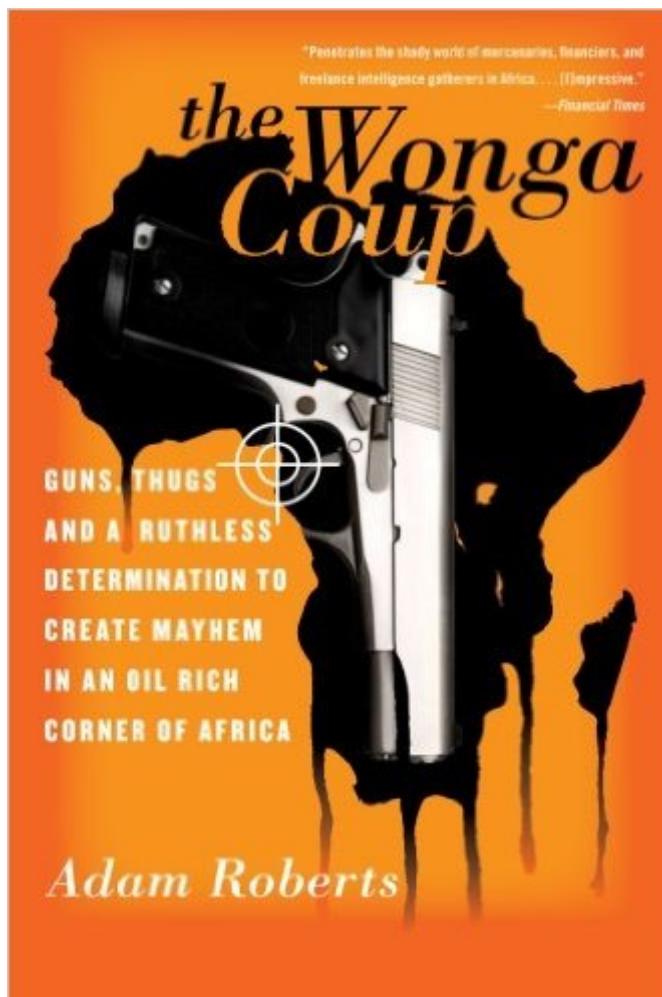


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The Wonga Coup: Guns, Thugs, And A Ruthless Determination To Create Mayhem In An Oil-Rich Corner Of Africa



Synopsis

Equatorial Guinea is a tiny country roughly the size of the state of Maryland. Humid, jungle covered, and rife with unpleasant diseases, natives call it Devil Island. Its president in 2004, Obiang Nguema, had been accused of cannibalism, belief in witchcraft, mass murder, billion-dollar corruption, and general rule by terror. With so little to recommend it, why in March 2004 was Equatorial Guinea the target of a group of salty British, South African and Zimbabwean mercenaries, travelling on an American-registered ex-National Guard plane specially adapted for military purposes, that was originally flown to Africa by American pilots? The real motive lay deep below the ocean floor: oil. In *The Dogs of War*, Frederick Forsyth effectively described an attempt by mercenaries to overthrow the government of Equatorial Guinea in 1972. And the chain of events surrounding the night of March 7, 2004, is a rare case of life imitating art; or, at least, life imitating a 1970s thriller; in almost uncanny detail. With a cast of characters worthy of a remake of *Wild Geese* and a plot as mazy as it was unlikely, *The Wonga Coup* is a tale of venality, overarching vanity and greed whose example speaks to the problems of the entire African continent.

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Customer Reviews

Equatorial Guinea isn't much of a nation, even for Africa. "In most atlases, the country lies hidden under the staple," writes Adam Roberts. But it has oil, and that makes quite the difference. In *The Wonga Coup: Guns, Thugs and a Ruthless Determination to Create Mayhem in an Oil-Rich Corner of Africa*, Roberts has told the story of an attempted coup by international businessmen and mercenaries in March 2004. The aim was not to gain political power, or to help the blighted nation's

poor start claiming some of their country's riches. The aim was simply to get "a large splodge of wonga" as one of the plotters called a big infusion of cash. (Surprisingly, the *OED* says that "wonga" is British, not African, slang.) The plot, for many reasons explained here, did not work, and plenty of the plotters and their henchmen suffered, but it has had some effects on Equatorial Guinea, and also reflects the current larger problems in the economic development of Africa. The book is well researched, and at times reads like an adventure novel, sort of a failed *The Dogs of War*. This is no coincidence. *The Dogs of War* was written by Fredrick Forsyth, who has recently, after formerly secret British documents were unsealed, admitted his own role in financing a similar, and similarly failed, coup against Equatorial Guinea in 1973. In some ways, it is a shame that the 1973 coup didn't succeed; it was less for riches than for removal of the deranged dictator Macias Nguema, who went on for a further six mad years. He was succeeded by his nephew, Obiang Nguema, about whom the best that can be said is that he is not as crazy as his uncle.

I first heard news of Simon Mann's arrest in Zimbabwe breaking over the BBC while living in neighboring Zambia. Couldn't imagine a fate much worse than a Zim prison cell- until I read Wonga Coup and learned of the conditions of the Black Beach prison in E.G. Pity for Simon's colleague...It's strange to feel pity for mercenaries, except that the utterly corrupt rule of Obiang and cronies can only encourage this. Siphoning off \$350mm of the national wealth of E.G. into a personal bank account in the US is a crime greater than any that might be committed by would-be coup-makers. Given the stultifying poverty in E.G., this level of graft is disgusting and unforgivable. Add to this flagrant human rights abuses, and I find myself very disappointed the coup failed. Even more so after reading "Tropical Gangsters", which gives some perspective of the lives of ordinary E.G. citizens, and those locals and foreigners who have made real efforts to improve the situation in E.G. Even if Mann's coup was financially motivated, it's hard to imagine how things could be any worse in E.G. for the average person. Perhaps a shake up (any shake up) might offer the possibility for positive changes. Despite the very real problems that the world oil/gas economy has caused certain underdeveloped countries whose major resource is petroleum (and whose near-sighted and corrupt governments can't see fit to invest this wealth into the futures of their countries), in the case of E.G., rule in the country was despotic before they even discovered they had oil. Can't blame this particular demon on Western oil consumption. Seems to be cultural and even geographical, engendered by tribal disparities and the isolating and strange borders of the territory.

The late FBI Deputy Director W. Mark Felt became renowned as the anonymous and well-informed

source on the Nixon Watergate affair, advising "The Washington Post" reporters Woodward and Bernstein to, "Follow the money" and all would be revealed...and, it was. Of course, it's always a safe bet when confronted with an otherwise perplexing or apparently irrational business or political affair to follow that advice, since power aligns along financial meridians: it always has and, unless human nature changes radically, it always will. How else to explain the warm welcome ("You are a good friend and we welcome you") extended by then American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (Washington, D.C., April, 2006) to Obiang Nguema, longtime dictator of the African backwater of Equatorial Guinea? Answer: Follow the money! Obiang Nguema, reviled by many independent human rights organizations as one of Africa's worst dictators (okay, maybe the worst) was a complete unknown outside Africa and most African nations didn't pay him too much mind either...until oil was discovered. Then, suddenly, the transformation: "Our friend in Africa!" It is a given that Obiang's record as head of government was hardly one worthy of emulation. Obiang himself was a torturer, possible cannibal and personal beneficiary of hundreds of millions of dollars purloined from petroleum revenues. His government has a no less enviable record: it purged political opponents, expelled/murdered minority tribesman such as the Bubis, stole from the Equatorial Guinean people who, given access to their fair share of oil revenue, would have had a per capita income of around \$6000.00, but instead had and have around 0.5% of GDP expended on education (lowest in the world) and 1.8% of GDP on health care (again lowest anywhere).

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