

IRÈNE BELLIER

Misunderstanding of autochthony *vis-à-vis* the question of indigenous peoples

I

Dear Peter Geschiere,

Your latest book (Geschiere 2009) gives the reader a key to understanding autochthony, which opposes the membership of some to the exclusion of others. From a study of the political uses of the term 'autochthonous' in Africa, and its antonym 'allochthonous' in the Netherlands, your analytical framework applies to different situations. However, it does not apply to contexts that are being defined by the dialogue of the last four decades between states and indigenous peoples' organisations on the international stage. We agree that 'indigenous/autochthonous issues' reflect a tension in the world of citizenship, but I note that the legal and political dynamics of indigenous peoples – united in an international movement of networks of organisations – are deployed by the advocacy of inclusion, not by the rejection of others. This construction of the 'Other' is also a critical element of post-colonial anthropology (Tuhiwai Smith 1999).

The Hellenic origin of the term 'autochthon', which feeds a common understanding to which you refer, acknowledges exclusive rights to persons, while the UN use aims at recognising a polity of peoples, who have been deprived of their rights in the territory and history of the nation state. The fact is that a dual tension illuminates the scope of the term, whether it is used nationally or internationally and spoken in English or French, the latter language using the expression '*peuple autochtone*' rather than '*indigène*' because of the pejorative uses of former colonial administration. But in the political category 'indigenous peoples', the quality of 'people' that confers a legal personality overrides the attribute 'indigenous', variously translated into the UN working languages (English, Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, French, Russian). Considering the semantic field of indigeneity, the scope of the terms – *Autochtone*/indigenous/*indigenas*/aboriginal or tribal – has to be interpreted with regard to three dimensions: the UN terminology in normative texts (e.g. the ILO Convention 169 or the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – UNDRIP); the state framework of legal registration (nations, nationalities, peoples, minorities, *pueblo originario*, scheduled tribes, etc.); and the statements made by actors in local mobilisations. However, indigenous peoples'

delegates called upon the international community less to fix a terminology than to define rights that respect their worldviews and exercise the right of peoples to self-determination in accordance with international law and procedures, which vary across countries (Bellier 2009).

Would different fieldwork areas be sufficient to explain the fact that we consider autochthony differently? The political discourses that you describe in Africa or Europe are not heard inside the forums of international organisations where a referential corpus is built on indigenous peoples, which seeks to extend human rights to groups that have been excluded from State decision-making systems. But the language of rejection of others within ideological frameworks has an impact on how indigenous peoples are perceived locally. A distinction has to be made between situations where people require inclusion into a political space as a mode for advancing human rights and democracy and those who ramble on about the purity of origins. The '*autochtones* (native?)' you speak about are absent from the UN dialogue involving 'indigenous peoples', but they sometimes live in the same country. Would there be two kinds of 'autochthons'? In my view, these problems result from unfinished processes of decolonisation while indigenous peoples' representatives search to re-enrol as subjects and actors in a disputed modernity.

We can be concerned by the construction of a UN generic aboriginal/autochthon/indigenous referential corpus (Kuper 2003), but the importance you attach to belonging and therefore to an analysis in terms of identity does not contribute to an understanding of their political dynamics. For instance, unlike in America and Oceania, African and Asian States consider, on the UN stage, every national as an 'autochthon'. Yet, after the concept of 'First Nations' has been coined to focus on both anteriority (before European colonisation) and a sense of sovereignty, other meanings are being explored for 'indigenous peoples' that do not respond to logics of belonging but to social relationships (see the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights report, CADHP-IWGIA 2005). Some States demanded that the UN provide a list of indigenous peoples, but international experts, representatives of States and indigenous delegates discussed the limits of classification and rejected the principle of such a list, so as not to exclude from the UNDRIP's scope those who are 'invisibilised' by dominant logics of power. **It's quite unsettling but the international community is facing a process similar to decolonisation, except that it relates to peoples who, in their majority, demand recognition within states.** That recognition does not necessarily operate through the paradigm of essentialism; it questions the meaning of a 'people', it has political effects, but it depends on how discrimination operates.

The political and legal treatment of indigenous communities varies across states. Transformations can be observed between the time of assimilation policies, which inform memory and the focus of conflicts, and the time of globalisation, which throws light on the construction of an international movement of indigenous peoples. The reflection about their place in public space is more developed in the Americas since the constitutional changes which began in the 1990s, and led to a proliferation of works on governance, participation of indigenous peoples and new forms of state. They converge on perspectives regarding the plural – pluri-national state, legal pluralism – the currently dominant paradigm being that of 'interculturality' which intends to renew the *dispositif* of multicultural policies.

The point is that the working (non-essentialist) definition proposed by Martinez Cobo¹ (1986) is now completed by studies concerning the concept of sovereignty, the meaning of self-determination and participation of indigenous peoples. The emphasis has shifted from the logics of identity assignment that anthropologists rightly criticise (*Social Anthropology* 2006) towards an understanding of the articulating mechanisms of systems of rights – customary and positive rights, individual and collective rights – which have the capacity to expand the body politic, more than menacing its integrity. It opens anthropology to new domains of thoughts. How does autochthony result from unfinished processes of decolonisation? How do we theorise on self-determination as a right of (and for) indigenous peoples, and as practices? What importance do you attach to the UN normative works, particularly those related to indigenous peoples, such as UNDRIP? These are a few questions that are eluded in your latest book.

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1 Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those who, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.

PETER GESCHIERE

Response to Irène Bellier

II

Dear Irène Bellier,

Clearly you would have preferred that I had written another book. For you the trajectories of autochthony I have tried to follow – the role of the notion in struggles over national citizenship and exclusion in present-day West Africa and Europe, but also in classical Athens – seem to be of less interest. The story you want to read about is on *autochtone* as the French translation of ‘indigenous’ in the new meanings (with emphasis on inclusion rather than exclusion) this term acquired since the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations became active. I refer to that story (there is, for instance, a section on how the Baka ‘Pygmies’ became caught between different versions of autochthony), but it is not central in my book. The reason is that it does not play a central role in the struggles over which group will control the state in countries like Cameroon or Ivory Coast (and certainly not in Europe). That is the focus of my book.

Of course, the story you highlight is of great importance. The struggle for recognition of indigenous peoples’ rights has had clear impact. Yet, what worries me is the tendency in your reaction to set it apart from the stories I am telling. At the 2006 conference in Paris on autochthony that we both attended, a similar attitude seemed to prevail. The discussions were dominated by colleagues from Quebec who used *autochtone* in the sense you prefer, as the French translation of indigenous. When Bambi Ceuppens and I stressed that the notion of autochthony had a quite different history in parts of Africa and also in present-day Europe, there was some disarray. Finally, one of the members of the panel (unfortunately I forgot her name) said that if the Dutch and the Flemish are so foolish as to define themselves as autochthonous, it is their affair, but that the UN had confirmed that the French translation of indigenous peoples was *peuples autochtones*. Of course, this was an exclamation in the heat of the debate. But I think the incident is of interest in this special issue since it relates to the tendency highlighted by the editors in their Introduction to oppose ‘indigenous’ to ‘autochthony’ (or *autochtone* as translation of indigenous to other autochthonies). It is quite clear that activists need to protect their terminology and keep it pure. Yet academics might be wary of such clear distinctions. Both indigenous and autochthonous are terms used to emphasise localist claims to belonging that have come back with a surprising force in a world that now pretends to be globalising; it has also been deeply marked for as long as we can go back by powerful currents of migration. No wonder that both notions struggle with ambiguities that risk to soil their purity.

For you the language of autochthony/indigeneity is about 'inclusion', and not about the 'rejection of the others'. In his review of my book in this issue, Christopher Kidd reproaches me for not paying more attention to the struggle of the Baka ('Pygmies') who presumably use the notion of autochthony not to exclude but to struggle for equality. He opposes autochthony as exclusion to autochthony for recognition. Again for activists it might be important to maintain such clear oppositions. But is it fruitful in academic debate? The editors of this volume rightly underline the tension between more inclusive and more exclusive tendencies as a criterion for positioning oneself *vis-à-vis* these forms of identification. But their conclusion seems to be that it depends on the context which tendency will prevail. In my book I try to show that similar tensions return in widely different contexts, since a claim to local belonging appeals to a purity that is constantly soiled by a history of movement. This can explain also – and this was the main point of my book – why in different settings such localist claims to belonging seem to be haunted by a strange paradox between apparent security and a practice of insecurity. Autochthony seems to anchor one's belonging (how can one belong more than if one is born from the soil?). Yet in practice this seems to be contradicted by a deep insecurity: someone's autochthony can always be put into doubt since belonging can always be redefined at closer range. The literature on indigenous peoples is full of such uncertainties (cf. Li 2000, *passim*).

The Baka and the vicissitudes of the notion of autochthony in the forest area of Southeast Cameroon offer a good example. The notion of 'indigenous peoples' acquired some impact in Cameroon in the course of the 1990s. People generally agreed that the Baka as 'Pygmies' were the first inhabitants in the forest so that they were generally accepted as a prime example of an 'indigenous people'. Labelling them as *autochtones* was a different matter. In fact, it was only in 2007 when the UN finally codified the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that *autochtone* became the official French translation for 'indigenous'. Representatives of NGOs who defend Baka interests (with the Baka mostly in a quite passive role) will now use the term *autochtone* for this group. However, this raises considerable problems because the term autochthonous has a much longer history in Cameroon. For the villagers, being autochthonous is vital in their struggles with migrants from other parts of the country. Everybody who is not *autochtone* of a certain area risks being seen as a second-class citizen. Identifying Baka as the region's *peuple autochtone* automatically disqualifies the citizenship of the villagers, who of course strongly resent this. So, as you fear, there are now two kinds of *autochtones* in this area (Robillard 2010); moreover, the two meanings clash in ways that are not to the advantage of the Baka. Recent studies of the area (Rupp forthcoming; Robillard 2010) highlight the exclusionary effects of NGO actions in favour of indigenous peoples. They emphasise the fluidity of the distinction between Baka and villagers in the past, and the increasing tensions and sharpening of boundaries due to the impact of the NGOs. They also highlight increasing tensions among the Baka. They tend to see the few young men from their group who have some education as 'cousins' and no longer really Baka (Leonhardt 2006). This distrust of the few people from the group who could act as their leaders does not help them in gaining control over their own struggle.

The editors of this volume are certainly right that it is no use confronting each other with case studies in order to 'prove' that indigenous/autochthonous is good or bad. I rather mention this example to highlight how difficult it is in practice to make clear oppositions: exclusion or inclusion are closely intertwined, not givens.

The importance of Appadurai's (2006) essay on 'predatory identities' is that he shows how plurality – identities existing side by side – can suddenly change, one identity closing itself and starting to cannibalise the others. Equally important is to see all these identifications as part of power contests, at all levels – also internally. In a world marked by migration, a claim of localist belonging will always sit uneasy with history. But this certainly does not disqualify such claims. Our task might rather be to follow these claims in their specific history (also to take the history of these notions in the area concerned seriously). Even more important might be to underline that, although these identifications have often a nostalgic tenor, they are forward looking – evoked in struggles over new opportunities.

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IRÈNE BELLIER

Response to Peter Geschiere

III

Dear Peter Geschiere,

Your response dismisses the questions I raised with regards to the notion of rights and the context of enunciation of indigenous/*autochtones* issues. Your use of 'activism' aims at disparaging the scientific approach of the anthropologists who examine the conditions of indigenous struggles at transnational and local levels. Nobody is questioning the

general history of a mobile humanity and the difficulty of proving the anteriority of a particular group on a particular territory. We know that identities are relational, historically changing and re-articulated concerning indigenous lives and experiences. But why are you so obsessed with the 'purity' of origins, soil or terminology? That echoes the language of the European Far Right. Of course, in the many places where indigenous/*autochtones* struggles develop, there are controversial arguments regarding the possession of land or definitions of belonging with regard to public policies. Categories of recognition or marginalisation constitute the basis of State control and that opens a space for us to critically analyse the modalities of classification of populations, the sources of xenophobia, and the meaning of peoples' self-determination at the time of globalisation.

As anthropologist we do not tell stories but analyse political and cultural processes, which characterise social groups. Our methodologies enable us to understand how indigenous subjects have been excluded from nation-states histories, why and how they redefine themselves to be part of history. For the Baka, you say their recognition as '*autochtone*' raises a risk of disqualification for the Cameroun villagers who fear being considered as second-class citizens. This is the key issue to be analysed, as indigenous peoples across the world demand equality in order to redress the mechanisms of their disqualification within the state. According to your argument, the Baka should remain where they are, then the social order would be maintained, development or human rights NGOs having only a destabilising impact. It is so common in the language of domination to see the Baka as 'passive subjects' that you also see them in a 'passive role'. Our responsibility as academics is not to judge but to analyse how indigenous peoples are concerned by globalisation, whether it takes the forms of extractive or pharmaceutical companies, that of NGOs, churches and development programmes, or that of digital communication. Indigenous peoples are part of the world tensions, they move to the city and remain attached to memories of origins, in ways that affect their identity but in a more interesting fashion than what you criticise through the prism of purity.

The adoption of UNDRIP, which confirms the concept of 'People'/*Peuples* and not the translation of 'indigenous' by *autochtone* that dates from the Nineties, opens space for the recognition of indigenous persons as subjects with individual rights, and as attached to a people that gives a legal personality and access to collective rights. That brings into the framework the modalities of external and internal colonisation, which account for understanding the meaning of dominated positions and the changes within majority societies. As academics, it is incumbent on us to unveil the ideologies that weigh upon the understanding of autochthonous subjectivities, to explain the resurgence of contentious territorial issues, as well as the meaning attached to the concept of a territory, which supersedes the notions of possession and belonging. It includes the dimension of a cosmovision that we can analyse as historical and cultural construction. It is invested with a 'sacrality' that needs to be properly described. It refers to standards of life, which can be both 'traditional' and compatible with modernity, and also to political spaces. That makes the issue of autochthony a very complex one. Indigenous demands are local, only if you do not consider that neo-liberal capitalism relies on techniques of fragmentation and de-legitimisation to guarantee the exploitation of vast areas corresponding to new trenches of colonisation. Hence critical is the issue of a legal personality that entitles indigenous communities to be part of a political decision on how 'development' is conceived and affect their conditions of subsistence.

If locality is the place where social relationships are constructed and power contests observed, the fact is that indigenous peoples' organisations, through their participation in global forums that are articulating points, make a link between the local and the global, to construct a capacity to resist forces that are described as menacing cultural and biological diversity, such as big dams, cash-crop monocultures, mining, logging, and oil and gas exploitation. The point is not to oppose the 'good indigenous' to the 'bad exploiter' but to show that indigenous subjects became political actors with a discourse that addresses the world, yet little access to major media. The revitalisation of indigenous identities and the construction of global inclusive political identities, such as 'indigenous peoples', question us on the form of the State and its capacity to incorporate heterogeneity.

PETER GESCHIERE

Response to Irène Bellier

IV

Dear Irène Bellier,

I am sorry you feel 'dismissed' by my reply. That is a heavy word, which can easily act as a boomerang. You were asked to comment on a book that analyses the emergence of the notion of 'autochthony' in different times and places, the variable implications it acquired in these contexts, and its recent return as a powerful political motto, again with quite different meanings. You chose in your reply to focus on only one moment of this long and tortuous history: the recent use of *autochthone* as the French translation of 'indigenous' in the context set by the UN working group on indigenous peoples. Your first reply suggested that the notion's other epiphanies, discussed in the book, are not of much interest. I could have reacted that thus you 'dismiss' the book's broader argument. Yet, this may not be a fruitful way to set up a debate. I tried to show in my first reply that this broader history of all the vicissitudes in time and space of 'autochthony' is important also for a balanced analysis of the struggles of people who identify themselves (or are identified by others) as indigenous/*autochtone*. It is striking, for instance, that in all these different settings the notion of autochthony is haunted by a surprising paradox between a promise of primordial security (how can you belong more than if you are born from the soil?) and a practice of haunting insecurity, since in everyday life one's autochthony can always be contested by someone (or something) more autochthonous. There are many examples of such tensions marking 'indigenous struggles' as well. But apparently you feel that even mentioning this is a frontal attack on your 'scientific approach'. Why?

Many anthropologists have offered important insights into these struggles precisely by dealing with the relativity of these notions and the tensions they evoke in practice. You ask me why I am 'so obsessed with the purity of origins, soil or terminology' and you accuse me of 'echoing the language of the European Far Right'. In all the examples I discuss in the book – from classical Athens to present-day Africa and Europe – all advocates of autochthony evoke a pure past as the time before immigration, before the invasion of 'the others'. So, clearly, it is not me who is obsessed with purity; it is rather a basic tendency that emerges from these examples. I point out that this tendency has its dangers since this appeal to an impossible purity – as long as we can look back the world was marked by constant migration – can lead to harsh and even violent forms of exclusion in Europe, Africa and elsewhere.

Your disinterest in the historical parts of the book might also explain your surprising take on the Cameroonian example. Apparently you feel I defend the villagers' entitlement to label themselves as *autochthone*; therefore, I deny the label to the Baka 'Pygmies'; I even would tell the latter 'to remain where they are'. What I argue in these chapters is rather that the villagers' claim to being autochthonous is very political, leading to nasty forms of exclusion also inside the village communities. So the more it is undermined the better. Still, academics must be aware that the recent imposition in this context of the notion of *peuple autochthone* for the Baka 'Pygmies' as the French translation of indigenous people (a notion that had already become quite current in the area) collides with earlier uses of this term. Thus *autochtone* has become a highly contested term, at the heart of power struggles that should not be ignored.

The broader interest of our debate might be that it shows how important the tortuous history of notions like autochthony or indigenous is, also for academics who study 'indigenous struggles'. A key question is to what extent these notions can be used without falling into a celebration of a former purity that so easily encourages exclusion and an obsession with unmasking 'fake' elements inside. But such a recurrent trend is certainly not a reason to disqualify 'indigenous struggles' *per se*, it is rather a plea for studying the crystallisation of the notion in all its complexities in specific settings. Many anthropologists – let me just refer to Anna Tsing's pioneering studies – have shown the value of an in-depth analysis of all the groups involved in the power struggles around these notions. This means surpassing simplistic dichotomies like the State versus indigenous peoples; it requires also to take history seriously, not as a unilineal process of subjection, but as an uneven process, full of unexpected twists and surprising turns. A crucial variable in all this might be, indeed, the tension between inclusivist and exclusivist tendencies underlined by this issue's editors in their Introduction. Clearly, it is not the definition we choose to give to a notion, but rather the historical context that determines which tendency will get the upper hand.