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ARTICLE

Moral discourses on internet fraud: Perspectives from Nalerigu community of northeastern Ghana

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Abstract

The phenomenon of *sakawa* (internet fraud) is in dramatic increase in Ghana as majority of the youth are engaged in it. In view of what goes into the practice and its repercussions, *sakawa* has witnessed serious backlash from society and religious bodies in the country. At Nalerigu (a Muslim community in North-Eastern Ghana) the phenomenon is very common, and it is characterized by the integration of occultic practices and internet-based fraud whilst posing a moral dilemma question of its rightness or wrongness. This study analyses the subjective moral interpretation using Nalerigu community as a case study. The article is approached qualitatively based on interviews and framed by the "moral anthropology" theory. The results shows that although internet fraud is transforming the material wellbeing of the young people, some community leaders and members have reproved its practice on grounds that it has negative effects on the moral foundations of the youth. This paper argues that the morality of *sakawa* is one of ambiguity, with the perpetrators approving and others reproving it. It therefore calls for the study of the morality of *sakawa* through the lens of a "moral anthropology" in order to account for the distinctive moral interpretations of the practice by one's research subjects and other people.

Key words: *sakawa*; Internet fraud; Moral anthropology; Ambiguity; Nalerigu; Ghana.

Introduction

The emergence of digital technological devices (computers, smart phones) and systems (internet and social media) have had both merits and demerits on the youth today. Whereas it has, on the one hand, enhanced youth socio-political involvement in general (Kamau, 2016), it has, on the other hand, equally been responsible for the shades of crimes (sex offenses, scamming, hacking, internet fraud, and media piracy) in society (Bossler and Thomas, 2013:349; Clarke, 2004:55; Cohen, & Felson, 1979:588; Durkin and Bryant, 1999:103; Strader, 2016:1). Of these crimes, internet fraud/scam appears to have witnessed a surge in many West African countries (Smith, 2001; Cassiman, 2019, 2018; Ndjio, 2008). These frauds are interlaced with attractive packages that are persuasive fabrications to hoodwink the gullible (Beek, 2016:305). In Ghana for instance, many youths who are unemployed seem to have taken to internet fraud and its related activities. Their argument is rooted in their quest to navigate and make life meaningful amid the economic hardships they go through (Cassiman, 2019:487).

Internet fraud practice is locally called *sakawa* (Beek, 2016:317). Although *sakawa* is largely interpreted as any spiritual instrumentalisation to acquire (quick) money that is based on "ritual murder" and "commodification" of human body among others, internet scam is labelled *sakawa* as its perpetrators (scammers) deploy similar occultic-spiritual powers for successful internet scams (Beek, 2016:317) and to protect themselves against associated "legal danger" (Warner, 2011:744). Since 2015, when this research commenced, *sakawa* has received serious moral onslaught from society, politicians, security agencies and religious bodies. Concerns from these agencies makes scammers morally and legally apprehensive, making

them panic of people who are not even in the security services. In a personal informal conversation with some scammers, they posed questions which made them curious of the real identity of the researchers, mistaking the researchers for security operatives. Although scammers are acutely aware of the legal and moral condemnations Ghanaians associate with their activities, they often find morally navigable explanations to endorse the practice. Given this situation, *sakawa*, has built starkly polarized moral camps between those who oppose and those who support it. In view of this, it can be misleading to take an entrenched ethical stance in *sakawa* without attending to the distinctive moral views of people that reflect the socio-economic and cultural-historical worlds within which its perpetrators are entangled.

Being sensitive to this context that makes moral understanding of *sakawa* difficult, this study examines the moral discourses of *sakawa* – with cases from Nalerigu Muslim community of northeastern Ghana – highlighting how the phenomenon is exposed to subjective moral interpretations. Adopting "moral anthropology" as an underlying theoretical framework, the study makes an objective moral assessment and refrains from a priori (pre) moral judgement or engages in any form of moralizing by proposing codes of good conduct. Thus, it examines the subjective moral views of people on *sakawa* in Nalerigu. The study argues that the morality of *sakawa* is ambiguous – with some people approving and others reproving it – and therefore calls for a "moral anthropology" theory that ensure an inclusive discussion by accounting for the distinctive moral interpretations of the practice by one's research subjects.

This paper starts with two sections that shed light on theoretical and literature analyses. Here the paper explicates the "moral anthropology" theory and outlines its aptness in examining the morality of *sakawa*. This morality of *sakawa* is taken further with analyses of extant literature on Ghana particularly that is relevant for the study. This is followed by another two sections that describes the physical and socio-economic features of Nalerigu community whilst outlining the specific methods the study adopts in data gathering and analysis. The last two sections are centered on the findings and analyses of the study. The first of these sections sketches *sakawa* activities in Nalerigu highlighting some specific methods of *sakawa* as well as its policing. This first sketch constructs the canvas for the last section which dives into a moral discourse analysis of *sakawa*. It argues that *sakawa* generates multiple and ambiguous moral versions which can properly be studied through "moral anthropology".

Moral Anthropology Theory

Moral anthropology constitutes the whole "human species" including its success through moral development. It concerns the production of theoretical and empirical knowledge in examining behaviors and improving human society (Fassin, 2012:1). Yet moral anthropology hinges more on Durkheimian or Weberian scientific notions (ibid). In studying "moral life according to the methods of the positive sciences," Émile Durkheim (1984[1893]:xxv) advocates for a descriptive instead of prescriptive method: "We do not wish to deduce morality from science, but to constitute the science of morality, which is very different. Moral facts are phenomena like any others." Constituting the science of morality entails analyzing and making sense of moral actions not merely from the theological perspective but largely from the scientific prism.

Further, Max Weber refutes normative approaches but proposes analytic methods in values assessment; arguing that "It can never be the task of an empirical science to provide binding norms and ideals from which directives for immediate practical activity can be derived," (Weber, 1949[1904]:52). This implies, "it is certainly not that value-judgments are to be withdrawn from scientific discussion because in the last analysis they rest on certain ideals and are therefore 'subjective' in origin." (ibid). One can therefore argue that the assessment of actions by the *Protestant Ethicist* is obsessed with faith, different from science which deals with objective value judgments (Fassin, 2012:2). As constituting science of objective moral judgement, a "moral anthropology" does not moralize actions by proposing "codes of good conduct". It rather assesses the "principles and practices operating in the social world, the debates they arouse, the processes through which they become implemented" and the justifications given in defense of incongruities between what ought to and "what is actually" (Fassin, 2008:334). In fact, "moral anthropology" does not support nor violate people's rights in implementing certain values. It neither against, for example *sakawa*, and female circumcision nor condemns efforts in regulating them. Rather, it engages the moral arguments and understandings of all sides (Fassin, 2012:2-3).

Therefore, in the context of this paper, "moral" or "morality" does not mean norms/values regarding right, wrong, good or bad. Rather it uses "moral" to refer to "human belief" in telling good from bad, right from wrong "and in the necessity of acting in favor of the good and against the evil" (Fassin, 2008:334). Das (2010) argues that whereas moral philosophers tried to limit "morality" in discussing whether "good" could be substituted by terms like "truthful" or "generous", and to emphasize the distinction between "values" seen as principles and norms regarded as conventions; social scientists start to avoid these a priori thoughts but remain a posteriori through exploring peoples' actions based on their views. Lambek (2010) corroborates that instead of theorizing "morality" and assessing peoples' actions in that regard, anthropologists tend to understand "morality" through subjective moral discourses based on agents' understandings. Thus, we conceptualize morality as a subjective affair – what people individually see *sakawa* relative to good or bad. Further, morality goes with ethics and their difference is problematic. Whereas some philosophers and anthropologists see morality as cultural codes and ethics as a branch of philosophy, others do not propose any difference, but used them interchangeably (Fassin, 2012:5), this is what is done in this study.

Studying *sakawa* through this "moral anthropology" would be criticized by some anthropologists and other scholars especially theologians. Indeed, anthropologists have had enduring controversies regarding whether ethnographers should be moralistic or intervene to make the lives of their research subjects better by helping to eliminate acts which are seen as 'evil'. Despite the anthropologists whose line of argument we draw to assert that anthropologists must be morally impartial

and not moral enforcers or proposers what is good (Fassin, 2008, 2012; High and Smith, 2019; Appel, 2019), others hold the contrary view. They call for anthropologists to be activists who will endeavor to 'correct' so-called 'immoral' acts or support to alleviate the 'suffering' conditions of their research subjects (Hughes, 2017; Borneman, 2020). Following these opponents of "moral anthropology" we can argue that one would try to criticize and correct *sakawa boys* for engaging in acts that bring – as David McDermott Hughes (2017:4) attributes to his Trinidadian interlocutors, who, according to him, extract oil without considering the moral implications of its negative effects – "moral deficit". This thus highlights what Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) has long termed "militant anthropology" that emphasizes on "responsibility more than care" – making it the responsibility of anthropologists to expose the harms of certain acts (without caring for the ethical views of others) to call for militant intervention and control. Following this view, *sakawa* will be seen as bad and immoral for indexing moral degradation of Ghanaian and Nalerigu society and so must be regulated to ensure 'good'.

Yet this argument which takes an ethical stance in one's study narrows the moral views by limiting one's interlocutors' chance to express the goodness and badness of, for example, *sakawa* and the social infrastructure they inhabit. In this sense, the morality of the sakawa phenomenon will not be well accounted for to reflect the distinctive moral views that people, including *sakawa boys* associate with the practice. Hence this study takes an objective approach that leaves space for *sakawa* ethical dilemmas. It is therefore our obligation to practice acute self-reflexivities and careful analytical commitments that ensure all voices are heard including those who have deferring moral visions (Appel, 2019) on *sakawa*. This way, as High and Smith (2019:20) argue, invariably generates broader anthropological knowledge resulting from inclusive moral discussions on a phenomenon, in this case *sakawa*. Although we not proposing that people to accept the moral views of our interlocutors as analyzed in this study yet understanding them will inform how the *sakawa* phenomenon is attended to.

Morality and *Sakawa* (Internet Fraud)

The phenomenon of Internet fraud (*sakawa*) has been widely researched by various scholars, although most of these studies seem to focus on the techniques and preventive mechanisms of fraud (Reyns Henson, 2013:312 Bossler and Thomas, 2012, 2013; Grabosky, 2007). Other studies have also examined the social dimension of internet crimes including scams by highlighting how criminal possibilities are part of globalization, or part of a dimension of what Arjun Appadurai (1996:33) calls 'global flows' or "networked society" (Castell, 1996). However, despite exploring the relations between the internet and globalization to produce theories (such as studies by Appadurai (1996) and Castell (1996)), anthropologists, for some two decades ago, focused on "how particular actors struggle to give meaning to online communication and transnational connections." (Coleman, 2010:489). This anthropological dimension has been pursued by many scholars in understanding internet scam (*sakawa*) in west Africa and beyond. Jan Beek's (2016:306) Cybercrime, Police Work and Storytelling in West Africa is one of such studies. Working closely with the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) headquarters in Accra to understand cyber fraud policing, Beek revealed that internet scam is analogous to "storytelling" in which all its characters (scammers, victims and police officers) try to create believable stories. He maintained however that all these "stories – not only the ones told by scammers – are often factually inaccurate, detached from or inconsistent with their everyday lives." (ibid). This shows how *sakawa* can be typified with lies by many people, not only *sakawa boys*, and thus raises moral ambiguity problem of who is the real scammer. This moral ambiguity is further highlighted below.

Jenna Burrell's (2012) Invisible Users: youth in the internet cafes of urban Ghana reveals some moral readings of *sakawa*. Burrell situates her study in Accra, the capital of Ghana, and pointed out that internet fraudsters legitimately or illegitimately enact foreign contacts to access wealth to ameliorate life conditions. According to Burrell, some of her informants made "morally sound" image of fraud arguments for fraud by indicating that the existential factors that affect their livelihood inform their engagement in the practice. (Burrell, 2012:92). In his Understanding Cyber-Crime in Ghana: A View from Below, Jason Warner (2011:746-747) resonates this observation by Burell. He shows how scamming in Ghana rejoin for socio-political injustices; as internet scammers hinge their activities on corruption of state leaders and economic marginalization. Amstrong (2011) also shows how rumors of *sakawa* generate serious moral tensions as Ghanaians condemn the practice as "socially grotesque" which denigrates Ghana's identity. Further, Oduro-Frimpong (2014) draws on interviews in Accra and Ghanaian *sakawa* movies such as "*Sakawa* Boys (2009), Agya Koo *Sakawa* (2009) and The Dons of *Sakawa* (2009)", to heighten the moral understanding of the *sakawa* practice. These movies portray how unemployment coerced Ghanaian youth into *sakawa* that makes it morally ambiguous.

Ann Cassiman also based on Zongo (Muslim communities) in Accra to further these moral debates. She demonstrates how internet scammers (commonly called browsers) are reproached by some people as indolent and immoral, and how instead browsers and others perceive internet fraud as not a wrongdoing but a way of responding to the prevailing poverty (Cassiman, 2019). She also shows how online dating scams in Zongo undermine trust and friendships as browsers turn to isolate themselves from familial relations after acquiring considerable wealth, leading to public condemnations (Cassiman, 2018). She further demonstrates how online dating scams subvert masculinity as male fraudsters pretend to be 'she' on dating sites (Cassiman, 2019).

Quite revealing however, whereas all the above among other ethnographical studies on *sakawa* in Ghana provide useful foundations in understanding its moral discourses, they tend to neglect remote regions especially the northern part of Ghana. Their focus on urban centers and Accra especially (Warner, 2011; Burell, 2012; Oduro-Frimpong, 2014, Cassiman, 2018, 2019) makes it quite difficult to extrapolate their findings to every socio-cultural context such as northeastern Ghana where social rules, relations, for instance, are more cemented than these urban centers. In Nalerigu community and the North East region largely – despite the upsurge of *sakawa* – it is striking that virtually no single anthropological study has

been conducted on the topic. This thus explains the relevance of this study as it fills this gap on the understanding of the moral dilemma encountered in Nalerigu on *sakawa* phenomenon; not to mention the invariable contribution it makes to anthropological studies on *sakawa* in Ghana and beyond.

The Nalerigu Community

Nalerigu community is a relatively small town located in the East Mamprusi Municipal of North East region of Ghana. It has a population of approximately 15,000 people with many constituting young people. Nalerigu is a confluence of modern and traditional governance, as it locates the regional capital for North East region and the paramount chief of the Mamprusi respectively.

Although the Mamprusi people are the dominant inhabitants, and Mampruli (the language of the Mamprusi) is the widely spoken language, other ethnic groups – including the Dagomba, Mossi, Bimoba, Kokomba, Kusasi, Bissa and Chokosi – exist in the community. Despite this ethnic diversity, social relations are connected, and individuals exist with shared communal values. This social relatedness is inspired by kinship, marriage, neighborliness and friendships, although religion cannot be estranged, as it supposedly sets moral standards that sustain communalism.

But the issue of religion/religiosity in Nalerigu and the North East region generally is confusing, as people are not clearly identified with specific religious traditions. Although Islam predominates, followed by Christianity and the African religion being the least (see the "2010 Population and Housing Census", East Mamprusi District report, (29)), the African indigenous beliefs/practices are not alienated from everyday life of the indigenes. In short, there exist religious syncretism – a blend of traditional African religion and Islam or Christianity. Albeit Nalerigu is largely a Muslim community and most of the youth described here see themselves Muslims. At the same time moral injunctions are explicit with family heads, parents, imams among others encouraging the cultivation of good acts such as care for others, sharing of wealth, respect, decency, and avoidance of bad acts like fornication, adultery, theft among others.

However, individuals don't entirely follow communal normative structures. Some people particularly the youth have engaged in acts that infract moral codes. A substantial section of the youth (both males and females between 15-35 age group) are involved in prostitution, theft, and scams on grounds of making livelihoods amid poverty and hardships. Indeed, economic conditions in the community and the region are deplorable. Many people are economically active engaging mostly in farming and trade, yet poor rainfall pattern and poverty make these occupations unprofitable. Besides, despite substantial section of the people educated to tertiary institutions of colleges and universities, majority have nevertheless remained unemployed by the government. Hence there are no income sources for many people in the community, accounting for the low standards of living.

Consequently, there is a tremendous drift of youth towards urban centers like Accra and Kumasi in pursuit of new futures. However, many people in these centers also have no jobs. In some areas in Accra such as Nima for example, unemployment triggers young people to explore both physical and virtual means including internet scams for livelihoods (Cassiman, 2018:S73). However, some youth remain in Nalerigu and other communities in the region and hustle for promising futures.

Pursuance for better futures is discernible at 'bases', where young men sit and discuss how to navigate hurdles of life. At bases, they strengthen brotherhood and help one another in naming, marriage and funeral ceremonies. Located at boutiques and under trees, bases consist of wooden benches and plastic chairs where mostly male comrades and relatives of the same generation who share common topics. Females do not form bases, they instead have their own socializing platforms (mutual saving schemes, marriage and outdooring groups) where they also support one another. In short, bases in Nalerigu parallel bases in Zongo of Accra where young men converge, play games and discuss hurdles of life (Cassiman, 2018: S74-77); and the fada (young men) of Dogondoutchi in Niger who converse, share job info and drink tea regularly (Masquelier, 2013:471-473).

In aspiring for better futures at bases, many young men adopt the increasing digital technologies (computers, smart phones and internet) for livelihoods. This has recently emerged, more than ever, (deceptive) online contacts both within the region and beyond, thus generating abundant internet fraud (*sakawa*). Although moral sanctions set by leaders and religious bodies (Islam especially) condemn *sakawa* – as will be shown below – *sakawa boys* and their supporters are fixed on the material and monetary benefits of the practice seeing *sakawa* as a smart and easy way to make money. Yet, *sakawa boys* also see the internet as a space that strengthens their socio-political engagement via contributing to Ghanaian leadership debates on Facebook and Twitter and enacting (legitimate) networks with leaders. Thus, they negligibly consider religious rules against theft, scam and occult practices, instead compose their own eccentric reasonings that challenge moral injunctions. At the same time, whereas *sakawa boys* do consider the boomeranging implications of the practice such as curses invoked by local victims that generate accidents, madness, extreme privation and even deaths, they endeavor to fight this through spiritual fortification – although some of them do not succeed and thus suffer accidents that are seen as fraud victims' spiritual revenge. But *sakawa boys* also think many of their victims are (rich) foreigners who might not be so disturbed to invoke curses. Whichever way, most youth are ready to sacrifice their lives and suffer any punishments (this world or hereafter) once they can succeed in fraud and enjoy the often short-lived and ephemeral luxuries associated with it. And questions about moral stakes of *sakawa* are often responded (both by *sakawa boys* and others) hesitantly in ways that foreground dilemmas, *sakawa* seems a wrong act but its survival leeway brings moral uncertainties.

Methods of the Study

To effectively examine the nuances of the question of which subjective (moral) views underpinned *sakawa* in Nalerigu relative to right or wrong, the study was approached qualitatively based on the descriptive research design. The descriptive research design (exactly) describes the "state of affairs" of an event (Kothari, 2004:2). This approach helped in gleaning in depth information – based on open-ended why and how questions – that enabled for (nearly) an overarching description of *sakawa* and its moralities.

The study further relied on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data was gleaned from journal articles, books, published theses and conference papers and formed a first-hand knowledge on the topic. Amidu Mutaru (the co-author of this article) conducted semi-structured interviews with *sakawa boys*, victims, police, politicians, imams and the general public which formed the primary data. The researcher was able to identify *sakawa boys* and victims because of his familiarity with the place and long-term personal interaction with scammers and fraud victims in the Northeastern Ghana broadly, and Nalerigu particularly. *sakawa* modus operandi and the moral perspectives of *sakawa boys* were gleaned to construct this study. Victims' reactions after being defrauded and how they perceived *sakawa* in terms of good or bad were also uncovered. Police (some of whom are our friends) were also engaged whose understanding on the internet fraud has enabled us to unravel some methods of fraud policing as well as strategies that fraudsters depend on in their attempt to defraud innocent people. It is worth mentioning that both the police and *sakawa boys* were unaware of each other's participation in this study. Further, parents, imams and politicians were interviewed to shed light on the overall community's moral reading of the practice.

Interviews were conducted in English and Mampruli. The interview process was quite difficult, as discussing moralities of *sakawa* seem to be an encroachment on people's privacies. Moreover, interviews turned morally poignant especially on the part of *sakawa boys*, making them loath to divulge *sakawa* tricks and its moralities. Albeit, guided by the "moral anthropology" theory interviewees were often told the intention was not to judge but to understand, making most respondents open to share many stories from their life experiences, although some insisted on being anonymized and pseudonymized.

The Concept of *Sakawa* and its Methods and Policing in Nalerigu

The etymology of *sakawa* is unclear, but it may be a non-Hausa speakers' approximation of the Hausa word chakawa, which means 'to stab', similar to the word for spirit infliction of harbe, to shoot" (Amstrong, 2011:7). Yet, the import of the word, *sakawa* in Ghana and video portrayals of it has to do with the use of 'traditional occult powers' including "ritual murder" and commodification of human body to make money both offline and online (internet fraud) (Oduro-Frimpong, 2014:132, Amstrong, 2011:3 Warner, 2011:745). Thus, internet scam is seen as *sakawa* because its perpetrators use spiritual powers to scam.

At the same time, from the years 2000 to 2006 neither fraud was popular in Ghana and internet fraudsters did not use spiritual powers to access their victim. However, from 2007 internet fraudsters subscribed to occultism (involving sorcery, witchcraft and magic) and spirituality. This was primarily motivated by the religio-cultural worldview of the African people that religion plays a significant role in addressing the pertinent problems of life. In Nalerigu, interviewees indicated that *sakawa* boys visit Malams (Muslim spiritualists) and African shrine priests for spiritual blessings which involve pouring of libations, fabricating Quranic passages and slaughtering of animals. That they virtually do not engage in any form of human sacrifice, and thus departs from the rumours that accuse fraudsters of child-killing, sleeping in coffins, sacrificing their erotic potencies for internet powers, and zombifying people into snake-like objects that vomit money mentioned above (ibid). These spiritual fortifications the perpetrators engage are not only assumed to evoke success in *sakawa* but are believed to protect them from police arrest. Furthermore, the spiritual fortifications safeguard them against impending dangers associated with curses invoked by victims whilst enabling them to withstand any physical torture.

After the prospective *sakawa* boy successfully goes through the ritual (which in Nalerigu range from sacrificing animals, washing one's face with so-called "holy water" concocted from herbs and Quranic verses to much financial commitments), he is then offered the power in the form of enchanted handkerchief, laptop, ring or sabili (like amulet) that is believed to spiritually fortify the *sakawa* boy for scam. However, interviewees indicated that not all *sakawa* boys complete their rituals resulting from inability to observe all the tutelages involved; which in many cases result in sickness (Oduro-Frimpong, 2014:132).

Successful fraudsters or *sakawa* boys then hypnotize their clients with their magic to coerce the latter to give out whatever the former request. This corroborates Malinowski's (1978) discovery among the Melanesians concerning the Kula shell systems of exchange. Just like *sakawa*, in Kula, magic is deployed to persuade other Trobriand to hand over valuable Kula shell. Usually, *sakawa* boys log on to their Facebook and other social media platform accounts and place on their computers their magical object (be it ring, flies whisk or handkerchief) during scamming in order to 'slaughter' their victims. However, these fraudsters don't entirely rely on the magical powers for success. They hold the view that the magic proffers secondary assistance, and before one can 'hit', in other words to succeed, one might have received enough training from those who are well versed in the operation to be able to create and maintain contacts with clients (Cassiman, 2019:490).

Sakawa boys target both Ghanaians and foreigners in Europe, America, and Asia. However, people from Western countries constitute lucrative clients because of the high value of their currencies and because foreigners are easier to be

conned, the interviewees said. White people are susceptible to *sakawa* because "Whites easily trust people. But Blacks are in the world of lies [scam] which make them hard to trust people" Kontrolla (one *sakawa* boy) explained. Thus, *sakawa* boys focus on Whites comparable to the "Whitization" of victims by the *feymen*[1] who turned Whites into gros pigeons ("big suckers or dupes") (Ndjio, 2008:15). The proceeding paragraphs focus on the internet-based tricks of *sakawa*.

One primary strategy of *sakawa* is "connectedness". *sakawa* boys are highly linked to each other which enable them share information and other tactics. Manukye (a former *sakawa* boy) declared in an interview with him thus: "actually here because the network fluctuates and there are no internet cafes… most of the boys have links with those in Tamale. I had my master in Tamale…." This implies that there are no many internet cafes in Nalerigu town and the Northeastern Ghana, which opposes the views that Ghanaian internet fraudsters generally linger around internet cafes (Amstrong, 2011:16, Cassiman, 2018:S78). But also supposes those in the cities are more experienced than those in Northeastern Ghana, all interviewees conceded. Yet still, the statement further affirms the interconnected habit of all scammers. Indeed, *sakawa* boys are linked which makes them play very organized professional performances (Aning, 2007:197; Brunton, 2013:106). In these networks, each scammer performs different set of anticipated roles. Some act as 'witnesses', 'police officers', and even 'lawyers.'

Furthermore, *sakawa* boys conduct background studies to identify potential victims before they operate. In conducting such studies, Mr. Agama (a retired teacher) said "they pretend to be gentle…come to do personal interviews, claiming they need the information to educate themselves, meanwhile they come to understand whether you have money, and your movements. If you give them such information, they turn it into 'something else'." The way *sakawa* boys make offline studies to understand whether people around "have money" or know their "movements" enable them narrate stories that aptly fit into victims' social realities and imaginations, which has been sine qua non in scam. Scammers across the world firstly comprehend the social realities and imaginaries of victims in order to narrate believable stories. In online romance scams, scammers act in ways that match common love stories around the globe (Cassiman, 2019:490). In counterfeiting scams where gold is involved, Ghanaian scammers tap into the global imaginaries of plenty gold in Ghana. And even after frauding, scammers still contact victims as 'police' to help recuperate the money, just to scam them again (Beek, 2016:308).

After identifying and knowing the "movements" of potential victims following the above, *sakawa* boys are able to access victims' phone numbers as well as passwords of their email addresses and even bank accounts, credit cards and then proceed to scam. In addition, *sakawa* boys understand people's social relations which they draw on to scam. Another interviewee narrates a story:

> in this town [Nalerigu], mba Tarana's wife, one day…someone called her line to say her sister has given some goods that need clearance, and so she is supposed to pay GHC2,000 [£283] for the clearing of those goods. She has so many sisters. I don't know how that person managed to get the full name of that sister and the voice! And she transferred the money just to realize it was fraud.

The above not only demonstrates that the scammer might have done studies to know mba Tarana's wife regarding her economic state and family relations but also reflects the booming growth of another method of scam interviewees called '419'.

Interviewees asserted that '419' is a scam. It can be counterfeiting currencies, selling 'fake' cars and gold online, advertising nonexistent jobs, or receiving instant message or email that you win a 'prize' (Zook, 2007:66, Whitty, 2015:443) They further categorize national lottery, corruption of leaders and even gossip as part of '419'. In short, their views are summarized below:

> '419' started in Nigeria before Ghana. When people say '419', they mean cheating someone both online and offline. You can receive fake mobile money from someone, and the sender will call that he mistakenly sent you money and that you send it back. Or someone can sell 'phone' to you only to reach home and realize is 'something else'.… scammers here don't want to be called '419', they say is dangerous.

The notion that "'419' started in Nigeria before Ghana" mirrors what scholars trace the origin of internet fraud in West Africa to the '419' scams (named in reference to the section number 419 of the Nigeria criminal law that deals with scams) of Nigeria in the 1970s/80s (Smith, 2008:30-31; Ndjio, 2008:4; Beek, 2016:307; Zook, 2007:66). Also, the argument that '419' takes place "both online and offline" implies virtually all forms of 'crime' regarding 'cheat', and that is why *sakawa* boys "do not want to be called '419'". *Sakawa* boys claim there is no wrong with internet fraud as compared to '419', and if society sees you as '419' they see you as both someone who swindles for money and also gossips. Thus, the region's conception of '419'resonates what scholars define it as all forms of immoral behaviors as part of Nigeria's culture (Smith, 2008:22; Beek, 2016:307). Indeed, '419' like feymania is seen as the "ability to attain wealth through witchcraft, trickery and devilish intelligence" not by violence (Hibou, 2004:7). This conception of '419' and feymania fit the scamming tactic of *sakawa* boys as they don't only trick but also use *sakawa* powers (witchcraft) to cajole victims.

Finally, *sakawa* boys also employ "online dating romance scams" ((Whitty, 2015:444). *Sakawa* boys enter into online dating with people especially the Whites, bewitch them with their powers and extract huge money. This method is discernible with a story by the retired teacher below.

> When I was teaching at Nalerigu Secondary School, one of my countrymen used to have correspondences with some white man, and they try to select girl friends from the internet. When the white man requested for a picture, he…snipped one of our nice

1 "feymania was popularized in the early 1990s as a result of the emergence of a group of wealthy young conmen and tricky businessmen who came to be known by the public as feymen" (Ndjio, 2008:5).

> girls…and naked the girl, because the white man wanted a 'bull structure' [naked picture] of her, because he posted himself as a 'girl'.… And the teacher snipped the girl, used his computer to remove her uniform and leave her naked! And the white man… gave him GhC4,000 [£568] and he went …to buy a motor bike.… But people saw the girl, and that brought big problems…that was against human rights. No one should see her naked, but it happened!

This narration was confirmed by *sakawa* boys themselves with similar descriptions. Pragmatically, the story confirms the literature on online dating scams that reveal how internet fraudsters masquerade their genders, pretend to be beautiful young women desperately in search of (male) lovers (Whitty, 2015; Cassiman, 2018, 2019). Also, the above story shows that *sakawa* boys use attractive naked (but bogus) pictures of beautiful women they download from the internet and those they know (like the female student in this story) for their dating profiles. Thus, *sakawa* boys interact with victims as women to convince the latter. Though they can also use men's pictures or pictures of themselves to attract women, they generally prefer to be 'she' in the dating so that they are free to request money from victims. This is because patriarchal conventions in the region and Ghana legitimize men to provide for women (Cassiman, 2019). However, the above narration highlights moral panics in seeing naked pictures of people especially those known in the region. Finally, the phrase "and he went …to buy a motor bike" hints at how *sakawa* boys use their monies which will be explored in subsequent sections. The rest of this section highlights *sakawa* policing and sentencing in Nalerigu which illustrates the Ghanaian rural case.

Interviewees' expressions regarding the police in *sakawa* show that law enforcement agents work under facades to arrest *sakawa* boys like the NIB (National Investigation Bureau) officers. These security agents whom some interviewees labelled 'genuine' try to discover about *sakawa* boys, mingle with them and learn their tricks as departure point in arresting them. This has been the common trick of the police across Ghana due to poor working conditions (Beek, 2016:310) or the wideness of the internet which makes policing ambiguous (Goodman, 1997:473). Thus, like *sakawa* boys, security agents forge documents, and even participate in scam as the NIB officers. Whereas these acts could generate serious moral ambiguities, most interviewees added that *sakawa* boys are criminals and must be arrested whatsoever. They further argued that the professionalisms of these security agents (NIB officers) have been to work in disguise. Yet, *sakawa* occult powers save *sakawa* boys from whatever security agents do, as Police officers I interviewed indicated:

> "internet fraud is not all technical…or else, by now most scammers would have been arrested. But they use magic that protect them."

The inability to arrest *sakawa* boys implies few or no *sakawa* cases become court cases (Bierschenk, 2008:118-119). However, as they appear in court, judgments turn to introduce serious legal disputes and diverse understandings of *sakawa*. Below is a typical *sakawa* court case adapted from Beek (2016:316).

> Maria, a [40 year] Czech accountant, had met a US soldier stationed in Iraq on an online dating service; she had fallen in love.… After he and his children had fallen on hard times during his business venture in Ghana, she had sent him US$45,000.… When she realized that she had been defrauded…she contacted Detective Corporal Antwi in the [Ghanaian] fraud unit.… And the detective arrested him [the scammer].
>
> …after the arrest, Antwi was approached by two senior police officers who asked him to halt the case.… [but] he was adamant about bringing the case to court.…
>
> .… Maria flew to Accra to appear in court. In Ghana, she gave Antwi US$1,350…to support the criminal investigation. The trial took place in a crowded circuit court in Accra. The suspect was Mr Seidu.… Maria gave her statement. Some emails were tendered in evidence and read.… The next day, the counsel for the defense had his turn, insinuating that the money had been a gift in a romantic relationship, not a loan in a business transaction.… Several months later, the court found Seidu guilty and sentenced him to a fine of 1,050 cedis (approximately US $500) and a fifteen-month prison sentence if he failed to pay ('in default'). This is at the lower end of possible sentences. Defrauding by false pretense is a second-degree felony in the Ghanaian Criminal Offences Act and punishable with up to ten years in prison. The court ordered the sale of his laptop and car. Proceeds were meant to be given to Maria (but never were). Seidu paid the fine immediately and was free.…

The fact that detective Antwi was interrupted by other detectives to annul the investigation supposes these detectives were part of the scam operation. This may be accounted to why such lenient punishment was given to the 'criminal' Seidu and thus "undermines the intended moral subtext of the investigation" (Beek, 2016:317). Ghanaians therefore could accuse the judges of bribery, since the results did not reflect their expectations (Budniok, 2014). Also, Maria's payment to Antwi US$1,350 is not a surprise, but part of criminal investigation in Ghana, and so Antwi was already expecting 'something'. Albeit, neither Maria nor Antwi probably considered that 'corruption' (Beek, 2016:316). Finally, different understanding of internet fraud is resonated, for the judges virtually considered the case as not fraud but mere "gift in a romantic relationship." Thus, at the end, though Maria won the case, she lost extra-amount (US$1,350), not to mention recouping her frauded US$45,000 and so felt disappointed.

Nonetheless the judgment reveals serious moral ambiguities as it illuminates the involvement of government officials in *sakawa* which undermines its investigation. These moral ambiguities are not restricted to *sakawa* investigation but underpin its entirety; from moral questions around *sakawa* rituals, internet-based techniques, victims' reactions and how *sakaw*a boys spend their monies. These moral arguments constitute the next section.

Sakawa: Moral Subjectivities, Dilemmas and Uncertainties in Nalerigu

As indicated above morality is used in this study to understand the subjective views of people on *sakawa* relative to right and wrong, not analyzing peoples' views by any (community or religious) moral codes. Thus, although most of my interviewees – imams, politicians and parents – often refer to some community and theological codes, the study does not consider this

to say *sakawa* is bad. Rather, and as "moral anthropology" has it, it considers the distinctive views of all including *sakawa* boys in order to provide nuances to the question of which subjective (moral) views underpinned *sakawa* (internet scam) in Nalerigu relative to right or wrong.

Varieties of opinions exist on the morality of the phenomenon of *sakawa*. Whereas some of the respondents were of the view that the practice is right, others held a contrary position. Unemployment and poverty have been the oft-cited vindications for *sakawa* practice. Indeed, socio-economic factors such as unemployment in most parts of Africa provide useful bases for youth hustles, banditry and delinquencies (Fourchard, 2006; Abbink, 2005; Bayart, 1993:252-259). More precisely, the African Economic Outlook (2012:2) report shows that in 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." While the proportion of unemployment across the country vary largely, Nalerigu and the northeastern Ghana are among the places deeply hit (Grauenkaer & Tufte; 2018:402). Such socio-economic context thus spawns a dramatic increase in the ways youth plug into informal (and sometimes illegal) economies like *sakawa*, yet with quite logical moral justifications.

In defending their acts, *sakawa boys* situate their views in the Mamprusi cultural 'hero' (sometimes 'heroine') – Asambari (spider). In the Mamprusi philosophy, the Asambari is a trickster figure who is marginalized, and thus works from the margins to survive. Legends depict him/her as very precocious who uses his/her precocity to trick those at the top for necessities that he/she otherwise could not have. At the same time, Asambari is portrayed as a lazy and greedy and as someone who refuses to work (farm) in the rainy season, but during harvesting time. He deploys every trick to 'get' food even more than he can eat from people's farms. Hence, Asambari is conceived marginalized in an unequal power dynamic and his craftiness is morally legitimate especially if it benefits others. But Asambari is equally seen greedy and indolent if his/her tricks only target him/herself or if there are other ways to survive on without trickery respectively. From this scenario, *sakawa boys* morally legitimized their activities by recalling the marginalized aspect of the Asambari which leaves no survival possibilities without trickery. However, some imams, parents and politicians stress that there are petty jobs like trade that people could depend on without scamming, thus berating scammers as indolent and greedy (Cassiman, 2019:497).

Therefore, when asked what internet fraud (*sakawa*) is, Faada (one scammer) defined internet fraud as "a way of making money through social media…for survival." This and similar definitions imply *sakawa boys* do not recognize any wrong with their activities. But other people endorse the moral legitimacy of *sakawa*. They perceive it as not wrong but a way of making money that has unprecedentedly augmented the financial capacity of most youth in Nalerigu. However, some people morally reproach and likened the practice to pure cheat, theft, robbery which has brought devastating impacts to societies. Some people even believe *sakawa boys* use the internet to masquerade their real robbery and witchcraft identities. They argue that *sakawa* has lately denigrated the reputation of Nalerigu and Ghana by stirring other devilish acts like burglary and human attack. Yet, *sakawa boys* persistently argue that *sakawa* rather controls robbery and drug smuggling. These arguments obscure the categorization of *sakawa* in terms of good or bad, but also reflect parallel moralities in other contexts like Nima. In Nima, whereas some people reprimand the youth as immoral for engaging in fraudulent online contacts, others see such activities to rather boosted living standards and regulate robbery (Cassiman, 2019).

Furthermore, imams' responses demonstrate that the spiritual element of *sakawa* is as morally ambiguous, or even more than, the dupe itself. The way *sakawa boys* perform spiritual initiations – slaughtering goats, sheep and cows at shrines and malams' houses – was condemned by some interviewees as immoral, though *sakawa boys* argued such sacrifices are practiced by nearly everyone in Nalerigu. But the word '*sakawa*' denotes something evil in its common parlance and Ghanaians perceive *sakawa* money as "blood money" (*sika duro, or la'a tiim* – the Asante and the Mamprusi respectively term it). This is because such monies are perceived to be gotten from socially nefarious acts such as "ritual murder", child abduction and others as noted above. Hence people are careful not to mingle their monies with *sakawa*'s for fear of their wealth being siphoned away by *sakawa powers*. This notion closely resonates the Dagara of Southwestern Burkina Faso conceptions of gold as dewr (dirty) or tuo (bitter). Because, for them, gold inhabits spirits which punish owners and threaten valuable usages, but also contaminates money derived from "selling goods" (Werthmann, 2003:111).

Furthermore, imams and some parents labelled those mallams and shrine priests who offer such powers as fake, and even consider them worse than *sakawa boys*. This parallels the detraction of these *sakawa powers* offerors by Christianity and Islam as those whose behaviours are immoral (Oduro-Frimpong, 2014:136). Indeed, Pentecostal and Islamic discourses on *sakawa* mirror Satanism, and prayer camps and mosques offer deliverances to so-called 'evil' people like *sakawa boys* for fear that they might be inhabited by evil spirits (Amstrong, 2011:17-20).

However, *sakawa boys* associated practices like ritual murder, zombifying people with many Ghanaian politicians. This draws our attention to both the moral disputes between *sakawa boys* and Ghanaian politicians which is discussed below, and the spiritual incorporation into Ghanaian and African politics. Africa's past and present are indeed wrapped with instances where politicians engaged or accused of engaging in spiritual societies that proffer them powers like the *sakawa boys* to manipulate, win and administer political power (de Jong, 2002; Meyer, 1998, Geschiere, 2017; Ellis and ter Haar, 1998). Hence, political behavior in (sub-Saharan) Africa is perceived, as Bayart (1993) argues "politics of the belly", denoting the ways that politicians deploy virtually everything including spirituallity to attain power for socio-economic benefits.

Furthermore, the *sakawa* methods of internet trickery – online dating, counterfeiting, and others discussed above – are also very morally controversial. The reality is that *sakawa* victims are intentionally hoodwinked, yet there is no clear dichotomy between morally acceptable and unacceptable trick (Cassiman, 2019:498). In questioning interviewees on the moral concerns of the internet trickery tactics of *sakawa boys*, all but *sakawa boys* responded the tactics and skills are reprehensible. They argued that computer skill is good but the way it is used is bad. Stressing on the online romance

scams, they averred that seeing naked pictures of people especially those known – like the story about the student who was used by her teacher in online dating noted above – is obscene. For them, exposing one's nakedness – or the nakedness of someone else – to the public desacralizes the sanctity, sanity and virginity of especially females, and thus accounts why girls who have been exposed naked hardly get marriage partners.

The online dating undermines customs and gender roles by exposing and selling the nakedness of girls on the internet, and by the fact that *sakawa boys* mask their genders. Technically, the *sakawa* boy on the internet labels himself 'she', behaving, paraphrasing Cassiman (2019), girlishly, and portraying femininity. This 'gender-swapping' according to interviewees is morally reproached. Though interviewees said there are no *sakawa* girls in Nalerigu, female scammers in places like Nima also jeopardize marital norms by courting men instead of the reverse (ibid).

sakawa boys also boast of their guiles and defined themselves as 'civilized' people who use their skills for good futures for patriarchal roles. This parallels Cassiman's (2018: S82) argument about the barons (successful scammers) of Nima who brag about how their computer prowess that influence their success. But other people equally admire *sakawa boys*' shrewdness. One Police officer asserts "some people hold the view that any person who engage in the activity is more 'civilized'. They assumed it takes knowledge and wisdom to be in that activity. So, all those in that activity are highly recognized by some people." *sakawa boys* are respected as stories abound where some parents are happily holding pictures of successful fraudsters, whilst encouraging their wards into the activity. These are the moral discourses based on moral anthropology; but can further be seen in the next paragraphs which show how *sakawa* is seen as an ethic of vengeance for injustices of Ghanaian leadership, the slave trade and colonialism by Whites.

Scammers (and Ghanaian youth generally) perceive themselves disadvantaged by 'evil' Ghanaian politicians who are loath to provide jobs for them. Hence, they see *sakawa* as resisting 'unfair' state powers, but also a revenge for the slave trade and colonialism that they claim have incapacitated Ghanaian and African youth. One *sakawa* Facebook blogger writes:

> hey, what is all this I am hearing, BLOODMONEY. There is nothing like that, what is going people call it BLOODMONEY is called *SAKAWA* and this simple means PAY BACK. How about the government, why don't they call it blood money? When the police arrest us, then who is going to pay Tax and Vat [Value Added Tax]. They should sit down and think before they are….MOREMONEY…AMOKODEY (Warner, 2011:746)

Conspicuously, the *sakawa* boy morally defended *sakawa* by underscoring that its meaning is not "BLOODMONEY" as many Ghanaians assume. Another point discernible here is that Ghanaian leaders are the real *sakawa*, raising interesting moral conflicts between politicians and *sakawa boys*. Ghanaian politicians stress that the youths are spoiled, engaging in illicit wealth accumulation including *sakawa* which not only undermine their education but also tarnish the global reputation of Ghana. For instance, Oduro-Frimpong (2014:138-139) reports that John Mahama, the former President of Ghana:

> lamented the involvement of the youth in "*sakawa*" (cybercrime). This act…was eating deep into the moral fiber of the youth who are supposed to take the place of the elderly in the near future…. He said the internet has a lot of resources… but rather they focus on its misuse which not only destroys their future but also affect society in general…. John Mahama appealed to the Christian Congregation...to preach against the "*s ´Sakawa*" ….

John Mahama's response has been the riposte of many Ghanaian politicians. One interviewee – a Northeast regional delegate for the New Patriotic Party (NPP) – also vehemently stated "all leaders in Nalerigu are complaining of how the youth are engaged in immoral activities because of the desire to get rich overnight through *sakawa*. This has negatively affected the performance of students", he ended. The interventions of the imams were sought by community leaders to pray so that the canker will stop in the community. Understandably, the condemnation of *sakawa* by political leaders and others emphasize four dominant themes. Firstly, *sakawa* has morally devastated the youth as John Mahama terms "eating deep into the moral fiber of youth." This reflects a bleak future as *sakawa*'s boomeranging effects start to show in poor performance of students. Secondly, *sakawa boys* are seen as greedy with great alacrity to be rich whatsoever. As one interviewee added "no matter what! Even if it costs them to walk on snakes, they are ready…." The third theme is that *sakawa* has degraded Ghana's global reputation. The final theme, briefly discussed above, resonates the role of Christianity and Islam in *sakawa*.

Conversely, *sakawa boys* argue that Ghanaian leaders are rather selfish and corrupt, that if the government wants Ghana's image to be high, leaders should stop corruption that plagues the country for long. These views are reminiscent of those by most *sakawa boys*, which are prevalent on social media as seen in the Facebook *sakawa* blogger discusses above. He writes, "How about the government, why do not they call it blood money as well." Here, we clearly understand that the *sakawa* boy is highlighting this idea of corruption but also the accusation against politicians regarding ritual murder explained above. Corruption of state leaders has been one of the dominant factors that spark up internet fraud in Ghana but also Nigeria. Studying '419' scams of Nigeria, Smith (2008:38) records the following from his interviewee.

> For me, I am just struggling…Obasanjo and his *boys*…are stealing so much money while the rest of our society is falling apart. That's the real 419…I would not be here sending these emails looking for rich greedy foreigners if there were opportunities here in Nigeria….

These arguments confuse who is real *sakawa* or '419', who engages in 'theft' or not and who is to be morally reprimanded or endorsed. Is it politicians who are accused of 'stealing' with devastating impact on society who are morally right, or it is *sakawa boys* who argue that their scams hinge on the government's failure to provide jobs who are morally wrong? What is more, *sakawa boys* added that their monies go for tax, which the government is risked losing if *sakawa* is abrogated;

as the *sakawa* Facebook blogger threatens: "When the police arrests us, then who is going to pay Tax and Vat." (Warner, 2011:746). This highlights moral brouhaha around *why* publicly berated 'dirty'/ 'blood' money are added to government tax for national development.

Furthermore, the slave trade and colonialism also play catalytic role in *sakawa* narrative. For *sakawa boys* the facts that Europeans oppressed their grandparents and 'exploited' their resources make them target White people. They explain that this is a moment of 'payback' where they reclaim their 'belongings' from Whites through *sakawa*. The notion of 'payback' might have historical roots following Jean Allman (1990:275). Allman records that in the 1955 Governor Arden Clarke was stoned in Kumasi by Asante young men for supporting Nkrumah's Convention People Party (CPP) at the expense of their National Liberation Movement (NLM) party which premised on advancing Asante's quest for "self-determination". This attack culminated to virtually confiscating the Governor's car claiming that the car belonged to them. This thus signifies Asante's confiscation of "colonial officialdom", but also mirrors reclaiming 'belongings' from colonial masters, framed recently as "payback' by *sakawa boys*. However, some parents, imams and elders reprimand them for scamming Whites. Yet *sakawa boys* are careful in scamming Whites as one interviewee argued "targeting Whites appears hard because migration and the slave trade imply that some Whites have African descent. So, targeting them risk targeting oneself."

'Payback' ostensibly permeates the whole community especially among the illiterates. Similar story was narrated by many interviewees about a White man whose GH1,000 (£142) got missing in Nalerigu's market square two decades ago. And when the *Nayiri* (king's palace) instructed a boy to announce to recoup the money, the boy uttered the following. "The *nayiri* said I should announce that a White man's money is lost (ten million [GHC1,000]), but whoever picks and gives back is a fool". This story although highlights Ghanaians confirmation of White superiority (Pierre, 2013:xii; Williams, 1989:223–25), it further reflects the 'payback', though some people adamantly berate *sakawa boys* and others who perceive White's resources as legitimate to be appropriated by any ways and hence condemn the notion hold by sakawa boys that money generated from Whites is legitimate and 'free money. This implies that *sakawa boys* hold the notion that money generated from Whites is legitimate and 'free money'. For *sakawa boys*, in the Western countries people are being paid by the government for nothing which is 'free money'. But they do not get such "free' monies" and so are claiming it through *sakawa*. The next paragraphs examine how *sakawa boys* spend their "free monies" and the moral arguments therein.

All interviewees including imams, parents and even *sakawa boys*' responses to how *sakawa* monies are spent show that scammers use their monies lavishly, aiming to become as Burrell (2005:5) observes about all Ghanaian scammers, 'celebrities', 'figures' and 'stars'.

> *sakawa boys* are those ridding cars and motors with expensive clothes. They spend money! When they go to gatherings as if they have machines that manufacture money. They are those roasting goats and taking tramadol plus some drinks and other misbehaviors. They most times use those monies to build houses and in these houses they operate beer bars.… When there is especially *ammerya* [marriage ceremony] and they go, the way they spend! They just want to make "names" so that girls will be running for them. Recklessly! They spend anyhow! Many scammers don't spend on their families. No! They rather spend among friends within that same shoe. Only few *sakawa boys* spend on their families and in such cases their families are happy. No one asks where such monies come from.…

Firstly, the above parallels Sasha Newell's (2012:1-2) observation among the Ivorian youth who "bluff" off their (illusory) riches to become famous through dance, music, night clubs, extravagant spending, dress and rush for women. Similarly, *sakawa boys* seek to gain popularity through "bluffing" their (few) Ghana cedis. They gather at bases roasting goats, drinking and speaking 'anyhow'. Moreover, *sakawa boys* stated that they must enjoy their successes with cars, houses food, women, to appear flashy in public such as ammerya. Thus, stories abound everywhere about *sakawa boys* impregnating and marrying many young girls, slaughtering cows in suuna (naming ceremonies) and building self-contained houses outside their parents' compounds. In behaving these ways, *sakawa boys* are seen as disrespecting authorities and elders and have even attracted larger following of the youth than leaders. This does not only mirror Smith's (2001:821) report about how the notorious '419' scammers generate inequalities and alter power dynamics in Nigeria, it also parallels Burrell's (2015:5) argument that internet scam has deconstructed old and reconstructed new hierarchies in Ghanaian societies. This 'disrespectful' nature of *sakawa boys* is strongly detracted as nowhere close to any good morals. Yet, *sakawa boys* insist it is their right to enjoy their successes such ways and some parents technically support them, as they derive prestige from their children's wealth. Thus, the few *sakawa boys* who share their monies with families are never asked where they get such monies.

The above extract further highlights the ethic of redistribution of property. Most *sakawa* boys don't share their monies with relatives except among themselves and fiancées as well as for self-fashioning in order to bluff Furthermore, interviewees stress, *sakawa powers* also dictate how *sakawa boys* spend their monies, spending alone and lavishly. And failure to abide will both drain their money and torment their lives. This has been the reality of *sakawa* monies across Ghana and thus portrays in *sakawa* movies. In one film, a *sakawa* boy (Hakeem) is instructed by a shrine priest – from whom he derives spiritual powers – not to extend the monies he will get to his mother and sisters. But the boy refuses and uses the money to pay hospital charges of his mother, and so killed by the god of the priest (Oduro-Frimpong, 2014:142). So, most *sakawa boys* spend their monies alone both for popularity and to protect their lives. Thus, *sakawa* monies are la'a da'ari (dirty monies) equivalent to the "bitter money" among the Luo of Kenya. For the Luo, Shipton (1989:31-34) maintains, "bitter money" from acts of murder, theft or products attributed to ancestors like tobacco, land or gold is seen inherently spiritual which thwarts meaningful usage like marriage and building houses; except for prostitution and alcoholism. Though *sakawa* monies can be spent on marriage and houses such things, according to interviewees, suddenly collapse.

Whether seeking for fame or protect their lives, *sakawa boys*, having spent their monies this way, are reprimanded as destructing communal life inspired by norms of redistribution and reciprocity. Similarly, Cassiman (2018) records that browsers subvert the moral economy – a system of exchange based on sociality, not profits as wealth (Newell, 2006:180) – of Zongo communities by spending their monies alone without care for relatives and friends, which attracts condemnations. The rest of the article focuses on the moral issues concerning the involvement of government officials in *sakawa* and the moral ambivalence around sawaka victims.

Interviewees argue that some police and politicians connive with *sakawa boys* to scam. Scammers across Ghana and beyond have wide connections with government officials that are hardly traceable and breakable (Beek, 2016:315, Smith, 2007:13; Ndjio, 2008:11). Thus, *sakawa* cases that were allegedly court cases with resultant punishments are managed within the network, relaxed and declared 'court free'. This undermines the professional ethics of these officials and so seen as 'illegitimate'. Yet still, these behaviors confirm the routinization and banality of corruption in Ghana, such that bribing government officials including lawyers among others are no more seen 'corruption' with its professional ethical implications (Beek, 2016:317).

Furthermore, interviewees assert, most victims feel remorse to report fraud cases to the police or even share with relatives because they would be perceived greedy who want to get much from 'small' or 'nothing'. This is not limited to Nalerigu community, but across Ghana. Essentially some people think that Africa is a continent that they can invest and make huge money within a small span of time, by taking advantage of her highly 'corrupted' politicians (Ndjio, 2008:16). Thus, victims plan to evade formal bureaucratic procedures associated with investments which is equally morally entangled. For instance, upon coming to Ghana for her court case, narrated above, Maria – "An accountant for a Czech textile company" – later wanted to establish a textile factory and so consulted the Free Zone Board regarding tax and customs evasion possibilities. Also, in counterfeiting scams where gold is involved it is patent that victims anticipate dodging custom duties, which is morally questionable (Beek, 2016:318-319).

Interviewees indicate that most victims (especially those within Ghana) also deploy spiritualities that surpass *sakawa powers* to torment *sakawa boys*. Thus, people liken frequent sanguinary deaths of *sakawa* boys in Nalerigu and the region generally to victim's spiritual manipulation. Yet, we can suggest that some victims' defrauded monies are also shrouded with moral questions. Indeed, *sakawa boys,* victims and some government officials have reinvented the global capitalism by interrogating the ethics and logics of economic activities through lies, trickery, jangling tax and corruption. Therefore, making *sakawa* besieged with diverse and eccentric moral renditions which can better be understood through a *moral anthropology* – an objective moral assessment of actions.

Conclusion

This study adopts "moral anthropology" – an objective assessment of moral actions according to subjective understandings of right and wrong – to construct a moral discourse of sakawa (internet fraud) phenomenon in Nalerigu. A phenomenon that is very banal in Ghanaian and African communities as most youth increasingly plug into its practice with the current abundant digital technologies. Yet, because of what goes into the practice and the eventual consequences, the sakawa phenomenon and its practitioners have seen serious detractions and backlashes from society and religious bodies in Ghana. At Nalerigu community – one of the places in Ghana where the phenomenon is common – sakawa is characterized by the integration of occultic practices and internet-based frauds. And has, for half a decade, posed a moral dilemma question of its rightness or wrongness. This study analysed the subjective moral interpretations that have been given to this phenomenon using Nalerigu community as a case study. The study adopts the qualitative research approach based on interviews and frames the findings with the "moral anthropology" theory. The study finds that although sakawa has seemingly ameliorated the extreme economic hardships of many youths and improved physical infrastructural development of Nalerigu making some people including sakawa boys and some parents to endorse it. Finally, it is said that some victims don't procure their monies from rightful sources, although that will not give sakawa boys the moral legitimacy to 'steal' such monies. Despite these seeming successes of sakawa, majority of people in the community condemns the practice on grounds of its boomeranging negative implications for the moral configuration of youths and the global reputation of the community and Ghana largely. Based on this, the study argues that the morality of sakawa is ambiguous, with some people approving and others reproving it. It therefore calls for the study of the morality of sakawa through a "moral anthropology" that allows one to account for the individual moral understanding of the practice by one's research subjects and other people.

Personal Interviews

Personal interviews

- Interview with Manukye (nickname), sakawa boy, student at the college, Nalerigu, North East region (NE/R), 12/04/2020.
- Interview with Controlla (Nickname), sakawa boy, graduate from college, Nelerigu, 02/05/2020.
- Interview with an anonymized sakawa boy, Nalerigu, 27/03/2020.
- Interview with Officer Razak, Police Officer, Nalerigu, 30/06/2020.
- Interview with an anonymized Police Officer (Woman), Nalerigu, 11/09/2020
- Interview with and anonymized Imam, Nalerigu, 04/04/2020.

- Interview with Imam Aroza, a nearly-by village, 12/10/0220.
- Interview with Mr. Agama (nickname), A retired Secondary School teacher, Nalerigu, 25/07/2020.
- Interview with an anonymized elder, Nalerigu, 05/05/2020.
- Interview with Mahama, An Assembly Member/Politician (male) of Nalerigu, 28/03/2020.
- Interview with Faada (Nickname), sakawa boy, Nalerigu, 06/01/2021.
- Interview with Mariam, an old woman, Nalerigu, 08/11/2020.
- Interview with Sulemana (man), fraud victim, Nelerigu, 03/05/2020.
- Interview with Hawa (woman), fraud victim, Nalerigu, 22/09/2020.
- Interview with an anonymized Pastor, Nalerigu, 16/04/2020.

Author Bio

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