

BOOK REVIEW

Suad M. E. Musa. *Hawks & Doves in Sudan's Armed Conflict: Al-Hakkamat Baggara Women of Darfur*. Rochester: James Currey Eastern Africa Series, 2018. 237 pages. \$80.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781847011756.

In *Hawks & Doves in Sudan's Armed Conflict: Al-Hakkamat Baggara Women of Darfur*, Suad M. E. Musa offers an insightful perspective on *al-Hakkamat*, the female oral poets of western Sudan. Through their songs (or folk poems) and performances, these women share wisdom, comment on important issues, engage in arbitration, and pass judgment on leaders. The book is a semi-ethnography based on interviews conducted in 2006 (with some follow-up participant observation) in Nyala and al-Fasher with 72 male and female informants. Given the dangerous security context of the Darfur civil war, the inability of the author to conduct much on-site ethnography in rural areas is understandable. This book contributes to an academic genre that examines the influence of charismatic oral poets, spirit mediums, prophets, and other “gifted tongues.”

Hawks & Doves begins with a clear description of the path a woman might follow to become a *hakkamah* (the singular form). As a girl, she might start singing and dancing in neighborhood events. If she is talented, her reputation might spread, and she might expand her repertoire of poems and dances and indeed begin composing verses herself rather than performing “standards” written by others. She might extend the venues and types of performances (singing solo, or in chorus). At the pinnacle of her fame, she would likely be known for songs about horsemen and horses (50–54).

The lyrics of *al-Hakkamat* praise Baggara traditions. They deal with violence (raiding, retaliation, and war); they comment on the bravery of some and the cowardice of others; they praise men who are generous and elegant; and they extoll ethnic solidarity. There is also humor in the lyrics. On the rivalry between Ta'aisha and Salamat (88–90), Musa quotes the following couplet: “*Oh, you, bitter as the grasshopper of calotropis... I have reported to the Water and Sanitation Department to come and clean the nasty rubbish.*”

This book is a social study of *al-Hakkamat*, rather than an aesthetic study of their performances. A central claim is that *al-Hakkamat* are influential in Baggara society. One section of the book argues for their importance in socializing younger Baggara into models of good behavior (56–60). Another

section suggests that they arbitrate personal disputes, much like judges (60–64). Musa analyzes the relationships between the military organization of Baggara men (known as the *Ageed*) and the al-Hakkamat (68–74). She recounts important events in Baggara political-military history (the Beni Helba and Mahriyah conflict of the mid-1970s, the Ta'aisha and Salamat conflict of the late 1970s, the Masalit and Arab war of 1996, and the Ma'aaliya and Rezeigat conflict), and asserts that al-Hakkamat played significant roles in each of these events.

It would not be unfair to say that Musa is a hakkamah for the al-Hakkamat. A more cautious interpretation might have been that al-Hakkamat were certainly commentators on important events, but whether they affected the course of local history in these conflicts is not quite established. Often Musa's claims about the influence of al-Hakkamat are mere assertions. Anecdotes are deployed as dispositive, rather than ideas to be interrogated. I would have liked to have seen more attention to the question of how, generally, do anthropologists and social scientists go about establishing that a group or social movement is influential? A structured comparison of the socialization and arbitration roles of al-Hakkamat with those of Quranic teachers, for example, might have been useful.

Parallel to ascertaining the extent of influence is determining the nature of al-Hakkamat's effects. At some points Musa claims the influence of al-Hakkamat had negative effects on Baggara society (68, 72, 74, 85, 94). But she wavers. She calls Al-Hakkamat ethnic "zealots" (143), while just a few pages later they are "good-faith Samaritans" (145). She characterizes them as pugnaciously pro-government, while at the same time lamenting that they were excluded from the peace process in Darfur. There is also evidence in the book that al-Hakkamat are not monolithic. Singers often praised female genital mutilation (FGM), despite the efforts of some Baggara to end the practice (59). Musa encountered informants who were critical of al-Hakkamat, but in general she downplays the criticisms.

This is a book that every student of the pastoralist societies of Sudan and Chad should read carefully. Musa does a fantastic job of transcribing and translating the songs of the al-Hakkamat. I was impressed with the breadth of coverage of this significant and singular institution. Musa raises many important questions about their influence. Are they driving forces in Baggara society, or merely poet-commentators, interpreting and reflecting back the events of the region and nation? Should they be promoted and encouraged, or vilified and shunned? Musa's book is a welcome addition to the "chorus" of academic voices in African studies trying to make sense of social voices such as Al-Hakkamat.

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For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Coplan, David. "Performance, Self-Definition, and Social Experience in the Oral Poetry of Sotho Migrant Mineworkers." *African Studies Review* 29 (1): 29–40. doi: [10.2307/524105](https://doi.org/10.2307/524105).

Drewal, Margaret Thompson. 1991. "The State of Research on Performance in Africa." *African Studies Review* 34 (3): 1–64. doi: [10.2307/524119](https://doi.org/10.2307/524119)

Hassan, Salah. 1993. "The Sudan National Democratic Alliance (NDA): The Quest for Peace, Unity and Democracy." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 21 (1–2): 14–25. doi: [10.1017/S1548450500004388](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1548450500004388)