

A SWAMP FULL OF DOLLARS

PIPELINES AND PARAMILITARIES
AT NIGERIA'S OIL FRONTIER

MICHAEL PEEL

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PROLOGUE: TRIGGER POINT

It is late, almost too late, to be looking for oil. The thought grows in my mind as we creep and crunch up the gravel road to the old cocoa plantation at Uba Budu, which seems as lofty and remote as an Alpine ski station. My driver is skilled, but understandably cautious: it is, after all, his car's chassis that will be mangled by any stray rocks. It is deep into the afternoon now; by six, the forest will be dark and its landmarks amorphous. I won't be able to see the *agua petróleo*, the crude-filled pool rumoured to lie at the heart of this West African jungle. My hunt for black gold will have run out of time.

We are on the island of São Tomé and Príncipe, a short hop across the Gulf of Guinea coast from Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta. São Tomé is reputed to be blessed – or cursed – with crude oil too, although it's hard to imagine in the magisterial stillness of this virgin forest. We pass little that is man-made, save the crumbling old walls built by Portuguese colonialists who thought they would rule forever but ended up leaving in a hurry. We give a lift to an old couple we have seen walking slowly ahead of us, the distance they keep between them suggesting long familiarity. Both their faces are etched with deep lines, like the tyre treads we are following up the forest track. The man is taciturn but the woman talks urgently in creole, communicating a controlled desperation through the remainder of the drive.

It is almost four by the time we reach the first of Uba Budu's ghostly houses, which appear as if frozen at the instant they were abandoned more than three decades ago. In the plantation's main square, a group of young men watches us from a small outhouse set a little apart from the sprawling white main building. The old woman gets out of the car, looking at me and raising her hand to her mouth in a plea for money. When I give her *dobras* worth about £1.50, she grips my hand with a strength unnerving in one apparently so frail. The intensity of her gratitude fills me with loathing, both for the economic gulf from which it springs and for the feeling of power it awakens in me.

A few of the men wander over from the outhouse to talk to us, one of them rocking along on crutches several yards behind the main group. The oldest of them, his hair unusually unkempt for a society notable for its high standards of personal grooming, wags his finger in warning when he hears our plan. He doesn't rate our chances of reaching the *agua petróleo* before nightfall, although he is reluctant to tell us exactly how far away it is. His negativity makes me cussed and determined to go, even though instincts honed in similar situations suggest I should hesitate. The local advice is to hold back, darkness is near, and I am the centre of attention of a crowd of young men. But I remind myself that I am the right side of the frontier of the incendiary Niger Delta, big brother in a partnership between Nigeria and São Tomé to exploit oil. Besides, I now crave sight of the crude reputed to be sitting in the forest, tempting and untouched.

After a few minutes of cajoling, a snake-thin young man named Afocinho Viera agrees to lead us to the *agua*. We start at a fast walk that soon turns into a jog. It's hard work, but comfortable enough, until Viera and Kaizer Montero, another youth who has joined us, dart off the path and into the trees. Soon they are springing down the rocky, loose-soiled paths, moving like mountain goats in flip-flops as I plod like an elephant in my trainers. As we hurtle deeper into a forest where tarantulas and spitting cobras live, I feel elated by the recklessness of the chase. We are alone with the birds and whatever else lurks in the darkening jungle.

Three-quarters of an hour later, my body coated in a slick layer of sweat, I am starting to regret the stubbornness of my pursuit. I feel like a spoilt kid each time I ask Viera and Montero whether we are nearly there. I realize I must cut a ridiculous figure, my shirt flapping open in the breeze like a mad professor's lab coat. Then Viera stops suddenly. He gestures to the right of the stony track, towards a small pool of water flanked by a scattering of giant fallen leaves. Peering down, I see the water has a rusty brown colour and the unmistakable iridescent sheen of oil. It is the *agua petróleo*.

We jump down onto a spit of land, into which my shoes sink as if it were quicksand. Viera leans down by the edge of the pool, which is bubbling gently like a cauldron coming to the boil. He scoops up some liquid and holds his fingers up to me. The brown fluid coating them has the same smell and touch as the light, sweet crude that I've handled in oil spills in the Niger Delta. I cup some myself, gazing with the exaggerated fascination of a small child as it trickles down my fingers, mingling with the perspiration from the effort of reaching this place. I wonder if this is how Africa's resource-hungry foreign adventurers have felt over the centuries, at the moment of grasping the prizes they have bought and fought for so ruthlessly.

Tracing the veins of precious fluid now running in delta-like rivulets across the palm of my hand, I am silent in thought for a moment. After more than seven years of living in and visiting Nigeria and its neighbours, I feel I am finally a step ahead of the expansion of the oil industry whose tumultuous wake I have constantly crossed. This potential oilfield is unobtrusive, unfenced and all but untouched, although I wonder how long this will remain the case. If the Niger Delta is anything to go by, it may be only a matter of time before geological accident thrusts the *agua petróleo* into one of the great geopolitical fights of our age.

One day, I reflect, this hidden pool and its hinterland may look like the warped Niger Delta wonderland of crude that has come to inform the way I see the world. I find it hard now to look at anything connected with oil – whether in the rawness of a Delta slick or the neatness of a Royal Dutch Shell filling station forecourt – without thinking of how it has moulded Nigeria, Africa's leviathan. For me,

the logos of Shell, Chevron and ExxonMobil evoke nightmarish images of the great pluming orange gas flares that cast a sickly nocturnal glow over rundown villages, where people drink from stagnant pools not unlike the *agua*. The barrels of oil whose price underpins City economic forecasts are what armed young Delta militants – determined, deluded or drunk, or all three at once – siphon from pipelines to fund a black market stretching across continents. Even in this era of realpolitik, it is hard to imagine a dirtier business in which so many of us in the rich world are so intimately involved.

It's not uncommon for visitors to Nigeria to see it as a disturbing and alien place, its value system warped by oil into something unrecognisable. But, over the years of my association with this brilliant, fragmented nation, I have found my view of its troubles shifting kaleidoscopically. The harder I look, the more I see in the shards a reflection of the life and times of my own homeland, Britain. My story of Nigeria is of a deep and deepening interconnectedness, forged in large part by crude and the wealth and power that flow from it. Like no other place I have visited, Nigeria brings to rich and raucous life the geopolitics of oil that enmesh us all. Its growing problems are ones we share.

Oil-based industries – first palm, then crude – have dominated Nigeria's economy and international relations for more than a century. The hand of Britain can be seen more or less obviously in the colonial era and the unending oil war that threads through the Niger Delta from Victorian times to the present day. But the Anglo-Saxon presence is also there in less expected places, like the apparently anarchic streets of Lagos, a chancers' paradise to rival the City of London and the wider international finance industry. Nigerian politicians are fond of Britain, too: they put their stolen millions through banks there that share their *laissez-faire* sensibility. If Westerners want to gaze, Scrooge-like, at the disturbing spirit of their age, they need only look to Nigeria to see it expressed more vividly than they might wish.

In the half-century since it shipped its first oil, the nation of Nigeria – one of the world's ten most populous – has become a little laboratory for the arrogance of a fossil-fuel-obsessed world. It is a country where the oil economy is slowly being destroyed by its