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Author: Mangarella, J.N.

Title: Politics and the longue durée of African oil communities: rentierism, hybrid governance, and anomie in Gamba (Gabon), c. 1950s - 2015 (and beyond)

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INTRODUCTION

On June 14th, 2018, *Jeune Afrique* published on its website the latest in a series of articles bringing attention to Senegal's burgeoning oil sector. Discovered in 2014 and 2015, Senegal's voluminous offshore fields were turning heads raising the spectre of the resource curse. The article featured Fary Ndao, recent author of *L'Or Noir du Sénégal*,¹ who when asked whether a resource curse existed, responded:

Yes, and it refers to the establishment of resource-rich countries in a rent economy at the expense of buoyant sectors such as industry or agriculture. Setting up a rent economy creates a rent elite, introduces inequalities and a loss of productivity. Senegal is fortunate to have discovered oil at a time when its economy was already diversified. The risk therefore seems less. Controlling this risk will depend in particular on the degree of information possessed by the citizens who, the more they are informed, the more they will be able to question the choices of leaders concerning the use of revenues.²

Ndao's assessment is not unique. Many analysts of politics and sociology, particularly those disposed to appreciating political economy, prefer to explain political, sociological, and economic changes with long chains of causation that inevitably begin with geographic endowments and constraints. It is, after all, among the most scientific ways of objectifying humanity, and differences between cultures across the globe have clearly been shown to have their roots in geography and environment.³ But, and critically, many of these cultures were assessed at a time

¹ *L'or noir du Sénégal: Comprendre l'industrie pétrolière et ses enjeux au Sénégal* (Essai : 2018).

² "Oui et elle désigne l'installation des pays détenteur de ressources naturelles dans une économie de rente aux dépens de secteurs porteurs comme l'industrie ou l'agriculture. Installer une économie de rente crée une élite de rente, introduit des inégalités et une perte de productivité. Le Sénégal a la chance d'avoir découvert du pétrole à un moment où son économie était déjà diversifiée. Le risque semble donc moindre. La maîtrise de ce risque dépendra notamment du degré d'information des citoyens qui, plus ils seront informés, plus ils pourront questionner les choix des dirigeants concernant l'utilisation des revenus."

³ See, e.g., John Desmond Clark, *The Prehistory of Africa* (Edited by Ginette Aumassip, and Fabrizio Mori. Vol. 302. London: Thames and Hudson, 1970); and for later analysis of "cultural geography," Don Mitchell, "There's No Such Thing as Culture: Towards a Reconceptualization of the Idea of Culture in Geography" (*Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 20, no. 1 (1995): 102-16).

when cross-cultural communication was relatively limited, when economies were lower in scale, and, critically, when the transfer of ideas and histories were relatively infrequent.

Even so, Ndao's assessment is not necessarily incorrect either. When a number of assumptions are taken, oil rents can and often do stifle otherwise buoyant sectors as well as corrupt political systems. After movements to nationalize oil sectors in the Middle East in the mid-twentieth century, several analysts pointed to "petrodollars" as the culprit in a process of creeping authoritarianism and increasingly vulnerable—and lackluster—economies.⁴ It might even be conceivable that the publication of oil transactions in Iran would have deterred its appropriation by a small minority of elites, depending on whether large enough factions of civil society were equipped to effectively pressurize the instruments of government—a big assumption to be dealt with later on.

But the more troubling aspect of Ndao's widely held views is that they are derived from a model of political economy with supposedly universal application. The idea that an informed citizenry can lower the risk of corruption is notoriously Western in both time and space, and evokes the errors of the now-defunct modernization and democratization paradigms that once prevailed in academies. Even in many Western political spaces today, the availability of information is no guarantee of the critical checks necessary to preventing the misuse of public funds, among other things. An informed citizenry can only effect real change when it has the will to change, when it knows what change it desires, and when the rules of interaction are widely accepted and agreed upon. This may have been the case in the 18th century—the real birth of the democratization paradigm—but it is not entirely clear today. Ideas, people, and patterns change.

What is most troubling then about the reification of natural resources as cause and consequence is that it tends towards dehumanization, dehistoricization, and oversimplification. At least one study has clearly demonstrated the tendency towards a bureaucratic elite in Senegal, roughly ten years before any oil had been discovered. And since oil could clearly not be attributed to things like informal privatization, other factors such as 'hybridity' were explored.⁵ The risk of oversimplification is not limited to natural resource-based theories, but extends as well to other

⁴ See, e.g., Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, *The Price of Wealth: Economies and Institutions in the Middle East* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁵ Giorgio Blundo, "Seeing Like a State Agent: The Ethnography of Reform in Senegal's Forestry Services" (in *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies*, eds. Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, Leiden: Brill, 2014, pp. 69-89).

understandings of livelihoods changes. Democracy itself—however defined—is still righteously assumed to produce desirable social outcomes, decentralization was once hailed as a means to capitalize on local ingenuity, and the list goes on. What is certain by now—to many Africanists at least—is that the region’s unique history throws a wrench into much presumed universality, but at the same time offers a chance to understand human cause and consequence at a deeper level and in a way which informs efforts towards universality of the human condition. In historical terms, sub-Saharan Africa is among the most recent broader regions to integrate European norms of social and political interaction, the same norms which become generally applied to all human systems.

The movement to reverse this trend must therefore preempt theories of political economy with natural resources as their bases. Oil is not a monolith, nor an unimpeded force of its own. The risks it is said to bring—a rentier class and inequality—as well as its mitigating conditions—transparency, economic diversification, etc.—are simply inapplicable to places where a strong civil society and reliable macroeconomic accounting are non-existent. This simplified view of the effects of a natural resource on a country’s political trajectories has its roots in a host of analyses and initiatives conducted and taken by Western-directed organizations such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Local variations are inevitably lost in this process. Efforts to rein in oil rentier states in Africa through international governance initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and Publish What You Pay (PWYP) are, while well-intentioned, insufficient to ensure lasting accountability to these states’ respective citizenry. Thus, the problem of how to exogenously contribute to the development of democracy — i.e. from an international perspective — in Africa’s oil rentier states remains, as efforts to build ‘accountability’ in these states are allegedly hampered from above and below.

The solution is not further macro-modelling and the endless recycling of similar statistical inputs, but a return to basics and an appropriation of advanced techniques in ethnography, anthropology, and more nuanced understandings of political and social meaning. Accurate determinations of social and political change must derive from internally constituted definitions of these factors. And rather than an exercise in hyper-relativity, or even intellectual nihilism, it is emphatically realistic and based on the simple notion that people in different times and spaces may think, perceive, and conceive quite differently. Unfortunately for grand theorists of the political

economy tradition, this reality is often only discoverable in the more specifically peri-urban and rural spaces of Africa, where “transparency” and “corruption” are highly problematized concepts.

Mirroring the fault lines of recent political commentary, much of sub-Saharan Africa’s poor performance is attributed to both its politico-economic peripheral status in an international system as well as political cultures which appear indigenous to much of the continent as a whole. Defining how each stratum has historically engendered contemporary institutional outcomes is critical to not only improving policy at the international level but also to empowering, or historicizing, local actors. This research therefore proposes to expand the knowledge of how these two phenomena, international structural conditions and politico-historical institutions, interact to affect livelihoods in African oil states as carried out by key actors. And not just any livelihoods, but those unconnected to the “modern” sphere of city centers, representing over 60% of the continent’s population.

To what extent, then, do subnational, pre-existing political institutions in sub-Saharan Africa, vis-à-vis both state and international structures, affect peri-urban rural livelihoods? “Agency” is one area of research which has steadily become important among political scientists and sociologists, especially since the latter years of the Cold War, when structuralist explanations of political phenomena began yielding more space to conceptions of politics emphasizing deconstruction, contingency, and discourse.⁶ This increasing focus on determining who in fact governs, and whose governance actually translates to the health and wealth of local populations, not only revisits the core set questions proposed by political science at large but highlights the pressing concerns of African political scientists themselves. Chabal claims that this approach to the notion of agency, which is “in the process of becoming the new orthodoxy,”⁷ forces political Africanists to revisit their models and concepts in finding the appropriate balance between historical and environmental factors, such as neo-colonialism and the nature of exports, and political factors which are conceived as processes and events rooted internally⁸. This paradigmatic shift from structure to people as mediators of structure will help us understand “the extraordinary

⁶ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991 [1962]); M. Foucault, *L’Ordre du Discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). For a very thorough discussion of the juncture of “agency” and resistance to several forms of domination in Africa, see Jon Abbink and Klaas van Walraven, “Rethinking Resistance in African History: An Introduction,” In *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History* (Leiden: Brill, 2003)

⁷ Patrick Chabal, *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*, (London: Zed Books, 2009), 11.

⁸ Chabal, *Africa*, 13.

ways in which Africans have adapted to rapidly changing international circumstances.”⁹ In turn, identifying patterns of adaptation in Africa has the potential to contribute enormously to our understanding of political change, which has perhaps been too preoccupied with structure in the post World War II era.

Determining which political structures and processes affect peri-urban livelihoods in African politics, whether it be with local systems of government, state bureaucracies, or plutocracies, would not only be a natural response to an epistemological shift in the social sciences but would also be facilitated by today’s changing “international” circumstances, since agency (or, simply put, causality) can only be identified in the context of changing conditions. The question of agency has been made less academic when applied to sub-Saharan Africa thanks to the rapidly changing empirics of external engagement in the continent. Whereas the traditional donor and investment community in African states had been composed primarily of Western actors, East Asian markets for resources have led Chinese, Japanese, and Indian investors and donors to the continent, contributing to the rapid change of international context faced by Africans.

The intense and rapid growth of many developing countries like China has partially caused a boom in world demand for oil, thus depleting global resources, especially in older oilfields such as those in Saudi Arabia. This leaves Africa as one of the few remaining bastions of future oil reserves.¹⁰ Whereas the oil price hikes of the 1970s were largely brought on by OPEC’s oil embargoes, the price hike which began in the mid-1990s and which has stagnated today is more due to the natural consequences of intense exploitation rather than politics, making Africa’s explored and unexplored oil fields all the more important.¹¹ Factors which had contributed to global interest in African hydrocarbons other than depleting resources in the world’s traditional oilfields and the once-untapped potential of those in Africa include the relatively low pecuniary and political costs to doing business, mostly off Africa’s shores. As John Ghazvinian recounts in an impressive piece of onsite investigative journalism, proven offshore reserves are attractive to foreign multinationals due to the relative ease with which they allow exploration, production, and

⁹ Chabal, *Africa*, 12.

¹⁰ M. Klare, and D. Volman, ‘America, China, and the Scramble for Africa’s Oil’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 33, no.108 (2006): 297-309.

¹¹ M. Levi and R. McNally, ‘A Crude Predicament’, *Foreign Affairs*, 90, no.4 (2012): 100-111.

distribution to proceed.¹² These “enclaves”¹³ afford MNCs the combined benefits of avoiding the kind of land-based entanglements with indigenous grievances that led to Nigeria’s Biafran war in 1966 as well as obstacles to shipping and distribution. Such major oil supply disruptions have also been evidenced by the decades-long conflict in the Niger Delta and more recently by the armed uprising in Libya leading to the ouster of former leader Muhammad al-Qaddafi. As a last example, a failed coup attempt in South Sudan and ensuing rebellion has reportedly locked off tens of thousands of barrels of oil in the key Unity State since the beginning of 2014.¹⁴

As a result of these developments, many journalists, politicians, scholars, and commentators of every shade have weighed in on whether the “new scramble for Africa” will bring benefits, in the form of added revenue and developmental opportunities, or costs, in the form of social, environmental, and political degradation. The question cannot be answered without first acknowledging the actors at all levels contributing to either better or worse livelihoods of those affected, and must be viewed through this prism. Humanity indeed reacts similarly to similar environmental conditions, and materialists have departed from this notion for decades. But environmental conditions, when taking into account hundreds of years of ideational shifts, collective memories, forms of legitimacy, and changing patterns of interaction, are scarcely if ever identical. This thesis proposes to examine—from the perspective of politics—when and why livelihoods changes take place in subnational, peri-urban communities, even when they bear material similarities, such as oil resources, the fruits of which are coveted by actors at all levels.

The next chapter surveys the extensive literature on the impact of politics—international, state, and local—on African communities. It demonstrates that the differences between various approaches can often be explained by differing ontological approaches to similar problems, and that these differences need reconciliation if generalizability is indeed the goal. Chapter 2 follows up by justifying the thesis’ research design, a loose comparative study of two oil-bearing communities: Gamba and the Ndougou lagoon in Gabon and Takoradi and the coastal Western

¹² J. Ghazvinian, *Untapped: The Scramble for Africa’s Oil* (New York: Harcourt, 2007).

¹³ See also J. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); J. Ferguson, ‘Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa’, *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 3 (2005): 377-382.

¹⁴ “War-torn South Sudan under economic attack from fall in oil price.” *Financial Times*. December 21, 2014. Accessed December 26, 2018. (<https://www.ft.com/content/6ba9f528-869c-11e4-8a51-00144feabdc0>).

“South Sudan oil revenue at \$3.38 bln, hit by conflict and price falls.” *Reuters*. January 3, 2015. Accessed December 26, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/southsudan-crude/south-sudan-oil-revenue-at-3-38-bln-hit-by-conflict-and-price-falls-idUSL6N0UI02D20150103>)

Region of Ghana. Though not a strict comparison, both geographic African spaces experienced oil exploitation, thus rendering it possible to compare oil's impact on politically-induced changes to livelihoods. Gamba, Gabon remains the focus of this investigation, however, as its long history with oil exploitation allows for the tracing of political interactions and models in the *longue durée*. Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on diachronically historicizing the evolution of social and political anomie in Gamba, coincident with Royal Dutch Shell's intensive exploitation of the region's enormous onshore oil deposits since the 1960s. Fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2015 aimed to identify indicators of [under]development and the critical local actors involved, broadening the scope to include not only material progress and rent-seeking but feelings of alienation, communal spirit, and solidarity. Chapter 5 then focuses on rentierism in Gamba, attempting to relate these findings to the axiomatic predictions of rentier theory. As such, I assess the causality of the state's extractive capacity, relief from taxation and economic diversification, and rentier "mentality" in producing Gamba's developmental outcomes. Chapter 6 argues that neither rentierism nor essentialism adequately account for the underdevelopment of Gamba, and instead aligns with theories of hybrid governance which proffer an epistemological "change of gears," one that hopes to evade the structural-essential binary. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the experiences of Takoradi, Ghana, where successive fieldwork trips in 2016 provide data with which externalize the validity of analytical conclusions reached in Chapter 6. Takoradi's very different pre-oil circumstances allow us a loose comparison with which to isolate the supposed centrality of extractive industries when explaining local political arenas. More time, however, will be spent on elaborating the colonial and post-colonial history of the Ndougou lagoon in Gabon. Not only has Gamba, Gabon had a long experience with oil production, but a such a study never been conducted in Gamba. The research here on Gamba should therefore be treated as the central contributory thrust of this thesis.