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Publication date
2011

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Ethnicity, citizenship and belonging: practices, theory and spatial dimensions = Etnicidad, ciudadanía y pertenencia: prácticas, teoría y dimensiones espaciales

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Geschiere, P. (2011). Autochthony, citizenship and exclusion: new patterns in the politics of belonging in Africa and Europe. In S. Albiez, N. Castro, L. Jüssen, & E. Youkhana (Eds.), *Ethnicity, citizenship and belonging: practices, theory and spatial dimensions = Etnicidad, ciudadanía y pertenencia: prácticas, teoría y dimensiones espaciales* (pp. 175-198). (Ethnicity, citizenship and belonging in Latin America; No. 1). Iberoamericana.

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Download date:16 Sept 2026

Autochthony, Citizenship and Exclusion. New Patterns in the Politics of Belonging in Africa and Europe

Peter Geschiere[1]

Abstract

Our world seems to be globalising, yet in practice, it is marked more than ever by what Tania Murray Li calls "a conjuncture of belonging". The notion of autochthony plays a special role in this obsession with belonging as some sort of primordial claim: how can one belong more than if one is born from the soil itself? Since the 1990s the notion has played a key role in politics in several parts of Africa. Yet, its spread has now become truly global. Comparisons with elsewhere show that this notion retains its apparently "natural" self-evidence, and hence its mobilising force, in very different contexts.

This article focuses on the notion of autochthony and its ambiguous implications for citizenship and exclusion. The classical example of Athens from the fifth century BC is of particular interest since it was the very cradle of autochthony thinking, yet it also highlights autochthony's inherent ambiguities that haunt the world today.

Introduction

One of the paradoxes of our time is the upsurge of strong preoccupations with belonging in a world that pretends to be globalising. Notions of autochthony (literally meaning "born from the soil") cropping up in highly different parts of the globe play a particular role in this respect as some sort of primordial form of belonging with equally radical forms of exclusion as its reverse. The emotional charge these notions recently acquired in different parts of the African continent, including the Ivory Coast, Cameroon, and the Congo, to mention the most obvious examples, will be well known. Yet, the impact of autochthony and the concomitant obsession with belonging as

[1] This article contains elements from my book *Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Geschiere 2009); notably from the Introduction and Chapters 4 and 5.

some sort of flipside of the processes of globalisation reach much farther than the African continent. My interest in this theme was triggered by the surprising realisation that during the 1990s, similar discourses on belonging suddenly invaded everyday politics with highly charged slogans in regions as different as West Africa and Europe. The surprise was all the greater because during this time, the core term "autochthon", with which I had become familiar in Ivorian and Cameroonian politics, had suddenly become a heavily emotional term in Dutch and Flemish discussions on how to deal with immigrants. How could the same language acquire such great mobilising appeal in completely different settings, and why did this happen in roughly the same moment of time?

An inspiring notion in this context is Li's term "a deep conjuncture of belonging" as specific to our times (Li 2002; cf. also ibid. 2000). She uses it to characterise particularly present-day relations in South East Asia. But the notion is clearly acquiring global dimensions. Many people may emphasise that our world is rapidly globalising. Yet, the flipside of such globalisation seems to be a true obsession with belonging, especially in localist terms. The notion of conjuncture is particularly well chosen to address this paradox: highly varying trends, apparently completely unrelated, turn out to converge in reinforcing this preoccupation with belonging. The examples referred to above – Cameroon, Ivory Coast, the Netherlands – indicate that the trends turning autochthony into a powerful political slogan with great mobilising potential differ also strongly per region. All the more important to try to be specific about the contexts in which autochthony, as some sort of primordial form of belonging, emerges with such force.

In the context of this article, it is important to highlight the vastly different implications of autochthony as a basic form of belonging for citizenship. Depending on the context, autochthony can become a dangerous rival to national citizenship, drastically undermining earlier ideals of national unity and the equality of all national citizens. On the other hand, it can also be seen as coinciding with national citizenship. In such cases, autochthony slogans demand a purification of citizenship and an exclusion of "strangers". Indeed, whatever the exact pattern in relation to nation and citizenship is, autochthony always demands exclusion. Yet, the exact definition of who belongs and who is excluded can change dramatically and abruptly.

Related to this is the curious paradox that emerges in a number of different settings and moments of the notion's long genealogy between the basic

security that autochthony discourse seems to promise (how can one belong more than if one is "born from the soil?"), and the haunting uncertainties this discourse evokes in everyday practice. Its apparent self-evidence, autochthony as an almost "natural" given, seems to give autochthony discourse great emotional appeal and, therefore, strong mobilising impact in highly different circumstances. Yet, there is a glaring contrast with its receding quality in practice. The "true" autochthon tends to be constantly redefined at ever closer range – the circle of who is in and who is out being drawn ever more tightly. The search for an impossible purity in a world marked by migration and mixing triggers both constant concerns about one's own autochthony and an equally constant obsession to unmask the traitors residing in one's native land. Recent history is full of lamentable examples of the latter and the terrible violent cleansing these efforts unleash.

In this contribution I will focus especially on the cradle of autochthony thinking, classical Athens of the days of Pericles and Plato. The reader may be surprised that I go back so far in time. My defence is that this old and very first example of autochthony discourse highlighted already 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 neo-liberal thinking.

Classical Athens: The first fortress of autochthony

The coincidence, mentioned above, that the notion of autochthony became quite abruptly so politically charged in such different contexts as Cameroon and the Netherlands made it a challenge to try and follow this term in time and space. This turned out to be quite an adventurous journey. I had certainly not expected that it would take me to such widely different places and moments – like some sort of magical bird, turning up in unexpected places. Leading thinkers have used it and still do so – be it in quite different ways. Lévi-Strauss (1985, 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 (1934-35/1989) proposed the heavy term of *Bodenständigkeit* as translation of autochthony, and used it to defend a more communitarian form of nationalism for Germany, as an antidote to the all too individualistic tenor of Anglo-Saxon and French versions of nationalism (unfortunately, but proba-

bly not accidentally, Heidegger developed these ideas in the days that he made overtures to the Nazis).[2] Derrida (1997, 95) on the contrary criticised autochthony as a mark of a too limited (even "phallic") form of democracy, which we urgently need to surpass for a more universalistic version of democracy (cf. also Cherif 2006). Despite such differences all these important thinkers drew their inspiration from the same source: classical Athens, the cradle of the very idea of autochthony.

To Athenian citizens of the 5th century BC – the city's Golden Age, the time of Pericles, Euripides and Plato – their own *autochtonia* was, indeed, of crucial importance. They used to boast of it as proof that their city was exceptional among all the Greek *poleis*. All other cities had histories of having been founded by immigrants. Only the Athenians were truly *autochthonoi* – that is, born from the land where they lived. This was also the reason why Athenians would have a special propensity for *demokratia*. The classical texts – Euripides, Plato, Demosthenes – are surprisingly vivid on this aspect. To the present-day reader, it might come as a shock to read in the texts of these venerated classics the same language of autochthony that is now so brutally propagated by Europe's prophets of the New Right. And, indeed, this correspondence did not go unnoticed by these prophets, as may be clear from an incident in France.

The 2nd May of 1990, a Member of Parliament in the French *Assemblée nationale*, a certain Marie-France Stirbois, member for Le Pen's *Front national* – 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 of autochthony. Apparently her colleague *députés* were somewhat surprised since until then Mme Stirbois' interventions had not betrayed such an in-depth interest in the classics (or for that matter in any academic subject). Clearly another sympathiser of *Le Front national* – probably a professor at the Sorbonne – had written her speech for her (Loraux 1996, 204). The incident had its pathetic overtones, but the good thing was that it inspired two leading French classicists – Nicole Loraux (a good friend of Derrida) and Marcel Detienne – to look into the issue of Athenian autochthony. Both authors show with impressive eloquence that it pays off to take the old authors seriously since these classical voices highlight already so sharply – maybe inadvertently – the tensions inherent to the autochthony notion as such.

[2] Cf. also Garbutt (2006), Fritsche (1999) and Bambach (2003).

At first sight the Athenian claim to autochthony seems to be as natural and as 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).[3] However, Loraux' and Detienne's visionary analysis shows that it may, indeed, be worthwhile to have a closer look at Athenian language on autochthony. As said, this will require a detour in time, and the lively imaginary of Greek mythology may put to the test the reader's patience. Yet, such a return to the classical locus of the autochthony notion is rewarding since here the tensions and inconsistencies of this apparently unequivocal notion come to the fore in particularly striking ways – as may be clear from the following examples that testify to both the vigour and the complexities of autochthony in Athenian thinking:

> In Erechtheus, one of Euripides' most popular tragedies,[4] the playwright has Praxithea, king Erechteus' 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 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.'
>
> Heavy language under heavy circumstances. The play's story is that Athens is threatened with destruction by Eumolpus and his Thracians invading Attica. The Delphi oracle has prophesised that king Erechtheus can only save the city by

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

[4] Cf. Euripides (1995); unfortunately only a few fragments of the text have been conserved.

sacrificing one of his own off-spring. He seems to hesitate but his wife gives him a lesson of 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.' (Euripides 1995; cf. also Detienne 2003, 36-39).

Euripides' tragedy was based on a myth, placed in some sort of mythical time (Erechtheus is supposed to have been mentioned already by Homer) but it was clearly very topical to Athens' situation of 422 BC when the play was first performed: the city was at the height of its naval power, but already locked in mortal combat with its arch rival Sparta. There was, indeed, good reason for celebrating Athenian uniqueness at the time. In other respects as well 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 5th century Athens where the majority of the population were seen as foreign immigrants (*metoikoi*) – amongst whom quite a few were much richer than many true citizens by descent.

With Plato, Athenian *autochthonia* seems to be equally self-evident:

> He makes Socrates – when instructing young Menexenes on how to deliver a funeral oration for fallen soldiers (a big occasion in 5th century Athens)[5] – 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, Plato – still speaking through Socrates' mouth – makes his famous (or notorious) equation of *autochthonia* and *demokratia*:

[5] Socrates pretends in his dialogue that he has been trained in how to deliver an *epitaphios* (funeral oration) by none other than Aspasia, Pericles' famous spouse (or rather "partner"?). Some (Detienne 2003, 21) emphasise the ironical elements in the Menexenes dialogue. However, it seems clear that once Socrates' / Plato's exemplary oration gets going, irony gives way to patriotism (cf. 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 2005, 343/7).

As in Africa (cf. infra), funerals and notably funeral orations must have been a high point in the expression of Athenian autochthony.[6] In general, autochthony in Greece – again, as elsewhere – must have been linked to heavy ritual and symbols that verge on the burlesque.

In Euripides' 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 to him as the city's protector. With his terrible trident Poseidon made a deep cleft right through the Akropolis (Athens' main mountain) so that Erechteus disappeared in the chasm to remain literally 'locked in the earth' – an appropriate position in view of his emphatic chthonic character, invariably repeated whenever he is mentioned.[7] But finally Athena, the city's chosen goddess appeared to save the situation. She ordained the consecration, in honour of the king-locked-in-the-earth, of a small temple, the Erechteion, to be situated on the Akropolis, as the focal point for celebrating Athenian autochthony.

Indeed, burlesque as some of the founding myths of this Athenian particularity may seem now, it is clear that, at the time, this heavy symbolism had a powerful appeal. In Athens, the reference to the soil in autochthony discourse was affirmed by a king-locked-in-the-earth and the rhetoric of the funeral orations in particularly graphic ways. All this confirmed also an idea of Athenian autochtho-

[6] Cf. also Pericles' famous *epitaphios* for the Athenians fallen in the first years of the long war against Sparta, and Demosthenes funeral addresses from a later period (second half of the 4th century) 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. Barrès, 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, 25, vol. I), cf. also Detienne (2003, 131). Cf. also infra and Geschiere (2005) on funerals and belonging in neo-liberal Africa.

[7] Detienne (2003, 42) translates a variant of the king's name, Erichthonios, as the *Très-Terrien*.

ny as a long-standing trait of this particular city; didn't Homer mention already Erechtheus as an arch-chtonian? Indeed, this pride in Athens' autochthony as an old tradition was so convincing that it was later also accepted by many modern classicists (Rosivach 1987, 294).

Yet, recently, several historians have raised doubts about this shiny 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 practiced already at the time. Striking is that the two most prominent historians of those days do not make special mention of Athens being particular in this respect. Herodotus mentioned a wide array of autochthonous groupings – some more autochthonous 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 opposite by explaining Athens' preeminence by its success in attracting immigrants (the *metoikoi* mentioned before) from all over Greece (Loraux 1996, 94). Indeed, the upsurge of autochthony in Athens in the fifth century seems to be intrinsically related to this influx of immigrants, who especially in the Piraeus, the harbour area, had rapidly become the majority of the population. As so often in its subsequent avatars, Athenian autochthony expressed a determined effort by the city's citizens to exclude newcomers (some of whom were rapidly becoming richer than earlier inhabitants) from citizenship.

A historian from our time, Rosivach (1987), even shows that the very term *autochthon* must have been of a much later coinage – probably only of the 5th century when Athens was emerging as the major power among the Greek cities. He proposes to distinguish an "indigenous" and a "chthonic" use of the term. It is certainly true that already Homer mentions, for instance, Erechtheus from Attica as a chthonic figure. But in Rosivach's view this is rather in a different sense, as some sort of primal, serpent-like figure (a monster?) closely tied to the earth. It is only during Athens' upsurge that this Erechtheus was linked to the Athenians' search for proving their exceptional indigeneity, giving the chthonic component in *autochthon* a quite different implication. Rosivach's conclusions may be quite hypothetical.[8] Yet his insistence on the reverse side of attributing a chthonic origin – it can also imply primitivising a being or a group as some sort of primal phenomenon – is very relevant for other situations as well. In Africa, as elsewhere, this double meaning was to come up time and again: the autochthon as prestigious first-comer, but also as primitive or even pre-human.

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

In the same line as Rosivach, Detienne (2003) emphasises that in general Greek claims to autochthony must have been somewhat a-historical since they denied per definition the great era of Greek colonisation of the 7th and 6th century BC, when new *poleis* were founded all over the Eastern Mediterranean in an adventurous expansion process. Even Athens was very much a city in formation up to the 5th century. It is, indeed, striking, that the laws on citizenship promulgated in 509 BC by Cleisthenes, Athens' great legislator during the city's ascension, were much more open and inclusive than Pericles' law of 451 BC, during the city's heyday. Although Pericles' law came only a little over 50 years later, it brought incisive changes, reserving Athenian citizenship only for those who could claim that both parents were Athenian (Detienne 2003, 53).[9]

Loraux (1996) problematises Athenian autochthony – and hence autochthony in general – at an even deeper level. For her, the insistence on having remained on the same spot is a basic denial of history, which always implies movement. It is a kind of negative history which always needs an Other – movement in whatever form – in order to define itself (cf. Loraux 1996,

[9] Again the parallels with present-day struggles are striking. Cf. Le Pen's half-hearted attempts to fix the notion of *Français de souche* as reserved to those who have four grand-parents born in France – a proposition he rapidly had to give up since many of his followers would not meet this criterion; or the fierce debates in Ivory Coast, directly related to the contested position of Alassane Ouattara (the leading politician from the North), over "and" versus "or" – that is, whether father *and* mother had to be Ivorian in order to grant Ivorian citizenship to their off-spring; or would father *or* mother suffice for this?

notably p. 82 and 99). At a very practical level, this implied for Athenians a guilty denial of memories of earlier migrations – especially for the city's aristocratic families who used to be proud of their founding histories, often referring to their provenance from elsewhere, as some sort of mythical charter. Loraux signals that in other classic texts on autochthony as well history and movement are a kind of hidden subtext undermining autochthony's rigid memory.

The above may indicate why the present-day 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 rather highlight the basic impossibilities of autochthony thinking: its tortuous struggles to come to terms with history which 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.[10] Such uncertainties 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: Globalisation and the neo-liberal turn

Clearly then, autochthony has a long history. The discourse of its present-day protagonists is certainly not new, it rather brings a reshuffling of elements from former days. Yet, it is clear as well that recently – especially since the late 1980s

[10] Detienne focuses in his last chapter also on present-day historians and their ongoing contribution to the reproduction of autochthony thinking. His main example – and indeed a quite shocking one – is Braudel and one of the latter's more recent books *L'identité de la France* (Braudel 1986). Braudel made his name with *La Méditerranée* (1949), precisely because this book showed in a challenging way how to write a history that surpassed the limits of the nation-state and nationalist thinking. So it is, indeed, a bit disconcerting that the same Braudel starts this later book by emphasising that, after all, a 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 to indicate France and its territory) back into pre-historical times, and to link the palaeolithic drawings of Lascaux to French identity. Detienne (2003, 142) cites all this as an illustration of the "extra-ordinary weight of nationalist thinking" that in the end could even constrain the view of an historian with such a broad vision as Braudel.

it experienced a powerful renaissance. The question is why it became such a tempting discourse at the present moment in time in many parts of the globe.

Li's notion of a "conjuncture of belonging" points at various aspects of what has come to be called "globalisation" as important factor. Especially the rapidly increasing mobility of people, not only on a national but also on a transnational scale set the wider context for people's preoccupation with belonging.[11] But Li's approach allows to outline also more specific factors, be it that these are quite different for various regions. For the areas she studies in South East Asia, Li emphasises global concerns over the loss of biodiversity, "indigenous people" and "disappearing cultures" as crucial factors in this upsurge of concerns over belonging. For Africa, determining factors might rather be the twin processes of democratisation and decentralisation – both closely related to the new emphasis since the end of the 1980s on the need to "by-pass" the state in the policies of the global development establishment.

Throughout the continent the new wave of democratisation of the early 1990s seemed to bring initially a promising turn towards political liberalisation. Yet in many countries it inspired in practice and quite unexpectedly especially determined attempts towards closure in order to exclude fellow-countrymen from their full rights as national citizens – or at least to differentiate between citizens who "belong" and others who do less so. As always Ivory Coast offers particularly tragic examples of this – for instance, the *Opération nationale d'identification* which was announced in 2002 with some fanfare by the country's new President Laurent Gbagbo, confirmed champion of autochthony. The idea was that everybody had to go home – that is to one's village of origin – in order to claim national citizenship. All persons who could not identify a specific village within the country as their place of origin would automatically lose their citizenship.[12] In Eastern Congo, the

[11] Historians (cf., for instance, Lucassen and Lucassen (1997)) may emphasise 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 a rapid increase of migration, and it is precisely this vision that plays such a central role in much autochthony discourse. Cf. also Appadurai's (1996) powerful definition, of globalisation as increased mobility of "goods, people and ideas"; for him, ideas are at least as important as the other two in this triplet.

[12] Cf. Marshall (2006), cf. also Banégas (2007), Banégas and Marshall (2003) and Yéré (2006). Until now, this idea has only been applied in mitigated forms, but it is still around in government circles.

enigmatic *Banyamulenge* – opponents rather call them *Banyarwanda* (Rwanda people) – became similarly the object of fierce struggles over belonging and autochthony, fanned by Mobutu's machiavellistic manipulations in offering them full citizenship and withdrawing it at will. In Anglophone Africa as well, belonging became a crucial issue in the new style of politics. In Zambia, former national President Kenneth Kaunda could be excluded from the political competition by the simple claim that he "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.

As important as democratisation was the drastic shift, already mentioned, in the policies of 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 up to the early 1980s it seemed self-evident that development had to be realised through the state, and that therefore strengthening the state and nation-building by the new state elites were the first priorities, the state was subsequently seen no longer as a pillar but rather as a major barrier to development in the Bank's official view.[13] Especially after the Bank's 1989 report on Africa – not by coincidence at the very moment that the Cold War was clearly over – "by-passing the state", strengthening "civil society" and NGO's, and notably "decentralisation" became the buzz words. But just as democratisation turned out to create unexpected scope for autochthony movements, the new decentralisation policy and the support to NGO's, often quite localist in character, similarly turned questions of belonging and exclusion into burning issues. In Cameroon, for instance, the new forest law, heavily supported by the World Bank and World Wildlife Fund, helped to make autochthony – that is, the question as to who could be excluded from the development projects new style, as "not 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 and other resources.

Important in all this is that such developments cannot be dismissed as merely political games – manoeuvres imposed from above by shrewd politi-

[13] An overview of speeches by World Bank directors and other representatives from 1972 to 1989 (cf. Geschiere 2008) shows indeed how deep a shift took place in the 1980s.

cians 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 from their feet. This is, for instance, vividly illustrated by the increasing importance, throughout 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 the villagers can get even with "their brothers" in the cities. Marked by a proliferation of all sorts of "neo-traditional" rites that often involve great expenditure, these occasions show how deeply this obsession with belonging is rooted in society, but also what a complex balancing act between returning and maintaining distance this requires from urban elites. Indeed, for many regions, there is a direct link between democratisation and the increasing exuberance of the funeral "at home", a clear sign how important local belonging has become. All this not despite, but rather because of "liberalisation". 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 globalising world.

Elsewhere, it were again other factors that had similar effects – as is clear from my surprise at recognising the same language I 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 so easily the gap between "South" and "North".[14] Apparently its language works as well in Flanders or Holland as in Cameroon or Ivory Coast. But the background here is rather increasing fear of transnational immigrants – "guest labourers" who are not planning to go back home again.

[14] In this respect there is again an interesting difference with the related notion of "indigenous": the latter seems to retain its exoticising tenor (it mostly refers 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 (cf. also above).

In the late 1980s, I became familiar with the term in Dutch language mainly from our southern neighbours in Flanders. But in subsequent years, it conquered with surprising rapidity the Netherlands as well. The shocking murder in 2002 of Holland's most successful populist politician ever, Pim Fortuyn, made his heritage all the more powerful. Since his meteoric career, Dutch politicians have realised that electoral success depends on taking "autochthony" seriously. Since then the defence of the "autochthonous cultural heritage" – which for the Dutch, always proud of not being *that* nationalistic, proved to be quite hard to define – has become a dominant theme, together with the idea that more pressure is needed to make immigrants "integrate" into this elusive culture. The term autochthony is now less current in France and almost absent in Germany or the U.K., even though similar concerns about belonging are high on the political agenda there as well. Yet elsewhere it crops up in unexpected places. In Italy, Umberto Bossi has recently adopted it for his Liga Norte; and as said it emerges strongly in the Pacific and in Quebec, be it in a different sense.

A brief illustration can show how great the confusion can become when autochthony, with its different meanings, crosses the diving lines between continents. In 2006, I attended, together with several Africanists, a conference around the theme of autochthony at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, Paris' leading institute for social sciences. The conference was organised in close collaboration by colleagues from Quebec and France. For the *Québécois* and some of their French counterparts the meaning of the term autochthony was clear. In the 1980s they had decided that this was to be used as translation for the budding Anglophone notion of "indigenous", clearly because since the colonial period the more direct French translation, *indigène*, has such a pejorative charge that it had to be avoided at all costs.[15] In the Quebec version of the term, *les autochtones* are "indigenous people" – that is, people in a minority position and threatened in their way of life by dominant groups. In this view, Quebec's Native Americans are the prototype

[15] 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*) which, until 1944, gave the harsher forms of French colonial rule (coercive labour, corporal punishment) a formal basis. Cf. also the challenge implied by the quite brutal name – at least in French – of the recent film *Indigènes* on the generally neglected role of African soldiers in the French army in the Second World War.

of *peuples autochtones*. At the conference, however, our Quebec colleagues discovered to their dismay that in other continents the term had acquired quite different meanings. It was difficult to accept for them that, for instance, in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa the term "autochthonous" does not primarily refer to groups like the "Pygmies" or endangered pastoralists, but is commonly claimed by well-established groups, who are in control of the state and try to use this against immigrants who are still seen as foreigners. Even more surprising seemed to be the fact that, for instance, in Flanders and the Netherlands, the majority of the population is happy to be labelled "autochthons". As one participant from Quebec put it most eloquently:

> 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.

It was of little use to question the UN's mandate to decide on the meaning of a term that clearly had very different histories in different parts of the globe. And the suggestion that the *Québécois* might be tempted to use the term for themselves in their relation to Anglophone "latecomers" seemed to be even more hilarious to a large part of the audience. Apparently in Canada, the *autochtone* has to be the Other, with his own, endangered culture.

A NEO-LIBERAL MOMENT? BETTING ON BOTH THE MARKET AND "TRADITIONAL" FORMS OF BELONGING

It is tempting to see the recent upsurge of "autochthony" or related notions of belonging in very different places of the globe as an unexpected outcome of the neo-liberal tide that swept our globalising world with so much force after the end of the Cold War. And, indeed, democratisation and decentralisation, the dominant trends in the African continent since 1990, fitted in very well with the so-called "Washington Consensus", tersely summarised by Ferguson (2006, 39) as pretending to bring "less state interference and inefficiency" – and, one could add, more leeway for the market.[16] Yet, the explana-

[16] The term "Washington Consensus" was coined by economist John Williamson in 1989, in order to summarise basic – and supposedly novel – principles behind IMF and World

tory value of invoking neo-liberalism as a final cause may lately have become somewhat overstretched.[17] In recent seminars and conferences, many colleagues have warned that this notion – just like globalisation – is rapidly becoming some sort of panacea that seems to apply to a discouraging wide range of phenomena. So it might be necessary to try and be a bit more specific. A *Leitmotiv* in the examples above might be the surprising penchant of many advocates of neo-liberal reform for "tradition" and belonging. There is of course an interesting paradox here: how can one combine a fixed belief in the market as the solution to all problems with far-reaching trust in "the" community or "customary chiefs" as stable footholds?[18] For Africa, this penchant for "community", "tradition" and "chiefs" seems to be a logical consequence of the belief in decentralisation as a panacea. If one wants to "bypass" the state and reach out to "civil society", local forms of organisation and "traditional" authorities seem to be obvious points of orientation. Unfortunately, this new approach to development tends to ignore that most "traditional" communities are the product of incisive colonial and post-colonial interventions. Even more seriously is the supreme indifference to 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 earlier on encouraged to migrate by colonial development projects). Local communities have now a tendency to close themselves and apply severe forms of exclusion of people who were earlier on considered as fellows.

For different reasons, the same paradox emerges with the protagonists of the New Right in Europe (and elsewhere). Striking is, for instance, that while

Bank policies at the time. Apparently he bitterly deplored having launched this term subsequently (cf. Wikipedia article on "Washington Consensus").

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

[18] Striking illustrations of this penchant are described in the recent thesis by Obarrio 2007 on Mozambique which in many respects offers a fascinating view of what the author terms the "Structural Adjustment State". Obarrio describes, for instance, that a senior American UNDP official assured him that "... communities know how they are and know also their boundaries perfectly well" – this, in order to counter warnings by some observers that "the" community on which his organisation wants 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). Cf. also the recent volume by Buur 2007 who similarly notes the unexpected comeback of traditional chiefs in a neo-liberal context.

liberalism in this continent used to be equated with various forms of anti-clericalism (or in any case with the insistence on a strict separation of religion and state), neo-liberal spokesmen now often plea for a resurrection of "Judaeo-Christian values" as an anchor for society. More important is that they manage to combine the good old liberal principle of reducing the interference of the state as much 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 a withdrawal (cf. Geschiere 2009, ch. 5). Neo-liberalism as such may be a fuzzy phenomenon, but on the ground this surprising combination of market and tradition has very concrete effects.

* * *

The above may help to relativise the apparent naturalness of autochthony claims. In the different contexts discussed above – classical Athens, as much as in the different manifestations of the neo-liberal moment of our days – autochthony may present itself as self-evident, but in practice it turns out to be always contested and full of uncertainty. One sad example from a recent article on Ivory Coast (Chauveau and Bobo 2003) remains for me one of the most striking illustrations of the dangerous ambiguities hidden in this now so current notion. The article is based on courageous field-work on a violent topic: the *barrages* (road-blocks) that after 2000 were erected throughout the countryside of 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" village). Striking is that these *Jeunes Patriotes* tended to posit themselves as the guardians of autochthony and tradition, often in direct confrontation with their elders whom they reproached to have squandered their ancestral lands to strangers so that there is no more left for them.[19] 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" lands, often with vio-

[19] Cf. also Fisiy (1999) for an early analysis of the tensions over land in Ivory Coast between elders and youngsters.

lent means. But then these *rurbains* became quickly disappointed with the rural way of life, and a number of them tried already to sell their new farms in order to get money 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 appearance of self-evidence, which so easily can lead to violence. More in general, autochthony's volatile relation to citizenship shows that appeals to history and culture – central in such claims to belong – offer quite slippery footholds for defining who can qualify as a full citizen, and who can be excluded as a "stranger".

For the present collection the question remains what the relevance of these African and European examples of struggles over autochthony may be to developments in Latin America. An obvious difference is, of course, that here the currency of the parallel notion of indigenous (*indígenas*) seemed to make the term autochthonous superfluous. Elsewhere (Geschiere and Jackson 2006, 6) I emphasised the differences between the recent trajectories of these two notions. Both come from classical Greek and both have similar meaning. Moreover, both experienced recently a somewhat surprising renaissance. Yet, for "indigenous" the United Nations working group on Indigenous Peoples served, since the 1970s, as a common forum imposing a common meaning of the notion (even if this meaning was subject to gradual shifts – Tsing 2007). The "autochthonous" notion was rather mushrooming all over the globe, emerging in widely different places and taking on all sorts of different implications. The quite recent choice of the UN group for the term *autochtone* as the French translation of "indigenous" further added to the confusion – especially in those areas where the term had a much longer history. For instance in Cameroon, people are quite shocked that expatriate organisations now use the term to indicate, for instance, the Baka ("Pygmies") – thus denying the claim to autochthony of groups like the Beti who are in control of the State. A forthcoming issue of *Social Anthropology*, polemically entitled *Indigeneity and Autochthony – A Couple of False Twins?* (Gausset, Gibb, and Kendrick forthcoming), follows the different meanings of the terms. In their Introduction, the editors make a tentative contrast between indigenous as more applying to groups who are already marginalised, versus autochthonous as reserved for people who are dominant in a given area but fear future marginalisation. However, they hasten to add that such differences can only be understood in relation to the political project of the group

involved. Other authors (notably Kidd in a review of the well-know collection by Cadena 2007 on *Indigenous Experience Today*, and my 2009 book) in the same volume oppose different uses of indigeneity/ autochthony: in some cases aiming at exclusion, in others striving for emancipation and acknowledgement as citizens from the state.

Can such distinctions help to distance the Latin American use of *indígenas* from the examples above of struggles over autochthony? Life would be easy if simplistic oppositions like the one between exclusion and emancipation would suffice. The editors of the *Social Anthropology* with their emphasis that everything depends on the political project of the movement concerned seem to be more sensitive to the basic ambiguity that besets these notions in most contexts.[20] In the African and European examples of the use of autochthony as a political slogan the exclusion of "strangers" – often people who have to be recognised as citizens of the same state – is heavily emphasised. The notion is there used by groups who feel entitled to have special control over the state and often succeed in maintaining this. Yet, their claims are also carried by strong ethical feelings of entitlement to resources that are seen as the group's heritage.

Inversely, the notion of indigeneity, despite its heavy emphasis on emancipatory aims, seems to attain even among the most marginalised groups a sub-text of exclusion. Even among a group in such desperate circumstances as the Baka-"Pygmies" in the forest area of Southeast Cameroon, debates emerge whether their *cousins* – a notion used for the few educated members of these groups – still "really" belong.[21] On the other hand, especially Latin America offers recent examples of "indigenous" groups making a successful bid to assume a dominant position – at least in relation to the nation-state.

Such recent developments raise interesting and probably also important questions for the comparison Africa – Latin America. For Africanists, con-

[20] Their emphasis on the need to analyse the political context compares most favorably to the introduction to another recent special issue of *Cultural Anthropology* on a similar topic, Fortun, Fortun and Rubenstein (2010). These editors are so subtle in their emphasis on "discursive risks" and "a politics beyond politics conventionally conceived" that they seem overly afraid to address the hardcore politics (often not at all that unconventional) that does mark indigenous power struggles in many contexts – anthropology succumbing to its own theoretical refinements?

[21] Cf. Leonhardt (2006), Robillard (2010); cf. also Li (2000) and ibid. (2002) on fierce struggles between neighbouring groups in SE Asia to be recognised as "really" indigenous; cf. also ibid. (2010).

stantly embarrassed by the extremely divisive trend of ethnic discourse in Africa – ethnic groups constantly splitting up while completely new groups keep emerging, especially in the struggle over access to state resources – the apparent unity of the *indigenista* movements in Latin American countries in their confrontations with white (or *mestizo*) dominant groups is something to be envied. One reason for this difference is clearly the political context. Since independence and the hasty demise of formal colonial power, ethnic groups in Africa have a fair chance to gain control – alone or in alliance with other groups – over the state. In most Latin American countries the *indigenista* movement still has to wage a very difficult fight against an apparently all-dominant white power bloc. In such contexts internal divisions may seem to be of minor importance. Yet, this situation may change when the movement has succeeded in gaining at least formal control over the state. In this sense, developments in Bolivia – the degree to which Morales will succeed in maintaining the unity of his constituency – have special importance.

Such changing situations might help academics to overcome a somewhat limited focus on the opposition between "the" state and "the" indigenous people as the all-determining one. This focus may provide the apparent clarity one needs for political action, but a good analysis of the situation may highlight greater complexity. In Cameroon, for instance, the government has no problems in recognising the Baka-"Pygmies" as indigenous / *autochtones*. On the contrary, this is seen as a welcome way of mobilising additional development funds. In practice, as Tsing (2005) has shown most powerfully for South East Asia, many other groups are involved in the struggle over the resources that indigenous peoples seek to protect – "the" state being rather in the centre of very complex tugs-of-war.

A more shattered image might make political choices more difficult but it can come closer to realities on the ground. As a newcomer to the field of indigenous studies – I never expected that my interest in the sudden intensification of struggles over autochthony in Cameroon and the Netherlands would lead me there – I am struck by the distance between expatriate and local views on issues of indigeneity. Many expatriate experts tend to be very impatient once their version of indigenous/*autochtone* is confronted with all the ambiguities the notion of autochthonous has taken on in other circumstances. To them, the notion of indigenous/*autochtone* is clear and circumscribed by given oppositions. Debates in the forthcoming issue of *Social Anthropology* offer good examples of such impatient refusal facing the ambiguities involved. Yet, more locally rooted experts tend to stumble more on the multiple interpretations that the notions like indigenous – just like autochthonous – attain in everyday practice. At the Bonn conference of which this collection is an outcome, for instance, the presentation by Santiago Bastos on Guatemala (this volume) on struggles over different meanings of indigenous at the local level suggested to me that, despite big differences, similar uncertainties prevail as in the African contexts.

Autochthonous or indigenous, both notions seem to partake in all the uncertainties that mark the identity concept – which so suddenly overran the social sciences (and other domains of life) since the 1980s. Appadurai's seminal concept of "predatory identities" is maybe the best vantage point from which the ambiguities highlighted above can be analysed – and also the differences (Appadurai 2006). The merit of his approach is to highlight that identities may *become* predatory – following historical processes that we have to analyse. Identities can be inclusive for longer periods of time, co-existing peacefully with other identities (also within the same person). But in certain historical contexts they can suddenly become exclusivist and predatory, cannibalising other identifications. This basic ambiguity seems to be given with identity as such.

The conclusion might be that it makes little sense to be "pro" or "contra" indigeneity / autochthony (or to distinguish the one as good and the other as bad). These notions have a strong mobilising power in the present-day world. The role of academics might rather be to analyse under which circumstances – political, historical but maybe also through what sort of cultural elements – exclusivist tendencies come to prevail. Showing that certain identity claims rest on a manipulation of history – in the case of indigenous / autochthonous often on a denial of previous migrations – may be a favourite pastime of certain historians and anthropologists, but it is of little avail. Our task might rather be to understand when and how such claims acquire the high mobilising power that they have in so many contexts in the present-day world (or when they fail to do so). Accepting such claims as natural and self-evident might blind us to the complexities and ambiguities involved.

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