

## Full Length Article

# New biodegradation degree proxies based on acids and neutral nitrogen- and oxygen-containing compounds characterized by high resolution mass spectrometry

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## ABSTRACT

Heavy oil is one of the most significant unconventional petroleum resources and one of its formation mechanisms is biodegradation. The characterization of the molecular compositions of petroleum is crucial for determining the various degrees of biodegradation. In this work, detailed investigations of acids and polar NSO compounds in different levels of biodegraded oils from the Bongor Basin (Chad) were carried out by negative ion electrospray ionization (-ESI) Fourier transform ion cyclotron resonance mass spectrometry (FT-ICR MS). The present findings show that the heteroatomic compounds of biodegraded crude oils are predominantly composed of  $N_1$ ,  $N_1O_1$ ,  $O_1$ ,  $O_2$ ,  $O_3$  and  $O_4$  species. The relative content of  $N_1$ ,  $N_1O_1$  and  $O_1$  species tend to decrease and those of  $O_2$ ,  $O_3$  and  $O_4$  species appear to increase with the increasing of biodegradation. The ratio of acyclic and cyclic acids (A/C ratio) of the  $O_2$  species increase with an increase of biodegradation, indicating the increasing of  $O_2$  class during microbial alteration. A new parameter, i.e. the ratio of  $(O_2 + O_3 + O_4)/(N_1 + O_1)$  species, is presented to quantitatively define biodegradation levels. This parameter is inversely proportional to API gravity and has a favorable positive correlation with total acid number (TAN), suggesting acidic compounds are formed by the microbial alteration of  $N_1$  and  $O_1$  class and are more presented in advanced biodegradation. A modified ternary diagram including  $N_1$ ,  $O_1$  and  $O_2 + O_3 + O_4$  species describe the detailed changes of nitrogen- and oxygen-containing compounds. Data points with a high level of biodegradation tend to shift to  $O_2 + O_3 + O_4$  species end-member and retreat from  $N_1$  species end-member, showing the relative content of  $O_2 + O_3 + O_4$  species increase and those of  $N_1$  species decrease with increasing biodegradation which may due to the formation of organic acids in degradation oil. The ratio of  $(O_2 + O_3 + O_4)/(N_1 + O_1)$  species and the modified ternary diagram provide new parameters to estimate the biodegradation degree and TAN in crude oil.

## 1. Introduction

With the sharp growth of energy demand and the rapid decrease of conventional resources, unconventional resources including heavy oil attract more and more attention [1–3]. Biodegradation is a common and important process in the formation of subsurface heavy oil reservoirs, particularly in the context of late basin uplifting [4–6]. The reservoir temperature dropped and is now suitable for microorganism survival [7]. During biodegradation, normal alkanes in crude oil are first

consumed by microorganisms, followed by branched alkanes, naphthenes (monocyclic and polycyclic), diasteranes and aromatic steroids [8–14]. Consequently, based on the sequence of selectivity in preferential removal compounds, the biodegradation index has been proposed to determine the grade of biodegradation [15,16]. A decrease of saturated and aromatic hydrocarbon fractions in crude oil resulting in a decrease in oil API gravity and an increase in total acid number (TAN) [17]. Thus, the heteroatomic compounds i.e. nitrogen-, sulfur- and oxygen-containing compounds, are predominate in biodegraded oil and

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could provide significant information to understand the related oil accumulation history. However, the heteroatomic compounds are characterized by a strong polarity and high boiling point, which makes those compounds difficult to separate and enrich. The conventional mass spectrograph, such as gas chromatographic-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) and gas chromatographic-mass spectrometry/mass spectrometry (GC-MS/MS), are inherently low resolution and poor ionization performance, leading to difficulty to represent the distribution of non-hydrocarbon constituents.

In recent years, Fourier transform ion cyclotron resonance mass spectrometry (FT ICR MS) is introduced into the field of petroleum geology and is considered as a useful tool to investigate polar NSO compounds [18]. This technology enables to direct measure basic and sulfur-containing compounds in positive ion electrospray ionization mode (+ESI) and acids and natural polar compounds in negative ion electrospray ionization mode (-ESI) [19]. Its resolving power and accuracy can be hundreds of thousands or even millions of times in the relative molecular mass range of the petroleum components (200–1000 Da) as high as GC-MS and GC-MS/MS. The polar compounds of petroleum can be completely separated and the number of atoms of C, H, O, N, and S elements can be calculated in different compounds using FT ICR MS. Hence, it has been applied for molecular composition measurement of petroleum [20–23], oil-source correlation [24–29], maturity definition [30–36], petroleum secondary migration [37,38], biodegradation process of petroleum [39–44] and origins of high acid oil [45–54]. For example, Kim et al. (2005) reported the change of acids and polar NSO compounds during secondary alteration of petroleum and proposed a new parameter i.e. A/C ratio (Acyclic/Cycle acids ratio), to quantitatively determine the degree of biodegradation of crude oil [55]. Li et al. (2010) hold that biodegradation is an important factor for the origin of high acidity crude oil [47].

In this paper, eight crude oils with different levels of biodegradation were investigated by (-) ESI FT ICR MS. Meanwhile, the distribution of

oxygen- and nitrogen- containing compounds was systematically observed and analyzed due to microbial alteration.

## 2. Geological setting

The Bongor Basin, located in Central African Shear Zone (CASZ), is a Mesozoic–Cenozoic continental rift basin resulted from the Central Africa dextral strike-slip fault [56,57] (Fig. 1a). The Bongor Basin, covers an area of  $1.8 \times 10^4 \text{ km}^2$ , is a significant petroliferous basin in Chad [58]. It was divided into four secondary structural units: southern depression, southern uplift, central depression and northern slope from south to north (Fig. 1b). Major discovered oil accumulations occurred in the northern slope, including Baobab oilfield, Mimosa oilfield, Ronier oilfield and Prosopis oilfield [59,60]. The intensive structural movement in the late Cretaceous caused inversion structural styles in the basin. The study area is characterized by predominantly NW-SE trending faults [61,62] (Fig. 1b).

In the study area, the Prosopis Formation and Mimosa Formation in Lower Cretaceous are considered as main source beds (Fig. 1c). The source rocks bear a high abundance of organic matter (average total organic carbon > 3.5%) and are characterized by type II kerogen. Oil accumulations occurred in the various strata in Cretaceous [59] (Fig. 1c). The discovered oils in northern slope are comparable in organic geochemistry and are classified as an oil family. Those oils are characterized by high wax content (average 22.3%), low sulfur contents (average 0.12%) [63,64].

## 3. Samples and experiments

### 3.1. Samples

Eight crude oil samples were collected from seven wells in the northern slope in this basin (Table 1), two wells in the Ronier oilfield,

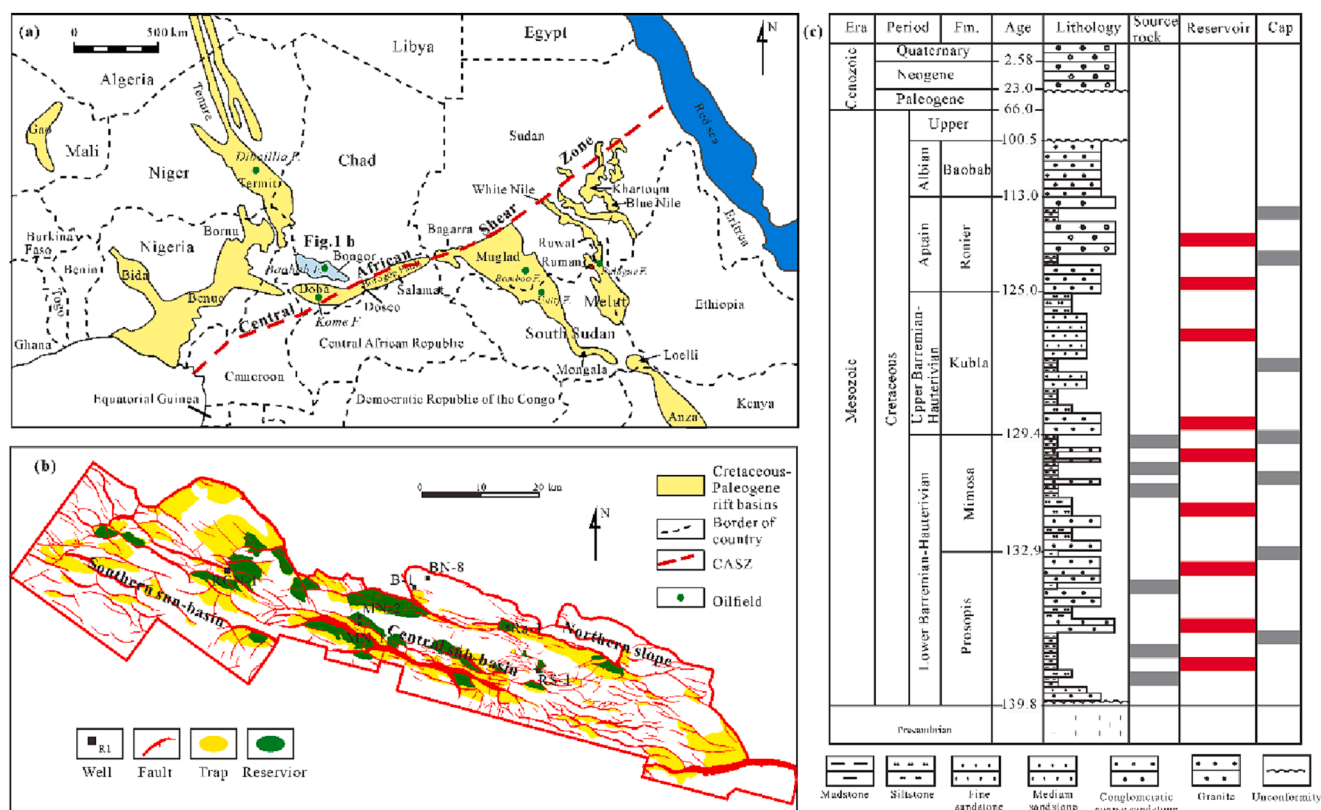


Fig. 1. (a) Location of Central African Shear Zone (CASZ) and Bongor Basin; (b) distribution of faults, reservoirs and traps in the Bongor Basin and sampled wells in the area; (c) comprehensive stratigraphic profile of the Cretaceous strata in the study.

**Table 1**

Physical and geochemical properties of crude oil samples from Bongor Basin, CASZ.

PM	Well	Depth (m)	Fm.	Sat (%)	Aro (%)	NSO (%)	Asp (%)	API (°)	TAN mg/g
0	RS-1	980.86–990.46	K	61.46	14.97	14.24	9.34	34.19	nd
1	R-1	1051.00–1053.00	K	67.45	13.85	14.44	4.26	29.28	0.05
2	BN-8	1388.00–1407.70	P	59.37	15.98	20.45	4.19	28.33	0.15
3	MN-2	896.70–976.20	K	19.53	54.78	20.70	5.00	21.08	1.42
4	MN-1	866.00–873.00	K	56.11	23.15	12.41	8.33	28.50	1.09
5	R-1	526.00–532.00	K	43.81	24.03	20.15	12.01	15.44	0.14
6	B-1	542.00–554.00	K	44.55	22.27	17.73	15.45	16.87	3.21
7	RCN-1	1014.40–1024.00	R	50.94	24.23	16.29	8.54	12.89	8.12

Notes: PM: Biodegradation index based on [15]; Fm: Formation, K-Kubla, P-Prosopis; Sat: the content of saturated hydrocarbons in oil, wt%; Aro: the content of aromatic hydrocarbons in oil, wt%; NSO: the content of gelatine in oil, wt%; Asp: the content of asphaltenes in oil, wt%; API: gravity, °; TAN: total acid number, mg KOH/g oil; nd: no data.

one well in the Prosepis oilfield, two wells in the Baobab oilfield and one well in the Raphia oilfield (Fig. 1b). Cheng et al. (2022) proposed that those oils have similar maturity, common origins and are likely to belong to the same oil group [63].

### 3.2. Gas chromatography (GC)

The Gas chromatography were carried out in an Agilent 7890A equipment with a HI-1 elastic capillary column (60 m × 0.25 mm × 0.25 μm). The initial temperature was 40 °C for holding 10 min, and then programmed to 70 °C at a rate of 4 °C/min, and finally to 300 °C at a rate of 8 °C/min for holding 40 min. The carrier gas was helium (purity > 99.999%) and its flow rate was 1 mL/min.

### 3.3. Gas chromatography-mass spectrum (GC-MS)

GC-MS analyses of the saturated fractions were carried out on a 5975A instrument, equipped with an HP-5MS chromatographic column (30 m length, 0.25 mm inner diameter, and 0.25 μm film thickness). Helium (purity > 99.999%) was used as the carrier gas. The oven temperature was initially set at 50 °C, with one-minute hold. It was then raised to 120 °C at 20 °C/min during the first stage, and then to 310 °C at 3 °C/min during the second stage, where it was held for 20 mins. Electron impact ionization (70 eV) was employed.

### 3.4. (-) ESI FT ICR MS

The crude oil analyzed by negative ion (-) ESI FT-ICR MS by a Bruker Apex-Ultra mass spectrometer equipped with a 9.4 T superconducting magnet to measure the polar and acid (Nitrogen- and oxygen-containing) compounds. The oil sample was injected to ESI source at a rate of 250 μL/h. The spray voltage is -4000 V, and the front voltage

and the end voltage of capillary column are -4500 V and 320 V, respectively. The mass range was set from  $m/z$  100 to 1000. The detailed FT-ICR-MS mass calibration and data analysis methods are described by Shi et al. (2010) [22].

## 4. Results

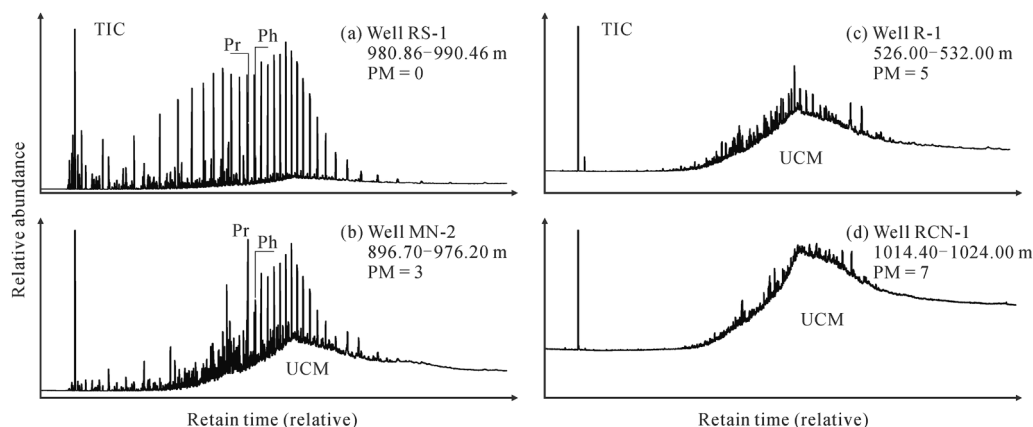
### 4.1. Degree of biodegradation of crude oils

The inversion tectonic movement resulted in the strong erosion of the Upper Cretaceous and oils had been biodegraded in different levels. The molecule markers in non-degraded oil (PM = 0) are complete (Fig. 2a, Fig. 3a). Samples of PM = 1, 2 and 3 occur obvious loss of *n*-alkanes (Fig. 2 b; Fig S1 b–d). Sample of PM = 4 exhibits a complete depletion of *n*-alkanes and isoprenoid (Fig S1 e). However, it is no distinct difference for the distributions of saturated biomarkers in samples of from PM = 0 to PM = 4 (Fig. 3a). The relative abundance of tricyclic terpenes is significantly enhanced in samples of PM = 5 (Fig S2b). Sample of PM = 6 occurs 25-norhopanes [65] and discernable hopane distributions (Fig S2 c). Sample of PM = 7 is characterized by high content of 25-norhopanes but less of tricyclic terpenes and hopanes (Fig. 2b).

### 4.2. Compound class distribution

The selected oil samples are characterized by high abundance of N- and O- containing compounds. In the non-degraded oil, N<sub>1</sub> compounds are the dominated species, followed by O<sub>2</sub>, O<sub>1</sub>, N<sub>1</sub>O<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>1</sub>O<sub>2</sub> classes (Fig. 4) (Table S1). The relative abundance of sulfur-containing compounds is much lower than N- and O- containing compounds.

Biodegradation in various degrees obviously affected the distribution of compound classes. Overall, the relative content of N<sub>1</sub>, N<sub>2</sub>, N<sub>1</sub>O<sub>1</sub>, N<sub>1</sub>O<sub>2</sub>



**Fig. 2.** Representative total ion currents (TICs) of different levels of biodegradation crude oils from the Bongor Basin.

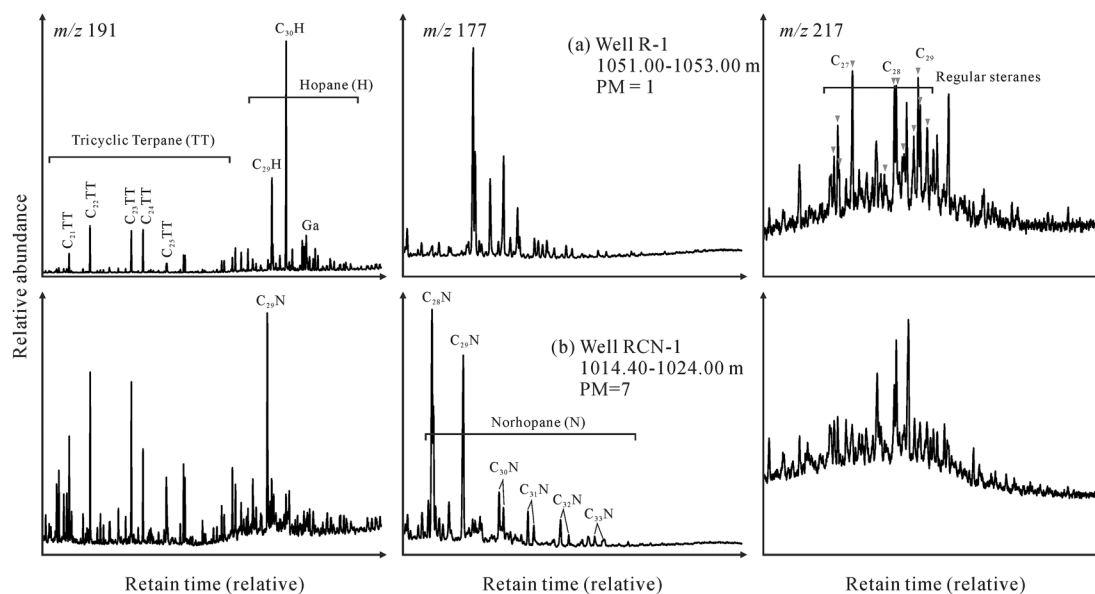


Fig. 3. Representative mass chromatograms ( $m/z$  191,  $m/z$  177 and  $m/z$  217) of different levels of biodegradation crude oils from the Bongor Basin.

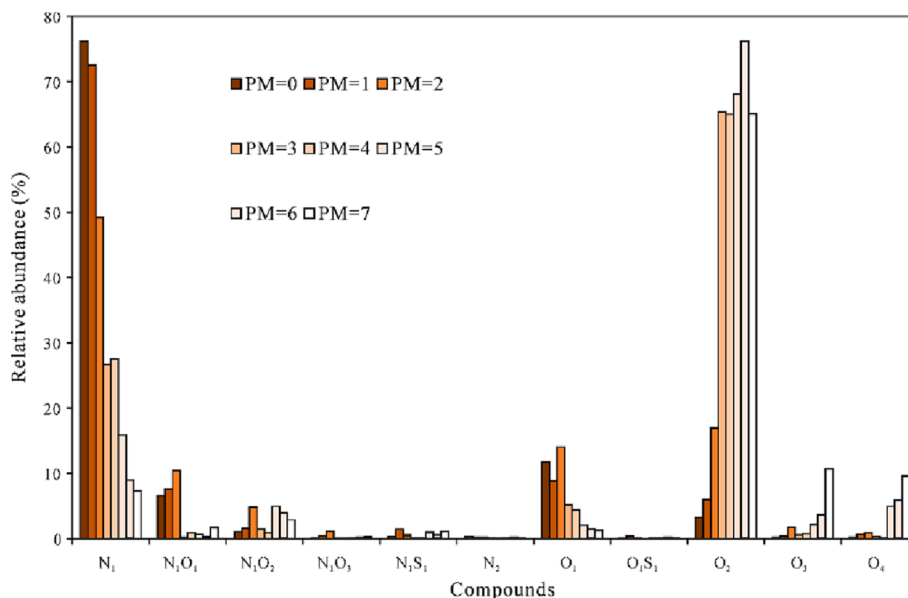


Fig. 4. The histograms showing the relative content of compound classes in different degree of biodegradation oils.

and  $O_1$  classes decrease whereas  $O_2$ ,  $O_3$  and  $O_4$  tend to increase with the increase of biodegradation. The high  $O_2$  class content of the highly to strongly biodegraded oils (samples of  $PM = 4-7$ ) is mostly caused by the oxidation of hydrocarbons to produce acid compounds.

#### 4.3. Distribution of O-containing compounds

##### 4.3.1. $O_1$ species

Fig. 5 shows the distribution of  $O_1$  species in different degree of biodegradation oils. The results suggest the DBE (Double Bond Equivalent) values of  $O_1$  species main range in 4–17. The species with a DBE of 4 may be alkylphenols rather than hydroxyl compounds [35]. The DBE values of  $O_1$  species lightly shift to higher DBE numbers with the increasing of biodegradation. High content of DBE values of 4–7 is a characteristic of non-biodegraded oil (Fig. 5a), whereas strong biodegraded crude oil exhibits high content of DBE values of 8–13 (Fig. 5h).

##### 4.3.2. $O_2$ species

Naphthenic acids are structures with acidic oxygenated functionalities with the formula  $C_nH_{2n+z}O_2$ , where  $n$  is referred to the number of carbon atoms and  $z$  represents the hydrogen deficiency [66]. The empirical formulas differ by  $CH_2$  for a given hydrogen deficiency, and they differ by  $H_2$  between  $z$  series [67]. And, a useful visualization method has been applied to categorize the data in terms of double bond equivalents (DBE) instead of empirical formulas by numerous authors, as calculated from the equation of  $DBE = c - h/2 + n/2 + 1$  for  $C_cH_hN_nO_oS_s$ , which is strongly convenient to characterized highly complex samples [68–70]. Therefore, the ring number of  $O_2$  compounds can be confirmed by the DBE values. The DBE value of fatty acids is one. It must be one more DBE for each additional ring or double bond. The  $O_2$  species with  $DBE = 2$  may have one ring and those with  $DBE = 3$  may indicate two rings.

The relative content of  $O_2$  species tends to increase with the increase of biodegradation (Fig. 6). Ethers and ketones are difficult to ionization

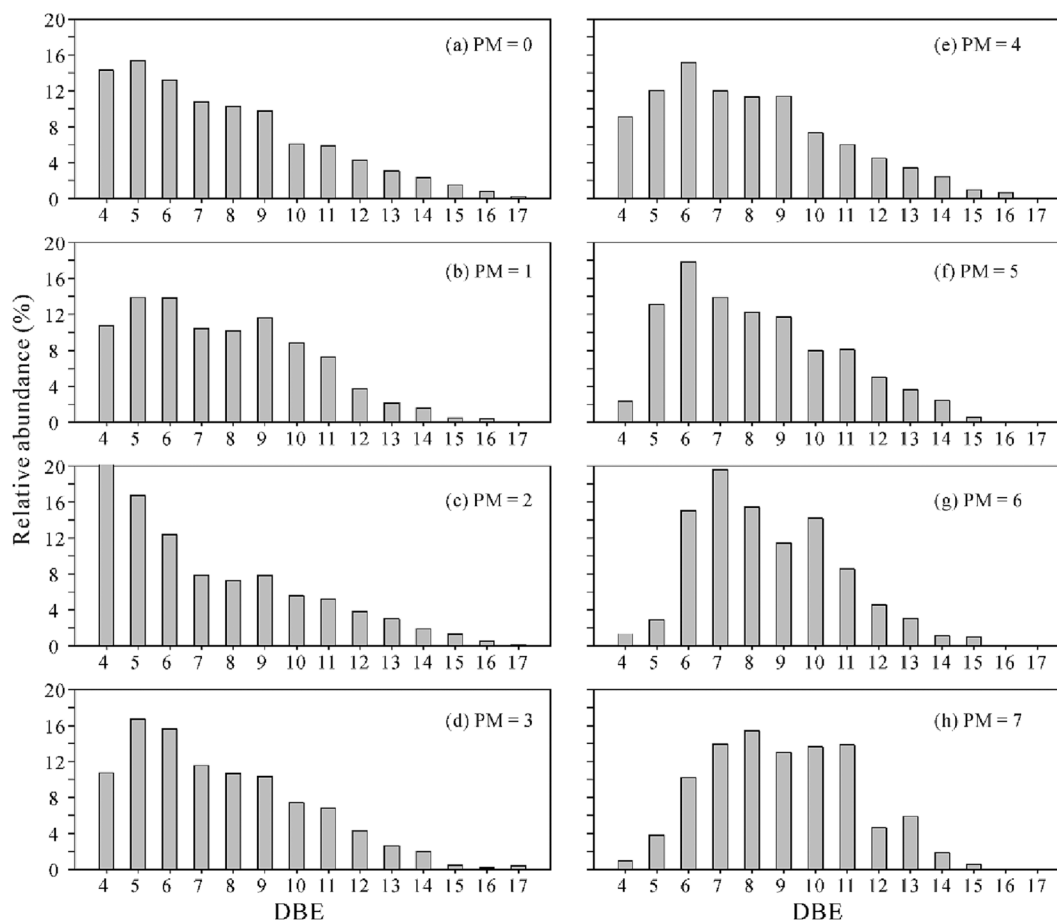


Fig. 5. Relative abundance of O<sub>1</sub> class in different degree of biodegradation oils.

using the negative ion ESI. O<sub>2</sub> species may be acids and dihydric alcohol compound. However, alcohols are easily oxidized to acids. Therefore, it could be inferred that O<sub>2</sub> species are mainly acids in crude oil. In non-biodegraded oil (PM = 0), the abundance of O<sub>2</sub> class is much lower than those of biodegraded oil (Fig. 6a). Fatty acids (DBE = 1) occur in the light biodegraded crude oil (PM = 1 and PM = 2) (Fig. 6b, c). The fatty acids become gradually decreased relative to naphthenic acids with the increase of biodegradation. Naphthenic acids are a typical of O<sub>2</sub> species in high levels of biodegraded oil samples. PM = 5 sample contains a high concentration of 1-ring and 2-ring acids (Fig. 6e). In the most degraded oil (PM = 7), polycyclic acid (3-, 4-, and 5-rings) predominate (Fig. 6h). As a result, the relative abundance of naphthenic acids with high ring numbers increases as biodegradation progresses.

As shown in Fig. 10, the O<sub>2</sub> species is abundant in the heavily biodegraded oils (Fig. 6e-h), most likely attributable to unremitting carboxylation with the increasing of biodegradation degrees. The O<sub>2</sub> species with DBE = 6 is mainly referred to hopanoic acids with 5 rings. The hopanoic acids are being generated by some specific bacteria, i.e. degrading bacteria. The various changes in the distributions of hopanoic acid changes in microbial population as biodegradation proceeds [55]. C<sub>30</sub>-C<sub>32</sub> hopanoic acids occurred in moderately biodegraded crude oils (Fig. 6e). The contents of hopanoic acids increase with the increasing of biodegradation levels (Fig. 6h), may indicating an expansion of the bacterial community. However, the occurrence of hopanoic acids in sample with PM = 2 (Fig. 6c) may imply the different bacterial species.

#### 4.3.3. O<sub>3</sub> and O<sub>4</sub> species

The relative abundance of O<sub>3</sub> and O<sub>4</sub> species in non-biodegraded and biodegraded oil is distinctly lower than N<sub>1</sub>, O<sub>1</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> species. The content of O<sub>3</sub> and O<sub>4</sub> species appears to increase firstly and then

decrease and finally increase with the increase of biodegradation (Fig. 4). O<sub>3</sub> species may be intermediate metabolites and O<sub>4</sub> species bear two carbonyls.

#### 4.4. Distribution of N-containing compounds

##### 4.4.1. N<sub>1</sub> Species

Both types of basic and neutral nitrogen-containing compounds occurred in crude oils [71]. The neutral nitrogen organic compounds generally comprise pyrrole, carbazole and their alkylated and benzoalkylated derivatives. The basic nitrogen forms mainly consist of pyridine, quinoline and benzoquinoline. In general, the content of the basic nitrogen compounds is much lower [72-73], while the neutral nitrogen compounds are dominant in crude oil and have been widely applied to assess maturity and predict oil filling orientation [74-80]. The neutral nitrogen compound can be analyzed using FT ICR MS in negative ion mode. N<sub>1</sub> species are predominant in the non-biodegraded and light biodegraded oil, and their abundance become gradually less content relative to O<sub>2</sub> class with the increasing of biodegradation (Fig. 4). The N<sub>1</sub> species are mainly composed of carbazoles (DBE = 9), benzocarbazoles (DBE = 12), dibenzocarbazoles (DBE = 15) and phenylindoles (DBE = 10) (Fig. 7). The relative abundance of N<sub>1</sub> species with higher DBE values, i.e. dibenzocarbazoles (DBE = 15) and benzonaphthocarbazoles (DBE = 18), tend to increase relative to carbazoles (DBE = 9) with the increasing of biodegradation. This change may be attributed to the strong anti-biodegradation of N<sub>1</sub> species higher DBE values and the microbial consumption of N<sub>1</sub> species lower DBE values.

##### 4.4.2. N<sub>1</sub>O<sub>1</sub> species

The N<sub>1</sub>O<sub>1</sub> classes distributions of crude oils at different levels of

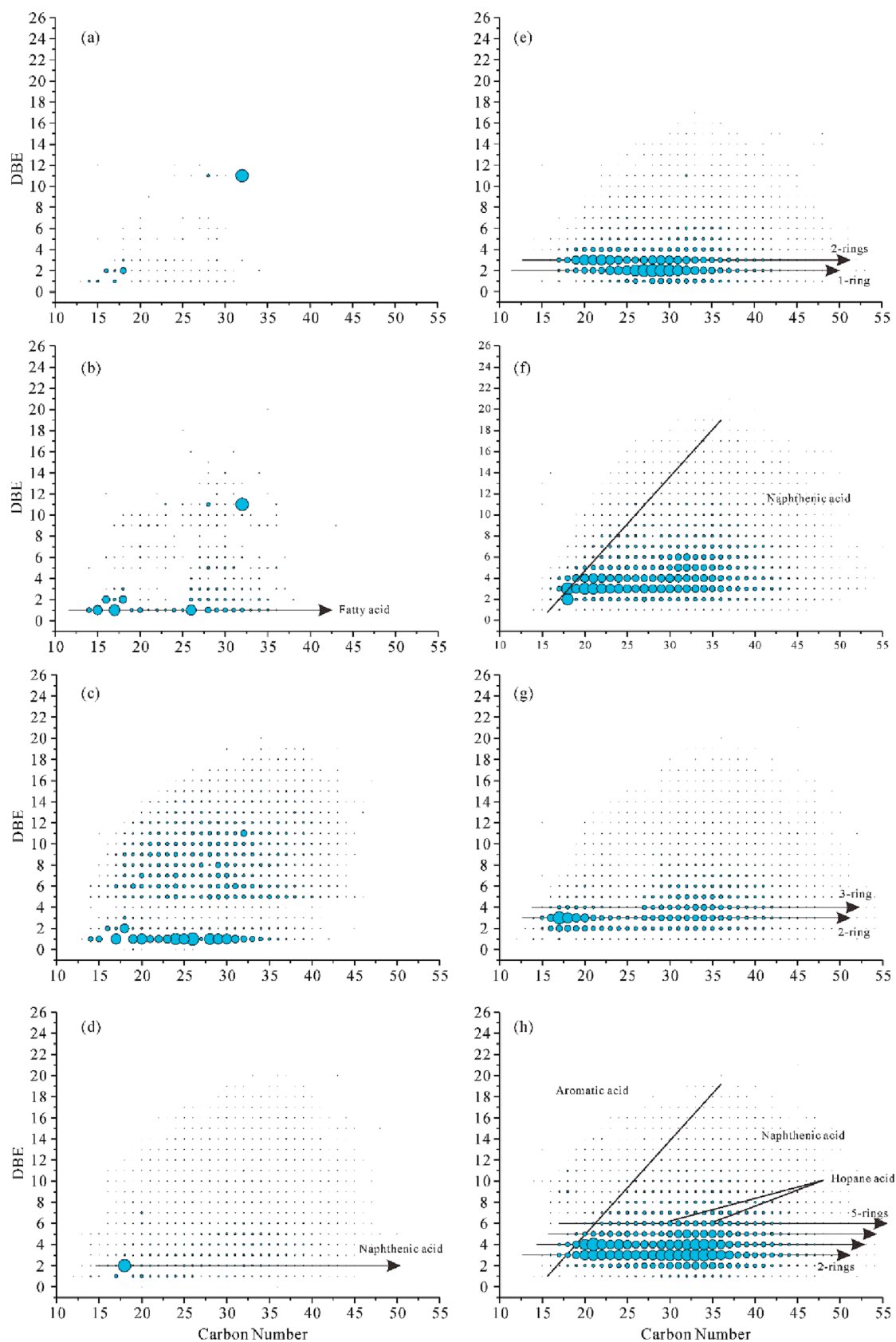


Fig. 6. Cross plots of DBE versus carbon number of the  $O_2$  species in different degree of biodegradation oils.

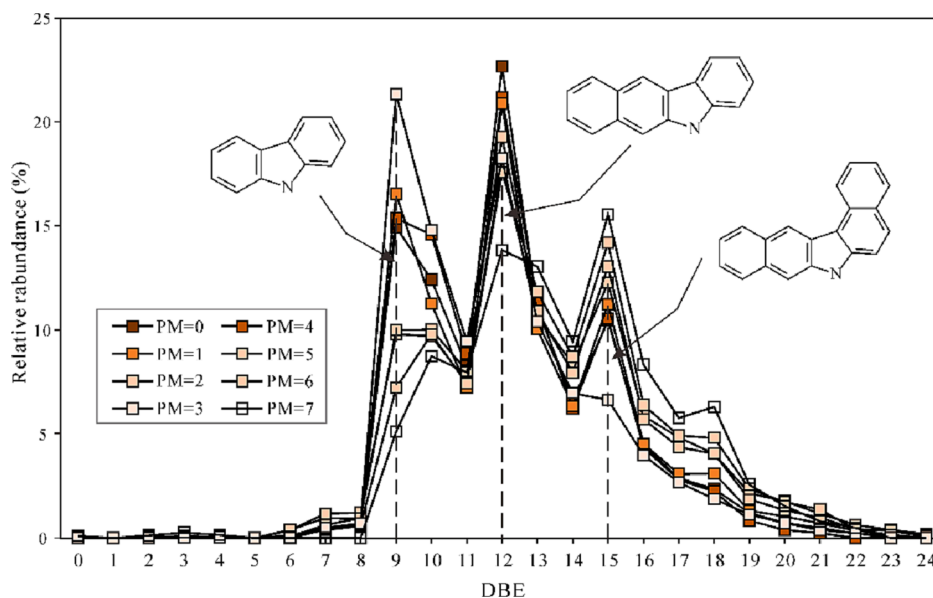


Fig. 7. Relative abundance of  $N_1$  class in different degree of biodegradation oils.

biodegradation are illustrated in Fig. 8. The oxygen atom exhibited in  $N_1O_1$  class may be in the form of hydroxyl. The DBE values of  $N_1O_1$  class are ranging from 6 to 22. The  $N_1O_1$  species are characterized by high abundance of dihydrodiol benzocarbazole (DBE = 15) and dihydrodiol dibenzocarbazoles (DBE = 18) (Fig. 8). As biodegradation proceed, the relative abundance of  $N_1O_x$  species increases when  $PM < 3$  and then decreases when the biodegradation degree is higher than three, may indicating that  $N_1O_x$  species were the intermediate products during the biodegradation of  $N_1$  species (Fig. 4).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Biodegradation index based on $O_2$ species

Kim et al. (2005) observed a decrease of fatty acids and an increase of naphthenic acids with the increasing of biodegradation degree, and proposed a parameter, i.e. the ratio of acyclic to cyclic naphthenic acids (A/C ratio) based on  $O_2$  species to define the degree of biodegradation

[55]. In this study, the A/C ratio has a negative relation to the degree of biodegradation of oil samples (Fig. 9a), indicating the formation of naphthenic acids with the increase in biodegradation [47].

### 5.2. New parameters to determine biodegradation index

The content of  $S_x$ ,  $S_xO_x$  and  $N_xS_x$  species is very lower may due to relatively low content of sulfur in selected oil samples from the Bongor Basin [63,64]. Therefore, those compounds are not considered in this study. The content of  $N_1$  and  $O_1$  species decreases and those of  $O_2$ ,  $O_3$  and  $O_4$  classes increase with the increase of biodegradation show that these compounds could be considered to estimate the level of biodegradation (Fig. 4).  $N_1$  and  $O_1$  species are oxidized to form acids ( $O_2$ ,  $O_3$  and  $O_4$  classes). Here, we proposed another biodegradation parameter the ratios of the sum of  $O_2$ ,  $O_3$  and  $O_4$  species ( $O_2 + O_3 + O_4$ ) and the sum of  $N_1$  and  $O_1$  species ( $N_1 + O_1$ ). The results show that those ratios bear a positive correlation with the degree of biodegradation of crude oil (Fig. 9b). Furthermore, based on the correlation between the ratios of

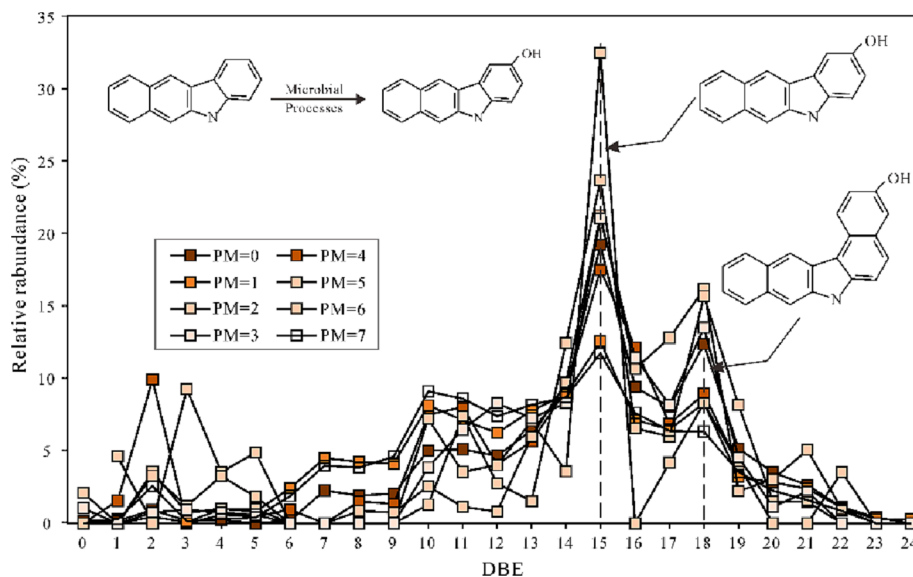
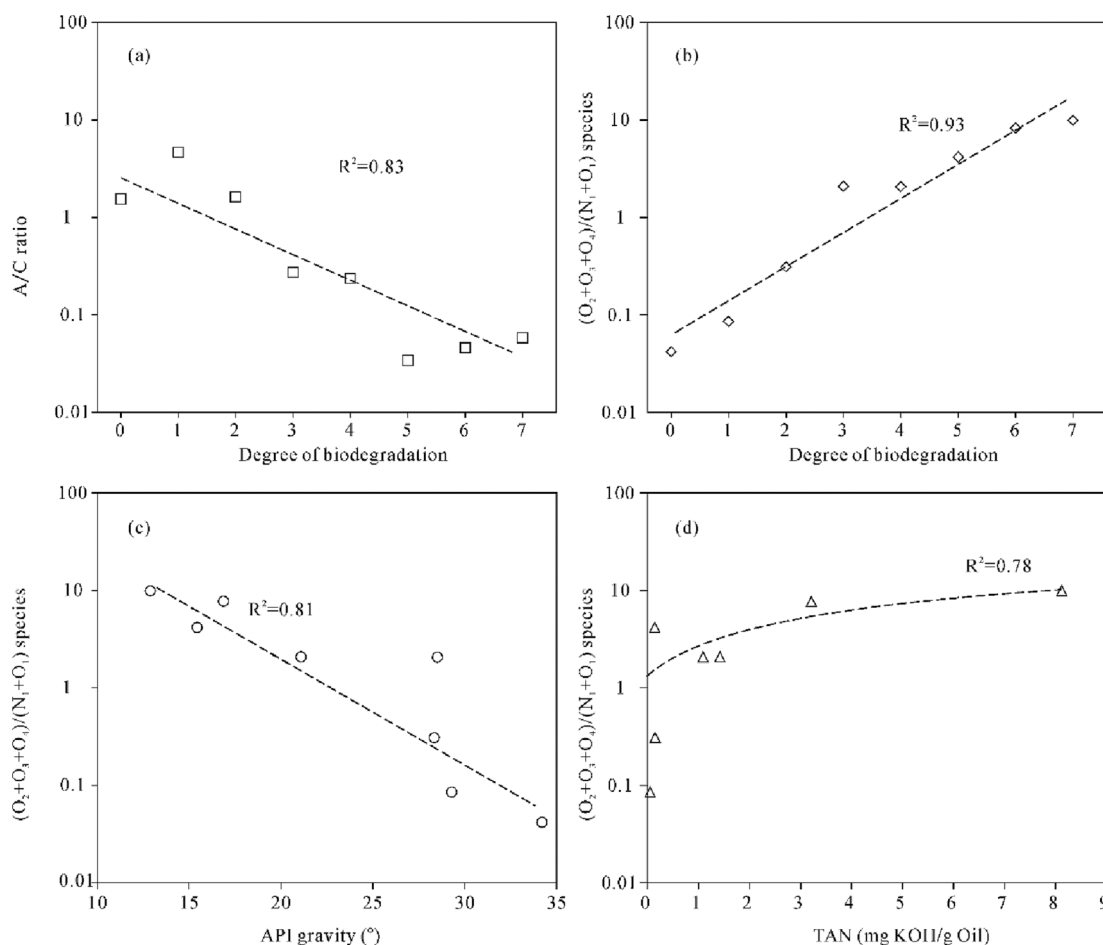


Fig. 8. Relative abundance of  $N_1O_1$  class in different degree of biodegradation oils.



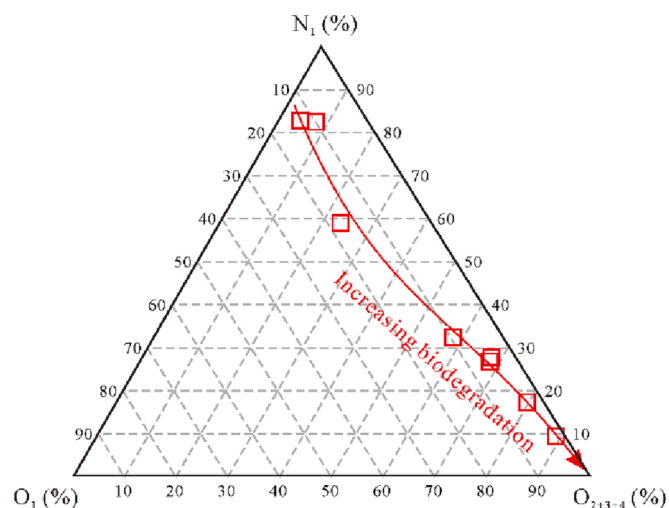
**Fig. 9.** Cross plot of (a) the acyclic/cyclic acid versus Biodegradation Index (modified from Kim et al. (2005) [55]); (b) the ratios of  $(O_2 + O_3 + O_4)/(N_1 + O_1)$  species versus Biodegradation Index; (c) the ratios of  $(O_2 + O_3 + O_4)/(N_1 + O_1)$  species versus API gravity and (d) the ratios of  $(O_2 + O_3 + O_4)/(N_1 + O_1)$  species versus total acid number (TAN).

$O_2 + O_3 + O_4$  and  $N_1 + O_1$  species and API gravity, this parameter could be a qualitative description of API gravity (Fig. 9c). Fig. 9 also illustrates the cross plot of total acid number (TAN) versus  $(O_2 + O_3 + O_4)/(N_1 + O_1)$  species ratio in the selected crude oil samples. It shows that  $(O_2 + O_3 + O_4)/(N_1 + O_1)$  species ratio bears a good correlation ( $R^2 = 0.78$ ) with TAN in crude oils (Fig. 9d). oil. The acid fractions in non-biodegraded and lightly biodegraded oils ( $PM = 0-2$ ) primarily consist of fatty acids with little in the way of naphthenic acids, leading to a low content of TAN in these oils [70]. With the increasing of biodegradation degree, the acid components are characterized by cyclic acids (e.g. mono- and dicyclic acids, hopanoid acids), resulting in a high concentration of TAN in severely biodegraded oils ( $PM = 4-7$ ) [47–49].

A modified ternary diagram including  $N_1$ ,  $O_1$  and  $O_2 + O_3 + O_4$  species characterized the detail changes of nitrogen- and oxygen-containing compounds (Fig. 10). Data points with high level of biodegradation tend to shift to  $O_2 + O_3 + O_4$  species end-member and retreat from  $N_1$  species end-member, showing the relative content of  $O_2 + O_3 + O_4$  species increase and those of  $N_1$  species decrease with an increasing biodegradation which may due to the formation of organic acids in degradation oil. Accordingly, the ratio of  $(O_2 + O_3 + O_4)/(N_1 + O_1)$  species and new ternary diagram could be reliable tools to quantitatively estimate the biodegradation level and TAN in crude oil.

### 5.3. Biodegradation processes

In the initial stage of biodegradation, *n*-alkanes of saturated hydrocarbon fraction in crude oil are first consumed [8,9] (Fig. 2 a-c), and



**Fig. 10.** Ternary diagram showing the relative abundance of  $N_1$ ,  $O_1$  and  $O_{2+3+4}$  species.

then are oxidized forming fatty acids in low grade biodegradable crude oil (Fig. 6 a-c; Fig. 9a). Next, the content of naphthenic acids in crude oil tend to increase with the increasing of biodegradation [55] (Fig. 6 d-h; Fig. 9a-b; Fig. 10).  $N_1$ - and  $O_1$ -containing compounds gradually decrease and may be convert into naphthenic acids [46,49,81,82].  $N_1$ -containing

compounds are main compose of carbazoles, benzocarbazoles and benzonaphthocarbazoles (Fig. 7). Three biodegradation pathways of pyrrolic ring of carbazoles, i.e. ring-opening reaction, carbazole dioxygenase [55,83] (CARDO) lateral deoxygenation [84,85] and CARDO angular deoxygenation [13,84–88], have been reported. In the ring-opening reaction and CARDO angular deoxygenation of pyrrolic ring, the DBE values of  $N_1$  class compounds would be decreased by 1 to convert into  $N_1O_1$  and  $N_1O_2$  species [44]. However, the DBE values of carbazoles, benzocarbazoles and benzonaphthocarbazoles would remain unchanged in CARDO lateral deoxygenation of pyrrolic ring. Based on the distribution of DBE of  $N_1$  and  $N_1O_1$  species (Fig. 7; Fig. 8), it shows that the degradation pathway of pyrrolic ring in  $N_1$  class compounds includes a CARDO lateral deoxygenation that keeps DBE values in the Bongor Basin (Fig. 8).

## 6. Conclusions

- (1) Biodegradation can influence the distribution of acids and polar NSO compounds in crude oil. The relative content of  $N_1$ ,  $N_1O_1$  and  $O_1$  species tends to decrease and those of  $O_2$ ,  $O_3$  and  $O_4$  species are seem to increase with the increasing of biodegradation degree.
- (2) The *n*-alkanes are consumed and converted to fatty acids for the first stage of degradation and the content of naphthenic acids in crude oil tend to increase but fatty acids decrease with the increasing of biodegradation level. The most possible biodegradation pathway of carbazoles is a CARDO lateral deoxygenation to convert into  $N_1O_1$  species compounds remain unchanged DBE values in Bongor Basin.
- (3) A new biodegradation parameter,  $(O_2 + O_3 + O_4)/(N_1 + O_1)$  species ratio related to acids and polar NSO compounds, is presented in this paper. This ratio indicates a good correlation with the degree of biodegradation, API gravity and TAN in crude oil, suggesting formation of acids with the increasing of biodegradation. A modified ternary diagram, including  $N_1$ ,  $O_1$ ,  $O_2 + O_3 + O_4$  species, shows the change of compounds and biodegradation process.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Dongyong Wang:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Meijun Li:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition. **Ding-sheng Cheng:** Conceptualization, Resources. **Yebo Du:** Conceptualization, Resources. **Quan Shi:** Methodology, Supervision. **Xianli Zou:** Resources, Writing – review & editing. **Qingyao Chen:** Methodology, Investigation.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

I have shared the link to my data/code at the Attach File step.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

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