Autochthony: Local or Global? New Modes in the Struggle over Citizenship and Belonging in Africa and Europe

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Abstract
The past 15 years have brought an upsurge of “autochthony.” It has become an incendiary political slogan in many parts of the African continent as an unexpected corollary of democratization and the new style of development policies (“by-passing the state” and decentralization). The main agenda of the new autochthony movements is the exclusion of supposed “strangers” and the unmasking of “fake” autochthons, who are often citizens of the same nation-state. However, Africa is no exception in this respect. Intensified processes of globalization worldwide seem to go together with a true “conjuncture of belonging” (T.M. Li 2000) and increasingly violent attempts to exclude “allochthons.” This article compares studies of the upsurge of autochthony in Africa with interpretations of the rallying power of a similar discourse in Western Europe. How can the same discourse appear “natural” in such disparate circumstances? Recent studies highlight the extreme malleability of the apparently self-evident claims of autochthony. These discourses promise the certainty of belonging, but in practice, they raise basic uncertainties because autochthony is subject to constant redefinition against new “others” and at ever-closer range.
INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to explore the recent upsurge of the notion of “autochthony”—with its implicit call for excluding strangers (“allochthons”), whoever they may be—as a political slogan with virulent undertones in different parts of the world. This upsurge points to a general obsession with belonging that seems to be the flip side of the intensifying processes of globalization. Comparing autochthony with the more widespread notion of “indigenous peoples” reveals certain ambiguities inherent in this volatile quest for belonging and for limiting the ranks of those who lay claim to be “real” citizens.

“Autochthony” and “indigenous” go back to classical Greek history and have similar implications. “Autochthony” refers to “self” and “soil.” “Indigenous” means literally “born inside,” with the connotation in classical Greek of being born “inside the house.” Thus, both notions inspire similar discourses on the need to safeguard “ancestral lands” against “strangers” who “soil” this patrimony, as well as on the right of first-comers to special protection against later immigrants. Nonetheless, these two terms have followed separate trajectories, with different repercussions for issues of belonging today. Over the past decades, the notion of “indigenous peoples” has acquired a new lease of life with truly global dimensions, especially since the founding of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (1982), representing groups from all six continents. The notion of autochthony has had a more limited spread. During the 1990s, it became a burning issue in many parts of Africa, inspiring violent efforts to exclude “strangers”—especially in francophone areas, but spilling over into anglophone countries. During roughly the same period it became a key notion in debates on multiculturalism and immigration in several parts of Europe, notably Flemish Belgium and the Netherlands.1

The spread of the notion into Western contexts is of particular interest. Most Westerners think of “indigenous peoples” as “others” who live in far-flung regions and whose cultures can only “survive” if they receive special protection, but the epithet of autochthon is claimed by important groups in the West itself. This term thus highlights the prominence that the obsession with belonging and the exclusion of strangers have assumed in day-to-day politics worldwide, in the North as much as in the South.

The new, global dynamics of the discourse on autochthony can therefore serve as a strategic entry point for understanding the intriguing intertwining of globalization with intensified struggles over belonging and exclusion. The New World Order, announced by President Bush, Sr., and others at the end of the cold war, seems to be marked less by freely circulating cosmopolitans than by explosions of communal violence and fierce attempts at exclusion. Appadurai (1996) signaled some years

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1Recently, Umberto Bossi’s Lega Nord in Italy has adopted the term as well. Redefining its “other” from the southern Italian to the allochthonous immigrant (especially from North Africa), it increasingly adopts the term autochthony to refer to its “own” people.
ago that globalization and the undermining of the nation-state inspire a vigorous “production of locality.” Meyer & Geschiere (1999) characterized globalization as “a dialectic of flow and closure.” In a seminal contribution based on research in Indonesia on the politics of “indigenous peoples,” Tanja Murray Li (2000) evokes a “global conjuncture” of widely different trends that all converge toward a growing concern with belonging. Neoliberal economics, which inspire new development policies of “by-passing the state” and “decentralization;” political liberalization, which turns questions like “who can vote where?” into burning issues; global concern with ecological degradation; the strong interest in the West in “disappearing cultures”—all these trends seem to be working toward a defense of local roots. This conjuncture also creates great uncertainty and intense doubt. Belonging promises safety, but in practice it raises fierce disagreement over who “really” belongs—over whose claims are authentic and whose are not.

Two points stand out with some urgency from the literature discussed below. First is the point—made most explicitly for Africa by Achille Mbembe (2001, p. 283; 2002, p. 7) and AbelMaliq Simone (2001, p. 25)—that notions such as autochthony or indigenous appear to defend a return to the local, but in practice are more about access to the global. It may seem logical to equate “autochthony” with a celebration of the local and of “closure” against global “flows”; yet, in practice it is often directly linked to processes of globalization. Simone (2001, p. 25) is correct 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.’” What is at stake is often less a closer definition of the local than a struggle over excluding others from access to new avenues to riches and power.

A second point is the surprising elasticity of autochthony discourses, allowing for constant shifts and redefinitions, but also making this discourse a somewhat empty one. Similar discourses, inspiring almost identical slogans, can have great mobilizing power in extremely different contexts, from present-day Africa to Europe. Studies that place the notion in a longer historical perspective (Arnaut 2004, Bayart et al. 2001, Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000, Socpa 2003) show how easily autochthony discourses can switch from one “other” to the next one, without losing their credibility. This may explain their great resilience in the face of modern changes, easily adapting to the constant redrawing of borders that seem to be inherent to processes of globalization. The flip-side is a certain fuzziness. In any given situation, who can claim autochthony may appear to be self-evident. Yet, any attempt to define the autochthonous community in more concrete terms provokes fierce disagreements and raises nagging suspicion about “faking.” Indeed, autochthony discourse is of a segmentary nature: Belonging tends to be constantly redefined at ever-closer range. It is precisely this emptiness—an identity with no particular name and no specified history, only expressing the claim to have come first, which is always open to contest—that can give this notion such very violent implications.

Below follows a brief discussion of the genealogy of “autochthony” in Africa—notably its role in the imposition of French colonial rule, a crucial link to its current upsurge on the continent. Next we discuss its new dynamics in postcolonial Africa in the 1990s, in the context of what can be termed the new politics of belonging, using Cameroon, Ivory Coast, and the Great Lakes Region in Central Africa as specific examples. We conclude with a brief comparison with the flowering of autochthony discourses in Europe, particularly in Belgian Flanders.

**COLONIAL ROOTS: AUTOCHTHONY AND FRENCH RULE IN THE SUDAN**

Like endogenes, the term autochtonos had positive connotations in classical Greek. The
Athenians justified their claim to superiority over other Greeks by emphasizing that only they were truly “autochthons” of their area. To them, moreover, their autochthony explained their natural propensity for democracy (Loraux 1996). Yet Nicole Loraux shows also that this defense of rootedness was paradoxically balanced by a celebration of a “fundamental alterity” in the myths, highlighting the role of strangers as founders of the society. We will come back to both these aspects.

The term never gained wide currency in English. The Oxford English Dictionary defines autochthony, as “son of the soil” but lists only historical examples for this meaning; interestingly, more recent etymologies refer to its secondary usage in geology and botany (as in autochthonous rock formations or plants). Jean and John Comaroff (2001) pick up this usage in an article on the widespread panic over a huge fire on the Cape Peninsula, which destroyed South Africa’s cherished heritage of fynbos (a unique plant community) that fed into the national preoccupation over the post-Apartheid invasion of “aliens” from other parts of Africa. The Comaroffs see this surprising convergence as a possible explanation for the haunting power of the autochthony discourse in current contexts, emphasizing its “naturalizing” capacity, as a “naturalizing allegory of collective being-in-the-world,” that makes it seem “… the most ‘authentic,’ the most essential of all modes of connection” (pp. 648–49).

In the French version, now prevalent in francophone Africa, autochtones are people, not plants or rocks. First introduced by the French at the time of the colonial conquest of Sudan in the late nineteenth century, the concept itself was envisaged as playing a vital role in categorizing these new subjects to aid in administering these vast, newly conquered areas. For the administrator and ethnographer Maurice Delafosse, for instance, later to become a towering figure in organizing French rule in West Africa, autochthony was a kind of first criterion in his seminal three-volume *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (1912). He used it as a first step in categorizing the dazzling variety of indigènes: Some indigènes were autochthons, whereas others definitely were not (Delafosse 1912, p. 280; Arnaut 2004, p. 207). His emphasis on this distinction was derived from the *politique des races*, a fixed principle for setting up a colonial administration during the early decades of French rule (see Suret-Canale 1964, p. 103). Unlike the British with their Indirect Rule, which concentrated on finding “real” chiefs, French policy, at least initially, was to by-pass chiefs (who might prove troublesome) in favor of homogeneous cantons, populated by the same race; hence, ruling immigrant groups had to be distinguished from true autochtones. In practice, however, the French as well soon resorted to involving local chiefs in the administration of the new colonies (see Crowder 1964, Lombard 1967, Suret-Canale 1964). Indeed, in spite of Delafosse’s determined search for autochtones, in line with the *politique des races*, he shows himself in practice to be more interested in mobile groups who had created larger political units. For instance, he devotes nearly 40 pages to the Peul—he is clearly fascinated by their peregrinations throughout West Africa and their reputation as empire builders, whereas most “autochthonous” groups receive only a brief mention (Delafosse 1912; see Triaud 1998). Also noteworthy is Delafosse’s somewhat condescending language for these autochthonous groups, describing them as malheureux (Delafosse 1912, p. 238).

This paradox of looking for autochthons as an anchor for the administration while at the same time treating them as some sort of lesser group became even more pronounced as the autochthon/non-autochthon distinction became sanctioned under French rule. In many of the societies in the Senegal-Niger area that Delafosse described, a complementary opposition between “people of the land” and “ruling” groups, who claimed to have come in from elsewhere, dominated local patterns of organization. Thus, “the chief of the land” formed (and still forms) a kind of ritual
counterpoint to the chief of the ruling dynasty. To the French “autochthony” was an obvious term to describe this opposition. A good example is the vast literature on the Mossi (the largest group in present-day Burkina Faso). For generations of ethnologists, this opposition between what they termed autochtones and “rulers” became the central issue inspiring highly sophisticated, structuralist studies (Izard 1985, Luning 1997, Zahan 1961; see also Grénaïs 1985). In this context, the notion of autochthony again took on somewhat condescending overtones. Luning (1997, p. 11), for instance, points out how in the prevailing discourse of the Mossi Maana, the tengabiise (now translated as autochthons) were characterized as some sort of “presocial” terrestrial beings, who were only included into human society 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 top of the prestige scale, decidedly above the “autochthons.” This stands in sharp contrast to how the opposition autochthony, stranger, came to be seen in later phases of postcolonial rule.

**AUTOCHTHONY IN THE POSTCOLONY**

In the 1990s especially, after the end of the cold war and the demise (at least formally) of one-party authoritarianism on the African continent, the seemingly clear-cut categorizations of colonial administrators according to the autochthons/non-autochthons divide turned out to be explosive. Ivory Coast made the headlines recently for the fierce hatred underlying the violence with which self-styled autochthons are trying to push out immigrants. But similar outbursts have been reported elsewhere. A major factor precipitating this violence was the wave of democratization that overran the continent. Democratization as such was certainly welcomed, but as several authors (Arnaut 2004, Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000, Socpa 2003) point out, the reintroduction of multipartyism inevitably turned into red buttons such questions as “who can vote where?” or, more important, “who can stand candidate where?”—that is, questions of where one belongs. In the more densely settled areas and in larger cities in particular, the fear by locals of being outvoted by more numerous “strangers,” often citizens of the same nation-state, reached such a pitch that the defense of autochthony seems to take precedence over national citizenship. A further complication is that the regimes in power in many countries encourage this kind of strife over belonging: The old slogans of nation-building and reinforcing national citizenship rapidly give way to support for localist movements, clearly with the aim to divide the opposition.

A more hidden factor was an equally dramatic switch in the policies of the development establishment during the 1980s from a decidedly statist approach to development (emphasizing nation-building as a prerequisite for achieving progress) to an emphasis on decentralization, by-passing the state and reaching out to “civil society” and non-governmental organizations. Several authors (Chauveau 2000, Geschiere 2004, Jackson 2003) have pointed out that, again, this switch in policy almost inevitably triggered fierce debates about belonging, i.e., over who could or could not participate in a project new-style.

Nearly all authors note, moreover, that such upsurges of autochthony during the 1990s were triggered not simply by political manipulations from above, but were equally

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2There is an intriguing similarity between forms of “diarchy” between land-chief and ruler (usually coming from elsewhere) described by anthropologists for SE Asia (for an overview, see Schefold 2001; Spyer 1992, 2000).

3This was certainly not limited to francophone Africa. A notorious case was in Zambia when former President Kenneth Kaunda was ousted from political competition to his successor Frederick Chiluba on the grounds of Kaunda’s descent from foreigners.
impelled by strong feelings from below. Some authors (Geschiere & Gugler 1998, Monga 1995, Vidal 1991) discuss the proliferation of funeral rituals, turning the burial “at home” (that is, in the village of origin) into a key moment in the contest over belonging. Others point to struggles over land (Lentz 2003 on N. Ghana/Burkina Faso) or the staging of ritual associations (Austen 1992 on Duala) as crucial moments in popular manifestations to defend people’s autochthony.

General studies of the autochthony explosion in postcolonial Africa are still rare. Therefore we will enlarge on the themes outlined above with reference to three specific regional contexts: Southern Cameroon, Southern Ivory Coast, and the Great Lakes Region.

**Cameroon: Autochthony Versus National Citizenship**

The upsurge of autochthony as an incendiary issue in Cameroon during the 1990s has to be understood in relation to the determined, sometimes even desperate, struggle of President Paul Biya, the former one-party leader, to remain in power. Only toward the end of 1990 did Biya, and then probably under direct pressure from François Mitterrand, at the time President of France, permit freedom of association. This immediately unleashed a proliferation of opposition parties. The regime’s stubborn refusal to meet popular demand for a National Conference inspired the opposition to launch “Operation Ghost Town,” which blocked public life in the major cities for over a year. Biya refused to give in and after 1992 the operation petered out. The crucial presidential elections of 1992 turned into a scandal since Biya’s 38% to 35% victory over his main rival (John Fru Ndi) was obtained through massive vote rigging. However, Biya continued to hold out against all pressure, his party won all subsequent elections, and the recent presidential election (October 2004) gave him a landslide victory (more than 70%) over Fru Ndi (still his main rival), who this time won only 17% of the vote. Biya’s capacity for political survival is indeed impressive, all the more so since this was taking place in the midst of a deep economic crisis. This regime is generally counted among the most troubling examples of the “criminalization” of the state (see Bayart et al. 1999), giving the country a top position on the list of the world’s most corrupt countries. Not only is Biya almost totally lacking in personal charisma, he has also become increasingly invisible to the population, spending much of his time abroad and limiting his public appearances to a minimum. This begs the question as to how he and his team nonetheless managed to completely outmaneuver the opposition, which had seemed in such a strong position in the early 1990s. For the authors quoted below one obvious answer lies in the regime’s success at playing the autochthony card. Indeed, Cameroon offers a prime example of the effectiveness that autochthony slogans can acquire in national politics.

Geschiere & Nyamnjoh (2000) show how the regime used the growing fear among autochthons in the core economic areas of the Southwest Province and Douala city of being outvoted under the new, democratic constellation by more numerous immigrants from the highlands of the Northwest and West Province (Bamenda and Bamileke; see also Bayart et al. 2001). After the 1996 municipal elections, the government actively supported large-scale and quite violent demonstrations by “autochthons” in Douala, who were protesting that Bamileke had won election to mayor on an opposition ticket in 4 of the 6 communes of the city. The demonstrators’ slogans were all too clear: The *came-no-goes* (the evocative pidgin term for immigrants) should go home and vote where they really belonged. The government defended its support for this viewpoint with reference to the new Constitution (1996), which emphasizes the need to protect the rights of “minorities” and “indigènes.” There is a telling contrast here between this and the earlier Constitution
of 1972, at the high tide of nation-building, which emphasized the right of any Cameroonian to settle anywhere in the country.

The regime’s support for new-fangled elite associations created another arena for conflict over belonging and autochthony (Nyamnjoh & Rowlands 1998). Again, there is a striking reversal of former policies. Under one-party rule, any form of association outside the party was strictly discouraged. But after the onset of democratization, the regime even obliged regional elites (who were mostly civil servants and therefore in the pay of the government) to form their own associations, often with ostensible cultural aims, but in practice with the firm order to go home and campaign for the President’s party. These regional associations thus offered a welcome channel by which to mobilize votes and neutralize the effects of multipartyism—all the more effective since they also served to exclude elites who were not “really” autochthonous to the area, thereby blocking political participation by allogènes who mostly supported the opposition parties. 4 Konings (2001) describes how effective this tactical mix of support by the regime to elite associations and minority groups, coupled with a general emphasis on belonging, has been in dividing the anglophone opposition that had seemed to form a solid front in the early 1990s. In subsequent years, the Southwest’s autochthons (Anglophones), just as fearful as the (francophone) Douala of being overwhelmed by come-no-go immigrants, became the regime’s staunchest supporters (see also Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003).

All this turmoil provoked a fierce debate among academics and other intellectuals over the rights of autochtones versus allogènes. The Cameroonien review La Nouvelle Expression devoted its May 1996 issue to a seminal overview of competing visions on this burning topic. While several contributors (e.g., Ngijol Ngijol, Bertrand Toko, and Philip Bissek) warned of the dangers of using discourses on autochthony for political ends, the contribution by Roger Nlep of exactly the opposite purport was to attain a central position in the debates in Cameroon. His “theory” of le village électoral argues that “integration” is the central issue in Cameroonien politics, and people can only be fully integrated in the place where they live if there is not un autre chez soi (another home). Therefore, if a person runs for office in Douala and still defends the interests of his village elsewhere, this must be considered as “political malversation.” There is a clear relation here to the regime’s manipulation of voters’ lists, telling people to go “home”—i.e., to the village—to vote. 5

However, also emerging from these debates were other notions on belonging, less directly linked to the vicissitudes of national politics. A crucial statement, as seminal as it is succinct, came from Samuel Eboua, an éminence grise of Cameroonien politics, in the review Impact Tribu-Une (1995, pp. 5, 14):

“Every Cameroonien is an allogène anywhere else in the country... apart from where his ancestors lived and... where his mortal remains will be buried. Everybody knows that only under exceptional circumstances will a Cameroonien be buried... elsewhere.” Statements such as this emphasize how strongly the Cameroonien version of autochthony opposes the very idea of a national citizenship and the principle that every Cameroonien “…has the right to settle in any place...” celebrated by the earlier Constitution at the time of nation-building. Geschiere & Nyamnjoh (2000) underscore the growing emphasis, in the context of autochthony politics, on the place of burial as the ultimate test of belonging. Protagonists of autochthony repeat time and again that as long as immigrants, 6

6See Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000 and Konings 2001 on the “Association of the Elites of the Tenth Province”—an imagined province (Cameroon has only nine provinces), proclaimed by elites who feel excluded from belonging anywhere else.

5For an overview of more extreme voices (for instance on the supposed “ethnofascism” of Bamileke), see Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000, pp. 430 ff.
even if they are Cameroonian citizens, still want to be buried back home in the village, it is clear that this is their home to which they should return to vote (see also Geschiere 2004b and Monga 1995 on the proliferation of “neotraditional” funeral rituals in this context).

Similar arguments play a central role in the confrontation between autochthons and alloénes studied by Antoine Socpa (2003) in two very different parts of the country: the capital Yaoundé and the Extrême Nord Province where violence first erupted after democratization. In both areas autochthony has a long history. In Yaoundé it was mainly the issue of land, the alleged tricks whereby Bamileke immigrants succeeded in appropriating land from the Beti autochthons, that had been a source of animosity between the groups since the time the town first became capital of the colony under the French (1921). But it was the new-style elections that made these tensions acute. Socpa (p. 117 ff) describes how the Bamileke who succeeded in buying a plot for building continue to address the former owner as their “landlord” (bailleur), whereas former owners refer to their “tenants” (locataires) even though they have sold the land. This choice of words became heavy with meaning with the new style of elections. To the “landlords” it was self-evident that at these occasions their “tenants” should behave as good “guests” and not vote for the opposition, i.e., not try and rule in their “landlord’s house.” It was especially the autochthons’ realization that their “guests” nonetheless introduced the SDF, the main opposition party, in the heart of Beti country (supposedly the fief of Biya’s ruling party) that led to violent confrontations in the early 1990s. Socpa (p. 208 ff) also points out the elusive nature of the autochthon notion despite the emphasis it receives. In the competition for political posts, autochthons take it for granted that they should rule in their own area, but some are apparently more “autochthonous” than others. After Biya’s party and his Beti won the 1996 municipal elections in Yaoundé, furious fights broke out between rival local clans who claimed the mayor’s position on the grounds that they were the “real” autochthons. In this very bastion of autochthony that Yaoundé remains within the Cameroonian context, the discourse shows its “segmentary” character, subject as it is to a constant tendency to redefine the “real” autochthon at ever closer range.

Socpa’s parallel study (chapters 6–8) of the bloody collisions in the North between Kotoko and Arab Choa illustrates another aspect of the malleability of the autochthony discourse. Here, in sharp contrast to anywhere else in the country, the Biya regime is now clearly siding with the immigrants (the Arab Choa) against the Kotoko who claim autochthony. This surprising volte-face springs from the determination on the part of the Biya regime to divide the northern bloc on which the power of Ahidjo, Biya’s predecessor, was built and in which the Kotoko sultans played a pivotal role. Biya’s shift to the Arab Choa caused an explosion of banditism—this is the area where les coupeurs des routes are always threatening the highways (see Roitman 2004)—and a series of bloody confrontations between Kotoko and their former subjects. Socpa shows just how easy it is for the government to reverse its arguments for determined support to autochthony movements in the South and justify its support for alloénes in the North.

In a recent article, Geschiere (2004a) studies the vicissitudes of autochthony in yet another part of the country: the sparsely populated forest area of the Southeast. The article discusses the repercussions of the new style of development politics, with its emphasis on decentralization and “by-passing the state.” The impact of the dramatic fall in world commodity prices for Cameroon’s main cash crops (cacao, coffee, and cotton) and the looming depletion of its oil reserves have made timber a crucial export product. Thus the Southeast, formerly the most backward part of the country, has become a region of crucial importance on account of its rich
forest resources. However, vehement opposition from global ecological movements, in this area coupled with strong support from the World Bank, against any further plunder of this “lung of the world,” led to the new forest law (Law 94/01) of 1994, which the Cameroonian government agreed to only under heavy pressure from the Bank and the IMF. As is typical in the new approach to development, the law emphasizes the role of local “communities,” unfortunately not further defined, as central stakeholders in the exploitation of the forest and advocates far-reaching financial decentralization. Thus, municipalities of a few thousand inhabitants stand to receive almost half of their taxes from logging in their areas. This insistence on redistribution and protecting “the” community, however well-meant, immediately set off fierce infighting over belonging in this sparsely populated area. Local communities here are notoriously diffuse, regularly splitting up according to malleable oppositions between lineage branches. In practice, the village committees responsible for managing the new “community forests” are constantly at odds over accusations that some people do not “really” belong. Even kin can be unmasked as allogènes who really belong in another village and therefore should join the new development project there. Apparently there is no end to the segmentary tenor of the autochthony discourse, hence its violent implications: Even within the intimacy of these close-knit villages that seem lost in vast tracts of almost uninhabited forest, it has become possible to unmask one’s neighbor or relative as “really” being a stranger.

Ivory Coast: Autochthony and the Difficult Birth of a “New” Nation

In Ivory Coast during the same troubled period of democratization, the concept of autochthony has taken a markedly different trajectory, notably in its relation to the nation. Whereas in Cameroon autochthony implies some sort of rival for citizenship by denying the formal equality of all citizens and defending special forms of access to the state, in Ivory Coast it refers to efforts to redefine, or even “save,” the nation. In this country the concept of autochthony, again introduced by French colonials, was quickly appropriated by local spokesmen. One of the first signs of a new local élan was the foundation, as early as 1934, of an association calling itself Association de Défense des Intérêts des Autochtones de Côte d’Ivoire (see Arnaut 2004, p. 208; Dozon 2000a, p. 16). At that time, Senegalese and Dahomean clerks occupying the lower ranks of the colonial administration were the main target for Ivorian autochthony. However, soon they were replaced by other “strangers” in the self-definition of autochthons. From the 1920s onward, cocoa production in the southern part of the colony was a magnet for immigrants from the North who first came as laborers, but soon managed to establish their own farms. After independence in 1960, this immigration became one of the mainstays in the miracle ivoirien, the spectacular flowering of the country’s economy. Both Dozon (2000a,b) and Arnaut (2004) mention the role of President Houphouët-Boigny’s Pan-African ideas in deliberately encouraging immigrants to push the “frontier” of cocoa production ever further into the South. Local communities were encouraged to grant land to enterprising immigrants. Chauveau (2000, p. 107) explains how the autochthons’ main chance of continuing to profit from their original rights was to hang on to their role as tuteurs, which would allow them to ask for regular “gifts.” Over time, as the value of land rose, this “tutorship” became a “permanent and conflict-ridden negotiation.” Immigrants came mainly from the northern parts of the country as well as from the neighboring countries of Mali and especially Burkina Faso. But Dozon (2000b) emphasizes that southerners hardly distinguish between Ivorian citizens and others among these northerners. Their shared similar characteristics, e.g., many are Muslims, generated the idea of le grand Nord from which all these
people, commonly called Dyula, whether Ivorians or non-Ivorians, originated.

As the 1980s ended, Houphouët-Boigny’s miracle seemed to stagnate. There was pressure on increasingly scarce land; world commodity prices for cocoa collapsed; and the economic crisis forced young urbanites to return to their villages. The resulting increase in rural tensions gave rise to a réactivation de l’idéologie de l’autochtone (Chauveau 2000, p. 114). After the 1990 elections, opposition parties in the South openly accused Houphouët-Boigny of owing his reelection to the votes of “strangers” and even claimed that he himself was some sort of “allochthon” (Arnaut 2004, p. 216; Dozon 2000a, p. 16). Developments since his death in 1993 and more particularly since 2000 have reinforced the fear expressed by several authors of a southern bloc of autochthons consolidating against the North (Chauveau 2000, Dozon 2000b, Losch 2000).

This broad trajectory may in retrospect appear almost inevitable. So it is all the more important to signal that it was marked by all sorts of unexpected turns and still contains quite different implications. For instance, Chauveau (2000) notes how the definition of the autochtone keeps shifting as the frontier of the cocoa zone changes. Production began in the Southeast and from there expanded gradually into the Southwest and the West. In earlier phases, Baule (in the center of the southern part of the country) were the main migrants, moving first into the Southeast as cocoa production took off. Cacao subsequently entered their own region, but they continued to follow the cacao frontier into the western and southwestern parts. Thus in the 1960s, autochthony was mainly claimed by groups in the Southwest and West (Bete, Dida) against Baule “immigrants.” Terms like allochène or immigrant have become nearly synonymous with northerner and Baule leaders, who since independence have been heavily represented in the national centers of power and are now at the forefront of defending the autochthony of southerners against northerners. But Chauveau (2000, p. 121) warns that they are very aware that “real” autochthons may at any time redirect their grievances against them.

The defense of autochthony became couched in more ideological terms after 1993 when Houphouët-Boigny’s successor, Henry Konan Bédié, launched the notion of ivoirité, mainly as a way of ousting one of his main rivals in the election for presidency, Alasane Ouattara—on the grounds that both his parents came from Burkina Faso. Dozon (2000a,b) and Arnaut (2004, chapter 3) show that this was part of a broader ideological offensive to justify the need to distinguish Ivoiriens de souche (trunk) from others.

Dozon speaks of an aéropage of intellectuals and writers around Bédié, brought together in Curdiphe (Cellule universitaire de recherche et de diffusion des idées et actions du président Konan Bédié). Politique Africaine (Curdiphe 2000, pp. 65–69) published extracts of a colloquium at this institute in which Professor Niangoran-Bouah (the country’s first anthropologist, as director of the patrimoine culturel of the Ministry of Culture) proposes a “re-grouping” of “the ancestors of Ivorians, or Ivorians de souche.” For him, this firstly refers to “the autochthons with a mythical origin” and then to les autochtones sans origine mythique. He insists, and this is clearly very important to him, that these groups were all already settled in the country on March 10, 1893, when “Ivory Coast was born” (Curdiphe 2000. See Arnaut 2004, chapters 3 and 4, for a discussion of similar texts).

In these enumerations ivoirité seems to be consistent with the notion of a southern autochthony. But Dozon (2000a,b) warns that, again, Bédié’s celebration of Ivoiriens de souche contained hidden subtexts. At a deeper level, it underscores the special vocation of the Baule (the group to which Bédié and Houphouët-Boigny both belonged) as some sort of super-autochthons. As part of the broader Akan group (also including the neighboring Ashanti in Ghana), the Baule
see themselves as endowed with state-forming talents that distinguish them from other southern groups (such as the “more segmentary” Bete). Thus, the idea of *Ivoiriens de souche* implies a double exclusion: on the one hand of northern immigrants, but on the other hand of other southerners too, because they are supposedly less capable of leading the nation on account of their cultural heritage.

According to Arnaut, the discourse shifts not only over region but also over time. In 1999, Bédié was ousted in a military coup under general Guéï. In 2000, Laurent Gbagbo, another southern politician (but a Bete from the Southwest) won the election, from which Ouattara, the candidate of the North, was again excluded. In September 2002, a military insurgency in the North effectively split the country between North and South, “the kind of geographical framework within which the discourse of autochthony flourishes so well in Côte d’Ivoire” (Arnaut 2004, p. 240). Under Gbagbo, the idea of *ivoirité* acquired new implications, according to Arnaut (2004, pp. 242, 252) now more in tune with globalization processes. It sets up the “frontier” in Bete land (rather than any Baule element) as a symbol of the nation, but then as a “purified” community of “real” Ivoirians. Arnaut (p. 254) concludes, “Autochthony is… also a powerful discourse for a regional minority to reinvent itself as a ‘national’ majority…”

In Ivory Coast, autochthony may remain more closely linked to the nation, albeit in purified form, but there are segmentary tendencies similar to those found elsewhere. Who the “real” autochthon is remains subject to bitter controversy, just as “the Other” continues to take on ever new guises.

**The “Great Lake Region” and Other African Settings**

Another hotbed of autochthony is the Great Lakes Region, notably Rwanda-Burundi and the adjacent parts of Congo (North and South Kivu). Stephen Jackson’s (2003) recent thesis on “War Making” in Goma, the capital of North Kivu, is based on research since the late 1990s when RDC “rebels,” backed by Rwandan and Ugandan troops, conquered this part of Congo. He speaks of “… a break-neck chase to exert control over fluctuating identity categories…” (p. 247). His second chapter, “Making History and Migratory Identities,” evokes a dazzling vortex of identities with ever-changing names and historical claims. However, a recurring dividing line seems to be the opposition between “autochthons” and “allochthons;” and a fixed pole in defining the latter are the deeply resented Banyarwanda, Rwandophones who are always suspected of plotting to deliver the region to neighboring Rwanda. However, even this more or less fixed beacon is ambiguous: It can refer to recent Hutu refugees (who fled to Congo after the 1994 genocide of Tutsi in Rwanda and the subsequent takeover by Kagame and his Tutsi army), but also to their arch-opponents, the enigmatic Banyamulenge, whom autochthons often call “Congolese Tutsi.” Jackson’s study describes both the surprising resilience of the idea of a Congolese nation among the “autochthons” of this remote part of the country and the fierce debates over history in this context. Where do these Banyamulenge come from? When did they settle in Congo? How can they claim to belong here as well? Like Jackson, Jean-Claude Willame (1997) emphasizes, as an important factor underlying these uncertainties, Mobutu’s volatile manipulations of national citizenship, first promising the Banyamulenge to recognize their Congolese citizenship when he needed their support, and then reneging when he looked for support from other groups.

Malkki’s references (1995, pp. 63 ff) to “autochtonisation” as a central trait in the construction of a group history among Hutu refugees from Burundi similarly highlight the narrow link, albeit with a somewhat different tenor, between the claims to autochthony and the struggle over national citizenship. The Hutu historical claim for autochthony...
is essential to their hope of one day being liberated from domination by the Tutsi, with their false pretence of superiority. However, Malkki shows that such claims to being autochthonous also have their flip side: Hutu have to share their autochthony with Twa (Pygmies), which illustrates how easily this notion can be associated with “primitive,” as still being in a first stage of development. There is a return here to the connotation that the concept acquired in the western Sudan, the area where the term was first introduced to the continent by French civil servants: The almost “prehuman” autochthons are socialized only by incoming foreign rulers. Malkki (p. 63) is justified in emphasizing that for the Hutu refugees as well “…autochthony can be a double-edged sword.”

Various authors stress the centrality of preoccupations with autochthony in recent political developments in other parts of Africa as well. Lentz (2003) emphasizes the long history of these tensions, predating colonial times, in Burkina Faso and neighboring parts of Ghana. But she also notes that “autochthony” became an especially powerful political slogan in the 1990s, in the competition for jobs, but even more in the struggle over access to land. The language of autochthony also extends into anglophone regions of the continent; it is not restricted to the anglophone part of Cameroon (see above), but also penetrated into areas of North Ghana bordering on Burkina and Togo (see Wienia 2003). But even where the notions as such are not current, similar discourses are highly mobilizing. The Comaroffs (2001) compare the ominous upsurge of xenophobia in South Africa against the makwere-kwere (African immigrants from across the Limpopo River) to the obsession over autochthony elsewhere on the continent. In reverse, their analysis of the “zombification” of these makwere-kwere, the tendency to depersonalize immigrants, is extremely relevant to the autochthony examples discussed above (see also van Dijk 2003 on Ghanaian immigrants in Botswana). Boone’s (2003) challenging comparison of developments in Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Ghana shows how easily similar discourses, again centering on the access to land, cut across the border between anglophone and francophone Africa. Achim von Oppen’s recent Habilitationschrift (2003) on Bounding Villages in Zambia presents a similar focus on the paradox of exclusionist discourses on locality and belonging that manage nonetheless to remain open-ended and tuned in to globalization.

In general, this upsurge of autochthony in Africa is cause for surprise. Historians and anthropologists used to characterize African societies as being oriented toward “wealth-in-people” in contrast to the conception of “wealth-in-things” prevailing elsewhere (see Miller 1988; Guyer 1993, 2004). Africa would be characterized by its open forms of organization with special arrangements—e.g., very broad kinship terminology, adoption, forms of clientelism—for including people into local groups. The current emphasis on autochthony and local belonging thus represents a dramatic turn toward closure and exclusion. However, as the above analysis shows, this apparent closure may again be deceptive given the extreme malleability of autochthony discourse. It is doubtful whether it can simply be characterized as a “retraditionalization” and a return to the village. Its exclusionary tenor is rather about limiting access to the state and new global circuits (compare Mbembe’s and Simone’s emphasis, quoted above, on the open-endedness of these discourses). Autochthony can be presented as a rival to national citizenship, but it can also pretend to reinforce the nation (by “purifying” it). Despite its appeal to local belonging as a self-evident criterion, its segmentary tenor creates nagging uncertainties in view of the ever-present risk of being unmasked as “not really” autochthonous. Indeed, its very emptiness, the elusiveness of who is “really” an autochthon, gives it a dizzy quality. African examples of recent autochthony movements suggest that the quest
for belonging is never-ending: promising safety, yet raising basic insecurities.6

**ALLOCHTHONS BETWEEN ETHNIC AND CIVIC CITIZENSHIP IN FLANDERS**

To what extent can the vicissitudes of autochthony in Africa help us gain closer insight into the prevalence of similar discourse in contemporary Europe? Exponents of the European New Right brandish exactly the same slogans, in Denmark or France, in England or Italy. This convergence is especially striking for Flanders and the Netherlands, since in Dutch the same terminology, centered around the opposition between “autochthons” and “allochthons” gained currency from the 1980s onward. Obviously, the problems addressed are quite different from those of Africa today. How then can a similar discourse seem to be equally self-evident and “natural” here?

In this final section, we turn our attention to Europe, particularly Flanders in Belgium where the Vlaams Blok, a New Right party, has had notable success.

Autochthony discourses seem to thrive in those European countries, including Belgium, that refuse to accept that they have become immigration countries. In Europe, as in Africa, this rhetoric comes from politicians as much as from voters, but European autochthony discourses differ from their African counterparts in two crucial ways. First, their rise ties in not with the decline of national citizenship but rather with attempts to reserve the benefits of the welfare state to those who are said to really belong. Second, they express not so much a fear of being outvoted by “strangers” under new democratic rules as a grass-root demand for a more representative democracy, in the face of the demise of the old political order—a protest against municipal, regional, and federal governments accused of riding roughshod over local sensibilities. In Europe, as in Africa, autochthony discourses easily switch from one “Other” to the next, but Muslims have become a favorite target throughout Europe, including Flanders.

Like the Netherlands and Austria, Belgium used to be a pillarized society with a consociational democracy, an institutionalized form of conflict management that is group oriented rather than individual oriented and characterized by subcultural segmentation and elite accommodation (Lijphart 1977, 1981): the stability of the system depends upon the ability of elites that represent the different subcultures to distribute the costs and benefits of government so as not to advantage or disadvantage any of these constituencies (Lamy 1986, p. 117). The major Belgian subcultures are ideological and linguistic. Ideological and often overlapping cleavages separate Catholics from anticlericals, and capitalists from proletariat through pillars.7 The language frontier divides the country in two ethno-linguistically homogeneous regions (dutchophone Flanders and francophone Wallony) and one linguistically bilingual region (Brussels), as well as a small German community in Wallony. In Flanders, as in Northern Italy, autochthony discourses are largely part of a separatist, regionalist rhetoric that views francophone co-citizens as equally “alien” as individuals of foreign descent.

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6For reasons of space we cannot address here the relation with alternative notions of belonging that seem to feed on people’s perception that the continent is in crisis. Notably, a comparison with the upsurge of Pentecostalism would be of interest since it clearly offers a sense of belonging different from autochthony. Most authors (see Meyer 1999) signal the deep distrust among Pentecostalists of “the village” and “the family,” equated with the devil, instead they want to belong to a (global?) community of “born-agains.” However, for Malawi, Englund (2005) emphasizes the close links that urban Pentecostalists retain with their village of origin. Apparently the relation between autochthony and Pentecostalism, although seemingly opposing discourses on belonging, allows for varying contradictions and artichokes.

7Pillarization is a system of exclusive linkages between political parties, civic associations, and a wide range of auxiliary organizations; thus, individuals are immersed in their segment from the cradle to the grave by attending their pillar’s schools, joining its trade unions, etc. (Méndez-Lago 1999, p. 192).
During the 1960s and 1970s, Belgian society underwent some major changes. The economic and political power base shifted from Wallonia to Flanders and the country imported many guest workers (gastarbeiders) from Morocco and Turkey. The language frontier was fixed, Belgium was federalized, and the decline of pillarization and the ongoing secularization created a floating electorate that regrouped itself around new social movements and regionalist parties outside the pillarized system. The negotiation processes that go into consensual politics are not transparent and coalition interests may supersede ideological principles. The Belgian consensual politics consist in governments buying socioeconomic and linguistic peace by compensating one subculture when allocating certain resources to another. This trade-off clearly works best during times of economic prosperity (Huyse 1970), but it came under pressure from the 1960s onward as the links connecting politicians and electorate through pillars weakened (Stouthuysen & Deschouwer 1993). This had far-reaching repercussions for the new labor immigrants who were particularly hard hit by the economic recession. Moreover, this was a time when international developments such as the American air raids on Tripoli, the Salman Rushdie affair, and the tumult over Muslim girls wearing headscarfs in French schools all contributed to a negative perception of Muslims.

Although not all of the new regionalist parties are extremist, they all rely upon a bifurcation between “us” and “them” that can take various forms. The Vlaams Blok is no exception. Its rise is proof of the fact that many Flemings, who now live in one of Europe’s most prosperous regions, have developed a siege mentality, having convinced themselves that their wealth and/or culture are under threat from various groups of “foreigners.” The Vlaams Blok was founded in 1979 as a separatist Flemish-nationalist party. It widened its appeal beyond the right-wing fringe from 1984 onward as it substituted a discourse of racial supremacy for one of cultural incompatibility, by singling out Muslim labor immigrants. Condemned for racism, Vlaams Blok recently became Vlaams Belang. It is now the largest party in Flanders, held from power only by the cordon sanitaire (the agreement between the mainstream parties not to join coalitions with it), which is now increasingly under pressure. Publicly, the party tries to reinvent itself as a mainstream, conservative party comparable to the American Republican Party; privately, it strengthens its ties with neo-Nazi and neofascist parties throughout Europe.

Blommaert & Verschueren (1997) and Blommaert & Martens (1999) argue that, in the wake of the rise of the Vlaams Blok, government agencies and academics minorized disenfranchised Muslim labor immigrants as a specific ethnic group, alternatively called migranten (migrants). Like Martiniello (1997), they relate the success of the Vlaams Blok rhetoric to a mainstream Flemish-nationalist ideology that is exclusive and assimilationist insofar as it relies on a notion of ethnic citizenship, as opposed to a Walloon idea of civic citizenship. This would explain why Flemings are less tolerant of ethnic pluralism (Caestecker 2000, 2001; Martens & Caestecker 2001). Blommaert & Verschueren (1997) show how elite antiracist discourses, including those of (Flemish) employees of federal governmental agencies dealing with racism, are suffused with a kind of homogeneity that does not differ fundamentally from the essentialist racist views associated with the Vlaams Blok. Quantitative research confirms that Flemings with a strong Flemish identification and Walloons with a strong Belgian identification tend to have a negative attitude toward Muslim labor immigrants and their descendants whereas Flemings with a strong Belgian and Walloons with a strong Walloon identification view them more positively (Maddens et al. 2000).

Since 1989, official federal policy has stressed the need for migrants to “integrate”
themselves in Belgian society by relegating aspects of their culture to the private sphere and publicly conforming to Belgian norms. However, any suggestion that federal policy in relation to Muslims is shaped by an ideal of (Flemish) ethnic citizenship is countered by the observation that the norms associated with Belgian society (democracy, the separation of church and state, equality between men and women, etc.) refer more to civic than to ethnic citizenship insofar that they are not considered Belgian but Western. In Martens’ (1997, p. 66) analysis, federalization of the country has exacerbated the distinctions between Flemish and Walloon approaches: Flemings initially expected allochthons to emancipate themselves through their own civic associations whereas Walloons still seek to remedy widespread discrimination against allochthons through policy measures (see Caestecker 1997, p. 54). The decline of pillarization introduced the concept of individual citizenship and its concomitant, civil citizenship into Flemish political discourse. Muslims would constitute a problem not because of their ethnicity but because they are alien to Europe’s democratic traditions and must be integrated through individual inburgering (turning “foreigners” into citizens; Verhofstadt 1992). This term reminds us that both ethnic and civic citizenship can imply a process of complete assimilation, either to a specific ethnic culture or to a public, political culture that is represented as universal and, as such, is oblivious of its own culturalness.

Flemish policymakers started using the term allochthons from the 1990s on. They drew inspiration from the Dutch government, which introduced the term in its 1989 report, Allochtonenbeleid (policy on allochthons), considering it more neutral than foreigners or guest workers. Since 1998, the regional Flemish administration has officially recognized allochthons on its territory as persons who are legal residents in Belgium, who have at least one (grand)parent who was born outside the country and who are discriminated against on the basis of their ethnic descent or their weak socioeconomic status. In actual practice, though not in theory, the category remains restricted to Muslim labor immigrants and their descendants, including those born on Flemish soil, although a distinction is increasingly made between nieuwkomers (newcomers) and oudkomers (literally oldcomers).

Most Flemish academics writing on the subject share the assumption that there is a connection between economic recession and hostility against allochthons. They relate the problem to the mindset of individual Flemings, be they members of a poor disenfranchised proletariat in impoverished, urban neighborhoods suffering from anomie (Billiet & De Witte 2000, Swyngedouw 1990) or poorly educated individuals who spend their time indoors watching commercial television broadcasts (Elchardus & Smets 2002, Pelleriaux 2001). Other authors opt for a more structural interpretation. Although Flemings identify primarily with their local communities and municipal elections have always served as the mechanism to incorporate groups into the national polis, most academics writing on

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*The terms autochthon and allochthon may have entered the Netherlands via Canada, which became officially the world’s first self-proclaimed multicultural state in 1971. Quebec has a Secrétariat aux affaires autochtones and Francophone universities offer degrees in études autochtones. The term is used to refer to the peoples who inhabited the land before British and French colonizations. In Quebec, both so-called indigenous people and Francophones make primitivist claims (Niezen 2003). The separatist Francophone Quebecois movement popularized the idea maître chez nous that inspired both the French Front National (les Français d’abord) and the Vlaams Blok (eigen volk eerst, one’s own people first and baas in eigen land, boss in one’s own country); it differentiates between Québécois de souche and others.

*Although the official term stresses a link between ethnic descent and victimization, the Vlaams Blok owes its electoral success to the connections it has made between (Muslim) culture and criminal activities. However, this idea has a gendered component: male Muslims pose a problem (they are criminals, a scourge on social welfare, etc.), whereas female Muslims are represented as victims of a misogynistic, “patriarchal” culture.
allochthons ignore the relevance of local politics, which were traditionally characterized by a high degree of factionalism and clientelism.

In his analysis of the rise of the Vlaams Blok in Antwerp, Swyngedouw (1998) observes that the decline of pillarization and economic recession coincided with a counterexodus of urban working-class individuals to socially mixed neighborhoods outside town and the amalgamation of municipalities between 1976 and 1982. The latter change interposed geographical distance between the centers of decision-making and residential areas, especially in larger municipalities, at a time when national politicians were trying to woo a floating electorate by increasing clientelism. The results were felt notably in urban working-class neighborhoods: first, the pillars lost their grassroots volunteers and activists at the same time as the decline of pillarization was reducing the political power of trade unions; second, voters in large municipalities lost personal access to local political patrons; third, cash-strapped municipalities were investing insufficiently in impoverished neighborhoods. Inhabitants of previously independent boroughs saw themselves surrounded by “foreigners,” and felt alienated, betrayed, and abandoned by the municipality. The Vlaams Blok successfully stepped into this void, setting itself up as the champion of erstwhile socialist voters.

Following on from Verhoeven’s (1997, p. 131) observation that inhabitants of urban neighborhoods view their Muslim neighbors as emissaries of sinister powers in their countries of origin, Ceuppens (2003, chapter 9) argues that Flemings conceptualize allochthons as “alien” in relation not only to the state or the region, but also to their local communities, in a political rhetoric whose appeal transcends these localities. She shows that rural, middle-class voters vote for the Vlaams Blok, which tries to exploit their fear of incomers, be they Muslim labor immigrants, refugees, or gangs of Eastern European “criminals,” because they want to retain their wealth and regain control over “their” local communities and “their” social welfare system. These voters have a gnawing disrespect for a form of representative government that pays no heed to grassroots sentiments, and they see themselves as “the people” rising up against forms of centralized authority that seems to care more for “foreigners,” for whom voting is not compulsory, than for “their own people,” who expect something in return for their compulsory vote. They are mobilized against “others” by voting for an “other” party outside the pillarized system.

Contrary to earlier expectations, the decline of pillarization has not led to a more open, democratic political culture, and a number of academics link xenophobia against allochthons to the decline of the pillars’ civic organizations (Elchardus et al. 1999, 2001). Hooghe (2003) nuances this view by arguing that some organizations, notably trade unions, have less positive perceptions of allochthons than others. The very notion of “foreigners” acquired an edge in Belgium only since the extension of the suffrage to the male working class after World War I and with the development of the welfare state, as different interest groups wanted to reserve the benefits of the welfare state exclusively to citizens (Caestecker 2000, 2001). After World War II, trade unions took a more inclusive approach, and started to defend the rights of all their members, irrespective of their nationality or ethnic background. However, their focus on maintaining the standard of living of those in fulltime employment rather than on securing jobs for all means that in practice, they do not represent the great majority of Muslim labor immigrants who are now unemployed. This focus feeds into assumptions held by many members (some 80% of all Belgians belong to a pillarized trade union) that these people are “foreigners” and as such should not profit from the benefits of the welfare state; it goes some way toward explaining why even trade union members support a corporatist party such as the Vlaams Blok. Although the party is opposed to the presence of all “foreigners” on Flemish soil, it is only its rhetoric that has
caught on, railing against those “aliens” who rely upon the benefits of the social welfare state or who are construed as posing a threat to Flemings’ prosperity (Ceuppens 2001).

Arnaut & Ceuppens (2004) observe that on the one hand, the idea that “allochthons” do not belong in Flanders builds on an older discourse that denies the legitimacy of the presence of Francophones in the region, while on the other hand, Francophones, not labor immigrants or refugees, are now increasingly represented as parasites feeding upon a welfare system sustained almost exclusively through Flemish toil. They argue that scaling, combined with a conceptual confusion between “race” and culture as well as between different types of “others,” allows the Vlaams Blok not only to paint a gloomy picture of “one’s own people” as threatened by “aliens,” but also to redefine the latter category between the national, regional, and local levels: expatriates, Eurocrats, Anglophones, refugees, non-European labor immigrants, Eastern European “thieves,” “niggers,” Muslims, Francophones, Walloons, etc. Even the category of “one’s own people” is not fixed. In its propaganda aimed at francophone voters in Brussels, until very recently, the party conveniently failed to mention that it wants to incorporate the city into a Flemish republic. It argues that “foreigners” sponge off “our” (Belgian) welfare state despite rejecting the legitimacy of the Belgian state while also accusing Francophones of feeding off Flemish labor. Although it is no secret that some prominent party members deny the Holocaust, the party publicly condemns anti-Semitism. Many party leaders prefer paganism to Christianity, which they view as a foreign import, but the party nevertheless identifies with a European “civilization” informed by the heritage of Christianity and the Enlightenment (when first condemned for racism, it set itself up as a champion of freedom of speech) under threat from Muslim “hordes.” Arnaut & Ceuppens conclude that these mixed messages appeal to voters because they create the illusion of being able to control and expel the different types of “others” whom they confront at different levels; as such, the confusions offer security and become a source of empowerment.

In sum, most Flemish academics stress the link between recession and xenophobia. However, they also relate the rise of the Vlaams Blok and the exclusion of so-called allochthons to the different cleavages that either preceded the immigration of laborers of Muslim descent to Belgium or came into being independent of them. Overlooked is the fact that identification with a pillar was never officially recognized and that the identities of “Flemings” and “Walloons” refer only to public language use in specific regions, irrespective of ethnic background or private language use. By contrast, the Flemish administration’s formal recognition of allochthons (in contrast to the Brusseler or Walloon authorities) can introduce a difference between citizens. This oscillation between discourses on ethnic and civic citizenship risks obscuring the socioeconomic dimension. The official definition reinforces the idea that allochthons are discriminated against because of their cultural specificity and thus it hampers their inclusion in the Flemish nation as a disenfranchised class. And inevitably, by including an ethnic element in its definition of allochthons, the Flemish administration is itself subscribing to the logic of the Vlaams Blok, reinforcing the view that these “aliens” can be excluded from the benefits of “our” welfare state. Holmes (2000) reminds us that the ideal of the active welfare state, which the Belgian federal and Flemish regional governments now embrace, disrupts the idea of automatic, national solidarity and creates new openings to exclude people considered “foreigners,” even if they are fellow-citizens, as is the case with many allochthons in Flanders. Simultaneously, the notion of equality for all is replaced by the idea of equal opportunities for all. This allows autochthony discourses to represent Muslim labor immigrants, refugees, Francophones, etc., as “undeserving poor” who have forfeited their chance for equal opportunities because they refuse to “integrate” fully in Flemish
society. A deep-seated hostility towards cities (Kesteloot 1999) and working-class culture (Ceuppens 2001) contributes to the idea that Muslims should assimilate individually to a public orthopraxy of Flemish middle-class culture, relegating all expressions of their religiosity to the private sphere; but the official recognition of allochthons, independent of public practices, undermines this assimilation.

One can debate whether one must fight structural and endemic racism and discrimination by recognizing group rights, be it from “allochthons” in Europe or “indigenous groups” elsewhere. (Within Europe, Scandinavia also has its “indigenous peoples.”) Ascribing a minority status to individuals on the basis of criteria beyond their control, as the Flemish administration does, is bound to stigmatize them and be counterproductive if the aim is their emancipation; insisting that all citizens are equal, as the French administration does, obscures the fact that some are discriminated against on the basis of group membership. For Flemish allochthons, taking Belgian nationality is not a real solution, because their appearance still marks them out as allochthons and the official definition rejects the primacy of citizenship. They must also abandon their culture if they want to be included in Flanders as a civil nation. Although many Flemish politicians recognize the existence of a Muslim community in terms of ethnic citizenship, there is sometimes a distinct impression that they are wholly uninterested in courting their votes as individual “civic” citizens, because they cannot be accommodated in the old pillarized system. Muslims are recognized as members of a community that should preferably disappear but not as individual citizens whose vote and affiliation politicians must seek. Even mainstream Flemish politicians now reproach Muslims for identifying with their own (Muslim) community while being unwilling to include them in their own (Flemish) one.

While “autochthonomous” workers and peasants were emancipated through pillars, there is now strong disagreement about the desirability or possibility of emancipating Muslims through a new Muslim pillar (Demeyere 1993, Jacobs & Tillie 2004, Neudt & Zarhoni 2002). (Note the general indignation about Dyab Abou Jahjah, the charismatic leader of the Arab-European League.) Ironically, Muslims have “assimilated” to such a degree that they now demand federalization of the Muslim Executive, the body that represents Muslims to the federal government, on the grounds that Flemish and francophone Muslims would have different interests. Thus, while the pillarization of the Muslim population is put on hold, its federalization, alongside an “autochthonomous” model, is well under way.

CONCLUSION

From all the variations discussed above, autochthony emerges as a never-ending game of mirrors. Its apparent “naturalness” hides a constant flux of redefining a kind of belonging that is equally elusive. Of special importance are its widely divergent implications for the nation-state. In Cameroon, it is presented as an alternative to the very idea of national citizenship. In Ivory Coast, by contrast, it is defined as the nation, albeit in a renovated, purified form. In Flanders, it is caught between “civic” and “ethnic” definitions of citizenship, whereas its target is really the welfare state, more in danger of being undermined by the global economy than by the influx of immigrants. For the Athenians long ago, it implied a kind of inborn propensity towards democracy. In modern times, it has come to express a deep disappointment about what democracy has become.

Yet general trends are also perceptible. A crucial one is again highlighted by the classical glorification of autochthony in early Athens, in the challenging interpretation by Loraux (1996, pp. 95–100). She evokes the paradoxical instability of a discourse that celebrates stability. Autochthony may invoke stasis as some sort of norm. But for historians—and certainly not only for academic ones—movement is the norm: All history starts with migration.
Even the Athenian families who were so proud of their autochthony had myths about their origins from elsewhere. And even the Beti, who have now become the arch-autochthons of Cameroon, express their unity by a myth of an only partially successful crossing of the majestic Sanaga river on the back of a huge python. Autochthony needs movement as a counterpoint to define itself. It is precisely this basic instability that makes it such a dangerous discourse. It seems to offer a safe, even “natural” belonging. But it is haunted by a basic insecurity: apprehension about its own authenticity, the need to prove itself by unmasking “fake” autochthons, that inevitably leads to internal division and violence.

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