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Cultural Diplomacy in Conflict Zones

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### **Popular Music as Vehicle for Cultural Change: Takun J's cultural diplomacy in post-conflict Liberia**

*Song for Hawa*, a 2013 song written and performed by Liberian colloquial-English rapper Takun J with support from the international NGO PCI Media Impact, is a pop/rap song, a video, a story, a message, entertainment-education<sup>1</sup>, and most importantly an intervention designed to influence behavior and change cultural norms. It is a highly remarkable intervention: a clear example of cultural diplomacy (as opposed to moral propaganda or advertising) intended to address and influence a cultural trend in the post-conflict developing nation of Liberia (prevalent child rape) that is in violation of universal human rights, in particular Article 2 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (United Nations General Assembly). This intervention is clearly in line with the goals of the Human-Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation (United Nations Development Group). The use of a popular male artist that enjoys a credible independent reputation and mass appeal to set an example and deliver this anti-rape message is what distinguishes this vehicle of expectant cultural change as cultural diplomacy from mere informational diplomacy<sup>2</sup>. The use of a cultural figure who is in possession of significant embodied cultural capital (Bordieu) and a strongly independent and credible artistic image makes it a particularly engaging case of effective messaging and programming in the context

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<sup>1</sup> As defined by PCI Media Impact on <http://mediainpact.org/entertainment-education/>

<sup>2</sup> "Informational diplomacy uses the techniques of public relations (and sometimes psychological warfare) while cultural diplomacy is rooted in education and example" (Feigienbaum 30-31).

of a post-conflict developing state still struggling with issues of reconciliation and progress, and helps to distinguish this intervention from other post-colonial attempts to influence behavior through cultural programming that rely more on informational diplomacy and could be more subject to criticism as culturally imperialist from normative moral relativists. I propose that in a post-conflict or conflict area, campaigns utilizing creative methods of cultural diplomacy are more likely to be effective in attaining true reconciliation, cultural change, and progress.

### **Defining Cultural Diplomacy**

As there are varying definitions of cultural diplomacy currently in use, it is important to define the term as it will be applied in this instance. Since the delivery method/vehicle of this intervention is a song, it is rather easy to see the venture as “cultural” in nature, but let us get more specific: “cultural” refers here not only to the intervention itself being a cultural product (delivered in varying formats as an audio recording, a video, and a live performance). In addition, the attempt to influence behavior is itself “cultural” in that it is intended to involve an exchange of ideas, values, and traditions (as opposed to a simple pop song, which might only be intended to entertain, provide a soundtrack to a dance floor, etc.). It intends to engage its audience to encourage discussion and open communication on a subject that is often difficult to discuss.

“Diplomacy” is a bit less obvious here, as diplomatic practice is generally associated with nation states interacting with one another with the purpose of convincing each other to adopt a desired agenda. It has been established, however, that non-state entities such as trans-national organizations, corporations, communities, institutions, and even individuals can be said to engage in cultural diplomacy (as well as propaganda, advertising, informational diplomacy, etc.). “Cultural Diplomacy is not restricted to nation states” (Cull 12). In this instance, we can view the diplomacy as occurring literally between Takun J and PCI Media

Impact (the agents) and the Liberian populace (the target audience). This diplomatic encounter could also be viewed as occurring between the moral code of the developed international community as embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the traditional cultural norms and traditions of the African communities. For reasons of both simplicity and to avoid the anthropological issues that framing the encounter as one between moral codes and traditions could exacerbate, it is sufficient here to use the literal definition and view *Song for Hawa* as PCI Media Impact together with Takun J engaging the people of Liberia in a campaign of cultural diplomacy.

*Song for Hawa* is an expression of soft power, meant to entice and pull the target audience towards changing their behavior and modifying cultural norms by using storytelling and entertainment from a credible male role model to create emotional ties that “inspire behaviors much more powerfully than direct appeals for change” (PCI Media Impact "Entertainment-Education"). This source and delivery are what makes *Song for Hawa* “diplomacy” as opposed to propaganda or prescriptive moral proselytizing. By telling a story to encourage sympathy with victims and cultural understanding of a problem, and utilizing popular music delivered by a credible independent author, this song is very much a cultural encounter and attempt to encourage discussion about the topic, not a mandate or instructional guide. Unlike a health warning to use condoms to prevent HIV, for example, this message is not imperative. It is diplomatic – it tries to pull the audience towards the author’s line of thinking by strategic use of emotions and enticement through a song performed by a credible popular artist.

### **Historical context: Endemic rape in Liberia**

Liberia’s population (currently estimated at just below 4 million) is extremely ethnically diverse: 80% of the population is split between nine separate ethnic identities (US Central Intelligence Agency). Liberia is popularly portrayed as consisting of sixteen main

tribal African ethnic groups in souvenir wood carvings and posters. Though these groups have at times engaged in conflict with each other, once the country gained independence in 1847 the historical narrative shifted to a primary conflict between the settler class and the indigenous people. This diverse mixture of indigenous cultures was dominated both politically and socially by the Americo-Liberians - freed American slaves who settled in the area and their direct descendants - until the revolution of 1980 (Ellis). The civil war of 1989 played into this narrative but was far too complex to be understood as merely a conflict between elites and natives. For our purposes of understanding the cultural issue, it is only necessary to note that multiple historical tensions exist within Liberian society that have recently exploded into armed conflict, and that rape has become extremely prevalent.

Exact figures vary in different reports about rape in Liberia, but the numbers are all horrifying. A 2012 story in Time Magazine reported that during the period of civil war 1989-2003, it is estimated that between 60% and 90% of the female population suffered rape (Toral). Other noteworthy statistics include the relatively small number of reports – only 1,475 rapes reported in all of 2011 (Toral), and that 90% of victims were under eighteen, half of those were under twelve, and 10% of them were under four years old (Toral). 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" (PCI Media Impact "Media Impact celebrates international day of the girl").

The scope of this paper is not to speculate on what degree indigenous tradition and ethnic culture versus other possible variables such as recent civil war might have contributed to the recent prevalence of rape in Liberia, in particular to the rape of such young children. It is sufficient to note that the rape of young women is a staggeringly common occurrence which goes largely unreported, and that in a post-conflict nation the challenges of communication

and dialogue can be particularly difficult to overcome due to fear stemming from the recent violence.

### **Agents of Diplomacy: PCI Media Impact, Takun J, and THINK**

There are two main agents and a third-party partner organization involved in this campaign.

#### *PCI Media Impact*

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” (PCI Media Impact "Who We Are"). 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 educational issue, create favorable attitudes and influence behavior and cultural norms” (PCI Media Impact "Entertainment-Education"). I find their entire approach to be indicative of what I consider to be a particularly clever method of cultural diplomacy – rather than directly promoting their cultural change agenda as a mandate or a suggestion (which would be more akin to propaganda), they package it inside an entertaining vehicle intended to increase knowledge, whereby the message provokes thinking about culture, rather than a direct appeal for change in the form of imperative directions.

#### *Takun J*

Takun J is the self-proclaimed “hipco king” (Takun J), a form of hip-hop/rap music performed in the colloquial dialect of Liberian English. Takun J currently enjoys a considerable following in Liberia, with over 17,000 fans attending a two-day festival he headlined in December 2012 (Takun J). In a nation where most Liberian performers struggle to draw sizable crowds, the reach and influence that Takun J enjoys is notably strong. This

popularity is not due to one single particular variable, but rather many contributing factors, both clear (his management is particularly literate in social media and promotion, he is extremely social and consistently hosts community parties and concerts at his house, he has been a performer since at least 2005, he enjoys a credible rebel image that aligns him with popular iconic gangster rappers of the USA, just to name a few) as well as unclear.

The formula for his popularity is not relevant here, but what is important to be aware of along with his fame are his credibility and rebel image. In particular, Takun J's biography highlights that he has tangled publicly with Liberian authorities – in 2007 his song “Policeman Coming” resulted in two arrests and a beating by the Liberian national police (Takun J). Recently, on the evening of June 17, 2013, Takun J was allegedly assaulted by Representative Edwin M. Snowe, a high-profile member of the Liberian House of Representatives and former Speaker of the House, following a near-collision in Monrovia traffic (Azango). Takun J uses these incidents as opportunities to draw attention to the problems in Liberian society that these arrests and assaults represent. It is fair to conclude that Takun J is viewed by the Liberian public as a man who will stand up to authority figures in order to ensure that his message is heard, even at risk to his freedom and physical well-being. In a country where corruption and dishonesty are major concerns, this image gives Takun J an authenticity that very few public figures enjoy. The embodied cultural capital employed here is rather ideal for the purposes of credible messaging.

Were Takun J a more typical popular recording artist and performer who did not possess this image, the message of *Song for Hawa* could still be delivered with a fair amount of attention and market penetration. However, as he enjoys a particular authentic and righteous image, he is in a position to be a more credible voice and effective agent of delivery. He comes from the native non-elite population and speaks and performs in the colloquial

language of the street. The fact that he is a male is also going to increase his ability to message to male fans of rap music.

*THINK – Touching Humanity in Need of Kindness*

A local Liberian NGO founded in 2003, THINK's mission is "to get involved with the peace process through human resource development using advocacy and activism, focusing on the rights and well-being of women and children, especially the girl child" (THINK). A rehabilitation home that THINK operates for victims of sexual abuse provided the setting for Takun J's meeting with rape survivors that inspired him to write *Song for Hawa* (PCI Media Impact "'Song for Hawa' Music Video"). THINK are a minor part of the story here and are providing much needed services to Liberian women, but are not a major element of the cultural diplomacy campaign aside from helping to provide source material and being a physical place where people who want to get more involved in working with rape victims can volunteer, donate, etc. Though the websites where *Song for Hawa* bring attention to THINK and its efforts, the main purpose of *Song for Hawa* is to initiate social change about attitudes and behaviors around rape in the general population, not simply raise funds or draw attention to THINK.

**Agenda**

The specific agenda of *Song for Hawa* as stated on the PCI Media Impact Website is to "address and try to reduce the high rates of sexual violence in the country" (PCI Media Impact "'Song for Hawa' Music Video"). It is my analysis that the following cultural change objectives that PCI Media Impact and Takun J are specifically aiming for can be summarized as:

**CULTURAL CHANGE OBJECTIVES OF *SONG FOR HAWA*:**

**Encourage more open discussion of the topic of rape**

**Encourage the reporting of rape incidents to the authorities by victims**

**Discourage males from perpetrating rape**

**Combat the cultural myth/superstition of rape as empowering or healthy**

**Discourage victim shaming**

**Encourage family and community to support the victims**

Quantitative data to track the success of *Song for Hawa* in achieving these objectives is not available at this time. Creating methods to track these objectives would contribute to the quantitative evaluation of the effect of the song on Liberian culture. I speculate that 2013 statistics will show an increase in reported rape cases, but that the estimation of total per-capita rape incidents should show a decrease.

### **Target Audience**

There is no specific mention of the target audience on PCI Media Impact's website. It is my analysis that the song is intended universally for all Liberians - both genders, all ethnic backgrounds, and all economic levels - as rape can be found everywhere in Liberia and reportedly affected up to 92% of the female population. I believe the song is not directly intended for an audience outside of Liberia due to the colloquial Liberian English. However, the use of the song in other countries that are also endemic rape areas would be an interesting experiment, as the lyrics are in English, written on the website, and the narrative of the video is quite clear.

Within the target audience of all Liberians, Takun J's lyrics also specifically address several specific groups: rape victims, parents, and men.



### **Delivery of the Message – The text itself**

*Song for Hawa* tells the story of a young girl sent to live with her uncle who cares for her for some time, but then threatens her with expulsion and withdrawal of financial support if she does not permit him to have sex with her. The protagonist succumbs to her uncle, but eventually finds the strength to report her uncle to the authorities. The video shows a grown up protagonist running her own hair salon at the end of the story. The story includes many pleas from Takun J to love the children, not to hurt them, and that rape is wrong. *Hawa's* lyrics attempts to deliver the agenda/message on two separate levels:

- 1) *Song for Hawa* hopes to create emotional ties to the protagonist's suffering and create general sympathy and support for rape victims in general among all listeners
- 2) *Song for Hawa* contains very literal messages of what Takun J feels that specific Liberians can do to help improve the situation (ex. victims, parents, men)

The first level is in line with the methodology of PCI Media Impact's Entertainment-Education, and is a more organic and holistic approach. It is also a large extent of what makes *Song for Hawa* cultural diplomacy rather than prescriptive moral propaganda. By telling a story intended to invoke sympathy, it is more than a mere prescription for cultural change based on moral precept – it is the embodiment of PCI Media Impact's "entertainment-education" method.

Though the second level might at first akin to informational diplomacy or prescriptive moralizing similar to Christian missionary work or earlier forms of development, there is much more sophistication and power behind the imperative messaging due to the credibility and authenticity of the performer. Since Takun J is a male rapper, and rap music is quite often perceived as misogynistic (Adams and Fuller), it is of particular note that male hipco fans are focused on within the target audience as a recipient for one of the prescriptive messages in the

lyrics: (Women) “need protection in their life but not fear (yea) / Based on the fact some guys they in some bad habits / Such a habit like that of course they need to stop it” (Koffa). It would be one thing to read this on billboard in the community, it is another thing entirely to hear it from a male role model with a rebel image. The use of Takun J to deliver these words again keeps it within the realm of effective cultural diplomacy despite its occasionally imperative quality.

The cultural background of ethnic societies tolerating or even encouraging ritual rape as part of religious or medicinal acts is alluded to as well: “Who told you by raping the children it going to give you power? / Destroying the children is that your desire?” (Koffa). This element can make the issue particularly difficult for development workers to communicate the issue to indigenous people. As a native Liberian, Takun J is the only credible voice that can speak to this issue. Any development aid worker or Christian missionary attempting this will not be as credible or effective.

Takun J also specifically instructs parents to be more mindful of their children: “Parents, control your children, don’t leave them alone / Rape always happens when the child is alone” (Koffa). While perhaps this prescriptive message is less of a good match than the example of the male hipco fan, it is an important part of the overall message to address parents directly and good that it is included, lest parents be thought blameless in the problem.

### **Methodology of PCI Media Impact**

PCI Media Impact’s “entertainment-education” hopes to implement their agenda by using *Song for Hawa* to tell a story, educate, and to entertain. They predict that the popularity, credibility, and authenticity of Takun J makes him an effective agent to deliver the message. Takun J also creates a very important distance between PCI Media Impact and the Liberian target audience. By allowing Takun J to write the song based on his personal experiences at

the THINK Rehabilitation Home, it creates an independent / non-programmed origin of the song. This is very important. If the audience were to perceive that Takun J was singing a message that PCI Media Impact had simply hired him to sing about, then the song would not enjoy as much authenticity – the credibility of his voice would be weakened. It would then resemble informational diplomacy or even moral propaganda, rather than cultural diplomacy. The credible independent author voice is instrumental in the effectiveness of the campaign.

It is extremely important that Takun J is perceived as the author and creator of *Song for Hawa* with minimal prompting in order for it to be effective cultural diplomacy. To put this another way, if *Song for Hawa* was created as a song-for-hire by PCI Media Impact, it would not enjoy the authentic credibility of a song written by an independent hipco artist and would merely be informational diplomacy coming from an international NGO, not unlike a billboard or poster campaign. Since *Song for Hawa* is perceived by the audience as Takun J wishing to share his own personal cultural opinion on the phenomenon of child rape, it is cultural diplomacy. I claim that this form of cultural diplomacy is likely to be far more effective in influencing behavioral and cultural norms to encompass the cultural change objectives. I expect that outcome data will support this claim once it is available.

## **Outcomes**

As of this paper being written (November 2013) there is no rape data that can be looked at to judge the effectiveness of *Song for Hawa*. It is simply too early to tell. Takun J's manager is enthusiastic with preliminary qualitative 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" (Rahimian). This qualitative data is encouraging, of course, but it will take more sophisticated quantitative analysis to speak to the efficacy of the campaign.

The Government of Liberia has been quick to notice *Song for Hawa* and despite a lack of clear outcome evidence, the Ministry of Gender and Development has added to Takun J's authority by officially naming him the country's "Anti-Rape Ambassador" (admin Liberian Listener). It seems apparent that Liberia is appreciating Takun J's messaging. This is also interesting, given Takun J's reputation being based largely on standing up to police and government corruption. The government is also engaging in its own side cultural diplomacy with Takun J by finding ways to work together.

### **Conclusion**

As it is too early to cite any outcome data to prove that *Song for Hawa* is a successful campaign, it is important to summarize the reason this paper was written *Song for Hawa* is of note because it is cultural diplomacy, rather than informational diplomacy, propaganda, or advertising. Of particular interest here is the selection of the author/performer – one who is credible and authentic precisely because he stands up to a government system that is universally perceived as corrupted. The vehicle is particularly effective due to the author/performer's embodied cultural capital. The involvement of PCI Media Impact is not directly known, they are distanced from their campaign of entertainment-education and allow the focus to fall on Takun J. In a developing post-conflict nation where reconciliation and progress are of major importance, the use of storytelling and entertainment to affect cultural change should be looked at more often as a technique to inspire behavioral and cultural change, rather than direct appeals. I predict outcome data will support this claim.

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