Sakawa Rituals and Cyberfraud in Ghanaian Popular Video Movies

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong

Abstract: *Sakawa* indexes a cyberfraud practice in Ghana allegedly linked with occult rituals. This article examines the phenomenon as an analytically relevant example of a material understanding of religion. It then offers a critical reading of a popular *sakawa* video series and contrasts its thematic perspectives with the reactions of some Ghanaian political leaders to the possible motivations for the practice. This critical approach is conceived as a response to the persistent myopic view of such popular genres as irrelevant to key debates around problematic Ghanaian issues and also to calls in global media studies to de-Westernize the field.

Résumé: Les rituels *Sakawa* indiquent une pratique de la cyber-fraude au Ghana qui serait liée à des rituels occultes. Cet article examine le phénomène comme un exemple analytique pertinent d'une interprétation matérielle de la religion. Il propose ensuite une lecture critique de la série populaire vidéo appelée *Sakawa* et contraste ses perspectives thématiques avec les réactions de certains dirigeants politiques ghanéens aux motivations possibles pour cette pratique. Cette approche critique est conçue comme une réponse à la perspective myope persistante que ces genres populaires ne sont pas pertinents pour les débats sur les problématiques ghanéennes, et aussi comme une réponse aux incitations des études sur les médias globaux à désoccidentaliser le domaine de recherche.

Key Words: Occult rituals; material religion; cyberfraud; popular culture; Ghanaian video

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong is an assistant professor in the Department of Arts and Sciences at Ashesi University College, Berekuso, Ghana. He is the author of "Glocalization Trends: The Case of Hiplife Music in Contemporary Ghana (*International Journal of Communication* 3 [2009]) and "Better Ghana [Agenda]? On Akosua Cartoons and Critical Public Debates in Contemporary Ghana" (in Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome, eds., *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday*, Routledge, 2014). E-mail: joduro-frimpong@ashesi.edu.gh

131

In early June 2008, I witnessed an incident at Blue Kiosk at Nii Boi Town, Accra. A large group of people were hooting at the driver of a speeding Toyota Corolla who, I learned, was a *sakawa* boy. *Sakawa*, a Hausa term coined by youth "cyberfraudsters" from deprived communities in Accra such as Nima, Mamobi, and Lagos Town, refers to a computer-generated fraud associated with occult religious rituals believed to compel victims to accede to the perpetrators' requests.[1]

This article explores the sakawa phenomenon as it is portrayed in popular Ghanaian videos. It is intended as a response to recent calls in global media studies to internationalize the field (see Nyamnjoh 2011; Thussu 2009), and it also attempts to provide grounded insights into recent theorizations in the fields of religion, media, and culture (see Lynch, Mitchell & Strhan 2012). It examines the phenomenon from two major perspectives. First, it looks at sakawa as an analytically relevant example of recent material approaches to religion that view religious ideas as inextricably linked with tangible practices (Morgan 2010). This material perspective departs from the normative modernist understanding of religious experience as private and inward (Meyer 2012). The observation that guides the discussion is the widespread denunciation of negative social acts (like cyberfraud) on the part of those who also believe strongly in the efficacy of the religious rituals that allegedly bolster fraudsters' success. I show how people's belief in the "power" of sakawa rituals is consistent with religious beliefs and practices in the three major religious faiths in Ghana as related to ritual supplications to a transcendental power to ensure a material outcome.

Second, the article investigates the sakawa phenomenon through a critical interpretation of the prominent themes in popular sakawa video series such as *Sakawa Boys* (2009), *Agya Koo Sakawa* (2009), and *The Dons of Sakawa* (2009)—hereafter referred to as *The Dons.* In particular, it focuses on the question of how popular representations of sakawa enlighten us about the motivations of those who engage in these illegal activities. Interestingly, although the movies join the general political discourse in denouncing the phenomenon, they go beyond mere condemnation and suggest socioeconomic and political conditions as possible motivations for sakawa youths.

Popular Ghanaian Video Movies

My position toward Ghanaian videos in general (and the sakawa film series in particular) as popular cultural media products is that they are not "true" and/or unmediated renditions of the various issues they (re)present (see Barber 1987, 1997). Growing up in the "video boom" era in Ghana in the 1990s (and with my impressions reaffirmed in my field research in 2008–9, an eight- month field research in 2010, as well as my presence in Ghana as a postdoctoral researcher in 2012), I am aware that most of these films borrow heavily from (and/or are titled after) circulating urban narratives, which producers filter "from the world 'out there' . . . through various apparatuses

of film production" (Plate 2003:262).[2] Furthermore, in an industry in which producers rely solely on the success of their films in the market to fund future productions, they, like other "authors" of Ghanaian popular syncretic works, strive to create products that resonate with a broad audience to ensure profit (Meyer 1999; Yankah 1984). Thus film producers tap into, and appropriate, circulating stories with potential appeal to audiences. For example, Socrate Safo, the chief executive officer of Movie Africa Productions, has established a Movie Africa Artist Club for actors and actresses who meet weekly to rehearse upcoming movie plots and also discuss "hot" circulating topics in town. Fiifi Paada, a leading actor in *Sakawa Boys*, told me of at least one plot that originated at such a meetings from a fellow actor who made it known that he had been "involved in a sakawa deal. So he gave him [Socrate] all the details. Then the little that we've known from people, we added, then it became a complete story" for the movie's plot (interview, Accra, 2009).

This statement points to a collaborative effort that is involved in appropriating and refashioning both "fact" and popular narratives about sakawa as a basis for video production. At the time of this conversation, one could also see prominently displayed advertising posters for the most recent *Sakawa Boys* video at various locations in Accra, which arguably hyped the sakawa issue in the public domain. Producers also strive to convince audiences that the movies portray the "actual" rituals that sakawa fraudsters perform. On private television channels the film's trailer showcased snippets of alleged sakawa rituals and spiritual fortification processes that are believed to occur in the supernatural realm to ensure the fraudsters' success. In one of the *Sakawa Boys* films for example, Socrate Safo, in an attempt to replicate an actual sakawa ritual, used real coffins for a scene in which a religious specialist commands three sakawa boys to sleep in them as part of the ritual.

It should be noted that film producers' determination to portray spiritual "reality" in the films is connected to the deeply taken-for-granted world of active spirits in Ghanaian popular culture, as well as the nature of Pentecostal religious beliefs. Thus, as Meyer (2005, 2009) compellingly argues, the complex interdependency between technology and religion taps into preexisting Charismatic-Pentecostal "religious sensational forms," which are best understood as "a condensation of practices, attitudes, and ideas that structure religious experiences" (2009:13). Thus audiences judge whether the representations of spiritual matters in the videos are "real" and believable or are unbelievable deviations (referred to in Ghanaian local parlance as *awam*, or fake) according to whether depictions of the supernatural realm do or do not live up to their knowledge and expectation of popular Charismatic-Pentecostal religious beliefs and rituals. An example of such an idea is the perceived antagonistic relationship between humans and *awiem atumfuo*—malevolent spiritual beings in high places—as represented in the Bible's Book of Ephesians 6:12. Charismatic-Pentecostals believe that one can win in this confrontation only through spiritually

crafted weapons made potent by the blood of Jesus. Thus when I watched the movie *Obonsam Besu* (Devil May Cry) (Ninja Film Productions, 2010), audience members laughed derisively at certain scenes considered as *awam*. Most Ghanaian film audiences are aware that these movies are fictional "realities." In this film, however, the audience considered as deeply flawed a scene in which spiritually unfortified people observed the Devil fly over Asafo Market in Kumasi. What made such a scene *awam*, as people explained to me, was its violation of popularly shared religious convictions about what is real or false or both—in this case, the widespread belief that it is impossible to "see" the Devil or any of his agents without being a spiritually anointed Christian.

From the above, we can argue that the "reality" or "truth" of popular movies that seek to depict the spiritual domain depends on how accurately they mirror popular Charismatic-Pentecostal religious ideas about God and the Devil. As Meyer (2005:178) says, it is through this "techno-religious realism . . . [that] the technologies of make-believe [support] . . . spectators' desire to believe in, and receive visual evidence for, the power of God" (or the truth of Satan's diabolical works). I was indeed told countless times that the appeal of these movies is that "won yi ahinta asem bi adi" (they reveal certain hidden truths) or allow people to witness "honhon mu nneema wontumi mfa w'ani kann enhu" (spiritual matters that cannot be sensed with one's physical eyes). These movies, therefore, have to be understood as fictionalized and "edited" representations of the sakawa phenomenon rather than any documentary representation of real life (see Yankah 1984:571).

Sakawa Beliefs and Ritual Practices

In various conversations with people who claimed to be knowledgeable about sakawa, I became aware of some of the alleged rituals associated with the phenomenon. Some of these rituals include self-inflicted wounds that never heal; sleeping in coffins for a number of days at cemeteries; carrying coffins during the night to isolated road intersections; and eating the contents from rubbish dumps. Engaging in these rituals (and the high likelihood of doing so imperfectly and violating their tenets), while bringing the individual wealth, allegedly results in dire consequences fairly quickly, including ill health, insanity, and/or ultimately death. In various conversations with people of diverse faiths in Accra, I realized the extent to which beliefs are aligned with convictions about the success of religious rituals in enabling a material outcome. I was alerted to the fact that just as there are practices in Ghanaian Pentecostal Christian circles such as "dry fasting" (going without food and water for a specified period) and reading specific Bible passages to achieve a material outcome, there are also occult practices engaged in for similar purposes. The other major religion in Ghana—Islam—also promotes a strong belief in the power of supernatural forces to shape people's material well-being through mediated rituals.

Underlying this belief and the associated rituals of traditional religion are two basic convictions. The first is that the supernatural realm consists of good and evil (as I was often told, "se nea Onyame tumi wo ho no, saa nso na Obonsam tumi wo ho" [as God's power exists, so does Satan's power]), and that both of these domains can be accessed through rituals. The second premise is that the sacred and the profane worlds are closely intertwined. The inseparable relationship within traditional religion between the physical and spiritual worlds can be seen in the practice of invoking material blessings from the Supreme Being and dead ancestors through libations and sacrifices. Thus, at Ghanaian cultural ceremonies and festivals, supplicants engage in libation-prayers in which they ask for long life and material wealth, harmony in their interpersonal relationships, and protection from evil forces and persons. It is believed that such requests, addressed to supernatural entities such as gods, ancestors, and the Supreme Being and accompanied by libation, will be granted.

There are also a number of popular narratives and morality tales in Ghana that crosscut ethnic affiliations and promote the belief that people can perform certain occult rituals to generate financial wealth. Sometimes the results are catastrophic, however; as one popular saying expresses the idea, "ape ntem, anya ntem, ene owuo ne nam" (seeking it quick, getting it quick, [both] leads to death). In one such story, a gentleman seeks the services of a magico-religious center that specializes in wealth generation. He is told that he has two choices of ritual sacrifice: either to name someone he loves for a spiritual sacrifice, or alternatively, to provide a hen, which would be starved for three days and then fed with maize. Allegedly, the number of ears of maize that the hen ate would correspond to the exact number of years that the gentleman would live to enjoy his wealth. Believing that both options are equally efficacious, the man chooses the latter, although the hen he provides, according to the story, is sickly. When it is released it has no appetite, just stares at its food, and wobbles off. The gentleman is sent away and dies that very day upon reaching home.

While the above narrative represents a popular fictional tale, many circulating stories about occult sources of wealth are widely accepted as true. For example, among the Kwahu ethnic group in the Eastern region, wealth purportedly gained through occult means is referred to as *sikaduro* (literally, money medicine), and Obo, one of the major towns in Kwahu, is known for its several inhabitants who have acquired wealth through such means. People point to unoccupied buildings and note that such houses are now uninhabitable because they are haunted by the souls of people who were sacrificed for *sikaduro*. The Nzema people of Western Ghana are also believed to have magico-religious centers that make people rich through occult rituals. At these centers, supplicants are supposedly given pythons that vomit money. They are then required to perform and observe specific rituals with the pythons in order to ensure their wealth, and failure to do so carries the threat not just of renewed poverty, but also of madness or even death.

It must be stressed that in spite of the pervasiveness of such narratives, occult-derived wealth is generally condemned, tagged as *sika fi* (dirty/evil/contaminated money) or *sika bone* (bad money). Thus shop owners and market men and women typically refuse to do business with persons whose wealth is suspect, or else they are careful not to mingle any currency received from such individuals with their existing assets. The threat is a spiritual siphoning away of one's wealth and a collapsed business. The occult practices are also condemned by mainstream religions, although they do believe, in general, in the efficacy of religious rituals in bringing about material outcomes. In Islam, a ritual believed to ensure material blessings to the giver is known as *salaka* or *saraka* (alms giving/charity). Within the Muslim community at Nii Boi Town, where I lived, wealthy individuals believe that the distribution of free beef to the needy will result in material rewards from Allah. In Ghanaian Charismatic-Pentecostal Christian circles, a popular belief is expressed in a paraphrase of Matthew 8:1: "Nea y'akyirikyiri wo asaase so no, na y'akyirikyiri wo soro" (Whatever is bound on earth, is bound in heaven). Such belief is crucial in understanding some of the ritual practices that one observes in prayer-healing-deliverance sessions in which church leaders use consecrated olive oil to anoint people's foreheads or palms to block the acts of malevolent spirits believed to thwart the material blessings of believers. In a similar manner, leaders like the self-styled "Rev. Dr." Ebenezer Opambour Adarkwa Yiadom (alias Prophet One) of Ebenezer Miracle Worship Center "command" those with financial and other life problems to verbalize these issues over specified amounts of cash to be left in offertory bowls. Such monies are deemed to act as entry points through which the transcendental manifests itself to answer supplicants' requests.

As the discussion above suggests, a particular set of beliefs that is shared by many people in Ghana—that is, moral condemnation of criminal behavior combined with a belief in the capacity of religious rituals to produce a material outcome—accounts in large part for the ready capacity of most Ghanaians to condemn the criminal act of sakawa practices while believing in the spiritual efficacy of the alleged sakawa rituals. Since religious rituals are associated with cyberfraud, the discussion also suggests that the widespread and largely Western supposition "that religion and technology exist as two ontologically distinct arenas of experience, knowledge and actions" (Stolow 2013: 2; see also de Witte 2013) is contradicted by the Ghanaian situation.

Sakawa in Ghanaian Public Media

In 2008, the period of my initial research, sakawa was a widely discussed topic in many Accra neighborhoods, with stories published, for example, in *The Daily Guide*, and references to the phenomenon appearing in other printed sources such as calendar posters (see figure 1). However, it was not until mid-2009 that one witnessed a sustained mainstream media focus on sakawa, beginning with a report in *The Daily Graphic* in May 2009 (see figure 2).

Figure 1. Calendar Poster

In recognition of the sakawa phenomenon in the mainstream media, Movie Africa Productions also released *Sakawa Boys* (2009), the first film series on sakawa.

The rest of this section consists of excerpts from newspaper reports about the sakawa phenomenon and the response of Ghanaian political leaders. This is followed by a discussion of these leaders' understanding of what fuels the practice.

Figure 2. *Daily Graphic*, **May 12, 2009**

Church-State Must Fight "Sakawa" (*Christian Messenger*, July 17–31, 2009)

> 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 repercussions 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 destroys 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.

School Children 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.

Gov't to Combat 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 was 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 ground 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 resorting 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 [being] 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.

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 cyberfraud, 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 cyberfraud, among others, are creeping into our social fiber, and are gaining roots," [he said,] 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.

Discussion of Political Discourses on *Sakawa*

Four dominant themes are evident in these comments of Ghanaian political leaders. The first is the belief that sakawa has penetrated deeply into Ghanaian society and taken over helpless, passive youths involved in the practice. Thus Vice President (now President) John Dramani Mahama noted that the dire consequences of sakawa were "eating deep into the moral fiber of the youth."[3] The focus on the stealthy nature of sakawa and the alarmist perspective on its effects on susceptible youths is also evident in the statements of Justice Joe Appiah, the MP of Ablekuma North, and of the late President of Ghana, Atta Mills.

The second dominant theme is the view that sakawa fraudsters are motivated by pure greed and the desire to get rich quickly. What is particularly interesting, however, is the near silence on some of the factors that sustain the practice, such as widespread unemployment.

The third theme is the view that the practice of sakawa is sustained by private Internet cafes, especially those who operate around the clock, as mentioned by Zeta Okaikwei, then the Minister of Information. The subtext of her statement about the government's intention to examine "the activities of Internet Cafes . . . [and] issue some directives to regulate their function" is that the government's failure to regulate these operators is responsible for the practice of sakawa.

The fourth theme is the connection between the sakawa "menace" and the "creeping" immorality, or at least the impression of immorality, in the country in general, especially among the youth. In this regard the proposed solution and antidote to the sakawa threat, offered by both the vice president and the late president, is the promotion of Christian messages by powerful political leaders, the preaching of ministers against sakawa from the pulpit, and the cooperation of Christian parents, who must, Mills said, "make

it their duty to train the youth in the ways of the Lord [and] to help incul-
cate the fear of God in them." The political leaders' perspectives, however,
offer a fairly superficial understanding of the possible root causes of this
practice, as we will see below.

The next section is concerned with the thematic focus on sakawa of
the *Dons* series within the context of other sakawa films such as *Sakawa
Boys* (2009) and *Agya Koo Sakawa* (2009). Although I have watched many
sakawa series created by different producers, I chose these examples not
only for their popularity but also because they represent three dominant
types of filmmaking in contemporary Ghana. Movies made specifically
in Akan (for example *Agya Koo Sakawa*), which enjoy the widest audi-
ence by far, draw directly from popular concert party tradition of being
comical while engaging with key social issues and are derogatively dubbed
"concert films" or "*Agya Koo* movies."[4] In the second type (for example,
Sakawa Boys), characters speak predominantly in Pidgin English, with some
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" (for example *The Dons of Sakawa*), named after one of the
most successful contemporary producers. These films are directed to edu-
cated, elite viewers.

Sakawa in Popular Ghanaian Videos: *The Dons of Sakawa*

The *Dons* series revolves around three characters—Hakeem, Mike, and
Justin. Through the initial scenes and their conversation, the viewer
becomes aware that these friends have graduated from the well-respected
University of Ghana at Legon and that they have aspirations of securing
good jobs and leading a fulfilling upper-middle-class life. However, after
three years, Hakeem, who graduated first class honors in computer sci-
ence, has not secured a job. After a typical day of his unsuccessful job
search, he returns home to witness his fiancée's infidelity in their bedroom
with her boss. The fiancée defends her action, noting that since Hakeem
has "not a Cedi tied to his name" she had to do whatever was necessary to
"clothe and feed and take care of [his] needs."

Mike and Justin, on the other hand, work part-time for Chief Titus, a
notorious fraudster who collaborates with corrupt government personnel
who supply him with authentic documents for his illegal activities. They
spend the rest of their time engaged in small-scale Internet fraud and black-
mail. Eventually they sever their ties with the Chief, who they feel compen-
sated them inadequately for their services, and establish an independent
cyberfraud business. Four years after finishing college they meet up again
with Hakeem, and Mike attempts to convince him to join them. Initially,
Hakeem refuses to be involved in "anything illegal," but the harsh realities
of unemployment force him to change his mind. Nevertheless, in spite of
Hakeem's expertise in hacking online credit-card databases and following
every known script in the scam business, their attempts yield very minimum

returns. Unbeknownst to these amateur cyberfraudsters, merely using one's intelligence for deceit is not enough; as Lord Bokka, the Custodian of the Shrine of Lord Calipha, Giver of Wealth Immeasurable, tells them, one "must [also spiritually] control [potential victims'] hearts and minds . . . to [let them] do [one's] bidding without hesitation."

Mike and Justin convince Hakeem—who initially did not "want to be involved in any voodoo shit"—to visit the Shrine of Calipha, where Lord Bokka makes them undergo a three-stage ritual: first, a blood covenant that officially binds them to Lord Calipha's rules; second, a spiritual cleansing that involves carrying coffins, while naked, in the middle of the night through deserted parts of town to a cemetery; and lastly, swallowing ritual objects meant to establish a contact point between them and Lord Calipha—a frog (Hakeem), a tarantula (Mike), and a large 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 the friends, with the help of a corrupt police superintendent, dupe a previously reluctant investor to hand over four and a half million dollars.

At the Shrine of Calipha, Lord Bokka also informs the supplicants of a "golden rule" that each has to observe in order to ensure their continued success. Mike has to be sexually intimate with a madwoman once a month. Justin has to be faithful to Stacy, his longtime girlfriend. And Hakeem is prohibited from using his wealth to pay for medical treatments for his mother and younger female sibling. However, all the friends flout these rules. Justin cheats on Stacy and then jilts her; Stacy later murders Justin and commits suicide. Hakeem initially refuses to pay for his mother's emergency medical care but changes his mind. When he visits her at home after her release from the hospital, Lord Bokka makes an appearance and demands Hakeem's soul as a punishment. A Christian pastor from Hakeem's mother's church intervenes on Hakeem's behalf, resulting in a spiritual fight between the representatives of good and evil in which evil Lord Bokka wins, and Hakeem dies.

Discussion of *Sakawa* in Popular Films

What, then, are we to make of this Ghanaian occult discourse in popular Ghanaian videos vis-à-vis the comments of Ghanaian politicians on this same issue? In answering the question, I approach the narrative such as the one summarized above as reflecting the "multidimensional, polysemic and deeply situated" (Carbaugh 2007:169) nature of contemporary Ghanaian issues such as sakawa. Such a reflection, I argue, serves as a counterdiscourse to the sorts of comments produced by Ghanaian political leaders who are arguably themselves audiences of sakawa movies, particularly those of Shirley Frimpong Manso. Yet the films' narratives penetrate Ghanaian social realities far more adequately and with more nuance than the comments of the political leaders do.

Some of the leaders, as we have seen, frame the issue with repeated images of corruption of the moral fiber of the nation and also suggest that sakawa fraudsters are motivated purely by greed. However, both the *Dons* series and films like *Sakawa Boys* and *Agya Koo Sakawa*, which are specifically targeted to a less elite audience, attribute characters' involvements in sakawa at least partly to conditions in their social world such as unemployment. Another external factor, as revealed in *Sakawa Boys*, is the problematic nature of Ghanaian inheritance practices. In this movie, Edem loses his father, who has left behind considerable wealth, but becomes destitute along with his mother because a paternal uncle who lawfully inherited the wealth refuses to take care of them. Later on, Edem's mother becomes sick, and in desperation to find funds to care for her, he is forced to partake in sakawa. Thus, while the political discourse on sakawa is concerned mostly with moral admonishment, the films, while often acknowledging the role of greed in practitioners of sakawa, also foreground social problems such as joblessness and poverty.

According to the *African Economic Outlook* (2012:2) report on Ghana, the "population in the 15–24 age group has an unemployment rate of 25.6%, twice that of the 25–44 age group and three times that of the 45–64 age group." In Ghana, the large numbers of youths who sell assorted merchandise in the streets is a daily visual reminder of the magnitude of the problem. Since Ghana's return to democracy in 1992, the nation has pursued youth policies that recognize youth unemployment as a critical national problem that urgently needs to be solved, although clearly it will remain for the near future.[5] With regard to university graduate unemployment in particular, the problem is exacerbated by the government's accreditation of private universities. This move had the laudable goal of helping to educate qualified students who were not admitted to the government-owned universities, but its unintended consequence is that large numbers of university graduates cannot find jobs or high-paying work that is commensurate with their skills and education. In this context of high youth unemployment, the proliferation of illegal enterprises is only one of many consequences. Another is the upsurge of NDC "foot soldiers" in the political arena who have engaged in the destruction of national property, seizure of public toilets and tollbooths, and the ejection of public officials from their offices to protest the unfulfilled promises of their leaders, since the 2008 presidential elections, to provide them with jobs. Such protests and illegal actions in recent Ghanaian politics, and the initial near silence from state authorities, point to a larger problem that is also dramatized in the *Dons* series: the connivance of some powerful state personnel with the sakawa boys. The collaboration in the *Dons* between the young men and a corrupt superintendent of police, who assists them in stealing four million dollars from a bank, reveals how sakawa results not just from unemployment (let alone from greed), but rather from a large and complex network of serious national issues that are not just ignored, but actually aided by the collaboration of some highly placed officials. In this context, solutions to such serious national matters cannot

consist in urging clergymen to "use the pulpit to preach against the 'sakawa' menace," as proffered by the late President.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion offers a critical reading of the sakawa movies, focusing on their appeal to Ghanaian audiences and the important insights that they offer into key contemporary everyday Ghanaian issues. The tendency to label these films as mere "concert" films to signal contemptuously that they have no relevance to important debates in Ghanaian public life is a myopic position that overlooks their importance as an important realm of discourse in their own right. Similarly, the political discourse betrays (a willfully?) shallow understanding of the conditions that engender the practice of sakawa as well as the popular recognition of the social and economic conditions that prompt youth to engage in this kind of criminal activity. Although one may argue that politicians do not have the option to discuss such matters frankly in public, it is precisely the predictable moralistic content of such official discourse on social issues that makes a critical approach to the sakawa films invaluable. Both the films and the politicians condemn these criminal activities. However, the films take a broader approach to the sakawa phenomenon, one that enriches our understanding of the socioeconomic and political factors that produce it. Such an analysis of popular representations of everyday social issues allows us to see how such genres engage seriously with sociopolitical, cultural, and economic issues, albeit on their own terms (see Scott 1990; Wasserman 2011).

The sakawa phenomenon also needs to be understood from the perspective of material approaches to religion that emphasize the inseparability of religious beliefs (in this case, a belief in the spirit world and its interventions in real-life situations) and tangible practices (in this case, criminal ones). The phenomenon of sakawa provides an analytically relevant and grounded example of recent theorizations of religion that conceptualizes it as "practices of beliefs" and that explore religious convictions as "emerging from and enfolded within the practices, things, and feelings that shape individuals and communities over time" (Morgan 2010:4,xiv).[6] Such studies expand our view of media to include formats that media studies scholars traditionally have not investigated—not only forms such as the down-market sakawa videos discussed here, but also, for example, talismans, scented candles, oils, and incense, posters, and messages or artwork painted on vehicles (Meyer 2009). The study of sakawa videos also demonstrates people's use of the external material world to enact their inner religious convictions. As evident in the discussion of sakawa, all of the major religious faiths in Ghana believe in the efficacy of religious rituals that tap into the supernatural in order to produce material outcomes. For this reason, most people do not find it contradictory to simultaneously denounce the practice as morally unacceptable criminal behavior and also to express their belief in the alleged occult rituals that apparently bolster fraudsters' success.

Finally, the article's analysis of these popular videos shows how the films are invaluable sources for cultural analysis of contemporary Ghanaian postcolonial culture. Only a few scholars in the field of global media studies are conducting research in African popular media genres (see Wasserman 2011). Thus, this article not only contributes to filling an existing lacuna in the research, but also responds to calls to internationalize current scholarship in the discipline in order to de-Westernize the field and move beyond theorizations and examples that derive mainly from the global North (Downing 1996, 2008; Curran & Park 2000; Wasserman 2011; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin 2002).

References

African Economic Outlook. 2012. "Ghana." www.africaneconomicoutlook.org.

Bame, Kwame. 1985. *Come to Laugh: A Study of Traditional African Theatre in Ghana.* Washington, D.C.: Lilian Barber Press.

Barber, Karin. 1987. "Popular Arts in Africa." *African Studies Review* 30 (3): 1–78.

———. 1997. "Introduction." In *Readings in African Popular Culture*, edited by Karin Barber, 1–12. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Barber, Karin, John Collins, and Alain Ricard, eds. 2001. *West African Popular Theatre.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Carbaugh, Donald. 2007 "Cultural Discourse Analysis: Communication Practices and Intercultural Encounters." *Journal of Intercultural and Communication Research* 36 (3): 167–82.

Cole, M. Catherine. 2001. *Ghana Concert Party Theatre.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Collins, John. 1994. *The Ghanaian Concert Party: African Popular Entertainment at the Crossroads.* Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo.

Curran, James, and Myung Jin Park. 2000. *De-Westernizing Media Studies.* New York: Routledge.

de Vries, Hent. 2001. "In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies." In *Religion and Media*, edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, 3–42. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

de Witte, Marleen. 2013. "The Electric Touch Machine Miracle Scam: Body, Technology, and the (Dis)authentication of the Pentecostal Supernatural." In *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, edited by Jeremy Stolow, 61–82. New York: Fordham University Press.

Downing, John. 1996. *Internalizing Media Theory: Transition, Power, Culture.* London: Sage Publications.

———. 2008 "Social Movement Theories and Alternative Media: An Evaluation and Critique." *Communication, Culture and Critique* 1 (1): 40–50.

Ginsburg, Faye, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin. 2002. "Introduction." In *Media Worlds: Anthropology on a New Terrain*, edited by Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, 1–38. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hoover, Stewart, and Lynn Schofield Clark. 2002. *Practicing Religion in the Age of Media.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Hughes, Stephen, and Birgit Meyer. 2005. "Introduction: Mediating Religion and Film in a Post-Secular World." *Postscripts: Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds* 1 (2–3): 149–53.

Kusi, Kwadwo, dir. 2013. *Ayaricough.* Kumasi: B.K. Films.

Lynch, Gordon, Jolyon Mitchell, and Anna Strhan, eds. 2012. *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge.

Meyer, Birgit. 1995. "Delivered from the Powers of Darkness: Confessions of Satanic Riches in Christian Ghana." *Africa* 65 (2): 237–25.

———. 2003. "Impossible Representations: Pentecostalism, Vision and Video Technology in Ghana." Working Papers 25, Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz.

———. 2005. "Religious Remediations: Pentecostal Views in Ghanaian Video-Movies." *Postscripts* 1 (2): 155–81.

———. 2009. "Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding." In *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion and the Senses*, edited by Birgit Meyer, 1–28. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

———. 2012. "Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion." Paper presented at conference, "Materiality, Mediation, and the Study of Religion, Utrecht, October 18–19.

Morgan, David. 1998. *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2008. "The Materiality of Cultural Construction." *Material Religion: Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 4 (2): 228–29.

———. 2010. "Preface." In *Religion and Material Culture: A Matter of Belief*, edited by David Morgan, xiii–xiv. New York: Routledge.

Nyamjoh, B. Francis. 2011. "De-Westernizing Media Theory to Make Room for African Experience." In *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa*, edited by Herman Wasserman, 19–31. New York: Routledge.

Plate, S. Brent. 2003. "Introduction: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making." In *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking*, edited by S. Brent Plate, 1–15. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Scott, James. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Stolow, Jeremy. 2005 "Religion and/as Media." *Theory, Culture and Society* 22 (4): 119–45.

———. 2013. "Introduction: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between." In *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, edited by Jeremy Stolow, 1–24. New York: Fordham University Press.

Thussu, Dayan. 2009. "Why Internationalize Media Studies and How?" In *Internationalizing Media Studies*, edited by Daya Kishan Thussu, 13–31. New York: Routledge.

Wasserman, Herman. 2011 "Introduction: Taking It to the Streets." In *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa*, edited by Herman Wasserman, 1–16. New York: Routledge.

Yankah, Kwesi. 1984. "The Akan Highlife Song: A Medium of Cultural Reflection or Deflection?" *Research in African Literatures* 15 (4): 568–82.

Notes

1. The term *sakawa* consists of *saka* (to put it in) and *wa* (to [have] put something in).
2. Numerous movies, especially those from Kumasi, follow this trend. Thus one comes across titles like *Ayaricough*, referring to the behavior of Hassan Ayariga,

the presidential candidate for the People's National Convention during the 2012 presidential debates, who coughed incessantly when his opponents were speaking.

3. John Evans Atta-Mills died on July 24, 2012, and his vice president, John Dramani Mahama, became president in the December 2012 presidential elections.

4. The term "concert" is used to refer to anything that is not deemed serious or important. The term is associated with the Ghanaian concert party, a popular "roving comic opera" (Barber, Collins, and Ricard 1997:6) tradition. See Cole (2001) for a concise history on this traveling theater tradition.

5. Some of the policies include employment opportunities for youth in the security services, sanitation, and trade.

6. See also Morgan (2008); Hoover and Clark (2002); Lynch, Mitchell, and Strhan (2012). On "religion as media," see Stolow (2005:125); see also de Vries (2001). On "religion as a practice of mediation" see Meyer (2003:1); see also Hughes and Meyer (2005).