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Uncertain Blessings

IMAGINING A FUTURE PETRO-STATE IN UGANDA

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that even though oil production in Uganda has not yet started, the oil is already relevant in its anticipation. In its “not-yet” state, the oil has gained a discursive presence in politics, media and civil society. I analyse the visions of the future that are created in this oil talk. The government paints a picture of a bright future, in which oil is a blessing to all, while civil society portrays oil as a shadow looming over Uganda. Despite this difference, I show that all the visions refer to the resource curse: Oil can either be a blessing or a curse. I understand the resource curse discourse as a form of risk communication. I propose that for people in the oil regions knowledge of the resource curse as a risk increases existing feelings of uncertainty with regard to the oil. The paper is based on 15 months of fieldwork in Uganda between 2012 and 2015.

Introduction

Promising oil discoveries at Lake Albert in 200 transformed Uganda into a potential oil state. A bright future seemed near and people’s expectations soared. Some thought Uganda would eventually become more “developed,” and there would be many job opportunities. Others thought oil meant instant riches. Often I heard that some young men in Hoima claimed they would never have to work again and could simply live off the fruits of their oil. Expectation management became a catchword for the government and civil society¹ activists. They tried to re-adjust these expectations to their respective visions of a future with oil, as expectations and hopes are externalities of the oil economy and could pose a threat to future developments (Weszkalnys 2011:352). As the pace of moving from exploration to production has been slow, expectations continued to be the main presence of oil in Uganda. A decade after the first big discoveries, there is no oil yet. During my fieldwork I noticed people had become tired of talking about oil and were disappointed. Instead of enjoying new wealth, new risks and uncertainties had started to cloud the outlook onto the future, especially for people in the oil region.

My research is concerned with the developments and negotiations that take place in a prospective oil state. The ethnographic approach is particularly well suited to understand these processes in new oil states and to cover the ways people negotiate the significations of oil (Behrends and Reyna 2011, Behrends and Schareika 2010). Anthropological research has recently focused on the materiality and the temporality of oil or resources in general (Rogers 2015). Especially, works on the temporal aspect of resources are relevant to the Ugandan case as they show ways in which to engage the oil in a state of not-yet-ness or potentiality (Ferry and Limbert 2008, Limbert 2008, Richardson and Weszkalnys 2014). My analysis of the ways people engage a future with oil in Uganda is centred on the concepts

¹ I use the label of “civil society” to refer to a conglomerate of media and activists from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Community Based Organisations (CBOs), which can be subsumed as Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). I discuss the term in more detail below.

of risk and uncertainty. Methodologically, not-yet-ness poses a challenge as the oil surfaces only temporally at different sites. Therefore, I found a broad and multi-sited ethnography best suited to deal with oil in its presence and absence.²

The first major oil discoveries were made in 2006 in Kaiso-Tonya and Kingfisher discovery areas in Hoima district. Uganda has managed the first round of explorations and is preparing for the development phase. Uganda has estimated oil resources of 6.5 billion barrels out of which 1.4 billion are deemed recoverable.³ The oil companies active in Uganda are a joint venture between three international oil companies: the relatively small Irish company Tullow Oil Uganda Operations Pty Ltd, the Chinese national oil company CNOOC Uganda Ltd, and the multinational Total E&P Uganda. Currently, production is expected to start in 2018. Momentous changes seem just around the corner.

But oil has been just around the corner for a long time. Even ten years after the first big discovery, there is still no oil.⁴ Oil development has been delayed from time to time by the government. It has thus been acting contrary to general assumptions that leaders of poor countries rich in resources will move fast to get the oil out of the ground and the money into their hands. Rather, Uganda has taken time to set up a legislative framework and to build up well trained and professionally working petroleum departments.⁵ To the dismay of the oil companies this caused delays in the oil development process. At the beginning of 2016, CNOOC was the only oil company with a production license, while Tullow and Total were still waiting for government approval of their field development plans. In 2016, Uganda is still in a state of anticipating the oil. This anticipation took the shape of the resource curse discourse that presented oil as a risk.

In this paper, I show that even though oil production in Uganda has not yet started, the oil is already relevant in its anticipation. In its “not-yet” state, the oil has gained a discursive presence in politics, media and civil society (Weszkalnys 2014). I analyse the visions of the future that are created in this oil talk. The government paints a picture of a bright future in which oil is a blessing to all, while civil society portrays oil as a shadow looming over Uganda. Despite this difference, I show that all the visions refer to the resource curse: Oil can either be a blessing or a curse.

The resource curse thesis is a scientific concept that seeks to explain what has been conceived of, mainly in economics and political science, as a “paradox of plenty” (Karl 1997:4). Resource-rich countries were found to perform worse than resource-poor ones although it had been assumed that resource-rich countries would perform well due to the revenue they derive from the resource. Yet they were found to have a stark wealth discrepancy with high levels of poverty, rampant corruption and a tendency to despotism, including repression. Furthermore, these states were seen to be more prone to political instability and conflict (Auty 1993, Gelb 1988, Humphrey et al 2007, Ross 1999, Yates 1996). The major macro-economic explanation for the negative impacts is a phenomenon called

² The paper is based on over 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Uganda between 2012 and 2015. I established relations with a variety of actors from civil society to donor agencies and workers in the oil industry. I participated in conferences, workshops and other stakeholder engagements held by CSOs and oil companies. I lived in Hoima, the self-proclaimed oil city and I made several short trips to villages in the exploration areas that had been the scene of oil activities. Furthermore, I conducted interviews with key players in the oil industry, the Petroleum Department of the Ministry of Energy and other government agencies concerned with oil activities.

³ More information on the exploration history see Hickey et al. (2015), Kashambuzi (2010), Kiiza et al. (2011), Patey (2015), Vokes (2012).

⁴ This seems a long period, compared to countries such as Ghana, where the time span from first discovery to first oil has been considerably shorter, taking only three years. However, countries like São Tomé and Príncipe also seem stuck in the process, thriving only on the economy of expectation of the oil (Weszkalnys 2011, 2014). Reasons for variations between the development time span can be assumed to lie in the individual context of each country and the specific shape of each of these oil complexes (Watts 2008).

⁵ Due to technical expertise and political will, Uganda has been praised for having secured some of the best oil contracts in Sub-Saharan Africa (Hickey et al 2015a,b).

the ‘Dutch Disease’⁶ and the enclave character of the industry that creates a dependence on the resource, which has major political repercussions.⁷

From its origin in social sciences the concept was turned into a traveling model by civil society (Reyna 2007, Weszkalnys 2011). Despite criticism from within social science (Basedau 2005, Basedau and Richter 2011, Rosser 2006, Watts 2004), the resource curse thesis is still very influential. Especially in the form of the “governance curse” (Pegg 2006) it has exponents in civil society and government in Uganda. The governance curse stipulates that a country only suffers from the curse if there is bad governance providing no transparency and accountability.⁸

The main argument of my paper is that the resource curse discourse is a form of risk communication, which has effects on people in the oil region. I propose that for people in the oil regions knowledge of the resource curse as a risk increased feelings of uncertainty with regard to the oil.

The paper is organized in six sections. First, I introduce the concepts of risk and uncertainty and then I describe the uncertainty people in the oil region faced. After that I turn to the relevant actors and the contrasting images of a bright and a looming future they create and that polarize the negotiation of oil. In a final step, I connect these images of oil, this discursive anticipation of oil, with its effects on the people in the oil region.

Risk and Uncertainty

It is necessary for my main argument, to introduce the concepts of risk and uncertainty. Risks are ubiquitous in our lives. We are confronted with them in warnings, alerts, insurance demands and safety measures. And time and again new risks get constructed and propagated, such as passive smoking or air pollution.

Risks are modes of anticipating, of handling the future. The future is full of contingencies, i.e. events that are possible but cannot be predicted with certainty. The future is essentially uncertain. Uncertainty is a state that is related to unpredictability, instability, lack of (accurate) knowledge, unreliability and the difficulty to interpret or even fathom life (De Boeck 2012:200).⁹ Uncertainty is the realization of blind spots or black boxes in life that we fail to grasp and that hence can loom over us if we do not manage to control them.¹⁰

Through risks we seek to control the contingencies of the future. Beck calls risks the anticipation of catastrophe (Beck 2007). The verb anticipate derives from Latin *anticipat* which means acted in advance. To anticipate means to guess or be aware and to take action to be prepared. Anticipation can thus go beyond merely expecting or predicting something. It can mean to take action based on an expectation. According to Weszkalnys anticipation brings the uncertain future into the present as discourses, practices, technologies and

⁶ The phenomenon was first noticed in the Netherlands after the gas boom of the 1970s, hence the name. It describes macro-economic processes whereby an inflow of rents from the resource results in an exchange rate appreciation. Imports become cheaper and exports more expensive. This leads to a decline in the productive sectors. Only the resource sector and the service sector, fed by the resource income, thrive, increasing the dependency on the resource.

⁷ Enclave character means that the industry necessitates technology which is not available in the country and gets provided by foreign companies. A technology transfer does not take place, the profits are expatriated and no linkages with other sectors of the country are created.

⁸ The efficacy of fighting the so-called “governance curse” has been questioned by Pegg for the Chad-Cameroun pipeline project (Pegg 2006).

⁹ Anthropologists have discussed uncertainty also in terms of its creative potential. In a recent collection on uncertainty in Africa, Cooper and Pratten (2015) highlight the productive and positive side of uncertainty that produces new social horizons.

¹⁰ Uncertainty is not insecurity (Calkins 2016). Insecurity builds on the knowledge we have while with uncertainty the focus shifts to that which we do not know. We know just enough to know that we cannot be sure but we do not know the probabilities.

material devices (Weszkalnys 2014:221). Risks are a way of anticipating the future and handling its' uncertainty. They open options to influence the future through present actions.

The transformation of of uncertainties into risks hinges on knowledge and the ability to make guesses about the likelihood of outcomes. What we call risk is then the combination of the knowledge of dangerous causal links between agents or objects and catastrophic or unfortunate events and the ability to predict through probability calculations (Knight 1969, Wynne 1992). Brian Wynne distinguishes between risk, where the odds are known, and uncertainty, where the odds are not known. Wynne further separates ignorance, where we do not even know that we do not know, and indeterminacy, where knowledge cannot be obtained (Wynne 1992:114). Based on Wynne, Arnoldi referred to uncertainty as known unknowns, ignorance as unknown unknowns and indeterminacy as unknowable unknowns (Arnoldi 2009:91). However, a gain in knowledge does not straightforwardly mean a reduction of uncertainty rather it opens the mind to all the yet unknowns and hence increases uncertainty (Callon et al. 2011).

Knowledge of risks includes knowing who or what is at risk from what person, action or object. The object at risk is something to which people attach value and that they wish to keep safe from harm (Boholm and Corvellec 2011). Risks are always embedded in the social context (Arnoldi 2009). They are socially constructed. They are identified by actors using their knowledge and drawing on their value system to point out harmful agents and that which is likely to get harmed (Boholm 2003:166, Douglas and Wildavsky 1983). Risks are means to manage the uncertainty of the future, to wrestle agency from chance.

Uncertain Outlooks in the Oil Region

In this article I argue that a sense of uncertainty underlies life in the oil areas of Uganda. People expressed their ignorance to me about the oil and how it would affect their lives. And they named serious doubts about their future. Again and again, people stressed how they did not know about the oil and felt generally left out. They did not know about the industry and its wider implications. Many statements suggested an uneasiness regarding the future, an uncertainty about whether their way of life could resist the changes oil would bring. The people in the oil region had heard about the oil but they had not seen it. They saw oil company men but they didn't (fully) understand what they do. Communities were not well informed about the activities taking place in their area. Many times they got to know about activities only the moment the companies started working. And even then they did not get to know what the companies were really doing. They saw that the companies were drilling, that big cars were moving on the roads and yet the companies still claimed that there was no oil. Many times people said they felt deceived or cheated and that they had waited in vain for the oil.

"The government is not open with the exploration of the oil. It is already seven years. But where is the oil? Are they already extracting? They say that they are taking it for testing but the community doesn't know. We feel cheated" (Political Adviser, Kaiso¹¹, 2013).

Many times when I asked about oil, people sounded frustrated or were disinterested. During my research, oil activities had been reduced. In villages that before had seen a lot of activity, the first big expectations had subsided. There were some improvements such as a small clinic and new schools sponsored by Tullow as part of their corporate social responsibility campaign. Yet they didn't last long. Buildings started collapsing and teachers stayed away after Tullow handed the project over to the government. Instead of finding people talking about oil, I found them focused on what really mattered to their lives: the

¹¹ Kaiso is a fishing village on the shores of Lake Albert, where wells had been drilled.

lack of fish in the lake or the trouble they were having with the wildlife reserve that starts just a few kilometres off the coast.

The oil discovery many times evoked a weird mixture of positive expectations and such expressions of discomfort and doubts. People tried to estimate how the oil would influence their lives and livelihood. Expectations were varying between hopes of a better future and the fear of losing their land and means of livelihood.¹² A local politician of Kaiso told me that his people feared that they might be stopped from fishing or that they would get resettled and thus lose their land (Local politician, Kaiso, 2012). His village had seen a lot of exploration activity and he described fears caused by the exploration activities. A politician from a neighbouring village also related to me the people's fears about resettlement and land grabbing.

“Since oil was discovered here in 2006 by Hardman, now the deepest worry even up to [to]day is eviction. Because eviction, what I mean by eviction, that people may be chased away from here minus compensation. Or people, the superior people in the government, may come and even chase people away forcefully and retain the what? the land. That's the people's fear. [...] That's the most important thing. What everybody is fearing. Even though we are living here but we are not living in peace. After the oil discovery” (Local politician, Kyehoro, 2012).¹³

This local politician stressed how the oil discovery had disrupted life in the community and people didn't feel at peace any longer. Statements such as this one highlight how important land and access to it is for communities that mainly relied on agriculture, herding and fishing for their livelihood. A possible relocation was surely a threatening issue to those people, and to people who had already experienced destruction of their houses or fields, a temporary ban on fishing during seismic exercises, or non-satisfactory compensation of land taken for the Kaiso-Tonya road.

People expressed feelings of distance to the government, companies and also NGOs. People were critical of NGOs because these were perceived as doing their business rather than attempting to help and represent local communities. People were sceptical of the government and the oil companies, fearing they were not getting the proper information from them. While people wanted information, there seemed to be no steady and reliable information flow.¹⁴ It was NGOs, government officials or oil companies that came and brought with them their visions of the future. So despite the oil not being visible, it had a presence in the visions that reached the villages. In the following, I describe those visions and the actors that propagate them, who are part of what Watts (2005) called the oil complex.¹⁵

¹² For example, a comparison of essays written by pupils, shows that while almost as many positive as negative impacts were mentioned, the majority of the essays drew a positive and hopeful conclusion. The essays were written by school children in a competition organized by a CBO from Hoima and sponsored by Tullow Oil in November 2012. Their task was to discuss the negative and positive impacts of oil on Bunyoro, a former kingdom that covers several districts of the oil region.

¹³ Of course, these statements have to be read in their context. They were directed at me as a researcher from Europe, whose affiliations might not have been clear. I did always stress though that I was working only with the university and not any of the oil companies or NGOs. Still it cannot be excluded that some comments were meant to garner some kind of support from me. I understand them as both expressions of unease based on experiences made since oil exploration started as well as an awareness of the opportunities the oil has opened within the NGO world. Donor money to spread the word of the resource curse was available and displaying the actual lack of knowledge could help to divert some of these to oneself or to the community.

¹⁴ Van Alstine et al (2014) checked registers of LCs for activities by different oil stakeholders in the local communities. They conclude that NGOs and local government are less often in the village than oil companies or the government.

¹⁵ According to Watts, the oil complex is “a configuration of social, political, and economic forces with a broadly similar ‘petrostructure’” (Watts 2005:378). It presents a mix of forces such as the petro-state, the transnational oil industry, the military, civil society, and local political forces. The concept highlights the strategic and everyday importance of oil by encompassing the many connections oil creates in our hydrocarbon societies.

Civil Society Vision: The Looming Future

Some actors usually referred to as ‘civil society’ portrayed a gloomy picture of Uganda’s future with oil. They cautioned people to start considering the oil as a risk. ‘Civil society’ is usually juxtaposed to the government and the oil companies. Although making such categories appear as self-evident, quasi-natural categories hides how they are intricately linked (Ferguson 2007: 390ff., Mitchell 1999:77), I use the term as a convenient way to refer to a set of actors with a similar vision of a petro-future. I include under this term NGOs, CBOs, civil associations and the media while I reserve the term civil society organization (CSO) for NGOs and CBOs. CSOs are mainly funded by international NGOs, international donors or sometimes even from Ugandan government agencies. Donor money plays an important role in shaping Uganda’s oil complex.¹⁶ Most CSOs do not have a single agenda but promote various endeavours, ranging from water safety to gender issues. The number of CSOs working on oil issues has increased over the past years, coinciding with donor money being available for these issues. CSOs formed networks concerned with the governance of oil, such as Civil Society Coalition on Oil (CSCO) or Publish What You Pay Uganda Chapter. It has to be noted here that usually organisations within civil society, be it CBOs or NGOs, are not grass-root organisations but more or less successful enterprises run by locals. National NGOs mainly operate from the nation’s capital Kampala or through proxy CBOs in the oil region.¹⁷ Many CBOs are based in the district capital and are hence closer to the affected communities. However, the CBOs also rarely visited their communities due to constrained resources (van Alstine 2014:52). Most of the CBOs are run by people who depend on them for their livelihood. The support these civil society entrepreneurs or development brokers enjoy from the communities is connected to their ability to create patron-client relations (Bailey 1969, Bierschenk et al. 2002, Mosse and Lewis 2006).¹⁸

According to the CSOs, the communities lacked basic knowledge and therefore did not know how to place their demands. One NGO claimed that the people in the community were “grappling in the dark” (NAPE 2011:12).¹⁹ NGOs offered their help, presenting themselves as the major source of information. The CSOs portrayed the situation in the local communities in a way that called for their intervention. They created their own brokerage space (Murphy 1981, Bierschenk et al. 2002, Mosse and Lewis 2006). They argued that the communities needed to be sensitized about the oil and that the CSO should be accorded donor money to “roll out the information,” as the CBO Rural Initiative for Community Empowerment West Nile (RICE-WN) put it.²⁰ The information was rolled out in various ways.

The most common ones were workshops, community meetings and conferences facilitated by the CSOs. These workshops were usually held at expensive hotels in Kampala or the district capitals of the oil region. Usually a representative of the oil companies, of the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development (MEMD) or the Petroleum Exploration and Production Department (PEPD), and representatives of communities in the oil region were invited. Attendants were paid allowances for coming to these workshops.²¹ These

¹⁶ Weszkalnys pointed out how the resource curse is mobilized through donor money and initiatives (Weszkalnys 2011).

¹⁷ NGOs face certain challenges in working in the communities due to an increasing securitization of the oil region, mentioned above.

¹⁸ This is not meant to discredit the individual’s dedication to the cause she or he is promoting and the goodwill involved.

¹⁹ The National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) is a national NGO working from Kampala with proxy organisations in the project areas. It receives funding from international donors and formed the oil watch network together with Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO), another national NGO. NAPE has had several issues with the Government of Uganda. Along with several other NGOs it was blacklisted by President Museveni during a speech in parliament (13.12.2012).

²⁰ Obtaining donor money is essential as without these funds neither could the CSO do its work, nor would the activists have an income.

²¹ Some people were referred to as professional workshop attenders as their main work as representatives of an organisation consisted in representing at these conferences and getting the allowances.

workshops were presented as a platform for dialogue between the state, the oil companies and the communities. They were also meant to disseminate information to the communities through the multiplier effect of the representatives. Most of the times they were combined with radio call-in shows to directly reach a wider audience. Other workshops were part of sensitization campaigns held in the villages of the exploration areas. A way to engage larger crowds were puppet theatres. These were set up in trading centres of rural areas or on busy town streets and included music, dancing and a question and answer session on oil. They were a kind of infotainment.

For these workshops the community members were “mobilized,” as it was usually referred to, by a CBO based in the district capital, either in their own function or on behalf of an organization from Kampala. The mobilized people showed up once the NGO arrived, they listened to their presentations, watched their documentaries, enjoyed their sodas and food and then provided some feedback for the NGO to carry to Kampala. The whole exercise usually did not last longer than a few hours to a maximum of a day.²²

Another way to promote their vision of the future was through booklets, leaflets and documentaries. While some were directed at donor agencies to showcase the NGO’s work, others, especially the documentaries, were used in the interaction with the communities.²³ In these publications the NGOs presented the resource curse as a risk and offered possible solutions. They included pictures of a degraded environment.

“Oil is a blessing to Uganda. It is a curse only when it is badly managed. Petroleum wealth has the potential [of] lifting millions of Ugandans out of poverty, but it also runs the risk of plunging them further into abject poverty and [into] the resource-curse syndrome much touted in the resource-rich developing countries like Uganda. In order for oil to continue being a blessing, it requires a robust legislative and institutional framework that provides transparency and accountability in the management of the sector.” (WGI 2012:2).²⁴

In this quote buzzwords of the NGO world were presented as the solution to the resource curse: transparency and accountability. The quote points out that petroleum wealth posed the risk to Ugandans of experiencing the resource curse. But this would only happen if the sector was not managed well. In this assessment the NGO’s view converged with that of the government: Oil was actually a blessing but only as long as government stayed on the right track. And it was the role of Ugandans represented by civil society to ensure this. Risk communication intends to guide the actions of others. An important part of the communication is who is to blame if something goes wrong (Douglas 1992). Civil society squarely laid blame at the government’s feet, which it considered as one of the risk agents.

In general, CSOs claimed the importance of swift action, motioning to the imminent risk posed by the oil activities and the oil revenues. Some NGOs and CBOs used sensational language e.g. describing oil as a “time bomb” and followed an antagonizing approach in the extractive communities. They underlined how they were on the side of the community, fighting for a common cause. They garnered support from people in the village that many times had not enjoyed the best the government could offer.

The following description may serve as an example of the antagonizing approach. I participated in a trip of community consultation meetings organised by two Kampala based NGOs²⁵, which was meant to institute committees in the communities that would monitor

²² I participated in many such activities either from CBOs or from activities organized for NGOs from Kampala. Especially in Hoima I was in close contact with the organizers of such field trips.

²³ Compared to the engagement of the oil companies and central government agents with communities in the exploration areas, civil society is not as present at the village level (Van Alstine et al 2014:55–56).

²⁴ Water Governance Institute (WGI) is a national NGO working from Kampala with proxy organizations in the project areas. It receives funding from international donors as well as the Ugandan government. It has been active in CSCO, providing the chairman of the coalition up until 2012.

²⁵ Given the rather controversial nature of the comments during the meetings, I decided to not name the NGOs.

and report on the activities of the oil companies.²⁶ Teams were elected democratically, as the NGO directors proclaimed, even though the mobilization had failed to bring many community members to the meetings. In Kaiso only five people were present while in Kabaale mobilization had failed completely. The team drove to the next village, Nyahaira, where around 30 men and a few women were gathered in a school building for a meeting by another NGO from Kampala. After that NGO had finished, the NGOs I was with took over the crowd. One of the directors set out to convince people of the necessity of their monitoring tool.

„It is your responsibility to make government listen to you. Government doesn't care about you. But government is there to do things on our behalf. If these people do not listen to what the people say, nothing will be done. You need to talk. Government world over only listens to numbers. The voters. [...] And remember, we are dealing with people that are super rich. People that have access to power. But you must know what you are fighting for and [have] resolution. Don't fight your wars alone" (NGO community meeting, Nyahaira, 2012).

In his speech he kept alternating between forms of you and we and positioned the "we" against the people with power and money. His fellow activist left no doubt about the legitimacy of that wealth. He accused government and the oil companies of being thieves, stealing from the people: "We are dealing with people that are very rich. The thieves we are hunting are very rich" and during the discussion he added: "What I said is that we try to track thieves. It is good you mention government. Among the thieves we are tracking, government is also there" (NGO community meeting, Nyahaira, 2012). These activists portrayed the oil companies and government to be thieves that needed to be monitored.

Continuous reference throughout the events and publications was made to Nigeria. Nigeria served as the bad example, the place where things had gone wrong. The NGOs claimed that this was meant to warn the public of the threats and help it demand from their government a prosperous future for all. To make this point, NAPE used pictures of fire explosions and polluted rivers in the Niger delta, subtitled them e.g. "Polluted Ogoni River – Oil in Uganda if not well managed, will pose a threat to community livelihoods" (NAPE 2012:7).

The negative language combined with the portrayal of careless leaders and horror scenarios from other countries created a horrifying picture of Uganda's future with oil. The director of the NGO Water Governance Institute (WGI) told me in an interview that to people Nigeria presented the basket case, the bad story about oil. That to people the image of Nigeria suggested that oil could be a disaster, that oil was bad, that oil killed (Director WGI, 2013).²⁷ Also many other civil society activists equated Nigeria with corruption, bad governance, oil pollution, greedy oil companies and general poverty. The resource curse perspective was elaborated visually in the documentary "Blessing or Curse? Oil and Uganda's Future", which was screened at community interventions.²⁸ In this video Nigeria is contrasted with Botswana, the showcase example, where supposedly everything went right. The revenues from the diamonds were used to educate the people and build the infrastructure. The movie skilfully plays out the dichotomy and at the end of the documentary, it asks the audience what visions they would want to endorse for Uganda.

"Which Uganda will you work to create, one that is cursed by the oil with money disappearing to corruption and doing more to destroy our country than to develop. Or a Uganda that is blessed with oil money reaching all our communities?" (AFIEGO et al.)

²⁶ The team was supposed to work voluntarily but would get training and later some material facilitation, like photo cameras, from the NGOs.

²⁷ Yet his NGO was also among the ones, using comparisons with Nigeria to make people grasp the oil curse.

²⁸ The documentary was produced for the national NGOs NAPE and AFIEGO and PWYP. It is available in several Ugandan languages.

After watching the movie, some people from the audience joined in the plea of the video and demanded to prevent Uganda from what happened in Nigeria: „We shouldn't go the Nigerian way which is called the oil curse. Let's go the Botswana way“ (Participant, CNOOC-Tullow Workshop, 2012).²⁹ Civil society actors tasked the audience to join them in managing the resource curse risk. They first highlighted or created uncertainty for people in the oil region in order to be able to make people accept the resource curse risk and hence build and maintain their brokerage space. And they were successful in this as even government referred to the resource curse, as I discuss below.

State Vision: The Blessed Future

In his state of the nation address from 2012 president Museveni proclaimed: “With our oil, matters will be easier. We shall be able to fund the roads, the railway and the power stations easily using our own money” (President Museveni, State of the Nation Address 2012). Not surprisingly, the government portrays an enthusiastic vision of Uganda's future with oil.

The main propagators of this vision are President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni and the Petroleum Department at the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development. The president has been in office since 1986 and is one of Africa's longest-ruling presidents. He was re-elected in 2016 in elections that were reported as ridden with irregularities (European Union Election Observation Mission 2016).³⁰ The Petroleum Department was founded in 1985 and in 2015 it was transformed into the Directorate of Petroleum, which includes departments for the up-, mid- and downstream parts of the petroleum industry. The department has been at the forefront of negotiations with the oil industry. It enjoys a close proximity to the president, having its headquarters in Entebbe, the seat of state house. Other important state actors are parliamentarians and district level politicians from the oil region.

President Museveni envisions the bright future oil would bring for Uganda. With oil, things would be easy, he claimed. Oil would enable the fulfilment of the development plan “Uganda Vision 2040”. This vision sees “a transformed Ugandan society from a peasant to a modern and prosperous country within 30 years” (National Planning Authority 2013). This involves changing from a predominantly low income to a competitive upper middle-income country within 30 years. It is envisaged that the country will graduate to the middle income segment by 2017 and reach a per capita of USD 9,500 by 2040.³¹

Oil revenues are considered to greatly contribute to this vision because the revenues would be invested in the development of the country's infrastructure and human resource. The hope, as stated in this vision, is that oil and gas present opportunities for economic growth by creating employment and fostering technology transfer. It is acknowledged in the vision that this will not become reality by itself but rather necessitates wise government decisions. One step that government has already taken to add value to the resource was to demand the construction of a refinery in Uganda based on the assumption that this will have multiplier-effects and stimulate other industries. The government plans to stimulate these developments further by offering capacity building and establishing local area development funds for local businesses. The vision calls to “effectively harness the opportunity” (National Planning Authority 2013:48). This shall be achieved by focusing efforts on the development of infrastructure, technology and human resources and by guaranteeing peace and security. The vision also postulates that the government will

²⁹ Such statements can also be read as strategic positioning of the actors to gain or maintain a stake in the economy of expectation (Weszkalnys 2011:347).

³⁰ The main opposition candidate was repeatedly arrested before and during election, ballot papers were delivered late, allegations of vote rigging and intimidation were made by the opposition and in general social media access was blocked during election days.

³¹ By now the time frame has been expanded to 2019.

strengthen the legal and institutional framework of the sector with the aim of providing transparency, environmental protection and good governance (National Planning Authority 2013: 48).³² In his state of the nation address (2012) Museveni lauded scientists for their substantial contribution to the development of the country. As was mentioned before, the existing expertise at PEPD had already made a difference in negotiations with the oil companies. As Museveni put it in his state of the nation address of 2015:

“This money [oil revenues] will be dedicated to infrastructure, science innovation and some of the high level science education institutions. It is considerable. We have been doing so much with so little. What will happen now that we are getting quite a bit of additional money?” (State of the Nation Address 2015)

According to Museveni, Uganda had achieved so much already that the oil money (along with other revenues) would give the country the final push up the ladder. Vision 2040 also envisages more material changes. Towns will be upgraded to cities. Hoima will become the oil city of Uganda. The cities will boast public transportation, (inter-)national referral hospitals and science and technology parks. Hoima is even meant to get an airport along with two other cities. Overall public infrastructures will be improved to include a standard gauge railway with high speed trains, new industries and multi-lane highways linking the major cities. It is a grandiose vision for Uganda, a country that has already seen construction booms in its capital Kampala, where every year several new shopping malls open their doors.

The optimistic future vision was made public through the media but it was also promoted by PEPD officials during conferences organised by civil society. Yet as optimistic as these visions appear, they are not devoid of an understanding of the risks of oil. Although it is claimed that things will be easy once the oil is there, the government knows that the way to get the oil is not easy. One of the early visions with regard to oil was the National Oil and Gas Policy in 2008. Its stated goal is to use the oil to eradicate poverty and create value for society (MEMD 2008:viii). It explicitly states as its goal to avoid the oil curse:

“It [the policy] also recognizes that if the country’s petroleum resources and revenues are not well managed, the sub sector [sic] has the potential to have the most negative impact on society, ‘The Oil Curse’ or the paradox of plenty. The oil curse is the negative effect of oil and gas resource utilization leading to economic stagnation, environment degradation and increased poverty. The oil curse can and should be avoided” (MEMD 2008:x).

The oil and gas policy was henceforth the guiding line for the industry until the creation of proper oil legislation. It shows an early concern for influencing Uganda’s future with oil. And it shows how many state and government officials were aware of the resource curse and were positioning their vision within the curse-blessing dichotomy. However, to these politicians Uganda was in a supreme position to enjoy the blessings of oil. Even though referring to the resource curse, they did not agree that Uganda was not prepared to manage the oil properly. They painted a brighter picture as this remark from a Local Chairman 5³³ during a civil society workshop shows.

„We don’t want to run away from treasure. We don’t want to be sad when we should be happy. Everybody wants to talk of the oil as a curse. As if it is a rule. Oil curse is not a rule. Oil becomes

³² In effect, work on the legislative framework for oil and gas, mentioned above, was already under way at the time of the publication of the national vision. And the government had already instituted programs to train Ugandans for the oil and gas industry and established a training institute at Kigumba. One such training program took scholarship holders for training to Trinidad and Tobago.

³³ Local Council is the highest elected political representative at the district level. I chose to discuss together high level district politicians and central government officials as their positions on oil were remarkably similar.

a curse only where there is bad governance. And I think the concern of Uganda especially from 1986 to date has been a positive trend toward good governance" (BIRUDO³⁴ workshop, 2012).

According to this LC 5, government in Uganda was so good that it would surely not suffer from the curse. The LC 5 from Buliisa claimed the oil would be a blessing because there has been good governance since Museveni and his National Resistance Movement took over power in 1986.³⁵ The District Community Development Officer from Arua district also pointed out during a youth workshop organised by a CBO that oil will be a blessing.³⁶

"When we get industrialization, benefits are there. Industries have forward and backward linkages. Goods will be produced and goods will be cheaper. With industrialization and urbanization we will see big business come to our country. How do we achieve this? Definitely these things will come, as the country grows. As the country realizes its own revenues. And the revenues will come from? The oil. The oil revenues shall be invested in infrastructure and social services and then everyone will benefit. So oil is not a curse. You have heard yesterday that if it is a blessing or a curse. I am saying it is a blessing." (RICE-WN Youth Workshop, 2013)

Again in this statement the officer suggested that easily, almost naturally, wealth and development would flow from the oil. Both statements were given at workshops organised by civil society and countered the rather gloomy vision CSOs spread. State representatives were always invited to such workshops or conferences. The state had taken a protective stance towards its oil. There were special branches of the police force and special security officers on oil matters in the district. The state controlled the access to the oil region. Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development (MEMD) demanded of researchers and civil society actors to seek permission to work in the oil region. For researchers this came on top of the official research permit and meant a considerable increase in time to get all permits.³⁷ If an organisation did not seek approval of the authorities and failed to inform and invite them, the workshop could be disbanded once authorities noticed. This way the government ensured that, at least formally, a state representative was present and the state's vision could be propagated.

To sum up, politicians and state officials have accepted the causal linkage between bad governance and bad effects of the oil established in the resource curse risk by civil society. This is important as the successful emplacement of a risk considerably shapes the future of any sociotechnical network, or in this case the oil complex (Hilgartner 1992:52). But they did not accept the negative prophecies it carried for Uganda. They stressed the good service they have done for Uganda and how they would continue to do so.

I finish this article by bringing together the prevalence of the resource curse risk narrative and the uncertainty in the oil region.

³⁴ The Buliisa for Rural Development Organisation (BIRUDO) is a CBO from Buliisa and the workshop was funded by International Alert.

³⁵ These remarks have to be situated within a discourse driven by the NRM government that they have brought peace, stability and economic growth to Uganda after the very volatile periods of the 1970s and early 1980s. And while this may hold true for some parts of Uganda, including the Western region. It is not the case for the North where a long civil war raged between the government and rebel armies such as the LRA. For a critical analysis of the recent Ugandan history see Dolan (2009), Finnström (2008), Vorhölter (2014).

³⁶ The workshop was organised by the CBO RICE-WN and funded by International Alert.

³⁷ Instead of alleged three months, it took me around nine months to obtain all permissions, from Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST), Office of the President and the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development (MEMD). I was not the only researcher who had to invest a lot of time to get access to the field. Researchers from Leeds University took a year to get all their permissions (van Alstine et al. 2014).

Ignorance is Uncertainty

According to a proverb, ignorance is bliss. Complete ignorance, it should say. Because once one realizes the lack of knowledge, the bliss evaporates. At the beginning of this article I described uncertainty as the realization of and the focusing on the limits of one's knowledge. Awareness of one's own ignorance is uncertainty, not bliss. Uncertainty is the presence of absent knowledge.

New tensions have arisen with the oil discovery and people feared their land and livelihood to be at risk. Gaining knowledge on the odds of losing their land and means of livelihood seemed hard though and many people did not seem to know whom to trust. With regard to loss of land, people had very limited means of negotiating their dispossession. They had to take what the government offered them, even if they thought the compensation rates were too low and it took too long as in the case of the construction of the refinery.

The two visions discussed in this article have shown that actors from civil society and the government position themselves within a framework given by the resource curse and draw different visions of the future from it. While the government underlines the positive potential of oil, the CSOs warn of the negative impacts. Or as the component manager of the donor agency Democratic Governance Facility (DGF) pointed out during a CSO action planning meeting on governance of natural resources, both the government and civil society were viewing the oil through different lenses. While the government looked through rosy future glasses, civil society peered through gloomy resource curse ones (Component Manager, Voice & Accountability, DGF Workshop, 2014). In his view some controversial CSOs were only trying to profit from antagonizing the government.³⁸

As the article showed, participants of civil society conferences, or Ugandans in general, were tasked by the CSOs to join the risk management. They were asked how the oil could be turned into a blessing, how its benefits could be harnessed and how the curse could be avoided. Turning the oil into a blessing or "harnessing" its potential was said to happen by applying the "internationally recognised mechanisms for managing such impacts" (International Alert 2011:13) developed by international experts. The panaceas against the resource curse were among others accountability, transparency, capacity-building or in general good governance or management. At a conference by the CBO RICE on the impacts of oil on the youth, the director of RICE explained to the young participants from several districts in West Nile how the resource curse could be avoided. He described the winning formula as consisting of prudent microeconomic management, investment in human capital and infrastructure, creation of good business environment, access to financing, and working with the private sector to spur investment, as well as a relatively open trade and open investment policies (RICE Youth Conference, 2013).

Advice like this, or that which was given in publications or documentaries, was rather general and did not offer concrete guidelines for action. Instead of discussing the details, the broad ideas were repeated. The reactions of the audience then reproduced the main message of the videos and presentations: "In some countries oil is a curse because the management of this thing is not what they have been planning for. If we manage it wrong, the oil will become a curse. If we manage it well, it will be a blessing" (Participant, RICE-WN Youth Workshop, 2013).

It was not just during the conferences that people referred to the resource curse and especially the bad case of Nigeria. It was pictures of polluted environments in Nigeria that NGOs left behind in the extractive communities in the form of posters or leaflets. During my first interview with the LC 1 of Kaiso in 2012, I noticed a poster from NAPE on his wall with a flaring well on it. He said that looking at the poster people feared it could look like that in Kaiso in the future. He said that the NGOs thought that leaving behind posters was enough and that they did not show people how to get help. And a resident of Kaiso mentioned to me that people feared things could turn out like in Nigeria and that they could be resettled

³⁸ DGF had also come under pressure from the government and was accused of having an anti-government agenda. This manager was intent on improving the working relations with the government.

and not benefit from the oil. His resigned conclusion was that maybe they would be better off without the oil (Resident of Kaiso, informal conversation, 2013). Not to produce the oil would mean not reaping the rewards but also not suffering any backlashes. However, this decision was not his to make.

Boholm points out that the idea that risk communication might mitigate conflicts is faulty. Encouraging dialogue and sharing viewpoints does not create a sense of agency for everyone involved. People that are affected by the risk decision of another will continue to perceive their status as being a “patient” (Boholm 2015:111). CSOs in Uganda pointed out the risks and how they could be managed. But the agency this risk narrative offered to people in the oil region was hollow. People in the oil exploration areas remained patients to the resource curse as the decisions on what to do with the oil were not theirs.

Based on my data, I suggest that the transformation of uncertainty into risk is only complete if the risk narrative provides guidelines for action. As stated above, risks are a way of anticipating the future in discourse and practice. In Uganda’s oil region the knowledge of the resource curse risk had not contained the uncertainty people expressed. While this seems paradoxical, I suggest that the risk itself or at least how it is communicated did not give them enough knowledge to act. The visions that civil society and the government brought to these communities neither answered immediate needs nor extended agency to the people. Therefore, I argue that despite the information they got from the government and civil society, the future did not become more manageable to them. Their uncertainty prevailed.

Instead of giving agency to the extractive communities, the risk offered a space to CSOs for engagement in the risk management. Thereby gaining financial resources and power. The financial resources were channelled into this economy of expectation by various international organisations and donor agencies. This money did have a profound influence on the shape of Uganda’s oil complex. While I was in Uganda, the oil coalitions had been riven by rows about the allocation of donor money and posts within the coalition.³⁹ The donor money had almost ended up being a curse in its own right.

Conclusion

This article traced early negotiations of oil in Uganda. In 2016, the oil was still in the process of becoming and had a discursive presence, driven by CSO activists and politicians. It was mainly present in an economy of expectation. Building on the concept of the resource curse, the actors presented the oil as either a blessing or a curse. They assigned possible future meanings to the oil – it could turn into either something good or bad. Civil society managed to have the resource curse risk frame the negotiation of oil. The government also referred to the curse but had a decidedly more positive evaluation of the status quo. While the government saw all the mechanisms in place to avoid the curse, civil society activists argued that their knowledge and guidance was still needed in the risk management to turn oil into a blessing.

The effect of the risk communication was a sense of uncertainty in the oil region. Although risks are generally a mode of anticipation that makes the uncertainty of the future manageable, this was not the case in Uganda’s oil region. The resource curse risk lacked behaviour guidelines that were within the reach of the people. Therefore, I argue that the risk management of CSOs did not actually manage the risk but it sensitized people to the uncertainty of their future in an oil state.

³⁹ Publish What You Pay was the first to get under this sort of inside attack. Following suspicions by some members as to the way funds had been used; a group split off from the main organisation and started lobbying for funds themselves while illegally continuing to use the name of PWYP. The donors refused to work with the group and in the end PWYP International came in to solve the issue. A similar internal split threatened to tear the Civil Society Coalition on Oil apart in 2012 and was resolved through a change in its’ leadership.

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