

Autochthony and the Crisis of Citizenship: Democratization, Decentralization, and the Politics of Belonging

Peter Geschiere and Stephen Jackson

Abstract: The recent upsurge of “autochthony” and similar notions of belonging is certainly not special to Africa. All over the world, processes of intensifying globalization seem to go together with fierce struggles over belonging and exclusion of “strangers.” A central question in the contributions to this special issue concerns the apparent “naturalness” of autochthony in highly different settings. How can similar slogans seem so self-evident and hence have such mobilizing force under very different circumstances? Another recurrent theme is the somewhat surprising “nervousness” of discourses on autochthony. They seem to promise a basic security of being rooted in the soil as a primal form of belonging. Yet in practice, belonging turns out to be always relative: there is always the danger of being unmasked as “not really” belonging, or even of being a “fake” autochthon. A comparative perspective

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Peter Geschiere is professor for the anthropology of Africa at the University of Amsterdam. He has been a visiting professor at the Universities of Kisangani (Congo), Yaoundé (Cameroon), Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) and at EHESS (Paris), Columbia University, and The New School University (New York). His main fieldwork was in West Africa, notably Cameroon. Publications include *Village Communities and the State: Changing Relations of Authority in South Cameroun* (KPI, 1982); *Capitalist Encroachment and Old Modes of Production: Anthropological Explorations in Africa* (with Wim van Binsbergen) (KPI, 1985); *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Virginia, 1997); *Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure* (with Birgit Meyer) (Blackwell 1999); and *The Forging of Nationhood* (with Gyanendra Pandey) (Manohar, 2003).

Stephen Jackson is currently special adviser to the deputy special representative of the secretary-general with the United Nations Mission in the DR Congo (MONUC). He holds a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Princeton University. His research interests include the political economy of war, global/local conflict linkages, principles and practice in humanitarian affairs, the political manipulation of ethnic identity, politico-ethnic violence, the postcolonial state, and regional conflict formations. His work has appeared in a number of prominent journals and publications, including *Politique Africaine* and *the Review of African Political Economy*.

on autochthony—as a particular pregnant form of entrenchment—may help to unravel the paradoxes of the preoccupation with belonging in a globalizing world.

Résumé: La poussée récente du concept d'autochtonie et des notions similaires d'appartenance n'est certainement pas spécifique à l'Afrique. Partout dans le monde, les processus intensifiés de la globalisation semblent aller de paire avec des luttes acharnées autour de l'idée d'appartenance et d'exclusion des "étrangers." La problématique centrale qui se dégage des contributions de ce numéro spécial est l'apparence "naturelle" du principe d'autochtonie dans des contextes très différents. Comment se fait-il que des slogans identiques puissent sembler aller de soi et avoir ainsi un pouvoir de mobilisation tel dans des circonstances si différentes? Un autre thème récurrent est la "nervosité" palpable des discours de l'autochtonie. Ils semblent promettre une sécurité élémentaire liée à l'ancrage des racines, l'établissant ainsi comme une forme primale d'appartenance. Et cependant, la pratique veut que l'appartenance se révèle toujours comme relative: il y a toujours le danger d'être démasqué et dénoncé comme n'appartenant "pas réellement," ou même être considéré comme un "faux" autochtone. Opter pour une perspective comparative de l'autochtonie, comme forme singulière porteuse de retranchement, pourrait aider à démêler les paradoxes liés à la préoccupation de l'appartenance dans un monde globalisant.

Since the 1990s, Africa has seemed beset by ever more violent struggles over belonging and exclusion, many of them expressed through a resurgent language of "autochthony" (*autochtonie* in French)—a term literally implying an origin "of the soil itself" and meaning, by inference, a direct claim to territory. Over the last few years, for example, Ivory Coast has suffered under the violence of President Gbagbo's *jeunes combattants*, forcibly separating "true" Ivoirians from "fake" ones: a tragic example of the violent extremes to which *autochtonie* can be stretched. Elsewhere on the continent, struggles over belonging have led to similarly violent orders of exclusion expressed in the vernacular of autochthony.

Yet, as this special issue shows, this brandishing across the continent of similar emotion-laden notions of belonging actually masks highly different patterns. Striking, especially, is the varying relation between claims to autochthony and the idea of national citizenship, the shibboleth of preceding decades, when nation-building was still seen by both postcolonial regimes and expatriate actors as the primary precondition for development. In Ivory Coast, autochthony has come to mean a much more restricted and smaller scale redefinition of the nation, excluding all those who are not of the Ivoirian *souche* (trunk). In Cameroon, the same lan-

guage is used to challenge the very idea of uniform national citizenship: immigrants in a certain region may claim to be Cameroonian citizens, yet they do not really belong. In Eastern Congo/Zaire, the violent struggles over the belonging of peoples of Rwandan/Burundian descent (including the enigmatic Banyamulenge) can only be understood against the background of Mobutu's on-again, off-again manipulations of their national citizenship in preceding years (Jackson forthcoming and this volume).

Clearly, in such highly different settings, the meaning of a notion like autochthony or belonging is not a given; indeed it turns out to be slippery and unstable. It is all the more striking, then, that these notions seem to have such great self-evidence to those who regularly use them. It would be too simplistic to explain the upsurge of these ideas as the result of political manipulation by certain leaders. This aspect is certainly present in all the cases examined in this issue of *ASR*, but such manipulation can be successful only because it strikes such a deep emotional chord with the general population. One of the aims of this issue, therefore, is to understand, through a comparison of different cases, how these notions can retain such self-evident meaning and therefore such great popular appeal in strikingly different situations.¹

This question is all the more relevant if one takes into account that in the context of our supposedly "globalizing" world, such preoccupations are certainly not limited to Africa. One of the intriguing aspects of the concept of autochthony is the surprising ease with which it bridges the gap between South and North. Thus, in this issue Bambi Ceuppens shows how the language of autochthony has acquired considerable resonance on the political right in Flanders and the Netherlands. Sloganeering about autochthon rights has been adopted in Italy by Umberto Bossi and his Lega Nord in an attempt to redefine his "Other"; autochthony discourse also has a long history in Canada and is on the rise in the Pacific. It is therefore clear that African conflicts around autochthony have to be seen in the broader context of what Tanja Murray Li (2000) calls most aptly "a global conjuncture of belonging." Apparently unrelated global trends—political and economic liberalization, decentralization, global concerns over "disappearing cultures," and decreasing biodiversity—seem to converge in a deepening concern about belonging. Or to put it in different terms: the New World Order that George Bush Sr. (and others) announced so proudly at the end of the Cold War is less an order of cosmopolitan citizens circulating in global flows than one of communal violence and efforts to exclude people who do not "belong."²

The great "performative quality"—as Ruth Marshall-Fratani calls it in her contribution to this issue—of similar languages of belonging in very different parts of the world bears some relation to what many see as the "crisis" of the nation-state, which seems to be surpassed by intensifying processes of globalization. Yet in this respect as well, all sorts of paradoxes emerge. As Jean-Francois Bayart shows with such a rich array of empirical

examples in *Le Gouvernement du Monde* (2004), it is far from clear that global processes have really led to a weakening of the nation-state per se. In many respects the latter has seemed rather to graft itself onto globalization processes, and its institutions still form the framework through which these processes crystallize.

But difference also manifests itself in the particular globalization process to be held responsible. In Europe, “the immigrant issue” provided the nation-state with an increasing role to play in protecting autochthony and deterring immigration by attempting to enforce an often impossible “integration.” In Africa, by contrast, the recent upsurge of conflict over belonging and autochthony seems to have been detonated by the twin processes of democratization and decentralization which so deeply marked the 1990s on the continent. The return of multipartyism and the fact that elections became meaningful again met with great popular enthusiasm. But in many regions these developments also triggered fear among local populations that they would be outvoted by more numerous immigrants. Questions arose as to “who can vote where,” and more important, “who can stand as a candidate where,” inciting fierce discord about where one belongs. (For example, can an immigrant run for mayor in a city where he does not belong? If he wants to go into politics, shouldn’t he do so in his home village?) The abrupt switch by the development establishment—the World Bank and the major bilateral donors—from a strongly statist conception of development to a policy of decentralization and “by-passing the state” raised similar questions: who can claim to “really” belong to the “community” that is supposed to profit from a new-style development project? In many cases, the result was an explosion of fuzzy and rapidly changing identities.

These new developments have to be seen against a longer historical background in which the colonial heritage played a complicating role. A recurrent contradiction all over the continent was between the formal effort by colonial regimes to territorialize people, on the one hand, and their equally common preference for migrants, on the other. Both Indirect Rule and *la politique des races* were inspired by the idea that people should be kept where they belong in order to facilitate ruling them; identity should be rooted in the soil. However, this was countered in practice by all sorts of measures to encourage migrants. Unfailingly, colonials compared migrants favorably, as more hardworking and enterprising, to “indolent” or even “obdurate” locals.³ The consequence was a precarious “migrant labor” policy: in many contexts, migration was encouraged, but people were somehow to remain attached to the village at the same time. The present-day struggles over citizenship, with its uncomfortable mix of autochthony and other forms of belonging, also have to be seen against the background of such historical inconsistencies.

The contributions to this special issue give an indication of the startling varieties of autochthony that have emerged from this complex con-

figuration. Ruth Marshall-Fratani offers a vivid account of Laurent Gbagbo's terrifying nation-building experiments in Côte d'Ivoire—notably the proposed Opération Nationale d'Identification, which takes the idea of autochthony to unprecedented limits. Antoine Socpa analyzes the quite different triangle of *autochtons*, *allogènes*, and the state in Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon. Here the land issue has a long history, but it threatened to become violent only when the full implications of the new style of elections became clear. Self-styled “autochthons” insisted that even if immigrants had bought land, they should not use the new political opportunities in order to rule in the “home of their host,” while the Biya regime eagerly used such divisions to divide the opposition. Alec Leonhardt discusses the complex implications of the new emphasis on autochthony for Cameroon's Baka “Pygmies.” In principle these people can claim to be the real autochthons, but they are hardly considered as such because, paradoxically, they seem not to qualify as Cameroonian citizens. Stephen Jackson shows how the “nervous language” of autochthony in the specific context of Eastern Zaire/Congo has led to a true explosion of fuzzy and constantly redefined identities on multiple scales. Debates on belonging may focus for now on the contested citizenship of the Banyamulenge/Banyarwanda, but they also fan out in other directions, leading to violent confrontations with all sorts of supposed “newcomers.” Loren Landau shows for postapartheid Johannesburg how growing resentment of immigrants from across the Limpopo (the Makwere-kwere) reinforces not only a joint sense of belonging among the various South African groups in the city, but also a stereotyping that completely misrepresents these Makwere-kwere's ideas about their own future. Finally, Bambi Ceuppens studies the emergence of autochthony as a powerful political slogan in Flanders. The context may be completely different from that of Africa, yet the notion acquires a similar aura of self-evidence and a similar emotional force. Like the other authors, Ceuppens shows that even if there are certain continuities, autochthony reflects, in this case as well, more a determined effort to gain access to processes of globalization than a “traditional” refusal of change.

In terms of our underlying question—of how notions of autochthony and belonging can retain such “natural” self-evidence in strikingly different contexts—two recurrent points stand out. One of the secrets of this broadly applied language is its relative emptiness, its attachment to a new and even more pliable form of ethnicity (see Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000). By now it seems clear that ethnicity, despite its apparent primordialism, is in practice a historical construct that can be readapted to changing circumstances. Yet by comparison with autochthony, ethnicity has some sort of core meaning: an ethnic group needs a name, a specific history, often a language. Autochthony needs none of this: only a claim to having been the first.⁴ Indeed, it is this very emptiness that seems to make it fit so very well into the constantly changing boundaries created by globalization processes and

that makes it so politically “useful” and malleable a discourse for ideologues. The “Other”—crucial to any form of identity but especially to such fuzzy ones—can be easily redefined, precisely because autochthony as such has hardly any substance. A related point, then, is what might be called the “segmentarizing” tenor of these discourse: there seems to be an inherent tendency to define the “Other” at ever closer range; the concomitant danger is that someone can always claim to “belong” even more than you do. As one Cameroonian skeptic put it: “You can go to bed as an autochthon and wake up to find that you have become an allogène.” Autochthony is always relative, and so there is always the danger of being unmasked as a traitor.

This goes some way to explaining the “nervousness” of the language of autochthony, highlighted particularly in Jackson’s contribution below. Autochthony seems to promise a primal security, based as it is on some sort of primordial truth-claim about belonging to the land. Yet in everyday life it seems rather to compound a basic insecurity. In practice, “belonging” turns out to be relative, rather than a given; one can never be sure that one “really” belongs.⁵ The “naturalizing” tenor of discourse on autochthony and belonging is highly deceiving—which may explain also why it can so easily acquire violent implications. For Africa, both Achille Mbembe (2001:283; 2002:7) and AbdouMaliq Simone (2001:25) strongly emphasize that such discourse—which seems to imply a return to the local and a celebration of origins—reflects in practice a determined struggle about access to the global. This may be a crucial point to make about the present-day “conjuncture of belonging” all over the world. The contributions below show how misleading it is to take the upsurge of belonging as reflecting an effort to return to some sort of “traditional” situation. For Africa, the image of authoritarianism as a kind of manhole cover—take it away and all the old communal tensions flare up again—may be a tempting one. Yet on closer inspection it becomes clear that autochthony in all its different forms and with its strong emotional appeal can be understood only in relation to incisive global changes.

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Notes

1. Jean and John Comaroff (2001) speak of the "naturalizing capacity" of the autochthony notion.
2. See Birgit Meyer and Peter Geschiere (1999), who characterize the explosive relation between globalization and identity as a "dialectics of flow and closure."
3. See Ceuppens and Geschiere (2005).
4. There is an interesting catch in this. Autochthony, a classical Greek notion, literally means "from the soil itself" (see the title of Loraux's fascinating book on this subject, *Né de la terre* [1996]). Yet in practice, most present-day autochthony movements are built around a claim to be first-come to the present place of settlement; so the claim itself already implies movement.
5. Nicole Loraux (1996) highlights this basic contradiction between an apparent security and a practice of nagging insecurity in her seminal study of the very cradle of autochthony, classical Athens. This city prided itself on being the only truly autochthonous one among all the Greek *poleis*. Hence its special talent for democracy. Loraux's fine-grained analysis of the inconsistencies hidden in this view is of direct relevance to present-day versions of autochthony (see also Jackson, below; Ceuppens & Geschiere 2005)

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