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## WEST AFRICA'S INTERNATIONAL DRUG TRADE

STEPHEN ELLIS

### ABSTRACT

Since the publication in 2007 of a report on West Africa's role in the illegal cocaine trade from Latin America to Europe, considerable media attention has focused on Guinea-Bissau in particular as a country infiltrated by drug interests. However, West Africa has a long history of involvement in the international drug trade, that has been dominated by Nigerian interests especially. Consideration of this history may help stimulate a debate in historical sociology that will illuminate both the nature of involvement in the drug trade itself, and also larger questions about the long-term formation of the state.

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A REPORT PUBLISHED BY THE UNITED NATIONS office on drugs and crime (UNODC) in December 2007 has drawn unprecedented international attention to West Africa's role as an intermediary in the cocaine trade between Latin America and Europe.<sup>1</sup> Major newspapers have carried full-page articles on the subject.<sup>2</sup> But law-enforcement officers have long been aware of the reach of West African drug-trading networks, and the UNODC and other official bodies have for some years been observing a sharp rise in cocaine exports from Latin America to West Africa. The roots of the current collaboration between drug traders in these two sub-continent in fact go back for more than a decade, as this article will demonstrate.

According to the UNODC's estimate, about a quarter of Europe's annual consumption of 135 to 145 tonnes of cocaine,<sup>3</sup> with a wholesale value of

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1. UNODC, *Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa: The threat to stability and development* (UNODC, Vienna, 2007), <[http://www.UNODC.org/documents/data-and-analysis/west\\_africa\\_cocaine\\_report\\_2007-12\\_en.pdf](http://www.UNODC.org/documents/data-and-analysis/west_africa_cocaine_report_2007-12_en.pdf)> (31 January 2008).

2. For example: *NRC Handelsblad* (Rotterdam), 4 August 2008; *Financial Times*, 4 November 2008.

3. UNODC, *Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa*, p. 8.

some \$1.8 billion,<sup>4</sup> currently transits via West Africa. In addition to the cocaine trade, West Africa is also a transit point for much smaller quantities of heroin exported from Asia to North America, as well as being a producer and exporter of cannabis products and perhaps amphetamines.

Needless to say, this trade is entirely illegal, and yet the proceeds are so great as to have a considerable impact on West African economies.

A major change in the global cocaine trade is taking place. South American cocaine traders are reacting against the saturation of the North American market, the growing importance of Mexican drug gangs, and effective interdiction along the Caribbean smuggling routes. These factors have induced them to make a strategic shift towards the European market, making use of West Africa's conducive political environment and the existence of well-developed West African smuggling networks. Some leading Latin American cocaine traders are even physically relocating to West Africa<sup>5</sup> and moving a considerable part of their business operations to a more congenial location, just as any multinational company might do in the world of legal business. Most recently, since a coup in Guinea in December 2008, there have been reports<sup>6</sup> of Latin American cocaine traders moving in significant numbers to Conakry, where some relatives of the late President Lansana Conte have an established interest in the cocaine trade. Some observers believe that the next step for Latin American cocaine traders might be to commence large-scale production in West Africa. Some African law-enforcement officers are deeply concerned by the likely effects of the drug trade and drug money on their own societies,<sup>7</sup> and indeed there is evidence that drug money is funding political campaigns and affecting political relations in several West African countries. Diplomats and other international officials worry that some West African countries could develop along similar lines to Mexico,<sup>8</sup> where drug gangs have a symbiotic relationship with political parties and with the state and drug-related violence results in thousands of deaths every year.

Research by the present author shows that Lebanese smugglers were using West Africa as a transit point to transport heroin to the USA as early as 1952.<sup>9</sup> A decade later, Nigerian and Ghanaian smugglers in particular began exporting African-grown marijuana to Europe on a scale large enough to

4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

5. David Blair, 'Special report: West Africa welcomes Latin America's drug barons', *Daily Telegraph*, <[www.telegraph.co.uk/new/worldnews/africaandindianocean/senegal/3456011/S](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/new/worldnews/africaandindianocean/senegal/3456011/S)> (9 December 2008).

6. Gleaned during a visit to Monrovia, 11–14 January 2009.

7. Interview, law-enforcement officer, Accra, 31 August 2008.

8. Interviews, US government officials, Washington DC, 6 June 2008.

9. US National Archives and Records Administration [NARA II], Maryland, RG 84, general records of foreign service posts: records of the consulate-general, Lagos, 1940–63, box 2, 'Smuggling of narcotics'.

attract sustained official attention. By the early 1980s, some had graduated to the global cocaine and heroin business. Since then, successful Nigerian and Ghanaian drug traders have established themselves in most parts of the world, including other West African countries, where they work with local partners in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and elsewhere. Very large shipments of cocaine from South America to West Africa have been recorded for the last ten years. In short, West Africa's role in the international drug trade has historical roots going back for over half a century and has been a matter of significant concern to law-enforcement officers worldwide for decades rather than years. Latin American traders who see some benefit in moving part of their operations to West Africa can find local partners with well-established networks who provide them with safe houses, banking, storage space, and a host of other facilities in return for a suitable financial arrangement or for payment in kind.<sup>10</sup>

Not only is West Africa conveniently situated for trade between South America and Europe, but above all it has a political and social environment that is generally suitable for the drug trade.<sup>11</sup> Smuggling is widely tolerated, law enforcement is fitful and inefficient, and politicians are easily bribed or are even involved in the drug trade themselves. Many officials throughout the region are deeply concerned by the effects of the drug trade, but are often confronted by people and networks more powerful than they, with other priorities. The recent emergence of a sophisticated financial infrastructure in Ghana and Nigeria is a further reason for the enhanced importance of West Africa in global drug trafficking. All of the above draws attention to a point made by Jean-François Bayart and others more than ten years ago,<sup>12</sup> namely that expertise in smuggling, the weakness of law-enforcement agencies, and the official tolerance of, or even participation in, certain types of crime, constitute a form of social and political capital that accumulates over time.

### *The origins of the West African drug trade*

It is sometimes said that West Africa was introduced to the cultivation of cannabis and consumption of the plant's leaves by veterans returning from military service in Asia at the end of the Second World War. Yet a pioneering article published in *African Affairs* in 2005 by the historian Emmanuel Akyeampong<sup>13</sup> pointed out that a small trade in cannabis products from

10. Antonio L. Mazzitelli, 'Transnational organized crime in West Africa: the additional challenge', *International Affairs* 83, 6 (2007), pp. 1075–6.

11. UNODC, *Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa*, pp. 11–16.

12. Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Béatrice Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (James Currey, Oxford, 1999), especially Bayart's Chapter 2.

13. Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong, 'Diaspora and drug trafficking in West Africa: a case study of Ghana', *African Affairs* 104, 416 (2005), pp. 429–47.

West Africa existed in the first half of the twentieth century. In Nigeria, later to emerge as the hub of West Africa's illicit drugs trade, the colonial authorities in 1934 were experimenting with the cultivation of the coca plant in the botanical gardens in Calabar and at various other stations in the south of the country.<sup>14</sup> By the mid-1950s, there were occasional arrests of farmers in south-west Nigeria for growing cannabis,<sup>15</sup> and small quantities of locally grown marijuana were being shipped from the region to Europe and the USA. At the same time, Nigerian marijuana smokers were also buying small amounts imported from South Africa and the Belgian Congo.<sup>16</sup>

The first documented use of West Africa as a staging post for heroin smuggling dates from 1952, when US officials noted that parcels of the drug were being transported by a Lebanese syndicate from Beirut to New York via Kano and Accra, using couriers on commercial airlines.<sup>17</sup> One of those implicated at the Beirut end of the pipeline was reported to be an Italian intelligence officer; it was not clear whether he was operating with the approval of his superiors. The US consul-general in Lagos was told by a Lebanese source, described as 'a competent narcotics and diamond smuggler',<sup>18</sup> that the existing 'heavy dope traffic' from the Near East to the USA via Europe was being diverted to Nigeria 'to an increasing extent' to avoid the attention of law-enforcement officers on the European route.<sup>19</sup> Given the use of West Africa by Lebanese smugglers in more recent times, it is an intriguing question whether there has been a highly discreet narcotics pipeline linking Lebanon and West Africa to the consumer markets of North America and Western Europe in continuous operation for more than fifty years. The presence of a murky official element in the person of an Italian intelligence officer is also of interest, as narcotics smuggling the world over seems to have become intertwined with the work of secret intelligence agencies from an early period.<sup>20</sup>

Generally speaking, however, the roots of West Africa's emergence as a major transit point for a more broadly based trade in illegal drugs may be traced to the 1960s. This was the era of the Beatles, youth rebellion and Swinging London, when a mass market for illicit drugs was developing in

14. National Archives, Ibadan, Oyo Prof 1/1321: correspondence concerning coca cultivation.

15. National Archives, Ibadan, Ekiti Div 1/1, 1085, Indian hemp: circular from Acting Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Local Government, Western Region, 7 December 1954.

16. NARA II, RG 84, records of the consulate-general, Lagos, 1940-63, box 2, 'Smuggling of narcotics': Erwin P. Keeler to Department of State, 3 February 1954.

17. *Ibid.*: Erwin P. Keeler to Department of State, 4 December 1952.

18. *Ibid.*: memorandum for Mr Ross, 21 August 1952, attached to Robert W. Ross to Department of State, 28 August 1952.

19. *Ibid.*: Erwin P. Keeler to Department of State, 4 December 1952.

20. Cf. Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade* (Lawrence Hill Books, New York, 1991).

the United Kingdom and some other parts of Europe. Marijuana was particularly fashionable. It was in this context that the first reports emerged of locally grown cannabis being exported from Nigeria to Europe in significant quantities. In 1966, Nigeria's first military government took this problem seriously enough to decree ten-year jail terms for persons found guilty of exporting cannabis, although it is not clear that anyone was actually convicted under the terms of this legislation. In 1971, Nigeria's Federal Commissioner for Health, Dr J. O. J. Okezie, described marijuana smuggling from Nigeria and other African countries as 'rampant'.<sup>21</sup> By the end of the decade, a Nigerian Federal Ministry of Information official claimed that drug smuggling had become so common that 'Nigerian travellers are often subjected to rigorous search each time they travel abroad.'<sup>22</sup>

Early West African marijuana traffickers seem to have been mostly individuals travelling by air to the United Kingdom in particular, carrying relatively small quantities of the drug hidden in their personal baggage or in cargo. A Nigerian government information leaflet concerning trade in cannabis 'across the border and overseas' claimed that some smugglers made use of unwitting couriers by persuading innocent passengers to carry parcels on their behalf, not revealing the true contents of the packages.<sup>23</sup> Significantly, among Nigerians arrested for smuggling cannabis in 1972 were pilgrims travelling to Saudi Arabia for the *hajj*.<sup>24</sup> This is important for the light it throws on an aspect of Nigerian drug trafficking that appears to be almost completely unresearched, as most reports on West African drug traders over the last forty years, whether by law-enforcement agencies or emanating from other sources, have concerned the supply of consumer markets in North America and Western Europe. The West African trade route to these destinations appears to have been largely in the hands of people from southern Nigeria from its inception. It is therefore interesting to note that, in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia already figured prominently on the list of countries where Nigerians had been arrested for drug offences, in third place behind the USA and the United Kingdom.<sup>25</sup> The transport of illegal drugs by Nigerians to the Middle East, including under cover of the *hajj*, is far more likely to involve people of northern Nigerian origin than the North Atlantic trade, given the historic links between northern Nigeria and the Muslim world.

21. Press release number 295, Federal Ministry of Information, Lagos, 22 March 1971, contained in press cuttings file in Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos.

22. 'The cost of war against smuggling', *New Nigerian*, 31 August 1979.

23. 'Avoid Indian Hemp', leaflet c. 1974, in 'Nigeria: drugs, 1979-', press cuttings file in Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos.

24. Umoh James Umoh and Alhaji Nurudeen Adio-Saka, 'The problem of smuggling among pilgrims', *Daily Times*, 13 July 1972. In 1972, 44,061 Nigerians officially went on the *hajj*, the second-largest national contingent after Yemenis.

25. Penny Green, *Drugs, Trafficking and Criminal Policy: The scapegoat strategy* (Waterside Press, Winchester, 1998), p. 46.

A significant case from the early period of West African marijuana trafficking concerns the conviction by a court in the United Kingdom of a 33-year-old Nigerian woman, Iyabo Olorunkoya, found guilty in 1974 of importing 78 kilograms of marijuana. The woman, said to be well-connected in Lagos high society, named as her accomplices two Nigerian army officers.<sup>26</sup> One of the two was Brigadier Benjamin Adekunle, known to the Nigerian press as 'the Black Scorpion', a hero of the federal army during the Biafra war. He was suspended from duty on account of the case, although his alleged role was not proved.<sup>27</sup> He never resumed his military career.

The smuggling of relatively small quantities of marijuana by individual traders, some of whom may have had connections to senior officials, was the precursor of the narcotics trade that emerged on a much larger scale in the early 1980s. This too appears to have been largely the work of individual Nigerian and Ghanaian traders, who penetrated the international narcotics market with extraordinary speed. They travelled to South America or Asia to buy small quantities of cocaine or heroin that they could carry to West Africa in their personal luggage for onward transmission to the consumer markets of the North Atlantic, or they took up residence in producer countries and recruited couriers to carry the packages for them. They developed the technique of swallowing cocaine and heroin sealed in condoms, soon to become a hallmark of the West African carrying trade. The large-scale involvement of West Africans in the cocaine and heroin trade is often said to have begun when West African students living in Europe and North America failed to receive payments of their study grants.<sup>28</sup> The US Drug Enforcement Administration has claimed that the trade was pioneered by Nigerian naval officers undergoing training in India, who bought heroin at source and sent it back to West Africa with couriers whom they had recruited from among Nigerian students there.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the exact origin, it is certainly the case that, in the early 1980s, there were already individual West Africans – overwhelmingly Nigerians, plus a few Ghanaians – who were settling in the main areas of narcotics supply. Nigerian smugglers were sending heroin by air courier from Pakistan to Nigeria, where it was repackaged and re-exported to the USA.<sup>30</sup> One Pakistani heroin dealer was reported in 1985 as saying that he had made regular sales of heroin to a locally based Nigerian

26. *Sunday Times* (Lagos), 10 March 1974; 'The redeemer is not near', *Daily Sketch* (Lagos), 28 July 1974.

27. National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew: FCO 65/1530: Reuters report, 23 August 1974.

28. 'Organized crime: Nigeria' (paper presented at UNODC workshop on West African organized crime, Dakar, 2–3 April 2004).

29. Mark Shaw, *Crime as Business, Business as Crime: West African criminal networks in southern Africa* (South African Institute of International Affairs, Johannesburg, 2003), p. 11.

30. Statement by US Embassy, Lagos, published in *Daily Times* (Lagos), 10 December 1984, p. 3.

for eight months.<sup>31</sup> There was also a small Nigerian community resident in Bangkok. This early cohort of heroin and cocaine traders was presumably ignorant of the fact that a Lebanese syndicate had been doing something similar a generation previously.

'Prior to 1982', the US embassy in Lagos stated, 'Nigerians played an insignificant role in the marketing of narcotics and dangerous drugs in the United States.'<sup>32</sup> That year, US authorities arrested 21 Nigerians for narcotics offences, with figures rising rapidly thereafter.<sup>33</sup> A similar pattern emerged in Europe, where an official of the West German Interior Ministry reportedly stated in 1983 that Hamburg was importing significant quantities of drugs from West Africa, including one and a half tonnes from Ghana (presumably of marijuana), and that a ship from Nigeria carrying cocaine, heroin, and marijuana had also docked there.<sup>34</sup> A year later, the director of West Germany's customs service, Georg Wolt, stated that Nigeria was one of the top six importers of cocaine to his country.<sup>35</sup> Also in 1983, Thailand witnessed its first known case of a Nigerian convicted of possessing heroin.<sup>36</sup> The great advantage of West African smugglers in the early days of this trade was that European and North American law-enforcement officers were not expecting heroin and cocaine to be imported from West Africa, since it was not a producing area. However, the reputation of Nigeria in particular soon changed, to the extent that, by 1985, British customs agents were said to be systematically searching, and sometimes strip-searching, Nigerians entering the country.<sup>37</sup>

A small market for cocaine soon emerged in Nigeria itself, to the extent that a Nigerian newspaper in 1983 reported the existence of what it called 'a tiny cocaine world' in fashionable Lagos society.<sup>38</sup> In view of this, it is interesting to note persistent reports as early as 1983 that one very senior military officer, married to a high society lady, had developed an active interest in narcotics trafficking.<sup>39</sup> The drug connection was already becoming a factor in Nigerian politics. A coup on 31 December 1983 brought to

31. Rasheed Williams, 'Nigeria, a leading heroin market', *National Concord* (Lagos), 8 April 1985.

32. Statement by US Embassy, Lagos, published in *Daily Times*, 10 December 1984, p. 3.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Quoted in the *Daily Times*, 26 November 1984.

35. Quoted in '... and its Nigerian connection', *Guardian* (Lagos), 30 December 1984.

36. According to the newsletter *Drug Force*, the official publication of the Nigerian Drug Law Enforcement Agency, quoted in *Daily Champion* (Lagos), 9 May 1993.

37. '2,000 Nigerians in foreign jails for drug offences', *New Nigerian*, 13 May 1988.

38. The *Guardian* (Lagos) carried a series of reports on this matter in May and June 1983. See also Axel Klein, 'Trapped in the traffick: growing problems of drug consumption in Lagos', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 32, 4 (1994), pp. 657-77.

39. Address by Alain Labrousse, director of Observatoire Géopolitique des Drogues, Bordeaux, 28 April 1994; interviews, US law-enforcement officer, Bangkok, 16 May 2005, and former Liberian presidential aide, Amsterdam, 4 November 2004.



power the austere General Muhammadu Buhari, who justified his assumption of power, in the customary manner, with the claim that he was going to clean up corruption in Nigeria with military rigour. Within months, the new military junta introduced a decree making drug trafficking punishable by death, and by the end of 1984 a number of minor drug smugglers had been publicly executed by firing squad in Lagos. In general, the reaction of the Nigerian public was not favourable to the severe penalties decreed by General Buhari's military government. Those West Africans who had heard of cocaine and heroin at all appear to have regarded them as luxury products that were consumed in the rich world. In Nigeria at least, little social stigma was attached to people who simply transported them from one part of the world to another in an effort to earn a living. To this day, Nigerians often say that, since the drug trade involves willing sellers and willing buyers at every stage of the chain, it is essentially a legitimate form of commerce. As for the fact that it is illegal, Nigerian drug dealers often 'view the black market as the only way to redistribute wealth from the north to the south, arguing that mainstream commercial channels are effectively occupied'.<sup>40</sup>

The 1980s were years of rapid economic decline in West Africa, including in Nigeria, the region's only major oil producer at that time, where problems were compounded by the corruption and incompetence of the civilian government in office from 1979 to 1983. Most West African countries, in financial difficulties as a result of the global convulsions of the period and their own profligacy in earlier, more favourable times, were obliged to borrow money from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and to undergo the process of economic liberalization known as structural adjustment. This required deep cuts in public expenditure and the sacking of public employees. Whether imposed by the international financial institutions or from domestic necessity, drastic reductions in public budgets plunged many people into acute financial difficulty, and this was undoubtedly an incentive to some to make money by any means possible. Those who went abroad in search of new sources of income tended not to be the poorest members of society – generally people from rural areas or without education – but rather those who had lived in towns and, being relatively well educated, spoke good English and were familiar with the workings of state bureaucracies. 'Let us call a spade a spade,' said Nuhu Ribadu, Nigeria's later top anti-corruption official, referring to his country's Second Republic of 1979–83. 'This is the period when we started hearing about

40. Mark Shaw, 'The political economy of crime and conflict in sub-Saharan Africa', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 8, 2 (2001), p. 66.

419,<sup>41</sup> it is the period we started having drug problems.'<sup>42</sup> It was indeed a critical moment in West Africa's insertion into global patterns of crime, even if Nigeria in particular had developed a role in the international marijuana trade well before the financial crisis of the early 1980s.

While General Buhari's decree of the death penalty for drug trafficking was regarded by many Nigerians as too severe, his campaign against crime and corruption seriously threatened the interests of some in the military, including the small group with interests in the drug trade. Another coup in August 1985 introduced a less stringent regime. The new head of state, General Ibrahim Babangida, revoked the death penalty as a punishment for drug trafficking and replaced it with life imprisonment. His period in government is recognized as having marked a transformation in Nigeria's already notorious corruption, turning it into a generalized instrument of government. '[D]irect disbursements and administrative favours were increasingly supplanted by politically-influenced arbitrage in a variety of domestic markets', according to one analysis, in a process more simply described as 'Zairianization'.<sup>43</sup> Nigeria became more than ever a literal kleptocracy, a system of government by theft and bribery. The word 'kleptocracy' had been invented some years earlier by the brilliant Anglo-Polish sociologist Stanislaw Andreski, who taught for some years at a Nigerian university.<sup>44</sup>

Among the many scandals of the Babangida years was the murder by parcel-bomb of the newspaper editor Dele Giwa. It is widely believed in Nigeria that Giwa's death was connected to his investigations into elite drug trading. Specifically, he is said to have been targeted as a result of an interview he had conducted with a former drug courier, one Gloria Okon, who had worked for principals in very senior positions of the state bureaucracy or for their families. Years later, when Nigeria staged its own truth commission, one of the country's leading human rights lawyers and one of its most senior journalists jointly petitioned the members of the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission, popularly called the 'Oputa Panel', requesting this body to charge General Babangida and others with murder.<sup>45</sup> It was also during the Babangida period that the Bank of Credit and Commerce

41. A reference to the notorious Four One Nine advance fee fraud. See Daniel Jordan Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday deception and popular discontent in Nigeria* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2007), especially Chapter 1.

42. Speech on 19 January 2006, reported in *Punch* (Lagos), 20 January 2006.

43. Peter Lewis, 'From prebendalism to predation: the political economy of decline in Nigeria', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 34, 1 (1996), p. 97. The reference to 'Zairianisation' is on p. 80.

44. Stanislaw Andreski, *The African Predicament: A study in the pathology of modernisation* (Michael Joseph, London, 1968). A definition of 'kleptocracy' is on p. 109.

45. See the unofficial version of the Oputa Panel report released on 1 January 2005 by the National Democratic Movement (Washington, DC), Vol. 4, p. 104, <<http://www.dawodu.com/oputa1.htm>> (24 November 2008). Further information is in Richard Akinola (ed.), *The Murder of Dele Giwa: Cover-up – revelations* (Human Rights Publications, Lagos, 2001).

International, which had arrived in Nigeria in 1979, became integrated into a practice of financial corruption and money laundering that was 'systemic and endemic'.<sup>46</sup> The chairman of BCCI (Nigeria) Ltd was Ibrahim Dasuki, one of General Babangida's closest associates, whom the head of state later appointed as Sultan of Sokoto. By the end of 1987, BCCI had no less than 33 branches in Nigeria.<sup>47</sup> When BCCI subsequently collapsed, in what was then the world's biggest-ever bank failure, the full extent of its criminal dealings became known.

In the general atmosphere of corruption and manipulation that characterized General Babangida's years as head of state, from 1985 to 1993, the country's role in the global narcotics trade grew. Nigeria was home to what a US government official called 'a vast commercial sector, immune to most regulations and well suited to illegal activities'.<sup>48</sup> When the head of the Ghanaian drug police visited Bangkok in 1986, he found 'a lot of Ghanaians and Nigerians' in prison for drug offences.<sup>49</sup> By 1988, some 2,000 Nigerians were reported to be serving sentences for drug offences abroad.<sup>50</sup> US authorities reportedly arrested 851 Nigerians for drug offences between 1984 and 1989, and reckoned that 55 percent of the heroin arriving at New York's John F. Kennedy airport was being carried by Nigerians.<sup>51</sup> In 1991, Nigeria's own Ministry of Justice reported that 15,433 Nigerians had been arrested worldwide for drug offences since 1984.<sup>52</sup> Of these, 4,802 had been convicted.<sup>53</sup> According to a statement attributed to the deputy director-general of the Ministry of External Affairs, Nigerians were the leading nationality arrested for drug offences in India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand.<sup>54</sup>

Nigerian traders showed great ingenuity in switching their smuggling techniques and routes, for example exporting from Thailand overland to Malaysia or by sea to Taiwan or Hong Kong for onward transmission to

46. *The BCCI Affair: A report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate by Senator John Kerry and Senator Hank Brown* (US Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 1993), pp. 99–104. The quotation is on p. 49.

47. Peter Truell and Larry Gurwin, *False Profits: The inside story of BCCI, the world's most corrupt financial empire* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston and New York, 1992), p. 162.

48. United States Information Service (USIS) press release, 2 March 1998, quoted in *Punch*, 5 March 1998.

49. Kofi Bentsum Quantson, *Travelling and Seeing: Johnny just come* (NAPASVIL Ventures, Accra, 2002), p. 67.

50. '2,000 Nigerians in foreign jails for drug offences', *New Nigerian*, 13 May 1988.

51. Jonas Okwara, 'Three Nigerians held weekly in US on drug charges', *Guardian*, 15 July 1990.

52. Jackson Akpasubi, 'US says "no" to Nigeria', *Sunday Concord*, 30 June 1991. Eric Fottorino, *La Piste blanche: L'Afrique sous l'emprise de la drogue* (Balland, Paris, 1991), p. 19, gives the same figure of 15,433 for Nigerians arrested for drug offences between 1979 and 1989.

53. Fottorino, *La Piste blanche*, p. 19.

54. Segun Babatope, 'Drug trafficking: a nation under siege', *National Concord*, 3 February 1992.

Europe and North America.<sup>55</sup> Professional drug traders were constantly adapting and improving their methods. The Nigerians' commercial skills were also attracting the attention of fellow-traffickers from other continents. Scrutiny of arrest figures suggests that the Colombian drug cartels, reacting to the saturation of the US market, had begun seeking relationships with West African traders even by the late 1980s,<sup>56</sup> interested in using the West Africans' highly developed marketing channels as a way of penetrating new areas, notably in Europe. Among Nigerians involved in the drug trade were figures of privilege and influence, as became clear in 1989 when a former member of Nigeria's Senate was arrested in New York for heroin trafficking and subsequently convicted. He had previously offered \$20 million of his own money, purportedly as a patriotic gesture, to pay a debt owed by Nigerian Airways that had caused French authorities to impound a Nigerian Airways airbus. Although this scheme did not succeed, his intention had apparently been to use the plane to transport drug cargoes. For some time thereafter Lagos heroin dealers referred to their product as 'senator'.<sup>57</sup> A later member of the upper house of Nigeria's legislature, who had previously held a senior position in the police, once alleged that the Senate was infested with ex-419ers and drug traders.<sup>58</sup> Even the law-enforcement agencies were not immune to the lure of drug money. A head of the Nigerian Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), a unit established in 1990 largely as a concession to US pressure, reportedly stated in 1994 that 'those charged with the responsibility of eliminating drug trafficking are by far more interested in drug trafficking than the professional traffickers'.<sup>59</sup> One of his predecessors had acquired a particular notoriety in this regard.<sup>60</sup>

### *The regional pattern*

Nigeria was not alone. From the late 1970s there were reports of individuals in various West African countries importing narcotics for eventual re-export. Many traffickers appear to have been acting on their own initiative or at any rate without the support of extensive networks. Some powerful external interests also discovered the commercial potential of small West African states that attracted little international attention, and whose authorities could be bought or manipulated. In Sierra Leone, the most prominent members of the commercially powerful Lebanese community in the mid-1980s found themselves under surveillance from Israeli security

55. Nnamdi Obasi, 'Drug trafficking', *Weekend Concord*, 1 June 1991.

56. Green, *Drugs, Trafficking*, p. 48.

57. 'Adegoke's ill-fated deal with skypower', *National Concord*, 30 April 1989.

58. Editorial, *Nigerian Tribune*, 24 March 2006.

59. 'NDLEA stinks – Bamaïyi', *Daily Times*, 18 February 1994.

60. Fottorino, *La Piste blanche*, pp. 57, 60.

officers responding to their role in funding various factions in Lebanon's civil war. They were confronted with a sudden influx of mobsters from the Soviet Union, some of them with connections to Israeli intelligence.<sup>61</sup> The most formidable of the newcomers was Marat Balagula, who later migrated to the USA, where he became a pioneer of Russian mafia influence, serving a prison sentence before being murdered in March 2008. Balagula and his colleagues used Sierra Leone as a freeport facility, smuggling in diamonds from the USSR and swapping them for heroin from Thailand for onward transmission to the USA. They also managed President Joseph Momoh's election campaign.<sup>62</sup>

Trafficking networks with high-level government connections emerged in other countries too. One example involved a group of Ghanaians and a diplomat from Burkina Faso, the latter providing members of the syndicate with diplomatic passports. This team imported heroin from Mumbai to Abidjan for onward transmission to Europe. One of the Ghanaians involved, a certain Emmanuel Boateng Addo, revealed some details of this operation in 1993 after his release from a French prison.<sup>63</sup> The Burkinabe diplomat at the heart of this syndicate was also a close associate of Charles Taylor, subsequently to become president of Liberia. In 1986–7 Taylor was one of several Liberian exiles living in Ghana and plotting against the Liberian government. He was twice detained by the Ghanaian government on political grounds. On the second of these occasions, it was his friend the Burkinabe diplomat who secured Taylor's release from prison.<sup>64</sup> A Ghanaian who shared Taylor's prison-cell in Accra recalled Taylor's opinions on the drug trade:

In one of our numerous, prolonged arguments whilst in cells he was critical about what he called unwarranted vigilance and the arrest of drug traffickers in Ghana. I begged to differ from him but he insisted that the major concern of African governments should be the prevention of domestic consumption of hard drugs. Once people are exporting such drugs from Africa, they should be allowed. He further stressed that we should think of cultivating coca and marijuana in Ghana as major exports. He was particularly peeved about the fact that African governments complain of lack of capital when they have the easy option of granting banking facilities to drug barons who have billions of dollars for laundering.<sup>65</sup>

Charles Taylor achieved his ambition of becoming head of state when he became President of Liberia in 1997. True to his earlier ideas, he proceeded

61. Stephen Ellis, 'Les prolongements du conflit israélo-arabe: le cas du Sierra Leone', *Politique Africaine* 30 (1988), pp. 69–75.

62. Robert I. Friedman, *Red Mafiya: How the Russian mob has invaded America* (Little, Brown, Boston, MA, 2000), pp. 57–8.

63. Akyeampong, 'Diaspora and drug trafficking in West Africa', p. 441.

64. Author's interviews with former aide to President Charles Taylor, 2002–4.

65. Kwesi Yankah and Lazarus D. Maayang, 'Charles Taylor: dark days in Ghana', *Uhuru* (Accra), 3 (1990), p. 40.

to associate with professional criminals from a wide variety of countries.<sup>66</sup> His predecessor, Samuel Doe, had allowed Liberia to be used for drug trafficking, as an earlier government may also have done.<sup>67</sup> Other West African heads of state said by police sources to have been implicated in drug smuggling include the late president of Togo, Gnassingbé Eyadema.<sup>68</sup>

Over the years, West Africa's most prominent traffickers, the Nigerians, developed footholds in many other countries where imported narcotics could be stored and repacked for onward travel. From the early 1990s South Africa became one such base, as it offered the advantages of an excellent transport infrastructure and a good banking system. Before 1990, the drug trade in South Africa was largely confined to mandrax and locally produced marijuana. The South African police, preoccupied by political matters, were extraordinarily inattentive to the risk posed by international traffickers, who flocked to the country from Eastern Europe and from the rest of Africa especially. By 2005, there were between 40,000 and 100,000 Nigerians living in South Africa, as many as 90 percent of them illegally. The drug dealers among them were described as 'the most prolific of the organised crime groups operating in the country'.<sup>69</sup>

Nigerian traders also established operational centres in Cotonou and Abidjan, which were home to Beninese, Ivorian, and other nationals who had entered the narcotics business. In March 1998, the US government described Nigeria as 'the hub of African narcotics trafficking', noting also 'traffickers' expansion into bulk shipments into Nigeria's neighbours'.<sup>70</sup> After Nigeria had dispatched a peacekeeping force to Liberia in 1990, under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), some members of the Nigerian expeditionary force developed interests in the narcotics trade. Their control of Liberia's seaports and of its international airport provided ideal transport facilities. A further attraction was Liberia's use of the US dollar as an official currency.<sup>71</sup> The Nigerian military, in power almost continuously for three decades, had by this time developed a high degree of impunity. In 1998, NDLEA director Musa Bamaiyi complained

66. The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, *Making a Killing: The business of war* (Public Integrity Books, Washington, DC, 2003), especially chapters 7 and 10.

67. Nya Kwiawon Taryor (ed.), *Justice, Justice: A cry of my people* (Strugglers' Community Press, Chicago, IL, 1985), p. 54; phone interview, former aide to Charles Taylor, 4 November 2004.

68. Interview, Ghanaian police officer, Accra, 31 August 2008.

69. *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 1 July 2005. Antony Altbeker, *A Country at War with Itself: South Africa's crisis of crime* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2007), pp. 124–5, argues that South Africans often exaggerate the impact of foreign organized crime in their own country. However, his concern in this passage is to refute any suggestion that South African crime is foreign rather than homegrown.

70. USIS press release, 2 March 1998, quoted in *Punch*, 5 March 1998.

71. Fottorino, *La Piste blanche*, pp. 60–1; see also allegations in *Liberian Diaspora* 3, 12 (1993), p. 4 (to be viewed with caution, as this was a propaganda sheet for Charles Taylor).

that his agents were not allowed to search military barracks, despite the fact that, according to him, 'a lot' of military officers were involved in the drug business. He had sent a list of names of military suspects to the presidency.<sup>72</sup> Bamaïyi, generally well regarded by international law-enforcement agents with whom he collaborated, had himself served in the Nigerian peacekeeping contingent in Liberia.<sup>73</sup> Being also a brother of his country's chief of army staff, he was particularly well placed to make such a judgement about the Nigerian military's involvement in drug trafficking.

Nigerian traders especially were truly global. They took over heroin retailing in Moscow. According to one veteran journalist, 'the Central Asians... were being displaced from 1997 onwards by Africans, especially Nigerians, who have established efficient and well-concealed networks for selling heroin and cocaine in Moscow's student living areas and university residences'.<sup>74</sup> Nigerians were particularly prominent in the North American heroin trade until being displaced in recent years. In 1999, the US Department of Justice said it was looking for two Nigerians who were said to be running a network importing 'up to 80 percent of the white heroin entering the USA from southeast Asia'.<sup>75</sup> This high figure is less noteworthy than might appear at first sight, as the US market for Asian heroin has lost ground to imports from Latin America. In 2002, Dutch customs officers, in a controlled experiment, for a period of ten days searched every Nigerian arriving in Amsterdam from Aruba and the Dutch Antilles, a route used by many of the 1,200 drug couriers arrested annually at Schiphol airport. They found that of the 83 Nigerian passengers using this route during that period, no fewer than 63 were carrying drugs.<sup>76</sup> In the same year, Nigeria's NDLEA arrested two Nigerians and one foreigner with 60 kilograms of cocaine, the agency's largest-ever cocaine find, on board a Brazilian vessel at Tin Can Island wharf in Lagos.<sup>77</sup> Substantial though this haul was, perhaps its chief significance lies in the evidence it presents of direct seaborne transport from Latin America.

There was evidence that knowledge of the drug trade was being passed from one generation to the next. Also in 2002, a twelve-year-old Nigerian boy with US citizenship was reportedly arrested at New York's John F. Kennedy airport with 87 condoms of heroin. He was the son of one Chukwunwieke Umegbolu, who had been convicted in 1995 for his part

72. 'Drug: NDLEA sends officers' names to presidency', *Guardian*, 9 November 1998.

73. See interview with General Bamaïyi in *Sunday Champion*, 20 June 1999.

74. John K. Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and international terrorism* (third edition, Pluto Press, London and Sterling, VA, 2002), p. 143.

75. Laolu Akande, 'Nigeria high on US fraud, drugs list', *Guardian*, 18 August 1999.

76. UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in the West African Region* (New York, NY, 2005), p. 21.

77. Sisca Agboh, 'NDLEA impounds N1b worth of cocaine', *Post Express* (Lagos), 31 August 2002.

in importing more than \$33 million of heroin in a period of more than a decade.<sup>78</sup>

By the mid-1990s, thus, some Nigerian drug traffickers in particular had not only developed the means to invest in bulk shipments of narcotics, but had also become fully global, having business associates in both producing and consuming countries as well as other facilities in countries outside Nigeria. The same was true on a smaller scale of traffickers from other West African countries, notably Ghana. By the same token, non-African traffickers had become interested in the commercial advantages offered by West Africa. Lebanese smugglers, Soviet gangsters, and South American drug syndicates were among a variety of external interests attracted to the region on account of its usefulness as an entrepôt.<sup>79</sup> In 2003, Senegal expelled a senior member of the Sicilian mafia, Giovanni Bonomo, who was subsequently arrested in Italy. A known money launderer and drug trafficker, he was said to have visited South Africa and Namibia regularly.<sup>80</sup>

### *The structure of the Nigerian drug trade*

A senior US anti-drugs official, Robert S. Gelbard, described Nigerian drug networks as 'some of the most sophisticated and finely-tuned transshipment, money-moving and document-forging organizations in the world'. He pointed out that 'they are sought out by both Asian and Latin American drug producers' on account of their commercial skills.<sup>81</sup> The Nigerian drug trade is characterized by a distinctive business structure that has developed over decades, and which gives depth to the emerging cooperation with traders from other countries and continents.

Crucial to the success of Nigerian drug traders is their highly flexible mode of operation, as those involved constantly form and re-form their business relationships from among a wide pool of acquaintances. This *modus operandi* closely resembles a so-called 'adhocracy', able 'to fuse experts drawn from different disciplines into smoothly functioning ad hoc project teams'<sup>82</sup> in a way that, according to some management gurus, is particularly suited to the modern business environment. It stands in contrast to the more corporate-style relations of classic American 'mafias' that have exerted such

78. Laolu Akande, 'Nigerian boy, 12, swallows 87 condom wraps of heroin', *Guardian*, 13 April 2002.

79. UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in the West African Region*, p. 48.

80. 'Italy police arrest mafia suspect', BBC News, 14 November 2003, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3270935.stm>> (24 November 2008).

81. Statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on African Affairs, 20 July 1995, obtained from the US Information Resource Center, US Embassy, The Hague.

82. Henry Mintzberg, *Structure in Fives: Designing effective organizations* (1983; second edition, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1993), p. 254. The term 'adhocracy' was coined by Alvin Toffler in his bestseller *Future Shock* (Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1972).



a powerful influence on popular ideas about how organized crime works via films like *The Godfather* or the TV series *The Sopranos*.

The following paragraphs will briefly describe the classic structure of the Nigerian drug trade, starting at the top of the ladder, so to speak, by considering the category often labelled drug 'barons'. In the words of a senior Nigerian drug law-enforcement officer,<sup>83</sup> a Nigerian drug baron requires at least three assets. First, he, or she, needs to be able to buy drugs cheaply at source. As we have seen, from an early date, there were Nigerians who travelled to producer countries in South America and south-east Asia to buy drugs. In 2003, some 330 Nigerians were said to be serving prison sentences in Thailand for drug-related offences.<sup>84</sup> Hundreds of Nigerians were living in Bangkok, notably in the city's Pratunum district that is home to an African community some 500–800 strong. Many of these are occupied in the textile or jewellery trades, but a significant number are alleged to have interests in crime.<sup>85</sup> There are also substantial Nigerian communities in the south Asian subcontinent, with over 2,000 Nigerians in Mumbai alone.<sup>86</sup> There is even a small Nigerian community in Afghanistan. A drug baron who lives in one of these locations or has stayed there long enough to build excellent local contacts is well placed to buy heroin. Sometimes, a baron who has the wherewithal to buy a large quantity of cocaine or heroin at source may sell this to a syndicate of smaller operators pooling their resources for such a major purchase. In December 1997, John Ikechukwe, a Nigerian who had emigrated to South Africa and become rich working the South American route, was murdered after cheating some fellow-traders in such a scheme. According to the South African police, 28 Nigerians were killed in Johannesburg alone in the first quarter of 1998.<sup>87</sup>

A second requirement for a drug baron is a good contact in the receiving country, generally North America in the case of heroin, or Europe in the case of cocaine. North America and Europe have substantial Nigerian communities, some of the millions of Nigerians who live outside their own country. Even if most of these people live blameless lives, earning their keep in respectable occupations, the existence of this diaspora nevertheless constitutes a medium in which traffickers can move. Many Nigerian drug barons keep a very low profile in order not to attract attention. The third necessity for a drug baron is a substantial supply of capital to finance operations. This poses little problem to anyone who has already made a couple

83. Interview, Lagos, 24 October 2007.

84. '237 Nigerian drug convicts in arrive [sic] today', *Guardian*, 29 March 2003.

85. 'African community at Pratunum, Bangkok' (paper presented by Royal Thai Police, African Criminal Networks conference, Bangkok, 16–19 May 2005).

86. 'Dongri nightlife', *Time Out Mumbai* 2, 24 (July–August 2006), <[http://www.timeoutmumbai.net/mumbailocal/mumbailocal\\_details.asp?code=11&source=1](http://www.timeoutmumbai.net/mumbailocal/mumbailocal_details.asp?code=11&source=1)> (24 November 2008).

87. 'Nigerian drug barons invade South Africa', *Guardian*, 11 April 1998.

of successful transactions. An example is Ekenna O, first arrested in 1995 and sentenced to one year's imprisonment, and rearrested in October 2005. At that point, his assets were over 500 million naira, or \$4.16 million. He owned three properties in Nigeria and several companies.<sup>88</sup>

For purposes of transportation, a drug baron works with a second layer of operators, known as 'strikers'. This word is used in Nigeria in regard not only to the drug trade, but also to a range of other criminal enterprises in which a high degree of logistical expertise is necessary. A striker is someone who can strike deals, quite likely a former courier who has entered the business at the lowest level and worked his way up, acquiring an excellent network of contacts. Many strikers are middle-aged, from their late thirties upwards. A striker knows exactly who is the best person to approach for forged documents or who is an expert packer of drugs. He receives a fee for performing this type of service on behalf of a baron, and will typically work with several such barons while remaining essentially self-employed. One of the striker's most important tasks is the recruitment of couriers, and one of the features of the Nigerian system that makes effective police detection so difficult is that the use of independent specialists provides a vital cut-out between the top level of operation and the humble courier. A courier is normally ignorant of the name, or even the very existence, of the baron who is the real initiator of a drug transaction. If a courier is arrested, he or she therefore cannot be prevailed upon to give vital information to police officers. For this reason, strikers often try to recruit a stranger as a courier, although friends and family may also be approached. A Nigerian striker based in South Africa, for example, may recruit South African nationals, or even better, South Africans with British passports. Gambia is a useful transit point because of the existence of a substantial tourist trade, which makes it easy for a courier to travel with a planeload of tourists, or to recruit a holiday maker and persuade or trick them into acting as a courier. The favourite recruits for strikers based in Nigeria itself are fellow-countrymen who have residence permits for European or North American countries, or Nigerians who possess foreign passports, the more prestigious the better. Having recruited a courier, a striker will stay with the person until the point of departure, a period often between a couple of days and a week, to make sure they do not lose their nerve. In some cases, couriers are escorted to religious oracles during this period to swear an oath. Relatives or home-boys who have been recruited, and made to swear a solemn oath of loyalty, do not easily betray their associates. They can also speak on the phone in 'deep' dialects of African languages, difficult for foreign police services to interpret if the conversations are intercepted.

88. The name has been suppressed for legal reasons. Information obtained from official source, Lagos, 24 October 2007.

The lowest level of transportation is the couriers or mules, mostly people in desperate need of money. Couriers recruited by Nigerian barons, via a striker, usually carry a small parcel of drugs on their person, in return for cash payment. There are also freelancers, individuals who try their luck at buying and smuggling drugs on their own. The 21-year old Iwuchukwu Amara Tochi, who was hanged in Singapore on Friday 26 January 2006 after being caught in possession of 727 grams of diamorphine, was one such unfortunate. He was just eighteen at the time of his arrest. He had gone to Asia in the hope of pursuing a career as a professional footballer, but had been recruited as a courier by a fellow Nigerian for a fee of \$2,000.<sup>89</sup> Of 316 people arrested at Lagos international airport in possession of cocaine or heroin between January 2006 and 5 September 2007, according to a Nigerian police report,<sup>90</sup> no less than 69 percent were so-called 'swallowers', people who had ingested condoms filled with hard drugs. Only 31 percent had packed them in baggage. Of the fifty-five people arrested at the same airport for similar reasons in the third quarter of 2007, most were in their thirties. According to police analysts, this is a vulnerable age because it corresponds to people losing the support of their parents and having to make major life choices. The preferred destination for couriers in recent times is Spain, on account of its relatively lax residence rules. An applicant can get a temporary residence permit after just six months, which makes him or her far less likely to be searched on entry as it is assumed that adequate checks have been made. Thus, between January 2006 and 5 September 2007, out of 273 people arrested in Nigeria on suspicion of exporting drugs, 29 percent were heading for Spain.<sup>91</sup>

Various attempts have been made to profile Nigerian drug traffickers. There is a general consensus among those who have attempted this that the Nigerian narcotics trade is dominated by Igbo people. The Swiss police are reported to have produced a more exact profile, even down to villages of origin, via an analysis of patterns of arrest. Among Igbos themselves, it is sometimes said that most narcotics traffickers come from one particular Local Government Area. Ninety percent of those arrested are male.<sup>92</sup> However, the profiles that are widely used by European, North American and south-east Asian authorities do not appear to include data from the considerable number of Nigerians arrested for drug offences in Saudi Arabia, which may well reveal a different social background.

89. Reuben Abati, 'The hanging of Amara Tochi in Singapore', *Guardian*, 28 January 2006.

90. Nigerian Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), 'An analysis of the drug trafficking issues and trends at the Murtala Muhammed International airport, Ikeja, Lagos (MMIA)' (unpublished paper, 7 pp., September 2007).

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*

The ethnic concentration of Nigerian drug traders is not unusual, as some other illegal trades, as well as many legal ones, are also notable for being dominated by people of just one geographical origin, such as the trade in prostitutes from Nigeria to Europe, which is overwhelmingly in the hands of people from Edo State, just one of Nigeria's 36 states.<sup>93</sup> In many legal businesses too, an individual entrepreneur, when he or she needs assistance, often turns to someone from their home area. This may be someone to whom they are related either closely or more distantly, or it may be someone who has property in the same village of origin, or a former school classmate. Entrepreneurs compete with one another but are also able to cooperate when circumstances require this.<sup>94</sup> Social networks that refer to a village of origin are sustained even when people live in Lagos or further afield, with the village remaining a moral point of reference. It is for this reason, too, that when an important bargain is made, including in regard to commerce or politics, the parties to the deal may swear a solemn oath on a traditional oracle, such as the Okija shrine that gained national attention in Nigeria in 2004.<sup>95</sup>

Igbos themselves often explain their general prominence in trade by reference to the civil war of 1967–70, alleging that they have subsequently had a semi-detached status within Nigeria that obliges them to seek their livelihood outside the ambit of the state. However, the Igbo ethos of enterprise also has older roots, in an area once known both for the productivity of its agriculture and for its role in the Atlantic slave trade. The establishment of colonial government and missionary education in the early twentieth century opened an avenue of economic advancement and social promotion for Igbos, whose political organization was traditionally republican, without powerful chiefs or any aristocratic class. During the past hundred years, the population of Igboland has increased dramatically, and the exhausted soil can no longer support even those who stay behind and farm. Still, it remains the ambition of many Igbo men to make money and buy land and build an impressive house in their home village as a mark of their success. 'Rich cocaine pushers' who hold extravagant parties to celebrate the acquisition of a chieftaincy title are a recognizable social type.<sup>96</sup> According to Nigerian police officers, those Igbos who dominate the drug trade do not normally choose this career in order to become professional criminals in the Western

93. Franco Prina, 'Trade and exploitation of minors and young Nigerian women for prostitution in Italy', 2003, Chapter 1, <[http://www.unicri.it/wwd/trafficking/nigeria/docs/rr\\_prina\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unicri.it/wwd/trafficking/nigeria/docs/rr_prina_eng.pdf)> (24 November 2008).

94. Cf. Kate Meagher, 'Social capital, social liabilities, and political capital: social networks and informal manufacturing in Nigeria', *African Affairs* 105, 421 (2006), pp. 553–82.

95. Stephen Ellis, 'The Okija shrine: death and life in Nigerian politics', *Journal of African History* 49, 3 (2008), pp. 445–66.

96. Joe Igbokwe, *Igbos: 25 years after Biafra* (Advent Communications, no place given, 1995), p. 40.

sense, but primarily as an avenue to wealth and social esteem. Their use of both traditional oracles and Christian rituals is thought to favour the drive to personal achievement and social success.

The employment by Nigerian drug traders of large numbers of couriers carrying small parcels of cocaine or heroin endows them both with a high degree of 'vertical' integration of their marketing channel from purchase to sale, and with the means to penetrate any customs service in the world. However, this method involves a high human cost, and not only in the sense that it supplies drug users who may have their lives ruined or cut short, as the growing numbers of addicts in West Africa testifies. The courier system also carries a high risk of arrest for those who actually transport drugs through customs controls. The number of West Africans sitting in jails all over the world after being arrested in possession of illegal drugs is probably disproportionate to the volume of narcotics seized, in consequence of the human-wave tactics often used by drug barons.

### *The new bulk trade*

The first recorded case of a Nigerian smuggler transporting heroin in bulk is that of Joe Brown Akubueze, who imported some 250 kilograms of heroin from Thailand by sea, packed in water coolers, in December 1993. He was arrested in Nigeria after a tip-off, and sentenced by a court to 115 years in prison, of which he served ten years before being released.<sup>97</sup> In retrospect, this was an early indicator of a move towards very large shipments by air and sea, although the classic Nigerian courier trade still remains as strong as ever. From the late 1990s, there were growing reports of 'very large consignments' of drugs heading to West Africa 'by ship or commercial containers', according to a police officer working for the UN.<sup>98</sup> In 2000, Cape Verdean authorities reported the interception of a ship in the Caribbean heading to their country with 2.3 tonnes of cocaine.<sup>99</sup> In 2003, a massive cargo of 7.5 tonnes of cocaine was intercepted on a ship en route to Spain via Cape Verde and Senegal.<sup>100</sup> In 2004, six people were arrested in the Ghanaian port-city of Tema in possession of 588 kilograms of cocaine from Colombia via Venezuela.<sup>101</sup> This was a particularly notorious case because of the action of a judge who, amazingly, granted bail to the accused, raising suspicions of corruption. In 2006, a boat was intercepted

97. Joe Brown Akubueze v The Federal Republic of Nigeria, 4 March 2003. Available via Toma Micro Publishers Ltd., <<http://www.tomalegalretrieve.org/phplaw/site/index.php>> (23 July 2008).

98. Flemming Quist, 'Drug trafficking in West Africa 2000–2004 in an international perspective' (UNODC workshop on West African organized crime, Dakar, 2–3 April 2004).

99. *Ibid.*

100. *Ibid.*

101. *Ibid.*

heading for the Canary Islands, 80 miles from the coast of Senegal, with 3.7 tonnes of cocaine from Colombia, apparently belonging to a Dutch syndicate and destined for the British market.<sup>102</sup> Major Dutch criminals had long had an interest in Liberia and Sierra Leone, in particular for the trans-shipment of hashish cargoes from Asia.<sup>103</sup> This particular shipment had travelled from Venezuela via the Dutch Antilles. On 31 January 2008, 2.4 tonnes of cocaine were on board the *Blue Atlantic* when it was intercepted by the French navy off the Liberian coast, en route to Nigeria.<sup>104</sup> Cargoes of comparable size have been detected in or close to the offshore waters of Cape Verde, Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Benin.

An authoritative view is that of Antonio Mazzitelli, a senior UN drug law-enforcement officer in West Africa, who sees 2005 as the year in which a major change of scale became visible. He lists the total seizures in West Africa of cocaine as going from 1.2 tonnes in 2005 to 4.3 tonnes in the first seven months of 2007.<sup>105</sup> The UNODC has given higher figures, reporting that the Spanish and British navies seized 9.9 tonnes of cocaine on five ships in international waters off West Africa in 2006, and that 5.7 tonnes were seized in West Africa in the first three quarters of 2007.<sup>106</sup> In June 2007, Venezuelan authorities seized 2.5 tonnes of cocaine on a private plane about to take off for Sierra Leone.<sup>107</sup> None of these sources appears to include a case from 2006, when Nigeria's drug police, the NDLEA, was reported to have seized no less than 14.2 tonnes of cocaine located in a container on a ship, the *MSV Floriana*, berthed at Lagos's Tin Can Island port. According to press reports, the ship had originally come from Peru via the USA and Cameroon. However, several features of this case as reported by the press are puzzling.<sup>108</sup>

By most accounts, the West African country that has become most completely immersed in the drug trade is Guinea-Bissau. A Nigerian drug law-enforcement official has stated that the Bissau-Guinean army cooperates with drug traffickers to the extent of using military premises to stockpile

102. Johan van den Dongen and Bart Olmer, 'Vloedgolf van drugs', *De Telegraaf* (Amsterdam), 26 October 2006.

103. Interview, Dutch judicial officer, Amsterdam, 13 December 2006; cf. Bart Middelburg and Paul Vugts (eds), *De Endstra-Tapes: De integrale gesprekken van Willem Endstra met de Recherche* (Nieuw Amsterdam publishers, Amsterdam, 2006), p. 324, a record of police interviews with a leading figure of the Dutch underworld, the late Willem Endstra.

104. ISN Security Watch, 27 February 2008, <[www.isn.etnz.ch](http://www.isn.etnz.ch)> (28 February 2008).

105. Mazzitelli, 'Transnational organized crime in West Africa', p. 1075.

106. UNODC, 'Cocaine trafficking in western Africa, situation report', October 2007, pp. 3–5, <<http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=UNODC±Situation±Report%E2%80%99%2C±October±2007&btnG=Search>> (24 November 2008).

107. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

108. *This Day*, 10, 13, 15 June 2006.

cocaine awaiting shipment to Europe.<sup>109</sup> The UNODC has recorded private planes flying into a military airstrip.<sup>110</sup> In April 2007, two Colombians, Juan Pablo Rubio Camacho and Luis Fernando Arango Mejia, were arrested in connection with the discovery of a large consignment of cocaine. According to US law-enforcement officers, both men are officials of the FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.<sup>111</sup> (Other sources confirm only one of the two as a member of the Colombian guerrilla force.) Both suspects were released on bail; both subsequently disappeared, and are presumed to be at liberty once more. The former head of Guinea-Bissau's judicial police, Orlando Antonio da Silva, says that he was reprimanded by his boss, the country's Interior Minister, and fired on account of his investigations into this case. The country's Attorney-General has received death threats, and also confirms the army's interest in the drug trade.<sup>112</sup> Political upheavals, infighting between rival security forces, and attempted coups in Guinea-Bissau throughout 2008 testify to the effect of the drug trade on the country's politics.<sup>113</sup>

Guinea-Bissau is not the only country in West Africa where Venezuelan and Colombian traffickers, including even FARC operatives, have taken up residence. Similar reports come from Accra, Conakry, Monrovia, and other capital cities. Throughout the region, the Latin Americans' key local partners are often Nigerian drug traffickers who have longstanding connections in South America, and who are paid for their logistical services with cocaine in lots of up to 200 kilograms. The Nigerians can then use this to operate their traditional courier service to European markets. Thus, in December 2006, 32 cocaine mules travelling from Guinea-Conakry via Morocco were arrested at Amsterdam airport. No fewer than 28 of the 32 were Nigerians.<sup>114</sup> Ghana, often seen by donors as a 'virtuous' state (high growth rate, freedom of speech, and democratic politics), has been extensively penetrated by drug money. According to Ghanaian law-enforcement officers, many of the country's politicians have interests in the drug trade, and some of Accra's impressive building boom is being financed with the proceeds of drug deals.<sup>115</sup> On 12 November 2005, US officials arrested

109. Interview, Lagos, 24 October 2007.

110. UNODC, 'Cocaine trafficking in Western Africa, situation report', October 2007, p. 6.

111. Presentation by DEA agent, Washington DC, 6 June 2008.

112. 'Bissau drugs probe death threats', BBC News, 30 July 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/7532466.stm>> (31 July 2008).

113. International Crisis Group, *Guinée-Bissau: Besoin d'Etat* (Africa report No.142, Dakar/Brussels, July 2008).

114. Mazzitelli, 'Transnational organized crime in West Africa', p. 1076, note 23. UNODC, 'Drug Trafficking as a Security Threat in West Africa' (November 2008), p. 13, gives the origin as Guinea-Bissau, <<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/drug-trafficking-as-a-security-threat-in-west-africa.html>> (4 February 2009).

115. Interviews, Accra, 31 August 2008; 'West Africa/drugs', *Africa Confidential* 49, 6 (14 March 2008).

a Ghanaian Member of Parliament, Eric Amoateng, in possession of 136 pounds of heroin. He was convicted in 2007.<sup>116</sup> There are reports of drug refining taking place in Ghana on a small scale, with precursor chemicals being imported from South Africa.<sup>117</sup>

In the Niger Delta, the home of Nigerian oil, local militias smuggling crude oil to tankers moored offshore are paid not only with cash and weapons, but also with cocaine.<sup>118</sup> Some of the cocaine imported into Nigeria in this process is consumed by foot soldiers in the militias that have sprung up in the Niger Delta, and towns like Warri and Port Harcourt have now become drug centres. However, it is improbable that all the cocaine imported into Nigeria by this relatively new route is consumed locally. It is likely that some at least is sold on or bartered in the complex international trade in oil, arms and drugs that is now connecting centres all along the Gulf of Guinea, from Luanda to Dakar.

Nigerian middlemen are also playing a leading role in the development of a trans-Saharan route for smuggling cocaine into Europe, using Tuareg guides. In early 2008, Malian authorities seized 750 kilos of cocaine at Tin Zawatine in the middle of the Sahara.<sup>119</sup> Intelligence officers of various nationalities claim that the Algerian armed opposition groups today known as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb 'earn their living' from taxes on this route.<sup>120</sup> Once cocaine has reached North Africa, established Moroccan hashish smugglers can take it to Europe. A US investigation codenamed Operation Titan unravelled a Lebanese-dominated syndicate that linked members of the Lebanese diasporas in North and South America and Nigeria with partners in their Mediterranean homeland, together involved in the transport of hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of merchandise to the USA.<sup>121</sup> In this case, an element of continuity in the drug trade becomes apparent, since it was a Lebanese syndicate that was first recorded using West Africa as a transit zone for heroin over fifty years ago.

116. Alistair Thomson, 'Drug trade threatens to corrode Ghana's image', *International Herald Tribune*, 23 December 2008.

117. *Africa Confidential* 49, 6 (14 March 2008), 'West Africa/drugs'.

118. Interviews, Lagos and Abuja, October 2007; "'Blood oil" dripping from Nigeria', BBC News, 27 July 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7519302.stm>> (25 November 2008).

119. 'Mali cocaine haul after firefight', BBC News, 4 January 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7171219.stm>> (17 January 2008). UNODC, 'Drug Trafficking as a Security Threat', p. 32, reports the discovery of a similar amount of hashish. It is not clear if this is a coincidence or a reporting error.

120. Heba Saleh, 'Islamist militants rise again in Algeria', *Financial Times*, 1 September 2008; cf. International Crisis Group, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or fiction?* (Africa report No. 92, Dakar/Brussels, 2005), pp. 18–19.

121. Presentation by DEA officers, Washington DC, 6 June 2008.



*The drug trade and the long term*

The UNODC has pointed out<sup>122</sup> that the relocation of a substantial part of the Latin American cocaine business to West Africa, including even some senior management functions, is not best understood as a consequence simply of comparative advantage in pricing. A more important reason for this development, which has been taking place for over a decade, is the exceptionally favourable political context offered by ineffective policing, governments that have a reputation for venality, and the relative lack of international attention given to West Africa. A pliable sovereign state is the ideal cover for a drug trafficker. The Colombian economist Francisco Thoumi states that '[p]rofitable illegal economic activity requires not only profitability, but also weak social and state controls on individual behavior, that is, a society where government laws are easily evaded and social norms tolerate such evasion'.<sup>123</sup> In short, '[i]llegality generates competitive advantages in the countries or regions that have the weakest rule of law'.<sup>124</sup> Drug production is not primarily to be explained by prices, but by reference to 'institutions, governability and social values'.<sup>125</sup> This is consistent with the 'new' international trade theory, which emphasizes the role of technical knowledge, public infrastructure, and the qualities of institutions in encouraging trade, supporting the view that 'institutional and structural weaknesses and cultural aspects determine the competitive advantage in illegal goods and services'.<sup>126</sup>

As the present article has shown, the development of the drug trade in West Africa has quite deep historical roots and has been enmeshed with politics in some countries for many decades. When the executive director of the UNODC, Antonio Maria Costa, sounds an alarm about the risk of drug money 'perverting economies and rotting society'<sup>127</sup> and of drug profits possibly financing insurgency,<sup>128</sup> he is really describing an existing state of affairs rather than some future nightmare. Liberia, to name just one example, was already a fully criminalized state under Charles Taylor, the country's head of state from 1997 to 2003. The financing of insurgency appears to be an established fact, in the case of both the Sahara and the Niger Delta. It is not hard to see why powerful people may nonetheless tolerate the drug trade

122. UNODC, *Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa*, p. 20.

123. Francisco E. Thoumi, 'The rise of two drug tigers: the development of the illegal drugs industry and drug policy failure in Afghanistan and Colombia', in F. Bovenkerk and M. Levi (eds), *The Organized Crime Community: Essays in honor of Alan A. Block* (Studies of Organized Crime No. 6, Springer Science and Business Media, New York, NY, 2007), p. 126.

124. *Ibid.*

125. *Ibid.*

126. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

127. UNODC, *Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa*, p. 1.

128. 'UN fears over West Africa drugs', BBC News, 27 November 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7114593.stm>> (25 November 2008).

in West Africa. For countries as poor as Guinea-Bissau or Guinea-Conakry, it makes a huge, though unofficial, contribution to national income. The UNODC, however, warns that crime hinders development, which it defines as 'the process of building societies that work'.<sup>129</sup> Crime is said to destroy social capital, and therefore to be anti-development.<sup>130</sup>

In purely technical terms, the emergence of the drug trade in West Africa over a period of fifty years or more is an astonishing feat. West African traders, with Nigerians in the forefront, have created for themselves an important role in a business characterized by competition that is cut-throat – literally – and by high profits. They have penetrated drug markets in every continent. Their success, and their growing ability to cooperate with organized crime groups elsewhere in the world, is inextricably linked not only to globalization and new patterns of international migration,<sup>131</sup> but also to specific experiences of rapid economic liberalization in the late twentieth century. Nigerians especially were playing a significant role in the illegal drug trade in the 1970s, before the era of structural adjustment. Subsequently, the manner in which new financial and economic policies were implemented in West Africa in the 1980s contributed greatly to the formation of what has been called 'a shadow state', in which rulers draw authority 'from their abilities to control markets and their material rewards'.<sup>132</sup> Dismantling large parts of the bureaucratic apparatus inherited from colonial times, and the formal economic activity that went with it, rulers became intent on identifying new shadow state networks, sometimes drawing in foreign investors.<sup>133</sup> West Africa's 'shadow states' are thus relatively new, but they draw heavily on older traditions. These include not only the existence since pre-colonial times of initiation societies that are sites of power, but also the colonial practice of indirect rule, which sometimes resulted in local authorities operating unofficial networks of governance rooted in local social realities, hidden from the view of European officials whose attention was focused on the official apparatus of government.<sup>134</sup>

The emergence of shadow states with networks that have become globalized through commerce and migration opens up an important debate in

129. UNODC, *Crime and Development in Africa* (Vienna, 2005), p. 67, <<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Studies-on-Drugs-and-Crime.html>> (26 November 2008).

130. *Ibid.*

131. Cf. Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium* (second edition, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000), Vol. 3 of the *Information Age* trilogy, pp. 82–118.

132. William Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995), p. 3. Interestingly, the expression 'shadow state' was used long before, by Jean Suret-Canale, 'La Guinée dans le système colonial', *Présence africaine* 29 (1959–60), p. 97.

133. Reno, *Corruption and State Politics*, p. 2.

134. Cf. Tekena Tamuno and Robin Horton, 'The changing position of secret societies and cults in modern Nigeria', *African Notes* 5, 2 (1969), pp. 36–62.

historical sociology concerning the degree to which a turn to predation in the last quarter of the twentieth century was the consequence of a specific context in the 1980s, and the extent to which its historical roots go much deeper.<sup>135</sup> The recent emergence of China as a major diplomatic and business operator in Africa, and the arrival in the continent of substantial numbers of Chinese expatriates and even settlers, adds a further element to this chemistry. Chinese crime gangs have a long history in Africa. Their enhanced presence in the continent can be expected to result in collaboration with African interests, and the development of new illicit markets in China itself.<sup>136</sup>

135. Castells, *End of Millennium*, p. 98; see also Bayart *et al.*, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, chapters 1 and 2.

136. 'Chinese gangs in Africa for long haul', *Jane's Intelligence Digest*, 8 July 2008.