

Comment on Joseph Oduro-Frimpong' Working Paper "Sakawa: On Occultic Rituals and Cyberfraud in Ghanaian Popular Cinema"
by Tilo Grätz (Halle University & Free University Berlin)

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

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

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

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

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

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

treaties with evil forces etc. characterising many Ghanaian (and also Nigerian) videos films obviously already since a longer time (see e.g. Austen/Saul 2010).

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

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

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