

**BEATING SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES AND SPEARS INTO PRUNING-HOOKS: TRANSFORMING THE TRADITIONAL MEDIA OF COMMUNICATION FROM DRIVERS OF CONFLICT TO INSTRUMENTS FOR PEACE AND SECURITY: EXAMPLES FROM HAKAMAT SINGERS IN SUDAN'S DARFUR**

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**Abstract**

*The Hakamats, a group of traditional women singers and poets from Darfur, Western Sudan, contributed greatly to fueling the decade old Darfur conflict using their traditional war songs and poetry. Using the same instrument to appeal to the ego and romanticisms of their male counterparts they also blocked several proposed peace initiatives. Through education and advocacy, they now sing for peace; a clear case of beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning-hooks. This study examines the factors that influenced the Hakamats' choice to promote war and conflict rather than peace and peaceful co-existence, and the motivation that sustained that momentum. The focus is on how they were convinced to abandon an old-time traditional role and embrace the search for sustainable peace in an area they held sway for a long time. The study is based on series of workshops, sensitization campaigns and personal interviews with some women Hakamats. The data generated from the workshops and interviews was critically examined using content analysis. The findings show that economic benefits and, the quest for societal recognition greatly influenced and sustained the Hakamats' choice of trade, motivation, and activities. The study recommends that a new set of value system and other means of economic survival for the Hakamat are an imperative in order for the transformation to be sustainable. It also recommends the deployment of traditional media as a very critical tool for conflict resolution.*

**Keywords:** Hakamats, Peace and security, Traditional media, Conflict, Hakamat singers.

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**Introduction**

Communication has been defined as the process by which information is transmitted between individuals and/or organizations so that an understanding response results (Little, 1977). Communication is also conceptualised as the act of giving, receiving, or exchanging information, ideas and/or opinion so that the message is understood by both parties (Flint, 2000). Rodriguez (1992) sees communication as an exchange and exact replication of thoughts, feelings, facts, beliefs, and ideas between and among the individuals through a common system of symbols to cause some actions or changes in behavior. The common denominator for all these definitions is that communication is a process that is interactive by nature and participatory at all levels. It, therefore, occurs within the framework of common experience with other people. It is thus, an act by which a person shares knowledge, feelings, ideas, information, etc., in ways such that each gain a common understanding of the intended meaning and acts based on the communication.

Communication can either be verbal or nonverbal. Verbal communication is the use of language to transfer information through speech while nonverbal communication refers to the use of body language, gestures, and facial expressions to convey information to others. It can be used both intentionally and unintentionally. Communication can also be written, oral, or visual. All these forms of communication can be used according to context to exchange useful messages, ideas, information, and feelings each time people meet whether in formal or informal settings. Communication is also an aspect of culture. Indigenous and traditional communication modes and channels, therefore, have a sort of cultural relativity. Such modes and channels are identified, assessed, and understood in the context of a particular culture and tradition. With this background in mind, this study located the activities of the Hakamat singers within the context of traditional communication with particular emphasis on folk media.

**Folk Media as Traditional Mode of Communication**

Before the advent of modern media, and recently the social media, traditional media had perfectly served communities and cultures in information, entertainment, and education, in the same way, the modern media serve societies today. Even with the modern media of communication, the social media inclusive, traditional media remains one of the most important and effective ways by which rural people communicate among themselves particularly in remote areas where the modern media of communication has either less penetration or no penetration at all. It remains one of the most potent vehicles for

grassroots mobilization. Folk songs, for instance, have been used specifically and effectively by nationalists, political parties, and by other government and private agencies to promote their causes with tremendous results.

Wang and Dissanayake (1984) conceptualise folk media as a communication system embedded in the culture which existed before the arrival of the modern mass media and still exists as a vital mode of communication in many parts of the world, presenting a certain degree of continuity, despite changes. Generally, folk media represents those arts that are inherited by a homogenous segment of the society through oral transmission. Folk media as cultural institutions transmitting values, thoughts, norms, beliefs, and experiences in the society has effectively been carrying on this function for ages. These, they do, using various channels such as folk songs, riddles and idioms, proverbs, drama, folk music, puppet dance, ceremonial occasions, and much more. Further, being a veritable storehouse of human experiences, folk media portray a realistic depiction of mass culture, therefore forming an integral part of the development process. Folk media is part of oral literature which has been the original medium of communication in traditional societies. The folk arts preserve and disseminate in a lively manner, the tradition and culture of a people since they are deeply rooted in the social mainstream. They act as an identity for a people and tend to be a critical instrument for mass mobilization towards a common agenda. Folk attire, folk dance, and other forms of folk arts are oftentimes the exclusive art of a particular community and serve to unite them and thus create a bond between them whether they reside within the community or in the diaspora.

Every country has its own traditional/folk media which serves as a significant tool in the process of motivating the people towards a desired direction (Chapke & Bhagat, 2015). This can be achieved by invoking the common ties that bind them or identifies them as a people with a common destiny. It can also refer to heroic events in which their forebears demonstrated such unity of purpose and achieved desired goals. Traditional/folk media also represents the traditional way of life, based on customs, beliefs, and arts that make up a distinctive culture. It draws upon people's past, present, and future by providing them with glimpses of reality by always referring to it. Ravindhar (2015) sees traditional media as the storehouse of customs, beliefs, legends, rituals, language, etc., which are very close to the people and so followed by them giving much importance to it.

### **The Hakamat and its Performers**

According to de Waal (2004a) the word Hakamat has connotations such as wisdom, judging/judgment, and rule. Mohamed (2013) argues

that Hakamat “literally” means an arbiter of men’s conduct. The Hakamats are like the griots from the West African Mande Empire of Mali, who function as storytellers, musicians, praise singers, and oral historians of their communities. Griot, in French, is one of the names for an expert in oral performance. This shows that they are, above all, professionals who represent a group in a well-defined social order. Griots are revered because they preserve the genealogies, historical narratives, and oral traditions of their people and as such, have for centuries retold the history of the empire, thus keeping their history and traditions alive (de Waal, 2004a; 2004b; 2004c).

Hakamats and griots were believed to traditionally belong to a social caste of story tellers and entertainers by virtue of their being born into a family of Hakamat or Griots. For instance, Huwaidah, a Hakamat from Nuba ethnic group was eleven years when she became a Hakamat. This role was transferred to her through her grandmother and mother who were Hakamats before her. Her traditional role is to sing for war. Huwaidah sometimes sings poetry from others but usually makes up her own specific to the occasions (Slim, 2004). Okoh (2018) also claims that the art and important position of storytelling is passed down from generations of griot families and as such, not just anyone could become a griot. Nevertheless, in many African societies like Nigeria, one does not necessarily need to belong to a social caste or generation of griot or Hakamat family. Tarker Golozo, considered by many as one of the greatest Tiv oral singers that ever lived was an educationist who spent part of his adult life teaching in primary schools in Benue State of Nigeria before launching out as a professional bard. In an interview as reported by Ker (2015), the poet stated that he did not inherit singing from anyone. According to him, the art of singing came to him by accident when he used to go to school as a pupil. He stated that whenever any pupil stole from home or school and he came to know of it, he would compose a song to ridicule such a pupil. But a major incidence that contributed to his becoming a singer was when he lost his wife. He mourned his dear wife with a dirge which he composed within twenty minutes, and which ended up as the launch pad into prominence as the most celebrated bard ever in Tivland and Benue at large. Thus, situations could turn a witty individual into a good griot.

A woman can even become a Hakamat by receiving an education deemed appropriate for a Hakamat. Mohamed (2013) explains that the prerequisites for a Hakamat include belonging to a respectable family, having a strong personality and leadership qualities, and being able to compose poems and songs. This view is shared by Connick (1975) who notes that to be a Hakamat woman; her character must have won the respect of her people before she can be acceptable

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functionally as someone with the power to move their thoughts and their emotional reactions into the areas she directs. She must also be acknowledged as the most clever and witty singer; often she must embody the ideal of physical attraction, and particularly she must have the gift of poetry and improvisation, all this encapsulated in a person of dignified bearing. Additionally, the songs performed or composed must be innovative songs that emphasize and transmit the society's beliefs, norms, and value system (Badri, 1998, p.16). What is required to be a successful bard, Hakamat or griot, therefore, is the skill to compose songs with an emotional appeal that can move or mobilize society towards common action. Other qualities for becoming a Hakamat include a talent for singing, composition, and guidance (Connick, 1975).

Most African societies have their Hakamats or griots. They may go by different names but similar functions. They could be women or men who perform similar functions of preserving the history and culture of a particular society and transfer the same from generation to generation so that it is not lost in modernism. They may be the Himayats of Morocco who are professional traditional storytellers who entertain, educate, and inspire the younger people through stories about families, lovers, beasts as a way of connecting them to their heritage. Or they could simply be the praise singers in Nigeria and other West African countries who sing or recite the heroic performances of certain leaders and their ancestors to the incredulity and hilarity of their audiences. In many parts of Nigeria, for instance, politicians are known to use traditional singers to mobilize support during their political campaigns. Such songs reminiscence the qualities of such politicians which make them the appropriate persons to lead. Governments also see these traditional Hakamats as a critical instrument for grassroots mobilization towards government policies and programmes

These praise singers are revered or feared because of their ability to either lift people to the limelight or bring them down due to the control they have on the public with their charisma and wits. They could perform at public functions and their adroitness, wits, and in-depth knowledge of tradition and culture, coupled with charisma are their main instruments. Scott (1977) rightly observes that when a culture relies on oral tradition to pass on legends, stories, and proverbs through many generations, the importance of the speaker is very essential to preserve one's culture. It, therefore, explains why in Western African cultures, griots, hakamats, himayats, bards, or professional praise singers were depended on by the culture to educate the folks of their history and traditions of the people. These people who are knowledgeable about culture would also have the duty of preserving one's history and keeping traditions alive. They

were not solely restricted to those responsibilities but were also teachers, poets, musicians, and participants in ceremonies that called for naming initiations and installations of chiefs or even funeral ceremonies. Wits and oratory are respected and admired in African culture and are taught to children as a way of preparing them for adult life where they would be exposed to the vagaries and trappings of the wider world. The folk stories told to children even at very young age are embedded with kinds of stuff that train the children to understand and appreciate wits and oratory as strength and virtue.

### **Darfur Conflict and the Role of Hakamat Singers**

Attempting to unravel the causes of conflicts in any African nation is as difficult as providing solutions because of their complex and multifaceted nature coupled with the difference in the historical developments of these countries. However, there is almost a general consensus among Darfur conflict scholars, researchers, and policy analysts that a combination of decades of drought, desertification, and overpopulation are among the causes of the Darfur conflict (Prunier, 2005; 2006a; 2006b; Tar, 2006; Flint & de Waal, 2008; Adam, 2013). Added to this, is the notion that the underlying causes of the present Darfur conflict are the failure of traditional systems for the allocation of land, water resources and the mediation of conflicts (An-Naim, 2004). This failure, according to Abdullahi A. An-Naim is exacerbated by a combination of drastic ecological changes and cynical human manipulations, emphasizing that, as the ability of local communities to cope with drought and famine declined over the last two decades, and the capacity of their traditional systems of conflict mediation over rapidly diminishing resources became overwhelmed, opportunistic politicians took advantage of the situation.

Hoile (2006) also describes Darfur as an ecologically fragile area that had already seen growing, and often armed conflict over natural resources between some 80 ethnicities and clans loosely divided between nomadic and sedentary communities. As also noted by O'Fahey and Sean (2008), the current Darfur conflict is a consequence of persistent ecological crises of increased desertification and lack of production and limited grazing lands among the pastoralist and agricultural peoples. Desertification and drought had forced several ethnic migrations from the 1970s onwards and by the late 1980s the migrant groups increased in numbers, and in the absence of social harmony, clannish factions developed and culminated in violent conflicts (Adam, 2013). However, the present Darfur conflict began in February 2003 when two rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLM/A) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) took up arms against the government citing discrimination against the black



ethnicities. What began as a small rebellion transformed into a conflict of massive proportions, involving other countries and organizations from the region and beyond. The roots of the violence are complex. They range from a mixture of ethnic tensions, a struggle for scarce resources, to a general breakdown of traditional systems of governance (Kimani, 2004).

### **The Role of Hakamat Singers**

The role played by the Hakamat women singers and poets and the impact in the Darfur conflict is vividly captured by Hamid cited in Khalid (1990) in the following lines,

The call for war in Darfur begins with the Hakamat – the ‘Janjaweed women’. Huddled as one, they move from house to house, street-to-street, energetic hate songs filtering through every door opened. The spirited words of bravery, bloodshed, and violence are sealed with government money, just as the Janjaweed militias are funded. As the songs stir the spirit of the men and reach their peak men leave to kill there and then, often accompanied by the Hakamat. Their lively tempo transcends and presents itself as murder and rape.

Traditional songs which ridicule fellow tribesmen who try to defuse conflicts with neighboring groups help stoke tensions in the region. According to Evans-Pritchard and Yousif (2012), sometimes in November 2011, two groups – the nomadic cattle-herding Rizeigat ethnic group and the farming community of Fayreen – clashed on the border between Darfur and South Kordofan region, resulting in dozens of deaths. The incident was a stark reminder of the power the Hakamat still exert within their communities. Although members of both groups were keen to avert bloodshed by engaging traditional authorities, it was the female singers who commanded the most influence. Like many clashes along this fractious border, the disagreement arose when cattle belonging to the Rizeigat were allowed to wander onto communal farmlands owned by the people of Fayreen. Fayreen tribesmen responded by slaughtering the cattle, prompting a strong response from the Rizeigat. A temporary halt to hostilities was then called when the Fayreen offered to pay compensation for the loss of the cattle. The Rizeigat accepted the offer. On returning to their village, however, the Fayreen men who reached the agreement were confronted by groups of Hakamat singing songs about cowardice. The women

removed their Islamic headscarves to indicate their lack of respect for the men and to question their manhood. They walked barefoot to suggest that the men had run away so fast that they did not have time to fasten their shoes. Faced with such ridicule, the men took up arms and returned to fight the Rizeigat, resulting in dozens of deaths on both sides. The Hakamat were so powerful that they could depose a king using their songs and poetry as critical weapons.

Khalid (1990) accused the Hakamats of being one of the genuine tools of genocide in Darfur. This is because they compose songs based on hate to inspire men to go and fight, and when they start singing in front of one's door, unless he gets his weapon and joins the militia, he is not a man. Musa (2011) contends that the government of Sudan (GoS) has been making use of the Hakamat since the 1990s. The GoS first invited them to cultural gatherings, where they performed in praise of the government and were paid in money and commodities such as sugar or sheep. This was seen as an attempt to win their support for the 'Arabization' mission that began the 'Arab' vs. 'African' polarization. To sustain the use of this group of people in the conflicts within the region, the Hakamat were required to mobilize and recruit the youth of their community for the (GoS) army to fight the rebels in the south of the state (Musa, 2011). The GoS also organized military training for the women and integrated them into the Sudanese army. It supplied the Hakamat with ID cards that proved their membership of the armed forces or police units, thereby giving them all the rights that came with their position such as the right to arrest and search (Musa, 2011).

After the war broke out in Darfur in 2003, the regime tried to use urban Hakamat for its propaganda against the opposition, as a result of which the Hakamat's lyrics changed, and the women added religious aspects and praised the government and President Al Bashir. This had not previously been a part of their songs; they had formerly addressed issues that concerned their community, and as the government did not usually influence people's daily lives, it had rarely been mentioned in Hakamat songs prior to 2000 (Musa, 2011). This only shows the extent to which politicians or individuals could influence the Hakamat singers to do their bidding using money as incentives. Perhaps advantage is taken of the fact that these are poor, uneducated women who are made to believe they could use their talents to better their financial standing in the society.

### **Beating Swords into Plowshares and Spears into Pruning-Hooks**

The impact of the Hakamats' pervasive activities on the Darfur conflict drew the attention of many people and organizations just as it was a



drawback on the efforts in search for a negotiated end to the conflict. Particularly worrisome was the enormity of the influence they exerted on their male counterparts as was clearly seen during the various inter-ethnic conflicts. Such influence was perceived as a potential resource for a more positive contribution to the Darfur peace process. Consequently, several workshops were organized by international and local non-governmental organizations as well as the United Nations agencies. The objective of the workshops was to reverse the pervasive activities of the Hakamat singers that extremely impeded all efforts to bring peace and stability to the region and make them partners for peace. The African Union/United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Collaborative for Peace (CfP) were the foremost in this initiative.

According to Inaju (2012), the main objective of the first set of workshops was to identify the Hakamat women's source of power, roles and values which made them exert such formidable influence on the menfolk and the society in general. Another objective was to identify the motivation and/or incentives, if any, that sustained their activities within the society. The aim of the second set of workshops was to reverse those roles and introduce a new value system that associates greatness with peaceful resolution of conflict, good neighborliness, dialogue, and reconciliation. It also sought to provide new incentives and create new opportunities for them to exert similar influence in the society but within the context of a positive value system that would advance peace and security in the region.

The findings of the workshops revealed that the enormity of the role accredited to the Hakamats by tradition and culture was partly responsible for the power and influence they exerted on the society. It is a culture that acknowledged and treated the Hakamat in the society with reverence and trepidation. The Hakamats made no mistake by consolidating this power and recognition. The Hakamats were so powerful that they could even depose a king. At public functions, be they naming ceremonies or circumcision initiation ceremonies, the Hakamat had a prominent role to play. This gave them a say in all societal affairs. It is with this consciousness that the Hakamat saw themselves as custodians of societal norms and values. They invoked this power to challenge the men to fight to prove their ancestral heritage of bravery and courage. Failure to comply was perceived as faint-heartedness and cowardice.

Poverty and the quest for survival also pushed the Hakamats to engage in activities that would earn them the much-desired financial benefits for a decent living. Hakamats were first introduced to the monetization of their talents by the Sudanese government. The government of Sudan first invited them to cultural gatherings, where

they performed in praise of the government and were paid in money and commodities such as sugar or sheep. Abdul-Jalil, Mohammed and Yousuf (2007) explain that initially, Hakamats never received any payment for their songs and poetry; instead, they received gifts in appreciation of their work especially at festivities such as circumcisions. On such occasions, Hakamats are presented with goats or cattle. However, in recent times Hakamats are paid whenever they are invited to sing at public or government gatherings. The introduction of money other than mere commodities as it used to be the case before was a great motivation for more women to get engaged in the new-found trade. Economic benefits from the government or other traditional groups, therefore, became one of the greatest motivations for most of the Hakamats' activities. Also, this change of orientation, aside from the harsh economic realities of the time, also stems from the sudden discovery by the Hakamats that they could use their skills to sustain themselves and survive during the economic crunch.

There is no doubt that the Hakamats were a critical factor in the Darfur peace equation. Not only did they influence the conflict with their pervasive activities, but they also stood in the way of most peace initiatives. Efforts to dissuade the Hakamats to abandon a long trade that earned them position and prestige as well as financial benefits was, therefore, concerted and sustained. The first step was strategic advocacy and sensitization to make them realize what negative impact their activities have on the communities and how they could easily become agents for peace and reconciliation using the same position and influence they possess. What's more, they were made to appreciate the value of their skills and trade and how they could be used for the advancement of peace and security for the benefit of the entire society. Consequently, the second series of workshops were specifically targeted at training the Hakamats in literacy and skills acquisition that would make them relevant in a decent society. They were provided with peace messages and requested to use the new skills to translate them into peace songs or poems to replace the war songs. The government of Sudan was not left out in the initiatives to re orient the Hakamats. Mohamed (2003) notes that the governor of Darfur, sometimes in 2012 organized training programmes to reorient the Hakamats' songs away from instigating violence and promoting war to start singing for peace. This clearly shows that even the government was aware of the Hakamat as peace spoilers who needed to be engaged in the peace process. A new value system was also introduced which no longer saw a strong man as one who fights at the slightest provocation but one who is a bridge-builder, capable of peacefully settling disputes or misunderstandings with his neighbor.

To address the financial need of the Hakamat, economic empowerment initiatives were organized for them to acquire certain skills that would earn them a decent living in place of instigating conflict and war. These initiatives were predicated on the discovery that most Hakamats were paid for singing war songs and their livelihood depended on the money they earned from mobilization. Collaborative for Peace for instance, organized the Hakamat singers into cooperatives for skills acquisition and income-generating programmes (O'Fahey, 2004). They learned skills such as making handicrafts, growing peanuts as a cash crop, and how to generate income by selling these commodities in the market. Economic empowerment, therefore, was believed to be able to dissuade them from the practice of singing to instigate men to fight. Result of the monitoring and evaluation exercise carried out by UNDP in 2013 showed that the various initiatives to reverse the role of the Hakamat in Darfur were successful and well received by most Hakamats. According to Kimani (2004), the newly acquired skills and other financial empowerment programmes appeared to offer them better, though more challenging prospects.

Flint (2000) is also of the opinion that the Hakamats' active engagement in community development as well as community peace initiatives is indicative of their acceptance of the new value system that stresses peace and peaceful co-existence. Not only are they just participants but they have several peace songs which they sing during such meetings. In Nyala, the capital town of Southern Darfur, the Hakamats have formed groups according to the types of skills they acquired during the series of workshop. They do take advantage of any public gathering to display their wares which they sell to the public. According to 56-year-old Hassanatu, herself a renowned Hakamat, it is not uncommon during such occasions for one Hakamat woman to raise a peace song which is immediately and simultaneously chorused by several other Hakamats (Mugaddam, Garri, & Alnour, 2020). What follows is a peace dance which enthusiastic members of the public easily join in solidarity with them. Expectedly, the report indicates that the much older Hakamats found it difficult to embrace the new culture of peace even though they knew what they stood to gain from it. This is quite understood giving the fact that most of them were illiterates they considered the idea of workshops and skills acquisition training rather elitist.

Eventually, however, even those who had initial reservations finally embraced the new culture of peace and reconciliation as sustained sensitization workshops and advocacy campaigns continued. This is evidenced in the more positive disposition they have exhibited towards issues of reconciliation and co-existence with their neighbours. The sustainability of the changing role and priorities is also seen in their

request for more literacy training to be organized for them to enable them to contribute better to peace and security. This desire for more literacy training is also indicative that illiteracy was also a major contributor to the negative roles they had played in the society. They have now realized that formal education matters more than being a Hakamat, and where their influence, even over their own communities, may be limited.

### Conclusion

Despite the rapid diffusion of new communication technologies, folk media continue to establish their value as effective agents of social mobilization for change and development. The transformation of the Darfur Hakamats is clear evidence of the relevance and influence the traditional media continues to demonstrate in modern society. It also validates the call for its application in modern development discourse. Whereas the modern media have not been able to reach millions of rural areas that still don't have access to appropriate infrastructure, the folk media still exerts great impact on rural societies and has been relied upon as an agent of social cohesion and economic mobilization. While a lot of modifications and resources may be needed to convey social messages using the modern media of communication especially in this digital age, folk media is reputed for carrying social issues related to rural development at little or no cost. In the areas of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, folk media is undoubtedly a very important and critical factor in resolving conflicts affecting the rural folks who are in most cases either victims or perpetrators of these conflicts. The experience of the Darfur Hakamats is a clear evidence that folk media remains a great resource in the quest for social development and a critical tool for conflict resolution, and peaceful co-existence among communities.

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