

Evaluation

The Hands of Social Messiness in the Raise of Economic Cybercrime: A Case of Sakawa Phenomenon in Tamale, Ghana

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1. General comments

This is a wonderful research project that can speak to various academic publics: criminology, sociology, anthropology, and African studies. Drs Abubakar has deployed a wide arsenal of theories in order to provide a more culturally-sensitive account of Sakawa. His main argument is that the disorder in Tamale society in general (or “social messiness” as he calls it) has favored the emergence and uptake of cyberfraud. Nine chapters combine theoretical musings, with empirical data, and even policy recommendations. Mgr. Abubakar shows to be an ambitious scholar who not only brings together various “libraries”, but also who wants to impact on Tamale society.

Drs. Abubakari’s approach is “eclectic” (as he describes in one of the first chapters), and this can be considered both a strength and a weakness of the dissertation. For an anthropologist, the data collection may not always be that convincing, however.

The manuscript is clearly the outcome of a lot of work. It also proves independent thinking. At certain points, Drs Abubakari proposes new, promising concepts. An example of an innovative concept is the notion of “inappropriate insider” (p. 104). This and other innovations impressed me from time to time when reading the dissertation. They show a particular intellectual maturity.

I have some questions regarding the collected empirical data. Throughout the manuscript, drs Abubakari jumps from one statement to a general conclusion. Furthermore, the ways in which materials from interviews are used, are not always convincing to me. E.g. p50 about the history of internet fraud: Abubakari seems to rely only on one source; did he carry out archival research or additional research in order to get evidence of that historiography? If so, then this should have been mentioned. Or, on p202 some statements about the religious leaders’ acknowledgements are made, though we do not get the evidence. The source is someone talking about the religious leaders. Drs. Abubakari then assumes that the source is right, although the source has only shared an opinion about the religious leaders.

While the dissertation is a real “tour de force” with its almost 400 pages, I think the manuscript would have benefited from several more rounds of editing, to eliminate the grammatical errors, strange formulations, and sloppy language. Overall, even though the author had his main argument clearly constantly in mind when writing, there is often a lack of focus. Explanations are often too wide. And, sometimes the author goes off in other directions than the argument that is being developed at that point in the text. There is also a lot of repetition in the manuscript.

Finally, scientific writing also entails accurate referencing. With some rare exceptions, drs Abubakari never gives page numbers in his references.

2. Break down per chapter

Every chapter brings together various aspects of Sakawa and also integrates a large body of theories. Summarizing a chapter has proven very daunting. Below are some comments made while reading.

Introduction

This part introduces the dissertation, and already announces many main arguments that will be made throughout the dissertation. The distinction between “cybercrime” in general and “Sakawa”, and its narrow definitions in Ghana is insightful. I do not understand why the author will nevertheless use the

two concepts interchangeably, especially given the semantic discussion. (and given the author's own misgivings against using them, as he critiques Whitty (2018) for doing exactly the same, on p. 49 in Chapter 1).

This chapter is intended to set the scene – despite the length of this chapter, nevertheless some additional information would have been in order, e.g.

- p. 17 It is mentioned that the Sakawa actors “turn to Sakawa activities to supplement their income”. This suggests that the Sakawa actors have other sources of income, which should be identified somewhere. (After having read the dissertation, I do not think that the author situates Sakawa among other economic pursuits)

- also on p. 17 “the poverty line”: what does this mean in Tamale?

We learn some basic information about digitalization in Ghana, the moral positioning of Sakawa in Tamale society, lived economic precarity, and the linkages with the spiritual world and religious leaders.

P20: I like the concept of “social messiness”, which the author introduces and unpacks. It fits fully the paradigm of “social disorganization”. I would like to know how it relates to more familiar rubrics in African studies such as “crisis” and “disorder”.

Some more effort could have been made to distinguish “social disorganization” from “cultural disorganization”.

I am rather reluctant to use a medical term such as “pathology” (p 21), and wonder whether this is a dominant way in criminology/sociology to look into deviant behavior in society?

Several research objectives are formulated, while also a gap in the criminology/sociology literature is identified. The research questions are broadly defined, and allow for qualitative research methods.

I am less convinced regarding the chosen methodologies: the duration of the fieldwork sessions is not mentioned, thus not giving us any idea how long the researcher has been able to carry out ethnographic research; it is unclear with how many people the researcher has talked, and whether these were one time only conversations, or whether there were follow up conversations. The doctoral candidate also seems to underestimate the qualitative data that he collected online, as on p 26 he mentions that “online data collected were quantitative in nature”. What about the Facebook posts, and online media publications that he has collected, and analyzed?

I appreciate the relative openness of the researcher regarding his positionality towards the research subjects, the difficulties of gaining access (and for example also not being able to dialogue with political actors). However, I am somehow puzzled as to why he does not identify himself as a religious leader (“Mgr.”). Or did they know? And what were the consequences?

We already get a beautifully nuanced exploration of the various weak and social ties that contribute to the emergence/flourishing of the Sakawa phenomenon

- disrupted intergenerational relationships (weak ties)
- poverty (that i don't understand how this leads to weak ties)
- transnational relationships between the Sakawa actors and their victims (weak due to the distance)
- strong ties within the community that protect and facilitate (with local police, political and spiritual leaders)

In this way, so, Abubakari argues, he nuances the theory prevalent in criminology that disorganization or deviant behavior is based on weak social ties.

Also the idea that Sakawa is forgivable by God is, in my opinion, novel, and exciting. It thus allows Abubakari to rethink the notion of “dirty money” (a key rubric in economic anthropological writing about Sub-Saharan Africa).

Some concepts need further clarification, e.g. “social nuance”, “ecological elements”

The chapter ends with an articulation of the significance of the study, its limitations, and the set up of the dissertation.

Chapter 1: Sakawa and Cybercrimes are Global Pandemics

This chapter starts with a wide, global lens on cybercrime, and gradually narrows down to the phenomenon in West Africa. It seems that “West Africa” here is limited to Nigeria and Ghana, mainly Anglophone West Africa”. The author could have dialogued with relevant literature on Cameroon (see Ndjio, Malaquais, on “feymen” in Cameroun).

The distinction between the MDFD in Ghana and the 419 scams in Nigeria is insightful.

p. 51 The argument that “cybercrime is not only a technological issue but also a socio-cultural phenomenon” is key, and should have been foregrounded more in the (too lengthy) introduction. Drs. Abubakari uses “traditional” in an outdated fashion. In Africanist studies, the concept has been rendered problematic since the publication of “The Invention of Tradition” by Hobsbaw and Ranger (1981). This should be avoided! (and I thus strongly disagree with what Abubakari writes about this vocabulary in Chapter 2 footnote 20 “the literature on African study is acceptable on using “traditional” to describe offline activities, as it may have a negative connotation in Africa.” By the way, there is a logical confusion in this sentence, the label is “acceptable” *despite* its negative connotations? Is that what he means? ...)

Sometimes, some more engagement with the mentioned literature is required. E.g. on P51 Payne’s argument is mentioned but I do not see whether Drs. Abubakari agrees with it, or not (and if so, why not). I observe also a too strong reliance on Whitty (2018).

The writing could at times be sharper. E.g. on P 60 when Drs. Abubakari says that “While Whitty identified five stages used by scammers, this study proposes a six-stage process”, here the author should have explicitly mentioned which state Drs. Abubakari adds, and why so.

p. 66 what does the practice of “Suhugu” mean? What is it that the Sakawa people do? It would be nice to have more ethnographic descriptions of the various “scripts” of the discussed process. It is unclear why the biomedical concept of “pandemic” is used in the title.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Approach to the Study

Various theoretical frames are provided, which all help to shed light on the Sakawa phenomenon. We move from space transition theory, over disorganization paradigm, and human ecology, Durkheim’s theory of social organization, and he builds towards a dynamic social disorganization theory. The scaffolds of this theory are convincing, however, I remain in the dark as to why this is a “dynamic” theory?

P 81 Drs. Abubakari rightly emphasizes that the “offenders” have connections to the community (family, friends, social networks, and religious and moral organizations), and that these are specific dimensions that we need to understand if we want to grasp what the Sakawa phenomenon entails. I am most excited about the “cyber social ties” (p83). I would have loved to read more about these (how are they established, how do they become “strong”, what “weakens” these cyber social ties? Etc.)

Chapter 3 Approaching Sakawa in Tamale: My fieldwork Approach

This chapter introduces Tamale and its social world, as well as its ecosystem (although he does not use this concept).

I wonder whether the statement that “almost everyone, whether educated or uneducated owes a smart phone with internet access in the city” (p100) is also valid for the elderly?

Here, we get more details about the field work duration, how he chose his interlocutors, and especially the difficulties the researcher was confronted with when trying to interview the Sakawa boys. The concept of “inappropriate insider” is, to my knowledge, new (see above). The impact of informed consent forms can also turn against the researcher, so Drs. Abubakari shows.

He has been able to overcome several limitations in the data gathering, by skillfully working with social structures, e.g. what he call’s working with “leaders’ endorsement” and “methodological grooming”, a practice he borrows from Howell and Griffin (2012).

There is however hardly any transparency on how the qualitative data have been interpreted.

Here some information is given about the digital ethnography, and he writes that “a large amount of qualitative data was extracted” (p118), which contrasts with what has been announced in Chapter 1. The issue of the 17 year old boy is important to mention, though it also shows that Sakawa boys are not always legally adults.

There is too much repetition in chapters 1-2-3.

Chapter 4; Framing Sakawa in Context of Livelihood: Sakawa is a Justifiable Immorality

This is a very strong chapter. Here, Drs. Abubakari explores how Sakawa is framed in Tamale, among various social groups.

In the theoretical and analytical parts, Drs. Abubakari rightfully draws on the closeness between “deviance” and “immorality”, rather than “deviance” and “illegality” or “crime”, the latter concepts relate to the state.

The section on the legal framework would have benefitted from an elaboration on attitudes towards the state; and from further analysis of police officers’ embedment with the Sakawa ecosystem. This chapter also contains fascinating insights in the relationships between Sakawa actors and their victims, which they prefer to describe as “clients”, and with whom they imagine to be in a reciprocal relationship. This subjective understanding of their engagements with their the scammed is novel, and could only be obtained via in-depth ethnographic research.

Questions that I would like to ask the doctoral student relate to “accountability” and “responsibility”: to whom are the Sakawa boys accountable? Only to the divine? What does “accountability” and “responsibility” look like in the Sakawa world?

There are some strange descriptions of social constructivism.

The whole chapter could have been summarized under the notion of “the moral economy of Sakawa”. The concept of “moral economies” grasps exactly the moralities of economic activities. It has been coined by Thompson, dealing with English society, but many Africanists have found it useful to understand social life in African societies.

Chapter 5: Navigating the Moral Repercussion of Sakawa: Trait and Divine Forgiveness

This is the strongest and most original chapter in my opinion.

The chapter deals with the “forgivability” of the scam. We learn how scammers even select their “clients” with regards to their assumed disposition to forgive. From time to time, the chapter steers into a more psychological analysis (study of motivations for example).

There are some weaknesses in this chapter, however:

- Section 5.2. about the victims is unconvincing as this section is fully speculative. As far as I understood it, Drs. Abubakari has not interviewed any victims. The evidence is lacking. The description of the various rituals is promising, though too superficial in my opinion. It requires more direct observations or more direct voices about these rituals.
- P185 A religious scholar would disagree with the argument that religious leaders have only limited impact on people’s lives, and that they do not hold influence over social interactions. Much of the taboos, religious instructions, and predications are exactly about social worlds. However, Drs. Abubakari may be right that for the Sakawa actors these religious authorities do not seem to hold much influence on them.
- P186 the summary of Mauss’ theory is incorrect
- The analysis of charity is pretty short. What about the lack of reciprocity?

Chapter 6: Economic Cybercrime: A Problem of Social Cohesions and Economic Conditions

This chapter brings together economic precarity and social confusion. The lack of authority of parents and leaders in Tamale is, so Drs. Abubarkari argues, accountable for the immoral activities of Tamale’s youth. This chapter situates Sakawa within a larger context of corruption, and moral decline.

Here, further ethnographic details about “strong” and “weak” ties would have been helpful in order to understand what these concepts actually mean in Tamale.

Chapter 7: Sakawa-Girls: Social Relations We Clench and Digitalization We Hide

The title of this chapter is an enigma to me.

This chapter is announced as a counterpart for the previous chapter, which focused on Sakawa-boys. Yet, the rubrics of “masculinity” and “femininity” are not part of the analysis.

The material here is, again, highly innovative, and Drs. Abubakari’s engagement with academic literature is far better in this chapter.

We learn that, even if Sakawa is predominantly a male practice, it relies heavily on women: women as victims/clients; women as assistants, etc. We learn about the tandem of Sakawa-boys and Sakawa-girls. The former need the latter because of certain types of skills that they have (e.g. knowing certain accents, the female voice, etc.). Drs. Abubakari calls this “symbolic capital”. These relationships are again studied through the lens of ties – all these practices (even those done “in the shadows”) are part of working on relationships, working on the social ties with their victims/clients; with their boyfriends; etc. Sakawa is not only a criminal offense, but it is first and foremost a social activity that bring together an unexpected set of actors.

In contrast to the narrative about boys’ participation in Sakawa, which seems to be mainly related to economic ambitions, here Drs. Abubakari argues that social relationships and digitality (especially the possibility to anonymization) are part of the explanation of why girls partake in Sakawa activity. I would like to learn more about the “morality” of these women. What kind of women align with the Sakawa-boys? Are they considered marriage material? Or are they closer to the figure of “the good time girl”? What kind of femininity do these girls embody? And, how do the Sakawa-boys judge the girls’ involvement in their “immoral” activities? Finally, what about the moral contagion of the Sakawa immorality on these girls? Do they also need to request forgiveness, and engage in various purifying rituals?

Chapter 8: Sakawa under Disorganised Social Collective Efficacy

This chapter provides a critical reading of Tamale society, especially in its informal, social institutions. Everybody seems to be corrupt, and there are no “leaders” anymore. The classical authorities such as ethnic chiefs, religious leaders, the elderly, etc. have lost authority, and are unable to reorient Tamale’s youth back to the right path. The reason is that many of these themselves are closely involved in Sakawa activities, either themselves, or their child(ren).

This chapter appears to me one of the least organized chapters.

My main question is: if “disorganization” is all around in Tamale, is Sakawa then the only (informal) institution that is well-organized?

Chapter 9: Espouse of Sakawa under Disorganize Formal Control Perspective: Law Enforcement Nexuses

The goal of this chapter is to study collective efficacy “within formal control mechanisms” and focuses on interactions between formal control structures such as law enforcement agencies, political actors, financial institutions, and internet service providers – and argues that these help shape the emergence of economic cybercrimes in the region. This is centered around a hypothesis of Police Community Partnerships – and if these are efficient, then community members and police can coordinate their strategies to control unwanted behaviors in society. However, what does “unwanted” here mean? Is Sakawa really “unwanted”?

This chapter also delves deeper in the institutional arrangements in Tamale, and national/federal infrastructures of investigation, law making, and the government’s very minimal engagement with cyberfraud.

Drs Abubakari mentions that politicians are considered to contribute to the spread of Sakawa. However, he has not been able to interview politicians directly. The data for this chapter are limited to others’ voices (Sakawa actors themselves, but also teachers, bankers, etc.) talking about the politicians. The chapter thus cannot fulfill its ambition of “exploring the role of political actors in the spread of Sakawa in Tamale”, rather he can only claim to explore people’s imagination and rumours about their involvement.

In addition, the objective of this chapter is formulated again in a very sloppy manner “an exploration of political actors’ role in understanding the emergence of Sakawa in Tamale”. He thus announces to study how political actors help to understand the emergence of Sakawa, meaning that he would study the hermeneutical work that political actors do. In contrast, the chapter ambitions to explore how political actors help spread the phenomenon of Sakawa ... These are not the same!

In this chapter, the notion of “cryptopolitics” would have been relevant as well.

Some examples of sloppy language again: conflation between “control mechanisms” and “control narratives” on p 292.

While the police men argue (as Drs. Abubakari did before, in other chapters) that most victims of Sakawa boys are white, he seems to suggest that there are also black victims. Some statistical data would have been helpful here.

I would have liked to see direct evidence about the involvement of police men, bank managers and politicians with Sakawa. So far, we only read about assumptions, perceptions, and rumors.

Chapter 10 Conclusions: theoretical reflections and research implications

The summary was excellent content wise. However, also here more editing is required.

3. Conclusion

I certainly assume that the doctoral dissertation demonstrates general theoretical knowledge required for the award of the doctoral degree. He even manages to combine theories from three different disciplines, and this should be applauded.

Despite some shortcomings mentioned above, I do think that the doctoral thesis demonstrates Drs Abubakari’s ability to carry out scientific work independently.

And, with the various convincing policy recommendations (which all are based on his own analysis of the socio-cultural grounds for the Sakawa economy to take off in Tamale), I am convinced that the doctoral dissertation represents an original solution to the scientific problem of the one-sided, eurocentric and legalistic understanding of Sakawa so far.