# BOOK REVIEWS

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

**Peter Geschiere. *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe.*** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. xii + 283 pp. Table. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $60.00. Cloth. $22.00. Paper.

How can it happen that a person can go to sleep a full-fledged member of a community and wake up a stranger? This is the question Peter Geschiere answers in his tour de force, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship and Exclusion in Africa and Europe.* The book provides a summation of Geschiere's analysis of the politics of autochthony in Africa, a field that he virtually created in the 1990s and 2000s in collaboration with a handful of African and European colleagues.

Geschiere's book is partly ethnography, partly history, and partly comparison of a variety of cases from Africa and beyond. The ethnographic portions draw from his forty years of research in Cameroon; three of the chapters focus on this research. Another chapter treats other instances of autochthony politics from other parts of Africa, including Côte d'Ivoire, and another chapter turns the ethnographic lens on his native Netherlands.

Geschiere elegantly lays out his thesis that while people see themselves (in Africa as elsewhere) as part of an increasingly global world, they simultaneously become more invested in rhetorics and practices of asserting local belonging. These languages of nativeness, indigeneity, or autochthony all benefit from the seeming self-evidence and naturalness of autochthony talk. Geschiere turns to some of the scholarship on citizenship in ancient Athens to show how the structures of autochthony then were strikingly similar to those in play today. What is different now, he argues, is the ways that the twin policies of multiparty democratization and decentralization have shifted the political economy of authochthony in such a way that politicians have clear incentives to instrumentalize the discourse as a means of excluding portions of the population.

In the struggle to monopolize political power, Cameroonian politicians have found the language of autochthony highly useful. Geschiere shows how autochthony talk links to talk about citizenship and the distribution of voting rights. In Cameroon as in ancient Athens, the performance of autochthony often culminates in funerals. There, the living confiscate the identity of the deceased for their own purposes, and the attendant funeral



https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2012.0045 Published online by Cambridge University Press

orations and ceremonies (invariably taking place in the "ancestral" village) enact a set of claims to political and social rights. Parallel to the political imperatives of being autochthonous (and the attendant incentives to deprive others of those same rights) are economic imperatives that also play out in rural areas of Cameroon. There, in the context of logging concessions and development projects, the state, the NGOs, and the private corporations all insist on a duly constituted "community" to which they will dole out a few paltry payments or services. This process, too, sets in motion a dynamic of distinction between natives and strangers, and the exclusion of the latter group from the distribution of goods.

Having clarified similar processes through comparative chapters dealing with Côte d'Ivoire, Eastern DR Congo, and the Netherlands, Geschiere ends the book with a powerful chapter titled "Nation-Building and Autochthony as Processes of Subjectivation." Here he builds upon his analysis of the seeming naturalness of the concept of autochthony to show how it becomes emotionally potent for people. He describes the coercive yet shambolic rituals of national belonging from his earlier fieldwork period during the Ahidjo presidency. Contrasted to this, thick description of several large funerals-cum-celebrations of autochthony show how emotionally engaging the practices of local belonging can be. The reader thus glimpses one of the ways in which nonelites become primed to accept the common sense of autochthony even before it is promulgated by political elites or development cadres.

These chapters constitute an argument far more powerful than the sum of their parts. The result is a comparative project in which the Cameroonian material is brought into sharp focus by the inclusion of comparative materials. This approach is different from an older comparative ethnological technique whose weaknesses have caused that approach to disappear. However, the resulting shyness about doing any form of comparative research has meant that most anthropologists have limited themselves to highly focused studies of a single place and time. This helps to inoculate them against accusations of comparison based upon misrecognition, or worse, of selecting apt examples from other places in order to bolster an argument rather than engaging the fine-grained complexities and contradictions of the societies so compared.

However, Geschiere's book successfully uses comparative materials for both a rhetorical and an analytical purpose. By showing that the logic of autochthony works in largely the same ways in ancient Athens or in contemporary Netherlands as it does in Cameroon or Côte d'Ivoire, he smashes the presumption of African exceptionalism. Beyond this, the comparisons also work like the addition of one chemical solution to another, causing a reaction. The precipitate that separates out as a result is like the knowledge we gain about Cameroon that we would not otherwise have discerned through close-range ethnography alone. In this regard, Geschiere's book is

a model for other scholars of a type of anthropological comparative work that derives the benefits of comparison that political science and sociology take for granted, while retaining the explanatory power of fine-grained ethnographic and historical description.

Mike McGovern
*Yale University*
*New Haven, Connecticut*
*michael.mcgovern@yale.edu*

https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2012.0045 Published online by Cambridge University Press