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THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION
Transparency and accountability online



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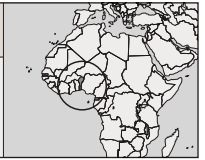
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BENIN

THE INTERNET CRIME BOOM IN BENIN: WHERE SORCERY AND THE “KINNINSSI” FETISH GET INVOLVED



CréACTION BENIN

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Introduction

Corruption begins at home. The corruption of our leaders reflects a wider moral corruption in society. This report looks at the phenomenon of internet crime in Benin – which is proving an attractive and lucrative outlet for the country’s wayward youth.

The internet has a huge impact on populations in Third World countries. The number of users has risen at an unprecedented rate, due to the countless advantages to be had from the use of the internet. In 1999, we could count over 300 million active “internauts” on the global network. Today, the number of people using this tool far exceeds one billion.

Unfortunately, as some people assert, “Not all we find on the internet is good.” Some people would talk about paedophilia, prostitution and internet crime. The naivety of some internet users has facilitated a new outbreak of internet criminals multiplying their frame-ups without being worried, largely because of the non-existence of an adequate legislative and regulatory environment. Opportunities, everything starts with opportunities. All is due to opportunities. “Opportunities” is the magic word that catalyses the crime. Trying to seize opportunities, people get trapped. They are deprived of all their possessions – sometimes, they claim, under the influence of evil spirits.

Benin, the country of the “Vodun” religion, of sorcery and of the occult, has become a hotbed for internet crime since 2005 – usually the result of student graduates. They can be found crouched in internet cafés, exploring new strategies and ruses. They constantly look for the next victims to swindle using social networks such as hi5, Facebook, Twitter and Netlog. Some even say they use magic: the “Kinninssi” fetish, a formidable Vodun fetish, and sorcery. These phenomena are far from things of the past in Benin: people complain about them every day at the Financial and Economic Brigade (BEF) and to Interpol.

This report tells the story of four young Beninese victims of internet crime. We argue that this is a symptom of rampant corruption in society – a result of a lack of leadership and strong parenting.

A brief, broad outline of the legislative and regulatory framework for the fight against internet crime in Benin

Benin has long functioned on an old criminal code; that is to say, the French Code introduced in the French colonies of western Africa by the decree of 6 May 1877. Unfortunately, this does not cover online criminal activities.

The Council of Europe convention on cyber crime, which came into effect on 1 July 2004, is today the only international treaty which acts as a landmark for any state willing to develop national legislation against internet crime. In view of the extent of the phenomenon, in 2009 the Beninese government, through the Secretariat of the Interior, drafted decree No. 200/MISP/DC/SGM/DGPN/SERCT/DER/SA related to the creation of a division in charge of the fight against internet crime. This decree stipulates that victims of internet crime can approach Interpol or the BEF with their complaints.

However, generally, the legal arsenal devoted to the fight against internet crime is poor in Benin. The only existing law is “the law related to the fight against corruption and other similar infringements in the Republic of Benin” passed by the Beninese legislature on 30 August 2011. This law fills the legal void that has existed when it comes to financial and economic crimes, including money laundering and corruption.

The storyline to a pathetic movie – what a lot of victims!

Two million CFA francs. That is the amount collected by four young Beninese (Yasmine, Erick, Doltaire and Rosemonde) in order to travel to Canada with a view to taking part in a training seminar on development issues. At the beginning, a huge number of emails were exchanged. The schedule of the meeting, the itinerary of the trip to Canada, even the hotel reservations, everything was known in advance by our four young friends. The information they were being given confirmed that everything was going well.

Beforehand, Joseph, a friend of Erick’s, was already whispering to the latter that there are different forms of swindles on internet. “You should be careful Erick; I hope you’re not doing ‘Gay’!”

Joseph didn't listen to his friend and carried on with searching for the funds required by the individual arranging the travel – an internet criminal. Some of their parents were even persuaded to support them financially so that they could afford the attendance fees to the seminar. They were supposed to be given the tickets after they had sent the money. One week before the trip, no more signs, no more emails, no more calls as before, and everything was muddled. They were never going to take part in the seminar. They understood this too late. Despair! Destroyed ambition! They just got ripped off on the internet. Wasn't heaven with them?

Anyway, God took sides: he chose to be with the "Gay men". Those hustler networks, those internet criminals, they are very well organised. They just robbed four naive, credulous young people who believed in their luck! They got tripped like thousands of other victims who thought they were seizing opportunities on the internet. These "offers" are either diverse sales offers (vehicles, household appliances, animals, metals), or loan opportunities (even donations) publicised on specialised websites and offering very advantageous conditions; or they can be invitations to seminars, direct commercial promotions to customers, introductions to networks of pornographic photos and fictitious marriage promises, the fraudulent sale of flight tickets, the delivery of forged diplomas, or the purchase of raw materials for fictitious pharmaceutical factories. The criminals have even succeeded in selling some of the most coveted public places in the economic capital of Benin, such as the historical landmark Étoile Rouge, the symbol of the Marxist-Leninist era in Benin, or the Sun Beach Hotel, a really comfortable hotel, which was subject to a fraudulent transaction on internet.

"Six hundred cases had been recorded in 2006 in Benin at the end of our survey. From 2007 to 2011, many hundreds of internet crime cases were subject to proceedings by the BEF. At least two or three cases per day," said the commissary Dieudonné Dadjo.

The last unimaginable case perpetrated by the "Gay men" in the week starting 20 May was the abduction of an American in Benin. During the press conference organised by the national police services, the American, taken hostage and discovered by the public security forces, has been a victim of the internet criminals' operations. The abductors led him into a trap with a view to getting money out of his family. It was the first time such an operation was carried out in Benin. The technique used by these forgers worked well, since the American was kidnapped. But they harvested nothing because of the involvement of US and Beninese secret services.

Nicknamed 419 scams in Nigeria, the internet criminals are known as "Gay men" in Benin. They appeared in Benin in the mid-2000s, and the phenomenon has expanded like lightning. For a long time the scams were operated by Nigerian people in Benin. But this activity quickly engendered new recruits, mostly student drop-outs. The only aim is "to pay back the Northern countries for the historical debt they owe to the Southern countries," they said. Young people, aged from 15 to 35, attacked the cyber centres, buying a frightening number of browsing hours. "It's a well-paid job," they usually say. The computers are occupied all day long, preventing other people from working. This causes some grumbles or some disputes with the powerless cyber centre managers. This rabble of thieves – very arrogant, proud and impolite – own wonderful villas, luxurious houses that catch the attention and the admiration of the Beninese. They drive nice, top-of-the-line cars and own shops placed here and there in Cotonou city.

Internet: When sorcery and the "Kinninssi" fetish get involved

Sorcery finally got involved in this huge swindle operation led by these young people. Neglected by their parents, they find their way through street education. Fond of the internet and the easy life, they invest in internet crime activities using every occult or evil mechanism or process to affect their customers. They carry out nocturnal journeys because they are part of lodges or other groups. The sorcery, the "Kinninssi fetish" and other occult practices have become "tools for helping them make decisions," then "tools to facilitate access to wealth." Their only aim is to "swindle to become wealthy." No sentimentalism, no state of mind. It's business. When these young people are questioned, they maintain that the "Kinninssi fetish" helped them get, by any means, what they wanted from an individual. Once targeted, the victims give in to their manoeuvres under the influence of occult forces and diabolical processes, and, bewitched, they send money via Western Union. At night, the "Gay men" control the stars through esoteric rites to muddle the spirituality of the targeted people and to possess their mind. Now they say how difficult it is to use fetishes since these are fed with human blood. Fatal accidents on the road and tragic deaths are often caused so the fetish can be fed with human blood. Sometimes, the difficulty in finding human blood for the fetish becomes the cause of "tragic deaths by accident" among "Gay men" themselves.

Analysis

The development of information and communications technologies (ICTs) has facilitated many negative behaviours amongst young people. The globalisation of the economy and resources has driven the world into a situation where values have disappeared and been replaced by a world with jungle law: “The strongest will always dominate the weakest.” This system perpetuates and generates frustrations among young people. “We are going to get our revenge on those colonisers who have been treating us roughly for centuries.” This message is strong, and supports the aim that the “Gay men” have given themselves – even though the irony that many of their victims are Africans escapes them.

The economic crisis and the impoverishment of Southern countries have facilitated the rise of juvenile delinquency. In Benin, the indicators are critical. The socioeconomic environment is characterised by a weak human development level with a Human Development Index score of 0.42%. Benin is ranked 158th out of 173 developing countries; 67% of the rural population and 55% of the urban population is considered as poor and vulnerable to poverty. The illiteracy rate is estimated at 67.4% overall, and 78.1% for women.

The state is resigned. Society, being an accessory, is also resigned and powerless. Before, in the socio-cultural communities, when a child stole something, other parents or members of the community could inflict a punishment before his parents came. Why? Because by doing this, the child made his family ashamed, and even the whole community. This age is bygone. Today, when you misappropriate millions or billions, you are congratulated, applauded.

All this is followed by the resignation of parents facing the education of their children. This incompetence sustained by the complicity of the parents has facilitated delinquency, corruption, theft and internet crime. The society has no values apart from those created by the youth. Obviously, the politicians and businessmen have shown their weaknesses, and the internet criminals resemble them. The politician misappropriates billions of CFA francs. The investigation committees that are created are nothing else but farces to legitimise the impunity. The youth, without any solid landmarks, face the damaging of human values, and give themselves other chances to survive thanks to the business on the internet. Business! Oh yes!! And they are busy with it, those abandoned children.

What do they actually gain with the sorcery, with the “Kinninssi” fetish, if they must die with lifeless

bodies on the roads and the highways? What do they gain with those luxury cars, those villas that they finally abandon, lying down in their caskets and saying goodbye to life? It’s not their fault. It’s the way the world is going.

Beyond the legislative and regulatory environment, developing countries such as Benin don’t have effective means to fight against this phenomenon. The efforts that are made are just proportional to the existing means. Yet, according to the saying, “desperate times call for desperate measures.” The public powers, which drain public savings, should develop mechanisms and strategies to bring an end to internet crime. The maintenance of a good business climate in Benin among traders is at least some guarantee for the safety of online activities and, above all, for a good brand image of the country at the international level.

Conclusion

We have explained the problem. As far as we are concerned, our role is not to moralise. Our role is to sensitise users so that they can become aware of the phenomenon that is internet crime.

The youth have to take charge of themselves in another way, taking up the challenges they are facing. And the state has the obligation to accompany the education of these young people by offering them suitable environments for their growth – because no one is wicked voluntarily. Beninese youth have to draw from the country’s psychological, emotional, mental and spiritual resources to find the right answers to their concerns. Development is not just a word. It’s planning, strategy – it’s work.

Action steps

We recommend the following:

At the state level

- The state has to improve the legislative and regulatory environment that fights against corruption, internet crime and other similar infringements.
- The authorities have to help disband the internet criminals in the cyber cafés through persuasion and dissuasion.
- The Beninese state has to create a suitable environment by protecting its citizens against internet abuses.
- The state has to sign bilateral and multilateral partnerships with other states to develop cross-border policies on internet crime.

At the level of parents

- Parents have to assume their parental duties to educate their children.
- They have to be more engaged in their children's lives, and informed about their activities.
- Some parents have to stop desecrating cultural heritage. This is necessary for the growing society to be a society of justice that respects values and contributes to the development of the human being.

At the level of children

- Children have to understand that they are the future of the nation and they have to work to take up the challenges that are waiting for them, including corruption and unemployment.
- They have to work at school so as to be role models for society.
- ICTs facilitate communication, and so, life. They have to draw from these tools all the applications that can guarantee them their financial independence and their future. ■