

In the Turmoil of the Cybercriminal Triad, Occult Practices and Toxicomania: The Case of a Young Ivorian Cyber Crook

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How to cite this paper: Ipou, Y.S., Ziketo, B.D.S., Gonce, D.A., Gahy, G.E.K., Koua, A.M. and Yeo-Tenena, Y.J.-M. (2024) In the Turmoil of the Cybercriminal Triad, Occult Practices and Toxicomania: The Case of a Young Ivorian Cyber Crook. *Open Journal of Psychiatry*, **14**, 457-466.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpsych.2024.145027>

Received: November 17, 2023

Accepted: September 9, 2024

Published: September 12, 2024

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Abstract

Far from the financial gains of cyber crooks, the informed observer will see in cyber crookery a complex field of psychopathological expression where addictions and ritualistic practices intermingle. We thus carried out a qualitative observational study, focusing on a young Ivorian cyber-escroc, hard drug user and follower of mystical practices taken in charge by a multidisciplinary team during a resocialization course for children in conflict with the law from November to December 2022. The aim was to describe the difficulties experienced by a young Ivorian cyber crook in escaping the clutches of occult practices, internet addictions and psychoactive substances encountered in the field of cyber crookery. KA is confronted with the problem of cybercrime associated with occult practices and drug addiction. He is a heroin addict and secondary internet addict, undergoing de facto detoxification and presenting risky consumption behaviors. His fear is fuelled by the sudden death of his childhood friend, who introduced him to cyber-scams and occult practices, and the impossibility of returning his “Agbaladai” fetish when he can no longer honor the weekly sacrifices. Our results show an interweaving of psychopathological entities, namely cyberaddiction and addiction to psychoactive substances, against a backdrop of mystico-cultural practices and interpretations.

Keywords

Cybercrime, Internet Addiction, Heroin Addiction, Occultism

1. Introduction

The mastery of new information and communication technologies, particularly social networks in Côte d'Ivoire, has led to the emergence of cyber fraud, a sub-culture of financial computer fraud, among individuals, especially young people. Speaking of this phenomenon, Rigaud asserts that it holds considerable appeal for a sizeable fringe of the juvenile population, precisely young people in the 12 to 25 age brackets [1], for whom cyber fraud has become at once a fashion phenomenon, a lifestyle and a highly lucrative profession in developing countries in general, and African countries in particular. This new, more astute form of criminality, commonly known as “graft” in Ivorian jargon, was successful in its early days, but for some time now, the activity has not prospered, as victims have become cautious and the fight has yielded tangible results. Faced with this reality, these young adepts are going to combine cybercrime with mystical practices. According to the authors, their aim is to influence the will of potential victims in order to make a quick buck. In this respect, A. M. Koua, *et al.* point out that Ivor with this in mind, they consult fetishists, marabouts, voodoo priests and other mediums [2] [3]. According to internal statistics from the Regulatory Authority of Telecommunications Ivory Coast (ARTCI), 2860 complaints of scams were recorded during 2018 and 89 “brouteurs” were apprehended, 73 of whom were referred to prison (Activity report 2018-l'ARTCI). Some authors maintain that cyber-scams are a matter of great concern throughout the world due to their growing scale and their multiple and unfortunate consequences on individuals and society as a whole [4] [5].

To this end, we conducted a monographic study of a cyber scam addict to occult practices, the Internet and certain psychoactive substances. The aim of this study was to describe the difficulties experienced by a young Ivorian cyber scam in escaping the clutches of occult practices and addictions to the Internet and psychoactive substances encountered in the field of cyber fraud cybercriminals are reputed to frequently resort to occult practices and rites to optimize their gains.

2. Materials and Methods

This qualitative observational study focused on a young Ivorian cyber scam, hard drug user and follower of mystical practices cared for by a multidisciplinary team (psychiatrist, psychologist, anthropologist, social attached) during a resocialization course for children in conflict with the law from November to December 2022. Verbal consent was obtained from the respondent before KA took part in the study. Anonymity was respected. K. A. Informed consent was obtained verbally. The subjects freely consented to individual interviews, which were held away from other trainees to ensure confidentiality. In addition, the survey forms were anonymised to protect the identity of the respondents. The team in charge of the study was made up of researchers (psychiatrists, anthropologists, criminologists and sociologists), all consultants to the Monitoring and Reintegration Coordination Unit (CCSR). This team constituted the scientific commission and was

authorised by the CSSR to authorise and/or carry out scientific work on the psychosocial aspects of the trainees.

The techniques used were

- Four (04) individual interviews lasting an average of 1 hour 20 minutes with the team psychologist;
- A psychiatric consultation with the follow-up group psychiatrist;
- An individual meeting with the anthropologist (ethologist) of the follow-up team;
- A discussion with the team's psychologist and anthropologist.

The data was collected using an interview guide that included socio-demographic data, characteristics relating to cyber-scam activities, occult practices associated with these activities and bio-behavioural aspects of psychoactive substance use. In addition to the interview guide, we used a Dictaphone to record the interviews. This data was transcribed according to the themes of the study.

Toxicological analysis of urine samples was carried out in conjunction with interviews. Toxicological analyses of urine for psychoactive substances were carried out using qualitative rapid tests. The technique used was based on an immunochemical reaction involving antibodies from a molecular family that recognises compounds from this family. The substances tested were opiates, cannabis, cocaine, amphetamines, phencyclidine, etc. The answers were "presence" (positive) and "absence" (negative) of a family, with an arbitrary positivity threshold.

The research methods used in this study were the systemic method according to Elkaim [6], which differs from other methods in its understanding of human relationships. It enabled us to understand that the individual is influenced by his or her own intentions, those of others, and those of the environment and/or system. The systemic method enables us to analyse the phenomenon in terms of its systemic nature. Each of the respondent's problems constituted a system with links to the other. This method consisted of studying the dynamics and links between the elements of the triad of cyber fraud, use of psychoactive substances and use of the occult. Finally, content analysis consists of analysing the patient's discourse through the filter of themes; this enabled us to obtain the verbatims that we transposed into the results. The second, clinical method is a scientific approach to research and knowledge production. Using a questionnaire and interview guide, we conducted individual interviews with our respondent. The clinical method is based on the model of the clinical interview in psychiatry, free and then semi-directive face-to-face.

The data collection techniques used in this work were documentary study and interview with the respondent. As for analysis methods, we opted for qualitative analysis and content analysis of our respondent's various discourses. During the qualitative analysis and the content analysis of the respondents' speeches, we used the survey grid, the Dictaphone recordings and carried out coding. Coding involves breaking down the data (direct observation, speeches, texts, images) into units for analysis, defining categories and then placing (arranging or categorising)

the units into these categories. The aim is to transform the raw, disorganised, empirical world of experience into an organised world of ideas and concepts, moving from the world of the “senses” to the world of “meaning”.

3. Investigation Results

3.1. Identity and Contextual Elements

KA was born on January 12, 1998. He comes from a monogamous family of three children, of whom he is the youngest. A resident of Bouaké, this young Ivorian deliberately dropped out of school in the second grade as soon as he was introduced to cybercrime. Aged 23 at the time of the study, he was first seen by the follow-up team for his use of hard drugs (heroin and cocaine). It was during this first interview that KA informed us that his activity was cyber-scramming. According to KA, to thrive in this activity, on the recommendation of a friend who was also a cyber crook, he enlisted the services of a fetishist living in Burkina-Faso. As his parents objected to his delinquent activities and inherent mystical practices, KA decided to leave the family and move into an apartment where he would be free to do as he pleased. From this brief contextual and identifying overview, it emerges that KA is confronted with the problem of cybercrime associated with occult practices and drug addiction experienced by a fringe part of the Ivorian youth population.

3.2. Initiation into Cybercrime

Young KA was initiated into cybercrime in 2018, by friends living in Abidjan. According to him, these are childhood friends with whom he spent the 2017 school vacations. After these vacations with them, he says he was impressed by the lifestyle of these young men practically the same age as him. It was on the strength of this impression that Mr. KA came up with the idea of being initiated. Already having the means and wanting to consolidate their friendly relationship, these young men came to Bouaké to train the young KA member of the “brouteurs” club. Asked why he decided to give up his studies for grazing, KA says: “My parents don’t have the means to look after me the way I wanted. I also wanted to have a lifestyle like my friends in Abidjan, who lived in apartments at their own expense, had nice cars and expensive telephones”. After this week-long initiation, KA says he spent 15 hours a day on the Internet for his “grazing” activities. His *modus operandi* was as follows:

- **Webcam or video blackmail scam**

Commonly referred to as “perverts” in cyber crook circles, this scam involves contacting an Internet user (client or victim), reassuring him/her and establishing intimate relations with this person. After a certain period of time, the cyber crook asks the victim to simulate sexual relations on the webcam. Once the request has been accepted, the cyber-stalker takes care to record a video of the victim naked during the online lovemaking. With this video, he blackmails the victim by demanding that she pay him a certain amount of money, failing which he will

publish the video in order to damage her reputation. This action can be repeated and, in some cases, lead the victim to commit suicide. On this subject, Mr. KA says: *“I’m currently wanted by the Anti-Cybercrime Police (PLCC) for blackmailing an Ivorian client with whom I had an online relationship. After receiving 500,000 francs (763 euros) from this lady, I blackmailed her again to pay me the same amount, failing which I would disclose her video. It was during this last transaction that I made the mistake of giving my personal contact. As the lady had already lodged a complaint for blackmail and swindling, the PLCC was able to contact me. I got rid of my phone chip so they couldn’t find me.”*

“It’s worth noting that, after two months off the Internet, KA said in a final interview about this job: “I have a strong urge to go back to my computer and connect with my customers. This thought is becoming more and more frequent, despite the two months I’ve spent without any contact with the Net.”

▪ **Occult practices linked to KA’s cyber-scams: rituals for worshipping the “Agbaladai” fetish**

To thrive in cyber scams, KA has turned to occult practices, hiring the services of marabouts, fetishists and others. KA’s use of occult practices followed a gradual succession. Indeed, as soon as he was initiated into cyber-scamming, Mr. KA first sought the services of a marabout, who gave him a canary containing a liquid with which he should wash himself. On this subject, he says: *“I had to wash myself with the contents of the canary, by getting naked at a crossroads in the neighbourhood chosen for this purpose.”* After this first recourse, KA turned to another marabout who prescribed another ritual, a mystical reinforcement: *“I had to get naked and walk around the market at a late hour of the night and then go and bury live chickens in the city dumps”.*

Despite this second reinforcement, KA contacted a fetishist living in Burkina-Faso. Accompanied by two of his friends, Mr. KA went to the latter’s house, whose fetishes were reputed to increase the favor of “clients” and success in various fields. To acquire one of these fearsome fetishes called “Agbaladai”, KA says he paid 130,000 Frcs (199 euros), a goat to which he added a photo, an under-body belonging to his father and a loincloth and photo of his mother.

According to KA, Agbaladai worship rituals involved the weekly immolation of a dog and the sacrifice of a toad. The mystical practices concerning this fetish took place every Saturday from 2 am. The final condition was to be naked during the ceremony and to have photos of his “clients”, in reality his victims. Once these conditions had been met, the ceremony actually took place in two phases, according to KA. In the first phase, he asserts: *“I take the dog that I immolate and pour its blood over the photos of my victims. I then take the toad and place it on the fetish, accompanied by incantations learned from the fetishist”.*

After these sacrificial rituals, in the second phase according to KA: *“I continue to mumble these incantations and stay awake without closing my eyes until morning.”* After the story of Agbaladai’s worship rituals, KA told us that he felt great fear. This fear was fuelled by two situations. The first was the sudden death of his

childhood friend, who had introduced him to cyber-scams and occult practices. On this subject he says: *“I lost a friend with whom I went to take ‘Agbaladai’ in Burkina-Faso. He died in a violent car accident in March 2022 after a night of partying in a nightclub. I think he violated some of the fetish’s rules and the disgruntled fetish killed him.”*

Still in contact with the fetishist, Mr. KA, after the sudden death of his friend, expressed the need to return “Agbaladai” to his master. In exchanges with his fetishist, according to KA, the latter made him understand that he could not return the fetish, as soon as he took the initiative to do so, he would die on the way before reaching Burkina-Faso. *“Agbaladai has become your wife, you can’t separate yourself from her”*, the fetishist added. In addition to these two situations, the fear felt by KA was also amplified following the cessation of weekly sacrifices dedicated to “Agbaladai”, due to the two months of detoxification and resocialization he underwent. In an interview, KA said: *“I’m scared, I think I’m going to die like my friend, because I’ve stopped doing the sacrificial rituals dedicated to ‘Agbaladai’. I have nightmares that my mother and I are in mortal danger”*.

3.3. Psychoactive Substances Used by KA

KA was seen by the care team for the first time for his heroin and cocaine use and the risks associated with their use. Initiated three years ago by the same childhood friends who introduced him to cyber-scams, KA is in fact a multi-consumer. He regularly uses cannabis, alcohol, psychotropic drugs, heroin and cocaine. However, he says he mainly uses heroin and cocaine. The routes of administration for these substances were: oral (cannabis), injectable/intravenous (heroin), snifer (cocaine). Consuming heroin and cocaine on a daily basis, the main risk behavior was the administration of heroin. A heroin addict, KA injected his own doses after buying them from his suppliers. In his own words: *“I started injecting heroin into my arms, but one day it went wrong and I had to resort to a surgical operation that I still remember”* (See **Figures 1-3**).



Figure 1. Injection site scar.



Figure 2. Type of syringe used by KA. Source: photos taken during interviews.



Figure 3. Buttock injection points. Source: photos taken during interviews.

After this incident, and being addicted to heroin, KA changed his injection area. He said: “*I now inject on my buttocks. I use the same syringe six to seven times a day for my daily doses*”. This administration of heroin to the buttocks was also risky, as it left after-effects in the area (see **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**).

The risks associated with this new injection area are considerable. As he is not a health care worker, KA’s self-injection could one day result in sciatic nerve damage through mishandling. On the subject of his addictive behaviors, KA says: “*I got into cyber-scams in order to fulfill myself and be an entrepreneur, but I find that everything I earn goes into buying drugs. I know it, but I can’t do without them. Half a gram of cocaine costs me 15,000 francs, and when I have the money, I take that dose four or five times a day. When I don’t have enough money, I fall back on cannabis and certain psychotropic drugs.*” In the last interview we had with KA, he said: “*The grazing led me into zamou and drug use, and at the moment I’m doing everything I can to stop, but it’s difficult for me*”. After two months of withdrawal, at the last telephone contact, he said he felt a strong desire to return to his cyber-scramming activity and the other behaviours that accompanied it.

4. Discussion

The results of the study showed that poverty and peer imitation were the main

reasons why KA turned to cybercrime. An analysis of KA's comments reveals that his socio-economic situation is an incriminating factor in his deviation into cybercrime. Indeed, these authors emphasized that among the factors explaining the phenomenon of cybercrime, there were socio-economic factors that included poverty, lack of employment and the high cost of living [7].

Mr. KA deliberately stopped his studies in the second grade as soon as he was introduced to cybercrime. The cybercriminal activity took precedence over their study. KA says he spends 15 hours a day on the Internet, *i.e.*, 105 hours a week on his "grazing" activities. This result is higher than that obtained in Shapira's study of twenty "Internet addicts" who spent twenty-eight hours a week online [8].

It was also noted that, after two months off the Net, during a final interview, KA claimed to have a strong desire to return to his computer and connect to his clients. The content analysis of this statement, combined with the 105 hours of Internet use, are suggestive of the criteria adopted by Golberg [9], which led to the diagnosis of Internet addiction in our study. The primary consequence of KA's involvement in cyber-scams was that he stopped going to school, developed a cyberaddiction with a minimum daily connection time of 15 hours, and developed an Internet withdrawal syndrome. On this subject, Michael O'Reilly in Canada and Kimberly Young in the United States have noted that the negative consequences of Internet addiction concern emotional life, which is neglected in favor of the relationship with the computer; family life; work and financial situation [10] [11].

This is probably a case of secondary internetomania, as described by Lejoyeux M. *et al.* Primary internetomaniacs have an affectionate, even passionate relationship with their computer. Other Internet addicts, known as "secondary" addicts, see the connection as a means of fulfilling another behavioral addiction (...). They are not fascinated by technology, computers or the virtual world for its own sake [12].

One aspect of the work highlighted that to sustain and prosper in these cybercriminal activities, KA has turned to occult practices by enlisting the services of marabouts, fetishists and others. This reality, which is intrinsic to the Ivorian cybercriminal milieu, was evoked in the study by Koua [2]. On this subject, these authors asserted that Ivorian cyber crooks are reputed to frequently resort to occult practices and rites to, in their view, optimize their gains. To this end, they consult fetishists, marabouts, voodoo priests and other mediums. This practice, known as "zamou" in Ivorian cybercriminal jargon, has two main dimensions, according to a study by K. P. Konan, *et al.* [13]. According to these researchers, these two dimensions depended on the goal pursued and the nature of the objects or supports used to perform the rituals. At KA, these were: canaries for washing, chickens for burying, dogs for immolating, toads for sacrificing and photos of the victims (customers). Analysis of the objects and sacrificial rituals linked to the occult practices performed by KA, fall within the first dimension of "zamou", whose main aims are to bewitch the client in order to extract money without any resistance, and to obtain protection and supernatural favor [13].

As for occult practices, KA enlisted the services of a fetish called “Agbaladai”. Renowned for its ability to increase favor and success in various fields, the rituals of fetish worship were restrictive. Added to these constraints was the sudden death of his childhood friend, who had introduced him to cyber-scams and occult practices. These two factors generate anxiety. This anxiety is amplified by two other factors: the cessation of weekly sacrifices to the fetish and the impossibility of returning it to Burkina-Faso.

KA’s involvement in cyber-scams has also led to his involvement in the use of psychoactive substances. A multi-substance user, KA uses cannabis, alcohol, psychotropic drugs, heroin and cocaine. However, he says he mainly uses heroin and cocaine on a regular basis. KA has therefore become dependent on these two psychoactive substances. Unlike the five cybercrooks presenting with a picture of cannabis psychosis in the study by Koua *et al.* [2] in the present study, the respondent had an addiction to heroin and cocaine. On the subject of his addiction to psychoactive substances KA had this to say: *“I got into cyber-scamming for self-fulfilment and enterprise, but I find that everything I earn, buying drugs sucks up most of it. I know it, but I can’t do without them. Half a gram of cocaine costs me 15,000 francs, and when I have the money, I take it four or five times a day. When I don’t have enough money, I fall back on cannabis and certain psychotropic drugs”*. Interviews with Mr. KA revealed the existence of certain risky behaviours in his drug use. On this subject, he said: *“I started injecting heroin in my arms, but one day it went wrong and I had to have a surgical operation, which I still remember. I now inject on my buttocks. I use the same syringe six or seven times a day for my daily doses”*. Sharing and reusing preparation and consumption materials (water, filter, spoon, syringe, disinfectant pad, tourniquet, straw...) exposes us to infectious risks. Fungi, bacteria and viruses can be transmitted by these tools. This is why harm reduction policies are an effective alternative for preventing infections among drug users in general, and injection drug users in particular. Moving away from an idealistic and moral stance promoting non-use alone, these new, more realistic and humanist practices share a common desire to develop, support and encourage everyone’s power to act. They make room for concepts such as controlled use and safer use.

5. Conclusion

The synthesis of the different aspects of our results shows an interweaving of psychopathological entities, namely cybercrime, cyberaddiction, addiction to psychoactive substances and mental disorders, against a backdrop of mystico-cultural practices and interpretations in KA. After two months of withdrawal, in the last interview we had with him, he said: *“The grazing led me into zamou and drug use, and now I’m doing everything I can to stop, but it’s difficult for me”*. This statement reflects the real turmoil in which KA finds himself.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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