The Perils of Belonging

Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe

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One of my most inspiring commentators suggested that this book should have the title *For the Migrant*.¹ He certainly had good reasons. This book is about the surprising obsession in our globalizing world with belonging—notably in its most localizing variant, “autochthony.” Therefore it is also about the migrant as the antipode of all this belonging. However, in my case that title would risk being presumptuous. I was born less than three miles from where I came to live thirty-five years ago now. So I can hardly claim to be a migrant. I may have traveled a lot, but so far I have always come back to where I seem to belong. Dedicating this book to the migrant might therefore be a bit out of place for me; belonging seems to be more my style.

Still, it is the aim of this book to show that migration is part and parcel of the order of things—anywhere, both in time and in space. Working in Africa, but also as a citizen of the Netherlands, I have become increasingly intrigued—not to say shocked—by how easily, over the last few decades, migration has been depicted as something exceptional, outside the normal order. In Cameroon, for instance, Beti and Bulu people now proudly proclaim to be *autochtones*—“born from the soil”—of the forest area in the south of the country. Yet the same Beti/Bulu may clinch arguments over to whom the forest “really” belongs with the simple statement “La forêt est à nous puisqu’on l’a conquise” (the forest is ours because we conquered it), referring to their epic immigration from the savannah southward into
the forest 150 to 200 years ago. These past migrations seem to be forgotten whenever they position themselves in contrast to others, mainly Bamileke from the west of the country, who came later and can therefore be branded as *allogènes* or “strangers.” The Dutch used to be proud of their country as the place where people from all over contributed to a Golden Age. Among many of my friends, genealogy has become a favorite pastime, leading often to the proud discovery of some Huguenot ancestor who entered the country fleeing French “Papists” in the seventeenth century. Despite these roots, today many Dutch identify themselves as *autochtonen*—though they seem to be at a loss to give more substance to this notion that, here again, may appear to be self-evident but in practice is always highly elusive and slippery.

Such intriguing shifts made me decide to pursue the notion of autochthony and its appeal in very different corners of the world. Its strength is apparently its self-evident, naturalizing appearance: being rooted in the soil would seem to be the most primordial kind of belonging. Yet tracing it turned out to be an adventurous journey, not only because such diverse thinkers as Heidegger, Lévi-Strauss, and Derrida were at some time inspired by it but also because it crops up at the most unexpected moments in time and space. Its history goes back as far as classical Athens of the fifth century BC. In many respects this classical locus already expressed, in a most condensed form, all the paradoxes and ambiguities that beset this notion, in all its variable manifestations, up until today.

Clearly, claims to “belong” and therefore to have special rights to resources, both locally and at national and global levels, are not new. But it might be worthwhile to explore why they have emerged with such force in highly different parts of the globe at precisely this moment. Even more challenging might be to try to understand autochthony’s vanishing quality, which may be its most intriguing aspect: self-evident and primordial as a claim to autochthony may seem, in practice it rapidly dissolves into basic uncertainties as soon as it must materialize. The main aim of this book is, therefore, to show that it pays to give autochthony—and belonging in general—back to history.

* * *

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Autochthony—the Flip Side of Globalization?

This book addresses the “return of the local” in a world that believes it is globalizing. The New World Order so proudly announced by George H. W. Bush in 1989 upon the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the cold war seemed to evoke a world of free-floating cosmopolitans. Yet since then, cosmopolitanism and globalization have followed quite surprising trajectories. The world in which the earlier Bush’s son plays such a central role is marked by entrenched forms of communalism, celebrating difference and exclusion, both in the North and in the South. Rather surprisingly, the trend toward a growing cosmopolitanism has been overshadowed by what Tania Murray Li (2000) aptly calls “a global conjuncture of belonging.” \(^1\) Religion plays a front-stage role in this quest for belonging. But in many contexts there seems to be also an inherent link between globalization and a return of the local in unexpected forms and with equally unexpected force. This “local” is of course deeply marked by ever intensifying processes of globalization, summarized well by Roland Robertson (1992) in his notion of “glocalization”—maybe a less elegant term, but then this return of the local often takes less elegant forms.

This book tries to address the return of the local not only as some sort of screen for ongoing globalization—although it is true that even the harshest forms of localist thinking often turn out to express struggles to gain or retain access to the global. My purpose is rather to take localist thinking seriously and try to trace its complex implications, often hidden
behind apparent self-evidence, by following its different expressions. I focus on a particularly pregnant expression of the local: the idea of autochthony—"to be born from the soil"—and its highly variable manifestations which proved to have such mobilizing force in very different corners of our globe. To Anglophone readers this notion may appear somewhat exotic and even quaint. It does figure in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but it is certainly not a familiar term. Yet there are two reasons why it is of special importance. First of all, it seems to represent the most authentic form of belonging: "born from the earth itself"—how could one belong more? This means that the notion not only condenses the essence of the idea of belonging but also highlights in a particularly pregnant form its inherent ambiguities. A second reason to study it is its impressively wide but fragmented spread: it turns up at highly different moments and places, without a clear link, yet assuming everywhere the same aura of self-evidence.

**A Primordial yet Global Form of Belonging?**

The claim to be autochthonous is certainly not the only kind of belonging that people tend to stress in the present-day context of globalization. As noted, religious belonging has become, also quite surprisingly, at least as important in our modern world. Yet, certainly to its protagonists, autochthony—the special link with the soil—seems to have some sort of primordial quality. In a seminal article, Jean and John Comaroff, following up on the botanical connotations the term *autochthonous* seems to have in English (see note 3 above), emphasized its "naturalizing capacity," which makes it "the most 'authentic,' the most essential of all modes of connection" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:658–59). Precisely its natural appearance, with the soil as a powerful referent, turns the claim of autochthony into a kind of *ur*-belonging. All the more reason to emphasize that underneath this self-evidence it hides basic inconsistencies that seem to beset most other claims to belonging as well—ambiguities that acquire particular impact in this most essentialist claim to belong.

Autochthony's global spread, noted above, is equally remarkable. Precisely because the upsurge of this notion seems to be linked to specific local factors, it is all the more important to emphasize that lately it has become a truly global phenomenon—even though autochthony explosions in different parts of the world do not seem to be related. For some time
the notion was especially associated with Francophone Africa, as various countries there became the scene of violent struggles between self-styled "autochthons" and strangers (often citizen of the same nation-state). The brutal exclusion in Ivory Coast of *allogènes* (or *allochtons*) —the "Other" for the self-defined autochthon—splitting the nation in two and leading to the economic implosion of this once so successful country, became world news. A particularly blatant example of where preoccupations with autochthony can lead was the Opération Nationale d'Identification launched by Laurent Gbagbo shortly after he became Ivory Coast's new president.

In 2002—in a situation of growing hatred and violence between southern *autochtones* and northern immigrants (who come from both the northern parts of the country and neighboring states)—the Gbagbo regime, pushing the autochthony idea to its very limits, announced its intention to oblige all Ivorians to return to their village "of origin" in order to be registered there as citizens. Abidjan, the country's megapolis, was not to be considered a "village of origin" except for the Ebrié, "historical autochthons." All persons who could not claim a village of origin within the country were to be considered as immigrants and would therefore lose their citizenship.

Thus, the Ivorian National Identification Campaign became a most pregnant example of the trend, everywhere in the continent, that the preoccupation with belonging—the fear of becoming someone "without bearings"—brings a *retrou en force* of "the" village. As Mr. Séry Wayoro, "director of identification" in this *opération*, explained: "Whoever claims to be Ivorian must have a village. Someone who has done everything to forget the name of his village or who is incapable of showing he belongs to a village is a person without bearings and is so dangerous that we must ask him where he comes from" (quoted in Marshall 2006:28).

Ruth Marshall (2006:26) describes the rage of the northern "rebels" at their roadblocks when people present IDs with the new marks—how they violently tear up these papers that threaten to rob them of their very citizenship. For the time being this *opération* has been executed in only mitigated form [see chap. 4 below], but the basic idea is still very much around. It is clearly at the heart of the frightening violence that in subsequent years has marked everyday life, especially in the southwestern parts of the country.
In Ivory Coast the defense of autochthony may have taken on especially violent forms under the inspired leadership of Gbagbo and his wife, with the Jeunes Patriotes as their storm troopers. But similar struggles over the exclusion of “strangers” (often citizens of the same country) plague Cameroon, the two Congos, and Senegal—to mention just a few examples.

It is small wonder that the term autarchthones gained special currency in Francophone Africa, since it is an inherent part of the French colonial heritage: the term was introduced to the continent around 1900 by French empire builders—often at the same time administrators and ethnographers—in a determined effort to gain control over the kaleidoscopic jumble of groups and communities that confronted them in the newly conquered territories (see below). But recently it has been spreading into Anglophone parts of the continent as well. Moreover, although I propose to focus first of all on areas where the term itself is cropping up, it is clear that similar issues of belonging have become highly explosive in other parts of the continent as well. Issues like the xenophobic reaction in present-day South Africa against the Makwere-kwere (“strangers” from across the Limpopo; see Landau 2006 and chap. 4 below) or the ways in which questions of belonging affected political competition in Zambia and Malawi play on similar registers as the autochthony craze in Francophone Africa.

However, it may be even more important to emphasize that such confrontations are not unique to the African continent—indeed, this is one of the main aims of this book. Since the 1970s, the Dutch and the Flemings adopted a similar terminology of autochtonen versus allochtonen in their efforts to deal with ever more pressing immigration issues. Other protagonists of the New Right in Europe play with the same notions. These notions are now very present also in the Pacific and have a longer history in Canada, though with quite a different meaning. It is striking—and this is a central theme of this book—that the same notions seem to apply in such varying situations. Even more remarkable is that they can have such strong emotional appeal and mobilizing force in highly different settings.

Indeed, this book is born from a coincidence that did surprise me. In spring 1996, I returned from Cameroon quite impressed by the vivid images on Cameroon TV of the large demonstrations of the Sawa (“sea people”) in Douala, the country’s main port and economic hub. The local Sawa people were clearly enraged that in the municipal elections—the first since democratization and the reinstatement of a multiparty system—Bamileke immigrants had been elected as mayors in four of the five municipalities of the city. The demonstrators’ language—in their songs, slogans, and posters—was clear: they were the autochtones; these “strangers” (alloègeses)
should go back home and vote there, and not try to rule in the land of
their hosts. Clearly the new style of democratic elections had created a
ture panic among the small coastal groups, the Douala (the original in-
habitants of the city) and other “Sawa”: they had foreseen that they would
be outvoted in their own hometown by the much more numerous immi-
grants from the interior, and this was indeed what happened in this city, as
in many other cities in the continent. Thus, the democratization wave of
the early 1990s had the unexpected effect in Cameroon and in many oth-
er African countries of triggering fierce autochthony movements and of-
ten quite violent efforts to exclude “strangers” (who are often citizens of
the same nation state).

Back home, I switched on the radio and—this was the surprise—sud-
denly realized that I was hearing exactly the same slogans, but now in
good Dutch. It was a program on the Vlaams Blok, a New Right party
in Belgium (Flanders) that recently had had striking electoral successes.5
Its main leader, Filip de Winter—often described as looking like “the
ideal son-in-law”—explained the aims of the party in terms that seemed to
come straight from the autochthony demonstrators in Cameroon: Eigen
volk eerst (your own people first); the need to protect the “ancestral her-
tage” that risked being “soiled” by “strangers.” Even the central term
was the same: in Dutch/Flemish, the term autochtoon has become a rally-
ing point, initially for the New Right but in recent years also for middle-
of-the-road parties, now that concerns over how to address the issue of
new immigrants and their “integration” have become ever more general.

Striking in all this is that even though the Cameroonian and the Flem-
ish/Dutch contexts are completely different, the autochthony discourse
seems to come across as self-evident, almost “natural,” in both situ-
tions. Precisely this self-evidence seems to give it considerable mobiliz-
ing impact.6 This panacea quality and its apparent capacity to emerge at
completely different points in our globalizing world makes autochthony
a fascinating notion for understanding present-day preoccupations with
belonging. Since we are seeking to understand its impressively wide ap-
PLICABILITY, it would be counterproductive to work from a strict definition
of this quite enigmatic notion. My intention is rather to try to follow what
meanings and associations people in strongly different situations attach to
it, and how it can retain its apparent self-evidence and thus its plausibility
in such different contexts.

Clearly the sudden upsurge of notions of autochthony in highly differ-
ent parts of the globe has to be placed in a broader context: the “global
conjuncture of belonging” mentioned before. I borrow this expression
from the Canadian anthropologist Tania Murray Li, who launched it in her studies of conflicts over “indigeneity” in Southeast Asia (Li 2000). Her notion of “conjuncture” is especially apposite since she shows how all sorts of apparently unrelated trends converge into turning belonging into a pressing issue. Her studies focus on the global attention to “indigenous peoples” and “disappearing cultures,” but also global concern over loss of biodiversity and ecological knowledge, as major trends in making people obsessed with the question of who “really” belongs (and even more so, who does not). Elsewhere other tendencies may promote such preoccupations: in Africa, democratization and decentralization, the two main issues on the neoliberal agenda, have the paradoxical effect of triggering an obsession with belonging (hardly in line with what one would expect from earlier versions of liberalism); in Europe, meanwhile, it is popular dissatisfaction over increasing immigration and the idea that the second generation of immigrants refuses to “integrate” that triggers similar concerns (see chap. 5).

Strikingly, discourses of belonging seem to be able to gloss over such crucial variations, turning questions like who belongs? and how one can prove belonging? into truly worldwide concerns. Autochthony’s capacity to crop up in quite dispersed moments and places across the globe makes for an intriguing difference with the parallel notion of indigenous, which made a similar comeback in recent decades (see Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005). While indigenous became increasingly centered in its meaning—roughly referring to the “tribal other”—autochthonous became employed in much more variable ways. Its use is no longer restricted to marginal areas, since even majority groupings within the West came to defend their position in the name of their “autochthony.” It is the free-floating profile of this term, combining apparent self-evidence with great ambiguity and variation in its meaning, that makes it of particular interest for unraveling the general conundrum of belonging in our globalizing world. A brief digression into history can highlight the ambivalences in autochthony discourse underneath its show of authenticity.

Autochthony’s Genealogy: Some Elements

Two crucial moments in autochthony’s long and tortuous history may be of particular interest here. Both highlight certain inherent inconsistencies in this apparently so self-evident a notion. So what may seem here to be
an overly long detour through history will help to outline key dimensions for analyzing the issue of autochthony and belonging in present times.

While I was working on this book, the complex historical vicissitudes of the notion became ever more intriguing to me. As noted, I started to dig into autochthony because I was struck by the coincidence that the same jargon quite abruptly became highly politically charged in such different contexts as Cameroon and the Netherlands. However, following the central notion of autochthony turned out to be quite an adventurous journey. I had certainly not expected that it would take me to widely different spots in the world and in history: it was like a magical bird, turning up in unexpected places. Leading thinkers have used it and still do so, though in quite different ways. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958:238) gave it a central place in his analysis of the Oedipus figure.7 Martin Heidegger (1934–35/1989) proposed the heavy term Bodenständigkeit as a translation of autochthony and used it to defend a more communitarian form of nationalism for Germany, in contrast to Anglo-Saxon and French versions of an all too individualistic nationalism (unfortunately, but probably not accidentally, this was also in the days that he made overtures to the Nazis). Derrida (1997:95, orig. 1994), on the other hand, criticized autochthony as a mark of a too limited (even “phallic”) form of democracy that we urgently need to surpass for a more universalistic version.8

Classical Athens: The Cradle of Autochthony

The presence of the autochthony notion in the work of these leading thinkers highlights its long historical pedigree, since all three drew their inspiration—albeit with highly different purport—from the central role the idea of autochthonia played in classical Athens. Apparently, Athenian citizens of the fifth century BC—the city’s Golden Age, the time of Pericles, Euripides, and Plato—were prone to boast of their “autochthony” as proof that their city was exceptional among all the Greek poleis. All other cities had histories of having been founded by immigrants; only the Athenians were truly autochthonous—that is, born from the land where they lived. This was also the reason that Athenians would have a special propensity for demokratia. The classical texts—Euripides, Plato, Demosthenes—are surprisingly forceful on this point. To the present-day reader, it might come as a shock to read in the text of these venerated classics the same language of autochthony that is now so brutally propagated by Europe’s prophets of the New Right. And indeed the correspondence
has not gone unnoticed by these prophets themselves, as may be clear from an incident in France.

On May 2, 1990, a member of Parliament in the French National Assembly, a certain Marie-France Stirbois, member for Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front—still the most right-wing party in France—surprised her colleagues by delivering a passionate speech about classical Athens and the way in which Euripides, Plato, and even Socrates himself defended autochthony. Apparently her colleague députés were somewhat surprised, since until then Mme Stirbois's interventions had not betrayed such an in-depth interest in the classics (or for that matter in any academic subject). Clearly another sympathizer of the National Front—probably a professor at the Sorbonne—had written her speech for her.

The incident had its pathetic overtones, but the good thing was that it inspired two leading French classicists, Nicole Loraux (a good friend of Derrida) and Marcel Detienne, to look into the issue of Athenian autochthony. Both authors have since shown with impressive eloquence that it pays off to take the old authors seriously, since these classical voices highlight quite sharply—though maybe inadvertently—the tensions inherent to the autochthony notion as such.

At first sight the Athenian claim to autochthony seems to be as natural and as unequivocal as, for instance, President Laurent Gbagbo's claims that one needs to distinguish Ivoiriens "de souche" (literally "from the trunk of the tree") from later immigrants (Le Pen uses similar terms in France). The Athenian declarations appear as emotional and sincere as the furious protests, cited above, of the Sawa (sea people) in Douala against being dominated by immigrants in their own area. However, Loraux and Detienne's visionary analysis shows that it may indeed be worthwhile to take a closer look at Athenian language on autochthony. This will require a detour in time, and the lively imaginary of Greek mythology may put to the test the reader's patience. Yet such a return to the classical locus of the autochthony notion is rewarding, since here the tensions and inconsistencies of this apparently unequivocal notion come to the fore in particularly striking ways. The following examples testify to both the vigor and the complexities of autochthony in Athenian thinking.

In Erechtheus, one of Euripides' most popular tragedies, the playwright has Praxithea, King Erechteus's wife, offer her own daughter for sacri-
flee in order to save the city: “I, then, shall give my daughter to be killed. I take many things into account, and first of all, that I could not find any city better than this. To begin with, we are an autochthonous people, not introduced from elsewhere; other communities, founded as it were through board-game moves, are imported, different ones from different places. Now someone who settles in one city from another is like a peg ill-fitted in a piece of wood—a citizen in name, but not in his actions.”

Heavy language under heavy circumstances. In the play, Athens is threatened with destruction by Eumolpus and his Thracians invading Attica. The Delphi oracle has prophesied that King Erechtheus can save the city only by sacrificing one of his own offspring. He seems to hesitate, but his wife gives him a lesson regarding what autochthony means in practice: “This girl, not mine in fact except through birth, I shall give to be sacrificed in defense of our land. If the city is captured, what share in my children have I then? Shall not the whole then be saved, so far as is in my power?” (Euripides 1995:159–60; cf. also Detienne 2003:36–39).

Euripides’ tragedy was based on a myth, placed in a mythical time (Erechtheus is supposed to have been mentioned already by Homer), but it was clearly very topical to Athens’s situation of 422 BC, when the play was first performed: the city was at the height of its naval power but was locked in mortal combat with its archrival, Sparta. There was, indeed, some reason for celebrating Athenian uniqueness at the time. In other respects as well, Praxithea’s words must have seemed highly to the point for the audience. Her scorn comparison of people “who settle in one city from another” to “a peg ill-fitted in a piece of wood” no doubt had special meaning in a city where in its heyday the majority of the population were seen as foreign immigrants (metoikoi), among whom quite a few were much richer than many a true citizen by descent.

With Plato, Athenian autochthony seems to be equally self-evident.

Plato makes Socrates—when instructing young Menexenes on how to deliver a funeral oration for fallen soldiers (a major occasion in fifth-century Athens)—celebrate Athenian uniqueness in no uncertain terms: “The forefathers of these men were not of immigrant stock, nor were these
their sons declared by their origin to be strangers in the land sprung from immigrants, but natives sprung from the soil living and dwelling in their own true fatherland.”

As the next step in his didactic model for a funeral speech, Plato, still speaking through Socrates’ mouth, makes his famous equation of *autochthonia* and *demokratia*:

For whereas all other States are composed of a heterogeneous collection of all sorts of people, so that their polities also are heterogeneous, tyrannies as well as oligarchies, some of them regarding one another as slaves, others as masters; we and our people, on the contrary, being all born of one mother, claim to be neither the slaves of one another nor the masters; rather does our natural birth-equality drive us to seek lawfully legal equality. (Plato, *Menexenus*, in 2005:343-47)

As in Africa (see below), funerals, and particularly funeral orations, must have been high points in the expression of Athenian autochthony. In general, autochthony in Greece—again, as elsewhere—must have been linked to heavy ritual and symbols that verged on the burlesque.

In Euripides’ tragedy, Eurechtheus is punished for his dearly bought victory over the Thracians by Poseidon, who is still furious that the Athenians preferred the goddess Athena to him as the city’s protector. With his terrible trident Poseidon makes a deep cleft right through the Akropolis (Athens’s main mountain), and Erechteus disappears in the chasm, to remain literally “locked in the earth”—an appropriate position in view of his emphatic chthonic character, invariably repeated whenever he is mentioned. But finally Athena, the city’s chosen goddess, appears to redeem the situation. In honor of the king-locked-in-the-earth, she ordains the consecration of a small temple, the Erechtheion, to be situated on the Akropolis and made the focal point for celebrating Athenian autochthony.

Burlesque as some of the founding myths of this Athenian particularity may seem now, it is clear that this heavy symbolism had a powerful appeal. The reference to the soil is affirmed by a king-locked-in-the-earth and the rhetoric of the funeral orations in particularly graphic ways. All
this confirmed an idea of Athenian autochthony as a long-standing trait of this particular city—Homer had already mentioned Erechtheus as an arch-chtonian—which was later also accepted by many modern classicists (cf. Rosivach 1987:294).

Yet recently several historians have raised doubts about this shiny image of classical Athenian autochthony—problems that must have worried contemporaries as well. There is a clear tension with the study of history as it was practiced already at the time. Striking is that the two most prominent historians of those days do not make special mention of Athens being exceptional in regard to the origin of its citizens. Herodotus mentions a wide array of autochtonous groupings—some more autochthonous than others—but he does not relate autochthony to Athens (Detienne 2003:49). And Thucydides seems determined to avoid the very word autochthoon, probably because he distrusted its rhetorical use. He explains Athens’s preeminence instead in reference to its success in attracting immigrants (the metoikoi mentioned before) from all over Greece, even allowing at least some of them “to become citizens” (Loraux 1996:94).

Vincent Rosivach (1987) goes even further, trying to show that the term autochthoon must have been of a much later coinage, probably in the fifth century BC, when Athens was emerging as the major power among the Greek cities. He proposes to distinguish an “indigenous” and a “chtonic” use of the term. It is certainly true that already Homer mentions, for instance, Erechtheus from Attic as a chtonic figure. But in Rosivach’s view this is in a different sense, as some sort of primal, serpentlike figure (a monster?) closely tied to the earth. Only during Athens’s upsurge was Erechtheus linked to the Athenians’ desire to prove their exceptional indigeneity, giving the chtonic component in autochthoon a quite different implication. Rosivach’s line of argumentation may be quite hypothetical. Yet his insistence on the reverse meaning of attributing a chtonic origin—primitivizing a being or a group as some kind of primal phenomenon—is very relevant for other situations as well. Throughout this book this double meaning will come up time and again: the autochthon as prestigious first-comer but also as primitive or even prehuman.

Along the same lines as Rosivach, Marcel Detienne (2003) emphasizes that in general Greek claims to autochthony must have been somewhat ahistorical since they denied by definition the great era of Greek colonization
of the seventh and sixth centuries BC, when new poleis were founded all over the eastern Mediterranean in an adventurous expansion process. Athens itself was very much a city in formation up to the fifth century. It is striking, that the laws on citizenship promulgated in 509 by Cleisthenes, Athens’s great legislator during the city’s ascendance, were much more open and inclusive than was Pericles’ law of 451 BC, during the city’s heyday. Although Pericles’ law came only a little over fifty years later, it brought incisive changes, reserving Athenian citizenship only for those who could claim that both parents were Athenian (Detienne 2003:53).

Nicole Loraux (1996) problematizes Athenian autochthony, and hence autochthony in general, at an even deeper level. For her, an insistence on having remained on the same spot is a basic denial of history, which always implies movement. It is a kind of negative history that always needs an Other—movement in any form—in order to define itself (see notably 1996:82, 99). At a very practical level, this implied for Athenians a guilty denial of memories of earlier migrations, especially for the city’s aristocratic families, who used to be proud of their founding history, often referring to their provenance from elsewhere, as some sort of mythical charter. Loraux signals that in other classic texts on autochthony as well, history and movement are a kind of hidden subtext undermining autochthony’s rigid memory.

A stark expression of this is to be found in one of Euripides’ most famous tragedies, Ion—probably the most outspoken celebration of autochthony he left us. For modern readers (and viewers), the force of the play lies mostly in Euripides’ beautiful verses in which he allows the actors to express their rage—contained by deep respect—against the gods and the careless way they handle mortals. But another possible reading of the text, one that takes into account the Athenians’ preoccupation with autochthony, suggests that a concern with origins must have been at least as important. Consider Ion’s statement when his “father” (who later turns out not to be his real father) tries to take him to Athens, while Ion still believes he himself is a stranger to the city: “They say that the famous Athenians, born from the soil, are no immigrant race. I would be suffering from two disabilities if I were cast there, both the foreignness of my father and my own bastardy. . . . For if a foreigner, even though nominally a citizen, comes into that pure-bred city, his tongue is enslaved and he has no freedom of speech” (Euripides 1999:397, 403). This is vintage autochthony thinking!

However, in the unfolding of the tragedy this theme leads to so many complications that the drama can also be read as a sort of carnival of auto-
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chthony: Ion has to be crowned in the end as Athens's truly autochthonous king, though he is Apollon's son and has been adopted by a father who himself is a stranger (the latter is even led to believe that he is Ion's "real" father)—and so forth, and so forth. As Detienne puts it so aptly, "nothing is impossible in autochthony" (2003:59). There is a clear reflection here of the deep unrest in autochthony thinking, which Loraux brings out well by insisting on the sheer impossibility of excluding history. Persons are not what they seem to be. If a foreigner like Ion can turn out to be an autochthon, the reverse can be true also. Indeed, the obsession with having traitors "inside" and needing urgently to unmask them, which was evident in the preceding examples from Ivory Coast and Cameroon, was very present in classical Athens as well. If a citizen was slandered by someone who put into doubt his citizenship, he could summon the slanderer before a city tribunal. However, this involved a huge risk: if the slanderer were judged to be in the right, his challenger would lose not only his citizenship but also his liberty: he could be sold as a slave (Loraux 1996:195).

The above may indicate why the present-day New Right in Europe is tempted to quote the celebration of autochthony in classical Athens as a precedent to be respected. However, Loraux and Detienne convincingly show that on closer reading these texts actually highlight the basic impossibilities of autochthony thinking: its tortuous struggles to come to terms with history, which always undermines the apparent self-evidence of chthonic belonging, and, even more, the great uncertainty it creates about "authentic" and "fake" autochthony and hence an obsession with purification and the unmasking of traitors-in-our-midst. These complications will prove to be all too relevant for autochthony's present-day trajectories.

French West Africa: A Colonial Version of Autochthony

For present-day developments the classical Athenian version of autochthony may serve to highlight certain inherent tensions. Yet the concept's complicated trajectories on the African continent were much more directly shaped by the colonial intermezzo. As noted earlier, the term was abruptly introduced on the continent by French colonials around 1900, when they were struggling with the question of how to administer the vast territories they had conquered in a few decades in West Africa. In the French colonial conception developed during the French conquest of the West African Sudan in the 1880s and 1890s, autochtonie was to become
the very first criterion for bringing some order into the confusing prolif-
eration of diffuse groupings—some more or less integrated in larger state
formations, others constantly splitting up in segments—that confronted
the new conquerors. Autochtonie was the basic principle of la politique
des races, elaborated by Governor-General William Ponty around 1900,
which for the French was, at least in the first decades of colonization,
their alternative to British Indirect Rule. While to the British it seemed
increasingly vital to identify the “real” chiefs in order to base the native
administration on them, the French were initially rather bent on circum-
venting at least the higher chiefs, who in some parts of the Sudan had
offered determined resistance. This policy called for homogeneous cantons
to be formed, populated by people of the same race (here used in the
sense of what today is called an “ethnic group”) and administered by local
power-holders who would constitute the building blocks for le commandement indigène. It was urgent to discover within the confusing medley of
groups and subgroups, more or less related but constantly splitting up, the
real autochtones who were so central in this conception of the politique des races.

A typical example of the French approach is provided by the huge,
three-volume book Haut-Sénégal-Niger (from 1912 but based on research
in the 1890s) by the French ethnographer-administrator Maurice De-
lafosse, who was to become very influential in the building of French
colonial empire. A recurrent principle in the book was that “some indigènes are autochthons, whereas others are definitely not” (see Delafosse
1912/1972:280; cf. also Arnaut 2004:207). Thus a vital question in his en-
cyclopedic description of the various groupings in this area was whether
a given group was or was not autochthonous. Yet despite his determined
search for autochthony, Delafosse was clearly much more interested in
migrating groups. Invariably, once he has finally found an autochthonous
group, it gets only a short description in somewhat condescending lan-
guage (they are characterized as malheureux, poor and backward—see
Delafosse 1912/1972:238; see also Triaud 1998). In contrast, Delafosse de-
votes more than forty pages to, for instance, the Peul/Dyula ethnic con-
glomerate: he was clearly fascinated by their peregrinations throughout
West Africa and their reputation as empire builders.

This makes his book a striking example of a widespread colonial para-
dox, of crucial importance to the vagaries of autochthony and belonging
in postcolonial times. On the one hand, there was a heavy emphasis on the
urgent need to “fix” the local populations: only thus would it be possible
to administer them—more specifically, levy taxes and labor. The politique des races and the principle that the new administration should be built upon autochthon groups, the true locals, fit in with this localizing approach. Yet on the other hand, most colonial governments showed in practice a clear preference for migrants, who were seen as more energetic and entrepreneurial—and therefore much more interesting for launching projects. In practice, the politique des races seems to have foundered rapidly on this penchant for migrants among the new colonial authorities, who tended, just like Delafosse, to oppose migrants' dynamics to locals' indolence and resistance to change. In many areas the French soon became inclined to appoint chiefs from such more "enterprising" groupings over "backward" locals. Still, ephemeral as the politique des races may have turned out to be, it did introduce the term autochtones and its counterpoint allogènes as some sort of primal criterion in the French colonial context.

One of the reasons that the term did flourish in this new setting was that it easily articulated with distinctions existing already locally, though these often had a quite different tenor. Indeed, the varying trajectories of the autochthony notion even within Africa reveal the ways in which colonial terms were appropriated locally, acquiring a dynamic of their own. Especially in the interior of the West African Sudan, local patterns of organization turned on a sort of complementary opposition between “people of the land” and “rulers.” The latter were (and are) often proud to have come in from elsewhere, and they referred to their external origin as their justification to rule; yet the “chief of the land” formed (and still forms) a ritual counterpoint to the chief of the ruling dynasty. To the French ethnologists, autochthony was an obvious term to describe this counterpoint position.

The vast literature on the Mossi (the largest group in present-day Burkina Faso) exemplifies this. For generations of researchers, the opposition in Mossi society between what they termed autochtones and “rulers” became the central issue inspiring highly sophisticated structuralist studies (Zahan 1961; Izard 1985; Luning 1997; see also Gruénais 1985). In this context, the notion of autochthony took on somewhat primitivist overtones, similar to the image of primal chthonic creatures in Athens’s mythical history. Sabine Luning (1997:11), for instance, points out how in the prevailing discourse of the Mossi Maana, the tengabiise (a term now currently translated, also among the people themselves, as les autochtones), were characterized as some sort of “presocial,” “terrestrial” beings, who
were fully humanized—that is, included in a society—only by the coming of the naam, their foreign rulers. In practice naam power was limited in all sorts of ways by the tengabiise. Nonetheless, the naam as foreign rulers were formally at the apex of the prestige scale, dominating les autochtones. Here, this latter term had a strong chthonic meaning, reminding one of Erechtheus, the Athenian king who was so graphically “locked in the earth” by Poseidon and whose temple thus became the very place to celebrate “autochthony.”

This was certainly not the meaning Delafosse had in mind in his search for autochtones for la politique des races. It was also not the meaning that came to the fore with so much force in the 1990s with democratization in this part of Africa. Among the main targets of the upsurge of autochthony in neighboring Ivory Coast, under Houphouët-Boigny’s successors, first Bedié and then Gbagbo, were precisely these Mossi immigrants who were supposed to have taken the land of the “autochthons” of the rich cacao belt in southern Ivory Coast (see chap. 4). In this version of the term—as in the version propagated by Delafosse and la politique des races—an autochthon is certainly not a subordinate; on the contrary, the notion implies a claim to priority and the right to exclude strangers. The reference to the soil in this context expresses a right to possess. Clearly, despite its self-evident or even “natural” appearance, a term like autochthony can take on very different meanings in different contexts and times.

Nevertheless, for the African continent the colonial background provided a common framework. In all the African present-day confrontations around autochthony discussed in later chapters, belonging and the exclusion of “strangers” turn out to be deeply marked by the paradox of most colonial regimes: on the one hand, their insistence on fixing and territorializing people—which implied a determined search for autochthons who “really” belonged—and, on the other, a constant preference for migrants.

Autochthony Now; Globalization and the Neoliberal Turn

Clearly, then, autochthony has a long history. The discourse of its present-day protagonists is certainly not new. Yet it is clear as well that recently, especially since the late 1980s, it has undergone a powerful renaissance. A crucial question, if we want to develop a more historical view of this discourse, is why it became such a tempting discourse at the present moment in many parts of the globe.
Tania Murray Li’s notion of a “global conjuncture of belonging” seems to point toward various aspects of what has come to be called “globalization” that can serve as important leads. The rapidly increasing mobility of people, not only on a national but also on a transnational scale—which to many is a basic factor of globalization—has generated the wider context for people’s preoccupation with belonging. But Li’s approach allows one to identify other more specific factors, which may vary among regions. While Li emphasizes global concern over the loss of biodiversity, “indigenous people,” and “disappearing cultures” in the areas she studies in Southeast Asia, in the chapters below about Africa the focus will be on the twin processes of democratization and decentralization, both closely related to the new emphasis since the end of the 1980s on “bypassing” the state in the policies of the global development establishment.

Throughout the continent the wave of democratization of the early 1990s seemed initially to bring a promising turn toward political liberalization. Yet in many countries it inspired, quite unexpectedly, determined attempts toward closure in order to exclude certain groups from their full rights as national citizens—or at least to distinguish between citizens who “belong” and others who belong less. The tragic example of Ivory Coast was mentioned already, with Gbagbo’s Opération Nationale d’Identification as an extreme manifestation. In Eastern Congo, the enigmatic Banyamulenge—opponents rather call them Banyarwanda (Rwanda people)—became similarly the object of fierce struggles over belonging and autochthony, fanned by Mobutu Sese Seko’s Machiavellian manipulations in offering them full citizenship and withdrawing it at will. In Anglophone Africa as well, belonging became a crucial issue in the new style of politics. In Zambia, former national president Kenneth Kaunda could be excluded from the political competition by the simple claim that he “really” descended from strangers. In a completely different context, the new African National Congress democracy in South Africa became marked by furious popular reactions for excluding all Makwere-kwere—“those” Africans from across the Limpopo.

At least as important as democratization was the drastic shift, already mentioned, in the policies of global development agencies like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other major donors from an explicitly statist view to an equally blunt distrust of the state. While up to the early 1980s it seemed self-evident that development had to be realized through the state and therefore strengthening the state and nation-building by the new state elites were the first priorities, subsequently in
the World Bank's official view the state was no longer a pillar but rather a major barrier to development. Especially after the Bank's 1989 report on Africa, "bypassing the state," strengthening "civil society" and NGOs, and notably "decentralization" became the buzz words. But just as democratization turned out to open up unexpected scope for autochthony movements, the new decentralization policy and the support of NGOs, often quite localist in character, similarly turned questions of belonging and exclusion into burning issues. In chapter 3 we will see, for instance, how the new forest law in Cameroon, heavily supported by the World Bank and World Wildlife Fund, made autochthony — that is, the question of who could be excluded from the new style development projects as "not really" belonging—a hot issue even in areas that were so thinly populated that there seemed to be no demographic pressure at all on the soil and other resources.

Such developments cannot be dismissed as just political games—maneuvers imposed from above by shrewd politicians or well-meaning "developers." Political manipulations and external interventions by development agencies certainly play a role in most of these cases, but they can work only because the very idea of local belonging strikes such a deep emotional chord with the population in general. Indeed, the force of the emotions unleashed by a political appeal to autochthony is often such that it threatens to sweep the very politicians who launched it right from their feet. This is vividly illustrated by the increasing importance, throughout the African continent, of the funeral "at home" (that is, in the village of origin), which is turned into a true festival of belonging—often to the discomfort of urban elites, who dread such occasions when the villagers can get even with their “brothers” in the cities. Marked by a proliferation of “neotraditional” rites that often involve great expenditure, these occasions show how deeply this obsession with belonging is rooted in society but also what a complex balancing act between returning and maintaining distance it requires from urban elites. In many regions there is a direct link between democratization and the increasing exuberance of the funeral “at home”—a clear sign how important local belonging has become. All this not despite but rather because of "liberalization." A major challenge for this book will be how to relate shrewd political manipulation and deep emotional involvement, since the combination of both seems to be at the heart of the autochthony conundrum.

Elsewhere, other factors have had similar effects, as my surprise at noticing the same language in Africa and on my radio "at home" clearly
showed. One of the interesting aspects of the term *autochthony* is that it easily bridges the gap between “South” and “North.”27 Apparently it works as well in Flanders or Holland as in Cameroon or Ivory Coast. In the early 1990s, I became familiar with the Dutch version of it mainly from our southern neighbors in Flanders. But in subsequent years it conquered with surprising rapidity the Netherlands as well. The shocking murder in 2002 of Holland’s most successful populist politician ever, Pim Fortuyn, made his heritage all the more powerful. Since his meteoric career, Dutch politicians have realized that electoral success depends on taking “autochthony” seriously. Since then the defense of the “autochthonous cultural heritage”—which for the Dutch, always proud of not being overly nationalist, proved quite hard to define—has become a dominant theme, together with the idea that more pressure is needed to make immigrants “integrate” into this elusive culture. The term *autochthony* is now less current in France and almost absent from Germany or the United Kingdom, even though similar concerns about belonging are high on the political agenda there. Elsewhere it crops up in unexpected places. In Italy, Umberto Bossi has recently adopted it for his Lega Nord, and as noted earlier, it emerges strongly in the Pacific and in Quebec, albeit in a different sense.

A brief illustration will show how great the confusion can become when autochthony, with its different meanings, crosses the dividing lines between continents. In 2006 I attended, together with several Africanists, a large-scale conference on the theme of autochthony at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris’s leading institute for social sciences. The conference was organized through close collaboration among colleagues from Quebec and France. For the Québécois and their French counterparts, the meaning of the term *autochthony* was clear. In the 1980s they had decided that this was to be used as equivalent to the budding Anglophone notion of *indigenous*, clearly because since the colonial period the more direct French translation, *indigène*, has carried such a pejorative charge that it had to be avoided at all costs.28 In the Quebec version of the term, *les autochtones* are “indigenous people”—that is, people in a minority position whose way of life is threatened by dominant groups. In this view, Quebec’s Native Americans are the prototype of *peuples autochtones*. At the conference, however, our Quebec colleagues discovered to their dismay that in other continents the term had acquired quite different meanings. It was
difficult for them to accept that, for instance, in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa the term *autochthonous* does not primarily refer to groups like the “Pygmies” or endangered pastoralists but is commonly claimed by well-established groups who are in control of the state and wield the term against immigrants who are still seen as foreigners. Even more surprising seemed to be the fact that in Flanders and the Netherlands, the majority of the population is happy to be labeled “autochthons.” As one participant from Quebec put it most eloquently: “If the Dutch are so foolish as to label themselves ‘autochthons,’ it is their affair. But the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations have already decided that *autochtone* is the French translation of *indigenous*? And I think we should stick to this.”

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

It is tempting to see the recent upsurge of “autochthony” and related notions of belonging in very different places of the globe as an unexpected outcome of the neoliberal tide that swept our globalizing world with so much force after the end of the cold war. It is true that democratization and decentralization, the dominant trends in the African continent since 1990, fit in very well with the so-called Washington Consensus, tersely summarized by Jim Ferguson (2006:39) as pretending to bring “less state interference and inefficiency”—and, one might add, more leeway for the market. Still, the explanatory value of neoliberalism as a final cause may lately have become somewhat overstretched. In recent seminars and conferences, many colleagues have warned that this notion, just like globalization, is rapidly becoming a blanket notion facilely cited as the cause for a discouraging wide range of phenomena. So it might be necessary to try and be a bit more specific.

A leitmotif in the chapters that follow will be the surprising penchant of many advocates of neoliberal reform for “tradition” and belonging. There is of course an interesting paradox here: how can one combine a fixed belief in the market as the solution to all problems with far-reaching trust
in “the” community or “customary chiefs” as a stabilizing anchor? In Africa, this penchant for “community,” tradition, and “chiefs” seems to be a logical consequence of a drive toward decentralization. If one wants to bypass the state and reach out to “civil society,” local forms of organization and “traditional” authorities seem to be obvious points of orientation. Unfortunately, as we shall see below, the new approach to development tends to ignore that most “traditional” communities are actually products of determined colonial and postcolonial interventions. Even more serious is neoliberals’ supreme indifference to the fact that focusing on such partners inevitably raises ardent issues of belonging: chiefs relate only to their own subjects and tend to discriminate against immigrants (who, as said, were often encouraged to migrate by colonial development projects). Local communities are tending to close themselves and apply severe forms of exclusion of people who had earlier been considered as fellows.

For different reasons, the same paradox emerges with the protagonists of the New Right in Europe (and elsewhere). For instance, while liberalism on this continent used to be equated with various forms of anticlericalism (or in any case with insistence on a strict separation of religion and state), neoliberal spokespersons now often plead for a resurrection of “Judeo-Christian values” as an anchor for society. More important, they manage to combine the good old liberal principle of reducing the interference of the state as much as possible with a vocal appeal to the same state to exercise almost total control over society (mostly against suspect immigrants)—thus strengthening the presence of the state in everyday life instead of promoting a withdrawal (see chap. 5). Neoliberalism as such may be a fuzzy phenomenon, but on the ground this surprising combination of market and tradition has very concrete effects.

**Autochthony and the Tenacity of the Nation-State**

The “global conjuncture of belonging” is certainly related to rapidly increasing transnational mobility of people, but it is so in a very special context: the tenacity of the nation-state that succeeds through a wide array of forms and processes in-grafting itself onto increasing globalization. It may indeed be important to stress that all the mobility globalization seems to stand for cannot be interpreted as a “withering away” of the nation-state. On the contrary, as most eloquently stressed by Jean-François Bayart
globalization processes still take place within the frameworks created by the historical emergence of the nation-state. This holds certainly true for present-day migration currents, transnational as they may be. It is precisely this tension between global flows and the continuing importance of national controls that gives autochthony and other forms of belonging such a powerful impact on recent developments. Indeed, we will see that the varying articulations of autochthony movements with the nation-state are central for understanding their different trajectories.

The close link with the struggle over the nation-state, as still a crucial target, is most strikingly illustrated by President Gbagbo’s 2002 plan for an Opération Nationale d’Identification in Ivory Coast, cited already as one of the most blatant examples of autochthony in recent years. The insistence by Gbagbo and his allies that every Ivorian had to go back to his or her village of origin to be registered and that people “without a village” could not pretend to national citizenship is strongly reminiscent of Achille Mbembe’s fulminations against autochthony as a basic idiom of the imaginaire identitaire in present-day Africa: “The central preoccupation becomes the struggle over the appropriation of political power and the state apparatus by the autochthons. Everything boils down to the perverse structure of autochthony. The prose of autochthony seems to exhaust the possibilities for the constitution of the subject...a xenophobic way of thinking, negative and circular.”

In other respects as well, the vision of the nation-state as being overtaken by recent developments can be misleading. It might suggest that the present-day upsurge of autochthony expresses a return of “traditional” tensions, now that the pressure of the authoritarian state is defused—just as, for instance, in Yugoslavia the implosion of the authoritarian one-party state seems to have pulled the lid off the can of worms that was hidden underneath all the time. But this is too simplistic a view. In the same text just quoted, Mbembe emphasizes that the postcolonial preoccupation with autochthony has clear colonial antecedents rather than “traditional” ones. Indeed, as stressed above, it is all too often a direct product of (post)colonial state formation. In many respects the present-day manifestations of autochthony in various parts of the African continent refer to a colonial model rather than to a precolonial one.

There are therefore good reasons to stress that the present-day preoccupation with autochthony and closure throughout the continent can hardly be considered as a traditional given that is typical for Africa. On the contrary, it is quite surprising that autochthony is becoming a seemingly self-
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evident frame for identity politics on that continent. After all, African traditions used to have a different orientation. Generations of anthropologists and historians characterized African societies as strongly inclusive, marked by an emphasis on “wealth-in-people” (in contrast to Europe’s “wealth-in-things”). These societies employed a wide array of institutional mechanisms for including people from elsewhere (adoption, fosterage, the broad range of “classificatory” kinship terminology, and all sorts of clientelist relations). As noted above, ruling groups often confirmed their prestige by boasting that they came from elsewhere to rule the autochthonous group—supposedly it was only under their guidance that the latter had become “humanized” and part of a social order (see chap. 4 below). The growing closure of local groups in recent decades, culminating in the fierce defense of autochthony—especially after democratization—is thus a striking development. All the more reason to emphasize the crucial role of the colonial intermezzo and the vagaries of (post)colonial state formation in this respect—notably the paradox noted above that most colonial governments (and their postcolonial successors) tended to affirm the principle of building on les autochtones, while in practice they consequently favored migrants (see also Geschiere 2007).

The current prominence of themes of autochthony and belonging in Europe, promoted by a growing distrust of immigrants, has a similar, paradoxical background. Here also the state is struggling to contain tensions that follow from its earlier policies: the halfhearted support in earlier decades of immigration, for a long time (and against all evidence) still seen as only temporary; and the continuing reluctance of most governments to acknowledge that Western Europe is becoming an immigration region that needs foreign labor, just like former white settler colonies in other continents with their “melting pot” ideology. The consequence is quite paradoxical: as said, right-wing groups that are normally in favor of privatization and reducing the role of the state now try to force the very same state to intervene in drastic ways in order to contain the “migrant problem.” Instead of trimming down the state, such “liberals” insist that it has to impose new forms of control and get involved into operations on a scale it can hardly handle.

In both contexts, it would be clearly misleading, then, to see autochthony as trying to offer an alternative to the nation-state. It may be tempting, especially when one listens to its propagandists, to see it as affirming the local level as some sort of counterpoint to the global, with both levels appearing to drain the intermediate national level. In contrast to this neat
but all too simplistic view, both the European and the African examples below fit rather with Bayart’s emphasis, already cited, on the tenacity of the nation-state as the continuing framework in which an emerging gouvernement du monde is taking shape (Bayart 2004).

One of the nodal points in the ambiguities surrounding the upsurge of autochthony and other forms of belonging is, therefore, their relation to national citizenship. And this notion is undergoing important changes, both in its ideological status and in its practices. It may be overly simplistic to talk of a weakening of the nation-state, given its capacity to graft itself upon processes of intensifying globalization. However, these processes have affected the status of national citizenship as an ultimate identity. Being a national citizen used to be a very icon of modernity. As Gyanendra Pandey puts it so graphically: “To be civilised is to have a nation” (Pandey and Geschiere 2003:15). However, recently the very idea of national citizenship has become the subject of fierce debate. A clear sign of the growing uncertainty around this concept is that in America “citizenship studies” is now seen as the field for the future (cf. Isin and Turner 2002). The well-known Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka characterized the 1990s as “the decade of citizenship” (2002:284), thus highlighting both the continued importance of the notion and its loss of self-evidence. Clearly the vicissitudes of autochthony in the present-day world are deeply marked by such debates.

In North America, the new discussions on citizenship center on growing doubts about the old, liberal version of the notion, based on the formal equality of all citizens as autonomous individuals before the law. Many authors emphasize that in practice this formal equality entails advantaging well-entrenched groups that better know how to play the rules and, further, that it ignores differences between groups that are all too real. This inspired a plea for recognizing special rights for special groups by creating scope for “group-based” or “group-differentiated” forms of citizenship. In the United States this translates, for instance, into recognition of special “women’s rights” and “gay rights.” However, pleas for group-based citizenship inevitably also create openings for protagonists in the struggles discussed above: champions of “indigenous peoples,” whether abroad or at home, or defenders of autochthony in a situation of decentralization.

An opposite tendency, starkly emerging in Europe, and to a lesser degree in North America, is what has been called the “culturalization of citizenship” —the search for a more pregnant formulation of the cultural consensus that forms the basis of citizenship and must be subscribed to
by new citizens as proof of their “integration.” Often an appeal to history as the mold of the nation is seen as essential for this. However, the difficult relation of autochthony to history, noted earlier, then generates problems. Advocates of such a cultural formulation of citizenship evoke a very special history: a condensed version, more or less fixed; recent demands for a historical “canon” in various European countries are good examples of this. Such a compression proves to be, time and again, highly precarious and even controversial. Indeed, the historical canons that have been produced in Denmark and the Netherlands offer striking examples of the confusion that results when academic historians try to honor the demand for such a canon. It might be interesting to relate this to well-known debates among historians over “memory” and “history.” Pierre Nora (1989) contrasted the two, since in his view our time brings the dramatic collapse of a last effort to bring the two together—“memory-history”—around the nation (“memory-nation”). The consequence would be that “history”—especially academic history, always plural and distanced—therefore inevitably fragments les lieux de mémoires, so dear to the nation. The protagonists of a culturalization of citizenship seem to ask for a return of memory-history, still around the nation. The question is whether this can work if “memory” refuses to allow for difference (see further chap. 5 below).

In the African context both tendencies emerge: efforts to purify the nation with an appeal to history (which often turns out to be a colonial history) and appeals to a special version of group-differentiated citizenship in which autochthons should have precedence over allogènes, even though the latter might still be recognized as citizens. In this continent, where national citizenship still has a very short history, any plea for differentiation will directly subvert the principle that all national citizens should be equal before the law. The new development policy of decentralization, referred to above—often applied in quite simplistic forms—undermines national citizenship, which had received such strong formal emphasis in the preceding decades of nation-building. With projects and development funds entering no longer through the state but rather through circuits of decentralization, regional or even local forms of belonging gain importance. This inevitably raises the by now familiar issues of belonging: who is to profit from the new-style development projects? and, even more urgently, who can be excluded from them?

In practice, decentralization has encouraged the reaffirmation of fuzzy identities and a constant search for the exclusion of “strangers” (often citizens of the same state). One question is whether the very idea of national
citizenship, which at least provided some sort of fixed point, is not thus being dispensed with too easily. To put it in stronger terms: are currently fashionable ideas about surpassing the nation-state from America and Europe, where national citizenship is deeply rooted and provides strong guarantees, being too thoughtlessly transported to zones of the South where this notion is still quite ephemeral and backed by fewer guarantees? Another question is to what extent the very idea of group-based citizenship will prove to entail similar divisiveness in Northern countries as well. It is with such questions in mind that various articulations of autochthony (and similar notions of belonging) with the idea of national citizenship—whether autochthony claims to offer an alternative to citizenship or rather is aimed at its “purification”—will be traced in the chapters below.

Whatever the trend of such articulations, however, it is quite clear that at the present moment autochthony and the quest for alternative sorts of belonging remain deeply marked by the specific trajectories that nation-building took in different regions. In the present-day context, historicizing autochthony will always mean putting it into relation with the nation-state. In this sense, and only in this, autochthony can be termed to be inherently postnational.

**Historical Construction, Political Manipulation, and Emotional Power**

The above discussion may suggest more specific dimensions for my explorations of the ambiguities and paradoxes of autochthony’s trajectories in the modern world in subsequent chapters.

A first key aspect is autochthony’s ambiguous relation to the local. As, for instance, Achille Mbembe (2001:7) and AbdelMaliq Simone (2001:25) have emphasized for Africa, it may seem logical to equate “autochthony,” “indigeneity,” and other notions of belonging with a celebration of the local and with efforts to close the community against global “flows,” as a retrograde reaction. Yet in practice these movements are often directly linked to processes of globalization. Simone is right to insist that “the fight is not so much over the terms of territorial encompassment or closure, but rather over maintaining a sense of ‘open-endedness’” (2000:25). What is at stake is often less a defense of the local than efforts to exclude others from access to the new circuits of riches and power. This is why it is
misleading to see the upsurge of autochthony movements in Africa as reflecting attempts to return to “traditional” realities: as if the cover of the pot (state authoritarianism?) had been lifted and the old tensions began to boil over again. Such a traditionalizing view severely underrates the degree to which the autochthonous subject is shaped by broader processes: struggles over local belonging are closely intertwined with the desire to be recognized as a citizen of the world. A key role in this is played by les originaires—the “sons of the soil” who left the village and made their careers elsewhere, in the city or even in diaspora. They are often central in raising the autochthony issue, but mainly as part of their struggle for special access to national or global circuits.

A second crucial point in the chapters that follow is the strong segmentary tendency of discourses on autochthony and belonging. In line with its “naturalizing” capacity, autochthony discourse will always make the basic distinction between autochthons and others appear to be obvious. But, as stressed above, in practice any attempt to define the autochthonous community in more concrete terms will give rise to fierce disagreements and nagging suspicions of faking. The preoccupation with purifying the community of alien elements leads people to redefine autochthony at ever closer range, especially when certain “spoils”—resources, political posts—have to be divided. In one of the examples examined in chapter 3, a Cameroonian village was confronted with new opportunities to create a “community forest.” This immediately triggered fierce debates on who “really” belonged and, more particularly, who did not. Initially, recent immigrants were pushed out of the project, but subsequently all sorts of latent divisions within the local population itself became exacerbated, and finally people started to classify even their own relatives as allogènes when their lines of descent did not perfectly correspond to patrilineal principles.

There is a direct link here to the paradox, already noted, between apparent certainty and a practice of great uncertainty. Autochthony’s appeal to the soil seems to promise some sort of primal belonging: what can be more secure than the knowledge that one is born from the soil? Yet the notion’s self-evident, natural appearance is time and again undercut by this elusive segmentary quality. An obsession with purifying the community generates constant redefinition of the “true” autochthon, with ever smaller circles being drawn. This goes together with an obsession with unmasking fake autochthons inside—people who pose as autochthons but are really traitors. The violent implications of such an obsession were most horrifyingly illustrated by Radio Mille Collines in Rwanda in 1993–94
with its terrible warnings against the *cancrelats* (cockroaches) hiding inside that had to be identified and exterminated.

Third, and most important, there is autochthony’s uneasy relation with history. In her masterful study of classical Athens cited above, Loraux puts it most pregnantly: autochthony’s claims of having stayed always on the same spot are historically impossible—after all, history is movement (Loraux 1996:36, 95). The Athenian aristocratic families’ embarrassment over their histories of origins elsewhere has striking parallels in present-day Africa and Europe. Such carefully guarded secrets can explain why the language of autochthony is a “nervous” one, as Stephen Jackson puts it so strikingly in his studies of East Congo, where rumors of alien origins haunt fierce debates of autochthony (Jackson 2003; chap. 4 below). Any claim to be “born from the soil” seems to sit uneasily with history, either denying it or trying to strictly control it.

Despite its heavy appeal to the soil, autochthony turns out to be quite an empty notion in practice: it only expresses the claim to have come first. It is precisely this emptiness that makes the notion so pliable: autochthony’s Other can be constantly redefined, entailing new boundary marking for the group concerned, which may be one reason it fits so well in a globalizing world. As several recent authors have emphasized, globalization entails not only “flow” but also “closure”; yet the boundary making that accompanies global flows is constantly shifting, just like the definitions of the Self and the Other in autochthony discourse. This pliability is part of autochthony’s considerable uncertainty: an obsession with traitors inside and constant fears of being unmasked as a “fake” autochthon (recall what was said about the notion’s segmentary quality). Autochthony discourse may seem straightforward, yet on closer inspection its apparent self-evidence hides great uncertainty and confusion. An important challenge is, therefore, to return it to history in all the different settings where this discourse emerges powerfully: this might be an obvious way to try to denaturalize it.

* * *

Yet historicizing may be only half of the job to be done. Following the varying trajectories of the autochthony notion in different contexts may relativize its pretense of constituting some primordial and self-evident truth, but will this indeed relativize its mobilizing force and the hold it has over people’s minds? The question remains why this notion and the
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link to the soil it postulates have such powerful emotional appeal. It is not clear how historicizing can help us to understand this.

Recently, several authors have expressed a certain fatigue with the emphasis on the historically constructed character of phenomena and the concomitant obsession with deconstruction or even debunking that, after cultural studies, increasingly affected anthropology as well. As Mattijs van de Port (2004; 2005; 2006) puts it in a series of publications on such varying topics as Serbia, homicide in the Netherlands, and candomblé in Brazil: the recent anthropological predilection for debunking authenticity does not preclude people's powerful cravings for the authentic—maybe especially in “modern” circumstances. The same applies to autochthony. History may highlight its volatility underneath a natural appearance, but this only makes the question of the reasons for its high “performative quality” (to quote Ruth Marshall again) in widely different situations all the more urgent. How can it evoke such deep emotions and a sensation of deep truth despite all the variations involved? Are there any limits to its apparent self-evidence?

An obvious starting point for explorations in this direction is to take the reference to the soil, basic to the notion, seriously and to try to follow it in its different implications and elaborations. Even in such places as present-day Flanders and the Netherlands, where people hardly seem to be conscious any more that the notion is centered in the soil, the reference still has power. A striking example of this is provided in the Comaroff and Comaroff article cited above (2001). A widespread panic in South Africa about a huge fire on the Cape Peninsula, which risked destroying the country's cherished heritage of fynbos (unique in the world), fed into national concerns about the postapartheid swell of immigrants from other parts of Africa. In popular perceptions, the menace to the autochthonous fynbos came to stand for the South African population's risk of being overrun by hordes of strangers from across the Limpopo (the Makwere-kwere). For the Comaroffs, this initially surprising transfer of anxiety from botanical to sociopolitical “aliens” is symptomatic of the powerful naturalizing capacity of autochthony discourse. The discourse's capacity to appeal to what seem to be primordial truths is indeed quite striking. The link with the land, central to the notion of autochthony, gives it a strong territorializing capacity, outlining—in a more or less symbolical way—a clearly defined “home.”

Of course, it is important in all this not to lose sight of the direct, economic importance that the soil has in many of the examples considered
here, both for the locals and for “sons of the soil” living elsewhere: land to make farms on, plots to build houses upon, forests in which to hunt and gather. Thus protecting the land against foreign invaders is of very direct economic importance. In autochthony notions, however, such economic interests seem intricately intertwined with a more general emotional involvement. In many settings (though in this too there are great differences), the soil as such seems to raise deep feelings that easily surpass economic calculations. As noted, in many parts of present-day Africa the funeral “at home”—that is, in the village, even for urbanites—has become one of autochthony’s major rituals, a veritable test of where one “really” belongs. There is a noteworthy parallel here with the central role, already mentioned, of the epitaphios (funerary address) in Athenian autochthony or with the role of the cemetery in European nationalism. The funeral offers an occasion to link “soil” and “body” in all sorts of naturalizing ways. Funerals among the Maka (Cameroon), for instance, require a division of roles between patrilineal descendants and the various groups of in-laws that is graphically inscribed on the body. Patri-kin are painted white, a sign of mourning; meanwhile the “daughters-in-law” (that is, all the women married into the village of the deceased) have to dance with great frenzy all night long (see chap. 6). And of course, the climax of a funeral anywhere is when the body of the deceased is committed to the soil. Below (chaps. 5 and 7) it will become clear that, in comparison, in Europe the autochthony notion seems to be much more uncertain precisely because of its problems with pegging itself onto similar “chthonic truths.”

It is tempting to ascribe the emotional power of an appeal to autochthony in many situations to such powerful naturalizing icons as the soil and the ways it is linked to the body. However, this may still be too simplistic. Below, a brief comparison among the rituals of nation-building that marked the first decades of independence in Cameroon and those in other African countries—roughly from 1960 till the end of the 1980s—will indicate that these rituals too invoked the soil (in this case the national territory) and strove to impose special disciplines of the body (military-style parades, special clothing, sometimes also special dances). However, generally these rituals seemed to lack the visceral quality of the funeral at home, and in most cases the nation-building rituals disappeared leaving scarcely any trace. New-fangled autochthony rituals in the Netherlands, as elsewhere in Europe, play with similar icons but retain an artificial or even insipid quality (see Verkaaij forthcoming). Clearly, not every appeal to the soil or the body “works.” Is it possible to outline more finel
tuned approaches that can help us take both the constructed character of these notions and their emotional appeal seriously?

**Approach: From Identity to Subjectivation and Aesthetics**

Autochthony's puzzling ambiguity between, on the one hand, emotional power and "natural" self-evidence and, on the other, haunting uncertainty raises questions of a more general nature. If historicizing its claims—which often boils down to debunking them (see van de Port 2004 and 2005; Latour 2005)—is only one step and the main challenge is how to understand its emotional appeal despite blatant historical inaccuracies and unsettling elusiveness in daily life, then what concepts can help us to analyze and compare the different manifestations of this notion? An obvious starting point might be the concept of identity, all the more so since autochthony with its earthy references—the soil, funerals, belonging—presents itself as a sort of primal identity. Yet in recent years the problems with that notion have become clear. It has an unfortunate tendency to fix what is in constant flux (which is often exactly what its protagonists are striving for), and it often acquires teleological implications, suggesting that there is a basic need for a group or a person to produce a clearly outlined and unequivocal identity. Indeed, the way in which, in the last decades of the twentieth century, the notion of identity rapidly spread from psychology to the social sciences in general, more or less replacing "class" as a key notion, could well be further explored and problematized (see Shami 1999).

In practice, the concept of identity seems to be employed in widely different senses. Sometimes it is used in a more or less essentializing way, in the sense that a given identity seems to determine a person's behavior. In other contexts it acquires overtones that correspond to an actors approach: actors are depicted as shaping identities and using them to further their interests. Neither use, however, is very helpful for explaining the variable and shifting ways in which autochthony and people's preoccupation with belonging manifest themselves in the present-day world. An essentializing view of identity risks taking autochthony's deceiving self-evidence for granted, thus neglecting its constant shifts and reorientations. But an actors approach has even more serious limitations: it risks resulting in a kind of instrumentalist view, reducing the impact of these notions to conscious choices and strategies of key figures. Thus it becomes
almost impossible to address what was identified above as the main challenge: understanding the impressive emotional power these notions can have, at least in some contexts. The chapters that follow will offer many examples of how politicians are almost literally swept of their feet once they let loose the emotional tide of this notion—this despite the fact that it is clearly historically constructed and is undergoing drastic shifts and reorientations. But how to take this emotional force into account without succumbing to the notion’s apparent self-evidence?

Recently some promising propositions have been forwarded to dynamize the notion of identity and overcome the stalemate between substantialist and actionist approaches. Most interesting for our topic is a focus on how identities can shift from inclusive to exclusive tendencies.\(^{47}\) Arjun Appadurai (2006) has raised the question of why and when identities become “predatory”—that is, under what circumstances they begin to refuse pluralist coexistence with other identities, claiming for themselves all available space (see chap. 5 below). Gerd Baumann (2004) has followed a similar track with his different “grammars of identity and alterity.” The merit of his approach is that he is determined to move beyond the rather basic truth that a “Self” (an “identity”) logically needs an “Other” (“alterity”) in order to profile itself. Instead, Baumann tries to distinguish different ways (“grammars”) of relating to the Other, each with its own implications: orientalizing; segmentation; encompassment.\(^{48}\) His distinctions suggest also the possibility of historical shifts from one “grammar” to another. This might be helpful for understanding the present-day turn to special forms of belonging, both in Africa and in Europe. A basic but sound idea might be also his plea to take the word belonging itself more seriously and to follow its different languages that so strongly assert themselves in quite different recent configurations. One of its advantages over identity is that it is at least in the -ing form.\(^ {49}\)

A determined processual approach may be crucial for interpreting autochthony’s riddles, precisely because of the notion’s inherent tendency to deny change and history. This makes it all the more tempting a topic for trying to explore the practical relevance of notions like subjectivation—following Foucault’s vision of the sujet in the double meaning of the word as both agent and being subjected—and its more concrete associate, “techniques of the self,”\(^ {50}\) as crucial to dispositifs of (auto-)disciplining. These notions are certainly in fashion now—which makes it all the more challenging to try to test their practical relevance. For instance, can they be of any help to break out of the stalemate in which “identity” seems to lead us?
My main inspiration in working with these notions is not so much theoretical but rather a hunch that they might highlight aspects of the dramatic Maka funerals, already mentioned as festivals of belonging, that have puzzled me ever since I began doing fieldwork in this part of southeastern Cameroon in 1971. My puzzlement has deepened into amazement that at these occasions people’s behavior—fairly wild, elated forms of behavior—seems to follow fixed (traditional?) patterns in a ritual that at the same time is constantly changing. Yet there seems to be no director who is in charge of all these dramatic performances, directing the innovations and people’s improvisations. The subjects in their different roles—remember what was said above about the strict division of roles between patrilineal and matrilateral kin at these funerals—seem to emerge from the ritual. But there are all sorts of switches—some people manage to play two different roles interchangeably—and constant innovations, often with a pseudo-traditional appeal and related to money: women impose new payments on the men, “daughters-in-law” ask to be “paid” for the deceased’s body, and so on. All these innovations are presented as completely self-evident (even as “traditional”) and are most graphically inscribed in the body: in the ways in which people are decked out or marked, in specific forms of dancing and rhythms. No external disciplining seems to be necessary; people seem to “automatically” discipline themselves—in all their outrageous behavior—within the role they enact for a given moment.

The result is an occasion of impressive power. Most urbanites express great reluctance to make the trip to attend a funeral in the village—for good reasons: many innovations of the ritual focus on reminding wealthier visitors of the urgent need to redistribute some of their wealth—but very few of them fail to attend. As soon as they arrive in the village, they seem to be sucked into the ritual, and they perform in high-spirited style. With the upsurge of autochthony as a major political issue in many countries of Africa (see chaps. 2 and 4), it is no wonder these funerals have grown in size and intensity: in them the emotional appeal of autochthony seems to be publicly condensed in a visceral involvement of body and soil. For me, the literature on subjectivation and techniques of the body irresistibly evoke these events, all the more powerful since they seem to unfold by themselves.

However, as noted already, such inscribing in the body and the soil does not always “work.” To put it more bluntly, the notion of techniques du corps cannot be invoked as a passe-partout explanation. The earlier rituals of nation-building in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa and the
new autochthony rituals in many European countries do address notions of soil and involve special bodily disciplines, but they conspicuously lack this visceral quality (see chaps. 5 and 6). Is it because they are so blatantly “made up”?  

In addressing such questions I am especially inspired by the way Jean-François Bayart works with the Foucauldian notions in a compelling mix of theory and historical examples from all over the world. His original approach has the great advantage of outlining the concrete relevance of these notions. Especially inspiring is the way he shows that people feel dominated by identity’s illusions or by processes of globalization but at the same time are deeply involved in shaping them. Changing techniques of the self, mostly centered on the body, are obvious entrance points for trying to understand how the subject is both shaped by and participates in evolving processes of subjectivation. Also important is Bayart’s emphasis, following Deleuze, that subjectivation is a never-ending process. This corresponds particularly well to the always unfinished nature of the autochthony discourse (like other discourses of belonging). Its protagonists may see themselves as fully shaped subjects, but the figure of the autochthon is constantly reshaped and further specified. This unfinished quality is precisely what makes the discourse such an uncertain one.

In a related perspective, equally focusing on experiences of the self and bodily techniques, Birgit Meyer has recently developed a seminal approach for understanding how some religious images can convince while others do not (Meyer 2006 and 2008). Especially the latter might be relevant for understanding autochthony’s highly variable performance at different times and in different parts of the world. Key notions in Meyer’s approach are “style” and “aesthetics” as bringing a “concentration” that can create “a shared sensorial perception of the world” (Meyer 2006:7). Her focus is on the “comeback of religion” that announced itself so emphatically in recent decades, upsetting current assumptions of ongoing secularization as a self-evident process. In her view the strength of religious images rests on their capacity to evoke a holistic sensorial experience, shared among a broader community and thus overcoming the Zerstreuung that marks the modern world (interestingly, this German term means both “distraction” and “fragmentation”). With this capacity, religious experiences can evoke a feeling of “authentic belonging” in the midst of a world that seems to be fragmenting. However, the degree of success in evoking such authentic feelings depends on the aesthetics of the images—that is, on the degree to which their aesthetics is indeed able to bring
about a shared sensorial perception. Style, as a concentrating force, is a crucial variable: "Thriving on repetition and serialization, style induces a mode of participation via techniques of mimesis and emulation that yields a particular habitus" (Meyer 2006:25; see also Meyer 2008). Religion depends on aesthetics and style, then, for being convincing.

The question is whether such an approach can be transferred from the field of religious studies to help us understand the appeal of alternative forms of belonging, like autochthony. Particularly a focus on style "as a concentrating force" bringing a "shared sensorial perception of the world" in the face of threatening disorientation might help to understand autochthony's emotional appeal in highly different situations, despite—or maybe because of—its unsettling elusiveness. Another question, especially in chapters 6 and 7, will be whether this approach can explain why in some situations autochthony's impact remains limited.

Yet in all this it may be wise to stick to the concrete maxim chosen earlier as our anchor and take the reference to the soil, central in any appeal to autochthony, most seriously (whether it is historically correct or not). The special and highly variable meaning imputed to the soil—and notably the different articulations of conscious socioeconomic interests and broader emotional appeal—can offer a vantage point to explore the relevance of these sophisticated approaches, in terms of subjectivation, disciplining techniques of the self, aesthetics and style, for explaining autochthony's varying trajectories in a changing world.

Chapter Overview

The order of this book's chapters follows from my central concern to place the upsurge of autochthony and belonging in Africa and Europe—and its varying articulations with the nation-state—in a global perspective. The focus is on the question of how similar languages of autochthony can acquire great persuasive self-evidence and hence great mobilizing force in widely different circumstances.

Chapters 2 through 4 take up spectacular but quite differently oriented outbursts of autochthony on the African continent. Chapters 2 and 3 are based on research I undertook with a number of Cameroonian colleagues—notably Francis Nyamnjoh, Antoine Socpa, and Basile Ndjio—in different parts of Cameroon. Chapter 2 discusses violent manifestations by autochthons in close relation with the politics of belonging of President
Paul Biya’s former one-party regime. Indeed, it was its support for autochthony movements that explains how his regime managed to hold on to power despite democratization (in 1990) and an initially very successful opposition. This betting on autochthony marked a dramatic shift. Up to 1990, the Biya government, like other one-party dictatorships in the continent, had always emphasized nation-building and the unity of all Cameroonian citizens. Its sudden choice to play the autochthony card—actively supporting all sorts of regionalist movements—proved to be an ideal strategy for neutralizing the effects of multipartyism. However, the autochthony movements were particularly unstable. Despite strong government support, segmentary tendencies asserted themselves as soon certain political gains had to be divided.

The third chapter discusses autochthony in a very different part of Cameroon—the very thinly populated forest area, only of marginal interest in national politics—and against a very different background. Here the drastic application of a new policy of decentralization triggered fierce confrontations over belonging and exclusion at the local level. Cameroon’s new forest law (1994), dictated by the World Bank in close collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund, gave local communities strong rights as major stakeholders in the exploitation of the forest. In itself, this initiative was certainly justified (this region had always been severely neglected). However, a major problem was that here the local units were (and are) particularly unstable—segmentary—in character. The law avoided defining the crucial notion of “community” in any detail. The consequence was that belonging became a major issue and that people tended to redefine autochthony at ever closer range, even excluding their own relatives as allogènes.

Chapter 4 follows parallel developments elsewhere on the African continent. Its main focus is Ivory Coast, where local violence against allogènes has recently taken on particularly shocking forms. The obsessive insistence of the regime of Laurent Gbagbo on trying to reconstitute a purified nation, cleansed from all foreign elements, led to a fierce struggle over the definition of who is and who is not an autochthon. It is not only a matter of southerners’ claiming to be autochthons and thus excluding northerners. Within the South, notions of autochthony have tended to shrink progressively, leaving the Baoule—who until Gbagbo’s election as president (2001) had been in control of the state—in a highly uncertain situation. Similar uncertainties mark the struggles over autochtonie in Eastern Congo/Zaire, notably because of the difficulties in situating the Banya-
mulenge (or Banyarwanda). Here again, the present-day violence has a long history: Mobutu's manipulations, affirming and then again denying Congolese citizenship for the Banyamulenge, make possible very different interpretations of their history and their belonging. In South Africa, rising xenophobia, notably in Johannesburg, against the *Makwere-kwere*, African immigrants from across the Limpopo, is expressed in a different language. But the implications are similar: the perceived pressure of these foreign immigrants offers South Africans, many of whom managed only quite recently to settle in the city, the possibility of affirming their belonging there. These three cases of violent localist reactions represent strikingly different patterns in the ways the government relates to them. But in all three cases local struggles are clearly centered on the nation-state.

The present-day predicament of many "Pygmy" groups shows another catch in autochthony discourse. Even though everybody agrees that they are the "real" autochthons, they cannot deduce any claims from this since the are not "really" citizens.

Chapter 5 discusses autochthony movements in Europe, where the language of belonging and autochthony spread especially in relation to popular concerns about immigrant labor. This chapter focuses on the Netherlands and what seemed to be an abrupt switch in this country after 2000—marked by two shocking political assassinations—from a multiculturalist approach to a forceful policy of cultural integration. The new and much stricter approach toward immigrants was based on the idea that, rather than socioeconomic marginalization, a lack of cultural integration was the main problem. More coercion would be needed in order to force *allochtonen* to integrate into Dutch culture. However, this begged the question how to define Dutch culture. In this context the autochthony notion again showed its receding quality. The efforts to define a clear cultural and historical core as an anchor for integration policies ran into all sorts of difficulties. Frequent references to the idea of autochthony, as a self-evident opposite to the influx of *allochtonen*, went together with an appeal to highly simplistic notions of culture and history as obvious tools for enforcing integration. The main lesson of the Dutch example seems to be that only concepts of culture and history that address differences—rather than trying to ignore them—are relevant to the present-day context.

Chapter 6 focuses on the striking emotional appeal of rituals of autochthony in present-day Africa. It offers a comparison, based on my fieldwork in East Cameroon, between the rituals of forceful nation-building of the 1960s and 1970s and the funeral "at home" that has become a high
moment for celebrating belonging in the present-day context. Since the 1990s, “nation-building” seems to have become a slogan of the past. Yet if we want to understand subjectivation as an ongoing process, the period of forceful nation-building and its quite artificial efforts to shape subjects into citizens may be of particular importance. Mbembe (1992) is certainly right in emphasizing that we must take the clumsy rituals imposed by the first national leaders much more seriously. After all, they did outline new forms of discipline in which the dominated were often eager to participate, and thus set the stage for the upsurge of autochthony with its special implications for processes of subjectivation. Yet one must also ask why these rituals always seemed so shallow in comparison with present-day rituals of autochthony and how they could disappear with hardly a trace left behind.

Chapter 7 offers, finally, a comparison with similar shifts elsewhere in Africa and in Europe, focusing again on the very different forms rituals of belonging take in these contexts. The question is whether different aesthetics and styles, in Birgit Meyer’s sense—that is, different ways of invoking key referents like “soil” and “body”—can help to explain the variable impact of appeals to autochthony as an ultimate form of belonging.

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Clearly autochthony’s techniques of the self are quite different in Europe and the African continent. But they have one thing in common, and that might be the leitmotif of this book: the paradoxical combination of autochthony’s promise of creating a safe kind of belonging and its practice of nagging uncertainty, since the “real” autochthon always seems to be receding. This relates to what might be the basic tension in this discourse: it celebrates the primacy of being rooted as something self-evident, but it does so to enable participation in a world shaped by migration.
CHAPTER TWO

Cameroon: Autochthony, Democratization, and New Struggles over Citizenship

On February 14, 1998, a train car full of petrol capsized near the station of Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. As was only to be expected, people rushed to the place in order to profit from the accident and fill their jerry cans with the precious liquid. Unfortunately, someone lit a cigarette, and the terrible explosion that followed produced dozens of victims. Strikingly, the terrible event was immediately interpreted in terms of the split between autochtones and allogènes. Comments by Radio Trottoir and on the Internet (the most modern variant of the former) were that “of course” all the victims were autochthons, since they had already chased away the allogènes. The accident had taken place in “their” territory, so the petrol was only for those who really “belonged.”

Noteworthy in this incident—and in many others since the 1990s—is that it apparently was self-evident to people to refer to notions like autochtone and allogène in their comments. This was “not done” in earlier decades when “nation-building” was the all-overriding theme in national politics. Under President Ahmadou Ahidjo, the nation’s founding president, who ruled from independence (1960) until 1982, it was bad taste to mention someone’s ethnic affiliation, let alone to qualify someone openly as an allogène. This was seen as a shocking transgression of the cornerstone of the ideology of Ahidjo’s one-party state: the unity of the Cameroonian people, which was repeated encore et toujours at any official meeting. In those days the standard answer to prudent enquiries about someone’s...