Tom Burgis
The Looting Machine: Warlords, Tycoons, Smugglers, and the Systematic Theft of Africa’s Wealth

At a time when optimism about Africa seems to be the norm, this book bucks the trend by offering a concrete illustration of the “resource curse” paradox. Tom Burgis, a Financial Times journalist focused primarily on the 21st century, provides an analysis packed with detailed information and statistical data. He describes how raw materials abundance leads some African élites, Western financiers, nebulous Chinese interests, and even the World Bank to systematically loot and exploit African countries.

Burgis’ volume is primarily a work of economic investigation and draws conclusions from observations and analyses of early 21st century events. While the author occasionally looks at 20th-century African history, he focuses more on highly detailed economic findings that will particularly interest readers seeking quantitative data about the continent’s exploitation in the 21st century. The author’s thesis, while not entirely original, broadly convinces through many specific examples. However, the book’s structure follows a sometimes repetitive series of journalistic case studies.

According to the author, Angola (Chapter 1) and Nigeria (Chapter 3) exploit oil resources; therefore, their governments have become corrupt to the point of kleptocracy. Burgis denounces the role played by Manuel Domingos Vicente in creating Sonangol, the Nigerian state-owned oil company. As the author sees it, both Vicente and Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos have created a parallel state within the Angolan government. This dual-state model provides the volume’s overarching theme. Burgis further suggests that mineral wealth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Chapter 2), has led to the establishment of a second state. President Joseph Kabila and Dan Gertler, an Israeli diamond dealer, regularly allow systematic élite looting of this war-torn country. The author observes the same pattern in Nigeria (Chapter 3); businessman Dahiru Mangal has prospered through his ties to former President Umaru Yar’Adua.

Burgis does a fine job of describing Chinese influence in Africa (Chapter 4), strongly evoking the concept of guanxi (关系) or the influence of
networks of relationships. The author uses the concept to analyze the role of a group of Chinese businesspeople known as the Queensway Group, in reference to their Hong Kong office location. One of the group, Sam Pa, managed to enrich himself very rapidly through personal contacts within the Angolan government. In fact, the Chinese Government arrested him on corruption charges on October 8, 2015 (after the book was published).

Burgis also links raw materials, corruption, and well-connected individuals to the case of Guinea. Chapter 5 details and decodes how Mamadie Touré, one of Lansana Conté’s widows, manipulated Frédéric Cilins, a Frenchman, and BSG Resources, a mining company founded by Beny Steinmetz, a highly powerful Franco-Israeli diamond dealer, for her own personal gain. The picture would not be complete without the presence of Rio Tinto, an Australian mining company and Sam Pa; both took a keen interest in Guinea’s abundant iron ore and bauxite deposits.

The case of Niger features similar élite corruption (Chapter 6) and serves to exemplify China’s Africa strategy. According to Burgis, far from an exclusive clash between Western countries and China, East-West cooperation is primary in exploiting the continent’s resources. As expected of any book about corruption in Africa, Burgis also covers the Niger Delta (Chapter 8). Discussing the role of foreign oil companies and Nigerien politicians, the author describes a veritable local and national looting machine.

The section on South Africa (Chapter 9) notes that the end of apartheid has led to the emergence of a class of black businesspeople; however, the country’s economic structure remains barely changed since 1994. Even in countries such as Zimbabwe (Chapter 10), resource exploitation—particularly the infamous “blood diamonds”—allows politicians to remain in power and businesspeople to carve out personal empires.

The final chapters tend to recycle several clichés about African corruption while providing useful quantitative data about it. Although Burgis’ volume does not provide any new theoretical perspectives, it does strongly present an abundance of concrete examples.

Surprisingly for a Financial Times journalist, Burgis denounces the World Bank’s role in Africa (Chapter 7). By financing projects in Ghana, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo via its International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Bank indirectly participates in this resource looting in partnership with corporations, such as Rio Tinto. The World Bank thus maintains a natural-resource exploitation system in Africa, one that sets little store by environmental or social conditions. The International Monetary Fund also facilitates the rush for African resources by bolstering Washington Consensus orthodoxy and promoting privatization.

Burgis’ book provides a trove of information for anyone interested in understanding how this African looting machine functions economically. However, the author overlooks several aspects of the situation. For example, international donor aid also fuels the machine, and should have been included in
the analysis. By focusing only on economic aspects, the author neglects various political and historical issues. For example, the colonial roots of Africa’s development and relationships between politicians and corporations should have been analyzed in greater detail to improve the reader’s understanding of how things really work in the early 21st century. Vincent Hiribarren³

³ Vincent Hiribarren is a lecturer in modern African history at King’s College, London.