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'Sons of the Soil': Autochthony and its ambiguities in Africa and Europe[1]

Peter Geschiere

'Land' and 'democracy' were central notions in Gerti Hesseling's work. The link between the two acquired new and potentially violent dimensions with the upsurge in notions of 'autochthony' and 'sons of the soil' as powerful slogans in post-Cold-War politics in Africa and elsewhere. This chapter analyzes the classic example of Athens in the fifth century BC as the very cradle of both notions: autochthonia *and* demokratia. *However underlying tensions were already starting to emerge even though Athenian philosophers saw the notions as being intrinsically related and the Athenians were the only ones in Greece to be autochthones, which was supposed to explain their special talent for* demokratia. *The Athenian example is highly relevant for present-day struggles over autochthony and politics in Africa but also in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe. A paradox that seems to haunt the notion in very different times and places is the tension between an appearance of naturalness and hence basic security on the one hand and, on the other, a practice of deep uncertainty since autochthony's precise definition appears always to be contested.*

Introduction

One of the things I learned from Gerti Hesseling was how important land and land rights are. For her, struggles over land and law were a vantage point that

[1] This article contains elements from my 2009 book entitled *Perils of belonging: Autochthony, citizenship and exclusion in Africa and Europe*, notably from the Introduction and Chapters 4 and 5.

allowed deeper insight into society as a whole. In 1982 we worked together for two months in Senegal and she taught me to see land rights, which I had previously found a bit boring, in a broader perspective. Little did I know at the time that I would come to write a book about people's obsessions with their links to the soil. But then, how could I ever have foreseen that a notion like autochthony (literally: 'born from the soil') would become a major issue in so many different parts of the world? Indeed, one of the paradoxes of our times is the upsurge in our strong preoccupation with belonging in a world that pretends to be globalizing. Appeals to the soil – as in the notion of autochthony – play a particular role in this respect as some sort of primordial form of belonging, with equally radical forms of exclusion as its flipside. The emotional charge these notions have recently acquired in different parts of Africa – Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Congo, to mention the most blatant examples – will be well known.

Yet, it is important to emphasize that the impact of this notion and the concomitant obsession with belonging as some sort of shadow side of the process of globalization are not only being felt on the African continent. Actually my interest in the theme was triggered by the surprising realization that similar discourses in the 1990s on belonging had suddenly invaded everyday politics with highly charged slogans in regions as different as West Africa and Europe. My surprise was all the greater because the term 'autochthon', which I had become familiar with in Cameroonian and Ivorian politics, was becoming, at the same time and quite abruptly, a heavily laden emotional term in Dutch and Flemish discussions on how to deal with immigrants. How could the same term acquire such a great mobilizing appeal in completely different settings? And why was this happening at roughly the same time?

An inspiring notion in this context is Tanya Murray Li's term 'a deep conjuncture of belonging' as specific to our times (Li 2002; see also Li 2000). She uses it particularly to characterize present-day relations in South East Asia, but the concept is clearly acquiring global dimensions. Many people are emphasizing the fact that our world is rapidly globalizing, yet the shadow side to globalization seems to be an obsession with belonging, especially in localist terms. The concept of conjuncture is especially relevant when addressing this paradox: highly varying trends, apparently completely unrelated, converge in reinforcing the preoccupation with belonging. The examples referred to above – Cameroon, Ivory Coast and the Netherlands – indicate that the trends that are turning autochthony into a powerful political slogan with great mobilizing potential differ strongly according to region. What is all the more important is to try to be specific about the contexts in which autochthony as some sort of primordial form of belonging is emerging with such force.

This contribution focuses on the cradle of autochthony thinking, namely classical Athens at the time of Pericles and Plato. The reader may be surprised

that I am going so far back in time. My defence is that this old and one of the very first examples of autochthony discourse highlights all the ambiguities with which we will be subsequently confronted in present-day examples from both Africa and Europe. Indeed, the idea of autochthony seems to be closely but quite paradoxically linked to new forms of neoliberal thinking. And also, and this may be an even better excuse for going so far back, Gerti loved history and always gave it a central place in her own work.

Classical Athens: The first fortress of autochthony

The above-mentioned coincidence, that the notion of autochthony became quite abruptly so politically charged in both Cameroon and the Netherlands, made it a challenge to follow the term over time and space. This turned out to be an adventure: I had certainly not expected that it would take me to such widely differing places and moments like some sort of magical bird turning up unexpectedly. Leading thinkers have used the term and still do so, albeit in quite different ways. Levi-Strauss (1958: 238) gave it a central place in his analysis of the Oedipus Myth and its emphasis on the physical handicap of its main actor. Heidegger (1989/1934) proposed the heavy term of *Bodenständigkeit* as a translation of autochthony, using it to defend a more communautarian form of nationalism for Germany, as an antidote to the all too individualistic tenor of Anglo-Saxon and French versions of nationalism. (Unfortunately, but probably not accidentally, Heidegger developed these ideas in the days when he was making overtures to the Nazis.)[2] Derrida (1997/1994: 95) on the contrary criticized autochthony as a mark of a too limited (or even 'phallic') form of democracy, which we urgently need to surpass for a more universalistic version.[3] Despite such differences, all these important thinkers drew inspiration from the same source: classical Athens, the very cradle of autochthony.

To Athenians during the city's Golden Age in the fifth century BC at the time of Pericles, Euripides and Plato their own *autochtonia* was of crucial importance. They used to boast about it being proof that their city was exceptional among all the Greek *poleis*. The other cities had histories of being founded by immigrants, while only the Athenians were truly *autochthonoi*, i.e. born from the land where they lived. This was also the reason why Athenians had a special propensity for *demokratia*. The classical texts – Euripides, Plato and Demosthenes – are surprisingly vivid in this aspect. To today's reader it might come as a shock to note that in the text of these venerated classics, the same language of autochthony appears that is being so brutally propagated by Europe's prophets

2 See also Garbutt (2006), Fritsche (1999) and Bambach (2003).
3 See also Chérif (2006).

of the New Right. And indeed this correspondence did not go unnoticed by these prophets, as is clear from an incident in France.

On 2 May 1990, a Member of Parliament in the French *Assemblée Nationale*, a certain Marie-France Stirbois who was a member of Le Pen's *Front National* (that is still the most right-wing party in France), surprised her colleagues by delivering a passionate speech about classical Athens and the way in which Euripides, Plato and even Socrates himself defended the case for autochthony. Apparently her fellow *deputés* were somewhat surprised because until then Mme Stirbois's interventions had not betrayed such a deep interest in the classics (or for that matter in any academic subject). Clearly another *Front National* sympathizer – probably a professor at the Sorbonne – had written her speech for her (Loraux 1996: 204). The incident had pathetic overtones but the good thing was that it inspired two leading French classicists – Nicole Loraux (a good friend of Derrida's) and Marcel Detienne – to look into the issue of Athenian autochthony. Both authors show, with impressive eloquence, that it pays off to take old authors seriously since these classical voices highlight sharply, and perhaps inadvertently, the tensions inherent to the autochthony notion as such.

At first sight, the Athenian claim to autochthony seems to be as natural and unequivocal as, for instance, the claims of the new president of Ivory Coast, Laurent Gbagbo, that one needs to distinguish *Ivoiriens 'de souche'* (literally: 'from the trunk of the tree') from later immigrants. (Le Pen uses a similar jargon in France).[4] However, Loraux and Detienne's visionary analysis shows that it may indeed be worthwhile having a closer look at the Athenian language on autochthony. This requires a detour in time, and the lively imaginary of Greek mythology may put the reader's patience to the test. Yet such a return to the classical locus of the autochthony notion is rewarding as the tensions and inconsistencies of this apparently unequivocal notion come to the fore in particularly striking ways, as can be seen from the following examples that testify to both the vigour and the complexities of autochthony in Athenian thinking.

In Erechtheus, one of Euripides's most popular tragedies,[5] the playwright has Praxithea, King Erechteus's wife, offer her own daughter for sacrifice in order to save the city:

> I, then, shall give my daughter to be killed. I take many things into account, and first of all, that I could not find any city better than this. To begin with, we are an

[4] In fact, the Athenians went even further by declaring their autochthony to be absolutely unique: their city was the only city where the citizens – at least the 'real' ones – were *autochthonoi*. They could therefore justly claim pre-eminence over all the Greeks, and certainly over the Barbarians.

[5] See Euripides in Collard *et al.* (1995). Unfortunately only a few sections of the text have been preserved.

> autochthonous people, not introduced from elsewhere; other communities, founded as it were through board-game moves, are imported, different ones from different places. Now someone who settles in one city from another is like a peg ill-fitted in a piece of wood – a citizen in name, but not in his actions. (Euripides 1995: 159-160)

Dramatic language in dramatic circumstances. The story is about how Athens is threatened with destruction by Eumolpus and his Thracians invading Attica. The Delphi oracle has prophesized that King Erechtheus can only save the city by sacrificing one of his offspring. He seems to hesitate but his wife gives him a lesson in what autochthony means in practice:

> This girl, not mine in fact except through birth, I shall give to be sacrificed in defence of our land. If the city is captured, what share in my children have I then? Shall not the whole then be saved, so far as is in my power. (Collard *et al.* 1995: 159-160; cf. also Detienne 2003: 36-39)

Euripides's tragedy was based on a myth that was placed in some sort of mythical time (Erechtheus is supposed to have already been mentioned by Homer). But it was clearly very topical for the situation in Athens in 422 BC when the play was first performed: the city was at the height of its naval power but was locked in mortal combat with its arch rival Sparta. There was, indeed, good reason to celebrate Athenian uniqueness at the time. In other respects too, Praxithea's words must have seemed highly to the point for the audience. Her scorn of people 'who settle in one city from another' being like 'a peg ill-fitted in a piece of wood' no doubt had special meaning in Athens at a time when the majority of the population were seen as foreign immigrants (*metoikoi*), quite a few of whom were much richer than those who were true citizens by descent.

For Plato, Athenian *autochthonia* seems to have been equally self-evident. He made Socrates – when instructing young Menexenes on how to deliver a funeral oration for fallen soldiers (a big occasion in Athens in those days)[6] – celebrate Athenian uniqueness in no uncertain terms:

> ... the forefathers of these men were not of immigrant stock, nor were these their sons declared by their origin to be strangers in the land sprung from immigrants, but natives sprung from the soil living and dwelling in their own true fatherland.

As the next step in his didactic model for a funeral speech and still speaking through Socrates, Plato makes his famous (or notorious) equation of *autochthonia* and *demokratia*:

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[6] Socrates pretends in his dialogue that he has been trained in how to deliver an *epitaphios* (funeral oration) by none other than Aspasia, Pericles's famous partner. Some (Detienne 2003: 21) emphasize the ironic elements in the Menexenes dialogue. However, it seems clear that once Socrates'/Plato's exemplary oration gets going that irony gives way to patriotism (see also Bury 2005: 330).

> For whereas all other States are composed of a heterogeneous collection of all sorts of people, so that their polities also are heterogeneous, tyrannies as well as oligarchies, some of them regarding one another as slaves, others as masters; we and our people, on the contrary, being all born of one mother, claim to be neither the slaves of one another nor the masters; rather does our natural birth-equality drive us to seek lawfully legal equality. (Bury, Loeb Library, Menexenus 2005: 343-347)

As in Africa, funerals and notably funeral orations must have been a high point in the expression of Athenian autochthony.[7] In general, autochthony in Greece, again as elsewhere, was probably linked to heavy ritual and symbols that verge on the burlesque.

In Euripides's tragedy, Erechtheus is punished for his dearly bought victory over the Thracians by Poseidon, who is still furious that the Athenians preferred the goddess Athena rather than himself as the city's protector. With his terrible trident, Poseidon made a deep cleft right through the Akropolis (Athens's main mountain) so that Erechtheus disappeared to remain literally 'locked in the earth', an appropriate position in view of his emphatic chthonic character, which is invariably repeated whenever he is mentioned.[8] But finally Athena, the city's chosen goddess, appeared to save the situation by ordaining the consecration in honour of the king-locked-in-the-earth of a small temple, the Erechteion, which would be situated on the Acropolis and become the focal point of Athenian autochthony celebrations.

Burlesque as some of the founding myths of this Athenian particularity may now seem, it is clear that this heavy symbolism had a powerful appeal at the time. The reference to the soil in autochthony discourse in Athens was affirmed in particularly graphic ways by a king-locked-in-the-earth and the rhetoric used in funeral orations. All this confirmed too an idea of Athenian autochthony as a long-standing trait of this particular city. Hadn't Homer already mentioned Erechtheus as an arch-chthonian This pride in Athens's autochthony as an old tradition was so convincing that it was later also accepted by many modern classicists (cf. Rosivach 1987: 294).

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7 Cf. also Pericles's famous *epitaphios* for the Athenians who fell in the first few years of the long war against Sparta, and Demosthenes's funeral addresses from a later period (the second half of the fourth century BC) when Athens was threatened again, this time by the Macedonians (Philippos, father of Alexander) (Loraux 1996: 44). There are, of course, striking parallels here with very different times and situations. Cf. Maurice Barrès, the champion of French nationalism in the 1880s and his famous dictum that the main things needed for creating a *conscience nationale* were 'a graveyard and the teaching of history' (Barrès 1925, vol. I: 25; cf. Detienne 2003: 131). See also below and Geschiere (2005) on funerals and belonging in neoliberal Africa.

8 Detienne (2003: 42) translates a variant of the King's name, Erichthonios, as *Très-Terrien*.

Yet several historians have recently raised doubts about this dazzling image of classical Athenian autochthony – problems that must have worried contemporaries as well. There is a clear tension with the study of history as it was being practised at the time. What is striking is that the two most prominent historians in those days did not make special mention of Athens being particular in this respect. Herodotus mentioned a wide array of autochthonous groupings, some more so than others, but he did not mention this trait in relation to Athens (Detienne 2003: 49). Thucydides seemed determined to avoid the very word 'autochthon', probably because he distrusted its rhetorical use. Instead he went to the other extreme by explaining Athens's pre-eminence due to its success in attracting immigrants (the *metoikoi* mentioned before) from all over Greece (Loraux 1996: 94). Indeed, the upsurge in autochthony in Athens at the time seems to have been intrinsically related to the influx of immigrants who, especially in the Piraeus harbour area, were rapidly becoming a majority. As so often in its subsequent avatars, Athenian autochthony expressed a determined effort by the city's citizens to deny citizenship rights to newcomers (some of whom were rapidly becoming richer than earlier inhabitants).

Vincent Rosivach (1987), another classical historian of our times, even shows that the very term autochthon must have been of a much later coinage, probably from the fifth century BC when Athens was emerging as the major power among Greek cities. He proposes distinguishing an 'indigenous' and a 'chthonic' use of the term. It is certainly true that Homer mentions Erechtheus from Attica as a chthonic figure. However in Rosivach's view, this is in a rather different sense, as some sort of primal, serpent-like figure (a monster even) closely tied to the earth. It is only during the rise of Athens that this Erechtheus was linked to the search by Athenians to prove their exceptional indigeneity, giving the chthonic component in autochthon quite a different connotation. Rosivach's conclusions may be quite hypothetical.[9] Yet his insistence on the reverse side of attributing a chthonic origin – it could also imply primitivizing a being or a group as some sort of primal phenomenon – is very relevant for other

[9] It is clear that the veneration of Erechtheus, the arch-father of Athenian autochthony who was so graphically locked inside the earth itself by Poseidon's revenge, cannot be that old. Archaeologists now maintain that the Erechteion, his temple where Athenian autochthony was sanctified, was built between 430 and 422, i.e. at the very time that Euripides was writing his Erechtheus play in which Athena ordered the Athenians to build this temple (Collard *et al.* 1995: 193; Detienne 2003: 44). A similar tension between founding and belonging haunts Plato's Republic as well. The founder of his model city, who necessarily must have come from elsewhere to found a 'new 'city, had to acquire a certain aura of autochthony to create a myth of belonging: Plato described this as 'a beautiful lie' that would serve as the basis for the civic instruction of its newly settled citizens (Rosivach 1987: 303; cf. Loraux 1996: 176; Detienne 2003: 56).

situations as well. In Africa, as elsewhere, this double meaning was to come up time and again: the autochthon as the prestigious first-comer but also as a primitive or even pre-human being.

In the same line as Rosivach, Detienne (2003) emphasizes that Greek claims to autochthony must have generally been somewhat a-historical since they denied, by definition, the great era of Greek colonization of the sixth and seventh centuries BC when new *poleis* were founded all over the Eastern Mediterranean in an adventurous process of expansion. Even Athens was very much a city in formation up until the fifth century BC. It is striking that the laws on citizenship promulgated in 509 BC by Cleisthenes, the city's great legislator during Athens's ascension, were much more open and inclusive than the Pericles Law of 451 BC during the city's heyday. Although Pericles's Law came only a little over 50 years later, it brought incisive changes and reserved Athenian citizenship only for those who could claim that both parents were Athenian (Detienne 2003: 53).[10]

Loraux (1996) problematizes Athenian autochthony, and hence autochthony in general, at an even deeper level. For her, the insistence on remaining on the same spot is a basic denial of history, which always implies movement. It is a form of negative history which needs an Other – movement in whatever form – to define itself (*Ibid.*: 82, 99). At a very practical level for Athenians, this implied a guilty denial of memories of earlier migrations. This was especially the case for the city's aristocratic families who used to be proud of their founding histories and often referred to their provenance from elsewhere as some sort of mythical charter. Loraux signals that history and movement are a kind of hidden subtext undermining autochthony's rigid memory in other classic texts on autochthony.

A blatant expression of this is to be found in one of Euripides's most famous tragedies, 'Ion', which is probably the most outspoken celebration of autochthony he left. For modern readers (and viewers), the force of the play mostly lies in the beautiful verses where Euripides allows the actors to express their rage (contained by deep respect) against the Gods and the careless way they handle mortals. But another possible reading of the text and one that takes into account Athenians' preoccupation with autochthony suggests that this latter

[10] The parallels with present-day struggles are again striking. Cf. Le Pen's half-hearted attempts to fix the notion of *Français de souche* as reserved for those who have four grandparents born in France: he had to rapidly give up this proposition since many of his followers would not have met this criterion. Or the fierce debates in Ivory Coast, which were directly related to the contested position of Alassane Ouattara (the leading politician from the North) over 'and' versus 'or', i.e. whether a person's father *and* mother had to be Ivorian to grant Ivorian citizenship to their off-spring; or whether either one's father *or* mother would suffice?

theme must have been at least as important. Compare, for instance, Ion's statement when his new 'father' (who later turns out not to be his real father) tries to take him to Athens, while Ion still believes he himself is a stranger in the city:[11]

> They say that the famous Athenians, born from the soil, are no immigrant race. I would be suffering from two disabilities if I were cast there, both the foreignness of my father and my own bastardy ... For if a foreigner, even though nominally a citizen, comes into that pure-bred city, his tongue is enslaved and he has no freedom of speech. (Kovacz, Loeb Library, 1999: 397, 403)

This is vintage autochthony thinking. However, as the tragedy unfolds, the theme leads to so many complications that it can also be read as some sort of carnival of autochthony: Ion has to be crowned in the end as Athens's truly autochthonous king, even though he is Apollon's son and adopted by a father who is himself a stranger (the latter is even led to believe that he is Ion's 'real' father). As Detienne (2003: 59) so graphically put it: 'nothing is impossible in autochthony'.

There is clearly a deep unrest in autochthony thinking that Loraux highlights by insisting on the sheer impossibility of excluding history. Persons are not what they seem to be. If a foreigner – like Ion – can turn out to be an autochthon, the reverse must also be true. Indeed the obsession with having traitors on the 'inside' and the urgent need to unmask them, which has recently been demonstrated in recent developments in Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Rwanda and many other hotspots of autochthony, was very much present in classical Athens too. If a citizen was slandered by someone who questioned his citizenship, he could summon the slanderer to appear before a city tribunal. However this ran risks: if the slanderer was found to be innocent, his accuser would not only lose his own citizenship but also his liberty and could be sold as a slave (Loraux 1996: 195).

This may indicate why today's New Right in Europe is tempted to quote the celebration of autochthony in classical Athens as a precedent to be respected. However, both Loraux and Detienne convincingly show that on closer reading these texts instead highlight the basic impossibilities of autochthony thinking: the tortuous struggle to come to terms with history constantly undermines the apparent self-evidence of chthonic belonging and even more the great uncertainty it creates about 'authentic' and 'fake' autochthony, and hence an obsession with purification and the unmasking of traitors-in-our-midst.[12] Such uncer-

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[11] Later, this same Ion was to learn that his 'real' mother was the sole inheritor of the city's autochthonous royal line. Greek stories love playing havoc with lines of descent!

[12] The focus of Detienne's last chapter is on present-day historians and their ongoing contribution to the reproduction of autochthony thinking. His main and quite shocking example is Fernand Braudel and one of the latter's more recent books *L'Identité de la France* (1986, Paris: Flammarion). Braudel made his name with *La Mediter-*

tainties make the notion, despite its apparent self-evidence, a fickle base for the definition of citizenship, a problem that is unfortunately all too relevant for autochthony's present-day trajectories.

Autochthony now: Globalization and the neoliberal turn

Autochthony clearly has a long history. The discourse of its present-day protagonists is certainly not new; it instead brings a reshuffling of elements from the past. Yet it is obvious as well that since the late 1980s, autochthony has been experiencing a powerful renaissance. The question is why this is becoming such a tempting discourse in many parts of the globe.

Li's notion of a 'conjuncture of belonging' points to the importance of various aspects of what has come to be called 'globalization'. The rapidly increasing mobility of people, not only on a national but also on a transnational scale, has set the wider context for people's preoccupation with belonging.[13] But Li's approach allows us to outline more specific factors too, albeit that these may be quite different for various regions. For the areas she studies in South East Asia, Li emphasizes global concerns about the loss of biodiversity, indigenous people and disappearing cultures as crucial factors in this upsurge of concerns over belonging. The determining factors for Africa could instead be the twin processes of democratization and decentralization, both of which are closely related to the new emphasis since the late 1980s on the need to bypass the state in the policies of the global development establishment.

Across the continent, the new wave of democratization in the early 1990s seemed to initially bring a promising turn towards political liberalization. Yet in many countries it inspired in practice and quite unexpectedly determined at-

ranée (1949), precisely because it showed how to surpass the limits of the nation-state (and nationalist thinking) while writing history. So it is disconcerting that the same Braudel starts his later book by emphasizing that, after all, an historian is really at home with the history of his own country – a familiarity that brings Braudel to project *notre hexagone* (the favourite national metaphor for France and its territory) back into pre-historical times and link the Palaeolithic drawings of Lascaux to French identity. Detienne (2003: 142) cites all this as an illustration of the 'extraordinary weight of nationalist thinking' that in the end could even constrain the view of an historian with such a broad vision as Braudel.

13 Historians (cf. Lucassen & Lucassen 1997) may emphasize that, demographically, migration in many parts of the world was more important in earlier centuries. Yet it is clear that the facilitating of mobility by new technology conjures up a vision of rapidly increasing migration and it is precisely this vision that plays such a central role in much of the autochthony discourse. Cf. Appadurai's (1996) powerful definition of globalization as the increased mobility of 'goods, people and ideas'. For him, ideas are at least as important as the other two.

tempts towards closure to exclude fellow countrymen from their full rights as national citizens, or at least to differentiate between citizens who 'belong' and others who belong less. As always, Ivory Coast offers a particularly tragic example of this: the *Opération nationale d'identification* was announced in 2002 with some fanfare by the country's former President Laurent Gbagbo, a confirmed champion of autochthony. The idea was that everybody had to go home to their village of origin to claim their national citizenship and those who could not identify a specific village in the country as their place of origin would automatically lose their citizenship.[14] In Eastern Congo, the enigmatic *Banyamulenge*, who are known as *Banyarwanda* (Rwanda people) by their opponents, became similar objects of fierce struggles over belonging and autochthony, fanned by Mobutu's machiavellistic manipulation by offering them full citizenship and then withdrawing it at will. In Anglophone Africa too, belonging became a crucial issue in the new style of politics. The former Zambian President, Kenneth Kaunda, could be excluded from the political competition by the simple claim that he was 'really' descended from strangers. In a completely different context, the new ANC democracy in South Africa became marked by furious popular reactions for excluding all *Makwere-kwere*, 'these' Africans from across the Limpopo.

At least as important as democratization was the already-mentioned drastic shift in the policies of the global development agencies like the World Bank, the IMF and other major donors: from an explicitly statist view to an equally blunt distrust of the state. While it was self-evident until the early 1980s that development had to be realized by the state and that strengthening the state and nation-building by the new state elites were therefore the first priorities, the state was subsequently no longer seen as a pillar but rather as a major barrier to development in the World Bank's official view.[15] After the release of its 1989 report on Africa, it was no coincidence that the Cold War was clearly over and that 'by-passing the state', 'strengthening civil society' and 'decentralization' became buzz words. However just as democratization turned out to create unexpected scope for autochthony movements, the new decentralization policy and support to NGOs, which was often quite localist in character, similarly turned questions of belonging and exclusion into burning issues. For instance in Cameroon, the new forest law, which was heavily supported by the World Bank and the World Wildlife Fund, helped to make autochthony – i.e. the question as to who could be excluded from the development projects' new style for 'not

[14] See Marshall (2006); Banégas (2007), Banégas & Marshall (2003) and Yéré (2006). This idea has only ever been applied in mitigated form but is still around in government circles.

[15]

really' belonging – a hot item, even in areas that are so thinly populated that there seems to be no demographic pressure at all on the soil an/or other resources.

What is important here is that such developments cannot be dismissed as being merely political games or manoeuvres imposed from above by shrewd politicians or well-meaning 'developers'. Political manipulations and external interventions by development agencies certainly play a role in all of the examples above but they can only work because the very idea of local belonging strikes such a deep emotional chord with the population in general. Indeed the force of the emotions unleashed by a political appeal to autochthony is often such that it threatens to sweep the very politicians who launched it right off their feet. This is, for instance, vividly illustrated by the increasing importance across the continent of the funeral 'at home' (i.e. in the village of origin), which is turned into a true festival of belonging, often to the clear discomfort of urban elites who dread such occasions when villagers can get even with 'their brothers' in the cities. Marked by a proliferation of all sorts of 'neo-traditional' rites that frequently involve vast expenditure, these occasions show how deeply rooted this obsession with belonging is, but also what a complex balancing act between returning and maintaining distance this requires from urban elites. In many regions, there is a direct link between democratization and the increasing exuberance of the funeral 'at home', a clear sign of how important local belonging has become. And all of this not despite but rather because of 'liberalization'. A major challenge in studying autochthony and the politics of belonging is therefore how to relate shrewd political manipulation on the one hand, and deep emotional involvement on the other, since the combination of both seems to be at the heart of the conundrum of belonging and exclusion that is becoming so central in our supposedly globalizing world.

Elsewhere other factors have had similar effects, as was clear from my surprise at recognizing the same language I had heard in Cameroon coming from my radio at home in the Netherlands. One of the interesting aspects of the term 'autochthony' is that it bridges the gap between 'South' and 'North' so easily.[16] Apparently its language works as well in Flanders or the Netherlands as in Cameroon or Ivory Coast. But the background here is more an increasing fear of transnational immigrants or 'guest labourers' who are never planning to return home.

[16] In this respect, there is again an interesting difference with the related notion of 'indigenous': the latter seems to retain its exoticizing tenor (mostly referring to 'others', i.e. people with a non-Western background). Autochthons are not necessarily the others; indeed the term can be adopted by majority populations, also in the West.

In the late 1980s, I became familiar with the Dutch term *autochtoon*, which was primarily used by our southern neighbours in Flanders, although in subsequent years it has conquered the Netherlands with surprising rapidity. The shocking murder in 2002 of Pim Fortuyn, Holland's most successful populist politician ever, made his legacy all the more powerful. His meteoric rise to fame made Dutch politicians realize that electoral success depends on taking 'autochthony' seriously. Defending the 'autochthonous cultural heritage', which for the Dutch who have always been proud of *not* being that nationalistic has proved to be quite hard to define, has become a dominant theme alongside the idea that more pressure is needed to force immigrants to 'integrate' into this elusive culture. The term autochthony is now less used in France and is virtually never heard in Germany or the UK, even though similar concerns about belonging are high on the political agenda there too. Yet elsewhere, the word crops up in unexpected places: in Italy, Umberto Bosi recently adopted it for his *Lega Norte*; and it appears quite forcefully in the Pacific and in Quebec, albeit in a different sense.

A brief illustration shows how confusing it can be when autochthony, with its different meanings, crosses the dividing line between continents. In 2006, several Africanists and I were at a conference on autochthony at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* in Paris, the leading institute for social sciences in France. The conference had been organized in close collaboration with colleagues from Quebec and France. The meaning of the term autochthony was clear for the *Québécois* and some of their French counterparts. In the 1980s they had decided that this was to be used as the translation for the budding Anglophone notion of 'indigenous' because the more direct French translation, *indigène*, had had such a pejorative charge to it since the colonial period that it had to be avoided at all costs.[17] In the Quebec version of the term, *les autochtones* are 'indigenous people' – i.e. people in a minority position whose way of life is threatened by other dominant groups. In this view, Quebec's Native Americans are the prototype of *peuples autochtones*. At the conference, however, our Quebec colleagues discovered, to their dismay, that on other continents the term had acquired quite different meanings. It was difficult for them to accept that, for instance, the term 'autochthonous' in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa does not primarily refer to groups such as the Pygmies or endangered pastoralists but is commonly claimed by well-established groups that are in

[17] What is particularly galling is the memory of the French institution of the *Indigénat*, the lower juridical status of the *indigènes* (in sharp contrast to the *citoyens*) that, until 1944, gave the harsher forms of French colonial rule (forced labour, corporal punishment) a formal basis. Cf. the challenge implied by the brutal

control of the state and try to use this against immigrants, who are still seen as foreigners. What was even more surprising seemed to be the fact that, for instance, the majority of the population in Flanders and the Netherlands is happy to be labelled 'autochthones.' As one participant from Quebec eloquently put it:

> If the Dutch are so foolish as to label themselves 'autochthons', it is their affair. But the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations has already decided that *autochtone* is the French translation of 'indigenous'. And I think we should stick to this.

Questioning the UN's mandate to decide the meaning of a term that had had very different histories in different parts of the globe was of little use. And the suggestion that the *Québécois* might be tempted to use the term themselves for their relationship with Anglophone 'latecomers' was hilarious for many in the audience. Apparently in Canada, the *autochtone* has to be the Other, with his own, endangered culture.

A neoliberal moment?
Betting on the market and 'traditional' forms of belonging

It is tempting to see the recent upsurge of 'autochthony' or related notions of belonging in different parts of the globe as an unexpected outcome of the neoliberal tide that swept our globalizing world with such speed after the end of the Cold War. And democratization and decentralization, the dominant trends on the African continent since 1990, have fitted in well with the so-called 'Washington Consensus', tersely summarized by Ferguson (2006: 39) as pretending to bring 'less state interference and inefficiency' and, one could add, more leeway for the market.[18] Yet the explanatory value of invoking neoliberalism as a final cause may lately have become somewhat overstretched.[19] At recent seminars and conferences, colleagues have been warning that this notion, just like globalization, is rapidly becoming some sort of panacea that is being applied to a discouragingly wide range of phenomena. So it might be necessary to try and be more specific. A *Leitmotiv* in the examples above might be the surprising penchant of many advocates of neoliberal reform for 'tradition' and belonging. There is of course an interesting paradox here: how, as a solution to all problems, can one combine a fixed belief in the market with far-reaching trust in

[18] The term 'Washington Consensus' was coined by economist John Williamson in 1989 to summarize basic, and supposedly novel, principles behind IMF and World Bank policies at the time. Apparently subsequently he bitterly regretted having launched this term (see Wikipedia article on 'Washington Consensus').

[19] I thank Daniel J. Smith for his critical comments on this point.

'the' community or 'customary chiefs' as stable footholds?[20] For Africa, this penchant for 'community,' tradition and 'chiefs' would seem to be a logical consequence of the belief in decentralization as a panacea. If one wants to bypass the state and reach out to civil society, local forms of organization and traditional authorities would be obvious points of orientation. Unfortunately, this new approach to development tends to ignore the fact that most traditional communities are the product of incisive colonial and post-colonial interventions. Even more seriously, there is supreme indifference in the fact that focusing on such partners inevitably raises ardent issues of belonging: chiefs relate only to their own subjects and tend to discriminate against immigrants (who were often encouraged in the past to migrate by colonial development projects). Local communities now have a tendency to close themselves off and apply severe forms of exclusion to people who were earlier considered fellows.

For different reasons, the same paradox emerges with the protagonists of the New Right in Europe (and elsewhere). It is striking that while liberalism on this continent used to be equated with various forms of anticlericalism (or in any case with the insistence on a strict separation of religion and state), neoliberal spokesmen are now demanding the resurrection of 'Judaeo-Christian values' as an anchor for society. What is more important is that they are managing to combine the good old liberal principle of reducing the interference of the state as far as possible, with a vocal appeal to the same state to exercise almost total control over society (mostly against suspect immigrants), thus strengthening the presence of the state in everyday life instead of promoting its withdrawal (Geschiere 2009: Chapter 5). Neoliberalism as such may be a fuzzy phenomenon but this surprising combination of market and tradition is having very concrete effects on the ground.

The above may help to relativize the apparent naturalness of autochthony claims. In the different contexts discussed above – from classical Athens to its manifestations under neoliberalism today – autochthony may present itself as self-evident but in practice it turns out to always be contested and full of uncer-

[20] Striking illustrations of this penchant are described in the recent thesis by Juan Obarrio (2006) on Mozambique that offers a fascinating view of what the author terms the 'Structural Adjustment State'. Obarrio describes how, for instance, a senior American UNDP official assured him that 'communities know how they are and know also their boundaries perfectly well' to counter warnings by some observers that 'the' community on which his organization wanted to base its new projects might in practice be highly elusive and volatile. Similarly a British USAID consultant insisted that communities 'will be like corporations, unified single legal subjects under the new land law' (Obarrio 2007: 105). Cf. the recent volume by Buur & Kyed (2007) who similarly note the unexpected comeback of traditional chiefs in a neoliberal context.

tainty. One sad example from a recent article on Ivory Coast (Chauveau & Bobo 2003) remains one of the most striking illustrations for me of the dangerous ambiguities hidden in this now so current notion. The article is based on courageous fieldwork on a violent topic: the *barrages* (road blocks) that were erected after 2000 throughout the countryside in southern Ivory Coast by Gbagbo's *Jeunes Patriotes*. Soon the *barrages* and their revenues – mostly 'fines' extorted by violent threats from 'strangers' – became a way of life for these youngsters, mostly *rurbains* (disappointed urbanites forced by the ongoing crisis to return to 'their' villages). These *Jeunes Patriotes* tended to posit themselves as the guardians of autochthony and tradition, often directly confronting their elders who they reproached for having squandered their ancestral lands to strangers to the point that there was none left for them.[21] Some elders still seemed to have preferred to lease the land to strangers who at least pay some rent. Yet, many youngsters succeeded in reclaiming 'their' land, often violently. But then these *rurbains* quickly became disappointed with the rural way of life, and a number tried to sell their new farms to generate the funds required for a ticket to Europe (or beyond).

In this one example, all the tragic contradictions of the notion of autochthony seem to be condensed, most importantly its basic insecurity, hidden under an aura of self-evidence, which can so easily lead to violence. More generally, autochthony's volatile relationship with citizenship shows that appeals to history and culture, which are central in such claims to belonging, offer a slippery foothold for defining who qualifies as a full citizen and who can be excluded as a 'stranger'. The culturalization of citizenship, which seems to be a recurrent aspect of the 'global conjuncture of belonging' we are living in these days, has great emotional appeal in many settings. Juridical or economic aspects are thus relegated to the background. Yet precisely because such cultural or historical claims to belonging are present and despite apparent self-evidence beset by deep uncertainties, they confound rather than clarify issues of citizenship.

Land and democracy were central topics in Gerti Hesseling's work and also in her important activities outside the confines of academia. It is precisely the unexpected complications in the relationship between the two, some of which are outlined above, that continue to mark the future of entire societies both in Africa and elsewhere. There is deep regret that Gerti's wide-ranging work was so abruptly cut short but it will retain its importance in the years to come.

[21] See Fisiy (1999) for an earlier analysis of the tensions over land between elders and youngsters in Ivory Coast.

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