

FORUM: ANTHROPOLOGY OF OIL AND THE RESOURCE CURSE

SIGNIFICATIONS OF OIL IN AFRICA or WHAT (MORE) CAN ANTHROPOLOGISTS CONTRIBUTE TO THE STUDY OF OIL?

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For half a century, oil production has been a key factor in the development of a small number of African states south of the Sahara. Only now, however, it is becoming a source of substantial social, economic and cultural transformation for an increasing number of new African oil states. This is partly due to the fact that political instability in the Near and Middle East, the inexorable move towards or even passing of 'peak oil', the growing demand for oil due to ever increasing consumption in the emerging countries, and the related rise of crude oil prices have given new importance to African oil. Even hitherto unprofitable deposits in Africa are now seen as an economically and geo-strategically important resource. It is estimated that the share of African oil to worldwide production could rise from currently 13–18 percent to 25 per cent by 2015. This brief intervention will look at existing studies on (African) oil and ask how social and cultural anthropology could further contribute to the analysis of this socially, politically and economically important conjuncture in world history.

Socio-anthropological perspectives on oil

The first sociologically oriented studies on global oil were inspired by politically incisive moments in history like the substance's crucial relevance during World War II, or the formation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960, and the oil crisis that followed the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Fascinated by the secrecy as well as the encompassing power relations triggered by oil production, a number of authors gave accounts of oil developments from the first US rush around the 1850s to the fast growing global importance of crude by the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time very few studies were based on first-hand information or field work. This state of affairs changed during the 1970s and 1980s when studies increasingly focused on socio-economic change and the impact of the globalising oil market on existing national economies. Regionally, these studies discussed the then (fewer) major centres of world oil production, like the Caspian Basin, the Middle East, Alaska or Latin America. Studies focusing on Africa before 1990 mainly covered Nigeria, the continent's largest producer, and highlighted the economic effects of oil production, for example on the lives of oil workers during the country's oil bust (Lubeck 1978; Turner 1986), foreign powers

(Abdulraheem et al. 1986; Shaw 1984) or on peasants and underdevelopment (Berry 1984; Watts 1987).

From 1990 on, studies on oil's impact in Africa increased in number and scope. These more recent studies focused on conflicts preceding and accompanying ensuing oil production. They applied three dominant analytical concepts: 'rentier-states'—indicating a growing dependency on non-productive incomes from exploitable resources and its political consequences in neo-patrimonial systems and corruption (Yates 1996); the 'Dutch Disease'—a phenomenon (first observed in the Netherlands) that depicts the decline in non-oil related investments paired with a rise in currency due to export gains, which leads to a fall in a country's overall economic performance (Karl 1997); and the 'resource curse'—which establishes dependencies between resource rich but otherwise poor countries' tendencies to political centralization, economic decline, and increased incidents of war (Auty 1993). Within the range of studies on African oil, only a few treat the effects of oil as productive of new orders. We want to mention four: Apter (1996) deals with the significance of the country's oil boom for the display of a new Nigerian confidence. He maintains that while oil helped to erase colonial cultural memories from collective consciousness it also significantly contributed to the establishment of a new entrepreneurial elite. Ferguson (2005) uses the example of oil production to suggest a specific global spatial patterning, which Barry (2006) picks up in his notion of globally spread epistemic communities created by "technological zones" whereas Reyna and Behrends (2008) maintain oil production to be essentially related to "modes of domination".

More ethnography in the study of African oil

While the above quoted literature and the political economy framework used by it remain extremely relevant for the study of oil, they leave out important domains of knowledge that could be crucial to an enhanced understanding of oil's impact on Africa. By lucky incidence, these domains of knowledge are exactly those that social and cultural anthropology traditionally claim as their fields of expertise.

First, there is a need for detailed ethnographies of practice as they can be provided by long-term (we are tempted to say 'classical') anthropological fieldwork. Macroscopic studies on African oil, like many of the more recent ones on oil and conflict, often cite journalists' or activists' accounts of real world happenings and conditions in the oil zone. However, epistemologically, such accounts are only illustrations attached to already construed theoretical arguments. They are not data to be methodologically (here inductively) used in the building of knowledge. As it has been shown for numerous other subject matters, the ethnographic study of practice can reveal how, in particular oil zones in Africa, a localized mix of actors, stakes, interests, resources of power and cultural understandings enter processes of interaction and negotiation that yield specific outcomes. It is by looking into such actual processes in the making that the complex interlocking of multiple factors becomes understandable.

Second, as Apter (1996, see above) has shown, the impact of oil can and must also be considered with regard to socio-cultural and therefore very heterogeneous and context-

specific *meanings* or *significations* attributed to various aspects of oil production by the involved actors. Big oil as a key determinant of global economy and international relations and therefore history is generally grasped through a framework of economics that highlights universal principles and behaviour deduced from rational choice theory rather than ethnographic inquiry into heterogeneous systems of culture- and actor-specific meanings.

However, for at least two reasons it is overdue that the anthropological concept of meaning or signification be consistently used to understand how dealing with oil is mediated by systems of signification and how these latter are shaped and change by their contact with oil. First, as detailed ethnographic studies of sciences, for example, have shown, culture-specific systems of signification structure a good deal of what is happening in the prototypical fields of rationality, namely science and business. Second, the production of oil in Africa brings altered conditions of livelihood, economic choice and potential conflict to many actors. Therefore one will see how these actors adapt, combine and invent systems of meanings in order to come to terms with, or make use of, their changed situation. Equally, it will be seen how actors with different economic interests, political positions and cultural backgrounds confront each other (or serve as mediators and translators to the parties involved) at various interfaces and make use of adapted or invented signifiatory practices in order to deal with these encounters.

Anthropology offers many, quite varied, applications of the concept of meaning or signification. Since it is obviously beyond the scope of our intervention here to discuss the immense literature we only mention some conceptual distinctions that might be relevant to the study of signifiatory practices in the oil zone. To begin with, significations have in various ways been treated as guides to action, they enable people to perceive the world and engage with it. Geertz, for example, produced the notion of the *model of* and the *model for 'reality'*. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have explored the role of language and metaphor in the cultural constitution of such models. While the concept of 'signification' as model or plan is often treated as something that is culturally embedded and fixed to specified tasks, the concept of *travelling models* highlights the fact that significations are neither bound to particular groups of actors nor fixed in their original semantic content and potential application to practical tasks. Thus whole systems of signification can be moved from one social and practical context into another where they would be creatively adapted (and thus changed).

Next to and sometimes opposing such understandings of signification as means to perceive and engage with the world are those approaches that study symbols and metaphoric speech as means to discursively *create* social and political order and influence others. While studies centred around the concept of ideology (e.g. those of Maurice Bloch) concentrate on (ethnographically reconstructed) *systems* of meaning and therefore come methodologically close to interpretive approaches such as Geertz', others follow the traditions of ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and linguistic pragmatics in order to study social *practices* of signifying rather than systems of signification (e.g. Boden and Zimmermann 1991). This latter approach to signification gives largest room for the exploration of creative and adaptive practices on the one hand and on the emergence of new forms of meaning as a result of contingent interaction processes on the other (cf. Meyer and Schareika 2009). We claim that an anthropological study of oil should not only take up and make use of frameworks set by political economy, but use its particular

theoretical and methodological strengths to develop new perspectives in this increasingly important field. We suggest that one (more) of anthropology's contributions to the study of social transformation induced by oil production could be achieved by conceptualising significations as embedded and socially productive in practice.

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