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**‘SAKAWA’ RUMOURS:  
OCCULT INTERNET  
FRAUD AND  
GHANAIAN IDENTITY**

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# ‘SAKAWA’ RUMOURS: OCCULT INTERNET FRAUD AND GHANAIAN IDENTITY

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## Abstract

‘Sakawa’ hit Ghanaian news headlines in 2007, prompting a nationwide epidemic of rumours which continue today. These rumours accuse young men of manipulating evil occult powers to perform successful internet fraud. In order to gain occult powers ‘Sakawa boys’ are said to perform socially grotesque rituals ranging from sleeping in coffins to cannibalism. These rituals endow Sakawa boys with the power to spiritually enter the internet; possessing the mind of the foreign fraud victim to extract quick and easy money. This is the first ethnography on Sakawa but the phenomenon is not completely new. Supernatural manipulation of the internet has continuities with longstanding West African cultural archetypes surrounding occult power and wealth that is gained at the expense of others. However with Sakawa this expense is not just paid by family or friends, misfortune is inflicted on the entire nation. A wide range of Ghanaians condemn Sakawa as “not Ghanaian” behaviour which raises fears for Ghana’s national identity and international reputation. An ontogenic approach is used to explore this change in scale, discussing the intimate relationship between identity boundaries and occult beliefs which shift and change as Ghana develops as a nation. Sakawa rumours draw on long-standing occult idioms that negotiate ‘Us’ from ‘Them’ and are revealed as the latest re-negotiation of a specifically Ghanaian identity, under and aware of the gaze of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> This Working Paper is a revised version of my undergraduate dissertation, completed as part of my BSc in Anthropology at UCL.

## Introduction

**“Sakawa boys sleep in coffins or don’t wash for weeks; some even kill a small girl and eat her like *fu fu* (A national dish)! They do whatever these Sakawa leaders tell them to do and then they have the ju-ju power to do their evil tricks. Then their spirit can enter the internet, possessing the *obruni* (white person) to get their money! It is evil, greedy behaviour and they bring shame to Ghana.”**

Kwame, Abiriw, Ghana 07/08/09.

Since 2007 Sakawa rumours have been fervently discussed throughout Ghana, engaging a wide range of people in their common condemnation of the behaviour. Sakawa is the use of evil occult powers to commit successful internet fraud, possessing the mind of the foreign cyber target. Ghanaian’s definitions of Sakawa are flexible, involving ‘witchcraft, ‘blood money’ (known as ‘*sika duro*’ amongst the Akan), ‘ju-ju’ or ‘magic’ and most commonly, a combination of them all.

Sakawa is predominately rumoured to be the practice of young men aged 16-30 who gain their spiritual powers by joining secret and sinister Sakawa cults. These cults are thought to be led by wayward spiritual men such as pastors or fetish priests who hold illicit Sakawa meetings in the middle of the night. Initiations into such cults are rumored to involve socially grotesque acts such as sleeping in coffins, public nudity, refraining from bathing, ritual murder and cannibalism.

These Sakawa rituals endow the internet fraudster with power to possess the mind of the foreign target, forcing them to hand over their money. This power can be from magic rings, handkerchiefs or enchanted laptops and allow the Sakawa boy to spiritually enter the internet. ‘Kof-I’, a self-proclaimed Sakawa boy who I ‘chatted’ with via a Sakawa Facebook group<sup>2</sup> boasted of his “magic handkerchief” which he placed on the computer during internet scams, allowing him to “enter the head” of his cyber victims. Sakawa boys are also rumoured to gain money by shape-shifting into snakes which then vomit copious amounts of banknotes. This money is consumed conspicuously on goods such as 4x4’s and is rarely shared.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Sakawa Reaction’ Group (2009) *Facebook* [Accessed Online 23/02/09-10/04/09] Available at: <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=102575958216&ref=ts>

After such an introduction I am cautious about a sensationalism of alterity which obscures the everyday ubiquity of witchcraft in Africa (Olivier de Sardan: 1992). Sakawa is one form of a wide complex of Ghanaian occult beliefs and although Sakawa rumours are contemporary, they are not a completely new phenomenon. Although the internet is somewhat emblematic of 'modernity' this discussion will be wary of treating Sakawa solely as a reaction to contemporary capitalism. Such an approach can potentially reduce complex witchcraft beliefs to a 'snap shot' clash between traditional and modern<sup>3</sup> (Shaw 2002). Supernatural manipulation of the internet has continuities with longstanding West African cultural archetypes surrounding occult power and wealth that is gained at the expense of others.

However with Sakawa this expense is not just paid by close kin and the local community, misfortune is inflicted on the entire nation. The predominant theme during fieldwork was Ghanaian's condemnation of Sakawa as a threat to their nation's prosperity, identity and international reputation with Sakawa boys associated with a stereotypically immoral Nigeria. However if Sakawa is a source of shame for Ghanaians why it is so freely talked about and splashed all over the media? If Ghanaians are so concerned with their global image, why are Sakawa rumours so enthusiastically told to a visiting British anthropology student? Points of concern and ambiguity are popular and important topics of conversation but it is also their openness which is interesting. This discussion will reflect on this with Sakawa discourse shown to be integral to the re-negotiation of a Ghanaian identity. This renegotiation is a constant process as boundaries and concerns change and develop over time with relevance to the past, present and future.

Longstanding occult idioms for negotiating immoral from moral, 'Us' from 'Them' will be revealed as interacting with contemporary ideas of nationalism the concerns that this raises. These concerns are discussed nationally with Sakawa rumours having a mass media coverage which engages a wide range of Ghanaians. Sakawa is a popular topic of conversation amongst men and women, young and old, professionals and the unemployed. Benedict Anderson's (1991) treatment of capitalism and communication technologies and their relationship to 'imagined communities' and nationalism thus proves more fruitful than

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<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Shaw's (2002) work on witchcraft and memories of the slave trade in Sierra Leone illustrated that the relationship between past and contemporary occult beliefs is fluid.

'witchcraft and modernity' inferences of capitalism as a juggernaut (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993 and 1999; Geschiere 1997:135; Moore & Saunders 2001).

The focus is therefore on Ghanaian perceptions of Sakawa and its feared consequences, rather than the practice itself. As in Favret-Saada's (1980) ethnography on witchcraft in the Bocage region of France, the focus will be on the power of words to make the witch, or in this case the Sakawa boy. Rather than explaining occult beliefs 'away' attention is given to the processes by which they exist and are maintained in social space over time, appreciating fears and concerns (Favret-Saada 1980). The occult may be omnipresent however a perceived 'epidemic' is not 'normal' but is often a cause of fear and sometimes violence. Unlike some witchcraft in Ghana (Adinkrah 2004), Sakawa rumours do not result in violent witch-hunts. However witchcraft rumours are not just a tool for controlling social concern (Gluckman 1963; Marwick 1962); they must also be valued as a cause of concern in themselves.

#### National phenomenon, national concern.

Since 2007 Sakawa rumours have featured strongly in the Ghanaian media as well as inspiring popular entertainment such as 'Hip Life' songs and the Ghanaian film industry. 3 months of Sakawa fieldwork and internet research included 55 newspaper articles, 27 television reports and 165 radio references, with many informants citing the radio during interviews.

The radio is a particularly prominent means of spreading of Sakawa rumours due to its easy accessibility compared to the cost and level of literacy associated with newspapers and television. Radio as a medium for rumour is also unique in its relationship to African values surrounding oral history and informal communication networks (Ellis 1989:321). Stephen Ellis uses the term 'pavement radio', translated from the French 'radio trottoir' to describe such networks as important sources of rumour and news (Ellis 1989). These networks are constituted by people listening to the radio, talking about the radio and talking to each other and this casual nature of 'pavement radio' is not dismissed as trivial. Instead Ellis values gossip and rumour as featuring items of historical importance and long-time social interest such as sorcery (Ellis 1989:330; DiFonzo & Bordia 2007:21; Shibutani 1966).

The soundtrack to Ghanaian *Tro tro* (public minibus) journeys is often the radio and conversations among passengers were a rich resource for Sakawa rumours, drawing in people from different areas and backgrounds. Radio reports of the latest Sakawa rumour could provoke a chorus of tutting with passengers often engaging in conversation and exchanging shocking rumours. Widespread media coverage is therefore a cultural externalization whereby the same Sakawa rumours are discussed nationwide, creating a durable storage of meanings from which increasingly complex and sensationalist rumours propagate (Hannerz 1992:27).

Ghana's diverse population is therefore united in a national Sakawa discourse, creating what Benedict Anderson has termed an 'imagined community' and a national identity. Anderson defines national identity as an emotional sense of belonging and loyalty, influencing a sense of oneself and an awareness of one's place within the world in relation to others (Anderson 1991:10). The 1991 book *Imagined Communities* analyses the fundamental role of the printing press in the construction of national identity. Accessible books and pamphlets created a collective consciousness whereby citizens were aware and relating to each other on an increasingly large and anonymous scale (Anderson 1991:6, 40; Eriksen 1993:106). Ultimately, a common discursive medium was created as people read the same information without direct contact with one another. Although Ghana already has a constructed national identity, it is constantly under negotiation and Sakawa rumours form a platform for Ghanaians to discuss how they see themselves and their society, both in the past and in the future (Hannerz 1987:547). As people contribute and interact with the national media, they are constructing themselves as Ghanaians:

**“You see this? [Points to article in the newspaper] These Sakawa boys, what next?! It is evil and now look, it is ruining Ghana. What will people think? This is not Ghanaian behaviour, it's not right!”**

A conversation with Mrs. Quansah whilst reading the *Daily Graphic* and pointing at Yamoah, E. (2009)

'Mob battle police over 'Sakawa' boys', *Daily Graphic*, 26<sup>th</sup> July, p.5.

Whether it's said between friends, in a national newspaper article or on an internet message board<sup>4</sup>, Mrs. Quansah's indignant comment that Sakawa is "not Ghanaian behaviour" is a common reaction throughout the nation. A sense of national identity stresses cultural similarity and solidarity, simultaneously drawing boundaries and creating others. Rumour often has a fundamental role in this social boundary maintenance (Eriksen 1993:6; Gluckman 1963:308; Stewart & Strathern 2004:30). Sakawa rumours portrayal of young men performing socially grotesque tasks constructs a dichotomy between 'Us' and 'Them', 'moral and 'immoral' and ultimately, 'Ghanaian' and 'Not-Ghanaian' behaviour (Douglas 2002:27).

Interestingly, Sakawa is not only 'not Ghanaian' but is widely described by Ghanaians as "Nigerian behaviour". Ghanaians commonly believe 'Sakawa' to be a Hausa word and although 'Sakawa' itself is not Hausa<sup>5</sup>, it is the perception of it as a Nigerian word which is most interesting. Sakawa also has particular connotations with Nigeria's infamous '419 boy' internet fraudsters, with '419' being a reference to the paragraph in the Nigerian Criminal Code for fraud<sup>6</sup>. Erikson has identified stereotypes as fundamental to the construction of a contrasting and often superior national identity and Sakawa is not only discussed as evil but as specifically influenced by a stereotypical Nigeria (Eriksen 1993:4).

Ghanaian stereotypes of Nigerians as immoral, corrupt and violent have a long history. For example, the 1980's saw mass expulsions of each others migrants and Ghanaians returned with tales of xenophobic Nigerians, commonly stereotyping them as pompous, immoral and corrupt (McCaskie 2008:332). Despite contemporary co-operative politics such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), popular relations remain strained and stereotypes continue (Gocking 2005). Friction is evident in an online September 2009 Ghanaian news report citing Nigerian Minister Godwin Abbe's comment: "the volume of water generated in Ghana is not enough to flush the toilets in Lagos state". Such insinuations of insignificance prompted Ghanaian journalists to retaliate with descriptions of Nigerians as corrupt and incompetent; whose flushing toilets probably do not work anyway (Online news article Owusu 2009).

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=162565&comment=4774586#com>

<sup>5</sup> 'Sakawa' could potentially be a non-Hausa speaker's approximation of *chakawa* meaning 'to stab', similar to the word for spirit inflictions of *harbe*, to shoot. Although the 'ch' sound is Hausa, the sound may be difficult for Ghanaian languages such as Twi where it is instead transformed into an 's'. (Last, M. 2010 *Email to Alice Armstrong*, March 10).

<sup>6</sup> Post-oil boom, internet fraud has become increasingly popular among young Nigerian men who use a number of online techniques to scam foreign targets into transferring money into their accounts (Jordan-Smith 2007).

However, the primary concern discussed in Sakawa rumours is the global scale of Nigeria's negative stereotypes surrounding corruption, drug trafficking and organised crime networks (Jordan-Smith 2007). As Daniel Jordan-Smith states: "The infamous Nigerian email scams are emblematic of Nigeria's worldwide reputation for corruption" (Jordan-Smith 2007:28). 'Transparency International: the global coalition against corruption' annually publishes a Corruption Perception Index (CPI) for public sector corruption in 180 countries. In 2009 Ghana ranked at 69, whereas Nigeria ranked at 130 (Transparency International 2009 [Online]). Ghanaians are aware that Sakawa could inflict the same on negative global reputation on Ghana. Phillip Mayer once described witches as "a traitor within the gates" (1954:66) and many Ghanaians discuss Sakawa boys as betraying the values of their nation (Crawford 1967:321; Douglas 2002:127; Stewart & Strathern 2004:67).

Sakawa boy's betrayal of their nation is felt particularly strongly as many Ghanaians are proud of their values and worldwide image. As the first African nation to gain Independence in 1957 Ghana has maintained some of its 'leading light' status (Armah 1974:175). U.S. President Barack Obama chose Ghana as his first visit to Africa, which occurred during fieldwork and prompted widespread national pride and elation<sup>7</sup>. With democracy and peace, Ghana is often put on a pedestal as a model modern African state and Ghanaians are aware of the contrast to other African states, including Nigeria:

**"It gladdens my heart to note that more Ghanaians enjoy electricity, potable water, functional health care, security, education and have a better standard of living than Nigerians, according to the United Nations"**

Owusu, D. (2009) 'Nigerian High Commissioner cannot deny Ghana bashing', *Ghana Web [Online]*, 19th September. [Accessed online 10/03/10] Available from:

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=168942>.

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<sup>7</sup> Newspapers were filled with national pride for example: Tsen, K. (2009) 'HAIL GHANA THE NEW FACE OF AFRICA', *Daily Graphic*, 13<sup>th</sup> July, p.1.

However many Ghanaians also believe that they are living in a time of increased danger, perceiving their nation as becoming increasingly similar to a stereotypical Nigeria with fears of epidemic immorality amongst the youth. One evening during fieldwork a small girl went missing and locals panicked, fearing the girl's abduction for Sakawa ritual murder. After a few hours the girl was found and her father reflected on his fear, articulating concerns surrounding a changing Ghana: "with this Sakawa you have to watch out, now we cannot just let our children wander anymore" (27/08/09). During fieldwork the media also reported increasing gun crime and banditry throughout the nation<sup>8</sup>. As with Sakawa, Tom McCaskie's work on gun crime in Kumasi found that such dangerous and immoral behaviour is equated with Ghana becoming increasingly like Nigeria (McCaskie 2008:437). A comment on a Sakawa online message board read: "...Ghana is in the process of being incurably infested with Nigerian crimes<sup>9</sup>." a sentiment which was often expressed by informants during my own interviews.

Interestingly, Sakawa rumours began in 2007 which was the same year that oil was found off Ghana's south-western coast. It may be that Sakawa rumours emphasize Nigeria's perceived immoral influence because Ghanaians are increasingly negotiating concerns similar to Nigeria and the ambiguities of potential oil wealth (McCaskie 2008b). Ultimately, Ghanaian's stereotypes surrounding Nigeria are integral to a sense of national identity, a boundary which Sakawa boys worryingly transgress. This raises concerns for Ghanaians on both a national and international level as Ghanaians negotiate their past and their future with ideas of progress which particularly concern the youth.

#### The youth and the future: social reproduction gone wrong.

Sakawa rumours are concerned with the youth and the power they embody. Sakawa is widely associated with young people and Ghana has a high youth population with the nation's median population age at only 20.7 (CIA World Factbook 2010 [Online]). Nationalism like kinship involves a sense of protecting vitality and the transmission of values across generations (Grosby 2005:120) and as Epstein stated in his analysis of

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<sup>8</sup> Tawiah, O. (2009) Ashanti police hunt for armed robbers, *Daily Guide*, 4th August, p.7. Also, Asante, D. (2009) 'Killer shot friend and bolted with GH¢96,200', *Daily Guide*, 22nd August, p.3.

<sup>9</sup> Online Sakawa discussion board comment by 'Lord Maxx'. Lord Maxx, (2009) Comment 'Re: Nigerians are destroying Ghana', 26<sup>th</sup> May, 01.20hrs [Accessed online 10/01/10] Available at:<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=162565&comment=4774586#com>

rumour, to be talked about is a measure of social importance (1969 cited in Bleek 1976:527). Young people reproduce biologically and socially creating Ghanaians they are the future and are therefore socially important. Sakawa rumours depict young men destroying this potential by acting immorally but also literally, with rumours of Sakawa boys sacrificing their fertility in exchange for occult powers. Many rumours also depict young men shape-shifting into snakes which then vomit money, an image which has also been linked to traditional Ewe symbols of often diabolical fertility (Meyer 1995:818; Wendl 2007:16). Fertility, reproduction and witchcraft accusations are frequently related (Apter 1993; Auslander 1993; Jordan-Jordan-Smith 2001a; Meyer 1995:24). Wolf Bleek has written of witchcraft accusations against older women in Kwaku, Ghana who are believed to inflict infertility on the younger generation. Citing the work of Nadel (1952), Bleek interprets accusations as a resentment of women's power as a life giving force (Bleek 1976:538-9). Sakawa is unusual as accusations descend generational gradients; it is the youth who are sacrificing their *own* fertility and therefore their own life giving force in return for occult power.

Ghanaians are particularly disturbed by this sacrifice as Sakawa boys are rumoured to be educated young men who have a relatively high level of English and computer literacy. Sakawa boys are therefore portrayed as particularly greedy, not from impoverished backgrounds but desiring the glamorous lifestyle and camaraderie of the cult<sup>10</sup>. This selfish behaviour has repercussions on Ghanaian society. Their education means that Sakawa boys embody potential for themselves, their families, their communities as well as their nation; a potential which is destroyed by their illegal occult activities. Sakawa is thus feared for its reversal of expected behaviour and interruption of social reproduction, with consequences for the entire nation's prosperity<sup>11</sup>. Throughout West Africa it is usually politicians who are portrayed as greedy and cannibalistic whereby 'eating' refers to food but is also a metaphor for money and sex i.e. life sources and resources (Bayart 1993; Geschiere 1997; Rowlands & Warnier 1988). Jean-François Bayart's term 'politics of the belly' therefore takes the phrase in both literal and figurative senses to discuss African attitudes to state

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<sup>10</sup> The etymology of "Sakawa" is not clear and although it may derive from the Hausa *chakawa* mentioned earlier in footnote 3, "Sakawa" may also be related to "sakuwa". This is a pidgin English word used in a 1960's Decca record entitled 'Stars from Zaire Volume 4' by the Congolese *Orchestre Bella Bella* and translates as "you no resist" i.e. greed (Sharpe, B. 2010 *Email to Alice Armstrong*, March 18).

<sup>11</sup> Charlanne Burke's (2000) study of Botswanan rumours of ritual murder known as *Dipheko* similarly illustrates tensions surrounding the embodied potential of educated youth in relation to national ideas of progress. However *Dipheko* fundamentally differs from Sakawa as adults are the perpetrators against youth whereas Sakawa critiques youth's own behaviour.

nepotism (Bayart 1993). However with Sakawa it is young men who are rumoured to be cannibalistic, self-cannibalising their own potential and therefore that of their nation.

'To be a man is not easy': Sakawa, the state and global inequalities.

However, despite their potential education in Ghana does not guarantee employment and there is an ever-increasing group of unemployed educated young men looking for 'white collar work' with unemployment at 20% in 2008 (Online CIA World Bank Factbook 2010). Misty Bastian has written of similar circumstances in Nigeria<sup>12</sup>, with anxieties surrounding jobless, educated young men who are rumoured to form occult cults (Bastian 2001). As with Sakawa, many Nigerians fear the consequences that such behaviour inflicts on their society as a whole as a powerful generation of educated but immoral and violent youths is created (Bastian 2001:81).

Many Ghanaians blame their government for this 'social reproduction gone wrong' and the perceived epidemic of occult immorality amongst the youth. Politicians are criticized for failing to resolve economic problems and unemployment thus making Sakawa a popular alternative. Promises of development are often unmet and Ghanaians are critically aware of national funds being siphoned off to politicians and elites:

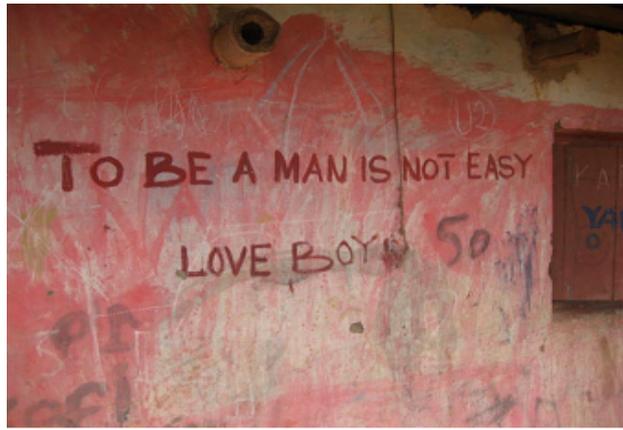
**"This Atta Mills [current President], he lies and lies. He promised to stop the suffering and now look ...young men turn to Sakawa and crime. You must provide jobs for people or what will they do?"**

Sebastian, Koforidua, Ghana, 02/008/09.

In the context of high expectations and often restricting situations it is perhaps not surprising that young men are the focus of Sakawa rumours. Mary Douglas stated that witchcraft accusations often occur where "roles are undefined, or so defined that they are impossible to perform" (Douglas 2003:127). This tension is evident in the popular Ghanaian male lament and graffiti slogan 'to be a man is not easy':

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<sup>12</sup> These Nigerian cults are believed to be involved in criminal networks such as drug trafficking. As with Sakawa rumours, young men perform grotesque rituals such as human sacrifice which consequently endow members with occult powers such as mind possession (Bastian 2001:80)



**Photo: Alice Armstrong, Axim, Ghana 2009.**

As Tom McCaskie found amongst the perpetrators of Kumasi gun crime (McCaskie 2008a:447), Sakawa boys defend their practice as taking something they deserve; a revenge against past and contemporary global inequalities:

**“Kof-I: Dem say we do Sakawa cos we is greedy. Its all lies, lies like the white man from de times of de colonie [sic]. It is because r [sic] politicians is greedy and the world is greedy. Ther [sic] aint no chances for a black Ghanaian so we have to make dem!”**

An extract from a Facebook ‘chat’ conversation: 15/03/10.

Geschiere identified witchcraft rumours bridging of the global and local, with acute inequalities in a world of many desires accessible by few (1997:81). As Bruno Latour stated “there are continuous paths that lead from the local to the global...only so long as the branches are paid for (Latour 1993:117 cited in Shaw 1997: 869). Sakawa offers access to these restricted ‘branches’ and their associated wealth and power, illicitly entering them via the internet’s Ethernet cables to commit occult fraud. With many refused visas or lacking the funds for travel, the internet allows access to places they cannot enter.

However, although Sakawa may transcend the frustration of global inequalities the moral price is high. Whether it’s the sacrifice of a local child or the reputation and prospects of the entire nation, Sakawa money is gained at the expense of others (Shaw 1997: 869). Sakawa boy’s manipulation of the internet has strong parallels with longstanding occult fears which raise a number of ambivalences surrounding the internet’s potential powers. Historical continuities claim neither origin nor explanation but acknowledge that Sakawa

witchcraft beliefs did not simply appear as Sakawa combines longstanding beliefs with new powers of the internet (Shaw 2002:11) .

### Manipulating the power of the internet.

Many ethnographies have described witches' abilities to travel large distances in mysteriously little time. Rosalind Shaw's Sierra Leonean ethnography recounts rumours of witches flying to London and back within an hour (Shaw 1997: 857). Similarly, the internet allows Sakawa boys to manipulate its compression of time and space, transcending national boundaries and engaging in worldwide spiritual travel. Shaw also describes how the Temne of Sierra Leone believe in an invisible, global space full of illicit wealth known as the 'Place of Witches': "Although its presence may be recognised everywhere, its incompatibility with moral personhood and community is registered both in its intangibility and in its tropes of perverted and predatory consumption: the agency of the witch is necessary for the pursuit of one's desires within it" (Shaw 1997: 857). Similarly, Ghanaians discuss the moral sacrifice entailed when a Sakawa boy makes an occult entrance into the intangible global space of the internet and extracts wealth by preying on foreign victims.

Sakawa boy's transcendence of national boundaries also has parallels with the Sakrobundi anti-witchcraft movement which originated in the Ivory Coast and spread to Ghana during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (McCaskie 2005). Colonial partitions and restrictions had created a tough economic climate which promoted a smuggling trade that monetized social relationships and ultimately triggered a 'witchcraft craze', a craze which Sakrobundi offered protection from (McCaskie 2005:14). Like Sakawa, 19<sup>th</sup> century witches gained their wealth at the expense of others, transcending the restricted economic context imposed by national borders whilst others struggled.

The powers Sakrobundi offered protection from were perceived of as "alien" and having entered from 'outside' were therefore especially dangerous (McCaskie 2005:6). Sakawa power is also gained via drawing alien powers and wealth from the worldwide web using a technique which is believed to have spread from outside i.e. Nigeria. Witchcraft and occult beliefs often involve the appropriation of foreign powers (Apter 1993). Sakawa is recognised for its extra-ordinary, almost 're-charging' power to existing beliefs in illegal

occult activities such as blood money or '*sika duro*'. Sakawa rumours are the latest Ghanaian example of witchcraft and occult beliefs being perpetuated and re-interpreted in social space (Robertson 1996:603):

**Alice: Can you remember people doing *sika duro* (blood money) before, when you were younger?**

**Akosua: Oh yes, there has been *sika duro* for a long time. When I was schooling we heard of a girl on Aburi who was murdered for this blood money. The men, they took her organs and her sex and they used it so they could be rich and powerful.**

**Alice: And now with Sakawa, is it different to *sika duro* or is it the same?**

**Akosua: These witches, they are always getting more powerful and finding new tricks. They will trick you, you have to be sharp. This Sakawa, it is getting too popular...their spirit will enter the computers for the ju-ju. It comes from Nigeria; they are learning their tricks and getting more powerful"**

Extract from an interview with Akosua aged 65, Akropong, Ghana 01/08/09

Sakawa boy's power as described by Akosua and many others is a particular form of occult agency which is distributed via the internet. Anthropologists have commented on the often 'dividual' nature of witchcraft personhood with witches having the power to be in multiple places at once; dispersing their agency via bodily transcendence whilst appearing physically present (Geschiere 1997:127; Strathern 1988; Shaw 1997). Similarly, Sakawa boys are rumoured to appear as normal, sat in front of a monitor whilst their spirit possesses multiple foreign fraud targets. Sakawa movies such as '*Sakawa Boys 2: Mallam Issa Kawa*' (Dir. Socrate Safo 2009) often conclude with the demise of the Sakawa boy by his seeming physical presence yet spiritual death.

West African witches are also commonly believed to have extra organs such as eyes and stomachs which are used to entrap or consume their victims (Geschiere 1997, Rowlands & Warnier 1988). Sakawa boys are similarly able to extend their bodies and consumptive powers via the internet, not via extraordinary physical traits but with numerous internet identities. Sakawa boys often have fake profiles on popular websites such

as Facebook and Hotmail as well as on Western online dating communities. These profiles feature fake photos and thus allow the Sakawa boy to have multiple cyber bodies. Many Sakawa boys even switch gender using attractive female profile pictures to entrap fraud victims via online friendships or romance. It is therefore not surprising that many Ghanaians are wary of the potential predatory powers that the internet offers.

Sakawa boy's cyber dispersal of agency, power and fame has parallels with Malinowski's work on Melanesian Kula shell exchange systems (Malinowski 1978). In Kula exchange magic is used to control the consciousness of the other Trobriand, persuading them to give up their valuable Kula shell. Similarly, Sakawa boys are said to possess their foreign fraud target, persuading them to transfer money. Kula also extend and create personhood as Melanesians travel to multiple islands in systems of exchange, increasing their fame (Malinowski 1978:51,75). However rather than extending themselves through seafaring to other destinations, Sakawa boys' agency is extended through the internet. Daniel Miller (2001) has similarly drawn parallels between the internet and Kula in his work on Trinidadian social networking websites. Miller interprets these websites as aesthetically 'trapping' and able to "influence the mind of potential exchange partners", promoting exchange with distant places and displaying a positive Trinidadian identity (Miller 2001:137-8). Likewise, Sakawa boys use the internet to 'trap' their fraud victims, influencing their victim's mind via occult powers and fake profile pages. However as discussed, unlike Miller's account of positive Trinidadian internet fame the national fame spread by Sakawa boys is negative since it threatens Ghana's international reputation. Instead, Ghanaians discuss Sakawa boy's global visibility to give moral force to concerns surrounding an immoral way for Ghanaians to behave.

These dividual notions of witchcraft personhood, visibility and fame raises interesting parallels with ideas of 'Big men', an idiom of power that has historical and contemporary value in Ghanaian society (Miescher 2005). Men of power are not 'big' individually but acquire their power via the division of their personhood through patron-client networks (Miescher 2005; Nugent 1995). The internet provides a new way to be dividual which could lead to legitimate power and success for both individuals and their communities via online business and trade. However Sakawa boys negatively manipulate this 'dividuality' with their occult internet fraud. Rather than capitalism and modernity creating a contested dichotomy between traditional

obligations versus capitalist *individualism* (Geschiere 1997:154), maybe Ghanaians are particularly wary of the internet because of increasing possibilities to be *dividual* and therefore powerful but in a socially unacceptable and immoral way.

Ambivalence towards the potential positive powers of the internet is evident in Ghanaian concerns and desires surrounding internet cafes. Internet cafes are increasingly prominent throughout Ghana and are particularly popular amongst the youth. They had however become places of mystique and speculation for more aged informants. Often open until late internet cafes were rumoured to be the site for young people to practice their night-time Sakawa rituals. However, the internet as an emblem of modernity and progress was commonly held alongside Sakawa fears amongst both young and old, with many informants articulating pride at the recent increase in local internet cafes. Amongst young people cafes remained popular and local owners did not notice any decline in business. Although customers acknowledged potential Sakawa accusation, visiting the cafes was fundamentally a fashionable activity for local young people and was associated with being 'modern'.

This ambivalence illustrates that rumours of Sakawa boy's immoral manipulation of the internet does not mean that the internet should not be used positively. Witchcraft rumours surrounding modern idioms such as the internet are not a resistance to change (Geschiere 2007:223). As Shaw's informant articulates, technology has immense potential within Africa: "If we [Temne people] put such science to good use, what a great continent Africa would be" (Shaw 2002:210). As with Ghanaian's condemnation of Sakawa, many Temne people resent witch's appropriation of new technologies as selfish, blocking their opportunities to develop. However occult power is also ambiguous, with the Temne not necessarily negating witchcraft's role in positive technological development. Shaw discussed Sierra Leonean attitudes to Western technologies as a mix of marvel and horror with many believing them to be created by European witchcraft (Shaw 1997:860). Occult power is ubiquitous in African life; it's the way this power is used which is a cause for concern rather than the existence of such power. The manipulation of technology can bring success and witchcraft could be harnessed to reach this goal. Perhaps Ghanaian's critique of Sakawa is not an adamant condemnation of supernatural use of the internet but *immoral* supernatural use of the internet.

The intimate relationship between the internet and cultural archetypes surrounding the occult and ideas of power thus places Sakawa boys in a worryingly liminal and powerful space between the conceptual and physical borders of 'moral' and 'immoral' and 'Us' and 'Them'; whilst simultaneously offering potential and danger. Many of these Sakawa ambivalences have been inserted into Pentecostal discourses as Ghanaians negotiate ideas of moral progress.

#### The church and Sakawa: contained or sustained?

The Church has taken an active role in assisting Ghana's 'moral progress' and pastors promote their responsibility to halt the Sakawa "epidemic" via prayer<sup>13</sup> as well as practically, by educating the youth about the dangers yet positive uses of the internet<sup>14</sup>. The Church is a massive social and political force in Ghana and throughout West Africa (Gifford 1998; Marshall 1993; Meyer 1999). Ghanaian towns have multiple churches and denominations, from urban mega-churches to those which pop up and down in backrooms or yards. Many have travelling pastors, websites and newspapers and are simultaneously part of a local and global Pentecostal community (Meyer 2002:68). Like nationalism, African Christianity was predicted to eventually decline as an alien colonial relic. Yet since the 1970's there has been a Pentecostal 'second wave' (Gifford 2004) and many have noted the intimate contemporary Ghanaian relationship between Christianity and nationalism (Gifford 1998; Marshall 1993).

Christian discourses bridge the national and the local involving politicians and citizens (McCaskie 2008b; Marshall 1993; Meyer 1995). A Christian condemnation of Sakawa further inserts it into a national discourse where 'not Christian behaviour' and 'not Ghanaian behaviour' can become synonymous. Sakawa is one of many contemporary ambivalences which are negotiated by the Church on a national scale. Tom McCaskie's

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<sup>13</sup> "They have indeed become lovers of money and wicked people. This trend can only be stopped with God's intervention... We need to pray and seek God's face to intervene so as to destroy the powers of the demonic authorities behind SAKAWA and other spiritually motivated frauds." Online article by Reverend Patrick Kofi Amissah, St. Paul Methodist Church, Tema, Ghana. Amissah, P.K. (2009) 'Internet fraud from 419 to Sakawa-a challenge for the Church', *The Christian Sentinel [Online]*, 1<sup>st</sup> October. [Accessed online 20/03/09] Available at <http://www.thechristiansentinel.com/?p=872>

<sup>14</sup> "Again, the church must find a very appropriate means of helping young people to use the internet and other modern technology positively. This can be through guided use by young people in the church's own café for this purpose, or through proper education for them to be vigilant." Amissah, P.K. (2009) 'Internet fraud from 419 to Sakawa- a challenge for the Church', *The Christian Sentinel [Online]*, 1<sup>st</sup> October. [Accessed online 20/03/09] Available at <http://www.thechristiansentinel.com/?p=872>.

ethnography on Ghanaian attitudes to the recent oil find highlights the intimate relationship between Christianity, politics and ‘progress’ (McCaskie 2008b). Oil is inserted into Pentecostal discourses with its potential prosperity often perceived as a gift from God but simultaneously a potential Satan (McCaskie 2008b:323). Politicians bickered over credit for the discovery which would legitimate their power to bring prosperity to Ghana, simultaneously inferring their religious right to rule (McCaskie 2008b:324-5). Often, national successes are Christian successes and national problems are Christian concerns<sup>15</sup> and large churches promote their moral responsibility to halt Sakawa on a national level:

**“We, as a nation, must continually praise God for His abundant blessings including the resounding victory of the 2009 Under 20 World Cup tournament, the visit of President Obama, commercial quantities of oil found, successful general elections... making Ghana one of the shining [sic] stars on the African continent.**

**While recounting and celebrating the goodness of the Lord, all serious-minded and well-meaning believers must be concerned about the total breakdown of our social fabric...such as Sakawa... armed robbery, bribery ...just to mention a few.”**

Ansa, M.A. (2009) ‘Is the Church losing its Impact and Influence on Modern Society?’, *Modern Ghana [Online]*, 8<sup>th</sup> December. [Accessed online 02/04/09] Available at <http://www.modernghana.com/print/253275/7/is-the-church-losing-its-impact-and-influence-on-m.html>.

Pentecostal discourses are therefore often used to negotiate national ambiguous issues, whether it’s the oil find or Sakawa, Christianity can insert it into a good versus evil dichotomy. This dichotomy and its diabolisation of ‘traditional beliefs’ such as witchcraft is often cited as a reason for Ghanaian Pentecostalism’s popularity (Meyer 1999). The Church offers witchcraft deliverance and protection, a space to confront a common fear (Moore & Saunders 2001:16). Diane Ciekawy and Peter Geschiere (1998) have described African witchcraft as a force which needs “containing”, a role which Pentecostalism’s good/evil dichotomy can provide. Witchcraft is acknowledged within Pentecostalism but it is also domesticated and controlled via its condemnation as evil (Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998).

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<sup>15</sup> “Church-State Must Fight Sakawa”. Headline of the *Christian Messenger* newspaper. Wiafe, I., Botchway, F. (2009) ‘Church-state must fight Sakawa’, *Christian Messenger*, July 17-31, p.1.

Ghanaian witchcraft concerns often involve ambiguities surrounding consumption with 'satanic money' featuring large within Pentecostal discourse (Meyer 1995). The problem is not money itself but the means of its acquisition, which must be moral and Christian (Meyer 1995:250). The Church discusses the temptations and promises of modernity; promising prosperity if one has faith (Meyer 2002: 75). Ultimately Christianity is promoted as a moral route to progress and success (Marshall 1993:234). The Christian imagination has therefore provided a space for traditional beliefs in evil spirits and forces to remain whilst negotiating contemporary concerns and ambiguities (Meyer 1999:177).

However, the Church may negotiate occult rumours but does not eliminate them; instead spreading Sakawa rumours in its services and press<sup>16</sup>. By simultaneously condemning Sakawa as well as revealing Sakawa practices, the Church constantly reasserts itself as a purveyor of 'true knowledge' (Jordan-Smith 2001b; Meyer 1995). Power is asserted by revealing intimate details of witchcraft which may have previously been confined to secrecy or gossip (Meyer 1995). The Church becomes a voice of authority on the occult with many informants reiterating Sakawa rumours from Church services during interviews.

Ultimately, just as Ghana seemingly needs Nigeria against which to define its identity, Sakawa must be maintained to define what is not Christian behaviour. The Church uses Sakawa rumours to reassert its identity and to bolster its popularity. Many large churches actively invest in the propagation of Sakawa rumours by commissioning large Sakawa posters which feature sensationalist Sakawa newspaper cuttings. Designed to deter and scare, these posters are an example of the Church's role in maintaining witchcraft meanings in social space and promoting an alternative Christian route to prosperity. Filip de Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart's work in the Democratic Republic of Congo similarly concluded that the church is a "crucial" contributor to the production and popularity of witchcraft in collective imagery (de Boeck & Plissart 2006). The Church has a vested interest in maintaining Sakawa fears; churches are big businesses and witchcraft fears promote attendance and therefore money collections (Meyer 2002:69).

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<sup>16</sup> For example: "We must stop the youth doing this evil Sakawa. It is the work of the Devil!" Extract from an article in the *Christian Messenger* newspaper. Wiafe, I., Botchway, F. (2009) 'Church-state must fight Sakawa', *Christian Messenger*, July 17-31, p.1. Also: Amissah, P.K. (2009) 'Internet fraud from 419 to Sakawa- a challenge for the Church', *The Christian Sentinel [Online]*, 1<sup>st</sup> October. [Accessed online 20/03/09] Available at: <http://www.thechristiansentinel.com/?p=872>

However Ghanaians are not duped into attendance. Many are critically aware of the power and wealth of churches and rumours of corrupt pastors are common (Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998:8; Meyer 2002; Jordan-Smith 2001a). Furthermore, reliance on witchcraft for identity and popularity means that the church treads a fine line. Daniel Jordan-Smith's work in Nigeria highlighted that although Pentecostal churches condemn witchcraft they consequently place themselves "precariously" close to it (Jordan-Smith 2001b: 602). With the 'big business' of West African churches pastors are often powerful and wealthy and are therefore vulnerable to witchcraft accusations themselves (Gifford 1994; Jordan-Smith 2001b; Meyer 1995). As in the Nigerian Owerri riots whereby pastors were implicated in ritual murder related to 419 frauds (Jordan-Smith 2001a); some wayward Ghanaian pastors are rumoured to be Sakawa boy's spiritual masters<sup>17</sup>.

The Church is therefore not just a condemner but a *part* of Sakawa rumours. By maintaining Sakawa rumours and inserting them into a good/evil dichotomy, the Church reinforces a Christian and often 'Ghanaian' community. Although this can backfire with accusations of Sakawa pastors, Sakawa remains prevalent in Pentecostal discourse. During church services the congregation would often be instructed to pray for their health, their nation, the youth and the demise of Sakawa:

**"And now let us pray. Pray for the health of our children, for the youth of our nation to be prosperous. Let our businesses flourish and our nation be a strong and Christian leader. Let us rid our society of these evil practices such as Sakawa, rid the devil from our lives and open our hearts to God! Only through prayer can we succeed!"**

Grace Congregation, Ghana, Akropong 09/08/09.

### Conclusion: the ontogenic dynamism of Sakawa rumours

Sakawa rumours have been revealed as complex moral negotiations which engage a wide range of Ghanaians in the discussion of what is acceptable Ghanaian behaviour versus immoral Sakawa and its connotations with a stereotypical Nigeria. With increased reports of internet fraud as well as the discovery of

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<sup>17</sup> Sarpong, D. (2009) 'Top Pastors in Ghana Patronize Sakawa Boys' 04/05/09 *Today Newspaper* [Online], 4<sup>th</sup> May. [Accessed online 11/12/09]. Available at: <http://www.theghanaijournal.com/2009/05/04/top-pastors-in-ghana-patronize-sakawa-boys/>

oil, Ghana has become increasingly similar to Nigeria and therefore potentially closer to its corrupt and immoral stereotypes. As is often the case with witchcraft rumours, Sakawa is being discussed at a time of social uncertainty and ambiguity (Douglas 2002:27; Marwick 1982). Sakawa rumours are a process of national self-reflection as Ghanaians note these similarities by defining Sakawa as “from Nigeria” and therefore recognising its threat to their nation’s international reputation and future prosperity.

Since Evans-Pritchard’s famous monograph on Azande witchcraft, many anthropologists have highlighted occult beliefs as constitutive of a particular worldview (Evans-Pritchard 1976; Geschiere 1997). Sakawa rumours have been revealed as a particularly Ghanaian negotiation however this worldview is not limited to Ghana; it is literally a *worldview*, negotiating concerns for their global reputation and access to global resources. As James Ferguson stated in his 2006 book *Expectations of Modernity*: “In Africa modernity has always been a matter not simply of past and present but also of up and down. The aspiration to modernity has been an aspiration to rise in the world in economic and political terms; to improve one’s way of life, one’s standing, one’s place-in-the-world” (Ferguson 2006:32). Sakawa boys ultimately betray their nation, threatening Ghana’s international ‘place-in-the world’ and future prosperity.

These concerns propagate an epidemic of discussion however the media rarely reports actual convictions and Sakawa confessions are rare. Although I spoke to Sakawa practitioners online I never personally met a practicing Sakawa boy, nor encountered anyone who had. Ghana ranked number 7 in 2008’s U.S Internet Crime Complaint top ten list and rose to number 6 in 2009, so internet fraud may be on the rise (U.S Internet Crime Complaint top ten list [Online] 2008,2009). However Sakawa as a practice seems to be a predominately discursive phenomenon, or at least not on the scale that that rumours infer.

The discursive construction of an ‘Other’ has been discussed in William Arens’ work on the worldwide pervasiveness of cannibalistic rumours which have been attributed to many, by many (Arens 1979). The *Man Eating Myth* questions the reality of these accusations, instead highlighting their utilisation in constructing a repulsive and often inferior ‘Other’ which maintains cultural boundaries (Arens 1979). Arens critiques anthropological accounts of the existence of cannibalism as mistaking rumours for fact. This mistake is motivated by anthropology’s disciplinary reliance on alterity which is situated in wider context of

fascinations with a 'savage' or exotic 'Other' (Arens 1979). Sakawa rumours depict a number of socially grotesque images including cannibalism but obviously, Ghana's youth are not widespread ritualistic murderers. Following Arens, these popular images are discursive, involved in maintaining a Ghanaian cultural boundary.

Sakawa is particularly interesting for the change in scale of this boundary maintenance. In Africa, witches are often believed to be jealous and selfish kin who betray their family values, destroying vitality and breaching the social boundary of the lineage. However Sakawa rumours rarely accuse kin and is instead rumoured to be the practice of the abstractly defined 'Ghanaian youth'. Furthermore, Sakawa boys' occult manipulation of the internet allows them to have a global power<sup>18</sup>. It is not the boundaries of the lineage which are transgressed but the boundaries of the nation and it therefore Ghana as a nation which suffers (Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998). Ethnographies of witchcraft and the occult frequently interpret accusations as defining an 'Us' from 'Them', however the focus has often been on small-scale societies (Crawford 1967:323; Douglas 2003:132; Kluckhohn 1944:255; Lienhardt 1951:310; Marwick 1982:15; Mayer 1954:68). With Sakawa these meanings have been extended to a national scale. Questions of 'who are we?', 'what do we stand for?' and 'what do we stand against?' have become redefined as Ghanaian concerns with contemporary relevance to the entire population. The Akan say that "It is the animal in your cloth that bites you"; Sakawa rumours illustrate that this 'cloth' has been extended to the nation and consequently, so has the 'bite'. The internet provides young Ghanaian men with the potential to use occult powers to inflict misfortune on their entire nation.

Sandy Robertson has written of the extension of meaning, using an ontogenic approach to highlight the re-definition and transmission of meanings over time. Robertson values the life cycle of individuals in the transformation and accumulation of culture (1996:591). As people grow their understandings change creating multiple meanings within a lifetime (1996:598). Therefore as individual's concerns and identity change over time so do their occult and witchcraft beliefs. This can be seen in 65 year-old Akosua's

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<sup>18</sup> Other ethnographies have similarly noted contemporary witchcraft's often global scale which incorporates longstanding occult beliefs and modern technologies (Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998; Geschiere 1997; Parish 2000)

discussion of *sika duro* transforming into Sakawa as the internet and Ghana's global reputation become contemporary concerns (Akosua p.12).

However, rather than focussing on the ontogeny of the body and changing understandings with age (Robertson 1996), Sakawa rumour's dynamism has been discussed in relation to the growing nation state as self and society are redefined simultaneously (Robertson 1996:597). It is understandings of a Ghanaian identity which are changing and Sakawa rumours reflect these concerns. A Ghanaian identity is not 'out there' to be engaged with, it is constituted by engagement. This identity is an amorphous mass, constantly transforming as Ghanaian's concerns and desires shift and change (Robertson 1996). Sakawa rumours are maintaining and negotiating this identity and are sustained in social space because of their relevance to a large number of people who actively discuss Sakawa with their family and friends. For Sakawa rumours, this renegotiation is critically occurring as Ghana enters a new age as a successful African state, with expectations of its own, as well as from the global community.

As with many African countries and nations around the world, this is not the first time Ghanaians have had to negotiate who they are (Shaw 1997, 2002). From pre-colonial trade routes to the slave trade followed by colonialism, 'Ghana' has gone through many periods of change and 'culture contacts' (Gocking 2005; Hannerz 1992). As a result borders, identities and fears have changed over time. Sakawa rumours highlight the ontogeny of Ghanaian occult beliefs as meanings and concerns surrounding 'Ghana' grow and develop (Robertson 1996). Sakawa rumours negotiate Ghana's global reputation as an African success story as rumours of occult internet fraud threaten Ghanaian's hopes and expectations for the future. Ultimately, Sakawa rumours are involved in a contemporary and dynamic redefinition of Ghanaian identity and they will not be the last.

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