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Capitalism and Autochthony:
The Seesaw of Mobility and Belonging

Peter Geschiere and Francis Nyamnjoh

A striking aspect of recent developments in Africa is that democratization seems to trigger a general obsession with autochthony and ethnic citizenship invariably defined against “strangers”—that is, against all those who “do not really belong.” Thus political liberalization leads, somewhat paradoxically, to an intensification of the politics of belonging: fierce debates on who belongs where, violent exclusion of “strangers” (even if this refers to people with the same nationality who have lived for generations in the area), and a general affirmation of roots and origins as the basic criteria of citizenship and belonging.

Such obsessions are all the more striking since historians and anthropologists used to qualify African societies as highly inclusive, marked by an emphasis on “wealth-in-people” (in contrast to Europe’s “wealth-in-things”) and a wide array of institutional mechanisms for including people (adoption, fosterage, the broad range of classificatory kinship terminology). In many African political formations, prior to liberalization there was an important social distinction between autochthons and allochthons, but its implications were strikingly different from today. Often rulers came from allochthon clans who emphasized their origin from elsewhere, yet had privileged access to political positions. Since the late 1980s, in contrast, autochthony has become a powerful slogan to exclude the Other, the allogène, the stranger. Political liberalization seems to have strengthened a decidedly nonliberal tendency towards closure and exclusion (cf. Bayart 1996).

We owe special thanks to three Cameroonian colleagues, Margaret Niger-Thomas, Timothée Tabapssi, and Antoine Socpa, whose Ph.D. dissertations we supervise and whose research touches...
In certain respects, issues of autochthony and their violent impact in politics are a continuation of a much older preoccupation with ethnic differences: at least in some parts of Africa, the increasing currency of slogans about autochtones versus allogènes can be seen as marking a new form of ethnicity. In principle, ethnicity evokes the existence of a more or less clearly defined ethnic group with its own substance and a specific name and history. Precisely because of this specificity, ethnicity is open to debate and even to efforts towards deconstruction by alternative interpretations of history. Notions of autochthony have a similar effect of creating an us-them opposition, but they are less specific. They are equally capable of arousing strong emotions regarding the defense of home and of ancestral lands, but since their substance is not named they are both more elusive and more easily subject to political manipulation. These notions can be applied at any level, from village to region to country. Autochthony seems to go together very well with globalization. It creates a feeling of belonging, yet goes beyond ethnicity’s specificity. Precisely because of its lack of substance it appears to be a tempting and therefore all the more dangerous reaction to seemingly open-ended global flows.

This emphasis on autochthony and belonging in politics is certainly not special to Africa: everywhere in our globalized world the increasing intensity of global flows seems to be accompanied by an affirmation of cultural differences and belonging. Unfortunately, eruptions of communal violence seem to be the flip side of globalization. For instance, there is a striking parallel between, on the one hand, attempts in Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Zambia to disqualify eminent politicians—including Kenneth Kaunda, the father of the Zambian nation —on the grounds of foreign ancestry and, on the other hand, the strenuous efforts of politicians like Jean-Marie Le Pen in France or Jörg Haider in Austria to exclude “strangers” from citizenship (although both politicians run into great difficulties when they have to define who really belongs). In other modern democracies, and in Europe and North America as well, autochthony and roots have become major issues. They always were so in the Caribbean and other “plural societies” that can be considered products par excellence of globalization.

upon many of the issues discussed here. Pascal Perrineau gave valuable advice for the section on Le Pen and his Front National in France. Piet Konings helped us out with his great expertise on the labor history and recent political developments in southwest Cameroon. Moreover, we had the chance to profit from seminal comments by the participants of a CODESRIA conference on Les Géographies de l’autochtonie (organized by Mamadou Diouf and Peter Geschiere, Dakar, June 1999)—notably from Arjun Appadurai, Jean and John Comaroff, Mamadou Diouf, Mitzi Goheen, Achille Mbembe, Peter Pels, and Seteney Shami. Jean-François Bayart has been a true source of inspiration, as always.
How is this upsurge of autochthony in very different parts of our globalized world to be explained? It may be reassuring to explain it away as the last flickering of some sort of traditionalist resistance against modern developments, but it is becoming ever more blatant that these movements are part and parcel of globalization processes as such. As many authors have stressed, the rapidly accelerating flows of people, goods, and images on a truly global scale not only lead to globalization, they trigger equally potent tendencies towards localization.1 *Glo-localization*—to borrow an ugly but evocative shorthand for this ambiguity from Roland Robertson (1992)—seems to be a hotbed for preoccupations of belonging and autochthony. In such a perspective, cosmopolitanism and autochthony are like conjoined twins: a fascination with globalization’s open horizons is accompanied by determined efforts towards boundary-making and closure, expressed in terms of belonging and exclusion (cf. Appadurai 1996).

There is some urgency in trying to gain more insight into such striking “paradoxes of flow and closure” (Meyer and Geschiere 1999), that is, into how globalization goes together with frantic attempts toward closure or how political liberalization in many parts of the world (and certainly in Africa) triggers an obsession with the exclusion of strangers and a highly nonliberal imaginary of autochthons versus allochthons as the basic political opposition. After all, millennial capitalism is marked not only by an accelerated opening of new peripheries for the world market, but even more strongly by frightening explosions of communal violence.2

It is tempting to analyze such paradoxes in terms of the tensions between, on the one hand, the increasing transnational character of capitalism that promotes an ever greater mobility of people, and on the other hand, the tenacity of the nation-state as a model that imposes boundaries and a tendency towards protectionism. Indeed, it is clear that Le Pen’s and Haider’s xenophobia is part of a desperate attempt to gain control over the nation-state, seen as the last defense of its citizens against the threat of globalization. In a somewhat different sense, it is quite striking that in Africa national regimes encourage people’s obsession with belonging. Instead of promoting national citizenship, as implied by the idea of “nation-building” that dominated politics in the 1970s and 1980s, these regimes now seem to be more intent on producing “autochthons.”

1. For a recent overview of the literature see Appadurai 1996 and Meyer and Geschiere 1999; see also Bayart forthcoming, on globalization as “une combinatoire paradoxale de l’exacerbation des particularismes et de la prétention de l’universalité.”

Yet it might be helpful to return globalization to history and to place its (or rather glocalization's) paradoxes in a longer historical perspective. In this respect, the focus of this volume on capitalism—a term that for some time seemed to go out of fashion among social scientists—is very relevant. In a longer time perspective, present-day dialectics of flow and closure in processes of globalization seem to be closely connected with certain contradictions in the unfolding of capitalism. Since the so-called victory of capitalism after the end of the Cold War, increasingly simplistic models of the market, with liberalization as its unequivocal gospel, have become current (but cf. Bayart 1994 and Dilley 1992). For some, this victory is even supposed to bring “the end of history.” All the more important to emphasize in contrast that capitalism (or the market) still reproduces its own contradictions and therefore still produces history. One contradiction is of special importance to our theme of autochthony: Capitalism appears to be about the “freeing” of labor as a necessary condition for creating a mobile mass of wage-laborers; yet in many instances it has also brought with it determined efforts to compartmentalize labor, imposing classifications—ever changing, but all the more powerful—in order to facilitate control over the labor market. Homogenization and exclusion are two sides of one coin in capitalist labor history, and this historical ambiguity seems to be a crucial factor in today’s enigmatic intertwinement of globalization and autochthony.

In this essay we focus on Cameroon, and notably on its Southwest Province, which has recently become a hotbed of confrontations about autochthony and exclusion in direct relation to national politics. The southwest is one of the more economically developed parts of the country. Already in the 1890s the Germans (the first colonizers) created here a large-scale plantation complex on the volcanic slopes of Mount Cameroon, near the coast. Throughout the twentieth century, these plantations attracted laborers from other parts of Cameroon and even from Nigeria. Capitalist agriculture did, therefore, lead to increasing mobility of labor in this region as much as elsewhere. However, to understand why autochthony has become such a fierce political issue in this particular area, it is as important to emphasize that the specific ways in which labor was made available maintained and formalized differences within this labor force that would mark social relations in the region up until the present.

Southwest Cameroon certainly has its specificities, yet there are intriguing (and quite worrying) parallels with developments elsewhere in Africa and in Europe. From a comparative perspective this specific example may help to highlight the problems of a simplistic, but unfortunately prevalent, equation of capitalism with liberalization and homogenizing notions of the individual. Histori-
Cally, capitalist interests were as much involved in promoting the mobility of labor as in formalizing cultural differences within the labor force (and thus freezing the boundaries of what used to be quite fluid communities). The example of southwest Cameroon illustrates this ambivalence particularly well. Closer attention to the seesaw in the evolution of capitalist relations between mobilizing and homogenizing the labor force on the one hand and formalizing difference on the other may help to explain the inherent link between globalization and communalism in its varying trajectories.

Autochthony in Cameroon: The Imaginary and the Law

On 14 February 1997, a train car full of petrol capsized in the centre of Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, spilling petrol onto a city square. This seemed to be a windfall for the many people who crowded the accident scene to fill tanks and bottles with petrol. But when one man was so imprudent as to light a cigarette, there was a huge explosion that killed and wounded dozens of people. The same day radio trottoir (as the grapevine is called in Yaoundé) started to resonate with the rumor that “all victims were autochthons.” According to our informant, this had a simple explanation: Local people had chased les allogènes from the spot of the accident, saying that it was their petrol since it was their city. Consequently there were hardly any strangers left when the accident took place.3 It is striking that radio trottoir considered even a horrible accident like this in terms of autochtones and allogènes.

The background to the increasing currency of these terms is the mounting tension in Yaoundé between the Beti people, who consider themselves locals, and the Bamileke people from western Cameroon, who are considered immigrants.4 This tension is as old as the development of Yaoundé as the capital of the colony.
in the 1920s, when the city began to attract a growing number of people from the populous Grassfields area of western Cameroon. The exact numerical balance between the two groups within the city’s present population is a subject of constant speculation, but the Beti fear that they have become a minority in their own city. Since 1990 this fear has attained new heights under political liberalization, because democratization evokes the spectre of being outvoted by these strangers (many of whom have actually lived in the city for generations, some since 1918). It is in this context that notions like autochtones and allogènes have become so powerful in everyday life.

Indeed, the return of the country to multipartyism in 1990—in the context of the general wave of democratization in Africa and despite the tenacious resistance of President Paul Biya (who remains in power)—made the idea of autochthony a central political issue. Since then there has been a constant proliferation of political parties. The most important parties are Biya’s CPDM; the SDF, with its main support among anglophones and francophones from the west; and the northern-supported UNDP. Democratization rapidly developed into a political stalemate between the CPDM, which remained in power (thanks to large-scale rigging of successive elections), and the SDF, as the main opposition party. More important than this proliferation of parties was the emergence of local and regional elite associations that were often actively supported by the Biya regime. These associations, although purportedly cultural and working for the development of the community, were usually more concerned with weakening the nationwide appeal of opposition parties like the SDF. Thus political liberalization was transformed into an effervescence of a new type of politics of belonging, often explicitly encouraged by the regime (see Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998; Geschiere and Gugler 1998).

This transition received pregnant expression in a series of new laws in the 1990s—not only in the successive electoral laws, but even in the 1996 constitution. A novel aspect of this constitution is that it mentions explicitly—in the preamble and in article 57, 3—the state’s obligation “to protect minorities and pre-

5. CPDM: Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement; SDF: Social Democratic Front; UNDP: Union Nationale pour le Développement et le Progrès. The ethnic map of Cameroon is complicated by a distinction between anglophones and francophones that, especially since 1990, has become one of the major lines of opposition. After the First World War the former German colony was divided between the French and British with the result that cultural differences often fall along regional lines rather than the divide between anglophones and francophones. For instance the Bamileke—the francophone Grassfielders—have much in common culturally with the anglophone Grassfielders. The same is true for much of the anglophone Southwest Province, where people have more cultural similarities with francophones (“Sawa”) of the Littoral Province than with the anglophone northwesterners.
serve the rights of indigenous populations.” Moreover, it requires that the chair-
person of each regional council “shall be an indigene of the Region” while its
“Bureau shall reflect the sociological components of the Region.” There is a glar-
ing contrast here with the preceding constitution (1972), which stated in the Eng-
lish version of its preamble:

The people of Cameroon, proud of its cultural and linguistic diversity . . .
profoundly aware of the imperative need to achieve complete unity,
solemnly declares that it constitutes one and the same Nation, committed
to the same destiny, and affirms its unshakeable determination to construct
the Cameroonian Fatherland on the basis of the ideal of fraternity, justice
and progress. . . . Everyone has the right to settle in any place and to move
about freely. . . . No one shall be harassed because of his origin.

The 1996 constitution replaced this emphasis on the rights of every national
citizen with an emphatic respect for the rights of minorities and indigenes. These
latter terms have a specific discursive background: they are borrowed from the
discourse of the World Bank, which since the 1980s has increasingly stressed the
need to protect “disappearing cultures.” In the World Bank discourse, minorities
and indigenes refer, for instance, to “Pygmees” and other hunter-gatherers, or to
pastoralists. In Cameroon, however, these terms acquire a very different meaning
and political impact (especially as the constitution makes no attempt to define
them).

Striking illustrations are to be found in the successive electoral laws of the
1990s that seem to be intended mainly to protect locals from being outvoted by
strangers. An elaborate set of rules and stipulations determines who may vote
where. For presidential elections, section 8 of Law No. 92/010 (17 September
1992) requires that candidates be “Cameroonian citizens by birth and show proof
of having resided in Cameroon for an uninterrupted period of at least 12 (twelve)
months.” One has to prove six months of continuous residence in a given locality
to qualify to vote there, and to stand for elections in that locality one must be an
indigene or a “long-staying resident” (this latter term is not further specified).
Other requirements, not explicitly formulated in the law, are invoked by the Min-
istry of Territorial Administration (MINAT), which is both player and umpire.6
During the consecutive presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections of
the 1990s, MINAT devised additional preconditions or used other diversionary
tactics for determining who is allowed to stand candidate. The complicated elec-

6. The ruling CPDM party and government have consistently refused to establish an independent
electoral commission.
toral laws provide the government with precious opportunities to manipulate the electoral roll in its favour while making matters extremely difficult for the opposition. For instance, it is common for opposition supporters to be told in the city where they live that they have to vote in their home area (their village of origin), but once there they are informed by the local authorities that they have to vote where they live (in the city). In this way many potential voters never make it to the polling station on election day. At every election the newspapers carry stories about opposition voting lists that have been disqualified by MINAT, either for failure to “reflect the sociological components” of the locality or for including candidates that did not “quite belong” in the area.

The direct political relevance of such legislative tours de force is illustrated by the fact that the 1996 constitution was adopted just before the municipal elections that the SDF opposition was clearly going to win in several key urban constituencies in Douala and even in Yaoundé. In Douala, the main port and the economic capital of Cameroon, the SDF victory led to the creation of a formal movement of all coastal peoples (“Sawa”) who presented themselves as an autochthonous minority that suffered political and economic marginalization by “ungrateful” and “unscrupulous” allogènes from the Grassfields.7 As in Yaoundé, the local people feel threatened by the immigration of the Bamileke (which in this city dates back to the German period). But in Douala, unlike in Yaoundé, it has been clear for decades that the small Douala group is far outnumbered by the Bamileke immigrants. The Sawa movement reacted, therefore, all the fiercer.

The SDF had won the mayoral seat in five Douala districts, and in all but one of these districts its candidate was a Bamileke. Thus the SDF victory triggered large-scale demonstrations in the city. The Sawa demonstrators displayed placards saying “Democracy: Yes. Hegemony: No,” “No Democracy without Protection for Minorities and Indigenes,” and “A Majority Based on Ethnic Votes Is a Sign Not of Democracy but of Expansionism.” They were singing songs in Douala like “This Shall Not Happen in Our Homeland,” “These People Lied to Us,” and “Where Are They Going to Dump Us.”8

7. A “Sawa” is “a man from the sea.” Therefore, the notion of Sawa used to be evoked in order to express the unity of all “sea people.” Indeed, there are close cultural, linguistic, and historical relations between the Batanga, the Douala, and some of the groups on the coast of the Southwest Province. Lately, however, the name Sawa has acquired such a broad meaning—somewhat parallel to the effort to create a larger Beti ethnic bloc—that it is supposed to include also the Bakweri, or even the Banyangi, still further into the interior.

The direct references to the new constitution in the Sawa slogans led to a fiery debate in various newspapers and journals. Sawa and Beti authors, writing for progovernment papers in Yaoundé like *Cameroun Tribune*, *Le Patriote*, and *L’Anecdote*, hailed the new constitution as a necessary step to protect minority groups from the “asphyxiating grip” of “expansionist” and demographically superior migrants such as the Bamileke (see note 8). In contrast, articles by mainly Bamileke and anglophone authors in the antigovernment press branded the constitution as a recipe for national disintegration. Zognong (1997: 124, 127), for instance, emphasized that instead of promoting “national consciousness,” it encouraged ethnic discrimination and therefore a “false consciousness,” substituting an “ethnic citizenship” for the “civic citizenship” defended by the 1972 constitution. He emphasized also that the term *minority* was deliberately ambiguous and therefore open to manipulation. Others (Tatah Mentan 1997; Jua 1997) warned of a trivialization of the notion of minority and blamed the CPDM government for championing politics of divide-and-rule to the detriment of nationhood.

However, the Sawa demonstrations led not only to a public debate, they were also the occasion for the Biya regime to intervene in a manner that graphically illustrated the importance of the issues involved. Invoking the new constitution, the government made it clear that the Sawa and Beti minorities could indeed rely on it for protection against a hegemony of strangers. Soon after the Sawa demonstrations in Douala, President Biya signed a decree appointing indigenes as government delegates in the metropolitan councils where the SDF had won the municipal elections. The installation of these delegates in towns “considered Sawa”—not only coastal cities like Douala or Limbe, but also Kumba in the interior—was the occasion for large Sawa meetings to “congratulate the head of state” for heeding their call to put a check on the hegemony of “non-natives” in their cities (Yenshu 1999). Thus, under the guise of protecting minority interests, the CPDM regime was able to impose its own people at the head of key urban councils, even in constituencies where it had lost the elections.

The message to SDF and other opposition politicians was clear: they stood to gain more by seeking prestige and power within the confines of the home region or village—in elite associations or cultural movements—than by competing with the dominant political party in national politics. The career of Jean-Jacques Ekindi from Douala illustrates this shift from national politics to culturalist movements. In 1991 Ekindi split off from the CPDM to found his own party, the *Mouvement Progressiste*, and in 1992 he even dared to stand candidate for presidency against Biya (of course without success). However, in 1996, after four
years of political anonymity, he enthusiastically accepted the leadership of the Sawa movement in order to make his political comeback, albeit under the CPDM umbrella. Other culturalist movements for the defense of autochthony seem also to offer some sort of second chance to politicians who failed to consolidate their position in national party politics.

The contrast with the recent, abortive political career of the famous Cameroonian author Mongo Beti is striking. In 1997 he decided to stand as SDF candidate for the parliamentary seat of Mbalmayo, his birthplace in the heart of Beti (that is, CPDM) country. In the fifties, Mongo Beti had gained international renown for his novels on life under colonial rule in Cameroon. But after independence he went into exile in France, fearing arrest by the authoritarian regime of Ahmadou Ahidjo, the country’s first president. Nearly thirty years later, after political liberalization, he decided to return. Unfortunately, the scope for opposition still proved to be fairly limited. The idea that a prominent member of the Beti elite would stand candidate for the SDF was deeply shocking to most of the elite people of his own group, and Mongo Beti was subjected to a smear campaign as “traitor of his own people” (Nyamnjoh 1996: 14). As during the Sawa riots, this was the occasion for the government to intervene in a most drastic way: invoking section 17 of the electoral code, it simply declared Mongo Beti’s candidacy invalid since he had gained French nationality during his years in exile. Although many Cameroonians, politicians included, have a second nationality, this was not permitted for a Beti standing candidate against his own “brothers.”

The “cultural associations” are clearly the government’s alternative to opposition parties, but it would be too simple to see their flowering as only a product of manipulations by political elites in their quest for power. The omnipresence of the autochtones-allogènes opposition and the obviousness it has acquired in everyday life indicate that deeper issues are involved. Under democratization, questions like “Who can vote where?” and even more importantly, “Who can stand candidate where?” acquired a pressing urgency and raised vital issues of belonging and citizenship. Cameroonians are acutely aware of what is at stake. The public debate, triggered by the new constitution and the subsequent Sawa demonstration, was joined by a broad scale of Cameroonian intellectuals, including academics and people abroad. At the end of 1996, for instance, Ethnonet/CIREPE—a Cameroonian research bureau that includes academics from various universities—organized a large-scale survey in various regions of the country on issues of autochthony and belonging in politics. The researchers were happy—but apparently also quite surprised—to report that, at least according to the replies to their questions, the majority of Cameroonians did not support the
growing emphasis on the tandem autochtones-allogènes. More than half the respondents said they opposed the use of such notions, and less than a fourth stated that such issues influenced their voting behaviour (Zognong and Mouiche 1997a: 10). However, the authors themselves were clearly somewhat worried that the survey might have elicited normative replies rather than actual political practices. And indeed, the overall trend in the other contributions in the volume they edited indicates how difficult it is to escape from the conceptual tandem of autochtones-allogènes (Zognong and Mouiche 1997b).

Earlier, in May 1996, the Cameroonian journal *La Nouvelle Expression* dedicated an entire issue to the topic of *Minorités, autochtones, allogènes, et démocratie* (*La Nouvelle Expression* 1996). The issue offers a serious and consistent attempt to deconstruct these notions and to highlight their dangerous political implications. An essay by Professor Ngijol Ngijol of Yaoundé University provides a historical analysis of consecutive versions of autochthony and emphasizes the dangers of including such an ambiguous notion in the very constitution of the country. Bertrand Toko shows how difficult it is to apply the notion of autochthony in cities like Douala and Yaoundé that from the very start of their urban development were populated by immigrants. He notes that it is all the more worrying that precisely in these cities people invoke *autochtonie* as a self-evident basis for political and economic claims. Philippe Bissek raises the question as to why so many African regimes recently seem to bet on such primordial political slogans. These critical analyses are further enriched by relevant historical documents. However, the same issue of *La Nouvelle Expression* also contains other perspectives. For instance, in a long interview Roger Gabriel Nlep, another academic from Yaoundé University, discusses his theory of *le village électoral*. To him “integration” is the central issue in Cameroonian politics. According to Nlep, people should be fully integrated in the place where they live, “but this supposes that there is not *un autre chez soi* (another home area).” Therefore, if somebody who is elected in Douala defends the interests of “his” village in another region, this should be qualified as “political malversation” (*La Nouvelle Expression* 1996: 18).

In this interview with *La Nouvelle Expression* Nlep is quite prudent in his discussion of *le village électoral*, but this very concept can be used quite differently. For instance, during the campaign for the municipal elections of 1996 and in subsequent interviews on Cameroonian television, Mola Njoh Litumbe, a politician from the southwest, interpreted the notion of *le village électoral* with more audacity as meaning that urban migrants should go back to their village to vote—an interpretation reinforced by the régime’s manipulations, discussed above, of electoral laws
and voters’ lists. Others use even less prudent slogans in their defense of autochtonie as a valid consideration in politics. For instance, Mono Ndjana (1997), a philosophy professor of the University of Yaoundé who is a very vocal supporter of the Biya regime, reproaches “the” Bamileke for their ethnofascisme and denounces the arguments of his intellectual opponents as a gauchissement du tribalisme (leftist tribalism).

**Land and Funeral as Crucial Issues of Belonging**

Apart from the political issue—Who is to vote where?—two other issues are crucial for defenders of autochtonie: the access to land and, even more, the question of where someone is buried. In the 11 January 1993 *Le Patriote* (Yaoundé) Ava Jean paints a horror picture of Bamileke land hunger:

> The ideologists of western fascism in our country tell us that the Bamileke is a superior being . . . who has the right to settle anywhere in Cameroon . . . . They arrive somewhere, hands outstretched and mouth full of insults, begging for land in the name of national unity. Since it is common knowledge that Ewondo men cherish red wine, discussions take place in the bar nearby. Everything is settled. Then starts the shameful exploitation of Ewondo land. (Our translation)

The burial question is even more emotionally laden. For instance, Samuel Eboua, leader of the Mouvement pour la Démocratie et le Progrès and one of the grand old men of Cameroonian politics (former secretary-general at the president’s office and former lecturer at the Ecole Nationale D’Administration, the prestigious academy for civil servants) explains in an interview with Pascal Blaise that where one is buried is the crucial criterion of where one belongs: “Every Cameroonian is an allogène anywhere else in the country . . . apart from where his ancestors lived and . . . where his mortal remains will be buried. Everybody knows that only under exceptional circumstances will a Cameroonian be buried . . . elsewhere” (*Impact Trib-Une*, 1995, 00:14, our translation).

Indeed, the burial issue illustrates most vividly to what extent these considerations permeate everyday life. In itself this is, again, not a new issue. In the 1970s, when President Ahidjo was still in power, radio trottoir spread the spectacular story of John Nganso, a Bamileke man from Kumba (the main town of the South-

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9. In this context, politicians and authors often use the French distinction between *territoire* (territory, in a general sense) and *terroir* (area of belonging).
west Province, so outside the Bamileke area) who aspired to become a government minister. Nicodemus Awasom (n.d.) summarizes the rumor thus:

John Nganso was born circa 1940 in Kumba in British Cameroon by émigré parents from Dschang in the French Cameroons who had succeeded in escaping from the harshness of French colonial rule. . . . Nganso did his primary education in Kumba and proceeded to Nigeria and the United Kingdom for further studies. On his return to Cameroon, he joined the civil service and after the inauguration of the unitary state, he quickly rose to the rank of a Director in a government ministry, an achievement which was rare, if not impossible for an Anglophone. Nganso had acquired sufficient French and is alleged to have manipulated the ethnic card by identifying with Francophone Bamileke. Since he had the ambitions of rising beyond the rank of a Director, he had to integrate himself in the Bamileke caucus as a full-fledged Bamileke. He had to produce or show what did not exist: his late father’s house and grave in Bamileke country as the supreme symbols of his Bamilekeness. Since his late father’s compound and grave were found in Kumba, he could not convincingly pass for a Bamileke. The exigencies of his ambitions dictated that he had to acquire a compound in a Bamileke country he had never visited all his life and his father’s corpse had to be exhumed and transported for reburial. Nganso had to undergo this ordeal to qualify as a Bamileke and a Francophone and renounce his disadvantaged anglophone identity. Nganso’s action provoked an uproar in Kumba where many Anglophones understood the political motives behind his act. The Ahidjo administration was so embarrassed by such sordid manoeuvres that Nganso was promptly dropped from his post. (12–13)

Nyamnjoh recorded another version of the story, according to which the Bamileke villagers told Nganso: “We do not know you. Show us your father’s grave.” At this, he had no other option than to disinter his father’s body (buried in Kumba) and to bury it again in the ancestral village. The broad circulation of this story shows how convincing it is to people. Indeed, to many Cameroonians burial location is the criterion for belonging. Some Bamileke migrants who fled their home villages during the 1960s civil war and settled in the Southwest Province were said to have left explicit instructions with their children and grandchildren to be properly buried (reburied) in their home villages once the situation had normalised.10

The issue in itself may not be new, but democratization and the renewed
importance of the vote made such considerations all the more urgent in the
1990s. It is also against this background that slogans like le village électoral were
launched. Defenders of autochtonie never tire of repeating that immigrants, no
matter how long they live in the city, still want to be buried in the village of their
ancestors. And this—as the quotation above from Eboua implies—shows where
their basic loyalty is. As became clear with the Sawa movement, the conclusion
in this line of thinking is that only autochtones should be allowed to stand candi-
date for important positions. It is also this logic of belonging that the government
invokes to justify its endless manipulations of electoral lists. There is, indeed, a
certain plausibility to the political logic of autochtonie, in view of the frequency
with which urban migrants—even if they live for generations in the city, own
land there, and build up their whole lives there—continue to bury their deceased
in the village. Under political liberalization such double commitments become all
the more problematic.11 Yet it is also clear that in practice notions of autochtonie
lead to disturbing forms of exclusion.

The much discussed Association of the Elites of the Eleventh Province,
founded in the Southwest Province, is a good example of how notions like
autochtonie or ethnic citizenship completely erode the ideal of national citizen-
ship that had been central to former President Ahidjo’s project of nation building
in the 1960s and 1970s. As demonstrated above, issues of autochthony have been
prominent in the Southwest Province, where the influx of plantation laborers
since the 1890s has made the local population feel outnumbered and threatened.
No wonder that democratization and the renewed importance of belonging in
politics led to particularly fierce tensions in this area. It is in this context that the
Association of the Elites of the Eleventh Province emerged. Already, the name is
quite challenging, not to say enigmatic, since everybody knows that Cameroon
has only ten provinces. Beltus I. Bejanga, the association’s founding president,
who teaches at the University of Yaoundé in the Central Province but considers
himself an indigene of Kumba in the Southwest Province, explains the name in an
interview with the Herald (Buea) (16 April 1997):

The members of this association . . . are the children or grandchildren of
our forefathers who came over from the former French Cameroon to the
then Southern Cameroon (British). . . . These children or the grandchil-

11. Cf. Geschiere and Gugler 1998, especially the introduction, on how the continuing impor-
tance of the village of origin for urban elites has led to a renewed vigour in many parts of Africa of
“the politics of primary patriotism.”
dren of these migrants had their education, training and everything in the British Cameroons and therefore they are members of what we call the Eleventh Province Association.

Asked why he chooses to call himself a member of this association instead of “identifying with where he was born,” Bejanga continues with some heat:

Exactly. We thought we belonged to where we were born—until recently SWELA [the South West Elites Association] was formed. In one of their meetings some of us attended but were driven out and called strangers who have no right to take part in the meeting. So we concluded that we didn’t belong to English-speaking Cameroon, nor are we accepted in French-speaking Cameroon. . . . We want to draw the attention of the government to tell them that we are here, we are Cameroonians but have no statehood. The government should decide what to do with us.

Bejanga continues, emphasizing that “someone’s home should be where you are born, where you went to school, where you live, where you have all your property.”12 But the Herald journalist quotes another elite from Kumba—probably a member of SWELA—who proposes to “refer to somebody’s home as the place where he is buried when he dies.” At this Bejanga gets really excited, apparently because he foresees that this criterion will make him a stranger in the area he considers to be his own:

Will I claim my home when I am dead and buried? I think my home should not be where I will be buried, because I could die in the sea and my corpse never seen. . . . The government should step in and stop people from calling others “settlers” or “strangers.” It is sometimes provocative. The government should say no to this.

This example vividly shows how vital an issue the place of burial has become. It shows also how the crucial role that regional and local elite associations came to play under political liberalization—a role that may affect political developments more than the proliferation of political parties—inevitably raises issues of autochthony and belonging. Encouraged by the government, SWELA became a major factor in regional politics, but one of the first things it did was to exclude so-called strangers like Bejanga—who until then considered himself a full-blown indigene of Kumba. Especially striking in the quotations above, therefore, is Bejanga’s appeal to the government to set things right. This appeal can only be

12. Interestingly, Bejanga does not refer here to the place where one works, since this would make him instead someone who belongs in Yaoundé.
ironic since Bejanga will know very well that the government is actively encouraging autochthony movements in the Southwest, if only to create a breach in the anglophone opposition. Indeed, with their ideology of autochthony, these elite associations are ideal remedies for the former one-party regime to contain the effects of multipartyism and remain in power (see also Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997).

Parallels in Africa

This link between national regimes, autochthony, and elite associations seems to be a recurrent pattern in many African countries since the beginning of political liberalization. A recent issue of *Africa Today* (1998) on *Rethinking Citizenship in Africa* shows that in present-day Africa the theme of citizenship seems to inevitably raise issues of autochthony, minorities, and belonging. Bruce Heilman (*Africa Today* 1998: 371) notes that in Kenya, violence perpetrated by Kalenjin and Masai as they defend “their” Rift Valley against “outsiders” like the Kikuyu and the Luo threatens to develop into true “ethnic cleansing” that is condoned by the national government. For Guinea-Conakry, Robert Groelsema (*Africa Today* 1998: 413) emphasizes that the strong involvement of urbanized Guineans in hometown organizations creates problems for democratization. The emphasis on belonging and autochthony seems to be less divisive in countries where politicians succeed in depicting the whole nation as one unprivileged group vis-à-vis outsiders, as the articles in the same volume by Christopher Gray on Gabon or by Heilman on Tanzania suggest. This issue of *Africa Today* shows that although the question of autochthony is much older, it is especially since political liberalization in the late 1980s that issues of autochthony and belonging have penetrated into the very heart of national politics.

A striking example from Kenya is the famous—or notorious?—court case concerning SM’s burial, discussed in the well-known book by D. W. Cohen and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo (1992). Upon the death of SM, an eminent Nairobi lawyer from the Luo clan, the question of where he should be buried became a fiercely contested issue between the elders of his Luo clan and his widow, who was a Gikuyu. While his widow insisted on burying him in Nairobi, the Luo elders claimed that whatever his position in Nairobi and no matter how “modern” a figure he had been, SM was a Luo and therefore must be buried in the village. Interestingly, Oginga Odinga, the grand old man of Luo politics, sided with
the Gikuyu widow and declared that this emphasis on burying at home was new. According to him, the Luo used to bury their dead in the area where they had migrated in order to confirm new claims. Even more striking was that the national court of appeal reversed the lower court verdict and ruled in favor of the Luo elders. According to Cohen and Odhiambo, it was clear that the appeal court’s decision was heavily influenced by a direct intervention by President Arap Moi himself. The Kenyan example shows again that authoritarian regimes often opt for supporting newfangled versions of autochthony as an effective means to contain the effects of multipartyism through subtle or not-so-subtle divide-and-rule tactics.

Of even more urgency is Mahmood Mamdani’s (1998) recent study of the struggle of belonging in Kivou (East Congo) that has lately led to an unprecedented degree of violence. By reconstructing the genealogy of the enigmatic Banyamulenge (who in the 1990s quite abruptly emerged as a major ethnic force in this area) and their changing role in the closely intertwined developments in Kivou and neighbouring Rwanda, Mamdani analyzes both the long history of these tensions and the reasons they became explosive during the last decade. In this case, the Rwandan genocide and the subsequent movement of refugees acted as a catalyst. But this was further exacerbated by the opportunistic and fickle ways in which President Mobutu Sese Seko intervened in the conflict—especially after incipient political liberalization forced him to look for new points of support. Here again, the interaction between national politics and ideologies of autochthony constituted a leitmotiv in recent developments.

**European Versions of Autochthony**

Parallel discourses on autochthony are certainly not limited to the African continent. It is striking, for instance, how much certain patterns in African discourses on autochthony bring to mind the arguments of the New Right in Europe and its urgent summons to defend “ancestral lands” against threatening hordes of immigrants. Of the New Right prophets, one of the most vociferous and until recently most successful was Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the *Front National* (FN) in France (since the 1970s regularly 10 percent and more of the vote in various elections and the majority vote in four municipalities in the southeast). The recent (December 1998–January 1999) split in his party may constitute a serious setback to his success. Nevertheless, because of his ideological fervor
and also since relatively much has been written about him and the FN, Le Pen offers a convenient point of comparison with autochthony movements in Africa. Precisely because there is an intricate mixture of differences and parallels, a comparison of the Le Penian discourse with that of the defenders of autoctonie in Cameroon might help to illuminate why such ideas seem to be so widespread and so appealing in the present configuration of our globalizing world.

A minor difference is that Le Pen consistently avoids—apparently because of possible problems with the law—terms like étranger and autochtone; yet the terms he uses instead (immigré and Français) have the same implications. Another difference is the emphasis in the French discourse on race and notably on colour. Central to the FN’s ideology is the fear of “wild immigration” and, since this refers notably to the threatening influx of Arabs and Blacks, colour difference becomes a central obsession: The main danger is “a change in the nation’s colour” (Taguieff 1985: 170). The emphasis on biological difference encourages the use of seductive biological metaphors: Le Penians like to describe the nation as an organism, for this enables them to argue that as with any “healthy organism” it is only “natural” for the nation to defend itself against an invading illness (Taguieff 1996: 191). Such biological metaphors give the FN ideology a particularly slanderous tenor, for instance when old colonial stereotypes about natives spreading contagious illnesses are raised: “[These immigrants] bring all sorts of illnesses with them into France . . . that constitute a heavy load on the French economic equilibrium . . . but endanger also the health situation of broad strata of the French population” (quoted in Taguieff 1985: 171; our translation of these and subsequent quotations from Taguieff).

In the Cameroonian version of autoctonie such biological connotations are largely absent, since there neither colour nor other racial traits can serve as clear marks of distinction. Yet there is a similar emphasis on innate characteristics (for instance, the “greedy” Bamileke). At least as effective as the Le Penian emphasis on race in confirming the dangers of mixing with the Other are persistent rumors about different witchcraft propensities—for instance, that the Bamileke become

13. For an overview of the literature on the FN, see Mayer and Perrineau 1996. It is important to underline that Le Pen and his successes are certainly not exceptional in Europe. In 1999, Haider in Austria became the most successful New Right leader in Europe as far as percentage of the vote is concerned. Filip Dewinter in Belgium—whom journalists often describe (with some apparent surprise) as making a very civilized impression, “the perfect son-in-law”—has had similar electoral success in Antwerp. The most powerful New Right slogan comes from the arsenal of German-speaking ideologists who (especially in Switzerland) like to refer to the danger of Ueberfremdung (overstrangering).
rich only through their nefarious famla, while the Beti are forced to hand out the state’s riches because of the jealous evu of their relatives.14

The biological emphasis in the discourse of Le Pen and his followers corresponds to a true phobia of métissage (mixing) in whatever form. This leads to urgent appeals to “purify” the nation in order to retrieve its “stolen identity” (identité ravie) (Lagrange and Perrineau 1996: 231). As Taguieff summarizes it, the “purification of the national body” demands a cleaning operation since “clean France is supposed to be defiled by the presence of elements that are heterogeneous to its specific essence” (Taguieff 1985: 179, 188; see also Taguieff 1996: 180). Such metaphors of cleanliness and defilement inspire an ecological discourse—somewhat surprising in view of the FN’s brutal policies in the few communes where it has the majority—on the “beauty of France” that is threatened by défiguration (Taguieff 1985: 186–87). Although less explicit, there is an emphasis on purification in Cameroonian discourses as well. Persistent rumors accuse the Bamileke of making Yaoundé a dirty city with their organic refuse, but the latter are quick to put the blame on Emah Basile, the Beti government delegate. And Le Pen’s celebration of the fields and forests of France, menaced by defilement (Taguieff 1996: 184), is reminiscent of Ava Jean’s horror about how the Beti of Yaoundé, out of love for red wine, fritter away their ancestral lands to Bamileke strangers.

It is striking that important practical differences do not manifest themselves in the ideological discourse. In Cameroon, the main struggle is over the access of strangers to land. But in France the most direct source of tension is rather the idea that an increasing number of French people face unemployment because foreigners usurp the jobs. However, in the ideology in France as much as in Cameroon it is the notion of ancestral land that is of overriding importance. Indeed, despite these and many other practical differences that are no doubt of consequence, the similarities at the ideological level are striking. There is in both cases a strong emphasis on the “naturalness” of the autochthons’ claims, backed up by what Taguieff (1985: 198) calls “the celebration of the natural community.” Le Pen’s urgent summons could be repeated by the Cameroonian autochthony advocates: “We have to act . . . and occupy our vital space, since nature abhors emptiness and if we do not occupy it, others will do so in our place. . . . All living

beings are assigned vital areas by nature, in conformity with their dispositions and their affinities. It is the same for man and peoples” (Taguieff 1996: 186).

Such considerations are said to make the défense identitaire (defense of one's identity) not only perfectly legitimate but also urgent, and this then justifies the highly militant tone of the autochthony advocates both in Cameroon and in France. The FN journal Le Militant constantly repeats that time is pressing, since the French will soon be “minorities on the land of our forefathers. . . . tomorrow it will be too late, tomorrow there will be no more French nation” (Taguieff 1985: 172). It is as if one is hearing the Sawa demonstrators shout their slogans in the streets of Douala.

Another common and crucial tendency is what Taguieff (1985: 181, 198) calls la déréalisation (the negation) of the individual by a fétichisation of belonging and origins: “The exaltation of the organic community imprisons . . . the individual . . . in the circle of its original belonging.” Different patterns are possible here. In the Cameroonian theory of le village électoral, the emphasis on belonging is an attempt to exile nonautochthonous politicians from the city to their village and to remind them that they should strive to satisfy their ambitions there, in their own environment. In Le Pen's ideology the emphasis is rather on reminding the French that they are traitors if they do not respect their “belonging.” However, we shall see below that, in practice, there are quite surprising links between these seemingly opposite poles.

**Autochthony, Globalization, and the Paradoxes of Capitalist Labor History**

The major reason why this comparison with the Front National in France is interesting is that the upsurge of autochtonie in Cameroon (and in Africa in general) and Le Pen's success in France occurred at roughly the same moment in time. In France, as in other European countries, the spectacular electoral successes of the New Right in the 1980s came as a surprise. Even in the 1970s, few people had foreseen that these slogans would attract so much support. In Cameroon, it is only since the end of the 1980s that autochtonie became the overriding issue in national politics. What does it mean that parallel discourses emerge at roughly the same time and with such surprising force in highly different settings of our globalizing world?

One tempting explanation for this simultaneity might be that such movements are a protest against accelerated globalization and the increased mobility of people it brings about. Indeed, proponents of these movements see immigration as a mortal threat to the corps national (Le Pen) and the safeguarding of the “ance-
The influx of migrants evokes in both cases the spectre of miscegenation and outside domination. Therefore complete closure of the borders—whether of the nation-state or the local community—is seen as an urgent necessity.

However, at closer inspection, the refusal of globalization by these movements is only partial. The Sawa movement or the Beti defense of the rights of the originaires (natives) are certainly not antimodern or antiglobal as such. On the contrary, the Sawa and Beti hatred of the “greedy” immigrants is strengthened by the idea that the immigrants profit more than the autochthons from new and highly coveted economic opportunities. Like these Cameroonian movements, Le Pen’s FN is very eager to use modern mass media to its advantage. Clearly these movements should be seen as part and parcel of globalization processes. They are the inevitable outcome of the ambivalence evoked by globalization’s open-ended horizons that are both fascinating and frightening—or, as it was formulated above, the dialectics of flow and closure.

The case of southwest Cameroon is of special interest here because its tortuous labor history can help to place globalization’s contradictions in a longer historical perspective. In this region it is particularly clear that present-day tensions between autochthons and strangers—the “kam-no-go” (came-no-go) referred to in the opposition newspaper cartoon on this page—are directly related to the drastic ways in which, from the beginning of this century, capitalist interests tried to solve
the pressing need for labor on the large plantations along the coast.\textsuperscript{15} It became equally clear in this area that the imposition of capitalist labor relations required not only the freeing of labor that is always seen as necessary for capitalist development but at the same time its containment and compartmentalization. This tension between freeing and containing labor—between mobility and closure—seems to mark capitalist history elsewhere as well. With capitalism's supposedly definitive victory, there is no attention to such tensions in the neoliberal gospel that now seems to have attained such stifling self-evidence. Yet this seesaw of mobility and fixing has been crucial in setting the stage for the emergence of autochthony movements and communal violence in recent times.

In this respect, a crucial moment in the history of southwest Cameroon was the transition from German to British rule during the First World War.\textsuperscript{16} Already in 1914, at the very beginning of this war, the British succeeded in conquering the extensive German plantations on the slopes of Mount Cameroon. Their reactions were somewhat mixed. On the one hand they were clearly impressed by the whole complex, its infrastructure, and the concomitant provisions for the settlers. But soon they began to fear that this was something of a poisoned gift: for the next few years, the question of how to mobilize all the laborers needed for the maintenance of these huge plantations became an overriding problem. \textit{Die Arbeiterfrage} (the labor problem) had been a central issue also in the German colony, leading to fierce clashes between the government and planters.\textsuperscript{17} However, to the Germans the solution was self-evident: Coercion was the only way to solve \textit{die Arbeiterfrage}. There may have been constant debates about which forms of forced labor were the most opportune and about the extent to which the planters themselves should be allowed to apply force, but coercion was to be a fixed principle in the German version of “freeing labor.”

To the first British officials on the spot after conquest, it was equally self-evident that forced labor was against the very principles of British colonial policy. To them it was clearly unthinkable that the brutal and coercive German labor policies would be continued under British rule. However, this gave urgency to the question of how else sufficient labor could be mobilized. Several officials referred

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Note, in regard to the opposition cartoon, that in reality President Biya does not refer to northwesterners as “authoctones.” The cartoon seems to imply that he has given birth to an obsession with belonging that now haunts him and that he does not appear to have devised a convincing strategy for dealing with these contradictions.
\item \textsuperscript{16} On the labor history of southwest Cameroon in general, see Konings 1993 and 1995; Epale 1985. On changing labor policies during the transition from German to British rule, see Geschiere n.d.
\item \textsuperscript{17} For an overview of the literature on German Cameroon and the labor question, see Geschiere 1982; see also Wirz 1972.
\end{itemize}
to the Gold Coast example of cash-crop production by local peasants as the obvious alternative: this implied that the plantations had to be divided into small holdings “to be leased to the natives of the country.” However, in 1917 they were in for a surprise when Sir F. D. Lugard, then governor of Nigeria, intervened. To him, there was clearly no question of dividing the valuable German plantation complex (which was, indeed, unique in West Africa). Moreover, he apparently felt that the district officers (DO’s) were too sensitive in their objections to forced labor. Lugard’s careful formulations are a masterpiece of keeping up appearances (the British cannot condone forced labor) and being practical (the German plantations have to be maintained at all costs): He felt that “we want to get to British methods, but to relax suddenly would be apt to encourage the natives in their naturally lazy ways.” Furthermore, rather than a sudden policy switch, “the transition stage from being forced to go in and their going voluntarily must take some time,” and to abruptly relax “iron discipline” might lead to chaos (BNA, Qd(a), Lugard, 11 October 1917). Accordingly, in the next few years the Resident in Buea ordered the various DO’s to deliver their contingent of laborers by whatever form of pressure they saw fit. The DO’s were apparently appalled, as evidenced by Bamenda DO George Podevin’s request for the Resident to send him the full text of Lugard’s comments, not only the excerpt “as it is somewhat difficult to understand his Honour’s observations without these references.” But the Resident refuses this, using strong language to exhort this DO to finally take the recruiting of labor in his district seriously: “If you still persist in this passive resistance, it may be found necessary to remove you from Bamenda.” Apparently, even to the British, the desire to maintain the impressive plantation complex had priority over the official preference for the “peasant option.”

18. See, for instance, Bue National Archives (henceforth BNA), CF 1913, report Stobart, April/May 1916, under “Plantations.”

19. BNA, Qd/a 1916, letters by DO Bamenda (Podevin) to Resident in Buea (Young), 22 August 1917; and Resident Buea to DO Bamenda, 22 September 1917; Qe, 1917, 2, letter by Resident in Buea to DO in Bamenda 1 November 1917. Podevin was certainly not alone in his resistance against the new policy. In his 1918 annual report, Rutherford, then DO in Victoria, still sharply protested the new policy of forced recruitment (BNA, CF 1918, 31 December 1918).

20. Cf. Clarence-Smith 1993 and Philips 1989 on British problems with the “peasant option.” The southern Cameroonian example suggests that if there seemed to be a more profitable alternative, even people like Lugard and Sir Hugh Clifford, his successor in Nigeria (both quoted by Philips as great defenders of the peasant option—but see below) did not hesitate to go against the peasant option. Cf. also Fred Cooper’s critique (1981: 31 and 59 n. 36) of Wallerstein for suggesting, in line with his world systems theory approach, that to the colonial state in Africa, the peasant option was “the path of least resistance.”
However, from 1920 on, the DO’s in their annual reports announced triumphantly that labor was coming forth now “voluntarily” and that the controversial German recruiting methods no longer had to be followed. Did this mean that Lugard’s prediction had been right and that the freeing of labor required coercion only during a short transitional period? It seems that more hidden forms of force did play a crucial role in this surprisingly rapid British solution to the labor problem. In the intervening years, the British system of “indirect rule” had been installed also in the populous Grassfields (the present-day Northwest Province). In their new role the customary chiefs were made to mediate in the recruitment of labor, sending their contingents of “voluntary” laborers down to the coast. Even more important, at least initially, was the influx of laborers from the French part of Cameroon who were fleeing the wide array of forced labor imposed by the French. Thus pressures by customary chiefs and the French labor policies (notorious for their harshness throughout the interbellum period) made the transition to voluntary labor possible in the British area. However, this “solution” involved precisely the groups that are now at the heart of the autochthony issue in the Southwest. Members of the Association of the Elites of the Eleventh Province, mentioned above, are the children and grandchildren of the refugee laborers from the French part of Cameroon who were never allowed to forget their external origin and now feel in danger of losing their citizenship because of the new politics of belonging triggered by political liberalization. And descendants of the immigrants from the Grassfields, sent by their chiefs to labor on the plantations, are the present-day “came-no-go” who are told to vote at home and not in the area where they live.

In southwest Cameroon, as elsewhere, the freeing of labor was a spasmodic process that was triggered by a complex interplay of mobilizing labor (largely through coercion) and compartmentalizing it (through preexisting labor controls). In his path-breaking studies of labor relations on the plantations in southwest Cameroon, Piet Konings (1993, 1995) emphasizes the “high visibility of ethnic heterogeneity” on the plantations. It is clear that the continuing role of particularistic networks in the recruitment of laborers played an important role in consolidating the divisions that have become so explosive in this area during the democratization process.

21. Cf. in general Pierre-Philippe Rey’s version of the “articulation of modes of production.” In his view, the ongoing role of “pre-capitalist relations of exploitation” is everywhere crucial in forcing labor into capitalist relations of production (Rey 1973; see also Geschiere 1985).

22. Cf. also the early and seminal study by Ardener, Ardener, and Warmington 1960.
Indeed, this pattern has many parallels elsewhere in Africa. Throughout the continent, capitalist agencies tried to make “traditional authorities” play a role in the recruitment and control of laborers, often in an even more manifest way. As Konings emphasizes in a more general article, “Two major prerequisites for capitalist development are (i) the procurement of a regular and adequate supply of labour and (ii) the establishment of managerial control over the labour process. . . . Chieftaincy in Africa has played a significant mediating role between capital and labour in the realization of capitalist objectives” (Konings 1996: 329). A. L. Epstein (1958), for instance, describes how for each ethnic group in the copper mines in Zambia, management imposed a separate system of “tribal elders” on the workers. Jeff Crisp (1984) and Carola Lentz and Veit Erlmann (1989) emphasize similarly the crucial role allotted to chiefs in the Ghanaian gold mines. In both cases, the efficacy of such impositions was limited, since laborers increasingly preferred to identify as “workers” instead of “tribesmen.” Yet it is clear that management’s reliance on “traditional authorities” (in reality often neotraditional authorities) for controlling both the recruitment and the performance of the workers served to formalize and consolidate divisions within the labor force.

Konings (1996: 329) suggests that this pattern is especially characteristic of “areas where the capitalist mode of production has not yet deeply penetrated and . . . rural producers are still strongly rooted in non-capitalist forms of organization and value systems.” Yet, in a more general perspective, such reliance on “traditional” demarcations might be reinforced by parallel efforts toward a compartmentalization of the labor force in order to facilitate control. For Europe as well, the long history of the freeing of labor seems to have been marked by a broad array of measures to classify the amorphous mass of potential labor, whether on the basis of its provenance or by dividing the work force through formal ranking. And throughout modern history, the paradox of both opening up and containing new labor reserves has been a crucial strand in capitalist policies all over the world. This is exactly the pattern that Le Pen evokes as some sort of spectre. Indeed, there have been clear advantages in capitalist development, at least during certain periods, to tapping a reserve of cheap labor from outside the national borders and at the same time setting the outside laborers apart in order to play them off against the local workers. Similarly, there is a clear link in southwest Cameroon between the British solution

23. In contrast, for the Dagara laborers (from northern Ghana) in the southern gold mines, Lentz and Erlmann (1989) emphasize a continuing multiple identity as both worker and tribesmen.
to the labor problem on the plantations in the 1920s and the upsurge of auto-
chthony as a particularly hot issue in this province more recently. The paradox
that the “freeing” of labor as a crucial moment in capitalist development is
intrinsically linked to the compartmentalization of the labor force provides the
historical background to the spectacular re-creation of parochial identities
today.

Conclusion: Autochthony and Millennial Capitalism

Why are autochthony and similar notions so appealing in the present-day constel-
lation of our globalized world? The above has shown that autochthony can best be
studied as a trope without a substance of its own. It can be used for defining the
Self against the Other on all sorts of levels and in all sorts of ways. Autochthony
discourses tend to be so supple that they can even accommodate a switch from one
Other to another. For the Bakweri of southwest Cameroon, for instance, the Other
in the 1980s was primarily the francophones from eastern Cameroon, but in the
1990s it became (again) the Grassfielders of the Northwest Province. Yet this
change could be accommodated within the same discourse. This suppleness may
make such discourses better geared to the rapidly accelerating flows of peoples
and images—and to the concomitant efforts towards closure—than more solid
ethnicity discourses. If globalization is to be understood in terms of a continuing
“dialectic of flow and closure,” notions of autochthony, with their paradoxical
combination of staggering plasticity and celebration of seemingly self-evident
“natural givens,” become an almost inevitable outcome of such dialectical ten-
sions.24 Their very plasticity makes them geared to rapidly changing situations in
which, indeed, even the Other is constantly becoming another.25

However, in this respect as well, globalization needs to be historicized. An
obvious way to do this is to relate the kaleidoscopic metamorphosis of contem-
porary autochthony movements to longer-term contradictions in capitalist labor
history. One of the dangers of the shallow models of capitalism that are increas-
ingly current since the end of the Cold War is precisely that they can only inter-
pret autochthony movements as tenacious forms of traditionalist resistance

24. Cf. Bayart forthcoming on “l’illusion identitaire qui s’est refermée comme une piège sur
l’histoire du monde au XIXème siècle . . . avec la conception ethnonationaliste de la cité.”
25. Cf. a recent paper by the Comaroffs (forthcoming) on the “zombification” of new immigrant
laborers in South Africa. The interest of this case is that this zombification is clearly linked to the
quite abrupt opening of South Africa’s borders.
against modern developments. This may lead to a highly dangerous underestimation of the force of such movements.

The examples above have indicated the continuing relevance of the inherent contradictions in the development of capitalism to present-day issues. The paradoxes of capitalist labor history—the intrinsic relationship between the freeing of labor and countervailing tendencies towards its compartmentalization—set the stage for today’s autochthony movements (and the concomitant threats of communal violence). This emphasis on inherent contradictions continues to be relevant for capitalism at the turn of the millennium as much as in earlier phases. Jean and John Comaroff (1999) convincingly show that such contradictions—for instance, between the heightened visibility of the capitalist consumer paradise and the more and more definitive exclusion of ever larger groups from it—become increasingly blatant. The same applies to the contradiction between the increasing mobility of people and more forceful forms of exclusion. Such a view of millennial capitalism as rife with contradictions (even if these are differently expressed from the Marxian ones) can help to historicize debates on globalization. Today’s autochthony movements are more than simply a kaleidoscopic outcome of a play of flow and closure. In a longer time perspective they are intrinsically related to the contradictions of labor history in earlier phases of capitalism.


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