

## *Articles*

### AUTOCHTHONY AND CITIZENSHIP

#### New Modes in the Struggle over Belonging and Exclusion in Africa

by Peter Geschiere<sup>1</sup>

*ABSTRACT.* In many parts of Africa, the 1990's brought a crisis of citizenship. The idea of national citizenship – in the preceding decades of nation-building so strongly emphasized as the central identity – seemed to lose much of its meaning. This void seemed to be filled by a true ebullition of more fuzzy identities, often highly localist in character. It is in this context that the author presents a few aspects of recent work he conducted in collaboration with several Cameroonian colleagues – Francis Nyamnjoh, Antoine Socpa, Basile Ndjio – , and also with Jean-Francois Bayart (Paris) and Bambi Ceuppens (Brussels), on the upsurge of “autochthony” and an obsession with belonging as an overriding theme in the new style of politics since democratization. The argument was first presented as a key note address at the 2003 annual conference of the Netherlands Association of Africanists (NVAS).

*KEY WORDS:* Africa, autochthony, belonging, Cameroon, citizenship (crisis of), democratization, fuzzy identities, localism, nationality, nation-building, politics

In many parts of Africa, the 1990's brought a crisis of citizenship. The idea of national citizenship – in the preceding decades of nation-building so strongly emphasized as the central identity – seemed to lose much of its meaning. This void seemed to be filled by a true ebullition of more fuzzy identities, often highly localist in character. Since this is a development with which most Africanists are confronted in their work – wherever in the continent it takes place – this might be an important topic to address in the present connection, i.e. as a keynote for the annual conference of the Netherlands Association of Africanists (NVAS).

It is in this context that I want to present a few aspects of recent work I

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the author's as a keynote address for the annual conference of the Netherlands Association of Africanists (NVAS), Leiden, 26 September, 2003.

did with several Cameroonian colleagues – Francis Nyamnjoh, Antoine Socpa, Basile Ndjio – and also with Jean-Francois Bayart (Paris) and Bambi Ceuppens (Brussels) on the upsurge of “autochthony” and an obsession with belonging as an all-overriding theme in the new style of politics since democratization.<sup>2</sup>

Most people in the audience will know only too well from the areas where they work (or come from) that the flip side of such preoccupations with belonging are ever more vicious forms of exclusion of “the other”: the stranger, the *allogène*. Often this *allogène* is a citizen of the same country. Then “autochthony” becomes a dangerous rival to the very idea of national citizenship. Indeed, in many parts of the continent, “nation-building”, the shibboleth of the first decades of Independence, now seems to be something of the past. The same authoritarian regimes that used to preach national unity as a primary political necessity for development, now seem intent to play the autochthony card – supporting all sorts of localist movements – in order to divide the opposition and thus neutralize the impact of multi-partyism. However, at least as important, is a similar *volte-face* of the development establishment, that also used to advocate nation-building as a primary condition for realizing development, but now insists on “by-passing the State”, decentralization and support to NGOs (who, on the ground, are often highly localist in character).

I just said that this theme is, unfortunately, becoming ever more topical in many parts of Africa. However, it may be important to emphasize that, in the present-day global setting, Africa is not at all exceptional in this respect. On the contrary, the language of autochthony and belonging seems to be in fashion throughout the world – which is somewhat paradoxical, in view of all the talk on globalization. Indeed, I became particularly interested in the topic when, on my return from Cameroon in 1996 and after just having seen

---

<sup>2</sup> See P. Geschiere and F. Nyamnjoh, “Capitalism and Autochthony: The Seesaw of Mobility and Belonging”, *Public Culture* 12, 2 (2000): 423-453 (special issue on *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, eds. Jean and John Comaroff); Jean-François Bayart, Peter Geschiere and Francis Nyamnjoh, “ ‘J’étais là avant’: problématiques politiques de l’autochtonie”, dossier ‘Variations’, *Critique Internationale* 10 (2001): 126-195; Peter Geschiere, Francis Nyamnjoh and Antoine Socpa, “Autochthony versus Citizenship – Variable Effects of Political Liberalization in Cameroon”, report for *Ministère des Affaires Etrangères*, Paris, 2000.

the fierce images of autochthony demonstrations in Douala on Cameroonian TV, I turned on the radio at home and heard exactly the same slogans, but this time in Dutch, from Philip Dewinter, the successful Belgian politician and leader of the Neo-Right political party *Vlaams Blok: Eigen Volk Eerst* (“Your Own People First”) etc. Unfortunately, I no longer have to switch to the Belgian radio to hear this kind of language in Dutch. Since the meteoric career of Pim Fortuyn – when the New Right in the Netherlands finally found an equally charismatic leader – many Dutch politicians, even those who see themselves as placed in the middle of the political spectrum, now see fit to use thinly veiled versions of the same slogans.

Of course, there are parallels all over the globe. The New World Order predicted by Bush Sr. at the end of the Cold War has turned out to be not so much an order of cosmopolitans and free flow, but rather one of struggles over belonging, exclusion of “strangers” (whoever they may be) and the drawing of constantly new boundaries. The frantic attempts to close “Fortress Europe” and the appalling consequences this has already had for our African colleagues and students when we invite them to the Netherlands for conferences, fellowships our scholarships are another indication of what this “New World Order” is turning into: endless queuing in front of Dutch consulates and embassies, being told to come back the next day even though the visa is already there, being harassed at airports, and once in the Netherlands not being allowed to return home for several months (even in case of serious family-problems) as long as the immigration service has not arranged the papers etc. Decidedly, “globalization” can mean very different things for different people!

So, Africa is certainly not the only continent in which globalization is marked by frantic efforts towards closure.<sup>3</sup> But it is clear also that in the Southern hemisphere this general obsession with closure and exclusion takes on special forms and is pushed by special factors. In her challenging publications on the role of the concept of “indigenous peoples” in Southeast Asia, the Canadian anthropologist Tania Murray Li speaks of a “conjuncture” of quite different but converging tendencies, who all seem to promote an upsurge of localist identities that seem to be “traditional”, but are in practice

---

<sup>3</sup> See Birgit Meyer and Peter Geschiere, eds, *Globalization and Identity – Dialectics of Flow and Closure*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

highly situational and constantly shifting.<sup>4</sup>

Li is a Canadian anthropologist, who worked on development projects and NGO's especially in Sulawesi, and who does not mince her words. She even speaks of "ethnic cleansing *by* indigenous peoples" (not *of* indigenous peoples but *by* them) – referring to recent attacks by "indigenous" Dajak, complete with a somewhat artificial renaissance of head-hunting traditions, on Madurese on Kalimantan.

I think her term "conjuncture" is very apposite to the topic I want to address. It is indeed striking that tendencies with quite different backgrounds seem to converge towards a growing obsession with "autochthony" and belonging. In our earlier work on Cameroon, quoted above, we mainly related this upsurge of autochthony since the onset of democratization in this country (1990) to political manipulations of the regime of President Paul Biya. It is certainly true that in many parts of this country the fear among local people to be overrun by immigrants from other provinces was much older – especially of Bamileke migrants, originating from the western highlands, who had fanned out throughout the country, and succeeded to dominate the local trade in many parts. But this fear acquired new dimensions by the very fact that, with democratization, elections became once more of real importance. Hence the locals, especially in the coastal zones, had indeed good reasons to fear that they would be outvoted by more numerous immigrants. Thus, democratization triggered fierce debates about questions like: Who will be allowed to vote? And even more importantly: Who can stand for candidacy? Or in more concrete terms: can a Bamileke be allowed to run for major in Douala?

In retrospect, it is clear that one of the secrets why the former one-party regime of President Paul Biya succeeded – against all expectations – to hang onto power (Biya will soon be running for a new term as President for another 7 years), was its cleverly playing the autochthony card. This was also the main reason why no opposition party – despite a very promising start by several of them in the early 1990's – succeeded to retain a national profile.

---

<sup>4</sup> T.M. Li, "Articulating Indigenous Identity in Indonesia: Resource Politics and the Tribal Slot", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (2000): 149-179; and "Ethnic Cleansing, Recursive Knowledge, and the Dilemmas of Sedentarism", *International Social Science Journal* 173 (2002): 361-371.

Indeed, after 13 years of democracy, the opposition is now hopelessly divided against the all-powerful governing party that made full use of the autochthony conundrum for its divide-and-rule strategy.

Yet it is clear that other factors play at least an equally important role in the upsurge of autochthony and belonging. I mentioned already the impact of the striking reversal of the policies of the development establishment, from a highly statist conception of development towards an equally simplistic emphasis on decentralization and support to NGOs as a panacea solution. In the 1960's and 1970's, the keywords for realizing development were strengthening the state and promoting nation-building. Now, the need to "by-pass" the state and to decentralize have acquired a similar ideological status in the new development thinking. The problem with this fairly abrupt change, however, is that there seems to be little concern (or even little consciousness) among those who advocate this new policy that this new tenets will inevitably promote an intensification of struggles over belonging: about who is "in" and who is "out"? – that is: who does not "really" belong and can, therefore, be denied access to the development-money-new-style? Tania Li emphasizes also another, but related, global trend, that has also considerable impact in Africa: the global concern for "indigenous peoples", often with a strong ecological flavour. Here a basic idea is that indigenous people have to be protected because they are vital to the protection of the world's ecological heritage.

All these new ideas have certainly sympathetic overtones. Yet, it may be important to emphasize that on closer inspection their flip side is the exclusion of others. They tend to dilute the very idea of national citizenship, that at least formally used to be one of the pillars of our world order. Of course, we all know now that the nation-state is out of fashion. Yet, again, the parallels – and even more the contrasts – with what is going on in the West might be important. It is one thing to talk about surpassing national citizenship in, for instance, the European context, where citizens' rights have been entrenched by a long history. It is another thing to launch such ideas in, for instance, Africa, where national citizenship and especially the idea of at least a formal equality of all citizens in the face of the law is still little institutionalized and protected. There may, therefore, be good grounds to question whether all the emphasis on decentralization and the rights of minorities does not allow the very idea of national citizenship to go down the drain too

easily. All the more so, since instead of this we seem to get highly fuzzy and constantly contested identities.

Let me give two rapid ethnographic examples of how omnipresent and unexpected the ramifications of this autochthony conjuncture have become.

*The funeral as a final test of belonging*

My first example concerns funerals: the proliferation of funeral ritual – and especially the obsession with the funeral “at home” – in many parts of the African continent. The Cameroonian economist Celestin Monga speaks even of “une mauvaise gestion de la mort” (bad management of death). This is, of course, quite strong language. Monga is clearly worried by the rapidly growing and ever more ostentatious spending at such occasions. He shows also that this private occasion is highly politicized, precisely because “belonging” has become such an all-overriding criterion in democratic politics.<sup>5</sup>

The quite complex implications this idea of the funeral “at home” is acquiring in the new political configuration, as a celebration of belonging, became clear to me during a visit to Mamfe (South West Cameroon) in 1996, when people were still talking excitedly about the funeral of the wife of a general from the region that had taken place a few months earlier. On the map Mamfe, situated close to the border with Nigeria, does not seem to be that far away from Cameroon’s main city and economic center, Douala. Yet, throughout the country Mamfe is considered to be a really far-out place because of the condition of the road that leads there. Indeed, the Mamfe road has become proverbial in Cameroon for the misery of travelling under adverse circumstances, especially during the wet season. I went to the place to visit Margaret Niger-Thomas who, only two years ago, defended here in Leiden her strong Ph.D. thesis on women, structural adjustment and smuggling in this area. Since it was still in the wet season, the road lived up to its

---

<sup>5</sup> Célestin Monga, “Cercueils, orgies et sublimation – Le coût d’une mauvaise gestion de la mort”, *Afrique 2000*, 21 (1995): 63-72.

reputation – as predicted we spent a night on the road.<sup>6</sup>

In Mamfe, the talk of the town was still the spectacular funeral that had taken place a few months before, when the rains had already begun. People still made wry comments about how all urban elites had to come down to Mamfe and how they all got stuck on the road. There was true Schadenfreude in these stories: it served the elites right to be stuck in the mud since they had always neglected their own area. Now they found out for themselves what a misery this road was. The whole funeral seemed to become problematic. But finally the general took a drastic decision. He “chartered” several helicopters from the army and had his wife’s body together with the main guests flown in from Yaounde.

People talked about all this as if the whole exercise was more or less self-evident: as if urbanites always had to be brought back to be buried in the village. To them, it appeared to be only logical that the general went to such great length to have his wife buried “at home.” However, it was quite striking that especially older informants had other stories to tell. Indeed, to them this whole emphasis on burying “at home” seemed to be new. The Banyangi (the people of the Mamfe area) have a long history of migration: especially the women are famous for their readiness to engage in trade of all kinds (or to put it in less diplomatic terms: they are known to be all over the globe as prostitutes). In earlier days – already during the interbellum – Banyangi elders had sent delegations to the coast, in order to persuade the women to come back and marry at home, in most cases without much success.<sup>7</sup> So it always had been an issue how to bring women back “home.” But the elders could not remember this strong emphasis on bringing back the bodies of deceased kin.

In many parts of Africa, people insist now that this emphasis on burying “at home” – that is, in the village – has been a traditional custom which exists since time immemorial. And, indeed in cities like Yaounde or Douala, there are still hardly any cemeteries: to be buried in the city is now seen a

---

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Niger-Thomas, “Buying Futures’ – The Upsurge of Female Entrepreneurship – Crossing the Formal / Informal Divide in South West Cameroon”, Ph.D.thesis, University of Leiden, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> See also Malcolm Ruel, *Leopards and Leaders: Constitutional Politics among a Cross River People*, London: Tavistock, 1969.

sign of social disgrace. But on closer inspection it seems that for many groups this “custom” is quite new – probably copied from groups who did this already much longer.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear also that, especially in recent times, this burying at home acquired great political significance. In a recent interview, Samuel Eboua, an *eminence grise* of Cameroonian politics, explained for instance:

“Every Cameroonian is an *allogène* anywhere else in the country... then where his ancestors lived and where his mortal remains will be buried. Everybody knows that only under exceptional circumstances a Cameroonian will be buried elsewhere.”<sup>9</sup>

This is, indeed, powerful language: any idea of the equality of all Cameroonian citizens, that was – at least formally – so dear to Cameroon’s first President Ahmadou Ahidjo, seems to have disappeared here.

Yet, it is quite clear that Eboua voices a current opinion here. This emphasis on “burying at home” is also *the* argument for *les autochtones* to justify their insistence that immigrants – these *allogènes* – should go “home” and vote there; and even more that they should stand candidate there, and not in their new surroundings where they are only “guests.” The argument is that, since the latter still want to be buried in the village, they clearly consider that to be their home. So if they want to join in politics they should

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also the famous case of the funeral of SM in Kenya (see David W.Cohen and A.S.Atieno Odhiambo, *Burying SM: The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power in Africa*, London: Currey / Heinemann, 1992). The funeral of SM, the nickname of a famous lawyer in Nairobi, led to a fierce fight – finally decided in the national Court of Appeal – between his Luo clan and his Kikuyu widow over where the corpse should be buried. The widow wanted to bury SM at their sumptuous farm in Nairobi and, together with her lawyers, emphasized SM’s identity as a modern Kenyan citizen. But the representatives of his clan insisted that whether a modern person or not, SM was foremost a Luo and a Luo should be buried “at home.” Strikingly enough, they were finally put in the right by the Court of Appeal, according to strong rumours after a direct intervention by President Arap Moi himself (who, thus, clearly gave precedence to ethnic forms of belonging over the idea of modern Kenyan citizenship) But at least as surprising was, in view of all this emphasis on custom, that Oginga Odinga, the grand old man of Luo politics, sided with the widow. He declared that all this stress on burying at home was new. According to him, the Luo as an expansionist group, rather used to bury their dead in newly conquered areas in order to confirm new claims.

<sup>9</sup> Translation mine. Interview with Eboua, *Impact-TribUne* 1995, 005: 14.



rather do this there than to try and prevail over their “hosts.” After all, a “guest” should never try to dominate his “host” in his own house.

The consequences of all this is a rather macabre traffic of bodies in order to confirm contested claims of belonging. In the articles quoted above (see note 2) we discuss at greater length cases of people digging up their father’s body and re-burying it elsewhere in order to prove a “belonging” that seemed politically more opportune. An even more complicated case took place in 1999 in Buea (also in South West Cameroon) when gendarmes disturbed a funeral to “arrest” the body in order to have it buried elsewhere. Clearly they acted on behalf of a politically more influential faction among the deceased’s kin who wanted to prove a different kind of belonging.

Of course, all this is not completely new: the funeral was always important as a mark of belonging. Yet is it quite clear that with democratization and the return of real politics, this emphasis on belonging got new impetus, turning the funeral into a crucial and often fiercely contested moment in these politics of belonging.

Striking is also the direct involvement of the national political leadership in such struggles. When these concern important persons, even the President himself may get involved – and, indeed, in all the cases we have, invariably on the side of the *autochtons*, defending their “belonging” over against “strangers.” Thus the funeral has become an important moment in the “politics of autochthony” that over the last decade has proved to be so effective for maintaining the Biya regime in the saddle.

*The new forest law: Autochthony in an almost empty area*

In Cameroon, it are particularly the more developed coastal areas, like the South West Province or the city of Douala, that are hotbeds of autochthony struggles. This is hardly surprising. These are quite densely populated areas whose economic dynamism attracted, moreover, numerous immigrants.

My second example, however, shows that even in the forest area of Southeast Cameroon – generally seen as one of the most backward parts of the country, very thinly populated (only a few inhabitants per square mile) and hardly attracting any immigrants – the language of autochthony and ex-

clusion of *allogènes* can emerge with surprising force. But here the background is not so much the new style of politics since democratization, but rather the new approach of the global development establishment, quoted above, with its emphasis on decentralization and local autonomy.

This example can show also a danger that seems to be inherent to this language: namely, its “segmentary” nature. The “other”, the “stranger”, can be constantly re-defined, and at ever closer range. There is never an end to debates about who “really” belongs. Even your own kin can be redefined as *allogènes* or outsiders. And, again, the parallels with the equally volatile ways in which this language is used elsewhere – for instance in present-day Europe – is striking.

Two years ago I did a brief study of the effects of the new forest law in East Cameroon (where I do field-work since 1971).<sup>10</sup> The new Cameroonian forest law of 1994 is generally seen as a major breakthrough in the struggle to save the rain-forest. Over the last decade this struggle has become a most confusing tangle of divergent interests: of the global ecological movement, the Cameroonian state, expatriate logging companies, development projects, the local population and many more. Moreover, this knot is complicated by surprising alliances. For instance, ecologists and logging companies – *bien étonnés de se retrouver ensemble* – often seem to agree that the first thing to be done is to empty the forest of its population by forced re-settlement.

The 1994 law is deeply imbued with ecological considerations.<sup>11</sup> It was almost literally forced down the throat of the Cameroonian Parliamentarians by the World Bank. Only under very heavy pressure of financial sanctions did the Parliament pass the law. Indeed, it is striking how strongly “ecological” the Bank has become – at least when the Cameroonian rain-forest is concerned. A major advance of the law is that ecological concerns are coupled with attention to the rights of the local population. Indeed – and this might be quite new in the ecological movement – the initiators of the law seem to have understood that in these sparsely populated areas conservation

---

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Geschiere, “Ecology, Belonging and Xenophobia – The 1994 Forest Law in Cameroon and the Issue of ‘Community’” in Harri Englund and Francis Nyamnjoh, eds, *Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa*, London: Zed Press, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Alain Karsenty, “Vers la fin de l’État forestier: Appropriation des espaces de la rente forestière au Cameroun”, *Politique africaine*, 75 (1999): 147-162.

of the forest is only possible with the participation of the locals. Consequently, there is now less emphasis on emptying the forest by re-settling the population. Instead, the local communities are recognized as major stakeholders in managing the forest resources: they acquire the right to create their own “community forests” and exploit these themselves. Moreover, they are supposed to receive a major share from the profits on logging by others. Indeed, the law takes the new ideal of financial decentralization very seriously: 50 % of the taxes on logging are supposed to remain in the area and to go to the municipality or even the village concerned.

As said, Cameroon’s East province, where the main remaining forest resources are to be found, has long been the most neglected part of the country. So, some guarantee that at least part of the logging revenues will be invested locally is most welcome. Nonetheless, one can not help wondering whether the ideal of financial decentralization is not applied here in an all too simplistic sense. On paper, the new law would imply that huge sums of tax money would go to municipalities of a few thousand inhabitants. Of course, the extremely centralist traditions of the Cameroonian administration guarantee that all this money will never get there. However, the official calculations raise high expectations; and these immediately trigger fierce struggles over belonging in what were highly fluid societies.

The same applies to the role attributed to “the local community.” What is striking is that the law is careful not to define this notion more closely. No doubt for good reasons: the forms of social organization prevailing in the forest area were (and are) extremely segmentary. These used to be very open societies, with constant splitting and fusing of segments, and without fixed positions of authority.<sup>12</sup> In such a context a logical consequence of proclaiming “the local community” (without further specification) as a major stakeholder in the management of the forest is, again, intense fighting over belonging and exclusion: Who will be allowed to profit from the new “community forest”? And who can be excluded as ultimately an *allogène*?. Such questions become all the harder to solve since, in the segmentary logic

---

<sup>12</sup> See Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, *Les seigneurs de la forêt – Essai sur le passé historique, l’organisation sociale et les normes éthiques des anciens Beti du Cameroun*, Paris: Karthala, 1981; P. Geschiere, *Village Communities and the State – Changing Relations of Authority among the Maka, S.E. Cameroon*, London: Kegan Paul International, 1982.

of these societies, the “stranger” can be constantly re-defined, at ever closer range. In the case studies I have of the few villages who had their “community forest” already formally attributed, the first struggles over exclusion were directed against a few persons who had, indeed, come in quite recently from outside. But subsequently accusations of not “really” belonging were directed against people closer-by: for instance, against relatives who – at least according to some – did not “really” fit into the patrilineal order (even though they had lived for generations in the village).

Indeed, the rapidity with which the forest law triggered such struggles over belonging even in the very thinly populated East Province, shows the elasticity of the autochthony discourse. As said, in the Cameroonian context it was to be expected that belonging would be an issue in the quite densely populated coastal zones where there is a real pressure on land. But my second example shows that there is no end to autochthony, precisely because it is such an empty term. It means no more than “I was here earlier” and that can become a claim towards the exclusion of “the other” in any circumstance.

### *The wider African context*

No doubt, my examples reflect specific aspects of the Cameroonian context. Yet, it seems that there are many parallels in present-day Africa.

It would be interesting to compare, for instance, with the recent trajectory of the notion of “autochthony” in the Ivorian context. There, it was first directed against people from outside the country: mostly against the Burkinabe who, ever since the 1950’s migrated in such great numbers to the South in order to participate in the booming plantation economy of Ivory Coast. As long as the autochthony label was directed against immigrants from beyond Ivory Coast’s borders, such fear for *allogènes* rather strengthened the idea of an Ivorian national citizenship. However, developments over the last few years showed how quickly the term could be re-interpreted and re-directed against fellow Ivorians: against the Northerners who are now more or less assimilated to Burkinabe outsiders. In this new setting, the autochthony craze seems, here as well, to weaken the idea of an Ivorian national citizen-

ship (to say the least).

Even more shocking parallels can be found in Northeastern Congo/ Zaire – in the Bunia-Goma region, which recently has been the scene of such terrible upheaval. In a recent study, Stephen Jackson masterfully analyzes all the complications and deliberate confusions around the Banyamulenge (these pseudo-Tutsi) and the issue of their national citizenship.<sup>13</sup> The national regime – in the person of Mobutu – played a particularly perfidious role in this context: constantly playing off the Banyamulenge against the self-styled autochthonous groupings (in some years defending the Zairean citizenship of the Banyamulenge; but then again supporting the locals in their efforts to exclude them etc.). And, in this context also, the global worries about “indigenous people” – which for this region meant particular attention of aid organizations to the Ituri “pygmees” – further complicated the issue.<sup>14</sup>

An obvious question is whether all this is new? Of course, all these conundrums have a long history that reaches back far into colonial times and even before.

However, I think it is important to emphasize that, since the end of the Cold War, all sorts of global processes – the “conjuncture” mentioned before – gave new impetus to such tensions. We have to get away from the seductive image that the authoritarianism of the one-party state (and before this, of the colonial state) served as some sort of lid that contained all these tensions, and even more from its implication that, now that democratization (and decentralization) took away this “lid”, all these “traditional” tensions are again boiling over, as was only to be expected. Precisely because this image seems to have some sort of self-evidence, it is all the more important to emphasize that the changing global context – democratization, but also the new style of development politics, the international attention for indigenous peoples, ecological concerns with disappearing bio-diversity and even globalization in its broadest sense (increased circulation of people and images) – created new scope and new modes for this quest for belonging and exclusion.

In an earlier publication Francis Nyamnjoh and I suggested that “autoch-

---

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Jackson, “War Making – Uncertainty, Improvisation and Involution in the Kivu Provinces, DR Congo, 1997-2002”, Ph.D. Thesis, Princeton University, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Compare also the controversial affair of SM’s burial in Kenya, mentioned in note 8 above.

thony” can be seen as a new phase of ethnicity, in some sense even surpassing ethnicity.<sup>15</sup> Of course, we all agree now that ethnicity is highly constructed and situationally circumscribed.<sup>16</sup> Yet there are certain limits to its malleability: after all, an ethnic group needs to have a name and create its own history. Autochthony is a much more empty notion. It states no more than “I was here before you” and, as said, this can be applied in any situation and constantly redefined. Thus it seems to fit much better in a context of globalization – of intensifying global flows, that have as their flip side a constant search for new boundaries and new forms of closure.

Indeed, one of the striking aspects of this language of autochthony is its extreme elasticity. As said before, the same slogans seem to apply in Europe, Africa and really anywhere on this globe. Of course they hide, on closer inspection, very different constellations: xenophobia reflects very different concerns in Belgium or the Netherlands, then on the Cameroonian coast. Yet, the secret of this language’s power seems to be that, notwithstanding such great differences, it always appears to express self-evident or even “natural” emotions and desires: the protection of ancestral heritage, the fear of being contaminated by foreign influences and so on. Clearly very different notions of “ancestors” or “contamination” are at stake here. But the autochthony language sweeps such differences under the carpet and seems to be capable to adapt itself to constantly changing circumstances and re-definitions, superseding these by its appeal to what appears to be “natural” instincts.

It might, therefore, be quite an urgent task for social scientists (and linguists?) to gain a deeper insight into the surprising elasticity of this language – its capacity to come across as self-evident and natural, despite all these adaptations and re-definitions. Or, to put it more directly, our task is to try and de-naturalize this language: to deprive it of some of its cogency by ana-

---

<sup>15</sup> See Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000, o.c.

<sup>16</sup> See for a pioneering text in this respect Wim M.J. van Binsbergen, “From Tribe to Ethnicity in Western Zambia”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 8, 1 (1981): 51-81; see also his *Kazanga: Etniciteit in Afrika tussen Staat en Traditie*, inaugural lecture, Free University, Amsterdam, 1992 –English version with postscript: “The Kazanga festival: Ethnicity as cultural mediation and transformation in central western Zambia”, *African Studies*, 53, 2, 1994, pp 92-125.

lyzing the different concerns it expresses in space and time.

### *Conclusion*

To end on a more practical note: the above might suggest also greater concern for what is left of national citizenship in the young African states. Especially the new emphasis in development policies on by-passing the State, decentralization and support to NGO's seems to have quite worrying consequences on the ground: all the more because of the rigid and simplistic ways in which these new ideas are applied. Africa seems to remain the laboratory for development experts for all sorts of experiments that they would never dream of applying at home. Sometimes one can not help wondering whether all these experiments would have been carried out if the responsible persons would first have tried them out in their own societies.

It is striking that, in the vivid debate on citizenship which is waged now notably in the US and to a lesser degree in Europe, everybody seems to agree that national citizenship remains crucial, despite all the talk about the nation-state as being something of the past.<sup>17</sup> This might be a very good reason to be more careful about promoting processes in Africa and elsewhere in the South that replace national citizenship, that had at least has some sort of formal basis, by all sorts of fuzzy, localist identities that can only trigger endless struggles about belonging and exclusion.

---

<sup>17</sup> Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy, An Introduction*, Oxford U.P. 2002; Etienne Balibar, *Nous citoyens d'Europe? Les frontières, l'État, le peuple*, Paris: La Découverte, 2001; Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism – Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton U.P., 1994.

