

Sakawa: On Occultic Rituals and Cyberfraud in Ghanaian Popular Cinema

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Working paper presented to the Media Anthropology Network e-seminar
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)

18 Jan- 1 Feb 2011

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/>

. . . [M]any lives are now inextricably linked with representations, and thus we need to incorporate the complexities of expressive representation . . . into our ethnographies, not only as technical adjuncts but as primary material with which to construct and interrogate our representations. Appadurai (1996:64) **Modernity At Large**

I. Introduction

This paper is generally concerned with popular narratives of a type of “computer-assisted crime” (Wall 2010: 99) in Ghana labeled as ‘sakawa’. Sakawa narratives allege that participants engaged in this fraudulent activity, who are to a large extent the youth (mostly male in the age bracket of 16-40), indulge in occultic ritual practices to enhance their potential to defraud people and become wealthy. Such rituals, it is further alleged, come with dire negative consequences to participants. These results include any type of ill-health such as insanity and/or ultimately death within a short time after achieving one’s desire. Why do people indulge in these risky occultic rituals knowing the consequences? I explore this question in terms of how it is addressed in the Ghanaian public sphere. Specifically, I examine this question within discourses of Ghanaian political elite¹ on the issue through media reports as well as Ghanaian popular video film² series on sakawa.

In the sections below, I orient the reader with a further understanding of what is entailed in sakawa. This information is gleaned from scheduled interviews with certain key informants³ and as well as casual conversations in Ghana. Following this discussion, this research shows how it responds to recent calls in global media studies and media anthropology to internationalize the field and utilize ethnographic field methods respectively. In this same section, I spell out the perspective within which I situate the video films in general and the sakawa film series in particular. I follow this exegesis with how discussions on sakawa contribute to recent discourses on modernity and occult manifestations in anthropology. In the next major sections, I summarize and discuss the perspective of one Ghanaian popular video film, *Dons in Sakawa*. Immediately after this, I present and examine the discourses of certain Ghanaian political elite on sakawa. I conclude the paper with ethnographic insights from Ghana to show how the film’s thematic

¹ I use this term to refer to the discourses of people “in socio-political power structure that develop fundamental policies, make the most influential decisions, and control the overall modes of their execution” (van Dijk 1995: 4).

² The history of the emergence the popular video film in Ghana has been thoroughly dealt with in Meyer (e.g. 1999, 2001). See also Garritano (2008)

³ The choice of these informant rested on their claim to know others involved in the practice.

discussion of sakawa provides nuanced insights as to the causes of sakawa than those of political elites.

Understanding Sakawa

Sakawa is a Hausa term that consists of the root ‘saka-’ [to put it in] and ‘wa [a simultaneously *past* and *plural* affix]. Combined, these affixes literally mean ‘to [have] put something in’⁴. Through my interviews, I learned that sakawa is a coinage by youth fraudsters from deprived communities in Accra such as Nima, Mamobi and Lagos Town⁵. The word indexes an ‘*azaa*’ [fraudulent] activity where cyber fraudsters’ alleged involvement in occultic rituals is aimed to compel their victims to accede to their demands⁶. These alleged rituals include taking an oath not to divulge sakawa secrets and to fully abide by sakawa rules; inflicting wounds that never heals; sleeping in coffins for specified days at cemeteries (maximum being a week); carrying coffins in the dead of the night at road-intersections while being semi-naked; drinking human blood obtained either from murdering someone or from discarded female menstrual pads; eating contents from rubbish dumps for a required number of days; abstinence from bath-taking before and after making a *hit*⁷; spiritually sacrificing one’s manhood (which manifests either as impotence or not being able to have children)⁸. Other alleged ritual rules to be followed after one makes a hit include spending one’s wealth in one’s specific ways such as not owning any permanent fixed structures or, in the case of owning such building, entering the building backwards. Furthermore, one also has to purchase buying new ‘luxury’ cars as Toyota Matrix; Chrysler, and Hummer. According to popular accounts, the consequences of violating these ritual rules include either losing all the wealth, going mad, death or all of the above.

In terms of the strategies that these fraudsters allegedly use, there is a plethora of these but I will discuss only two for illustrative purposes. One of them is in the area of sakawa males pretending to be females or males depending on dating sites they utilize. Here, these fraudsters scout these sites and examine profiles of males/females who are interested in Ghanaians or Africans for relationships. They would then create profiles that match those of their potential ‘*mugu*’ [client]. Here they use photographs either taken from the web or that of a female accomplice. Another type is where emails are sent out to potential clients that inform them about a business deal or the fact that the person is a royal now in possession of some ancestral royal gold that needs to be sold. After creating an online profile, a sakawa person will send baiting emails which establish the basis for an initial friendship if the ‘*mugu*’ responds. The fraudsters

⁴ A minority view of the origin of the word states that ‘sakawa’ is corrupted version of the Akan phrase “hye kawa” [to wear a ring]. This phrase denotes magical rings that spiritualists mandate fraudsters to wear on their index finger and to be used at all times to press the ‘enter’ key on the keyboard when communicating with potential ‘clients’. The belief is that if the ringed finger is used to execute the command, then all the demands in the email message is infused with a spiritual force that compels the client to accede to all the requests in the mail.

⁵ Interview with the Editor of Daily Guide, March 2010, Accra.

⁶

⁷ In sakawa lingua culture, a ‘*hit*’ principally refers to a successful receipt of funds transferred through money transfer process like *Western Union* or *Money Gram* as well as other material items. A ‘*mugu*’ is a person about to be defrauded or actually defrauded or still on the hook to be defrauded. Thus, in the latter case, a ‘sakawa boy’ might say ‘*makyi no mugu*’ [I’ve got the client on a hook].

⁸ One of the alleged rituals is the spiritual sacrifice of one’s manhood. This type of sacrifice comes up in an interview which the journalist Akumaa Zimbi conducted with a young man who claimed he nearly got involved in the practice and he knows colleagues who indulged in the practice: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKn4f8xZrsE>

use this stage to profile and assess the generosity or seriousness of the client. Testing this characteristic involves requesting items like cologne, lingerie, explicit or near explicit pictures of the client. If this is accomplished, then the stage is set to demand bigger sums of money.

Research Contributions

In my quest to understand what fuels the practice of sakawa amongst Ghanaian youth especially through Ghanaian popular films, I utilized the ethnographic approach to understand the context from which the films draw their narratives. This approach is in response to recent calls in media anthropology where scholars encourage the use of ethnographic fieldwork methods as a “heuristic trail towards a better understanding of the dynamics between global forces and local specificities” (Patrick and Kraidy 2003: 16; Abu-Lughod 2005; Algan 2003; Rofel 1993). Furthermore in utilizing popular films from the Global South as a route to realize my research goal, I contribute to filling two crucial gaps in international media studies. Here, scholars note the near absence of research on popular media genres in the field (Wasserman 2011). As well, researchers draw attention to the need to internationalize current scholarship by de-Westernizing the field (Downing 1996; Park and Curran 2000; Nyamnjoh 2011). This call is in view of the discipline’s universalizing theorizations and examples, which mainly derive from the Global North (Wasserman 2011: 7; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002; Kim 2008; Thussu 2009).

This paper’s overall focus on sakawa narratives also contribute to recent approaches in the social sciences that now incorporate the “popular epistemological order” (Nyamnjoh 2001:29) in the quest of a holistic understanding of diverse experiences of modernity. These approaches to elucidating and comprehending contemporary social reality espouse what Castoriadis (1994: 138) terms as “radical imagination”. Here scholars utilize the simultaneous aspects of “‘real’ and ‘fictitious’ (Castoriadis 1994: 138) or what Meyer (2003: 15) terms as “fantasy versus reality” to deepen our understanding of “the acceptability and plausibility of the regimes of thought that we call rationality or even ontology” (Miller 2010: 41). Also, the discussion contributes to the debates in global media studies in expanding the contours of the discipline’s “critical considerations of media globalization” (Wasserman 2011: 7) that plays out in Ghana. As well, the discussion here extends recent debates in the social sciences that recognizes manifestations of the occult in contemporary life as “emblematic of societies undergoing rapid change, rather than of backward-looking and traditional communities” (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2001: 17; Cameroff and Cameroff 1999; Geschiere 1997; McCall 2004; Meyer 2003; Pels 2003). Last, the paper contributes to the current discussions on anthropology of modernity. Here, scholars view contemporary global experiences in all parts of the world not through the prism of “narrow teleological terms as progress, development and modernization” (Moore and Sander 2001:19; Meyer 2003). Rather, scholars’ view modernity from a nuanced perspective variously labeled as ‘alternative modernities’ (Appadurai 1991), ‘parallel modernities’ (Larkin 1997), or ‘concurrent modernities’ (Adamu 2011). Central to these labels proffering an understanding of the simultaneity of contemporary global experience anywhere in the world, is their call for “regarding the modernities of [other parts of] the world [not] as pale reflections of Euro-American original” (Breckenridge and Appadurai 1995: 1, 2).

Research Perspectives

The unique features of the films, which the sakawa series are part of, especially in terms of their “aesthetics, narrative structure, and message” (Meyer 1999: 95), makes me approach them as contemporary African popular arts (Barber 1995; Fabian 1997; Haynes 2000; Meyer 1999; McCall 2002). Here, I treat the films as “a complex of distinctive expressions of life experiences” (Fabian 1997: 18) that reflect “hybrid [sounds and] images which mediate between aspirations and experiences in postcolonial society” (Meyer 1999: 97; Barber 1997). However, in view of the current democratic dispensation in Ghana, I do not regard the video-films’ reflections on contemporary Ghanaian social realities as disguised discourses with hidden transcripts (Scott 1990; Yankah 1995). Rather, I treat the video-films as alternative media (Downing 2008) partaking in democratic discourses and providing differing views on Ghanaian social issues. Cumulatively, I approach the video films just like other popular syncretic or glocalised forms like hip-life (Oduro-Frimpong 2009), that abandons “reified notions of an authentic African Culture struggling against the West, and urges to think about these two sides together” (Meyer 1999: 112).

On Occult Discourses in Anthropology

The sakawa narratives are obviously enmeshed in the context of computer-mediated interaction. This married nature of occult discourses within contemporary social experience of globalization (and media) is part of a larger dialogue of ‘occult discourses’ in anthropology (Austen 1993; Bastian 1993, 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997, 2003; Meyer 1999b; McCall 2002; Moore and Sanders 2001; Pels 2003). Evident in these works is the view that occult forces and discourses are not under the monopoly of Africans, and also such beliefs constitute an integral part of most people’s quotidian life around the world (Comaroff and Comaroff 199; Tholden van Velzen and van Wetering 2001; Sanders and Moore 2001). More importantly, these researchers point out such ‘occult discourses’ are not reflections of “popular but misguided beliefs” (van Dijk 2000: 7) but rather part of “systems that are the basis of socio-political cognitions of groups . . . [that] organize social group attitudes [and beliefs] consisting of schematically organized general opinions about relevant social issues” (van Dijk 1995a, p. 135). Further such beliefs are not vestiges of African ‘tradition’. Rather, these discourses are a coherent set of ideas or beliefs through which people make sense of “modern manifestations of uncertainties, moral disquiet and unequal rewards and aspirations in the contemporary moment (Moore and Sanders 2001:3; also Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 284; van Dijk 2000, Meyer 1995).

It is in view of conceiving of occult discourses in our contemporary world as “new magic for new situations” (Comaroff and Comaroff 199: 284) that I approach sakawa narratives as ‘collective fantasies’ (Tholden van Velzen and van Wetering 2001: 18). In adopting this notion as a way of understanding these narratives, I am not suggesting that it is a coherent framework shared by *all* Ghanaians to explain the connection between the enactment of occultic practices and the success of cyberfraud. The concept lies allows for certain flexibility in exploring “new possibilities . . . with empirically unproven relations between phenomena . . . without the necessity of turning them into a coherent, ordered system” (Meyer 1995: 248). Within such system, collective fantasies “often employ the realm ‘realm of darkness’ in order to express and clarify existential questions” (Meyer 1995: 248). From this perspective, I demonstrate how

sakawa narratives are popular in Ghana precisely because they express discontent with certain economic and social situations in the country. Such an expression, as couched in sakawa narratives, is a “retooling of culturally familiar technologies” (Comaroff and Comaroff 199: 284) of previously existing narratives involving religious beliefs and (alleged) practices that go with satanic/occultic riches (Meyer 1995).

II. Sakawa in Ghanaian Public Media



Figure 1: Sakawa calendar-poster (picture by author)

In spite of the massive circulation of sakawa narratives in Accra, Swedru, Kumasi and Cape Coast at least in 2008, these stories did not feature as an issue of social concern in both the

official Ghanaian media and government discussions. Unsurprisingly, in the arena of popular fiction, and calendar-posters (see Figure 1) one witness how these popular sources place the issue of sakawa in the wider public domain. In interviews, vendors who sold these posters at Nkrumah Circle and Kantamanto in Accra noted how these posters attracted crowds and initiated serious discussions on the issue of sakawa. In fact when I hung different pieces of these calendars in front a relative's hair salon at Nii Boi Town in Accra, the calendar posters drew audiences, whose comments suggested the reality of sakawa.

Yet, in mainstream media, it was not until May 2009 that one observed sustained attention on sakawa beginning first with *The Daily Graphic* report in May 2009. Closely following this report was the first film series on sakawa titled *Mallam Issa Kawa* (Socrate Safo Productions). Since May 2009, mainstream media has continued their coverage of sakawa⁹. How has sakawa been critiqued in the Ghanaian public media sphere? I explore this question by examining two principal but ideologically contrastive narratives on the practice: Ghanaian political elite discourse and popular Ghanaian sakawa film series. In what follows, I provide a succinct summary of one popular video series on sakawa. Utilizing ethnographic insights as well as parts of a different sakawa film, I discuss how the popular video's treatment of sakawa provides a rather nuanced and holistic view on the issue. I then present newspaper reports of Ghanaian political elites' discourse on sakawa after which I thematically discuss these leaders understanding of what fuels sakawa practices.

Popular Sakawa Video-Films: Dons in Sakawa¹⁰

This movie revolves around three leading characters – Hakeem, Mike, and Justin. Through the initial scenes and their conversation the viewer becomes aware of two things. First, these friends have graduated from the well-respected University of Ghana at Legon. Second they have aspirations of securing good jobs and leading a fulfilling upper-middle class life due to their college education. However, as the film progresses we note that after three years, Hakeem has not secured a job, in spite of graduating with First Class Honors in Computer Science. Hakeem's joblessness contributes to his eventual separation with his fiancée. The separation stems from Hakeem coming home one early afternoon, after his search “for non-existent jobs”, to witness his fiancée having sex in their bedroom with her boss. The fiancée defends her action as doing what it takes to care for both of them since Hakeem has “no Cedi¹¹ tied to his name”. When Hakeem became angrier at this statement, she rhetorically asks him how he thought she was able to “clothe and feed and take care of [his] needs” when he was not doing it himself.

Mike and Justin on the other hand work part-time for Chief Titus. This man is a notorious fraudster who closely collaborates with government personnel to supply him with authentic documents for his fraudulent activities¹². On other part of their time, Mike and Justin are also involved in ‘small scale’ internet fraud and blackmail. After not seeing one another for four years since finishing college, Mike accidentally meets Hakeem and rescues him from being publicly beaten by paying for Hakeem's bill at a local food restaurant. Hakeem's trouble stems from his

⁹ See a most recent report in August 2010 (as of writing this paper): <http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/video?id=7617860&syndicate=syndicate§ion=>

¹⁰ Watch a trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIJBEQIPOUk>

¹¹ This is name of the Ghanaian currency

¹² Here, it is not clear if their working for Chief is due to unemployment or just greed.

inability to pay for food he had consumed, as a male youth stole his wallet at that restaurant. After this incident, Mike attempts to convince Hakeem to join him and Justin in their cyberfraud business as they have decided not to work for Chief. This pair parted ways with Chief Titus because they felt they were not being adequately compensated for their services. Initially, Hakeem refused to be involved in ‘anything illegal’ but the harsh realities of unemployment force him to change his mind. However, these colleagues realize that in spite of Hakeem’s expertise in hacking online credit-card databases and following every known script in scam business, their attempts yield very minimum returns¹³. Unbeknownst to these amateur cyber fraudsters, consistent success in the cyberfraud business depended on applying additional different set rules. As these colleagues later learn from a spiritualist, in the world of computer assisted fraud “using your brains to mesmerize your clients is no longer enough; you must control their hearts and minds . . . to [let them] do your bidding without hesitation”. Through a close friend, Mike becomes aware of the tenets of this ‘extra’ knowledge as being closely connected with the spiritual world. Mike and Hakeem convinces Justin – who initially did not “want to be involved in any voodoo shit”- about visiting the Shrine of Lord Calipha, “. . . Giver of Wealth Immeasurable”. Here, Lord Bokka, the Custodian of the Shrine of Lord Calipha, makes these supplicants undergo a three-stage ritual. The first stage involves a blood covenant that officially binds the supplicants to abide by the rules and regulations of Lord Calipha. The second stage involves spiritual cleansing as well as carrying coffins, while naked, in the dead of the night through deserted parts of town and in a cemetery. In the final stage, each of the supplicants swallows a ritual object (meant to establish a contact point between them and Lord Calipha): frog (Hakeem); tarantula (Mike) and a class-size ring (Justin). This ritual, as Lord Bokka explains, ensures that “whatever or whoever you demand from anyone shall be granted without hesitation”. Within forty-eight hours after visiting Lord Calipha’s Shrine, the friends make a hit of four-million, five-hundred thousand dollars from an investor who had previously not shown interest their ‘business propositions’. With the help of a corrupt Assistant Superintendent of Police, who accompany these friends to the Trent International Bank, they successfully withdraw the transferred funds.

At the Shrine of Calipha, Lord Bokka makes the supplicants aware that each has a “golden rule” to observe that ensures their continued success in the cyberfraud business. Although these ritual rules are not made explicit to the audience, as the film progresses, one becomes aware of them. Thus, for Mike, he had to find and be sexually intimate with a mad woman once a month. Justin had to be faithful to Stacy (his girlfriend for several years), and not have any other sexual affair. Hakeem was not supposed to use his wealth to cater for the health needs of his mother and younger female sibling.

However, all the friends flout these rules. Mike discontinues with his monthly sexual escapades with mad women, which results in his eventual madness. Justin becomes attracted to a young lady and jilts Stacy. One day while Justin and his new-found love were coming out from a fashion boutique, Stacy confronts him about his inconsiderate behavior but Justin snubs her. Stacy pulls out a gun, shoots Mike and then commits suicide. With Hakeem, although he initially refused to pay upfront, the needed funds so that the mother could be attended to, he finally gave in after reflecting on how his single-parent mother had struggled to see him through his

¹³ In fact, according to Mike’s estimates, they were making in a week only “\$1300 from three credit cards . . . [and] that’s frustrating”.

university education. Soon after Hakeem's mother's was released from the hospital, Hakeem visited her at her home. On his way out, Lord Bokka appeared in the courtyard of Hakeem's mother to demand Hakeem's soul. A Christian pastor of the church Hakeem's mother attends was present and the pastor decided not to allow Lord Bokka to take Hakeem's soul. This impasse results in a spiritual fight between the representatives of Good and Evil where the latter lost and Hakeem redeems his soul.

Political Elite Discourse on Sakawa

N1. "Church-State Must Fight 'Sakawa'" (*Christian Messenger*, 23(4) July 17-31, 2009, p. 10).

"H.E. the Vice President, Mr. John Dramani Mahama has lamented the involvement of the youth in "Sakawa" (cybercrime). This act, he noted, was eating deep into the moral fiber of the youth who are supposed to take the place of the elderly in the near future and the repercussion were quite enormous.

He said the internet has a lot of resources and services which the youth can take advantage of but rather they focus on its misuse which not only destroy their future but also affect society in general.

...

Mr. John Mahama appealed to the Christian Congregation and Ministers of the Gospel to use the pulpit to preach against the "Sakawa" menace as well as other vices plaguing the country".

N2. "Schoolchildren Urged to Refrain from 'Sakawa'" (*Daily Graphic*, August 10, 2009)

"The Member of Parliament (MP) for Ablekuma North, Mr. Justice Joe Appiah, has advised schoolchildren in the constituency not to indulge in "sakawa", an internet fraud that has gained notoriety in the country recently, because it can ruin their future.

He urged them to rather study hard to achieve academic excellence, stressing that schoolchildren must channel their energies into profitable ventures that would enhance their future development.

Mr. Appiah gave the advice last Saturday at a graduation ceremony for pupils of God's Glory Academy at Kwashieman in Accra.

...

The MP emphasized that "sakawa" was destroying the youth in the country and, therefore, urged parents to take keen interest in the activities of their children, so that they do not fall prey to their children

N3. "Gov't to Combat on Internet Scam 'Sakawa'" (*Ghanadot News* May 19, 2009)

"The Ministry of Information and National Orientation on Tuesday brought together all the comparatively young government appointees and Ministers to address the issue of 'Sakawa' which is eating into the culture of Ghanaian youth.

According to the ministers who took turns to address the press, the NDC Government will soon put before Parliament a Cyber Security Bill which will clamp down on the menace of Cyber Crime and that government initiating measures to deal with the upsurge of internet fraud, popularly known as 'Sakawa' among the youth of Ghana.

The ministers hit the moral high grounds when addressing concerns about the evils of Cyber Fraud locally known as 'Sakawa'.

Running across their concerns is the admission that unemployment pushes the youth to the brink of frustration and lawlessness.

According to the Youth and Sports Minister, Muntakar Mohammed the eagerness of the youth to be rich in the shortest possible time is a contributing factor to the rise this social menace.

To him, this is in obvious reference to reported cases of some young men and women resulting to occultism with the aid of some spiritualists in their quest to acquire quick money.

He stressed the need for the youth to be hard working and self sacrificing since that will bring them better life rather than been involved in occult practices.

Haruana Iddrissu, Communication Minister highlighted that the image of the country is at stake and the government will do all it can to reverse the creeping image of a country of immoral young men and women.

Information Minister Zeta Okaikwei on her part disclosed government's readiness to look at the activities of Internet Cafes and will soon issue some directives to regulate their function especially those who operate all day, all night."

N4. "Mills advises youth against sakawa" (*Ghanaian Chronicle*, July 28, 2009)

"President John Evans Atta Mills has stated that the desire by some Ghanaians, especially the youth, to get rich quickly, is compelling them to engage in social vices such as occultism, and cyber fraud, otherwise known as sakawa, among others.

According to him, some Christians were losing focus of their spiritual needs, and in their quest to attain riches and status in society, are sacrificing "their youth, health, family life and spiritual values in pursuit of these things.

"Consequently, vices such as sakawa, occultism, and cyber fraud, among others, are creeping into our social fiber, and are gaining roots," adding, "These negative practices have caught on extremely well with our youth, who are the most vulnerable, in terms of morals."

In a speech read on his behalf by the Greater Accra Regional Minister, Nii Armah Ashitey, at a thanksgiving ceremony of the Golden Jubilee celebration of the St. Paul's Methodist Society at Tema last Sunday, President Mills appealed to Christians to make it their duty to train the youth in the ways of the Lord, to help inculcate the fear of God in them."

In carefully reading these reports, three dominant themes emerge from the discourse of Ghanaian political elites on sakawa. The first is that sakawa is an alien negative force that has somehow managed to sneak into the Ghanaian society and taken over helpless passive youths involved in the practice. Thus, in the Vice-President's reported address on the issue (*N1*), he noted how the dire consequences of sakawa, manifest in "eating deep into the moral fiber of the youth". The Vice-President's metaphor suggests the widespread and the seeming overpowering nature of this fraudulent activity and its negative effects. Here, the reader is not made aware of how this apparently dangerous phenomenon emerged and sakawa is implicitly presented as an unannounced plague whose 'deadly' effect is evidenced in the apparent corrosive invasion into the moral fiber of the youth. The focus on the stealth nature of sakawa and its (potential) negative effects is also evident in the reported statements of Mr. Appiah, the Member of Parliament (MP) of Ablekuma North (*N2*). The MP, in advising school children about how sakawa can "ruin their future" or "sakawa was destroying the youth in the country", also reiterated an alarmist perspective of this practice. Here too, we are alerted to the (possible) harm of indulging in sakawa. Finally, the President of Ghana, in reportedly noting that sakawa has crept into the Ghanaian "social fiber and are gaining roots" in the morally vulnerable youth, re-echoes the alien nature of sakawa and its 'attack' on susceptible youths. From the above, one notes political elites' discourse on sakawa focuses on unwarranted exciting of 'fear and panic' around sakawa.

The second dominant theme from these reports is the totalizing view that sakawa fraudsters are just lazy and motivated by pure greed to get rich quickly. This perspective is evidenced in the reported address of then Minister of Youth and Sports, Muntakar Mohammed (*N3*). In his statement given in the context of addressing the sakawa issue, the former Youth and Sports Minister attributes the emergence and what fuels the practice of sakawa to "the eagerness

of the youth to be rich in the shortest possible time”. In view of this ‘fact’, Mr Muntakar urged “the need for the youth to be hard working and self sacrificing since that will bring them better life than been [sic] involved in occult practices”. Implicit in this statement is the view that laziness and greed is the major motivation that drives youth fraudsters to engage in this practice. This same viewpoint of laziness and greed as the basis for people to indulge in sakawa is echoed in the reported statement of the President of Ghana, John Atta-Mills (N4). Here the President notes that “the desire by some Ghanaians, especially the youth, to get rich quickly is compelling them to engage in social vices as . . . sakawa”. What comes through in the political discourse on the causes of sakawa is the total absence of any engagement with the specifics of such ‘external’ factors that fuel and sustain this practice.

The third and somewhat less dominant theme is the implicit view that the practice of sakawa is sustained by private internet owners especially those who operate around the clock. This perception is evident in the reported statement of Zeta Okaikwei then Minister of Information as to how the government aims to tackle the issue. Here, she noted the government’s intention to “to look at the activities of Internet Cafes . . . [and] issue some directives to regulate their function especially those who operate all day, all night”. Here, the subtext is that the non-vigilance of these operators is responsible for the practice of sakawa.

From the above, one can summarize the perspectives of the discussed Ghanaian political elites on what has occasioned the emergence and sustenance of sakawa as follows: an outside force that has stealthily crept into Ghanaian society; character flaws in morally susceptible fraudsters; and the non-vigilance of internet café operators. One is thus not surprised as to these political elites’ readily ‘tangible’ solutions to the ‘menace’. Thus, we witness Haruna Iddrisu, the Communication Minister who makes public the strategy of the government to “do all it can to reverse creeping image of a country of immoral young men and women”. Another solution in the reported speeches of the Vice-President and President is noted in how they advocate Christian messages and religious training as antidote to the sakawa issue. Thus, the Vice-President urged “Christian Congregation and Ministers of the Gospel to use the pulpit to preach against the “Sakawa” menace” (N1). The President request Christian parents to “make it their duty to train the youth in the ways of the Lord, [and also] to inculcate the fear of God in them” (N4). Another solution to the issue is in the suggestion of Mr. Joe Appiah who seemed to suggest that studying hard to “achieve academic excellence”¹⁴ is an antidote to the issue. This particular solution is also endorsed by the Editor of the *Ghanaian Times*, Enimil Ashon, who in a symposium address in June 2009, noted that sakawa is a “desperate activity by [academic] failures”¹⁵. The above political elite discourse on sakawa radically departs from my observations in Ghana and what I learned from interviews with Ghanaians. I weave such experiences into the discussion in the conclusion section. In the next section, I examine how the popular video-films take up the issue of sakawa. I begin with a summary of one of the most popular movies on the issue *The Dons in Sakawa*. I follow these summaries with analyses of their subject matter and supplement my discussion with another movie *Mallam Issa Kawa*¹⁶

¹⁴ See “Sakawa Is For Failures – Enimil Tells Students” at <http://www.newtimes.com.gh/story/60>

¹⁵ See fn 14

¹⁶ Although I have watched all the sakawa video-film series by different producers, I chose these movies because not only are they the most popular but they represent the dominant types of video-film making in contemporary Ghana. For analytical purposes, I identify three dominant types. The first is those movies made specifically in Akan that people have derogatively dubbed as ‘concert films’ or ‘Agya Koo movies’. These movies, which by far enjoy most

III. Sakawa Films: Socio-Cultural & Political Critique

So what are we to make of this Ghanaian example of occult discourse as dramatized in *Dons in Sakawa*? Here, I approach the film's thematic focus on sakawa as reflecting on contemporary everyday Ghanaian issues, which provides a counter-discourse to those of Ghanaian political elite on such issues. I discuss how the films' critiques and sheds light on some pressing issues in Ghana. I conclude by arguing out two things. The first is that both the films and political elites' discourse condemn sakawa. Second, the film's overall thematic treatment of sakawa not only provides a nuanced understanding of some of the pressing underlying factors that engenders sakawa practice in Ghana but indirectly hints at how they must be addressed. Through these discussions I aim to draw attention to how as scholars, we should critically approach popular media representation of everyday social issues as they equally and democratically engage the political, albeit on their own terms (Scott 1990; Wasserman 2011).

In the Ghanaian political elite discourse on sakawa previously discussed, it becomes clear that some of the leaders frame the issue as an 'alien' practice that has somehow managed to sneak into the country. As well, we note these leaders' suggestion that those who indulge in sakawa are idle yet greedy to attain material wealth. However, in *The Dons in Sakawa* (hereafter *The Dons*), we witness a very contrastive presentation on the issue. Here, we note that the practice of sakawa stems from certain conditions within the social world of characters. In the film, we observe that Hakeem, an ambitious, motivated individual, who has completed college, cannot find work in spite of serious attempts to do so. Clearly Hakeem's inability to find a job is not due to laziness but lack of available work.

This situation of university graduate unemployment is a reality in Ghana, as there are more graduates than jobs on the market. This situation of jobless graduates has existed for some time in the country. The problem is now exacerbated as the Ghanaian government now accredits private universities to help absorb those equally qualified students that the six traditional universities cannot enroll. Although the government's accreditation of private universities is a laudable enterprise, this action now has the unintended negative effect of producing more graduates every year who cannot find work in the public sector. Even in the private sector, where occasionally few jobs exist as evidenced in the ubiquitous financial institutions mushrooming all over the country, some of their hiring practices smacks of pure exploitation and only the desperate accede to work for their offered meager 'wages'. In such a climate, those who resort to illegal activities such as sakawa as a means to escape the lived realities of unemployment are not lazy or greedy but want to survive. This statement is not meant to suggest that there are not those who engage in this practice solely because of greed. Indeed, in *The Dons*, this view of greedy sakawa individuals is evident in Mike and Justin's decision not to work for Chief Titus. The greed of these individuals is seen in their decision to become their own boss. This choice stems from the twenty thousand dollar compensation that Chief Titus gives them (which they considered highly inadequate) for ensuring the success of over a two million dollar fraudulent

audience consumption, are patterned along the lines of popular concert party traditions. The second type is in the realm of those movies that are predominantly in Pidgin English with occasional standard English and any of the Ghanaian languages thrown into the mix. The third type, which is fairly recent, is what people term "Shirley Frimpong-Manso movies", named after one of the successful female producers whose films cater to the educated elite and whose themes mostly derive from the producers' artistic ideas.

deal. So here, the film's narrative confirms that other possible motives drive people into sakawa. In spite of such other motivations, however, per my experiences in Ghana, I noted unemployment as a major cause for some youths to indulge in illegal activities such as sakawa. This issue of youth unemployment is now on the nation's radar as a problem to be tackled is evidenced in the recent policy document on the youth in Ghana (National Youth Policy of Ghana 2010). Although the document makes clear that there is dearth of employment opportunities for the youth, there seems not to be a real effort to tackle this problem. For example, the youth policy document only has Cabinet support but no legislative backing whatsoever (Yakubu 2010). Hence one wonders whether the document is not merely for political window dressing.

The contributory role of unemployment to youth lawlessness is seen in two arenas. The first is in the area of escalated armed robbery that has plagued the country for the past ten years leading to the adoption of a desperate and unconstitutional policy of "shoot to kill" by the Ghana Police¹⁷. The second is seen in the upsurge of the lawlessness of "foot soldiers" of the ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) (see Figure 2) who attribute their actions to their leaders' reneged promises of giving them jobs. One cogent illustration of the lawlessness of this arm of the ruling party is captured in the case of Shakespeare Ofori-Atta, NDC Abaka South Constituency Secretary on August 3, 2010.

¹⁷ See such articles as:

"Police Must Shoot To Kill Criminals" at: <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=166316>

"Shoot-to-kill policy is illegal -Martin Hamidu". Accessed at: <http://news.myjoyonline.com/news/201002/41898.asp>

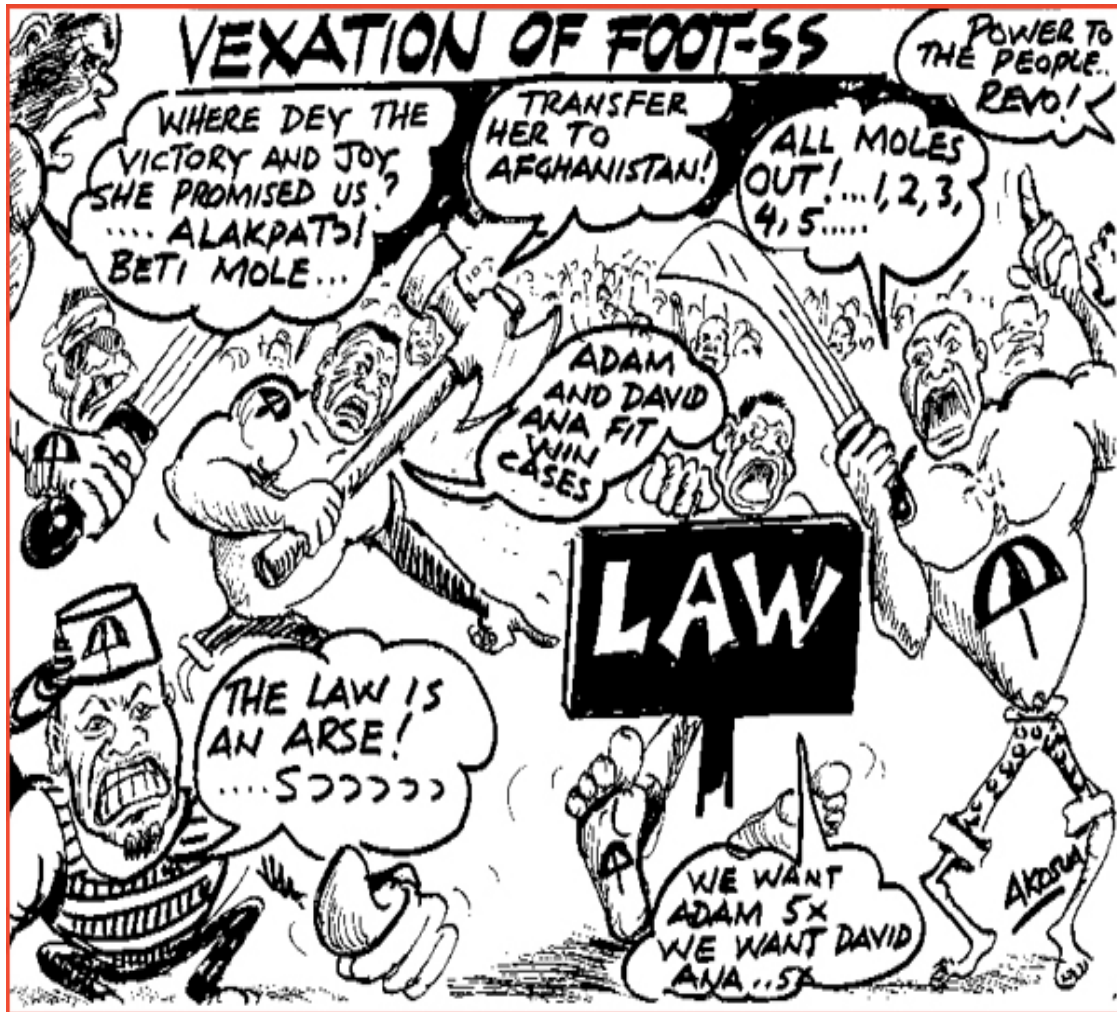


Figure 2: Akosua's NDC foot soldiers' lawlessness in Ghana (*Daily Guide* August 2010)

This gentleman led NDC foot soldiers not only to sack the newly-appointed manager of the National Health Insurance Scheme out of the constituency but also locked the office where he worked. The reason for these actions, according to Ofori-Atta, stem from the failure of NDC party leaders to give the youth elements jobs, as promised during the December 2008 elections. According to Ofori-Atta, the appointment of this NHIS manager (who was allegedly not even a party member or resident of Abuakwa-South region), unmistakably illustrates this reneged promise. Ofori-Atta became an epitome of all NDC foot soldiers' lawlessness due to a statement he made on a popular radio station. He declared he was not afraid of the police because "no matter how long and frightening the whiskers of a mouse might be, the cat is never afraid it"¹⁸. Ofori-Atta's statement insinuated he was the cat (a naturally potent and deadly force in the cat-and-mouse world), and the Police, the mouse (an insignificant weakling in the eyes of a cat). Ofori-Atta, through this poetically powerful proverb that upends such power relationships, publicly and doubly demeaned the image and authority of the Ghanaian police¹⁹. The above examples support the position in *The Dons* and contradict the political elites' position that all

¹⁸ My translation from Akan.

¹⁹ Listen to this audio interview here: <http://elections.peacefmonline.com/politics/201008/66336.php>

those who indulge in illegal activities like sakawa, are lazy or motivated by greed. Rather, certain peculiar circumstances outside their control, contribute to their decision to indulge in these acts. Yet, as *The Dons* and the political elite discourse on sakawa make clear, those very extenuating circumstances do not absolve these youths from their criminal behavior.

The implications of Ofori Atta's proverb as well as his utterances in the radio interview points to a larger issue in Ghana that is critiqued in the sakawa films but not addressed in the political discourse on sakawa. Namely the support of some state personnel in corridors of power who condone such illegal activities as sakawa or NDC foot soldiers mob justice²⁰ either by direct participation or by their silence on such issues²¹. In Ofori-Atta's case, before his radio utterances caused a national outcry on the actions of the foot soldiers in general, there had been numerous media reports of these 'soldiers' unruly behaviors. In spite of these media reports, the ruling NDC government failed to comment on the matter, and the Ghana Police did not act on any of these reports. These semiotic silences, especially from the government, bolstered the general perception that these 'soldiers' (just like the Nazi SS alluded to in the cartoon above) were rather to be feared rather than the police.

With regards to the issue on sakawa, as earlier noted, the political elites' discourse on it suggested that the practice is sustained by slothful but greedy youths. Absent in this discourse is how some personnel in the security and banking agencies in the country condone with sakawa fraudsters to commit such fraud. Thus, just as was revealed in the film, it is no secret in Accra that some officials in authority at certain banks at Abeka-Lapaz, Silver-cup and Teshie, allow huge transferred funds to be cashed so long as they have their 'ten percent share'. Clearly, what the film reveals, evident in an Assistant Superintendent of Police who helped fraudsters in their work, is that the practice of sakawa is not isolated national issue but part of a larger question of corruption that is condoned in higher quarters of the country. Here, finding lasting solutions to such a serious national matter is not to be found, for example, in urging clergymen "use the pulpit to preach against the "Sakawa" menace" (NI)

The second example that illustrates how the film's thematic focus on sakawa also reflects on certain Ghanaian issues is drawn from another popular sakawa film series, *Mallam Issa Kawa* (henceforth *Mallam*). This movie also makes the case that certain external factors are responsible for some youths to indulge in sakawa and not necessarily combined 'internal' reasons such as laziness and greed for material wealth. In *Mallam*, Edem, a leading character loses his father. Although his deceased father left considerable wealth, Edem's uncle who inherited this wealth refused to take care of Edem and his mother (who later becomes very sick). In desperation to find the funds to care for his ailing mother (and for himself), he is forced to partake in sakawa. Here, the film shows Edem's involvement in sakawa stems from an irresponsible uncle who refuses to take care of his duties. In this scenario, the film also makes explicit some defective aspects of Ghanaian socio-cultural practices. Specifically, this aspect relates to the lack or weak enforcement of checks and balances of traditional inheritance system that sometimes leads people who inherit their relatives not to live up to their responsibilities.

²⁰ See this January 5, 2011 news report "NDC Foot Soldiers Chase Out Two DCEs":

<http://dailyguideghana.com/ghananewspolitics/1676-ndc-footsoldiers-chase-out-2-dces.html>

²¹ Examples of such acts of condoning and inaction if recent WikiLeaks cables pertaining to Ghana is to be believed, see: "WikiLeaks: Ghana Police 'Helped Drug Smugglers Evade Security':

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=199478>

What the preceding discussions highlight is the view that a critical approach to the popular sakawa video film series yield important insights into contemporary everyday key Ghanaian issues. Thus to label these films as mere ‘concert’²² films, as some elites do, to signal that they have no relevance to important debates in the Ghanaian public sphere is to eliminate an important alternative realm of discourse. As we saw in the political elites’ discourse on sakawa, one observes a shallow understanding of the practice. Thus, if anything else, the films provide a certain corrective to the discussion of sakawa.

In conclusion, the sakawa films series, unlike political elites’ discourse on sakawa, examines different dimensions of the causes of sakawa. However, the films’ visualization/dramatization of the sakawa theme and perhaps technical infidelities - characteristic of most the video films -, might suggest that films bear no link to significant, thorny issues in Ghana. However, a critical ethnographic approach to these films enables one to tease out some crucial issues that such films subtly draw our attention to. Here, we note that the films unique feature of reflecting everyday Ghanaian issues, cogently shows how socio-economic issues have contributed to the emergence and the continued practice of sakawa. From this viewpoint, it becomes clear that the seemingly ‘poignant’ political narrative, mostly devoid from the realities on the ground bears no link to the reality behind the existence of sakawa.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (2005). *Dramas of nationhood: The politics of television in Egypt*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press
- Austen, R. A. (1993). The moral economy of witchcraft: an essay in comparative history. In J. Camaroff and J. Camaroff (Eds.), *Modernity and its malcontents: Ritual and power in postcolonial Africa*, (pp. 89-110). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bastian, M. (1993). Bloundhounds who have no friends: Witchcraft and locality in Nigerian popular press. In J. Camaroff and J. Camaroff (Eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents: ritual and power in postcolonial Africa*, (pp. 129-166). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Brekenbridge, A. C. and Appadurai, A. (1995). Public modernity in India. In C. Brekenbridge (Ed.), *Consuming modernity: Public culture in a south Asian world* (pp. 1- 22). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Camaroff, J. and Camaroff, J. (1999). Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: Notes from the Southern African postcolony. *American Anthropologist*, 26(2), 279-303.
- Castoriadis, C. (1994). Radical imagination and the social instituting imaginary. In G. Robinson and J. Rundell (Eds.), *Rethinking Imagination: culture and creativity* (pp. 87-117). London, UK: Routledge.
- Crain, M. M. (1991). Poetics and politics in the Ecuadorean Andes: Women’s narratives of death and devil possession, *American Ethnologist* 18(1), 67-89.
- Curran, J. and Park, M. (2000). Beyond globalization theory, in J. Curran and M. Park (Eds.), *De-Westernizing Media* (pp. 3-18). London: Routledge.
- Downing, D. H. J. (1996). *Internationalizing media theory: Transition, power, culture*. London:

²² The term is used to refer to anything that is not deemed serious or important.

- Sage Publications.
- Downing, D. H. J. (2008). Social movements' media and democracy: Achievements and issues, in Mojca Pajnik and John D. H. Downing (Eds.), *Alternative media and the politics of resistance* (49-60). Ljubljana: Peace Institute Publishing.
- Edelman, M. (1994). Landlord and the devil: Class, ethnic, and gender dimensions of Central American peasant narratives, *Current Anthropology* 91(1), 58-93.
- Fabian, J. (1978). Popular culture in Africa: findings and conjectures. *Africa* 48(4), 315-354
- Gadzekpo, A. (2011). Street news: The role of posters in democratic participation in Ghana. In H. Wasserman (Ed.), *Popular media, democracy and development in Africa* (pp. 105-122). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Garritano, C. (2008). "Contesting Authenticities: African Film Critics and the History of Early Video Production in Ghana." *Critical Arts: A Journal of South-North Cultural and Media Studies*. 20 (1): 21-48.
- Geschiere, P., Meyer, B. & Pels, P. (2008). *Readings in modernity in Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press
- Geschiere, P. (1994). *The modernity of witchcraft: politics and the occult in postcolonial Africa*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia.
- Geschiere, P. & Fisiy, C. (1997). Domesticating personal violence: witchcraft, courts and confessions in Cameroon. *Africa*, 64(3), 321-341.
- Ginsburg, F., Abu-Lughod, L., and Larkin, B. (2002). Introduction. In F. Ginsburg, L. Abu-Lughod and B. Larkin (Eds.), *Media worlds: anthropology on a new terrain* (1-38). California, CA: University of California Press.
- Haynes, J. (2000). Introduction. In J. Hayes. (Ed.), *Nigerian video films*. (1-36). Athens, OH: Ohio University Press
- Kim, Y. (2008) *Media consumption and everyday life in Asia*, (Ed.), New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lan, D. (1985). *Guns and rain: Guerrilla and spirit mediums in Zimbabwe*. London: James Currey.
- Larkin, B. (1997). Indian films and Nigerian lovers: Media and the creation of parallel modernities. *Africa*, 67(3), 406-439.
- McCall, C. J. (2002). Madness, money and movies: Watching a Nigerian popular video with the guidance of a native doctor. *Africa Today*, 49(3), 78-94.
- Meyer, B. (1995). Delivered from the powers of darkness: Confessions of satanic riches in christian Ghana. *Africa*, 65(2), 237-225.
- Meyer, B. (1999a). Popular Ghanaian cinema and "African Heritage". *Africa Today* 46 (2), 93-114.
- Meyer, B. (1999b). *Translating the devil: Religion and modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*. Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press.
- Meyer, B. (2001). Money, power, and morality: Popular Ghanaian cinema in the fourth republic. *Ghana Studies* 4, 65-84.
- Meyer, B. (2003). Visions of blood, sex and money: fantasy spaces in popular Ghanaian cinema. *Visual Anthropology* 16, 15-41.
- Miller, D. (2010). *Stuff*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Moore, L. H. and Sanders, T. (2001). Magical Interpretations and Magical Realities: An Introduction, in Henrietta L Moore and Todd Sanders (Eds.), *Magical Interpretations and Magical Realities*, (1-27). New York: Routledge.
- Murphy, P. and Kraidy, M. (2003). Towards an ethnographic approach to global media studies. In P. Murphy and M. Kraidy (Eds.), *Global media studies: Ethnographic perspectives* (pp. 3-20). New York, NY: Routledge.
- National Youth Policy of Ghana Document. (2010).

- Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2001). Delusions of developments and the enrichment of witchcraft discourses in Cameroon. In Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders (Eds.), *Magical interpretations, material interpretations: modernity, witchcraft and the occult in post colonial Africa*, (pp. 28-49). London, UK: Routledge.
- Nyamnjoh, B. F. (2011). De-westernizing media theory to make room for African experience, in Herman Waaserman (Ed.), *Popular media, democracy and development in Africa* (19-31). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Oduro-Frimpong, J. (2009). Glocalization trends: The case of hiplife music in contemporary Ghana. *International Journal of Communication*, 3, 1085-1106.
- Pajnik, M. & Downing, J. D. H. (2008). Alternative media and the politics of resistance: Perspectives and challenges, in Mojca Pajnik and John D. H. Downing (Eds.), *Alternative media and the politics of resistance* (49-60). Ljubljana: Peace Institute Publishing.
- Pels, P. (1992). Mumiani: the White Vampire: a neo-diffusionist analysis of rumor. *Etnofoor*, 5(1/2), 165-187.
- Pels, P. (2003). Introduction: Magic and modernity, in Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels (Eds.), *Magic and modernity: Interfaces of revelation and concealment* (1-38). California, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Rofel, L. (1994). Televisual love and melodramatic politics in contemporary China. *American Ethnologist* 21(4) 700-722
- Scott, J. (1990). Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Shaw, R. (1996). The politician and the diviner: Divination and the consumption of power in Sierra Leone, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 26 (1), 30-55.
- Thussu, D. K. (2009). *Internationalizing media studies*. (Ed.), New York, NY: Routledge.
- Van Dijk, T. (1995). Elite discourse and the reproduction of racism, in: R. K. Slayden and D. Slayden (Eds.) *Hate Speech*. (pp. 1-27). Newbury Park: Sage.
- Van Dijk, T. (2000). Ideology and Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Perspectives. Accessed on 3 November 2010: <http://www.discourses.org/UnpublishedArticles/Ideology%20and%20discourse.pdf>
- van Velzen, B. T. and van Wetering, I. (2001). Dangerous creatures and the enchantment of modern life, in P. Clough and J.P. Mitchell (Eds.), *Powers of good and evil: Social transformation and popular belief*, (pp. 17-42). New York, NY: Berghahn Books.
- Wall, D. S. (2010). Criminalizing cyberspace: the rise of the internet as a 'crime problem', in Y. Jewkes and M. Yar (Eds), *Handbook of internet crime*, (88-103). London, UK: Willan Publishing.
- Wasserman, H. (2011). Introduction: Taking it to the streets. In H. Wasserman (Ed.) *Popular media, democracy and development in Africa* (pp. 1-16). New York, NY: Routledge.
- White, L. (1993). Cars out of place: vampires, technology and labor in East and Central Africa. *Representation*, 43, (Summer) 27-50.
- Yakubu, A. M. (2010). Youth unemployment and Ghana's National Youth Policy implementation. *Ghanaian Chronicle* (27 August)
- Yankah, K. (1995). Nana Ampadu, the sung-tale metaphor, and protest discourse in contemporary Ghana. In J. Adjaye & A. Andrews. (Eds.). *Language, Rhythm and Sound: Black Popular Cultures into the Twenty First Century* (pp. 54-73). Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.