THE AFRICAN ENERGY MOMENT

Leadership, Gas and the Race to Power the World

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Dedication

To the memory of my father, Boniface Pliya.

A proud descendant of the Migan lineage of the Kingdom of Dahomey – a family whose ancestors served among the Kingdom's highest dignitaries as Migan, the King's Chief Minister and principal adviser.

You taught me that true leadership is measured not by power, but by service; not by privilege, but by responsibility; and not by words, but by actions.

You instilled in me a profound love for Africa, unwavering integrity, and the conviction that our continent possesses the talent, the resources, and the resilience to shape its own destiny.

This book is, above all, a tribute to your legacy.

May The African Energy Moment inspire today's and tomorrow's leaders to transform Africa's extraordinary energy potential into sustainable prosperity, industrial strength, and economic sovereignty for future generations.

With eternal gratitude, profound respect, and enduring love.

And to all those who, like he did, believe in Africa's future.

To the engineers, entrepreneurs, decision-makers and leaders who work every day to transform opportunities into progress.

And to the next generation of African professionals who will shape the continent's energy destiny.

Franck Pliya

Between Two Worlds – Where This Book Comes From

In Dakar, Paris and beyond, ministers, engineers, financiers and geologists often sit around the same table to discuss billions of cubic metres of gas buried thousands of metres beneath the Atlantic seabed. There is something awe-inducing yet deeply human about these gatherings. The people sitting at these tables are making decisions whose consequences will be felt for decades, long after their mandates have expired and their careers have ended.

Over the course of my career, I have had the privilege of observing the African energy industry from multiple perspectives. This experience has shaped the convictions and strategic reflections developed in this book.

My story is rooted in two worlds. With an Executive MBA from HEC Paris in hand, I built my professional career in the energy industry at the intersection of the two continents that shaped me – Europe and Africa. Over the years, I have been involved in business development initiatives in the African oil and gas sectors, have contributed to projects that shaped entire provisions of regional energy policy, and have had the rare privilege of observing up close how strategic decisions are made – and how they sometimes fall apart.

This dual heritage – European and African – is not merely a biographical detail to be noted and set aside. It heavily influences my interpretation of a given situation. When I hear a European official speak of the need to diversify their country's gas supply, I simultaneously hear the voice of a Senegalese technical director explaining how his country might capture the industrial value of its resources. These two perspectives are not in opposition – they are complementary. But they rarely connect and are driven by different priorities. Bridging the distance and ensuring that a dialogue exists between them has often been my role.

It took me a long time to find the right way to give shape to what I had learned. For a while, I believed that experience alone was sufficient, that there was no need to write any of it down. It was the events of recent years – the war in Ukraine, the accelerated reconfiguration of global energy markets, the rise of African gas projects – that convinced me it was time to try.

This book is neither a technical report nor a political manifesto. It is a strategic essay informed by extensive experience of the energy industry, by someone who not only believes that Africa stands at a historic crossroads but also knows from experience just how hard it is to make the most of it.

The Central Question

This book seeks to answer a question which takes many forms but remains the same at its core: why is it that Africa, sitting on so much of the gas resources the world desperately needs, fails to turn those hidden riches into sustainable development for its populations?

The question has been asked before. The “resource curse” – the idea that an abundance of raw materials frequently leads to more corruption and inequality than prosperity – has been documented, analysed and debated at length. But it is often asked by outsiders observing the phenomenon from a comfortable distance. I want to examine this question through the perspective developed over more than two decades in the energy sector.

My thesis is as follows: African natural gas can become a lever for industrialisation and economic transformation – but only if African leaders, national companies and international partners stop treating it as a simple export commodity. The difference between gas that does not meaningfully benefit a country’s population and gas that transforms a national economy comes down to precise strategic choices, which this book endeavours to identify.

Three major questions run through these pages.

First: how can Africa's energy story shift from one of dependence to one of sovereignty?

Second: what are the concrete mechanisms that would allow gas to drive industrialisation, and which countries have succeeded or failed in leveraging them?

Third: what kind of leadership does this transformation require?

Prologue – When Energy Becomes Strategy

For much of the twentieth century, energy was viewed primarily through an economic lens. Oil and gas were commodities that powered industrial growth, supported transportation systems and enabled modern economies to function. Their value was purely commercial. Their management was treated as a matter of business economics and fiscal policy.

But in the twenty-first century, energy has become a strategic instrument in global geopolitics. The war in Ukraine illustrated this transformation with a force that no one had truly anticipated. For decades, Europe had relied heavily on pipeline gas imports from Russia. This dependence did not go unexamined – it was discussed at length. But commercial interests, convenience and the competitive price of Russian gas had always prevailed over geopolitical concerns.

Over the course of 2022, as Russian gas supplies to Europe were progressively reduced, then almost entirely cut off, European governments were abruptly confronted with the fragility of their economic security. Liquefied natural gas imports (LNG) surged. Although they took several months to fully materialise, new supply partnerships with the United States, Norway, Qatar and Algeria quickly emerged. Floating regasification terminals were ordered and deployed within months – a remarkable logistical feat for an industry accustomed to timelines of several years. Energy security became one of the most critical strategic priorities for European decision-makers.

In this reconfigured context, Africa entered the global strategic agenda with new intensity. Gas projects that had been seeking buyers for years suddenly found takers. Negotiations that had dragged on for months concluded within weeks. And names like *Grand Tortue Ahmeyim* in Senegal and Mauritania, *Coral Sul* in Mozambique, or the offshore discoveries of Namibia began to appear in the briefing notes of European chancelleries.

These developments unfolded against a larger structural reality. Global energy demand continues to grow. Emerging economies in Asia and Africa require increasing quantities of energy to support their industrial development and urbanisation. The transition towards less carbon-intensive energies is real and irreversible, but also slow and uneven. In this transitional period, natural gas plays an increasingly central role – both as a bridge fuel and as an industrial feedstock.

Africa sits at the intersection of all these dynamics. The continent has held its resources for decades. What has changed is that the world has suddenly become aware of their importance. What has not yet changed – and this is the question that lies at the very heart of this book – is the way Africa positions itself in the face of this opportunity.

Africa's energy moment has arrived. The question is no longer whether Africa has the resources. It does. The question is whether it has the leadership, the institutions and the strategic vision to transform them into destiny.

PART I – ASSESSING AFRICA'S ENERGY POTENTIAL: WHAT MAKES AFRICA AN EMERGING ENERGY SUPPLIER?

This first part sets out to establish a solid assessment: where Africa's resources come from, what was discovered over recent decades, and what these discoveries actually mean, in terms of both potential and complexity. Understanding the present requires looking back into the past. Only by understanding why Africa has so often failed to transform its resources into sustainable development can one begin to see how that might change.

Chapter 1 – A Long and Troubled History: Africa and Its Energy Resources

To understand what is happening today in African gas basins, one must look back to a part of history that remains partly untold. Africa is no stranger to the global oil and gas industry. It has been part of it for more than a century. But more so as an exploited territory than a full strategic actor.

The Colonial Era and the First Oil Concessions

The first significant oil discoveries in sub-Saharan Africa date back to the early twentieth century. But the real turning point came in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1956, the geologists of the French company CFP – the predecessor of TotalEnergies – identified the first commercial fields in the Algerian Sahara, around the Hassi Messaoud field. The same decade saw the first commercial discoveries in Gabon, which entered production as early as 1957, and in Nigeria, which would rapidly become one of Africa's leading producers.

These discoveries were made against a particular historical backdrop: most African countries were still under colonial rule or had only just gained independence. The concessions granted to Western oil companies – Shell, BP, CFP, Standard Oil – were negotiated under profoundly unbalanced conditions. Nascent African states, often without their own administration or technical expertise, found themselves in a position of structural weakness facing companies with considerable financial, legal and technical resources.

The terms of these first contracts are revealing. In many cases, African states received only a marginal fraction of the revenues generated by the exploitation of their own subsoil: royalties negotiated down to minimal rates, profit taxes eroded by artificially low transfer pricing mechanisms between subsidiaries of the same group, and profits repatriated almost entirely to foreign parent companies. It is in these founding contracts that a large part of the frustration still observed today in relations between African states and international companies is rooted.

The Wave of Nationalisation: Taking Back Control

The 1970s marked a decisive turning point. Driven by the first oil shock of 1973 and by a broader movement of economic decolonisation accompanying political independence, a wave of nationalisation swept across Africa.

Algeria led the way. Shortly after its independence in 1963, it created