INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN INSTITUTE

LUGARD LECTURE 2007

Lord Lugard and the Ambiguities of Belonging: From Indirect Rule to Present-Day Issues of Autochthony

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It is a real honour to present here the Lord Lugard lecture – I never thought I would ever come so close to this towering figure.

It is also a very good development that IAI and AEGIS are making a tradition of this bi-annual symbiosis.

The IAI has of course a much longer history than AEGIS, a history that was not without difficult moments: at the end of the 1930s it was nearly hijacked by Nazi-Germany; in the late 1980s it was on the verge of being transferred to Harare.

But here we are, still located in good old London.

Yet, it should be noted that we are becoming more mobile after all – a few years ago we met in Hamburg, and now AEGIS made us come to Leiden. So we are looking forward to many more occasions for working together with AEGIS.

Moreover, my compliments to the African Studies Center people for this impressive conference – so good to have Leiden so central on the map of African Studies in Europe!

But now the lecture.

I thought it might be appropriate to start with Lord Lugard himself. All the more so since, somewhat to my surprise, I did stumble on this great figure in the course of my research in Cameroon. Yet, it was at what may have been an unusual moment in his brilliant career – moreover, a moment when he exhibited a striking (and to some of his contemporaries highly shocking) unorthodoxy in applying his own ideas of Indirect Rule.

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But let me emphasize right from the start: this will not be a talk about colonial history and certainly not about the intricacies of Indirect Rule. (After all, I am no longer a historian – I am an anthropologist now.)

What I rather want to focus on is the direct consequences of Lugard's unorthodox application of Indirect Rule in the newly conquered colony of the 'Southern Cameroons' – and notably on its direct relevance for the present-day battle in this area over belonging and exclusion of strangers – or as it is called locally on 'autochthony'.

I am working on a book on the upsurge of autochthony and other discourses on belonging in our supposedly globalizing world – both in Africa and in the Netherlands.[2] What invites this apparently audacious comparison is the fact that in both parts of the world the term 'autochthony' has become quite abruptly a virulent political slogan. And if we talk about autochthony in Cameroon, then the present-day Southwest Province (the former British Southern Cameroon) is the hotspot: this is the part of the country where autochthony and the concomitant preoccupation with the exclusion of 'strangers' have become a true obsession – leading to constant confrontations in everyday life, sometimes violent ones.

Of course, Southwest Cameroon is not the only spot in the continent where people are prepared to kill each other over issues of 'autochthony' – think of Ivory Coast, think of Congo.

Often there is a direct link with the abrupt start of democratisation: In many places local people have good reasons to fear that they will be out-voted by more numerous immigrants, now that votes do again count in multiparty elections. This raises inevitably the issue of whether the more numerous 'strangers' should be allowed to try and dominate politics in the land of their 'hosts' – is it acceptable that a stranger will become mayor in Douala (or in Accra)?

It is, of course seductive, to see this as a return of 'traditional' conflicts: just as, for instance, in Yugoslavia, the implosion of the authoritarian one-party state seems to pull the lid off the 'can of worms', that was brewing underneath all the time. Luckily, several authors have recently warned against this simplistic explanation.

For Africa, for instance, it is crucial to take colonial history into account – and notably the strange colonial paradox between
- on the one hand a frantic search for trying to fix the population so that the administration of the land could be built upon stable, clearly localized groups.
- yet, on the other hand, a equally consequent favouring of migrants, as more enterprising and therefore as more important to the *mise en valeur* of the colony.

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[2] Published as: Peter Geschiere, *Perils of Belonging – Autochthony, Citizenship and Exclusion in Africa & Europe*. University of Chicago Press 2009.

This paradox, that has had such drastic consequences for post-colonial developments up till the present-day, seems to be returning in all colonial regimes, whatever their differences in ideology and practice: in the French *politique des races* as much as in British Indirect Rule or in the Belgian labour policies in the Congo.

Everywhere the logics of state rule seemed to make the fixing of the population into a first priority (compare, for instance, what Janet Roitman writes on how the idea of *les populations flottantes* was to haunt the reports of French administrators).[3] Yet, everywhere, the locals (the 'autochthons') were depicted in colonial reports as slow-witted, obstinate and resistant to change; this invariably in striking contrast to migrants who were celebrated as enterprising and innovating.

This colonial paradox of
- on the one hand, deep distrust of mobile people (the side that is so strongly emphasized in Jim Scott's *Seeing like a State*) and so a true obsession with fixing/localizing people
- and, on the other, the invariable preference for 'more enterprising' migrants

is behind nearly all the struggles over belonging and exclusion that came to dominate African politics since the thaw of democratisation in the 1990s.

Allow me to make a quick caveat here: of course, my aim is not to detect some sort of colonial conspiracy behind present-day conflicts. Nor does it help much to put the blame for these conflicts on colonial heritage. The challenge is rather to surpass the current tendency to oppose so-called 'external' an 'internal' causes of Africa's crisis.

After all, it is precisely this opposition that enables most of the Western press nowadays – certainly in Holland – to bluntly choose internal causes (over and against the supposedly 'politically correct' earlier tendency to put the blame for everything on colonialism). Clearly, it is urgent to understand how colonial interventions became intertwined with local circumstances – just as in general it is the specific intertwinement of external and internal causes that needs to be analysed if we want to gain a better understanding of Africa's ongoing crisis

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Back to Lord Lugard. It was, indeed a shock for me to stumble upon this big name while working in the extremely modest building of the national archives of Buea.

Buea is a specific place in many respects – full of colonial and even post-colonial nostalgia. It was formerly the capital of German Cameroon; and for a brief period in the 1960s also the capital of the West Cameroon, the anglophone part of the country which at independence (1961) joined the francophone part as a separate state in the Federal Republic of Cameroon. The archives, created with great devotion by Edwin

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[3] Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience – An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa*, Princeton University Press 2005.

and Shirley Ardener, are still located near the old German post office opposite of the Bismarck Brunnen (the 'Bismarck Fountain'), recently restored by German development agencies (the fountain itself is now in good state, but unfortunately the access to it has again been rapidly overgrown so that it still takes wet feet to visit it).

During the British period, this area had been ruled as a minor outpost of the colony of Nigeria (some nationalists called it the colony of a colony). Therefore, it was somewhat unexpected for me to find that, in his later days, Lugard himself had played such a central role in the future of this far out part of his realm. I was working through a pile of documents on the destination of the impressive German plantation complex on the slopes of Mount Cameroon – which the British had conquered without much resistance in 1914 when they invaded this jewel in the German colonial crown. Some geography might be necessary here. This area is dominated by the huge volcano Mount Cameroon which towers up more than 4000 metres straight from the coast – a truly impressive sight. It is still a working volcano (there was a big eruption in 2005) and the Germans were quick to grasp its economic potential:

- By the 1890s great stretches of land on its fertile slopes had been expropriated and turned into a huge plantation complex, that according to all observers had no parallel in West Africa.

- Moreover, foggy and wet Buea half way up the mountain was high enough to offer some protection against malaria – which further attracted German *colons*; this was also the reason it became the proud capital of the colony.

In 1914, at the outbreak of the First World War, British troops entered Kamerun from the West, from Nigeria. The French sent several *colonnes* from the South and the East. The latter conquered by far the biggest part of the colony – in some areas after strenuous fighting. But the British occupied without much effort the most valuable part: the German plantations.

The first British reports on the area showed an intriguingly mixed reaction to what they found here:

 • On the one hand the first administrators were clearly impressed by the whole complex, its infrastructure and the concomitant provisions for the settlers.
 • But soon, they began to fear that they had appropriated something of a poisoned gift: for the next few years, the question of how to mobilize all the labourers needed for the maintenance of these huge plantations became an all-overriding problem.
 • This *Arbeiterfrage* (the labour-problem) had been also a central issue in the German colony, leading to fierce clashes between government and planters. However, to the Germans at least the solution was self-evident: coercion was the only way to solve *die Arbeiterfrage*. There may have been constant debates about which forms of forced labour were the most opportune (and notably about the extent to which the planters themselves should be allowed to apply force in recruiting labour), but

coercion was to be a fixed principle in the German version of 'freeing labour'.

To the first British officials on the ground after 1914 it was as self-evident that this was against the very principles of British colonial policy. To them it was clearly unthinkable that the brutal coercive labour policies of the Germans would be continued under British rule. However, this made the question of how else sufficient labour could be mobilized all the more urgent. Several officials referred to the Gold Coast example of cash-crop production by local peasants as the obvious alternative. This implied that the plantations would have to be divided into small holdings 'to be leased to the natives of the country'.[4]

However, they were in for a surprise. In 1917, Sir F. D. Lugard, then Governor of Nigeria, intervened himself. After he had made a visit to the place itself, there was for him clearly no question of dividing the valuable German plantation complex. Moreover, he apparently felt that the District Officers (DOs) there were too sensitive in their objections to forced labour. Lugard's careful formulations are a masterpiece of keeping up appearances (the British could not condone forced labour) and being practical (the German plantations had to be maintained at all costs):

> I do not quite grasp why the European plantations have been a curse. There was, I understand, ample land, mostly forest and unoccupied…. I am not wholly in agreement with the Resident re genuine voluntary labour and I think greater encouragement to labourers to go in voluntarily would probably have done a good deal. It must be remembered that the transition stage from being forced to go in and their going voluntarily must take some time and I am not in any way in favour of relaxing all at once the strict hand of German rule. We want to get to British methods, but to relax suddenly would be apt to encourage the natives in their naturally lazy ways. I would therefore encourage by every means in my power the native to labour. He has learnt under iron discipline what labour means and I should like him to come to realize gradually that we are entirely in favour of his working though we do not wish to force him. This must however dawn on him very gradually or chaos might easily result.[5]

Accordingly, in the next few years the Resident in Buea ordered the various DOs in no uncertain terms that they had to deliver their contingent of labourers by whatever form of pressure they saw fit. The DOs were apparently appalled. Especially the reactions of George Podevin, the DO in Bamenda (that is, in the famous 'Grassfields' with which so many colonials fell in love) are of interest, since this is the area from where a big part of the labour force for the plantations was to come.

Podevin must have been a charismatic figure. He is described as one of the first victims of the Cameroonian version of Masaïtis (and indeed, many British civil servants in Cameroon were as fascinated by these Grassifelds, as their colleagues in East Africa by the Masai). Podevin would even die in his beloved Bamenda.

Apparently this Podevin was so shocked by the orders to make labour available, if

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[4] See, for instance, Buea National Archives (henceforth BNA), CF 11913, report Stobart, April May 1916, under 'Plantations.'
[5] BNA, Qd(a), Lugard, 11 October 1917.

necessary by force, that he even dared to ask the Resident to send him the full text of Lugard's comments, not only the excerpt '… as it is somewhat difficult to understand his Honour's observations without these references'. But the Resident refused this, using strong language to exhort this DO to finally take the recruiting of labour in his district seriously: 'If you still persist in this passive resistance, it may be found necessary to remove you from Bamenda.'[6] Apparently, even to the British, the desire to maintain the impressive plantation complex had priority over the official preference for the 'peasant option'.[7]

However, from 1920 on, the DOs in their annual reports announced triumphantly that labour was now coming forth 'voluntarily' and that the controversial German recruiting methods no longer had to be followed. Did this mean that Lugard's prediction had been right and that, indeed, the 'freeing of labour' only required coercion during a short transitional period? It seems that more hidden forms of force did play a crucial role in this surprisingly rapid solving of the labour problem by the British. In the intervening years, the British system of Indirect Rule had been installed, also in the populous Grassfields (the present-day Northwest Province). In their new role, the 'customary' chiefs were made to mediate in the recruitment of labour, sending their contingents of 'voluntary' labourers down to the coast.

As Piet Konings shows in his through studies of the evolution of the labour force on the plantations, its composition was highly complex.[8] At least initially there was also an important influx of labourers from the French part of Cameroon, who were fleeing the wide array of forced labour imposed by the French. But, in retrospect the pressures by 'customary chiefs' especially in making the transition to voluntary' labour possible for the plantations economy were to have a great impact on subsequent developments in the anglophone region. This 'solution' to mobilize labourers through reinforcing the chiefs involved precisely the groups that are now at the heart of the autochthony issue in the Southwest: it are especially these Grassfielders who are now resented as 'strangers' or even more graphically in the local Pidgin as 'cam-no-goes'. They are now especially targeted by the protagonists of autochthony – mostly politicians who are strongly supported by the Biya regime

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

[7] Cf. Anne Philips (*The Enigma of Colonialism: British Policy in West Africa*, James Currey 1989) on British problems with the 'peasant option.' The Southwest Cameroon example suggests that if there seemed to be a more profitable alternative even people like Lugard or Hugh Clifford, his successor in Nigeria (both quoted by Philips as great defenders of the peasant option) did not hesitate to go against the peasant option. Cf. also Fred Cooper's critique ('Africa and the World Economy', *African Studies Review* 1981: 1-87, see p. 31 and 59 n.36) of Wallerstein for suggesting, in line with his world systems theory approach, that to the colonial state in Africa, the peasant option was 'the path of least resistance.'

[8] See, for instance, Piet Konings, *Labour Resistance in Cameroon – Managerial Strategies and Labour Resistance in the Agro-Industrial Plantations of the Cameroon Development Corporation*, James Currey 1993.

who insist that these 'strangers' should not try and use democratization in order to rule over their 'hosts', the 'autochthons' who so graciously received them.

After Lugard's quite forceful intervention to save the big plantations on Mount Cameroun's slopes – even if this meant recruiting labourers by force – the principle of Indirect Rule became sacrosanct for several decades. Subsequent generations of DOs remained obsessed with finding the true local authorities in order to build their administration on them. In their application Indirect Rule became a celebration of the local – a passionate search for the pure local form. Yet, as Lord Lugard must have foreseen so clearly, Indirect Rule was not only about localism and the fixing of people under the authority of their chief. On the contrary, the redoutable power of the Grassfields chiefs, further fortified by colonial rule, played a pivotal role in making their young men migrate to the economic centres of the colony near the coast. Clearly Indirect Rule could also be a form of mobilizing people, if need be by force.

French colonialism, even though it is often presented as ideologically very different, was marked by similar paradoxes. The role of the first French administrators is of particular interest in this context since they were the ones who introduced the very notion of autochthony in West Africa, in the context of *la politique des races* – in many sense the French counterpart to British Indirect Rule.[9] Recent authors emphasize that all the binary oppositions that have been used to contrast French vs. British colonial rule are highly tenuous: *politique des races* against Indirect Rule, as much as *assimilation* versus association.[10] Especially during the first decades of colonial rule French officers often had a free hand in imposing highly variable arrangements at the local or regional level. And, as military men, many of them were as impressed as the British protagonists of Indirect Rule by African chiefs and their often theatrical display of power. Still, it is also true that French governors – may be more than their British colleagues – learned to be distrustful of the powerful chiefs, like Samory (or earlier Omar Tall) who opposed them so fiercely in the Sahelian region.

The French had good reasons to distrust the powerful chiefs (Samory and others) who had resisted them so fiercely. Therefore, the *politique des races*, developed by governor-general William Ponty around 1910, imposed the search for truly local power-holders rooted in the local groups, in order to discard the warlike aristocracies, often seen as invaders from elsewhere, who had subjected the locals to some sort of imperial authority. The consequence was a determined search for truly local groups who had to be protected against foreign invaders. It was in this context that the term *autochtone* was introduced on the African continent, where it soon would prove to have a chequered and tortuous history.

A central figure in this new policy was Maurice Delafosse, the great French ethnographer/administrator – in many senses Lugard's peer. Delafosse's huge, three volume book *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (from 1912 – but based on research in the 1890s) can

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[9] See further Geschiere 2009, p. 13-16.
[10] See Peter Geschiere, 'Chiefs and Colonial Rule in Cameroon: Inventing Chieftaincy, French and British Style,' *Africa* 1993, 63(2): 151-76

be read as a determined search for sorting out the autochthonous groups among the kaleidoscope of tribal groups, chieftaincies and larger state formations which the French had to confront in their newly conquered territories. Indeed, a *Leitmotiv* in the book was that 'some *indigènes* are *autochthones*, whereas others are definitely not'. A vital question in his encyclopaedic description of the various groupings in this area was therefore whether a certain group was or was not autochthonous.

Striking is that, 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 a somewhat condescending language (they are qualified as *malheureux,* poor and backward). In contrast, Delafosse devotes more than 40 pages to, for instance, the Peul/Dyula ethnic conglomerate since he is clearly fascinated by their peregrinations throughout West Africa and their reputation as born empire builders.

We meet again the strange paradox that, despite their obsession with fixing people, the French administrators turned out to be – like their colleagues in other parts of Africa – much more taken by migrants, as more enterprising and resourceful. *La politique des races* may have formally imposed a determined search for the 'true' autochthon, but Delafosse's book is again marked by a strong interest precisely in migrant groups (*La population flottante)*.

One of the reasons that the term *autochtone* and its fixed counterpart, *allogène* or *allochtone* (after being introduced by the French in their search for the real locals) did flourish in this new setting was that it easily articulated with distinctions already existing locally – be it that these had often a quite different tenor. Especially in the interior of the West African Sudan local patterns of organization were built around some sort of complementary opposition between 'people of the land' and 'ruling' groups; the latter were (and are) often proud to have come in from elsewhere. Thus, '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.

A good example is the vast literature on the Mossi (the largest group in present-day Burkina Faso). For generations of researchers, this opposition between what they termed *autochtones* and 'rulers' became the central issue inspiring highly sophisticated, structuralist studies (cf. the studies by Zahan, Izard and Luning). In this context, the notion of autochthony took on somewhat primivitist overtones. Sabine Luning, 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 'pre-social', 'terrestrial' beings, who were only fully humanized – that is included into a society – by the coming of the *naam*, their foreign rulers.[11] 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, decidedly above *les autochtones*.

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[11] Sabine Luning, *Het Binnenhalen van de Oogst – Ritueel en Samenleving in Maane, Burkina Faso*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Leiden 1997.

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 democratisation in this part of Africa. One of the main targets of the upsurge of autochthony in neighbouring Ivory Coast, under Houphouët-Boigny's successors – first Bedié and now Gbagbo – are precisely these Mossi immigrants who are supposed to have taken the land of the 'autochthons' of the rich cocoa belt in Southern Ivory Coast. In this version – 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. Clearly, despite their self-evident or even 'natural' appearance, terms like autochthony can take on very different meanings in different contexts and times.

Examples abound, also from other colonial contexts, of this colonial paradox: on the one hand high priority to 'fix' the population (that is, to make people stay in the place where they belong) and, on the other, effective encouragement of migration and mobility. For instance, the present-day tensions in Kivu (East Congo) around the Banyamulenge/Banyarwanda – the fights over whether they do or do not belong in the area – can only be understood against the background of the large-scale MIB-project (*Mission d'immigration des Banyarwanda*) of the Belgian colonial government. Created in 1937 by an agreement between Belgian administrators in Rwanda and Kivu it moved, until its closure in 1955, more than 85,000 Rwandan migrants from the densely populated highlands into the fertile Massisi zone, where they would be needed for the *mise en valeur* of this supposedly under-populated area. Historians impute the Belgian colonial government to have had a true preoccupation with fixing the domestic community in order to guarantee production of food for labourers in the mining economy, but if the *mise en valuer* seemed to require it, it was eager to stimulate migrations (cf. also the central role of Luba Kasai in the mining economy in Elisabethville/Lubumbashi).[12]

In all the hotspots of struggles over belonging in present-day Africa, such colonial ambiguities play a major role. Clearly it is therefore important to try and historicize notions like autochthony despite – or maybe rather because of – their often blatant denial of history.

However, it is important as well to emphasize that these African examples are certainly not exceptional. Colonial administrators were not the only ones to struggle with the tension between the need to stabilize the population, seen as a prerequisite for modern government, and the equally pressing need to mobilize labour and make it available for the development of a market economy. It is precisely in the context of such ambiguities that notions like autochthony can serve as a powerful panacea,

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[12] See Stephen Jackson, 'Sons of Which Soil? The Language and Politics of Autochthony in Eastern D.R.Congo,' *African Studies Review* 49 | (2006): 95-122; Jean-Claude Williame, *Banyarwanda et Banyamulenge: violences ethniques et gestion de l'identitaire au Kiva*, Brussels: CEDAF 1997.

disregarding important differences and none the less retaining high emotional appeal and mobilizing force.

Indeed, a central ambiguity of the notion of autochthony is that (like many notions of belonging) it seems to offer a celebration of the local, while in practice it is rather about a claim to special access to the national or even the global, and even more, of excluding 'strangers' from this access (this seems to apply to present-day European examples as much as to the preceding African cases). In the notion itself – just as in the colonial paradox highlighted above – belonging and mobility seem to be intricately intertwined. Or as AbdouMaliq Simone puts it: '… the fight is not so much over the terms of territorial encompassment, but rather over maintaining a sense of "open-endedness".'[13]

Autochthony may seem a bit retrograde, just like Indirect Rule or other localisms, but it can be tuned in to modern developments in a quite unexpected way. I started to work on autochthony because I was struck by the coincidence that the same jargon became quite abruptly so highly politically charged in such different contexts as Cameroon and the Netherlands. Since then, this strange notion of autochthony took me to widely different spots in the world and in history – like some sort of magical bird, turning up in unexpected places. Leading thinkers have used it and still do so:

- Levi-Strauss in his analysis of the Oedipus figure.
- Heidegger, proposing the heavy term of *Bodenständigkeit* as translation of autochthony and using it to defend a more communautarian 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 Heidegger made overtures to the Nazis).
- Derrida on the contrary used autochthony as a symbol of a too limited (even 'phallic') form of democracy, which we urgently need to surpass for a more universalistic version of democracy. [14]

From this quick overview, it may already be clear that the Dutch ventured into deep waters when they adopted precisely this term to define their 'own-ness' in trying to deal with the immigration problem. Moreover, autochthony seems to take central space in the most varying places in our present-day world: not only in Africa, Flanders and the Netherlands, but also in Quebec, Italy and the Pacific.

Of course this omnipresence in our supposedly globalizing world should not surprise. Since the 1990s 'belonging' seems to have become an all-overriding concern everywhere in the world.

I especially like the way Tanya Murray Li (a Canadian anthropologist working on Southeast Asia) evokes a 'conjuncture of belonging', that seems to be global, as characteristic to our era.

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[13] AbdouMaliq Simone, 'On the Worldling of African Cities,' *African Studies Review* 44 (2000): 15-43, see p. 25.

[14] See for further references to this and the following sections, Geschiere 2009, ch.1.

She shows it can rightly be termed 'conjuncture', in the sense that all sorts of apparently diverging processes: ecological concerns like the global interest in biodiversity; worldwide concern with disappearing cultures and indigenous peoples; the neo-liberal turn which meant for Africa, for instance, democratisation and decentralization; the immigration problem in Europe and US seem to converge automatically into a growing obsession with belonging.

They may seem different indeed, but they all converge to the issue of belonging.

Still one should add, that it is a conjuncture that may surprise: rather than 'the end of history' à la Fukuyama, the victory of 'the' market and the global neo-liberal turn seems to have brought an increasing obsession with belonging and boundary-making that can acquire highly violent overtones.

In the context of this 'global conjuncture of belonging' the notion of autochthony may be of special interest.

Autochthony seems to express some sort of condensed, ultimate form of belonging: how can one 'belong' more than by proving that one is born from the soil itself?

Yet, despite its apparent self-evidence, it proves to be a notion that is quite difficult to grasp and to define in empirical terms.

In practice, it has a strange receding quality. As soon as one tries to define it empirically, it is always severely contested. There is always the suspicion that someone else might be more autochthonous, or that the community is undermined by traitors within: false autochthons who have to be unmasked in order to safeguard the community's purity. A consequence of all this seems to be that autochthony discourse (like all discourse on 'belonging') is marked by an unsettling tension between
- a promise of basic security
- and a practice of haunting insecurity.

It can be of interest, therefore, to go even further back into history, to the cradle of autochthony: classical Athens of the 5th century BC. It is from there that thinkers like Heidegger and Derrida drew their inspiration. But already in this classical context, the notion displays the striking ambiguities and tensions that beset all discourses on belonging, whether in colonial times, in the post-colony or, for instance, in present-day Europe. So forgive me one last excursion, even though it may seem to lead us far afield: I promise that classical Athens can be of interest to Africanists or for people struggling with the immigration issue in Europe.[15]

In this, I am certainly not the only one. On 2nd May 1990 a Member of Parliament in the French *Assemblée Nationale*, a certain Marie-France Stirbois, member for Le Pen's *Front National* surprised her colleagues by delivering a passionate speech about

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[15] See for references Geschiere 2009 p. 7-13 and ch. 5.

classical Athens and the way in which Euripides, Plato and even Socrates himself defended the case of autochthony.

Apparently her colleague *deput*és were somewhat surprised since until then Mme Stirbois' interventions had not betrayed such an in-depth interest in the classics (or for that matter in any academic subject). Clearly another sympathiser of *Le Front National* – probably a professor at the Sorbonne – had written her speech for her.

The good thing was that this inspired two leading French classicists – Nicole Loraux (a good friend of Derrida) and Marcel Detienne to look into the issue of Athenian autochthony.

The issue itself is fascinating – certainly to those who had to wrestle with Plato and other in their school days; but also to Africanists faced with such a violent upsurge of autochthony thinking as we are confronted with in these days.

Apparently, the Athenian citizens of the 5th century BC were prone to boast of their autochthony, which supposedly made their city exceptional among all the Greek *poleis*. All other cities had histories of having been founded by immigrants. Only the Athenians were truly *autochthonos* – that is, born from the land where they had always lived. To the Athenians of Pericles' days (the golden age of Athens) this was the very sign of their city's excellence and also the secret behind their special propensity for *demokratia*. The classical texts – Euripides, Plato, Demosthenes – are surprisingly vivid on this aspect. To the present-day reader, it might come as a shock to read in the text of these venerated classical authors the same language that is now so brutally propagated by Africa's protagonists of autochthony or Europe's prophets of the New Right.

To give just a few rapid examples:
In 'Erechtheus' (which must have been one of his most popular tragedies at the time), Euripides makes Praxithea, queen of Athens, who is ready to sacrifice her daughter in order to save the city, deliver the following clauses:

> I could not find any city better than this. To begin with we are an autochthonous people, not introduced from elsewhere; other communities 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.

One can imagine a long applause after this phrase from the audience of Athenian citizens, all the more so since the first performance of the play was in the year 422, when the city was at the height of its naval power but already locked in mortal combat with Sparta, its arch rival.

In 'Menexenes', Plato makes Socrates celebrate Athenian uniqueness in similar terms: '… the forefathers of these men were not of immigrant stock, nor were 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'.

An even more telling example of the force of autochthony thinking in the Athenian context comes from Plato's 'Politeia', the most imaginative of his writings. Even for this model city he deemed it essential that the founder (who necessarily must have come from elsewhere to found his 'new' city) had to acquire a certain aura of autochthony in order to create an effective myth of belonging; Plato describes this as 'a beautiful lie', that will serve as the basis for the civic instruction of the city's newly settled citizens.

It might be good to remember that all this celebration of autochthony emerged only one century after the high time of the famous Greek colonization (the founding of new cities throughout the Mediterranean) that was to form the basis of the Greeks' Golden Age. Striking is also that, for instance, the man who is still seen as Athens' most genial historian, Thucydides, seems intent to completely ignore this preoccupation with autochthony – even though he must have lived right in the middle of it. He consistently avoids the very word *autochthon,* probably because he distrusted its rhetorical use. Instead he did the opposite by explaining Athens' pre-eminence by its success in attracting immigrants from all over Greece. Thucydides sees it rather as a sign of the city's greatness that it even allowed at least some of these immigrants to become citizen.

Modern historians indeed see the upsurge of autochthony in 5th century Athens as a new phenomenon in a city in which these immigrants (the *metoikoi* who in principle were indeed not citizens) were becoming ever more numerous – and, at least some of them, ever richer. The fierceness of Athens' autochthony – which comes to the fore most graphically from the ways in which Euripides tunes in to his audience – might have a lot to do with the jealousy of ordinary citizen of the wealth these immigrants were accumulating in their hosts' territory.

We seem to be back in Southwest Cameroon!

But let us return to the *Front National's* attempt to hijack the Athenian examples and the fierce reaction to this by leading French classicists.
Both Loraux and Detienne try to show that Mme Stirbois' and her Front's effort to appropriate these classical authors for defending their own programme are unjustified.

> Detienne emphasizes especially Plato's irony in the words he puts in Socrates' mouth.
- Loraux rather stresses the absence of racism in the Athenian context.[16]

However, re-reading the old classical texts I could not help to be struck by the heavy charge of autochthony thinking that they do contain.

I would advise students of autochthony and belonging in particular to read Euripides' *Ion* as one of his best, since in it he makes mortals protest again the Gods,

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[16] Marcel Detienne, *Comment être autochtone? Du pur Athénien au Français raciné*, Paris: Seuil, 2003;
Nicole Loraux, Né de la terre: mythe et politique à Athènes. Paris: Seuil, 1996.

but one that can be read also as some sort of carnival of autochthony in which he spares no trick or subterfuge in order to prove that Ion (the ancestor of the Ionians and an important link in the line of Athens' kings) was after all an autochthon and truly 'born from the soil'.

As one of my Cameroonian friend (himself an *allogène* in the capital, Yaounde) bitterly remarked after a new election stunt by *les autochtones* in the city: apparently with autochthony, anything goes.

I was impressed especially by Loraux's analysis of the impossibility of autochthony thinking, more than by Loraux' and Detienne's efforts to 'save' Athens. To summarise, her highly sophisticated argument runs like this. The insistence on having remained on the same spot – in Athenian autochthony as in its subsequent variants – is basically a denial of history. After all, history is always about movement. Thus, autochthony is a kind of negative history which always needs an Other – a migrant or rather a 'stranger', who does move – in order to define itself.

In practice, this implied in Athens, especially for its aristocratic families, a guilty denial of founding histories which emphasized their foreign origins and of which they used to be so proud, as some sort of charter. In the time of autochthony such a secret became a skeleton in the cupboard – which could be exposed any time by an informer.Thus, a basic incompatibility arises from Loraux's sharp analysis of the classical texts on autochthony. She shows most convincingly that in many ways history – that is, movement and the traces of it - is constantly undermining autochthony's rigidly closed memory.

More recent examples of autochthony's ambiguities suggest that one might take her analysis one step further: indeed, Loraux' emphasis on autochthony's uneasy relationship with history – and probably this applies to all discourses on belonging, which can only integrate a very rigid version of their own history – can also explain the deep insecurity that seems to be a fixed corollary of autochthony discourse. Stephen Jackson speaks for the Kivou (East Congo) of 'a nervous language' when he characterizes the fierce debates between Banyarwanda and others about who belong (and especially who does not).[17] I think this is a very apt term, all the more since it highlights the frightening tendency to violence that seems to be hidden in many discourses on belonging that lately have exploded time and again in this area.

It is this tension between
- on the one hand, the promise of autochthony as a supreme form of belonging to offer some sort of primal security – what can be a safer claim to belong than being born from the soil?
- and, on the other, a practice of basic doubt (the need to unmask fake autochthons) and insecurity

that gives these discourses such violent overtones. Remember Radio *Mille Collines'* terrible warnings in Rwanda against the *cancrelats* that were hiding inside and that had to be exterminated.

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[17] Jackson 2006.

Another Cameroonian friend (himself an autochthon of Yaounde) said when his friend was bypassed as mayor after the elections since he was not 'really' an autochthon: 'This autochthony thing is terrible – you can go to bed thinking you are an autochthon and wake up to find you have become an *allogène*.'

The classical Athenian example seems to express this basic uncertainty in a most pregnant way.

To conclude.

We seem to have come a long way from Lord Lugard and his unorthodox way to use Indirect Rule for solving the labour problem on the big plantations near the coast – a solution which more recently was to make the area a hotbed of struggles over autochthony, belonging and exclusion.

Yet, I hope the red line in all this remained clear: it is important to give back autochthony/belonging to history.

Let us return to Southwest Cameroon: Protagonists of autochthony in the area now tend to see the opposition between the Sawa – the sea people, that is the autochthons – and the *cam-no-goes* as a given. They themselves 'belong' to the coastal area and the others have to respect that, even if they are also citizens of the Cameroonian nation.
Yet, history highlights rather the mobility of all these people, the 'sea-people' included. And the colonial intermezzo played its own role in bringing about these tensions: especially the intriguing colonial paradox between proclaiming the need to localize people, and at the same time favouring migrants.

So, one of the lessons of invoking the towering figure of Lord Lugard is no doubt that it is always important to relate claims to belonging – especially now that we live a 'global conjuncture of belonging' – to history. However, however, this is only one step. Will historicizing belonging indeed help to relativize it, and to nuance the tensions that notions like autochthony evoke nowadays?

Maybe only in very special circumstances.

A much more important challenge might be to understand why a discourse like autochthony – whether it is historically correct or not – has such enormous emotional appeal? How is it possible that the same language (*eigen volk eerst*/your own people first) has such enormous mobilizing force in completely different circumstances (for instance, in Cameroon or Ivory Coast, but as much in Flanders or the Netherlands)?

Historicizing the central notions will hardly break their hold over people's minds. So it might be even more important for us academics to try and understand the emotional charge of these heavily laden notions. Probably it is no accident that my two colleagues here on the podium work on similar issues:
- Phil Burham on the 'politics of culture'.

- Birgit Meyer on 'aesthetics' and 'style' in order to understand why certain images catch on and others fail to convince.[18]

In the book which I should have finished a long time ago now, I try to understand this emotional appeal of autochthony by comparing rituals of autochthony in Cameroon (notably the funeral 'at home' – that is in the village) with, on the one hand, the earlier rituals of nation-building of the 1970s, and, on the other hand, with the artificial and insipid rituals of autochthony in present-day Holland (*inburgeringscursussen* and *burgerschapsrituelen*/citizenship rituals).[19]

But I am afraid that this is the topic for another lecture.

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[18] See Philip Burnham, *The Politics of Cultural Difference in Northern Cameroon*. IAI and Edinburgh University Press, 1996; Birgit Meyer, 'Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,' in *Religion Beyond a Concept,*'ed. H. de Vries, Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 704-23.
[19] See further Geschiere 2009, ch. 6.