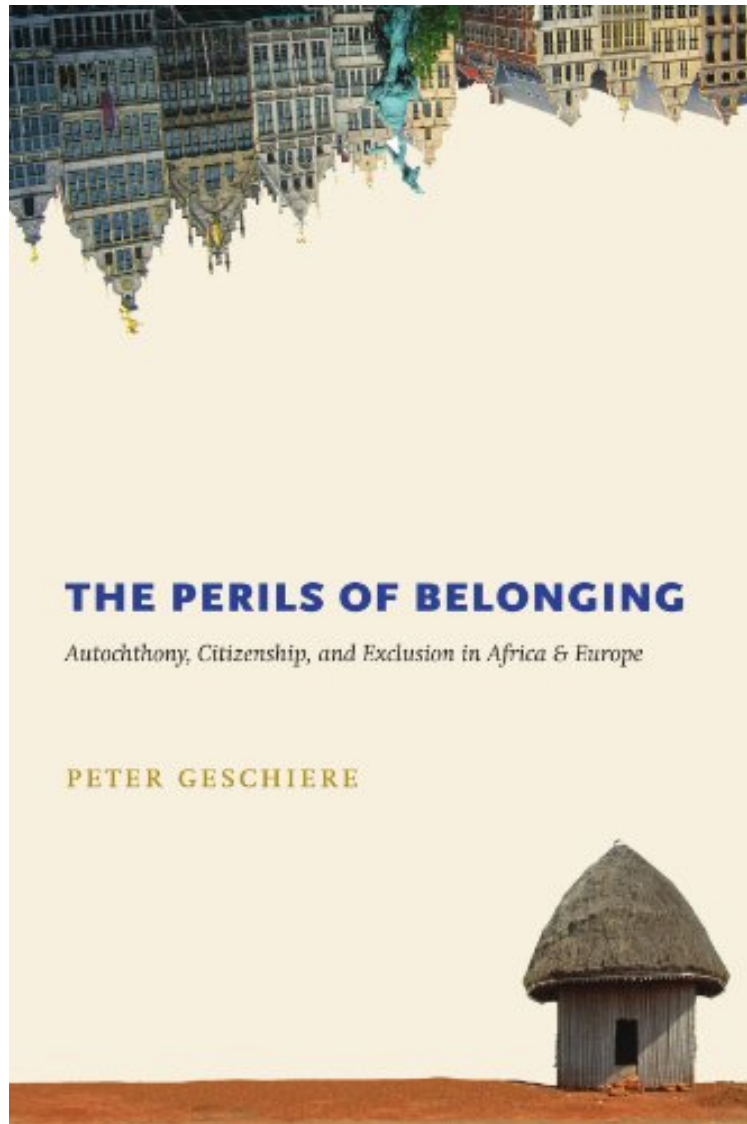


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The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe

Peter Geschiere

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#450357 in Books University Of Chicago Press 2009-05-01 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.00 x .70 x 6.001, .85 #File Name: 0226289656304 pages | File size: 37.Mb

Peter Geschiere : The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe:

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. The Perils of National Identity By Etienne RPA few years ago, the Netherlands had a public debate on national identity. Dutch people have always been cool and laid-back about their

own country. Except during soccer tournaments, they don't show the flag around, and when they are abroad they are as comfortable in English as in their national language. People are at a loss to give examples of Dutchness, except perhaps a general attitude of openness and tolerance. Ian Buruma, a literary critic, attributes this attitude of squeamishness about national identity to a country "well known for its Calvinistic restraint and its bourgeois disdain for excess". For many Dutch people there is not only uncertainty about what Dutch culture is about but also reluctance to accept the very idea of such a national culture. Until well into the 1990s, the Netherlands saw itself, and was seen by others, as a beacon in the world for realizing a tolerant society with integrated multiple cultures. Differences were not frowned upon. Immigrants were allowed, even encouraged, to retain their own cultural identity. A series of events challenged those self-perceptions. First, there was the unexpected rise of populist politician Pim Fortuyn, who made a rocket start in national politics by taking a controversial stance against foreigners, before being murdered by a radical ecologist in 2002. Then there was the even bloodier murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by an Islamic fanatic in 2004, after he made a film attacking Islam with Somalia-born Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Another dramatic event that got less international media coverage was the death of eleven "illegal" immigrants who, in 2005, burned alive while in a provisional detention center. To many people in the Netherlands, these three events marked an abrupt switch. One key to Pim Fortuyn's success was that he had been able to tap the pent-up popular resentment against ever growing numbers of immigrants that the national discourse of antiracism and tolerance had covered up. Some Dutch citizens feared that the Netherlands would lose its traditional tolerance and Western liberalism, becoming increasingly influenced by Islamic viewpoints. These fears were fueled by population growth studies and projections that show the Muslim community growing much faster than that of the "autochtonen" (autochthonous Dutch). Already in 2002, the new cabinet took a new stance on foreigners: drastic curtailing of immigration, speedy extradition of "illegal" immigrants, and a new policy toward remaining "allochtonen" aiming at their forceful integration, especially in a cultural sense. Foreigners, and Dutch citizens of foreign descent, were thus requested to comply to Dutch mores, and to adopt the norms and habits of their host country. But here was the rub: besides the paradox inherent in forcing people to adopt liberal views, no one could agree on what "Dutch culture" was all about, and how this "cultural integration" was to be effected. Especially after 2000, when opinion leaders like Paul Scheffer and Pim Fortuyn started to propagate forcible cultural integration as the only solution to the immigration problem, it became all the more urgent to define more clearly into what immigrants needed to integrate. But the notion of national culture proved elusive. Until well into the 1960s, Dutch society was divided among four competing "pillars"--Protestant, Catholic, liberal, and socialist--which exercised true hegemony over people's life: family, school, work, social and cultural activities, old people's homes, everything was fitted in the grid of this pillarization. The vaderlandse geschiedenis (history of the Fatherland) taught in the Protestant Free University in Amsterdam differed markedly from the version taught at the Catholic University of Nijmegen--or from the socialist version taught at the University of Amsterdam, in those days the bulwark of secularization and socialism. Pillarization taught people to live with differences rather than conforming themselves to one national culture. In 2005, a film destined for persons who were considering emigration to the Netherlands caused controversy: it comprised a shot of two men passionately kissing each other after they had been officially married by the mayor of their municipality, and a longer shot of young women sunbathing topless on the beach. To a significant number of Dutch "autochtons", these scenes are as shocking and disturbing as they would be to prospective Muslim immigrants. In the end, the debate about national identity was defused of its most poisonous stings, and Dutch common sense prevailed. The scientific advisory board for the government produced a report, *Identificatie met Nederland* (Identification with the Netherlands), which typically replaced "identity" by "identification", pleading for a more open approach in trying to outline a Dutch identity, with room for inputs from groups with a different cultural background. Princess Maxima, the very popular wife of the crown prince, was courageous enough to express doubts about the existence of "the" Dutch identity--which brought upon her vicious attacks from a number of opinion leaders. Former prime minister Ruud Lubbers published a book expressing his worries about growing xenophobia. The queen, in her annual Christmas address, emphasized that there were "no simple formulas for integration" and pleaded for tolerance instead of confrontation. Other countries were less lucky. In Cote d'Ivoire, a debate about ivoirité turned ugly, pitting Ivoirians against each other, ending in civil war and de facto partition of the country. In Cameroon, the twin processes of democratization and decentralization led to a wave of autochtony movements that were used by the regime to hold on to power. Divergent expressions of the obsession with autochtony and belonging also emerged from Eastern Congo around the Banyarwanda--opponents rather call them Banyarwanda to emphasize their foreign origin--and, in a completely different setting, South Africa in its struggles with the Makwerekwere, threatening strangers from across the Limpopo. Peter Geschiere's book is about the surprising obsession in our globalizing world with belonging--notably in its most localized variant, to be "born from the soil", as the notion of autochtony originally means. Clearly, claim to "belong" and therefore to have special rights to resources, both locally and at national and global levels, are not new. But our present condition seems to be marked by "a global conjuncture of belonging", as one social scientist put it. There seems to be an inherent link between globalization and a return of the local in unexpected forms and with equally unexpected force. As Clifford Geertz already noted in one of his essays, "cosmopolitanism and parochialism are no longer opposed; they are linked and

reinforcing. As the one increases, so does the other." Peter Geschiere approaches these debates about autochthony and belonging with the tools and mindset of an anthropologist. Most of his research concentrates on Cameroon, where he conducted fieldwork over an extended period, focusing on regional elites associations, citizenship laws, funeral rites, village kinship dynamics, and the adoption of a new forest code. But the lessons he draws from his ethnographic material have a general validity, and should be meditated each time notions of autochthony, belonging to the "trunk" (as in *citoyen de souche*) and "being from the soil" are invoked.

Despite being told that we now live in a cosmopolitan world, more and more people have begun to assert their identities in ways that are deeply rooted in the local. These claims of autochthony meaning born from the soil seek to establish an irrefutable, primordial right to belong and are often employed in politically charged attempts to exclude outsiders. In *The Perils of Belonging*, Peter Geschiere traces the concept of autochthony back to the classical period and incisively explores the idea in two very different contexts: Cameroon and the Netherlands. In both countries, the momentous economic and political changes following the end of the cold war fostered anxiety over migration. For Cameroonians, the question of who belongs where rises to the fore in political struggles between different tribes, while the Dutch invoke autochthony in fierce debates over the integration of immigrants. This fascinating comparative perspective allows Geschiere to examine the emotional appeal of autochthony as well as its dubious historical basis and to shed light on a range of important issues, such as multiculturalism, national citizenship, and migration.

"This is an ambitious, astute, and timely effort to address one of the most interesting and potentially troubling trends in our contemporary world, namely, the rise of politically charged passions about belonging. Geschiere's judicious and incisive analysis offers a model of how an academic investigation can shed light on a major global problem." - Daniel Jordan Smith, Brown University

About the Author Peter Geschiere is professor of African anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and the author of *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*.