Scrambling for Oil in West Africa? (Draft: Comments are welcome)

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Introduction

This paper explores the full ramification of the intensified struggle for access to the vital oil and gas resources in West and Central Africa or what in global energy strategic terms is referred to as the Gulf of Guinea. Its point of departure is a critical interrogation of the notion of a "new scramble" or "oil rush", particularly as it relates to its post-Cold war geopolitical and global energy security dimensions as well as the implication of the intensified extraction of hydrocarbons for medium to long-term stability and sustainable development in the sub-region. This involves a discussion of the role of the various actors involved in the struggle for West Africa's oil: Oil Multinationals, National/State Oil Corporations, Independents, Indigenous oil companies, "petro-elites" and oil producing communities. The impression is often given that the "scramble" is basically a "new" competition between an oil import-dependent United States, European Union and Japan versus the energy-hungry emergent Chinese industrial power that has since 2003 become the world's second largest oil consumer (Pan 2006; Pham, 2006: 251; Alden 2005: 148; Klare and Volman 2006a: 609). But the analysis in this paper will demonstrate that the situation is more complex and multi-layered, with far reaching implications for oil-rich, but poor Africa states.

There is an attempt to capture the nexus between increasing energy dependency in the advanced market economy countries and emerging industrial powers, a tight global oil market and the representation of West Africa as an "oil gulf" (and alternative to the volatile Middle East), that is critical to global energy security in a post-9/11 world. It is however appropriate to note that the "scramble" for finite hydro-carbon resources is not limited to West Africa, but rather spans the entire world. Every drop of oil on land or at the bottom of the ocean everywhere in the world is being sought to fire the engines of globalised capitalist production, accumulation and power.

The focus on West and Central Africa in this paper is impelled by several considerations. The first has to do with its rising strategic profile in the strategic global energy security calculations of the United States (Report of the National Energy Policy Development Group, 2001; African Oil Policy Initiative Group 2002; Klare and Volman 2004: 226-231, 2006a: 609-628; Klare and Volman 2006b: 297-309; Obi 2006: 93-95; Forster 2006; Watts 2006; Council of Foreign Relations, 2005: xii, 8; Ghazvinian 2007). The second relates to the reality that West Africa's deeper incorporation into globalised oil relations provides a very good case for the exploring the possibilities for /economic growth/development of its oil producing countries as the result of a new "oil boom". The third point relates to the emerging conditions of the globalisation of the sub-region: the designation of its resources for global markets, transnationalisation of its elites, and the capacity of its states to mediate the pressures on it, from within and without. It also relates to the impact of the struggles between global industrial powers in West Africa and the theoretical leverage that this bestows upon the oil state, but also includes the rising stakes of global access to, and control its oil reserves, particularly the energy security interests of the world's dominant power in a post-9/11 global order (Obi 2005b, 2006b). Another critical consideration in the choice of West Africa is the need to interrogate the assumptions of protagonists of the "resource curse" thesis that the most recent oil boom will inevitably feed into the spiral of the paradox of plenty: state corruption, violent conflict and poverty.

A logical question that flows from the foregoing is: can "post-adjustment" West and Central African countries currently poised to enjoy the providential dividends from rising oil prices "trade their way out of poverty" (Schulze and Edinger 2007: 6-7)? What interests, dynamics and new opportunities are embedded in, or represented in the increased competition for oil in Africa beyond the obvious growth potential of increased oil rents? Does the "new scramble" offer any prospects for changing the unequal trade patterns between Africa and the world's industrial powers that has resulted in the plunder of the resources of the former over the centuries? What social contradictions are the processes of global extraction and pollution spawning in the sub-region and how can these be resolved? It is to these questions and related issues that this paper addresses itself.

In setting about its task, this paper is divided into four broad sections. The introduction outlines the critical issues and questions that underpin the paper. A conceptual section that deals with the "new" scramble for Africa as a basis for locating West Africa in the globalised political economy of oil and one of the sites of an "oil rush" follows it. Part of the conceptual discussion addresses the oil-development linkage, particularly as it relates to the "oil-curse" thesis. The third section is the analytical fulcrum of the paper. It examines the various dimensions of what has been described as the "new scramble for Africa", particularly the dynamics, actors and contending transnational interests involved in the intense struggle for oil and gas in West and Central Africa. The fourth and concluding section sums up the patterns coming out of the on-going struggles and the prospects for the sub-region.

Framing the "New Scramble" in Critical Perspective

The notion of the "new scramble for Africa" has been attributed to an article in *The Economist* magazine on China's Business links with Africa (The Economist 2006, Frynas and Paulo 2007: 230) or to represent the perceived threat posed to Western and US interests in Africa, by growing Chinese penetration and competition for natural resources, oil, markets and strategic influence (Lyman 2005). The notion of the "new scramble" has been also described by Marks (2007: 4) as "China's race for Africa" which is "certainly due in large part to the same causes as Europe's 19^{th} century scramble – the need for raw materials to fuel industrialisation". In supporting the notion of a "new scramble", it appears that the literature focuses on what Melber (2007: 6-9), identifies as "The (Not So) New Kid on the Block: China".

The analysis of China's rapid penetration of Africa is framed on its growing trade, energy, aid and strategic interests in the continent. However, the discussion here will concentrate more on its energy ties with Africa. China's quest for oil in Africa is the logical outcome of its rapid economic expansion in the past decade and its transition from oil exporting to an oil-importing nation from 1993, leading to a situation in which an estimated 30% of its energy demands are met through imports. As a rising global power, China perceives that a critical part of its energy security lies in increasing its access to stable oil supplies around the world, including Africa. Part of the concern is diversify its dependence on the volatile Middle East and Asia that both account for most of its oil supplies and also expand its access to larger volumes of oil. As the Chinese ambassador Guijin put it, "China is diversifying to secure its supply, and now imports energy from countries in Africa such as Angola, Nigeria and Sudan" (cited, IRIN news 2006a).

Chinese state oil companies have in the last decade increasing entered into the highly competitive African oil sector, long the exclusive preserve of Western Oil Multinationals, State Corporations and Independents. Its multi-pronged strategy for winning oil in Africa includes investing in countries western companies have lost grounds, or have been forced to withdraw as a result of the policies of their home governments towards host-states, as in the case of Sudan, where the withdrawal of Chevron in 1992, followed by other western companies such as Concorp, Arakis, Talisman, and Lundin (Patey 2006: 13-32), paved the way for the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) to buy (40%) into the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPC), which commenced oil exports in 1999 and is the largest oil company in the country. Sudan (Africa's third largest oil producer) exports between 50-60% of its oil and accounts for an estimated 7% of China's oil imports. On the whole, it is reported that China "presently imports 30% of its oil from Africa, compared to 47% from the Middle East"(Chen 2006).

Other strategies include "financial assistance, prestige construction projects and arms sales" (Alden 2005: 148). Chinese companies have also purchased equity shares in oil fields, invested in energy and infrastructural developments, and acquired oil concessions across the continent. In 2005, China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) bought "a 45% stake in a Nigerian oil-for-gas field for US$2.27 billion and also purchased 35% of an oil exploration licence in the Niger Delta for US$60 million" (Jiang cited in IRIN news 2006a). The CNOOC acquisition in Nigeria was its largest in the world. This is apart from Nigeria's sale of four oil blocks (2 in the Chad Basin and 2 in the Niger Delta) to the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in May 2006 following a visit by the China's President Hu Jintao.

China has thus made in-roads into the oil sectors in Nigeria (Africa's largest oil producer) and Angola (Africa's second largest producer), which accounts for "13 per cent of China's crude oil imports". In Angola, Sinopec acquired two oil blocs following a "soft oil-backed credit facility" of $2 billion to support post-war reconstruction projects in the country (Frynas and Paulo 2007: 239; IRIN news 2006a), after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Western creditors citing widespread corruption and the need to keep to the path of "macro-economic discipline" had turned down a similar request. Other African countries with Chinese oil interests include, Gabon, Mauritania, Niger, Equatorial Guinea, Algeria and Chad.

China's forays into Africa's oil fields have been viewed with increasing concern by Western strategic thinkers, energy analysts and policy makers. Its bid to secure stable oil supplies has increasingly come up against the bid of the US and other western countries to also secure stable oil supplies in a very tight global oil market. Of note, is the centrality of West and Central Africa to US national and global energy security interests. Drawing on Report of the National Energy Policy Development Group or the Cheney report, Klare (2004), notes, "West Africa is expected to be one of the fastest growing sources of oil and gas for the American market". The case is underscored by the fact that the region accounts for over 10 per cent of all US oil imports; it is projected that this will increase to 25 per cent by 2020 (Klare, 2004). Leading US policy makers and analysts have emphasized the centrality of oil from West and Central Africa, to US efforts to diversify oil supplies from the volatile Middle East, respond to competition arising from a sharply rising demand for oil and secure stable supplies of oil and gas. The reasons for this lie in the proximity of Africa to US oil markets, the fact that most of the oil is of the light variety, with low sulphur content and favoured by US refineries. Also, more oil is being discovered and produced in the Gulf of Guinea, and US oil companies have vast investments in the region that guarantee stable supplies of oil to the expanding US domestic market, American jobs and profits to shareholders. Thus, the control of West African oil is critical to American oil security and global power (Klare and Volman 2006a, 2006b; Perry 2007 23-25; Turshen 2004). US oil interests are locked into major oil producers such as Nigeria, Angola, Algeria, Gabon, and the "new oil boom states" Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and Sao Tome and Principe. Since most of the oil being discovered is off-shore, it also has the added advantage of being beyond the reach of protesting oil communities on land that are capable of disrupting the oil flow, as had been the case in the restive Nigerian oil-rich Niger Delta since the 1990's (Obi 2006a: 93-94).

Several pressure groups have also been pushing the case of Africa's Oil as a way of shifting from a total dependence on the volatile Middle East that is partly seen as a seething hotbed of militant political Islam and anti-Americanism. Thus, the AOPIG Report (2002) quotes the US Assistant Secretary of State, Walter Kanstenier III, "African oil is critical to us, and it will increase and become more important as we go forward." US growing dependence on West Africa's oil provides a strategic and concrete basis for securing supplies and also keeping competitors out. Beyond energy and security considerations, the "partnership" also gives the US the leeway to promote its neo-liberal values of free markets, regional economic growth, good governance and democracy, which would influence regional stability and peace in ways that broadly favour US hegemonic interests and security.

In the light of the foregoing, United States oil corporations have been at the vanguard of the "new scramble" for West Africa's oil, having been disadvantaged in the first oil rush of the early to mid-twentieth century, and recognize the need to compete more against their European counterparts, such as Shell, Elf, BP, Statoil and ENI-Agip. The US is also particularly keen on containing the perceived threat posed by Asian National Oil Companies (ANOC's), but particularly, Chinese oil companies: CNPC, CNOOC and Sinopec, that are aggressively making inroads into the region to the consternation of western strategists who are worried about the ramifications of the entry of the "Chinese dragon" into the "new" scramble for Africa's oil (Zweig and Jianhai 2005: 25-38; Hennock 2005).

Illustrating the deep involvement of US oil companies in Africa, Gary and Karl (2003: 12), note that "Chevron Texaco announced in 2002 that it had invested $5 billion in the past five years in African oil and would spend $20 billion more in the next five years" and "Exxon Mobil signified its intention to spend $15 billion in Angola in the next four years, and $25 billion across Africa in the next decade." In addition both Exxon Mobil and Chevron Texaco were investing billions of dollars in Nigeria the fifth largest exporter of oil to the United States, accounting in 2002 for 600,000 barrels per day of US oil imports (Valle, 2004:52). Chevron Texaco has also been involved in developing the oil and gas fields in Equatorial Guinea, while Exxon Mobil had cornered the Sao Tome and Principe oil and gas fields (Obi 2006b: 94-95; McCullum 2006). US interest is also represented in the 1,070 Kilometre Chad-Cameroon Oil pipeline, carrying oil from the Doba oilfields in Chad for export through the Cameroon port of Kribi, that is reportedly the “largest single US private investment in Africa by Exxon Mobil valued at $3.7 billion” (Valle, 2004:53).

Other US oil interests include the West African Gas Pipeline Project (WAGP) valued at $500 million to transport an estimated 120 Mmcf/d of gas to Ghana, Benin and Togo from Nigeria’s Niger Delta by 2005, a distance of 1,033 Kilometres (EIA, 2003). According to the EIA the Oil Consortium that has invested in the WAGP is led by Chevron Texaco (36.7%), and includes Shell (18%) and the national oil corporations of Nigeria (NNPC) (25%), Ghana (GNPC&VRA)(16.3%), Benin (SoBeGaz)(2%) and Togo (SoToGaz)(2%). The WAGP is central to plans for power generation and industrialization along the West African coastal corridor, and there are plans to extend it further as far as possibly Senegal given the right security and economic conditions. Oil companies from the US, other western countries, China, India, Korea and Brazil, are also competing over potential oil interests in Senegal, Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire, Togo and Cameroon.

A core consideration underpinning United States quest for the stability of oil supplies in West Africa is its concern for the security of US energy interests: uninterrupted supplies, safety of international sea-lanes for oil tanker movement, protection of oil investments and the protection of American citizens from possible terrorist attacks. This, brings to the fore the close connection between West African oil and the US-led Global War on Terror. Evidence to support such concerns have been found in the escalating violence in Nigeria’s oil-rich Niger Delta region where the abduction of expatriate oil workers and attacks on oil pipelines by youth militias seeking a greater say over the distribution of oil rents for local development have disrupted the flow of oil and contributed to sharp spikes in global oil prices (Junger 2007: 22-30; Marquardt 2006; Ukeje 2001; Obi, 2007, 2006c, 2005a).

Oil is thus writ large in West Africa’s place in the post-9/11 global security architecture (Obi 2005: 38-41; 2007, Lubeck, Watts and Lipschutz 2007: 3). Through a series of strategic partnerships and military assistance programmes, the most recent being the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSTI) and Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), the US has integrated African states into its global counter-terrorist agenda (Obi 2007: 91). This year the US President inaugurated a US African Command – AFRICOM expected to become fully operational in 2008. As the US assistant-secretary of state for African Affairs recently put it, “achieving coastal security in the Gulf of Guinea is key to America’s trade and investments in Africa, to our energy security and to stem transnational threats like narcotics and arms trafficking, piracy and illegal fishing” (Crawley 2006; Sieber 2007).

The other, less-obvious dimension of the securitization of West Africa’s oil lies in the hegemonic project of promoting “efficient” managerial states (under the rubric of democracy and good governance) that are supportive of US capital and geo-political interests in the region. The emphasis on promoting neo-liberal democracy: multipartyism, transparency, accountability and the rule of law are directed at ensuring that the transnational neo-liberal global order does not collapse, by guaranteeing the freedom of capital flows within, or across national borders. This brings out in bold relief the links between the "new scramble" for oil and capitalist globalisation, represented by the intensified struggles for resources, markets and spheres of influence in Africa in what is gradually becoming a new East-West race.

What the foregoing underscores is the fact that China is the catalyst in the "new scramble" for West Africa's oil, which is clearly dominated by western oil multinationals. Roughneen (2006), sums up the Western anxiety about China's role in Africa as being twofold, "Beijing provides an alternative to the supposed consensus built around governance and development policies, giving China an unfair advantage in competing for the continents resources". Although some have argued that China is merely following the steps of Western countries that have plundered Africa's resources over the centuries (a new imperialism), others claim that China's policies in Africa provide support (money and arms) for dictatorial and corrupt regimes in complete disregard of the norms of good governance, accountability and respect for human rights. Critics have pointed to China's support for the regime in Sudan by purchasing it oil, providing it with arms and diplomatic support against sanctions at the United Nations Security Council, support for Zimbabwe through investments in the energy and mining sectors and providing it with arms, while providing aid to Angola accused of a lack of transparency in the management of its oil revenues, as evidence that it is undermining Western interests and efforts at 'development and democracy-promotion in Africa.' Lyman (2006) makes the point that "China challenges areas where US political leverage was once greatest. This is particularly true in the oil and gas sectors", which incidentally are largely concentrated in West and Central Africa.

The conceptual challenge that arises relates to the space and opportunities that the notion of the "new scramble" for oil represents for the region. Schulze and Edinger (2007: 8), identify development assistance, trade and investments as the various ways in which African states benefit from Chinese engagement. They are also of the view that it "gives African leaders more leverage to act with increasing confidence towards western countries due to the Chinese alternative. Second, the state of infrastructure, regarded as one of the major obstacles for business and entrepreneurial opportunities in Africa, will advance as Chinese companies increase investment in extractive and other industries". Yet, it is clear that even if there are some short-term benefits and costs, the capacity of Africa to exploit the opportunities attendant to the "new scramble"—Chinese "gifts" lies more in internal cohesiveness, socio-political conditions and a strategic Pan African project of socio-economic transformation.

The Scramble for Africa: Berlin and Bismarck's Ghost?

The notion of the scramble for Africa has several connotations: competition, greed, partition, plunder, imperialism, domination, exoticism, and Africa's subordination to an inequitable global division of labour. Its origins lay in 19th century European "new" imperialism (1880-1918) when Otto von Bismarck of Germany convened the Berlin colonial conference (1884-1885) 'to set the broad limits of expansion by the interested powers—Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Spain, so they would not quarrel in Africa during the race to carve up the continent among themselves' (Davidson 1991: 284).

Coming at towards the end of the heinous trans Atlantic slave trade, it also represented the emerging changes in global capitalism, where commodities—raw materials, natural resources and minerals, and the search for markets, were replacing the trade in "human cargo" from Africa for some of Europe's excess finished products. The logical outcome was the partition of Africa into fiefs of each European power, exploited for the exclusive benefit of the occupying power. It was only logical that partition led to occupation and colonial conquest, subordination and rule, as African resisted the imposition from outside and the plunder of their resources and labour. The logic that drove the scramble was clearly shaped by global capitalist expansion beyond Europe. As it moved out, it also shaped the world after its own image, and defined Africa within the new global division of labour as a supplier of primary products for global industrial manufacturing and market for finished products. This situation has largely remained unchanged ever since.

The foregoing places oil in the context of the scramble for Africa. As it assumed increasing significance as a more viable source of energy (compared to coal) during and after the First World War, when colonial attention was focussed on the search for oil in Africa. As far back as the second decade of the 20th century, the search for oil had commenced in Algeria, Egypt and Nigeria. In Nigeria's case, the Imperial power Britain had legislated its exclusive monopoly over the oil in the country. As noted elsewhere, "as far back as 1889, 1907 and 1914, the colonial administration in Nigeria passed a series of legislations that gave the monopoly of oil concessions in the country to 'British or British-allied capital" (cited in Obi 2006c: 16). Under this law, Shell-D'Arcy (later BP) was granted an oil concession in 1938 covering the entire Nigerian mainland. Shell-BP struck oil in Oloibiri in 1956 and commenced oil exports in 1958.

During the two decades in controlled it huge oil concession, Shell-BP (later Royal Dutch Shell) identified the most-promising potential oil-fields and established a clear head-start over the other western oil companies (Mobil, Texaco, Agip—now ENI, Esso—now Exxon, and Safrap—now Total) that later joined the "scramble" for Nigeria's oil in 1959, when 'its' oil concession was opened up a year before Nigeria's independence. Shell has managed to retain its position as the largest producer of oil in Nigeria, contributing almost half of the country's daily output.

The same pattern replicated itself in the other oil-rich colonies, where the Imperial power exercised exclusive control of the oil fields and dominated them after independence. Thus, "French oil companies dominated the oil industry at independence in Algeria and Gabon" (Frynas and Paulo 2007: 235), as well as the Congo-Brazzaville, while the Italians held sway in Libya, before the 1969 revolution. However, the broad picture across the continent in the 1960's up to the 1990's showed the clear dominance of Western oil companies, often operating in partnership with African state oil corporations (after the OPEC revolution of the 1970's) in the African oil industry. Given the opaque nature of such ties, a lot of competition and corruption was involved in such deals as each company (backed by their home state) tried to outsmart the others in wringing juicy oil concessions and profits from African petro-states as demand for oil grew rapidly over the decades.

The foregoing shows that a scramble for oil in Africa was literally embedded in the scramble for Africa. While some commentators in media and policy circles have interpreted the entry of China from the 1990's into the race for raw materials, energy and markets as the sign of a "new" scramble for Africa, others have asserted that it is "a very different process" (Frynas and Paulo 2007: 233). Melber (2007: 6), argues that there is nothing new about "the looting of Africa" (Bond 2006), noting that "Chinese penetration only presents the ugly face of predatory capitalism". But Frynas and Paulo (2007: 233-235), aptly note that the " key characteristics of the nineteenth century scramble are missing from the current expansion of interests in Africa. For instance, there are no clear spheres of interest or spheres of control today". But then they concede that a pattern clearly exists in relation to the scramble for Africa's oil, where US oil firms dominate the oil fields of the New Gulf States of Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tome and Principe, and French oil interests dominate Gabon and Congo-Brazzaville. Also, Anglo-Dutch and US oil interests have a formidable presence in Nigeria and China has established a firm foothold in Sudan. The fundamental issue here is to evaluate the impact of the entry of new actors from China, India, Malaysia, Korea, and Brazil on the nature of the oil trade with Africa and the prospects for the continent's development.

One point that is often left out in the discourse on the "new scramble" relates to its connections with the place of Africa in post-Cold war globalization, particularly as it relates to the transnationalisation of capital. The transnationalization of oil capital has at its primary objective the optimal exploitation of Africa by global oil capital, irrespective of whether it is American, European, Indian or Chinese. It implies among others the greater opening up of Africa's oil reserves for exploitation without any interference by African petro-states. Yet, given the strategic importance of oil to global capitalism and the risk of demand outstripping supply in the near future, African petro-states stand to reap more revenues from the new oil boom, while African elites stand to a greater chance of being integrated into the transnational capitalist elite by riding on the crest of the latest oil waves which command unprecedented prices in the world market. In this regard, outside industrial powers: states, oil companies and transnational elites have to compete for access to Africa's oil. Unlike, the days of old scramble, African states rather than being exclusive fiefs, have considerable leverage to determine who gets "their" oil, even if they lack the power to determine the global price(s) of oil nor possess the technology for oil production.

What flows from the foregoing is that the intensified struggle for oil in Africa is not a re-play of the partition of the 19th century, yet the continent is haunted by the ghost from the past, as the continent's natural resources are being increasingly exploited by competing transnational actors, that simultaneously incorporate, and marginalise people within the various African countries, and

Resource/Oil Curse

The discourse on the oil-development nexus in Africa is often predicated on the view that oil breeds corruption, misgovernance, human rights abuses and violent conflict (Gary and Karl, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2002; Coalition for International Justice, 2006; Obi, 2007a; Ross, 2001). This perception is clearly a spin-off of the "Dutch disease" and "resource curse" theses, which is a mainstream explanation for (resource) conflicts and insecurity in Africa. The "resource curse" thesis seeks explanations for the causes of violent conflicts by demonstrating how huge natural resource endowments rather than brighten the prospects for development, paradoxically motivate people to struggle over resources, or act as an incentive for armed groups to engage in conflict in order to exploit the opportunity to loot. It is hinged upon the resource wealth-violent conflict nexus, and provides explanations, why in spite of being relatively well endowed resource-wise, African countries remain poor and conflict-ridden. Ross (2003) presents a concise description of the resource curse based on findings, 'that natural resources play a key role in triggering, prolonging, and financing conflicts.' In an earlier article, he had observed that, "many of the poorest and most troubled states in the developing world, have, paradoxically, high levels of natural resource wealth. There is a growing body of evidence that resource wealth may harm a country's prospects for development" (Ross, 2001: 328). This echoes among others the views of de Soysa (2001; Collier and Hoeffler, 2001), which seek to draw a relationship or correlation between natural resources, greed and civil war.

In seeking to extend the borders of the connection between resource dependency and conflict, Ross (2001: 325-361), using regression models explored the oil – democracy nexus by examining the thesis that "oil and mineral wealth tends to make states less democratic." Focussing on the "causal mechanisms," identified as: the rentier effect, repression effect and modernization effect, Ross attempts to analyze the "alleged link between oil exports and authoritarianism" (2001: 332), and concludes that "oil does greater damage to democracy in poor countries than in rich ones, and a given rise in oil exports will do more harm in oil-poor states than in rich ones" (2001: 356). However, it is not clear how oil does this beyond an assumption of its "ineluctable" corruptive influence.

The picture that emerges is clearly one in which resource wealth is subversive of the development process. Operating within this perspective, (Billon, 2001: 562), asserts that, "beyond increasing the risk of armed conflict by financing and motivating conflicts, natural resources also increase the vulnerability of countries to armed conflict by weakening the ability of political institutions to peacefully resolve conflicts." Thus apart from the risk of subverting development, natural resources increase the risk of war and insecurity.

The implications of the foregoing diagnosis is that even if Africa experiences an increased net inflow of oil revenues from the "new oil boom", the "oil curse" and the "rentier effect" will conspire to ensure that it feeds into corruption and violent conflict, rather than the democratic development of society. Already the argument is being made that the windfall from oil in countries like Chad, Nigeria, Angola and Sudan have not benefited the ordinary people in those countries, rather it is the elites and their foreign partners that have monopolised the benefits from the oil trade. This supports the prognosis that African oil-rich countries appear to be caught in the trap of the "paradox of plenty", where more oil wealth will serve to deepen the developmental crisis confronting the continent.

Yet, in spite of its attractions, the resource curse thesis does not capture the complex dimensions of the politics and international linkages that underpin violent conflicts in resource-rich African countries. Neither does it explain why wars break out in resource-poor countries. Rather it exaggerates the role of a single factor, out of many, as the predisposing factor to violence. A deeper reflection shows that the reality is more complex and that the resource curse – as seductive as it appears could be wrong-headed.

Even when the emphasis is placed on intensified struggles over ”scarce” resources, the fundamental questions about how such scarcities are produced, and the distributive inequities that underpin such scarcities are usually glossed over (Obi, 2000: 47-62). The second issue relates to the question of who the actors in conflict are. While most of the attention is often placed on local actors: the state/political elites, militia groups/warlords, and weak and inept bureaucracies, very little attention is paid to the role of external and transnational actors and the lack of transparency that shrouds the extent of their involvement in these conflicts. Such external actors include private security organizations, mercenaries, international traders and companies, arms suppliers, and extra-African powers pursuing strategic and economic interests in the continent.

In a rapidly globalising world, the international scramble for, and exploitation of Africa’s resources has been intensified (Bond, 2006), resource-endowment may be a curse for those that loose their land, homes and rights for oil extraction to take place, but, it is a blessing for those extractive external forces and their local allies, that control and sell the oil on the world market. Thus, oil alone does not cause conflict. It is transformed and mediated through market, social and power relations, so that by the time it features in the “circuits of conflict”, it would have entered into other spheres as energy, profit, and power. The fundamental question then is who has the power over these resources, how are the benefits shared in the context of state-society relations? This is partly relevant in explaining why a resource-rich Norway is not embroiled in “resource wars”, while a resource-rich Nigeria is confronted by insurgent militia in the Niger Delta.

Rather than place the blame on an “oil curse”, it is better to trace the roots of conflict in political and socio-economic inequities and historical factors. The issue of whether China’s joining of the oil-rush in Africa will worsen poverty, corruption, conflict and impunity in the continent will ultimately depend on local, national and transnational factors. The fundamental issue however is that the roots of Africa’s conflict lie more in historical, social and distributive inequities and the contradictions being spawned within the continent by globally-led extraction, accumulation. China’s entry into the race—either for better or for worse, will ultimately depend on how African states and governing elites interpret and use the moment for transformatory or non-transformatory ends.

The “New” Dimensions of the Scramble for Africa’s oil

Rather than a “new” scramble for Africa, it may be appropriate to identify new or emerging dimensions to the struggle to exploit Africa’s resources and markets. One of the features of the scenario is the entry of emerging industrial powers from Asia, particularly China in what has been since the days of the “old” scramble, the “hunting preserve” of the Western powers. Clearly linked to the most-recent phase of globalisation, this has contributed to the intensification of the exploitation of the continent, but has also altered the context of exploitation, by providing African state(s) with an alternative choice in the global developmental context in what has become a unipolar, post-Cold war order. While the West has tried to reinforce its ties with Africa through the G8-Nepad initiative, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), GPOI, and Economic Partnership Agreements, there has also been a growing closeness in Sino-African relations following the establishment of the China-Africa cooperation Forum in 2000 (Wenping 2006: 39).

The growing profile of China in Africa reached a significant milestone on November 4-5, 2006, when 41 African Heads of State were hosted by the Chinese leadership to a Forum for China-Africa Co-operation (FOCAC) summit at Beijing. At the end of the summit, it was agreed that the next meeting should take place in Egypt in 2009. According to Naidu and Corkin (2006: 4), the Chinese leadership proposed a robust development assistance package for Africa, based on, "US$3 billion in preferential loans and US$2 billion in preferential buyers credits over the next three years; the doubling of its 2006 aid assistance by 2009; initiating a China-Africa development fund that will reach US5billion to encourage Chinese companies to invest in Africa". Other aspects related to the building of agricultural projects, hospitals, training programmes, scholarships and debt forgiveness.

In response to Western charges of China's support to autocratic regimes and the use of investments and development assistance, it has responded that it is guided by the principles of its foreign relations: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non interference in other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence (Roughneen 2006). Yet, in most of the discussions at FOCAC, China stressed its interest in assisting Africa in its development efforts, while "African leaders spoke of investment in developing oilfields and copper deposits and building airports and ports. No Chinese speaker mentioned China's appetite for African oil" (Orr 2006: 6). This also makes it clear that China seeks to tap into the goodwill and support of African states as it projects itself and builds up its influence globally.

As noted earlier, the implication of Chinese policy towards Africa is that undercuts Western policies and domination. For instance, in Sudan, the exit of Western oil companies was followed by the entry of Chinese and Indian oil companies, while in Angola, the state's rejection of Western aid conditionalities, paved the way for the acceptance of Chinese aid, and the takeover of an oil block hither-to allocated owned Total (upon its expiration) to a Chinese oil company. In other parts of Africa, Chinese companies are muscling their way into oil-rich countries by "under-cutting" Western competition through its attractive "gifts" of development aid and "non-interference". China's entry into the lucrative Nigerian oil sector was attendant to visits to China and a reciprocal visit by the Chinese premier, following which deals on Chinese investments and development aid in the railways, agriculture and oil were sealed. China has also taken advantage of the "nationalist" instincts of an African elite seeking integration into a global elite on more equitable terms. But this should not subtract from the immense benefits that Chinese is gaining from increased access to Africa's resources.

A related question that arises from the foregoing is how the conflicts that may arise in the course of the entry of new external players seeking oil in Africa. How can the West in the spirit of a "Bismarkian congress" resolve the competing claims of the "Chinese dragon" in the context of the expansionist logic of global(ised) capital? What prospects lie beneath the growing competition between the "Western" and emerging "Eastern" factions of globalised capital and how can the contradictions be resolved? To address and other issues, it would be relevant further explore the roles of the transnational actors operating in Africa.

Oil Multinationals (OMNC's) and Asian National Oil Corporations (ANOC's)

Western Oil Multinationals play a key role in globalised capitalist accumulation and power by their central role in the commoditization of energy, particularly hydrocarbons. They collectively represent some of the world's most wealthy and powerful transnational actors. According to the Forbes 2000 Global Report (2007), ExxonMobil and Shell, the world's 7th and 8th largest companies, but 1st and 2nd largest OMNC's, recorded profits of US$39.50 billion and US$25.55 billion respectively. Other OMNC's in the top 20 companies in the world are BP, Chevron and Total. Although most of global oil is theoretically controlled by the national corporations of the Middle East States, the global reach and might of OMNC's is unmatched. This has been further reinforced by recent mergers which has seen to the rise of "super" OMNC's: ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, BP-Amoco-Arco, and ChevronTexaco (Davis 2006: 3). The implication of this is that these companies with their immense wealth, global clout and support of their home-governments, have considerable leverage over the petro-states with which they do business. Thus, these companies operate in Nigeria, Angola, Algeria, Congo-Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, and Chad. In all these places they operate mostly in partnership with state oil corporations—in Nigeria's case, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, in Angola's case—Sociedad Nacional de Combustveis de Angola, Sonangol, and GNPC in Sudan. They also operate in partnership with private indigenous and foreign oil firms. An important consideration is the revolving-door relationship between the state and oil sectors, which enables top indigenous OMNC executives to take top government positions, or for retired government officials to assume positions on the boards of local subsidiaries of OMNC's. This trend can be gleaned from the Nigerian case, particularly in relation to Shell (Rowell, Marriot and Stockman 2005).

A related point that also echoes in the literature suggests that the control of oil has shifted in favour of National/State Oil Corporations. Citing the figures of the size of oil reserves/production controlled by such National Oil Corporations (NOC's) as Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) the National Iranian Oil Company, Brazil's Petrobras, Saudi Aramco, the Kuwaiti Petroleum Corporation, Algeria's Sonatrach, Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation and the Libyan National Oil Corporation, this perspective argues that NOC's not MNOC's control the world's oil. In the context of the struggle for oil in Africa, two issues are relevant: the security threats posed by the control of oil by "kleptocratic petro-states" or "failed petro-states" and the ability of such states to play OMNC's against each other, and against ANOC's, or even deny access to an oil-addicted world. Unfortunately, the ownership of oil reserves and control of oil by African states are not altogether synonymous. In spite of the "ownership" by African NOC's, their non-ownership of sophisticated oil technology, and limited knowledge about global oil markets and the secrets of oil contracting, coupled with the support of the home-governments of OMNC's all combine to ensure that Oil Multinationals control oil production, without owning the oil reserves. What has changed is the increased bargaining power of petro-states to demand more in exchange for allowing access to "their" oil reserves. Outside of that globalised arrangement of global power and accumulation, African petro-states only stand to earn more, which in terms of their place in global power relations does not amount to control. Another point, is that by shifting the blame to NOC's and petro-states, the securitization of oil provides justification for intervention to save the world from the depredations of the "ticking time bomb" of petro-states (and NOC's). Such interventionism often takes the form of promoting the global neo-liberal agenda, often in the form of economic liberation, demands for accountability, and in extreme cases, external intervention.

Under the regime of economic liberalisation with its emphasis on the withdrawal of state intervention in the economy, many state oil corporations in Africa have opened up their oil sectors to more foreign investments and even divested from the downstream sectors. This has provided opportunities both for OMNC's to invest, or to enter into partnerships with local actors. The overall global picture in the oil sector, is that demand is virtually outstripping supply, and that in the face of diminishing returns on oil investments, OMNC's have to push into new frontiers and strike new big oil discoveries to keep the rate of profit rising. When the factors of a post-9/11 world, increased global production and energy consumption are added, it becomes all to clear why the West will continue to have the control of oil in Africa as a top priority strategic goal for the foreseeable future.

OMNC's clearly dominate the oil sector across Africa, which although contains an estimated 9% of the world's oil reserves is nonetheless a very important factor, given its significance to the energy security of the world's powers and the view that the continent is the least explored in the world and may hold a lot more oil than is presently known. The entry of Chinese oil companies in the late 20th century, and their tactics for getting a slice of the African oil pie, has led to the intensification of the "oil rush" in Africa.

Asian National Oil Corporations (ANOC's)

The discussion of ANOC's is limited to the Chinese state oil companies. This is due to their role in Africa, constrains of space and the fact that they are presently the largest when the region is placed in a global context. China operates in Africa through three companies: China National Petroleum Company (CNPC), China National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) and China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (Sinopec). According to Fee (2006), Chinese companies are "most active in Sudan, Angola, Nigeria, Algeria and Gabon, with pre-investment talks ongoing in Chad, Libya and the Central African Republic". All these companies are state-owned or publicly listed companies making the transition from national to global conglomerates.

The CNPC operates in Sudan, Angola, Nigeria, Niger and Chad, while the CNOOC, which primarily operates offshore, has interests in Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea. Its attempt in 2005 to acquire Unocal Oil Company in the US as part of its global outreach policy failed as Chevron beat it to the tape. Sinopec was set up in 2000 as a publicly listed company. According to its website, based on its turnover, it is the largest listed company in China. It is quoted on the Shanghai, New York and Hong Kong Stock Exchange(s), and was ranked 23rd in the 2006 Global Fortune. According to the Forbes Global 2000, it is listed as the 41st in the ranking of global companies with a profit of US$16.53 billion. Sinopec has invested in Sudan, Angola, Gabon, Algeria, Congo-Brazzaville and Ethiopia.

The foregoing suggests that as far as the race goes, the ANOC's are presently far behind the OMNC's both globally and in Africa. Yet, their current foothold is significant not just for the challenge it poses for the OMNC's, but more so, for the opportunities that it provides African states, and China itself as it continues to project itself on a global scale.

The Other Scramble: oil politics in Africa

So far, most of the attention has been focussed on the struggles by external forces for Africa's wealth. Yet, it is important to critically examine the struggle for the control of oil in Africa, and the ways in which these connect with the broader global structures, actors and processes. This struggle has several dimensions, but it is often represented as pitching centralised control or monopoly of oil revenues: by a centralized state/dominant elite or group to the exclusion of other (marginalised) groups/regions or elite fractions. This much is clear from the well-known Niger Delta crisis where the struggle by the ethnic minorities for autonomy and resource control has assumed insurgent proportions with frequent attacks on oil and government interests by well-armed militias. Apart from the militias, transnational networks trading in stolen crude oil (illegal bunkering) and small arms are also involved in the struggles for oil in the Niger Delta. By blending into the state-oil company-oil community nodes of power, authority and conflict, these networks are responsible for the loss of almost 20% of Nigeria's oil production annually.

Starting from the struggles of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the early 1990's, to the more recent attacks by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) on Western and Chinese oil interests in the Niger Delta, the quest for the redistribution of federally-controlled oil revenues minorities, has been at the heart of the quest by the oil-producing parts of Nigeria to wrest the control of oil from a central government, believed to be largely dominated by elites from non-oil producing parts of the country (Obi 2001, 2007; Saro-Wiwa 1995; Human Rights Watch 2005; Omeje 2006: 141-146, Timberg 2006).

In Sudan's case, the struggle for oil, located in the central and southern parts of the country lay at the heart of one of Africa's longest civil wars before the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005 between the Government of the Sudan and the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM) representing Southern Sudan. Thus was a prominent feature in the civil war between the central government and southern rebels. The discovery of oil by Chevron after getting an oil concession in 1975 from the central government in Khartoum made it a target of attacks by rebels of the SPLM. The combination of this and pressures from international human rights groups and the US government forced Chevron to withdraw in 1992. As noted earlier other Western oil companies followed until the Sudanese state formed a joint venture company — the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPC) involving the state-owned Sudan National Petroleum Corporation (Sudapet), Chinese National Petroleum Corporation—40%, Petronas of Malaysia—30%, and Oil and Natural Gas Corporation of India—25% (that took over Talisman's interests in GNPC in 2003) (Pinaud 2006; The Times of India 2002). It was the GNPC that produced oil and commenced exports for the first time in 1999.

Since oil accounts for 70% of Sudan's export revenues it has also influenced the struggles between the Khartoum-based political elites that control the central government (and the oil in pre-CPA days, but since the CPA, share it on a 50/50 basis), and other groups in the country. Even though, the CPA has provided for an equal sharing of the oil revenues, its implementation has been delayed with the consequence that the Southern Sudan has not been able to get its full share.

The foregoing underscores the close intimacy between state and oil power, and the nature of the fractional squabbles over oil revenues on a national scale, which imposes a centralist logic on the control and distribution of oil rents. The result of a centralist imposition of control from above is both the intense horizontal struggles for access to, and control of a larger share of oil rents, but more fundamentally, vertical struggles between the marginalised and oppressed groups I society and the ruling "oil" elite. These struggles also underpin the ruling class formation process mostly through strategic locationing in the distributive circuits of the politics of the petro-state often carried out through primitive accumulation activities. As such the premium on controlling political (oil) power is very high, leaving virtually no incentive or space for the democratisation of state-society relations. Such features can be gleaned from politics in Nigeria, Angola, Algeria, Sudan, Chad and Equatorial Guinea.

Another dimension of the struggles over oil is the relationship between foreign oil companies and national capital in African petro-states. While in the main, both are partners with OMNC's and ANOC's operating joint oil ventures/contracts and having equity participation in national oil companies in Africa, there are also competitors in those African countries where a petro-bourgeoisie is emerging, and seeking incorporation into a transnational capitalist class. This is most visible from the policies of the Nigerian government since 2000, when it embarked on the liberalisation of the oil industry. Its effort at building an indigenous petro-elite can be gleaned from several policies: the decision of the NNPC to increase local content in the Nigerian oil industry to 70% by 2007, divestment of state shares in downstream sector oil companies which were sold to indigenous investors (Conoil and Oando), and the reserving of a 10% quota for indigenous participation in every Oil Mining License (OML) granted to foreign investors. There is no doubt that the leverage given to the Nigerian State by the "new" scramble for its oil has partly fed into a new kind of economic nationalism, driven by the quest for more profit and the political patronage calculations of the national ruling elite.

Thus, Nigerian oil companies are beginning to assert themselves locally and also venturing outside the country. Oando, which was formed in 1992, but acquired the National Oil and Chemical Marketing plc (formerly the marketing arm of Shell), was listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange in 2005; while other indigenous oil companies were allocated oil blocks in the Joint Development Zone between Nigeria and Sao Tome and Principe in 2005. These include: Energy and Equity Resources (EER), Water Smith Petroman, and South Atlantic Petroleum (later revoked and now subject of a court case) (Oduniyi 2005). In the same manner, on May 16, under two weeks before handing over power, two of the federal government-owned refineries were sold to a consortium of indigenous oil companies named Bluestar Oil Services: Dangote 55%, Zenon Oil 25%, Rivers state government 15% and Transcorp 5%. It bought the Kaduna Refinery and Petrochemical Company (KPRC) for US$160 million (after the bid by CNPC was turned down for being too low), and the Port Harcourt Refinery for US$561 million (Badejo 2007). The major equity holder in Bluestar, Dangote has substantial interests in salt, sugar, cements and oil, particularly in the EER, and together with the owner of Zenon Oil are known donors to the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP).

What flows from the following is the complex architecture of the scramble for oil and its enmeshment with trans-global processes and actors. Given its place in the class struggles around in a rapidly globalising world, oil is destined to be "the commodity of choice" for power, influence and wealth. Whether the struggle with between OMNC's, or between them and ANOC's, or between both and State/Indigenous private oil capital, the contestations are framed within highly inequitable relations of production and distribution, which deepen existing social contradictions within Africa, and further complicate any prospects of social transformation, or the democratisation of state-society relations.

Conclusion

The foregoing clearly shows that although the scramble for Africa formally ended at the doorsteps of colonial rule, and independence, its spirit continues to haunt the continent as the world most powerful states, companies and trans-territorial actors continue to seek its resources for power, influence and domination on a global scale. Africa is much sought after for these reasons and more. And as the Council on Foreign Relations (2005) put, it is more than humanitarianism. Indeed, it appears to be less about humanitarianism and more about the pursuit of and attainment of strategic interests in the continent. As has been shown in this paper oil in West and Central Africa is one of the most highly priced strategic interests, not only because of its rich energy deposits, but also because of its linkages to the US-led war on terror, migration, environmental and epidemiological security and the promotion of Western neo-liberal ideology in Africa. U.S. and Western strategists have identified China (to a lesser extent, India, Malaysia and Korea) as the next great competitor for resources and influence in Africa (following the collapse of the Soviet Union). China, on the other hand has refrained from any ideological position in its African diplomacy, insisting on its policy of peaceful co-existence: non-interference, respect for the sovereignty of Africa states, assistance cooperation to help Africa achieve self-reliance and development. Yet, it may well be that China has a long-term strategy behind its engagement, that may well be broadly similar to those of the West, although, the road from Beijing is seemingly different, it only serves China's national and global interests

The question of coherent Africa's agency for taking advantage of the "Chinese moment" has preoccupied some scholars and policymakers (Taylor 2006a: 937-959; 2006b: 3; Naidu and Davies 81). So far, the entry of the Chinese dragon has elicited a mixture of approval, where it has brought more national revenues from resource exports and cheap manufactures, or disapproval or protest, where cheap Chinese products had destroyed local industry, or Chinese investors are accused of indulging in harsh/discriminatory labour practices or policies that destroy to environment or support authoritarian governments in the continent.

There is some scepticism, that the present resource-rich African states and political elite may not be able to use the increased revenues to transform their economies or societies, and would more likely enrich themselves and their patrimonial networks, and seek to entrench themselves in power through forceful means, including the use of made-in-China-arms. The picture that emerges is that while China appears to have got its act together, Africa is still searching, with the West busy sizing up the Chinese threat in Africa and exploring the options for neutralizing it. This may either through an amicable agreement of "the limits of expansion" or spheres of influence in Africa – a Bismarckian ghost, or a dialogue directed at making China tow the Western line of engaging Africa, or as an unlikely worst case scenario, more competition and a East-West clash over competing interests in Africa.

In the final analysis, there can be no easy answers outside of a critical reading of the processes of transnational capitalist accumulation, in which oil plays a central role. The prospects of oil-rich African states emerging from the present struggle for the continent's resources will ultimately depend of the ability of these states to transform themselves through a developmental ethos to acts as catalysts both for social transformation, but perhaps more fundamentally, for the re-organisation of production in the continent in ways that lift it out of its marginal position in the globalised division of labour which since the days of the "old scramble", has defined it as an object of domination and exploitation by forces from "outside".

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