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TAKUN J FOUGHT THE GBAGBA

LIBERIA'S MOST FAMOUS RAPPER WANTS TO SAVE DEMOCRACY IN ONE OF THE WORLD'S POOREST COUNTRIES. THE FIGHT BEGAN IN AUGUST 2016.

By Zach Williams

Jonathan “Takun J” Koffa planned to perform a miracle. He wanted to gather his music buddies, slay the *Gbagba* and save democracy in Africa’s oldest republic. Everyone besides me began to pray on a Sunday afternoon in downtown Monrovia.

The most famous rapper in Liberia looked in silence at a dozen DJs and rappers who sat in front on the dance floor of the 146 Bar. They would help form the core group that Koffa needed for the following months.

Bass lines normally rattled from the loud speakers and marijuana smoke usually swirled in the doorway that led to the backyard. This was a hangout for that lost generation of Liberians known as the *Gronnah*. But it had also become a campaign headquarters for the man they called their HipCo King.

To their eyes, Takun J had performed miracles before. He had come from humble beginnings to become the first Liberian rapper with an international reputation. HipCo music — a distinctly Liberian form of Hip Hop — followed Koffa off the streets of downtown Monrovia to airwaves across West Africa. The voice of the *Gronnah* spoke through Takun J. All he had to do was shepherd them for his latest task. The music had already cleared a path.



But his campaign against the *Gbagba* (bog-bah) would not be easy. This word referred to a local form of chicanery that made the country one of the most corrupt in the world. Liberia was nominally the oldest democracy in Africa, but nothing could get done without bribes, kickbacks or nepotism. This scourge infected government officials, police, bank tellers, ice cream vendors and ordinary people. Anytime someone said they were “thirsty” it meant the *Gbagba* got them too.

Koffa grabbed the microphone after a communal “amen.” Government corruption affected people throughout the country of 4.5 million people. Half of Liberians cannot read. The average income is the fifth lowest in the world. The country is rich in iron, rubber and palm oil but government officials sold the rights to foreign companies at bargain prices. The Liberian House of Representatives had not convened in months because the indicted speaker feared members would vote to remove him. The leader of the senate had resigned weeks before. Faith in government had crumbled 13 years after the civil war ended. Koffa had an idea of where to start in reversing all that was wrong in his country.

“People like to shift the blame onto the president but the representatives are there also. We got to stand for ourselves,” Koffa said.

They could do that by following him into the political lion’s den. He would save democracy through the power of HipCo music. Liberians knew him as the man who demanded government accountability through rap. This blend of Hip Hop, Reggae and the local English vernacular had made Takun J’s name, but had a new purpose, Koffa told his followers.

Takun J would leverage musical fame to win the seat in the House of Representations that represents his old neighborhood in downtown Monrovia. He promised that if he won the election he would have a platform to rally all Liberians for a final showdown with the *Gbagba*. Their faith in “love” would triumph and a transparent and accountable national government follow. HipCo music could

inspire democratic revivals across West Africa but first Koffa had to save democracy in Liberia.

“I cannot do this without your acknowledgement,” Koffa said. Then he returned to the center of the table onstage and resumed his silence.

One follower was already rallying fellow rappers to disperse throughout the country to register voters. Another was preparing to fly abroad to spread word of the emerging Takun J District Eight Movement. No one knew yet that thousands of people would gather with Koffa by the sea within months. The HipCo revolution had just begun.

But at least one of his followers doubted that his reputation could survive the transition from a muckraking rapper into an effective legislator. The press would question whether he had the qualifications to effectively serve as one of the 73 representatives. And people across the country had little faith that anybody could rid Liberia of corruption — however much they prayed for it.

Koffa said earlier that day that he would overcome this impasse by taking the high road to Capitol Hill. Small donations could fund the campaign. His supporters could canvass the neighborhoods where he grew up and paint signs for a grassroots campaign. He had more than a year to prepare to win the 10,000 votes he would need to win.

But the *Gbagba* had been around since free blacks from the United States established Liberia nearly two centuries ago. Leaders in the past 50 years had promised to stamp out corruption, but two coups and two civil wars ended those efforts. Nobel Prize Winner Ellen Johnson Sirleaf had won two elections but officials throughout her government faced indictment. Accusations followed the 2014-15 Ebola crisis that elected officials pilfered foreign aid meant for the families of its 10,000 victims.

Koffa gained even more fame in the meantime, but he also made enemies during the past ten years. They would try to stop him for the rest of 2016.

* * *

The 2017 elections will test not the popular appeal of democracy in Liberia. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf plans to step down after two five-year terms and for the first time in four decades, a peaceful transfer of power could happen. At the same time, support for democracy was riding high in Liberia before a noticeable decline in recent years.

Two out of three Liberians want a democratic government. Forty percent of those surveyed by a 2016 study from the Ghana-based Center for Democratic Development said the current government has fallen short. Twenty percent more Liberians have become open to military rule since 2008 and two-thirds of Liberians are open to either that or a civilian dictatorship — the 11th highest rate out of 36 African countries listed. Urban residents tend to oppose democracy in greater numbers than their rural counterparts, notes the report.

“This finding is worrying. Urbanites and the educated tend to be opinion leaders in society. Moreover, youth constituted a core mass in rebel group activities during the Liberian war and may be particularly susceptible to being drafted into activities aimed at undermining the country’s democracy,” the study stated.



Koffa though intended to mobilize the city dwellers and the youth for his own purposes. HipCo music has become a means to an end for him. Koffa has argued that his decade-long reign as the HipCo King qualified him to run for the House of Representatives in the 2017 elections. Policy proposals were notably absent at his campaign announcement, but he had a record of populist rhetoric throughout his music career.

His music has favored synthesized beats, simple choruses and a dash of storyline. Liberians were already familiar with this style when song “*Gbagba* is Corruption” came out in 2014. The song told the story of two children on a daytime journey through Monrovia and their encounters with all the different ways that people are on the take in Liberia.

“(People say) ‘Oh Takun J, why you want to get political?’ I say the music I do is already political,” Koffa said.

The song begins with Koffa singing “*Gbagba* is getting too much.” The children found it in a church, at a school, all over the police and even wrapped inside an expired chocolate bar. Children surrounded Takun J as he repeated the words “corruption” or “corrupt” 56 times before ending with “Say ‘no’ to corruption and you’ll be all right.”

Simple terms can explain the complexities of politics in a country where only two-thirds of students make it through primary school, according to Koffa.

“The more positive part of the HipCo (is) it preaches a message, speaks on the ills maybe people don’t know, but the language is accessible to everybody,” Koffa said in an interview.

Most HipCo performers cultivate images as men and women of the people. But Takun J appeared as something else when he entered the music video for the 2013 song “Pot Not Boiling.” He stood on a mountaintop with outstretched arms while a halo of sunlight surrounded his head.

The politicians were wasting the potential of the country by pilfering their own pockets. They would only listen to Takun J if more people believed in what he had to say.

I'm like a prophet on the cross

I'm speaking them the message

But no one can hear my voice

“Pot not Boiling” played well online in a country where only five percent of people have Internet access. More than 200,000 of them watched on YouTube and an unknown number on Facebook, where viewership of videos by Liberians typically exceeds other social media several times over.

Despite the fame, music did not make Koffa rich. No big record labels offered musicians in Liberia six-figures. There were hardly enough microphones and recording studios to produce tracks. But they did not deter Koffa and his disciples from promoting HipCo any way they could.

Fans respond by greeting him everywhere he went. They chased him in the rain to keep him dry with newspapers. More than one fan cleaned his shoes while he performed. Others threw cash at him as he rapped every Friday at the 146 Bar — the house that HipCo built in downtown Monrovia.

Fans stopped their beer drinking and pot smoking when he came to the microphone on Friday nights. They abandoned their seats and held their cell phones up high as he began to sing. A HipCo frenzy would follow as the bass line bounced off the walls and made the empty beer bottles buzz.

Koffa could command an audience. That did not mean they would turn out to vote for him on October 10, 2017. People from the streets of downtown Monrovia to the bush of Lofa County know that while the experience he could bring to government is unorthodox, it contrasts with what is not working, according to Bernard “DJ Blue” Benson, owner of Da Fiyah 107.9 FM.

“A lot of people there know all this bug about Harvard-graduated politicians who aren’t doing anything. So you need somebody who has lived right there in the community who has love,” he said in an interview.

* * *

The *Gbagba* came for Jonathan Koffa in a physical form on a Saturday afternoon in 2007. He was selling copies of his debut album “The Time” when a member of the Liberian National Police walked through the front door of a theater in central Monrovia. He did not like the upstart muckraking rapper.

At first, Koffa did not notice him within the crowd of admiring fans, but then the policeman attacked. He grabbed a stack of CDs and told Koffa that there was a criminal complaint against him for “influencing” the people through his first hit single “Policeman.”

The real-world policeman did not like lyrics like this:

Policeman coming, the policeman running

The policeman can take sides when he see money

The policeman not fair, policeman not right

Policeman judge your case, brother you'll be scared

The policeman picked up a copy of “The Time” and snapped it in half. Then he grabbed another. Koffa pleaded with him to spare the CD. Each one that broke was another that had to be imported. “I need my CDs!” Koffa had to perform within minutes but the delays escalated minutes later.

More police came and the electricity went out. Someone punched Koffa in the face and the police got the better of him. They arrested him in the darkness and whisked him to jail in a pick-up truck. Then the police showed Takun J why he should be scared. He watched from an empty cell as they took out a couple electric batons and moved in on him with all of the wickedness of the *Gbagba* behind them. They told Koffa that this was punishment for rapping about the police.

This fight against the *Gbagba* was an endurance test. Koffa lay there and absorbed the baton swings and a volley of police boots. “You think you can make war against the police and walk inside the streets? Every show that goes on ... we will get to you,” one policeman said before punctuating his message with a kick to Koffa’s head.

“Oh God,” he thought. “What am I supposed to do?” He endured more punches and kicks and his blood began splattering on the floor. There was an easy way out.

He could promise the police that he would not rap about them or he could continue to make his music.

“That was the choice I had at that moment in my life,” he said in a later interview.

He refused to surrender for the next three hours.

Then he heard a commotion interrupt his suffering. Koffa could hear from inside his cell people outside chanting “free Takun J.” He did not know how many of them were out there or how the police would respond to them. But as the minutes passed the standoff continued and the police knew they were outnumbered. He later learned that they “stared the police down” until they backed down as the night began.

Dozens of fans swarmed him as he exited the jail. There was no time for speeches or ceremony. Takun J had to return to the theater to perform. The crowd followed him as he walked back through downtown Monrovia in triumph. Koffa remembered that they looked at him like he were their “*takun*” — Liberian slang for an older brother. Some among them swore their filial devotion to him.

“It was the first time that I had that kind of appeal,” he said in an interview.

Bruises surrounded his eyes. Blood soaked his t-shirt. The policemen had conveyed their message but they could not silence Koffa. A capacity was waiting for him by the time he returned to the stage two hours later.

Then Jonathan Koffa grabbed the microphone just as police sirens began to wail

Four loud beats followed. But the audience of rappers, unemployed youth and booty-shaking businesswomen were not alarmed. They knew the opening bars to the latest HipCo hit — the same song that had brought Koffa so much trouble just hours before.

Policeman not shamed, Policeman can't change

Oh when you look him, tell me how he will change?

Tell me now my people, tell me who we will trust

The police that we got, that doing that kind of stuff?

He kept speaking out the next day. He appeared on Peace FM — one of the most popular radio stations in the country — and told people throughout the Tennessee-sized country that they were not alone in their poverty. They were not alone in believing that the promise of peace was slipping away because of corruption in places high and low.

Word spread across Liberia of the rapper who had confronted the wicked police and lived to tell the tale. He was lanky with a long beard and a fierce freestyle. More and more people began to believe that if anyone could prevail in the decades-long fight against the *Gbagba* it would be Takun J, the HipCo King.

* * *

Political pundits doubted that Takun J could defeat the *Gbagba*. Liberian history was filled with cautionary tales of those who had tried before and failed.

Liberia became an independent country in 1841 when the descendants of American slaves, known as *Americos*, became the new masters. They were five percent of the population but they made sure to keep the indigenous population in illiterate and impoverished so they could be more easily controlled. For the next 139 years, a steady flow of plantation crops like rubber and palm oil flowed from Liberia.

Then a member of the Krahn tribe promised in 1980 to deliver 95 percent of the population from the *Gbagba* of the ruling Americo True Whig Party. Master Sergeant Samuel Doe staged a bloody coup but promised to establish a true democracy. But as the 1980s neared their end the time had come for another man with promises to eradicate corruption. The First Liberian Civil War began when Charles Taylor led a small band of fighters across the border with the Ivory Coast on Christmas Eve 1989.

But Taylor was a false prophet of peace and reform. His soldiers blew up the roads, burned the schools, raped the women and attacked with cavalry mounted on the backs of pick-up trucks. Soldiers settled bets about the sex of pregnant women through gruesome means. Liberians again saw that a self-proclaimed savior was just another kleptocrat infected by the *Gbagba*.

When he stepped down in 2003 at the end of the Second Liberian Civil War, he left behind 15 years worth of garbage on the streets of Monrovia. New roads had to be paved. Schools had to reopen. A government had to be created from scratch. Three-quarters of girls and women had to learn how to live with the social stigma of being raped.

The vast majority of Liberians had to live on a plate of grain and fish each day, and the *Gbagba* continued to thrive. President Ellen

Johnson Sirleaf announced a war against this “national cancer” in 2006, but that promised remained unfulfilled as her second term neared its end a decade later.

A Global Witness report exposed a failed effort by the UK-based Sable Mining Africa company to secure the Wologizi iron ore deposits in northern Liberia. A billion tons of iron ore lay under a mountain and Liberia’s politicians were relatively cheap compared to the billions of dollars that could get extracted.

The report alleged \$950,000 in total bribes. Speaker of the House Alex Tyler pushed legislation that exempted the deposits from a public bid process for \$75,000. The head of the National Investment Commission, which grants licenses to foreign mining companies, took \$50,000. The head of the senate was in on it too as well as senators, representatives. The leader of President Sirleaf’s own Unity Party was the lawyer who set it all up. Sable executives lavished her stepson with \$1,070.87 in gear from a Johannesburg gun shop and took him hunting for a gnu, which they later paid to stuff.

Many of them refused to resign despite criminal indictments. Liberian politics took a comic turn when the speaker of the House of Representatives was indicted for his alleged involvement. He simply refused to convene the lower chamber of Congress from officially meeting.

The most influential political observers in the country however did not believe that Takun J could ameliorate this situation. He offered no political experience except his appointment as an anti-rape ambassador for the Liberian government. As always, he fulfilled his mission by writing a song and then performing it. As an elected representative he would have to find his voice among 73 others.

The upcoming elections will not be friendly to incumbents, according to Henry Costa, a leading radio host in the country. Three-fourths of them are vulnerable, he said in a telephone interview.

The incumbent representative in District Eight, Acarous Gray, appeared vulnerable. His own party had suspended him that summer for a colorful exchange of aspersions with a fellow lawmaker on the floor of the House of Representatives.

“This place is smelling with opium scent. Some among us have come from smoking weed,” Representative Solomon George reportedly said to Gray, a fellow member of the leading opposition party. Gray also had yet to repair a reputation damaged by accusations in recent years that he embezzled funds meant for Ebola victims and was involved in a stolen car ring. He could not be reached for comment for this story.

People had hopes when he was elected that Gray would become a “rebel for good” but years later he had sold out. A similar fate would await Koffa if he were to win, Costa said. Koffa would accomplish a lot more by pursuing his activism as a musician than venturing into a political muck that he does not fully comprehend, Costa added. He alone cannot pass a bill, especially since he has never joined a political party.

“First of all, he’s not very knowledgeable about how the system works. He does not come from this background and I don’t see how he is going to make a difference. I think, I think what he is going to do is get a salary, get a car and be like the rest of them,” Costa said.

The power of the *Gbagba* was too strong of a temptation to resist. Years of reporting from inside the House of Representatives for the country’s only independent newspaper convinced Henry Karmo that only a miracle could eradicate the scourge. The political will did not exist to keep people from pilfering public funds and abusing their power, whether they were government officials, police, bank tellers, ice cream vendors and ordinary people.

“To end corruption in the legislature or government could be compared to the end times that Christians refer to in the Bible, meaning it is impossible,” he said in an email. “To have an honest politician is like having a virgin prostitute.”

* * *

Thousands of people waited by the sea for Koffa to emerge on stage as the sun went down on final Tuesday night in November. Everyone stood from the front of the stage to the surf hundreds of feet away.

Three months had passed since he had announced his campaign, but Koffa had yet to really campaign. A predominantly male audience of HipCo fans paid willing 200 Liberian dollars per head (About \$2 USD) to enter the event. Participating in the Takun J District Eight Movement was simple as attending a rap concert with Liberia’s best. The event was about building a network of supporters nine months before the official filing deadline with the National Elections Commission, Koffa told me later.

“It’s not just about fundraising for the campaign,” he said.

But events like these would bring him closer to his \$100,000 goal and Takun J did not rapping instead of talking. Two members of his campaign committee performed alongside him onstage as white flashes burst from smartphones throughout the crowd.

He entertained his followers that but Koffa was also planning for the future.

He planned to canvass the streets and refine the stump speech when the time came. First he had to gather more people who believed. Another supporter, the rapper Amaze, was already spreading the word of HipCo across the countryside with a new song called “Know Who to Vote For.” Nasseman would take the HipCo message to an anti-corruption conference in Panama in early December.

The street campaign would not begin for months but the Takun J District Eight Movement was already about something much more ambition than winning a seat in the House of Representatives.

Two days before the UN-designated International Anti-Corruption Day, Movement Chairman Rokenzy G Smith meanwhile predicted with Hipco flair the coming rap-tocracy in a Facebook post on the main campaign page.

“We taking over no play play!!” Smith wrote.





Liberian rapper Rokenzy G Smith speaks at the campaign launch of the Jonathan Koffa's congressional campaign in Monrovia, Liberia in August 2016.

Koffa still had not given a detailed plan for how he would combat corruption as a lawmaker. But he still promised that the *Gbagba* would be defeated as long as people had faith like those who cheered him on during a warm November night in Monrovia.

“I can defeat *Gbagba*, but not 100 percent,” he said. “If I got a multitude of people with me fighting *Gbagba*, after we fight *Gbagba* all over Liberia we’re going to at least minimize it.”

Takun J swung his arms out towards the crowd. A man looked up but kept his hands clasped at the edge of the stage. The man next to his raised his right arm as the microphone reached its apex. A man four rows back yelled something at the HipCo King who looked straight out into the darkness at something beyond his audience.

The miracle would have to wait but the consequences had already become real should he fail.

“People can kill me any time,” he told me later. “I could lose everything I own only because of what I’m speaking.”

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