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Petro-Governance as Colonial Extraction Engineering: Spectral Infrastructures, Resistance, and the Unfinished Afterlife of Empire in Africa's Oil Regimes

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Abstract
Although all African states are formally independent, the continent, like much of the postcolonial Global South, "still breathes coloniality all the time and every day," to borrow Maldonado-Torres's evocative phrasing. Nowhere is this condition more striking than in the governance of oil. This study, therefore, interrogates the historical and structural foundations of Africa's oil postcolonial regimes as afterlife projects of colonial extraction. Anchored in postcolonial theory, decolonial economic thought, and critical political economy, it advances the claim that African petro-governance was inaugurated on three colonial logics of structurelessness, imperial subterfuge and authoritarian managerialism. The analysis moves further to ask what continuities and discontinuities have these legacies encountered, and how they have shaped postcolonial ways of economic life, order, and political authority. Drawing on archival evidence, oral histories, and secondary sources, the study argues that colonial oil governance has reappeared in three spectral forms of institutional dependency, neocolonial economic rationality, and authoritarian statecraft. The argument, ultimately, is that African oil governance requires a fundamental rethinking to delinks it from these unfinished colonial projects and imagines discontinuities adequate to the demands of postcolonial equity, autonomy, and survival.

Keyword: Petro-governance, colonial extractive engineering, post-colonial extension, decolonial political economy.

Introduction

The twentieth century, aptly termed the "oil century" by Amen (2004), was profoundly reshaped by oil's emergence as the cornerstone of global petro-modernity. This transformation was driven by technological innovation (Priest, 2012), oil's entanglement with imperial security paradigms (Penrose, 1976), and the ambitions of industrial capitalism to engineer a "petro-market civilisation" (DiMuzio, 2012). Africa's transition from colonial to sovereign states coincided with significant oil discoveries, which many believed would catalyse rapid postcolonial development. Early theorists such as Rosenstein-Rodan (1961) envisioned oil as the "big push" for Africa's modernisation, yet these visions often overlooked the specific historical and

structural contexts of oil extraction on the continent.

Despite possessing vast reserves and attracting hundreds of energy firms (Energy Institute, 2024), Africa's oil wealth has not yielded broad-based development or structural state-building. Instead, many African petro-states remain beset by subsistence economies, political instability, and violent resource conflicts. Dominant explanatory frameworks—such as the "resource curse" (Auty, 1993; Sachs & Warner, 1995, 2001; Ross, 2001, 2012), "Dutch disease" (Corden & Neary, 1982; Corden, 1984), and the "paradox of plenty" (Karl, 1997; Watts, 2008)—often treat oil as an ahistorical pathology, privileging econometric correlations over critical historical analysis of colonial legacies embedded in extractive governance.

Critical African scholarship, while highlighting resource management failures (Okonta & Douglas, 2003; Obi, 2010; Akpan, 2012; Adunbi, 2015; Abdulahi & Hickey, 2018), frequently neglects how colonial infrastructures were designed to perpetuate inequality and institutional

failure. This omission reinforces the coloniality of knowledge and forecloses decolonial theorisation, as it fails to account for the ongoing influence of colonial legal, security, and extractive institutions. This study departs from orthodox paradigms by critically reappraising colonial extractive regimes and tracing their enduring effects on post-imperial oil governance. It argues for decolonising oil governance as essential to addressing Africa's contemporary crises, using case studies from Nigeria, Angola, and North Africa.

Colonial Capitalism and the Rise of African Petro-Governance

Europe's colonisation of Africa was underpinned by a utilitarian philosophy equating national wealth with resource extraction, a key tenet of fifteenth-century mercantilism. This reductionist worldview enabled European powers to perceive Africa solely in terms of material wealth, driving a revolutionary, though imposed, transformation of indigenous systems. Despite divergent colonial tactics, such as Britain's indirect rule and France's assimilationist mission civilisatrice, the overarching aim remained the dismantling of African institutions to facilitate foreign rule and capitalist expansion (Rodney, 1972; Lugard, 1922).

Precolonial African societies were structured around communitarian values, prioritising reciprocity and stewardship of nature (Mbiti, 1970; Gyekye, 1996). These systems, grounded in symbiotic human-environment relations, were radically disrupted by colonialism, which imposed denationalised ownership and redirected both labour and resources toward export extraction. The result was the replacement of communal practices with extractive logics aligned with the demands of global capitalism.

Colonialism and capitalism functioned as mutually reinforcing systems, as theorised by Wayne (1981). Surplus labour from Africa and other non-industrial regions was commodified and channelled into expanding European capital, with colonial rule serving as the apparatus for dispossession. As Rodney (1972) contends, African surpluses subsidised European industry and social stability, while "primitive accumulation" enabled the consolidation of industrial capitalism. Thus, colonialism and capitalism should be understood as co-constitutive rather than discrete phenomena.

Colonial petro-capitalism, a hybrid system linking imperial ambition with capitalist extraction, facilitated Western investment in African oil. This system was marked by the collusion of colonial states and multinational firms, exemplified by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and Compagnie Française des Pétroles, who promoted oil as essential to imperial security (Jones, 1981; UK National Archives, 1920). Oil exploration thus became both a tool for commercial profit and a strategic instrument for sustaining imperial power, shaping extractive governance and hierarchies that persist today (Malm, 2016).

Revisiting the Origins and Theorising Colonial Petro-Governance

Oil governance in Africa emerged as an experimental construct of colonial petro-capitalism, marked initially by imperial subterfuge. This "dual regime" combined covertness, through opaque treaties, off-the-record contracts, and bureaucratic manoeuvres, with coercion, such as militarised enforcement and punitive legal frameworks. These intertwined strategies enabled colonial powers to secure oil-rich territories while minimising local resistance and public scrutiny (Peter, 2013). The consequence was a system where Africa was treated not as a society, but as a reservoir of resources, shaping both extractive practices and the narratives constructed around oil's history and value (Rodney, 1972).

The historiography of African oil often accepts 1908 as the starting point of Nigerian oil extraction, coinciding with Shell BP's public concession (El-Badawi, 2009; Akpan, 2011). However, colonial and corporate records reveal earlier, covert activities, such as British test drilling in Yorubaland under the 1889 Petroleum Ordinance disguised as health regulation (National Archives Ibadan, File CO 147/89). Chiefs, misled by legal jargon, unknowingly

signed away resource sovereignty. Oral histories and archival evidence indicate that covert oil exploration and mislabelled activities were foundational to colonial oil governance, supporting the view of oil as both a tool of domination and a constructed epistemic fiction (Peter, 2013).

Imperial covertness extended to corporate identities, exemplified by the Nigeria Bitumen Corporation (NBC), often misrepresented as German but actually British-registered (Steyn, 2010). Such misrepresentation concealed Britain's strategic interests in its colonies, reinforcing covert modalities of exploration and deepening imperial entanglement in Africa's petroleum sector. This strategy, described by Sousa Santos (2014) as "epistemicide," entrenched ignorance among Africans about the true scale and value of local oil, consolidating imperial control while stifling resistance and claims to resource sovereignty.

When resistance arose, colonial administrations swiftly employed coercion, including fines, bans, detentions, and militarised enforcement, as seen in cases from Nigeria to Libya (Umejesi & Akpan, 2013). Colonial oil governance, as theorised by Mbembe (2003), operated as a necropolitical regime, wielding the power over life and death to discipline African communities for metropolitan gain. This was evident in mass displacements, exploitative labour systems, and racialised exclusion from technical and economic opportunities, which provoked resistance and ultimately prompted colonial powers to shift towards authoritarian managerialism.

Authoritarian managerialism involved centralised, bureaucratic control over resources, pioneered by French institutions such as BRP and SNPA, and later adopted by British and other colonial administrations. These organisations standardised exploration policies, labour regimes, and administrative systems, disregarding local socio-ecological contexts (Steyn, 2010). By centralising control, colonial states further excluded African actors from meaningful participation, consolidating oil governance as a tool for securing corporate and imperial interests in the face of decolonisation.

The transition to centralised oil regimes resulted in exclusive, long-term concessions for colonial oil firms, excluding both indigenous and rival foreign competitors (Port Harcourt National Archive, File CO 147/189). These concessions entrenched monopolies, stifling competition and local content, echoing Smith's (2007) critique of monopolies as distortive and anti-developmental. Africans were relegated to subordinate roles, and the resulting bifurcation between Western technological advancement and African marginalisation fixed enduring structural barriers to development. Colonial infrastructure investments served extractive agendas, leaving African oil economies peripheral at the end of colonial rule.

Discussion of Findings

Decolonisation in Africa's oil-producing states followed varied trajectories, shaped by colonial operational and ideological legacies. In non-settler colonies such as Nigeria, independence was achieved via negotiation, described by Azikiwe as a "gift on a platter of gold." In contrast, Algeria and Angola gained sovereignty through protracted armed struggles that fused anti-imperialist and socialist aspirations (Acemoglu et al., 2001). Ultimately, the formal transfer of power was ambiguous, as the colonial institutions and extractive structures remained intact, forming the backbone of postcolonial states. As Eyo (2025) observes, the transition was more a handover than a transformation, with African leaders inheriting rigid, self-perpetuating frameworks from their colonial predecessors.

The ambitions of postcolonial political orders in oil governance have largely mirrored those of colonial-capitalist regimes. Successor elites often safeguarded the interests and structures established under colonial rule, leading to a shift from colonial to postcolonial petro-capitalism. This blurring of boundaries between foreign and domestic interests resulted in oil being embedded in paradigms of dependency and compromise, rather than genuine transformation

(Eyo, 2025). Rather than achieving true autonomy, postcolonial African oil states experienced the persistence of extractive logics and the entrenchment of elite capture.

Flag-raising and independence ceremonies did little to remove neo-imperial influences over Africa's oil. Petroleum-rich states endured civil wars and regime changes, with former colonial powers and global allies intervening primarily to protect strategic interests. For instance, Britain supported Nigeria's federal government over Biafra to secure oil interests for Shell and BP (Peel, 2009). Such interventions, often covert and coercive, reveal the durability of colonial tactics in shaping postcolonial oil governance.

Similar patterns unfolded in Angola, where Cold War petro-politics shaped both the independence struggle and subsequent civil war. The United States, via Kissinger's "Tar Baby Option," supported UNITA against the Marxist MPLA, prioritising liberal oil governance over nationalisation (Gleijeses, 2002). Elsewhere, Sudan, Morocco, and Algeria, postcolonial conflicts reflected the unresolved legacy of colonial map-making and the exclusion of oil-bearing communities. France's Françafrique ensured that African petro-state leaderships in Gabon and Chad remained aligned with Paris (Verschave, 1998).

Despite structural constraints, many African leaders pursued oil nationalism as a strategy for Pan-African solidarity and transformation. Inspired by developmentalist ideals, they sought to reclaim sovereignty by nationalising oil assets, such as Algeria's 1971 nationalisation and Nigeria's indigenisation decrees. Yet, these efforts clashed with entrenched colonial frameworks and the realities of external control, resulting in a combustible mix of optimism and structural desperation that limited the efficacy of oil nationalism (Clarke, 1994).

Multinational oil companies responded by ceding nominal equity to appease local demands, while retaining operational control through technical agreements. In Nigeria, Shell's strategy during indigenisation ensured continued profit outflows, a pattern mirrored in Angola, where sanctions and insurgency forced the MPLA to reengage multinationals under production-sharing agreements (National Archives, Port Harcourt; Pan-African Liberation Committee, 1971). Western institutions maintained significant stakes, reinforcing the structural entanglement between African oil and transnational capital.

The irony of oil nationalism lies in its production of a "false sense of control." National oil companies, NNPC in Nigeria, Sonatrach in Algeria, Sonangol in Angola, symbolised sovereignty on paper, but critical infrastructures and expertise remained under foreign control (Mitchell, 2011; Müller, 2024). Technical dependency and path dependency meant that even nationalisation reinscribed the very dependencies it sought to overcome, as postcolonial elites adopted "development" rhetoric without dismantling colonial legacies.

Postcolonial oil governance is still shaped by institutional path dependency, neocolonial economic logic, and authoritarian statecraft. Colonial-era contracts persist, facilitating the migration of oil revenues abroad, aided by offshore financial centres such as the British Virgin Islands (Rakei, 2022). The architecture of global capital enables elite collusion and capital flight, with Africa losing billions annually from extractive industries (Ndikumana & Sarr, 2016). These dynamics, architected at decolonisation, have sustained extractive and exclusionary governance.

Neocolonial rationality is reinforced by international financial institutions, whose policies favour transnational capital. IMF and World Bank reforms, including liberalised production-sharing contracts and SAPs, subordinated local governance to corporate interests and eroded environmental and social protections (Hoogvelt, 2001). The result has been environmental racism, fractured community relations, and shallow CSR initiatives that rarely address core principles of environmental justice (Clarke, 1994).

Mass resource activism has emerged in response, but oil states have often reverted to authoritarian rentier statecraft, consolidating elite power and prioritising regime survival over inclusive development. Oil revenues underpin militarised security apparatuses, while health, education, and welfare languish (CABRI, 2025). The enduring legacy of colonial bifurcation, elite clientelism, and exclusion continues to shape the political economy of oil in Africa, rendering democracy a façade for the persistence of extractive authoritarianism (Mamdani, 1996; Bayart, 1993).

Conclusions and Paths Forward

The enduring presence of colonial infrastructures in Africa's oil governance has undermined the ability of petro-states to translate oil wealth into broad-based development. Instead, a colonial-style management persists, manifesting in extractive inequalities, infrastructural decay, capital flight, and environmental racism that disproportionately affect oil-rich communities (Gomba, 2020; Watts, 2008). These crises are perpetuated by neocolonial economic rationality and are further obscured by analytical frameworks that focus on oil as a moral problem, overlooking the deeper institutional and historical structures responsible for these outcomes.

To advance more effective solutions, it is crucial to transcend narrow paradigms such as the "resource curse" and instead analyse African oil governance as a linear extension of colonial petro-capitalism (Mitchell, 2011; Acemoglu et al., 2001). Policy reforms should target the dismantling of extractive governance frameworks, prioritise transparency, and foster inclusive management. Only by addressing the longue durée of imperial imposition, institutional capture, and fiscal dispossession can Africa's oil sector achieve sustainable and equitable growth.

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