

**35 EASA [Media Anthropology Network](#) E-Seminar on
Joseph Oduro-Frimpong's Working Paper
“Sakawa: On occultic rituals and cyberfraud in Ghanaian popular
cinema.”**

18 January – 1 February 2011

Welcome to the 35th EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar. Over the next two weeks we shall be discussing a working paper by Joseph Oduro-Frimpong entitled "Sakawa: On Occultic Rituals and Cyberfraud in Ghanaian Popular Cinema" (abstract below). If you haven't yet had time to read this paper, you can still do so now! You'll find a PDF of the paper on our site, http://www.media-anthropology.net/file/frimpong_rituals_cyberfraud.pdf

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. He currently works on popular media and contemporary social experience and has published in the International Journal of Communication (2009) and Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media (John D. H. Downing, ed., 2011). Previously his research focus was on interpersonal communication, with publications in Semiotica (2007) and the Journal of Pragmatics (2010).

The discussant will be Tilo Grätz who studied Social Anthropology, History and African Studies in Berlin at the Free University and Humboldt University. Tilo holds a PhD from Bielefeld University (1998), and obtained his habilitation degree in Social Anthropology at the University of Halle-Wittenberg in 2008. At present he is a guest professor at the Institute of Social Anthropology, Free University Berlin, and works as a Lecturer at the Martin-Luther-University, Halle-Wittenberg and the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences, Berlin.

As always you are all very welcome to contribute comments and questions after we've had the presenter's response to the discussant who will be posting his comments later today (Tuesday 18 Jan). To post please write directly to medianthro@easaonline.org (with cc. to j.postill@shu.ac.uk so that I can make sure we don't lose any messages en route). Please keep your messages brief and on-topic.

Feel free to forward this announcement to colleagues who are not on this list but may wish to participate in the seminar. To see PDF transcripts of previous papers and e-seminars, go to <http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

Tilo Grätz

Comment on Joseph Oduro-Frimpong “Sakawa: On Occultic Rituals and Cyberfraud in

Ghanaian Popular Cinema”

Dear members at the Medianthro mailing list, Thanks to John for entrusting me with the role of the discussant to Joseph’s paper for this e-seminar. Before discussing the text, please note that I neither do know Ghana very well, nor am I a specialist in Ghanaian films and Ghanaian media and political culture in general.

I am only in part familiar with methods of discourse analysis as applied to relevant public debates, and have not done research in the field of the occult and internet fraud in Africa. Therefore, these comments should be complemented by those colleagues who are much more familiar with Ghana, its cultural environment, and various electronic and small media.

The paper addresses the topic of cyber criminality in Ghana and its reverberations in particular popular narratives, media and public debates. This discursive field is, according to the author, primarily related to the significance of occult practices (sakawa, Hausa) as being potentially helpful for the (mainly young) cyber criminals to succeed (betray individuals) and to become wealthy. Occult rituals, supposed to be essential in order to succeed in these activities, represent strong elements of imageries significant to both active and future internet fraudsters and form part of wider popular narratives that also find their way into many video films. Proposing various pathways of understanding the meaning and significance of these discourses in the context of Ghanaian public culture (and beyond), the author mainly focuses on their representation in various public media formats, primarily video films, but also calendar-posters, Ghanaian newspapers as well as cartoons.

Employing both a profound discourse analysis and a deep content analysis of the respective films, the author relates various representations on these illicit activities to wider social and political issues and debates inside Ghanaian society, above all tensions between elites and young urban people living in precarious economic conditions. As far as I read & understood the paper, Joseph argues that the mentioned films provide a counter-discourse, opposed to those produced by Ghanaian political elites, visible above all in press articles. While the latter condemn any such fraudulent activities and blame their participants, the films open the way into a deeper insight into the socioeconomic conditions but also popular understandings of the contexts in which these young fraudsters operate.

The author convincingly demonstrates the strength of anthropological media studies that are able to include a variety of media forms, including popular media, and analyses them on an equal position, determines their place in changing national mediascapes, examines their content from different perspectives and ultimately relates their dominant narratives to current research topics in Africanist anthropology, here with regard to debates on the occult as part and parcel of contemporary idioms and comments on socioeconomic change and thus African perceptions of modernity.

Some questions and potential critical points (with all the reservations made above):

The author argues that at least since 2009, the fraudulent practices have gained a mediated attention on various levels. For me, it is however not fully clear why not before, and against potential other topics and issues. In other words, I still not fully understand why these films are in fact so popular, central all across Ghana (significant to all social and religious groups to the same extent?) I am sure the author could explore more "voices" than those (some few interviews and vendors' opinions) mentioned in the article. Furthermore, from my little knowledge on Ghanaian video films, I had the impression that these films follow in part a longer imaginary on the occult origins of wealth, a treaties with evil forces etc. characterising many Ghanaian (and also Nigerian) videos films obviously already since a longer time (see e.g. Austen/Saul 2010).

On a methodological level, I would expect more accounts on the positions and reflections of the producers of films, but also editors of newspaper articles, as these are certainly not directly detectable in their products, thus a better understanding on the process of production of these media forms. Following such an idea of methodological pluralism and the question raised above, one could expect more data with regard to the perception of these films by (basically not homogenous) audiences. The point about the elitist discourse refers to something which does not really comes as a surprise- do these elites ever have other options, to argue differently in public? Official statements are to my sense of a limited value; more varied strands of discourse produced by other actors (other media, religious groups, etc.) would enhance the scope of analysis, I guess. With regard to the references quoted (spelling - Camaroff?) one would expect some engagement with other current debates on the role of the occult (controversy Ranger /Ellis, ter Haar Meyer) or with the wider implications of internet frauds in an transnational perspective, including the controversial debates on the role of those (mainly in the west) who in turn are trying to ridicule these fraudsters.

Furthermore, some points made here are probably not that novel, at least not in the realm of Africanist anthropology (e.g. research on mediated discourses also beyond the West, the importance of popular media, debates on occult practices as parts of multiple modernities etc.). I am a little puzzled about the reasons and the way in which the authors celebrates the strength of ethnography in this paper, submitted to a circle of media anthropologists, – I think ethnography should generally be *conditio sine qua non* for any anthropological enterprise – including those in the realm of media anthropology – and is thus hardly something particularly noteworthy; and even the more so here, where the ethnographic methods and approaches (at least mentioned in this version of the article) are applied rather selectively(see above). By invoking a more ample discussion of fieldwork data I do not mean to question the central arguments made here and the way in which the author adequately addresses and contextualises contemporary media forms and their topics against the background of social and economic changes and their related crucial discourses in contemporary Ghanaian society.

I am sure that some more suggestions will be made by other colleagues, and hope that specialists on video films and Ghanaian popular media in particular will join the debate, thank you

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong

Dear All:

Join me to express my appreciation to Tilo for a very close reading of the paper as well as the questions and critical points here raised. Below, I attempt to address these questions and points. Apologies for the format used.

Comment: The author argues that at least since 2009, the fraudulent practices have gained a mediated attention on various levels. For me, it is however not fully clear why not before, and against potential other topics and issues. In other words, I still not fully understand why these films are in fact so popular, central all across Ghana (significant to all social and religious groups to the same extent?)

RESPONSE: One of the issues Tilo raises relate to how it is not clear in the paper the reason why the issue of sakawa did not gain media attention before the time noted in the paper. In the early versions of the paper, I had this question answered but had to take out when a colleague suggested I had to take it out. But now that I think about this 'answer' could be put in a footnote. So in the original answer I noted that although I do not know why the 'media blackout' on sakawa until the time it was given widespread coverage, I asserted that it might be just due to the political environment at that time. The year 2008 marked a watershed in Ghanaian political history as it was to signal if Ghanaians would bring back to power a previously highly unpopular political party (National Democratic Congress) or vote out the ruling National Party (which fulfilling its promise of developmental programs seen as nearly unparalleled in the country's history, yet partially fulfilled its promise of job creation). So prior to the December election, the (media) scene in Ghana was rife with political issues. The aftermath of the elections which brought the unlikely-to-win NDC to power, as the well as the political rhetorical gaffes of the new President dominated media attention? So if I am pressed to give a like factor that accounted for the why the media paid attention to sakawa at the time that it did, I'd say that it might have been the political environment at the time.

In terms of what makes the films, in general and those in the sakawa vein in particular are popular, there are numerous reasons. In my work, I found out that beyond being entertained, people found the morals in the films enriching and claimed to use these in their lives; for some people, they see the films as a means of understanding the realm of the hidden (spiritual world). There are people who claimed that such visualizations helped them to become good Christians as they are knowledgeable of the machinations of evil forces and are hence on the alert as not to be engaged in those activities.

For me, the sakawa phenomenon is a rich source through which I am examining two sets of issues. The first focuses on the discussion presented in this seminar paper. The second (forthcoming) examines the sakawa issue from the perspective material religion. From the perspective of the first focus (i.e. examining the two dominant but opposing discourses as to what gives rise to sakawa), I found it more profitable to include the various voices that were represented in the paper as I feel they support the point I was making. My hope is that this representation of “some few interviews and vendors’ opinion” is not construed as a result of quasi-ethnography. Indeed, my understanding of the term itself and its etymology, for example, took numerous conversations/interviews with both key informants and ordinary people to figure out. Although such a ‘barrier’ might easily be overcome by people deemed as foreign researchers, for a Ghanaian asking such seemingly simple question as ‘what is sakawa?’ it took a lot of hurdles to have answers to such a question. With regards to the films, one can watch them but it is with a contextual background that enables one to have a fuller appreciation of all the nuances. Thus by invoking the ethnographic approach as underlying this work, my aim is to capture the total experience of researching video films and its’ publics/audiences in Ghana (of which this piece is part of). Thus perhaps, I think to correct the perception that the paper might be laying claim to something that it is not, I should have a footnote that detail the length of fieldwork conducted and how this paper is part of a larger project (any suggestions in this direction is welcome).

Comment: [...] some points made here are probably not that novel, at least not in the realm of Africanist anthropology (e.g. research on mediated discourses also beyond the West, the importance of popular media, debates on occult practices as parts of multiple modernities etc.).

RESPONSE: I agree with Tilo’s observation on this. The points made were meant to situate this work within the pertinent literature. Due to how this work straddles aspects of different disciplinary areas, I was trying to ensure that each got their piece so to speak. Perhaps my wording in this area made it to appear that I was making novel claims. Suggestions to dispel this perception are welcome.

Comment: I am a little puzzled about the reasons and the way in which the author celebrates the strength of ethnography in this paper, submitted to a circle of media anthropologists, – I think ethnography should generally be *conditio sine qua non* for any anthropological enterprise – including those in the realm of media anthropology – and is thus hardly something particularly noteworthy.

RESPONSE: Tilo’s puzzlement is understandable, and perhaps my wording of the ethnographic approach sounds celebratory. My defense? - First, as many scholars have already noted the video films radically differ from ‘proto-African cinema’ in so many ways, for example, most themes are drawn from everyday issues (and are sometimes barely modified for the ‘screen’). As a result of this and other unique features, it has been pointed out that existing analytical approaches in film studies is either inadequate/inappropriate to investigate these films hence the call for an ethnographic

approach (Meyer; McCall; Haynes). Within the Ghanaian context, with the exception of Meyer's works (which amply answers this call), research in this direction is absent (not that it exist but doesn't utilize this perspective).

Second, within (global/international) media studies, the ethnographic approach is relatively new on this terrain (to borrow from Ginburg et. al's title).

So it is from the above background that I seemed to have been arguing for the relative strength of the ethnographic approach. And here I see how I need to have a footnote to address to this point.

Comment: Furthermore, from my little knowledge on Ghanaian video films, I had the impression that these films follow in part a longer imaginary on the occult origins of wealth, a treaties with evil forces etc. characterizing many Ghanaian (and also Nigerian) videos films obviously already since a longer time (see e.g. Austen/Saul 2010).

RESPONSE: Since this comment is open-ended I am assuming it is pointing out how unclear I make the connection with previous scholarship on the issue especially within the Ghanaian context (e.g Meyer 1995, 1999, 2001). If this is the case, I agree that I do not make the connection. In doing, I argue that while previous work have examined what Meyer terms as 'satanic riches' within the context of Pentecostalism, my focus has been to use such narratives as a spring board to investigate the root cause(s) of such practices.

Comment: The point about the elitist discourse refers to something which does not really comes as a surprise- do these elites ever have other options, to argue differently in public? Official statements are to my sense of a limited value; more varied strands of discourse produced by other actors (other media, religious groups, etc.) would enhance the scope of analysis, I guess.

RESPONSE: Here, I'd be hesitant to totally dismiss these 'predictably' elite political discourses as of limited value especially within the study of popular media. To utilize the logic of Willems (2011) rethinking of Jenkins (2006) concept of 'convergence culture' within the African media context, I note that the value of such elite discourses (on particular issues) is seen at the juncture that they merge with those of non-elites. From this vantage (at least as it evident in the paper), we witness "the crucial role of popular culture in political communication" and the added advantage of concomitantly being forced to begin to "theorize the contribution of popular culture to democratic engagement" (Willems 2011: 57).

Thank you for that response, Joseph.

John Postill

The floor is now open to further questions and comments on "Sakawa: On Occultic Rituals and Cyberfraud in Ghanaian Popular Cinema".

Please remember to keep your posts brief, addressing your post to medianthro@easaonline.org with cc. to j.postill@shu.ac.uk

John

Jenna Burrell

Dear Mediaanthro list and e-seminar participants,

I read Oduro-Frimpong's paper with immense interest as the phenomenon of Internet scamming and 'sakawa' in Ghana is something I'm actively following myself. I wanted to offer a few thoughts and comments (and some references) directed both at Oduro-Frimpong's observations and analysis and at Tilo Gratz's comments.

First, let me note that as an ethnographer working in Ghana since 2004 on Internet use, youth culture and Internet cafes I've been able to witness firsthand the evolution of the 'sakawa' phenomenon and have spoken to a number of 'sakawa boys' myself as well as some of their 'fellow travelers' who orbit this subculture - i.e. friends of the sakawa boys as well as other Internet café users who observe their activities. My most recent trip to Ghana was this past summer and I can confirm much of what Oduro-Frimpong noted about the new and very public circulation and discussion of these occult narratives of 'sakawa' and more generally Internet fraud among the political elite and in the popular media. I also watched the movie 'Dons of Sakawa' over the summer and scanned the newspapers each day for references to 'Internet fraud' and 'sakawa' which were frequent both in salacious tabloid stories and in more straightforward reports in the state-owned newspaper the Daily Graphic.

Looking back on my field notes and interviews on Internet café use in Accra from 2004-2005 the word 'sakawa' was rarely mentioned. The occultic dimensions were only nascent and very much underground. I spent a lot of time in Mamobi a poor, somewhat notorious neighborhood adjacent to the Nima and Newtown and an area that, to this day, is known as a hotbed for Internet scamming. This is where I first heard the word 'sakawa' then used to speak about Internet fraud, but without mention of anything occult. There were no references to 'sakawa' in the newspapers at that time nor had it made an appearance in popular media (hip-life music, movies, etc) during this 9-month period when I was doing my initial fieldwork. I did however talk to one young man who had sought spiritual assistance for making financial gains from Internet chat partners. He spoke of going to a series of malams, at one point making plans to travel to the north to get assistance from more spiritually powerful malams. These spiritual figures provided a special kind of drink to consume, a fetish object to bury in a particular way, and some instructions about salaka (offering alms), etc. One malam diagnosed him as suffering from witchcraft (an

aunt and and ex-girlfriend were implicated) that prevented him from making gains from his Internet scam activities.

I think the way Oduro-Frimpong situates this phenomenon in relation to the 'alternative modernities' literature is very apt. Though I think the suggestion that the political changeover has something to do with the recent emergence of sakawa and related occultic activities begs further explanation. The dramatic change I see in Ghana from my initial work in 2004 to recent work in 2010 is the greater degree of real, material success many young Internet scammers now seem to be having, or at least the more public way in which they display their gains. It is now easy to find young men in certain parts of town cruising up and down the street with a certain kind of newer model Toyota or Chrysler car, showing off designer clothes, carrying around several laptops to sell for cash, and splashing a lot of money around at drinking spots. What were once underground or unsuccessful activities have emerged into a very visible subculture. It is possible (though here I'm speculating) that the brazenness of these displays relates to changes in police power (many young scammers mentioned passing along a cut of their scam money to police) and may be related to change in political rule in that sense - its hard to say. The public response and pop culture narratives are likely a result of this new public evidence of success and the moral discomfort and uncertainty about such ambiguous avenues of financial gain and especially about gain among lower status youth (in what is still very much a gerontocratic society). Furthermore there's the technology aspect to this and an important thing to note is that the political elite and the older generation in general are not typically very fluent with the Internet and the Internet cafes are dominated by youth. Is the occult narrative perhaps also then a reflection of the mystery or magic surrounding the Internet for those not well acquainted with these technologies? The 'sakawa boys' themselves spoke much less of occult practices (though would have reasons to deny involvement if they used them) and spoke instead pragmatically about the 'format' of the scam, the persuasive story they told as yielding the 'boom' in successful scamming. These formats have changed with time becoming much more sophisticated than what I observed back in 2004-2005.

At any rate, I'm not sure the 'why now' question discussant Tilo Gratz asks is altogether that interesting. The nature of the narratives of occult practices and what purpose they serve seems the heart of the matter. The occultic dimension of these Internet activities and the zero-sum game they depict in which sacrifices in the form of shortening one's life (or the life of a loved one) in exchange for short term financial gain -- this is consistent with the recent history of alarm over occult practices and counter-occult activities that serves as a commentary on the modern disordering of income earning, wealth redistribution and reciprocity – a theme running from the colonial era until now in Ghana with some relevant prior work on anti-witchcraft cults (see McLeod M. 1975 and Parish 2002) and the more recent work of Birgit Meyer.

I think the emergence of this societal alarm (moral panic?) and the occult narratives connected to Internet scamming is important in another way because it counters an emerging Western discourse (as in the Western media coverage of West African

scamming) that equates weak legal enforcement (that scammers go about unpenalized in these countries) with an absent or pathological morality in these societies. The occult narratives suggest instead that there is considerable alarm over these practices. Among the scammers I spoke with none recognized any threat from the police, however almost universally they were concerned with being found out by family and suffering their disapproval or of being expelled or distanced from family and also from tangible, financial family support (which some were already experiencing). Scammers are by no means unequivocally celebrated in Ghanaian urban society, by political elites or anyone else - there's at best a strong ambivalence.

Another interesting thing to note is the way 'sakawa' has expanded to be used beyond reference to the Internet in the discourse of political elites. For example when the NDC government released a proposal for the national budget, members of the opposition party (the NPP) described it as a 'sakawa' budget. See - <http://www.modernghana.com/news/205352/1/sakawa-budget.html>

One mismatch I see in Oduro-Frimpong's paper is where he suggests his aim is to grasp a sense of why youth do sakawa (get involved in Internet scams and/or occult practices related to the Internet) but without in fact talking to any of these youth, relying principally on a media (video film) depiction of these motives. It's uncertain, in fact, whether youth ARE indeed involved in occult practices and to what extent or whether this is primarily a publicly circulating narrative and kind of moral panic among non-Internet users and elders. The practices of scamming Oduro-Frimpong refers to are a bit dated also suggesting some conversations with some of those involved in these practices is needed. For example, many scammers are now posing not as seductive young African women, but as white Americans or Europeans on dating websites seeking white dating partners. After wooing the scam target they then construct a story of having traveled to (and gotten into some sort of trouble) in Ghana. Furthermore, the paper considers the plight of youth and the misunderstanding of political elite, but doesn't really get to the bottom of the occult dimensions (beyond the description of them) that Oduro-Frimpong suggests he seeks to explain so I would encourage delving further into this matter. The occult narratives are very new, and a dense and complex cultural phenomenon that next to nothing has been written about. Likewise I believe Oduro-Frimpong is the first to consider the local media coverage, and pop culture imaginings of this phenomenon in Ghana. So the paper is very timely. I would encourage the author in the pursuit of this very interesting topic to complement his text analysis with interviews and participant-observation to answer some of the questions he poses. He's likely to have a much easier time than I did (as a white woman) building rapport and gaining trust with the young men involved in these activities.

As far as other references -

There's a Nigerian novel that has a very similar narrative to the 'dons of sakawa' movie, but without the occult aspects. It is by Adoabi Tricia Nwaubani, *I Do Not Come to You By Chance*.

I also have a paper out on how Ghanaian scammers explain their strategies and reasoning behind pursuing Internet scamming:

Burrell, J. (2008). "Problematic Empowerment: West African Internet Scams as Strategic Misrepresentation." *Information Technologies and International Development* 4(4): 15-30 - which considers at length why young men do Internet scams (but not the occultic dimensions which had not emerged at the time).

Also, Daniel Smith, an anthropologist at Brown did some earlier work in this space in Nigeria dealing with some of the issues of technology, morality and occult belief:

Smith, D. J. (2001). "Ritual Killing, 419, and Fast Wealth: inequality and the popular imagination in southeastern Nigeria." *American Ethnologist* 28(4): 803-826.

Smith, D. J. (2006). "Cell Phones, Social Inequality and Contemporary Culture in Southeastern Nigeria." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 40(3): 496-523.

For more on youth perspectives in relation to hip-life music which Oduro-Frimpong mentions see:

Shipley, J. W. (2009). "Aesthetic of the Entrepreneur: Afro-Cosmopolitan Rap and Moral Circulation in Accra, Ghana." *Anthropological Quarterly* 82(3): 631-668.

To Joseph Oduro-Frimpong - my hope is that these comments and suggestions are helpful in considering and further developing this paper. I'm very pleased to see this topic taken up and explored and subjected to this public discussion.

Jenna Burrell
Assistant Professor
School of Information
UC-Berkeley
<http://people.ischool.berkeley.edu/~jenna/>

Tilo Grätz

Dear Joseph,

thank you for your comments, they made many things much more clear; and I also learned a lot from Jenna's comments.

There is, perhaps, a general misunderstanding with regard to the term ethnography and its implications, but it seems to me that this forms part of a more general debate beyond this article (but perhaps worth to address in of the subsequent EASA workshops?)

Hope to see your article published soon,
Yours
Tilo

John Postill

Like Jenna Burrell, I too was wondering about whether the elite (and other) discourses surrounding Sakawa in Ghana may be cast as a moral panic.

For instance, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) see an analogy between moral panics and technological disasters (esp. involving toxic substances). In contrast to natural disasters, in technological disasters there is often a 'folk devil' or a human agent who gets the blame, i.e. there is a moral dimension at work, these authors suggest, see <http://shortlinks.co.uk/30ch>

Any thoughts on this?

John

Reference

Ben-Yehuda, Nachman; Goode, Erich (1994). Moral panics: the social construction of deviance. Oxford: Blackwell.

Misha Patel

Hello Joseph

I suppose, having read the thoughts and points raised by Tilo, Jenna and John, that my question is a little clearer now - from the point of view of newer influences in everyday social realities - from the broad range of material circumstance to apparitions of community in the form of screen-based lifestyles, and the daily challenge of maintaining what has in material terms been achieved (income, objects, perceptions of symbolic pride, the regard of others, pride in or regard of self) - how is sakawa and its performance in these films received by, for example, elders, of community?

Does community also include screen-based lifestyle as participant tool or instrument? Or does it tend to be received as a leisure-time activity and contribution to positive, what might be described in the UK as a 'feel-good' factor to the quotidian?

Misha Patel

Misha Patel misha@mishapatel.orangehome.co.uk

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong

Dear List:

Apologies for my tardiness in responding to the various comments related to the paper. I just had to deal with a serious cold which has prevented me from making this discussion as lively as I had hoped.

So, hanks very much to Jenna for her comments, observations and encouragements and the pertinent refs she provided. And on a side note I wish we had met in Ghana during my stay from January-August 2010 for an equally lively sakawa conversations but I guess this forum also serves the purpose as well). Also, thanks to Tilo for seeing potential in the paper as a possible future published paper.

So some responses:

Comment: "... I think the suggestion that the political changeover has something to do with the recent emergence of sakawa and related occultic activities beg further explanation"

RESPONSE: So to clarify, I do not suggest that the political changeover has something to do with the emergence of sakawa and the occultic activities that come with it. The point I made (per Tilo's 'why now' question) was one of the strongest possible reasons I could think of for the media blackout on sakawa – beginning in Summer 2008 when I was in Ghana (when such stories were rife in most Accra suburbs) – was perhaps because of the pre-election fever and also the unexpected results of that election.

COMMENTS

1. "The practices of scamming Oduro-Frimpong refers to are a bit dated also suggesting some conversations with some of those involved in these practices is needed"
2. "One mismatch I see in Oduro-Frimpong's paper is where he suggests his aim is to grasp a sense of why youth do sakawa (get involved in Internet scams and/or occult practices related to the Internet) but without in fact talking to any of these youth, relying principally on a media (video film) depiction of these motives".
3. "Furthermore, the paper considers the plight of youth and the misunderstanding of political elite, but doesn't really get to the bottom of the occult dimensions (beyond the description of them) that Oduro-Frimpong suggests he seeks to explain so I would encourage delving further into this matter".

RESPONSE

So regarding the scamming practices, as I noted in the paper, there are many different types (and Jenna's addition is a testament). Definitely those practices I heard about in

2008, had significantly changed when I went back in 2010. And even during my eighth-month stay, new forms kept emerging. As I indicated in the paper, the examples I noted was for illustrative purposes.

Regarding comment comment 2, I do not see a mismatch. If anything I see equally valid ways of exploring the question from different perspectives. Definitely, exploring that question from the perspective of those alleged to be involved is one route. Exploring this same question via media reports of political elites' 'elucidation' on the matter as well as popular video films' take on the issue are also valid. What I see lacking in my paper in re-reading (which I will rectify) which makes 'dry' is the absence of my interviewees voices which makes the paper to read as pure media analysis.

With comment 3, I am sure Jenna might agree with me that it warrants a separate paper whose route she has gracefully sketched out (for me) and I will be looking into it.

Estrid Sørensen

Dear list,

first of all thanks to Joseph, Tilo and Jenny for your writings and discussions, of whom I have already learnt a lot.

I do research on how harm to children through media come to be known and practiced in different areas of German society (science, industry, regulation, children's gaming practices), and my questions to Joseph (and Jenny and others) arise out of that interest, and without any expertise in Ghana or African media (even though I play with the idea of extending my research to a comparison with Ghana):

1. Joseph's paper discusses 'elite' comments on sakawa that among other things identify these practices as harmful to the young men practicing it and to the image of Ghana as a nation. I am very curious about the reception of the videos such as "Dons in Sakawa". Is there any film regulation in Ghana, and if so, how have they dealt with this (and similar) films? Compared to Germany it seems surprising that no initiatives are taken (at least not in the quotes selected for Joseph's text) to restrict the circulation of such videos - especially to children. If possible to imagine something similar happening in Germany, one of the first reactions would very likely to call for classification of the movies. Especially because I have learned from the Internet that a very famous Ghanaian actor plays a main part in the movie, which could bring about fear of imitation among youth of the film practices.

2. On the other hand, it is unclear to me, whether the film actually condemns Sakawa, and thus can be seen as a critique of such practices (as Jenny wrote, one woman said she had learned how to become a better Christian through the film - i.e. 'anti-magic')? Which would probably render the discussion of regulation irrelevant.

3. Thinking about Sakawa in relation to 'harmful media' I also wonder if the term only refers to cyberfraud with occult aspects, or does sakawa indicate any cyberfraud? If it is the latter, the particular discourses of sakawa related to the occult (such as Dons in Sakawa) may be a way of insisting on the 'harmful' character of Sakawa to the young men, to Ghana, on top of it being criminal. An analogy: linking smoking to its effects on passive smokers evokes not just a health discourse, but also a moral discourse.

4. How common is the Sakawa practices 'compared to' the media (not press) representations of the phenomenon? Are the 'elite' discussions primarily caused by the sakawa practices, or are they (as well) reactions to the videos etc. on sakawa? This issue matters, because it is crucial for how to interpret the politician's reactions. (Even though, if the Sakawa media discourse is indeed dominant, these two may be impossible to keep apart.)

5. This leads me to my final comment: It seems questionable to me to make a straightforward comparison between elite utterances in the press and a fictional movie video as both 'reflecting' Sakawa in Ghanaian society. Those are two so very different media, and it would be utterly surprising, if politicians started providing the kind of details a fictive cinematic narrative does. If we do take into account the different genres and the different expectations to these different genres as well as the different contexts in/ through which they are created and read/used, the critique of the lack of richness of the politicians' discourse seems less to the point.

All best,
Estrid Sørensen
<estrid.sorensen@hu-berlin.de>

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong

Hello Misha:

I hope all is well. In answering your first question, I did not investigate the reception of the sakawa films in particular with elders of any community in Accra. However, in interviews with audiences of the video films in general, especially in regards to their interests in the films, some of my interviewees (and here I am referring to those who primarily watch those films made in English symbolized in what people termed as 'Shirley Frimpong Manso movies' – because this female makes all her films in English) noted parts of their interest lie in seeing the latest fashion as worn by the actresses. In my participant-observations of watching these films with audiences, I observed that audiences watch these films both as a leisure activity while simultaneously commenting on the issues raised in the films.

For those not familiar with viewing practices in Ghana, film watching is quite a different

activity (compared to what in the west) as audiences audibly comment on all aspects of the film till its end. It is through these commentaries that one learns how aspects of the movie connect with wider social and political issues. Regarding your question 'Does community also include screen-based lifestyle as participant tool or instrument? Can you please rephrase it for me?

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Joseph Oduro-Frimpong
Doctoral Candidate (Socio-Cultural Anthropology)
Department of Anthropology
Southern Illinois University,
Carbondale, IL, 62901
U.S.A.

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong

Hello List:

Find my responses to John and Estrid in attached document. I sent this earlier today but not sure if it came through.

John

Certainly I think the sakawa issue can be viewed/cast from the perspective of moral panic. This is much the case when one examines the phenomenon from the features that Cohen (2002) utilizes to discuss moral panics such:

- The use of 'folk devils'
- most of the Ghanaian **media's** (both print and radio) sensational reports (*P & P* - People and Places) and the *Daily Guide* (and the **public reaction**) especially evident in the case of SAKAWA SNAKE BOYS story that caused some panic in the environs of Accra; the Ghanaian **public reaction** to/concern with the phenomenon evidenced through the endless recycle of sakawa stories which perhaps stems from a generational gap in terms of lack detailed understanding of internet use (as suggested by Jenna) or even from illiterate youths.
- The interest of **politicians** in the issue and pronouncements suggesting legislating laws to deal with the phenomenon.
- The role of certain influential 'moral entrepreneurs' of **interest groups** such as Ghana Christian Council as well as the Muslim Council who make appeals and call for an end to such new societal 'canker'.

Cohen, S. (2002). *Folk devils and moral panics* (3rd Edition). London: Routledge.

Estrid

With regard to the reception of what can be termed as 'sakawa films' (*Mallam Issa Kawa* – parts 1-11); *Dons in Sakawa*; *Agya Koo Sakawa*; *Sakawa 419* etc) by their sheer

‘duplication’ by different producers, one can say they were well received. Moving beyond this speculation, my interviews with Socrate Safo (the producer of Mallam Issa Kawa) as well as films vendors regarding how the films did on the market reveal that they films did very well. As Safo notes, it was due to this success that motivated him to continue to make the various parts after the initial 1-4. Your question about film regulation and the sakawa films create the impression that the films prompted the political discourse on sakawa. On the contrary, it is rather the cumulative sensational media reports of sakawa that prompted these political responses (see titles photographs I took of the first Daily Graphic front page report and an opinion piece in the same paper below):



It is from this perspective that it is not surprising that no initiatives were taken by the government to restrict the circulation of sakawa films (or most of the films in general). In any case, most of the sakawa films (all of which I have watched) can/could not be censored simply because they are close dramatization of rumors and in a way speaks to how people are concerned with the issue. From this perspective, most of the movies

mirror societal concerns.

The films do condemn sakawa practices in various forms such as how the participants die, go mad or decide to forsake the practice altogether and to strive for honest living. So obviously here, although the films reveal dark secrets of sakawa practices, their depiction of such secrets is not meant as blue-prints to be followed, but as means through which to condemn the practice.

The term ‘sakawa’ has now moved beyond its confines of cyberfraud and occult practices to cover/explain any form of fraudulent activity or deceit in either popular, interpersonal or political discourse (in the latter, the term denotes [to borrow Akrang-Parry’s words] ‘the political economy of corruption and struggles against poverty’). [See the title of Kwesi Biney’s article “Political Sakawa vs Cyber Sakawa below]



The above responses, I hope provide an answer to Estrid’s comment no. 5. But in order not to assume anything I will reply to that comment. I think the comment stems from Estrid’s understanding of the political elite’s statements emanating from watching the video films. Of course, if this is the case then the elites’ comment that I examine would just be mere parroting and not worthy of scrutiny and comparison. However, since the elites’ comments do not emanate from the films, it crucial to see how these different discourses address the same topic. Furthermore, examining the elite discourses side by side of with those the films in particular (and popular media in general) allows us to deeply understand “the way in which ordinary people engage with political elites through the state and its media outlets” (Willems 2011: 46)

References

Willems, W. (2011). At the crossroads of the formal and popular: Convergence culture and new publics in Zimbabwe. In Herman Waaserman (ed), *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa* (pp. 46-62). Routledge.

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong

Dear List:

I just came across this article by Birgit Meyer titled "Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of the Medium (Social Anthropology, 19, 1, 2010). A section of the paper briefly touches on sakawa and thought it might enrich our discussion. The paper is also part of a special issue on "What is a medium? Theologies, technologies and aspirations" and the articles there might be of general interest.

Sincerely,

Joseph

John Postill

Dear All

Our Media Anthropology Network e-seminar on Joseph Oduro-Frimpong's paper "Sakawa: On Occultic Rituals and Cyberfraud in Ghanaian Popular Cinema" has now come to an end.

Warm thanks to Joseph for responding to comments while battling a cold, to our discussant Tilo Grätz and to all of you who've posted comments and questions. There'll be a PDF of this session up on our site as soon as we can get it ready.

Our next presenter will be Francine Barone (University of Kent) who'll be giving a paper titled "New media: A case study of Fotolog and changing online/offline leisure practices in Figueres, Spain" (see abstract below). This e-seminar will run from 15 to 29 March. Then from 3 to 17 May Kristin Vold Lexander (University of Oslo) will present a working paper on multilingual texting in Senegal.

Before that, and as previously announced, sometime this month (exact dates TBA) we shall be holding an e-discussion on Wikileaks chaired by Martijn de Koning (Radboud University, Nijmegen).

John

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong

Hi Estrid:

There exist film regulation in Ghana through the National Film and Video Censors Board. The board ensures that, amongst other things, all films released have appropriate label classification. But the board faces so many challenges such as adequate personnel to handle the numerous films that are released virtually everyday, those that are coming in outside the country and adequate checks on distributors who are somehow gatekeepers of these locally produced and foreign films. But in the least the board exist and have from time to time flexed their muscles when producers and distributors flout their rules. In terms of how sakawa is portrayed in the movies, it is framed in a way that doesnt glorify the phenomenon at all and all those who engaged in this are eventually punished/die.

Such portrayal follows closely the concert party tradition that ensures that such stories have morals to teach. With the censorship board, they allow virtually all films that follow this trend to pass through even if it shows some nudity, (which used one of their 'no-nos') - as recent movies like *4 Play*, *Hot Fork* and *Big Girlz* indicate. I hope this helps.

Let me know if you have more questions.

Cheers,

Joseph