Autochthony, Natural Resource Management and Conflicting Rights in West Africa

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Abstract

Global phenomena such as nationalism, extremism and xenophobia are related today to discourses on autochthony and citizenship. Given current processes of democratisation and economic liberalisation, and the scarcity of natural resources, interaction between people of diverse origins is becoming increasingly violent. In West Africa, the declining resource base and power relations are important factors in conflicts between different communities. Many outbreaks of violence are caused by attempts on the part of 'autochthons' to safeguard 'ancestral lands' against 'newcomers' accused of overusing this patrimony. This seems paradoxical at a time of political and socio-economic change, when official discourse invites national and regional integration. The present article draws on studies carried out in West Africa between 2002 and 2007. Data extracted from various individual studies on institutions concerned with natural resource management, livelihood and territory, and negotiated statehood were compiled, analysed and discussed in two interdisciplinary meetings involving researchers from many scientific backgrounds. Focusing on pastoralism and access to land, this article aims to demonstrate that management institutions are eroded in a context of resource scarcity, and that certain groups build discourse and strategies on fuzzy notions of nationhood or identity in order to exclude other users. In this process, the notion of autochthony appears to be an ideological tool in the hands of native people to express their social malaise and difficulties in sustaining their livelihoods in a context of global development. The article concludes that in a context of 'presence-absence' of the state, negotiations between various stakeholders at different levels could foster sustainable development.

Keywords: Autochthony; citizenship; conflicting rights; institutions; public space; West Africa.
4.1 Introduction

Tensions and conflicts generated by socio-political crises in West Africa should not be regarded only as ‘popular agitation’ or spontaneous street demonstrations. Conflicts and violence are often fomented by political actors with great bargaining power to enhance their personal position and interests (Richards and Chauveau 2007). Even though the Ivorian crisis is an example of conflict located within a single country, cases such as this should invite scientists to question the political, economic, social and cultural determinants used as a basis for defining citizenship in African states (Bayart et al. 2001). In many cases, national citizenship is shaped by encounters between ‘locals’ and ‘non-locals’, or ‘nationals’ and ‘foreigners’. It is challenging to understand how these different constellations contribute to the political, social and economic development of a nation – especially in Africa, a continent characterised by fluidity of borders due to weak state control and cross-border social organisation.

Even though national physical boundaries are fixed, social boundaries are still shifting due to artificial foundations of states and an unclear notion of nationhood. Migrants and mobile populations are often animated by the desire to achieve their livelihood goals whatever the conditions and the cost. Opportunistic uses of the notion of citizenship by ‘outsiders’ create many tensions in areas where local people believe that newcomers (pastoralists, migrant workers) have nothing to lose if resources are completely depleted. The autochthony discourse that emerges from these confrontations is rooted in the strategy of local people to safeguard their assets and secure their livelihoods. But it is very often forged by political and economic entrepreneurs for their personal benefit (Socpa 2003). Thus, autochthony has become a strong catalyst for specific actors in building their socio-political personality and also in establishing new ways of accumulating wealth.

This article aims to demonstrate that, in a context of land and resource scarcity, the notion of autochthony leads some actors (autochthons or powerful outsiders) to base their discourses and strategies on a fuzzy notion of nationhood or identity in order to exclude other users (Dozon 2000; Dembélé 2002). Today, there is a growing tendency to exclude alleged ‘strangers’ and unmask ‘fake’ autochthons, who are often citizens of the same nation-state (Socpa 2003; Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005).

Based on the results of several studies carried out in West Africa, this article examines concepts of institutions, public space and conflict, focusing on the
notion of autochthony as the entry point in analysing the dynamics of natural resource management in West Africa. It takes a three-fold approach. Firstly, it focuses on the notion of autochthony, which appears as an ideological tool used by native populations to express their frustration and difficulty in achieving their livelihood goals in territories they consider as theirs, but where the resources bring greater benefit to ‘foreigners’. Secondly, it tries to demonstrate that, contrary to the common explanation of conflicts between resource users as the consequence of scarcity (ecological factor), conflicts in West Africa have strong socio-economic and political roots. Thirdly, it shows that rather than excluding people, the notion of autochthony can become a tool of national development when various segments of a population are given real incentives for sustainable management of resources.

The article begins with a review of hotly debated questions of citizenship in Africa in which ‘in’ and ‘out’ or inclusion/exclusion dichotomies are very flexible. Based on examples from studies in the semi-arid context of West Africa, it then analyses the question of shifting boundaries marked by rapid institutional transformations, resulting in resource scarcity and outbreaks of violence. Finally, it discusses the stakes of regional integration for sustainable development in a context marked by strengthening of the feeling of belonging.

4.2 Methodology

This article draws on an analytical synthesis of studies carried out in West Africa between 2002 and 2007 within the framework of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South and addresses questions of sustainable development. Data presented here are extracted from completed or ongoing studies that have applied various research methods of the social, veterinary and epidemiological sciences. Investigations were conducted in both semi-arid and urban contexts. The main focus of these studies was on livelihood and institutions, with an emphasis on transformations of institutions for natural resource management in wetlands, particularly in the Lake Chad floodplains (Landolt 2003; Fokou 2008); livelihood and territory, with a look at urbanisation, city design and the urban model in West African countries such as Mauritania, Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire (Chenal 2009); and negotiated statehood, with a focus on historical and socio-political perspectives.
Data from empirical results and conceptual analyses in various studies were compiled, analysed and discussed during two interdisciplinary meetings involving researchers from different scientific backgrounds (anthropology, sociology, urban planning, history, political science and veterinary science) in Côte d’Ivoire (September 2007) and Mauritania (March 2008).

4.3 Results and discussion

4.3.1 The ‘in’ and the ‘out’ in African citizenship

Human relationships are always marked by dichotomous categories such as local and non-local, autochthons and allogènes, indigenous and foreigners, sedentary and mobile. These categories constitute the determinants of the ‘in’ and the ‘out’, or factors relating to inclusion and exclusion in various societies. However, the term ‘indigenousness’ is unclear and multidimensional. The United Nations and its subsidiary organisations use the term ‘indigenous peoples’ to characterise ethnic groups of people who inhabit a geographic region with which they have the earliest known historical connection, along with immigrants who have also populated the region and are greater in number (WGIP 2001). Even though many criteria such as territory, race, history, and lifestyle are often mentioned when defining the indigenousness of a given people, the most important are the political role played and access to decision-making arenas. Thus an indigenous group could be considered as a politically underprivileged population group which shares a similar ethnic identity that is different from the one of the nation in power, and which constituted an ethnic entity in the locality before the present ruling nation assumed power. This definition of indigenousness primarily emphasises colonisation or annexation of a minority group by a nation-state or a powerful socio-political group. However, in more restricted terms, indigenous people may be regarded as groups of populations with collective rights in a given territory. This definition is close to the notion of ‘autochthonous’, derived from Greek and meaning ‘sprung from the earth’. In the present article, ‘autochthony’ is preferable to ‘indigenousness’ for two reasons. Firstly, several of the studies on which this article is based were carried out in French-speaking countries where the term indigène has a pejorative connotation owing to its use by colonial rulers to designate less advanced native peoples. Secondly, we do not consider indigenous peoples or autochthons in marginal terms, but rather as groups of people who are recognised as having primacy of settlement in a given territory and the right to regulate access to natural resources.
The notion of autochthony as it is used here is a dynamic social construction that often tends to exclude categories of people previously accepted as locals. This is illustrated by clashes between various groups of populations since the 1990s in West Africa, with the beginning of the democratisation process that gave more power to people who had previously been less involved in decision-making processes. The autochthony discourse was then used as a tool to repair ethnic disparities in access to natural resources in areas such as the Lake Chad floodplains (Socpa 2003). In Côte d’Ivoire, local people found an opportunity to exclude communities who had recently settled in their homeland due to difficulties in access to scarce natural resources (Richards and Chauveau 2007). However, strong opposition between groups is rooted in colonial times and motivated by the need for locals to safeguard ancestral land or their resources in general (Bayart et al 2001). Exclusion discourses always express ‘natural’ emotions and desires, such as protection of ancestral heritage, the fear of being ‘contaminated’ by foreign influences (Geschiere 2005), or the need for security in regulating access to scarce resources.

Religious dimensions are often important in understanding how political identity affects the build-up to and the continuation of a conflict. From his study in Côte d’Ivoire and neighbouring Ghana, which has the same socio-religious and geographical characteristics, Nordas (2007) concludes that although the conflict does not show many of the characteristics of a religious war, religion has become an important label that increases identity polarisation. However, based on the example of Ghana, this author recognised that the existence of religious fault lines does not predetermine bloodshed. Many authors in Côte d’Ivoire have developed arguments about the main cause of the war, following the same lines and making ‘identity’ the central issue at stake (Dembélé 2002; Akindès 2004). However, Marshall-Fratani (2006) showed in her study of Côte d’Ivoire that mobilisation of the categories of ‘autochthony’ and ‘territorial belonging’ among different actors involves redefinition of the notion of citizenship and the conditions of sovereignty.

During colonial times and after independence, cocoa production in West African coastal countries was a magnet for immigrants from the north who first came as labourers, but soon managed to establish their own farms (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005). This trend was favoured by local authorities that deliberately encouraged immigrants to push the ‘frontier’ of cocoa production ever further south (Dozon 2000). However, during the 1980s, when economic crisis was followed by structural adjustment programmes, cash crop prices col-
lapsed and forests quickly diminished. This resulted in a drastic change in the affective relationships between indigenous and immigrants.

One major change occurred in the 1990s with multiparty systems and democratisation processes. Ceuppens and Geschiere (2005) argue that during the 1990s, the question of autochthony became a burning issue in many parts of Africa, inspiring violent efforts to exclude ‘strangers’ who suddenly turned into political rivals of the local elite (see Socpa 2003). This movement was closely linked to the trend of democratisation, which has often relied upon ethnicity. Thus, in a context of democratisation, autochthons take it for granted that they should rule in their own area, but some groups of people, due to their primacy of settlement, see themselves as more ‘autochthonous’ than others and try to exclude the latter from natural resources and political power (Socpa 2003; Fokou 2008).

This analysis indicates that in West Africa, the influence of both internal and external factors helps to shape the dichotomy between ‘local’ and ‘non-local’ autochthons and strangers. Conflicts often emerge on the grounds of deep disparities between ethnic groups over access to natural resources (land, pastures and water), commercial exchanges, and access to political power (Socpa 2003). This was demonstrated by case studies carried out in West Africa (Schelling 2002; Landolt 2003; Fokou et al 2004; Fokou and Landolt 2005; Fokou 2008; Chenal 2009). These studies have helped to demonstrate that notions of institutions, public space and conflicts are interrelated and affect access to resources by groups of actors. This is best illustrated by analysis of institutions for pastoral resource management in semi-arid areas.

4.3.2 Shifting boundaries in access and natural resource management

In West Africa today, natural resource users such as mobile pastoralists in the Sahel are having increasing difficulty earning a livelihood. Very often, they have to move far beyond national boundaries. Voluntary or forced, mobility has affected notions of autochthony and belonging, causing changes in institutions concerned with resource management. Boundaries here are not only political, geographical and national – types of boundaries that are very fluid in the West African context – but ecological, socio-economic and professional as well. This is illustrated by: 1) the dynamics of the production system (livelihood diversification); 2) re-creation of new borders in West Africa through treaties aimed at removing obstacles to the free movement
of goods, capital and people in the sub-region; 3) ecological changes and increased competition over land; 4) rural migration: rural people are increasingly migrating to towns while absentee owners, mostly city dwellers, are gaining more bargaining power in the development of rural areas.

As demonstrated by a case study in Togo (Tezike and Dewa-Kassa 2008), West African countries are rapidly moving towards political and economic regional integration marked by free movement of people and goods across borders. Therefore, pastoralists from the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) are increasingly moving to coastal countries (Togo, Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire) for better living conditions. If mobility is vital for pastoralists from the Sahel, the arrival of foreign herders in coastal countries poses problems of regulation of access to pasture, as well as social problems (conflicts over resources) and animal sanitation problems (bovine tuberculosis, foot-and-mouth disease, uncontrolled breeding). These issues help to reinforce the animosity of sedentary populations (Tezike and Dewa-Kassa 2008). Thus, access to natural resources becomes more complex and helps to bring about change in institutions, and also reshapes notions of autochthony and belonging. This change in physical, financial, socio-professional and legal borders has affected interactions between groups of users and institutions concerned with natural resource management.

Studies in the Lake Chad area (Landolt 2003; Fokou and Landolt 2005; Fokou 2008) have shown that natural resource management is made more difficult in a context where legal pluralism prevails. Across Africa, the management of natural resources is often based on several types of legal systems: statutory and customary systems and combinations of both coexist in the same territory, resulting in overlapping rights, contradictory rules and competing authorities (Cotula 2005). In this process, external factors such as new political structures, infrastructure and technologies have reduced access costs for external users who, due to difficult economic conditions, see key resources (game, fish and cattle) as valuable sources of income, just as locals do. But while local rules have been dismantled, the new bureaucratic institutions which have replaced them failed to put in place mechanisms of management, monitoring and penalties, thus confirming the lack of a clear authority. Fokou (2008) demonstrated that in the Lake Chad floodplains most resources are increasingly under open access or have been privatised. In open access constellations, politically stronger individuals and outsiders obtain the biggest share, ignoring rules governing access and use of natural resources. In the Sahel or around Lake Chad, for instance, institutional
cross-border modalities exist but do little to give transhumant pastoralists better access to natural resources or basic social services such as health facilities for human and animals, drinking water, and markets (Schelling 2002; Fokou 2008). In this open access situation, several trends concerning the use of resources were observed: firstly, boundaries are no longer clearly defined, as foreigners easily cross borders to use pockets of resources; secondly, local populations often claim their exclusive rights over resources by means of violence; thirdly, less powerful actors lose out and are forced to use natural resources even more intensively. Finally, this leads to depletion of pockets of natural resources and to outbreaks of conflict.

4.3.3 Presence-absence of the state, mismanagement of natural resources, and outbreaks of conflict

Throughout the African Sahel, scarce pockets of resources are increasingly under pressure as a result of the intensification of agricultural activities, pastoral settlement, and privatisation of land (Niamir-Fuller 1998, p 253). Natural resources have been put under different management regimes in order to promote sustainable use. This trend is visible in discourses used by diverse groups of actors to justify their access to resources. In a context of migration, newly arrived ‘strangers’ have developed a new rhetoric to challenge the management regimes of the autochthons considered as ‘sons of the soil’. Very often, they argue that with democracy, the majority determines how resources should be used. Democracy is then reinterpreted as the freedom to access and use resources as one pleases (Fokou and Landolt 2005). This attitude is reinforced by the high social status acquired by some of the newcomers, who are ‘rich’ pastoralists. In the new institutional context where poorly paid members of the local bureaucracy initiate various strategies to generate personal profit, livestock owners often use their wealth to attain a better socio-economic position (e.g. by paying for exclusive rights to rangelands or bribing authorities during conflict settlement). As a result, management of resources is ‘autochthonised’, and the so-called outsiders, due to their late arrival, are increasingly excluded. The recent emergence of patriotic movements (e.g. Côte d’Ivoire) and rebellions (e.g. Tuareg of northern Mali) illustrates the new discourse of autochthons based on the willingness of socio-political actors to impose sovereignty on a territory or a nation-state. However, it could also be interpreted as the expression of social frustration among groups of people confronted with difficulties in achieving their livelihood goals. The emergence of conflicts in arid areas such as northern Mali, where there are no other ethnic groups with competing land claims, recalls
the debate about autochthony and land rights. With a feeling of being threatened over their own land and excluded from resources by powerful ‘outsiders’, local people tend to develop animosity toward other social groups, even when they consist of citizens of the same country (Landolt 2003; Fokou and Landolt 2005; Haller and Helbling 2005; Fokou 2008). In a context of diminishing natural resources and insecure access, the ideological opposition between ‘locals’ and ‘strangers’ or ‘real autochthons’ and ‘fake autochthons’ is growing and resulting in outbreaks of conflict.

4.4 Autochthony and integration: the inevitable collaboration for sustainable development in West Africa

4.4.1 A malleable notion of citizenship in West Africa

The notion of citizenship, which can be considered as a regime of rights and duties that links an individual to a state, centres on the status of the citizen acting in accordance with the law, their position as a political agent actively participating in a society’s political institutions, and their membership in a political community that furnishes a distinct source of identity (Bayart et al 2001). In the African context, these characteristics change constantly. In Côte d’Ivoire, for instance, the notion of autochthony has taken a new trajectory. It was first directed against people from outside the country: mostly against the Burkinabe, who, since the 1950s, have migrated in great numbers to the south in order to participate in the booming plantation economy of Côte d’Ivoire (Tokpa 2006). As long as the autochthony discourse was directed against immigrants from beyond Côte d’Ivoire, the fear of ‘outsiders’ rather strengthened the idea of Ivorian national citizenship. However, developments in the last few years have shown how quickly the term can be re-interpreted and re-directed against fellow Ivorians (Geschiere 2005). The question is: what does citizenship mean today? Is a citizen the local leader who considers that “the goat grazes wherever it is tied” to justify corrupt practices? Is it a migrant who actively contributes to the booming national economy but is nevertheless considered a foreigner? Can it be the nomadic pastoralist who keeps changing nationality according to the countries visited during transhumance in order to pursue pastoral activities peacefully?

The answer lies somewhere in between. This elasticity in the notion of citizenship could be seen as a need to recreate rules to provide various groups
of people with ‘institutional incentives’ for natural resource management, social dialogue and peaceful consolidation. This could be made possible by clearly defining the role of the state in satisfying the basic needs of citizens. In many cases, frustration among groups of resource users is caused by the feeling they have of bearing the costs of national development but not clearly benefiting from profits generated by their activities or from the resources in their region. Rural populations are often confronted with many difficulties: exclusion from their land due to public activities such as the establishment of protected areas, damage to their assets (animals and crops), levying of taxes by the state, and overuse of resources such as forests, fishing or mining reserves by multi-national companies without any social investment (Geschiere 2005; Fokou and Haller 2008). Transhumant pastoralists, for instance, feel that they are regarded as citizens only when they contribute to state income (Fokou 2008). Most of the time taxes collected by the state are not converted into basic social infrastructure and services (wells, delimited transhumance corridors, public health, veterinary facilities, etc.). As expressed by local populations in the Lake Chad area, their losses are far greater than their gains (Fokou and Haller 2008).

The situation could be reversed through more scientific research to help bridge the gap between policies and groups of actors. In this process, many studies have been initiated to analyse how the state interacts with different actors such as traditional authorities, local or regional governments, civil society, and domestic and global actors.

### 4.4.2 Negotiating statehood and sustainable development

In West Africa today, the paradoxical situation emerging from the opposition between the strong appeal for regional integration and the exclusionary behaviour of some local people poses the question of negotiating statehood for sustainable development. One should not trivialise the collective action of local groups to exclude other users from land and resources. However, the important aspect is the ‘presence-absence’ of the state, which benefits some local powerful actors trying to keep, revitalise or transform certain traditional institutions because the rules give them power and access to common-pool resources (CPRs) for commercial reasons. The analytical setting for the relationship between statehood and livelihood can be found in public space. As defined by Habermas (1993), public space is a platform to explain conflicts but also a place to analyse the spatial distribution of conflicts. If public space reveals the strategies of private actors to gain ownership of
land, form social groups and exclude other users, it remains for many people a place of contest (in its spatial and political dimensions) and protest; a place where poor and voiceless people have an occasion to express themselves. It is above all a shared and disputed space (Chenal 2009).

Analysis of public space shows that nowadays interactions between constituted social groups are taking a particular trajectory, with the emergence of youth movements trying to show their patriotic ideologies through clear political positions. Youth, women, natural resource users, politicians and other social categories use public space to express their frustrations and malaise. These dynamics of the means and spaces of protest and affirmation of one’s identity sound like an appeal to revisit the political, economic, social and cultural criteria on which citizenship has been based and how this notion has changed through time. The central question in this diachronic perspective is to examine the way the encounter between ‘locals’ and ‘foreigners’ has helped to shape national citizenship. This process passes through tensions and conflicts which should be situated in a context of political economy or access to livelihoods. Thus relationships between power, violence and wealth accumulation appear to be central to analysis of the interaction between social groups. In Côte d’Ivoire these relationships, which are part of an iterative process, help to understand and explain the new status of the cocoa sector. Here the cocoa sector is understood as a site of conflicting social relations in which different actors deploy different strategies in order to benefit from the surplus of capital.

4.5 Conclusion

This analytical process has demonstrated how, in a context of natural resource scarcity, the concept of autochthony is instrumentalised by actors to serve their interests. The notion of autochthony is above all socially constructed and the result of power struggles. 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. It is understood that resources are becoming scarcer and, in response, groups of users adopt various strategies to guarantee their livelihoods. To achieve this, they build their discourses and strategies on shifting views of nationhood or identity so as to be able to exclude other users.
Today, discourse on autochthony is easily adapted to the ongoing redrawing of borders and public spaces that seems to be inherent to processes of decentralisation and globalisation. The emphasis in development policies on by-passing the state, decentralisation and support for NGOs seems to have worrying consequences on the ground (Geschiere 2005). Many blueprint development solutions appear to contribute to conflict exacerbation and to redirecting the notion of autochthony in a dangerous direction. Inversely, the notion of autochthony can contribute to national development when various segments of populations are given real incentives for sustainable management of resources. But this is still a big challenge for African nation-states. For many resource users in West Africa, “frontiers do not matter”, they move across countries in search of better living conditions. To control this flux and avoid conflict, there is a need to implement multi-level institutional frameworks such as updated pastoral codes and norms for natural resource management that could directly improve the livelihoods of people, indirectly improve their access to basic social services, and enhance social dialogue.
Endnotes

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6 Examples of such cross-border social groups include the Tuareg in Niger and Mali, the Arab Choa in Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon, the Fulani in the whole of West Africa, and others.

7 Three PhD studies on the historiography of citizenship, the political economy of cocoa, and the emergence of youth patriotic movements are currently in progress in Côte d’Ivoire.
Treaties of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), signed by 15 countries in Lagos, Nigeria, on 28 May 1975.

Cf. PhD research by Gnangadjomon Koné on “Emergence of the patriotic youth movement in Côte d’Ivoire” currently in progress.

Cf. PhD research by Henri-Michel Yéré on “Negotiating citizenship in 20th-century Côte d’Ivoire” currently in progress.

Cf. PhD research by Mathieu Gasparini on “Power, violence and accumulation in Côte d’Ivoire: The cocoa sector in transition” currently in progress.
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Publications elaborated within the framework of NCCR North-South research are indicated by an asterisk (*).


