audience towards the agents’ cultural agenda. It believes emotional reaction will “inspire behaviors much more powerfully than direct appeals for change.”⁷ It is hoped that the audience will be moved to examine their own values after hearing Takun J tell the story of the rape of a young girl. It is a work of musical literature that listeners will interpret differently. The term *cultural diplomacy* is appropriate and useful in identifying this sort of hybrid between art, pedagogy, and the attempt to appeal to moral views in order to adjust the attitudes and values of its target audience.

Endemic rape in Liberia

Exact figures vary in different reports about rape in Liberia, but the numbers are staggering. A 2012 story in Time Magazine estimated that during the period of civil war 1989-2003 between 60% and 90% of the female population suffered rape.⁸ Nearly all are under eighteen, and many incidents go unreported – often kept quiet as a shameful family matter. 1,475 rapes were reported in 2011 before the campaign began. 90% of victims were under eighteen, half of those were under twelve, and 10% of them

⁶ The sexual assault of children is highly unethical and is unlikely to be defended through an argument involving moral relativism or the importance of preserving local tradition. Cultural diplomacy usually appeals to shared morals, but sometimes it involves one ethical world view or ideology trying to influence or supplant another. Sometimes the ethics are not as clear as in this case. Malevolent cultural diplomacy is possible, as is benevolent propaganda. The term is about the process and technique, rather than whether the ethics are shared.

⁷ PCI Media Impact, “Entertainment-Education.” *PCI Media Impact Website*, [<http://mediaimpact.org/entertainment-education/>], accessed 30 November 2013.

⁸ Almudenta Toral, “History of Violence: Struggling with the Legacy of Rape in Liberia,” *Time Magazine Online*, 30 April, 2012 [<http://world.time.com/2012/04/30/history-of-violence-struggling-with-the-legacy-of-rape-in-liberia/>], accessed 29 November, 2013.

were under four years old. PCI Media Impact's website claims equally ominous figures: "92% of women and girls have experienced rape, 62% of these are under the age of 12, and many are infants."⁹

Agents of cultural diplomacy: PCI Media Impact and Takun J

There are two main agents¹⁰ involved in this campaign.¹¹ An international NGO with its main offices in New York City, "PCI Media Impact is a pioneer and world leader in Entertainment-Education and communications for social change."¹² Their methodology is self-defined:

*Entertainment-Education is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate. This is done to increase audience members' knowledge about an issue, create favorable attitudes, and influence behavior and cultural norms.*¹³

Rather than directly promoting their cultural change agenda as a mandate or instructions, they package it as a story inside an entertaining vehicle, whereby the message is more likely to provoke sympathy, reflection and discussion.

Takun J is the self-proclaimed king of *hipco*, a form of hip-hop/rap music performed in the colloquial dialect of Liberian English. He currently enjoys a considerable following in Liberia, with around ten thousand fans attending a two-day festival he headlined in 2013.¹⁴ In 2007 his song "Policeman Coming" resulted in two arrests and a beating by the Liberian

⁹ PCI Media Impact (2012), "Media Impact celebrates international day of the girl." *PCI Media Impact Website*. December 11, 2012, [<http://mediaimpact.org/news/media-impact-celebrates-international-day-of-the-girl/>], accessed 30 November, 2013.

¹⁰ THINK, a home for victims of sexual abuse, provided the setting for Takun J's meeting with rape survivors which inspired him to write "Song for Hawa." THINK do not play a major role in the campaign, but are important to recognize as the origin of Takun J's creative inspiration. They are not an actor in the cultural diplomacy campaign.

¹¹ Though their name is absent from campaign materials, UNICEF was also involved. The campaign is also part of their End Violence Against Children initiative. Requests made to PCI Media Impact for evaluation data were referred to UNICEF.

¹² PCI Media Impact (2012), "Media Impact celebrates international day of the girl."

¹³ PCI Media Impact, "Entertainment-Education"

¹⁴ Ashoka Mukpo, "'Hipco' Is the Soundtrack of Monrovia's Post-War Youth," *Vice*, March 31, 2014, [http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/hipco-liberia], accessed 29 July 2015.

national police.¹⁵ On the evening of June 17, 2013, Takun J was allegedly assaulted by Edwin M. Snowe, a member of the Liberian House of Representatives, following a near-collision in Monrovia traffic.¹⁶ Takun J draws attention to his problems with the government by releasing songs. His recent single "Justice" refers to the incident with Snowe, and several other songs reference government corruption, in particular the song "They Lie."

Takun J seems unafraid to criticize authority figures, even at risk to his freedom and physical well-being. In a country where corruption and dishonesty are major concerns, this image gives him an authenticity that very few public figures enjoy. The voice of Takun J distinguishes this particular vehicle of expectant cultural change from other less-remarkable examples of cultural and informational diplomacy. A cultural figure who is in possession of such significant embodied cultural capital is a valuable asset when trying to spread any message. In the context of a population struggling with deep mistrust of government,¹⁷ the potency of this value seems indisputable. The relatively high quality of the song and video production can become apparent when viewed alongside other examples of cultural change campaigns in Liberia.¹⁸

Agenda and Evaluation

The agenda of the "Song for Hawa" campaign as stated on the PCI Media Impact website is to "address and try to reduce the high rates of sexual violence in the country."¹⁹ The project is designed to influence both

¹⁵ Jonathan Koffa, "Takun J bio," *ReverbNation*, date unknown, [<https://www.reverbnation.com/takunj>], accessed 29 July 2015.

¹⁶ Mae Azango, "He Almost Got Me Killed' - Rep. Snowe Accused of Assaulting Hipco Star Takun J," *Front Page Africa*, June 19, 2013, [<http://allafrica.com/stories/201306191070.html>], accessed 29 July 2015.

¹⁷ See Ashoka Mukpo, "Surviving Ebola: Public Perceptions of Governance and the Outbreak Response in Liberia", *International Alert*, 2015 [http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Liberia_SurvivingEbola_EN_2015.pdf], 28 July 2015.

¹⁸ In Liberia these campaign messages can often be seen on billboards with imperatives such as "Stop Rape," "Report Corruption," and "Wash Your Hands." Over the last few years there are also several examples of artists being hired by humanitarian development organizations to produce songs. Ebola awareness songs are a recent example.

¹⁹ PCI Media Impact, "Song for Hawa Music Video" *PCI Media Impact Website*, [<http://mediaimpact.org/song-for-hawa/>], accessed 30 July 2015.

attitudes and behavior. Attitudes must be measured with surveys, whereas behavior can be examined through other indicators. Requests for evaluation data from PCI Media Impact and UNICEF unfortunately yielded no results. The 2014 Ebola epidemic led to a suspension of the End Violence Against Children campaign.

Indicators about Liberian attitudes towards child rape could be created (e.g. attitudes towards discussion on the topic, victim shaming, etc.). Such an evaluation of people's values and attitudes is more in line with what Belfiore and Bennett refer to as a "humanities-based approach" to program evaluation, an approach not currently in favor with the evidence-based indicators favored in development.²⁰ This sort of survey-based research is expensive, difficult to conduct, and must be started before the campaign begins. Attitudes are also always subject to change by countless other environmental variables. For now, we can only examine existing rape statistics.

Outcomes

Takun J's manager Nora Rahimian was enthusiastic with preliminary qualitative anecdotal data: "people are talking about rape more, even when Takun J does non-related interviews. Or the guys around him will say things like 'it not right' when violence against women comes up."²¹The Government of Liberia was quick to notice "Song for Hawa" and the Ministry of Gender and Development named him the country's Anti-Rape Ambassador in 2013. This is both affirming and surprising, given Takun J's multiple songs referencing government corruption.

I was later informed that rape victims began coming to Takun J directly to report rape to him. The campaign resonates with most development workers I have spoken with as particularly well-executed. These anecdotal reports are encouraging. However, as much as most people I have spoken with seem to feel the song performs its function extremely well, this is quite different than being able to demonstrate a shift in societal values.

²⁰ Eleonora Belfiore; Oliver Bennett, "Beyond the 'Toolkit Approach': Arts Impact Evaluation Research and the Realities of Cultural Policy-Making," *Journal for Cultural Research* 14, no. 2, 2010, pp. 121-42.

²¹ Nora Rahimian, email interview, 24 October, 2013.

When looking at the rape reporting statistics, the hope is that reports would go up, indicating more willingness of victims and their families to come forward. Even if actual incidents decreased, the reports should increase, based on an assumption that most rapes go unreported or are handled within the community. Obtaining data from Liberia without a budget or being physically there is extremely difficult. Press reports were the only source for any rape reporting statistics. I was confused to note the following:

YEAR	REPORTED RAPES	CHANGE + / -
2011	1,475	
2013	1,002	-32%
2014	554	-45%

Figure 1 – Annual rape reporting statistics in Liberia.²²

Rape reporting dropped substantially during and after the campaign. Clearly, this data set is problematic and contradicts the assumption that the campaign should have resulted in more reports. I was unable to locate figures for 2012, and 2014 was greatly affected by the ebola outbreak. Though the argument could have been made that the campaign was so hugely successful that actual incidents of rape dropped in addition to the reporting figures, but that would be a questionable assumption. The drop in 2014 is much easier to explain: rapes declined due to a fear of contracting ebola, which is spread through human contact. The ebola outbreak affected both the data itself as well as the ability to conduct research.

Barring any better data to cite, the impression of the song's efficacy is limited to the song's ability to emotionally move the listener (an aesthetic judgment), and impressions formed by listening to peers in Liberia (subjective

²² Sources: Toralop. *cit.*, Press TV (2014), "65% of 2013 Rape Victims in Liberia Were Children," *PressTV.com*, [http://www.presstv.com/detail/2014/01/29/348236/kids-65-of-2013-rape-victims-in-liberia] accessed 30 July 2015. Cholo Brooks, "Gender Ministry Reports 554 Rape Cases in 2014," *GNN Liberia*, 2015, [http://www.gnnliberia.com/articles/2015/01/23/liberia-gender-ministry-reports-554-rape-cases-2014], accessed 30 July 2015.

peer group). In both cases, considering the campaign successful is a subjective, non-scientific estimation, not a rigorous evaluation of whether the song has impacted attitude and behavior. Without any numbers or survey research, however, the judgment that it is a successful campaign has already been made by many. This is based on “the powerful, yet often unacknowledged, role of *values* and deeply-held *beliefs* in the ‘transformative power of the arts’ in policy development and implementation”²³ that cause us to expect/assume that an emotionally moving song has the ability to change opinions. It also can be asked: are aesthetic judgments perhaps good enough for evaluating matters of art and culture? When looking at the drop in rape statistics, it is also a question of framing: rape reports went down because of the campaign, vs. rape reports went down because of ebola.

Until (costly) studies about the attitudes and behavior can do more to scientifically demonstrate an impact on values (and this could still prove elusive), praise of this campaign is limited to the aesthetic appreciation of a well-executed song by a credible voice that emotionally moves the listener, and believing that the anecdotal stories from peers are indicative of a cultural trend. It is premature to speak of the campaign having any real significant effect in the same way that a health study proves its impact on community health outcomes, yet people do constantly make this judgment: “Song for Hawa” has made a difference. We can *feel* that it did a good job, but we cannot claim scientifically that “Song for Hawa” has made any change in attitudes and behavior about child rape in Liberia without further study.

Is it worth questioning that we always expect rigorous and expensive research to confirm aesthetic judgments as in this case? Perhaps expert local opinion might be nearly as effective (and much cheaper) an evaluation technique. The problems with the rape reporting data clearly demonstrate the challenges involved when trying to tie cultural campaigns into empirical outcomes. The evaluation process should not be ignored, of course, but it must be acknowledged that current methods are problematic for measuring the impact of art and culture on attitudes and beliefs.

²³ Belfiore; Bennet, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

Instrumental Concern

Some scholars argue that over-emphasis on instrumental use of art in development causes harm.²⁴ Hiring or collaborating with an artist to communicate a message and influence public opinion is nothing new. "What is new, however, is the transposition of this paradigm into the postcolonial context of development and the emergence of transnational funding for the arts in conditions of highly unequal relations of power."²⁵ Not only is the agency of the artist compromised in unbalanced power dynamic, but funding of art projects becomes reduced to its ability to contribute to project objectives and frameworks.²⁶ A successful outcome reinforces this dependency. An unsuccessful one means less future work.

In Liberia, musicians have very few opportunities for income. Performance fees are normally the only revenue stream. Politicians and companies routinely hire popular artists to perform at events in service of their publicity. While instrumental projects from humanitarian organizations offer a welcome chance for artists to earn an income and work in service of the community, the drawbacks to becoming overly reliant on instrumental systems must be recognized and avoided. Artists need to have opportunities to develop art-for-art's-sake. Non-instrumental opportunities for artists are essential for local artistic identity. While instrumental use of music for development goals is of course not inherently bad and the intentions are always noble, the risk of negative impact exists. Opportunities for instrumental use ought to be a part of a spectrum of income opportunities available to artists. Otherwise, artists are reduced to publicists and spokespeople in service of other voices, rather than authors and performers in command of their own local identity and agency.

²⁴ Instrumental use refers to only valuing artistic culture as means to fulfill other objectives, normally project goals or economic growth. An excellent example is P. Sacco, G. Ferilli, and G. T. Blessi, "Understanding Culture-Led Local Development: A Critique of Alternative Theoretical Explanations," *Urban Studies* 51, no. 13 (October 1, 2014), pp. 2806–21.

²⁵ Polly Stupples, "Creative Contributions: The Role of the Arts and the Cultural Sector in Development", in *Progress in Development Studies* 14, no. 2, 2014, p.123.

²⁶ Singapore is interesting to look at as an example where arts and culture received plenty of funding, but it was heavily focused on a participation in global culture and economic hegemony and local cultural identity suffered. See Lily Kong, "Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas," *Geoforum* 31, no. 4, 2000, pp. 409–24.

Conclusion

“Song for Hawa” is best called an example of (non-state)cultural diplomacy, rather than informational diplomacy, propaganda, or advertising. It is not possible to scientifically prove that “Song for Hawa” has changed attitude or behavior. When attempting an evaluation of the impact of the campaign based on existing rape statistics, problems arise that demonstrate the difficulty of measuring the influence of art on behavior. Researching its effect on attitudes is costly and also problematic. Since many development practitioners and Liberians already consider “Song for Hawa” a success based on aesthetic judgment and anecdotal evidence, it is worth valuing these methods of evaluation as useful and relevant in lieu of evidence-based evaluation methods that are costly and logistically challenging. A scientific proof of the impact of an artwork is likely to be elusive. The case is a clear example of how behavior statistics can fail to confirm success due to other variables (in this case the ebola outbreak of 2014), and points to the problems with using quantitative tools to measure the effects of art.

An instrumental use of an artist’s voice in service of behavioral change goals pursued by foreign development organizations raises concerns about the negative effects on the agency of local artists and encouraging dependency on further instrumentalization work. The benefits of these campaigns must be viewed in the context of other opportunities for local artists. Dependency and over-reliance on instrumental funding sources in poor economies must be avoided, lest the artists lose too much of their own voice. Non-instrumental opportunities for artists must also exist to maintain a sustainable artistic community and cultural industry.

This paper has noted some of the structural concerns with cultural diplomacy campaigns in development that aid organizations ought to consider. For the local artists, the choice should ideally be based on whether they share the values of the campaign, and feel that it will be a collaborative effort based on a shared vision. If artists feel that they must participate in campaigns they do not agree with in order to earn a living, then the concerns about over-emphasis on instrumentalization have not been addressed.

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