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Mourning and the Imagination of Political Time in Contemporary Central Africa

Funerals and Belonging: Different Patterns in South Cameroon

Peter Geschiere

Abstract: The preoccupation with "autochthony" and the exclusion of "strangers" in many parts of present-day Africa, a paradoxical outcome of political liberalization, has given new importance to funerals as an ultimate test of "belonging." However, the link between funerals and belonging is certainly not new. This article compares three different versions of this link from southern Cameroon. In the 1970s, Maka funerals in southeast Cameroon emphasized belonging in terms of local kinship and affinity. In the 1980s, Ewondo funerals in Central Province reaffirmed the belonging of urban elites to their village of origin. In the 1990s, funerals in the Southwest Province revealed the increased political significance of the funeral in the context of a growing preoccupation with autochthony and belonging under democratization. These three examples illustrate the continuing stretching of kinship as it bridges new inequalities and distances. They also raise questions as to its breaking point.

Résumé: La préoccupation du principe d'«autochtonie» et de l'exclusion des "étrangers" dans bien des régions de l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui, une résultante paradoxale de la libéralisation politique, a donné une nouvelle importance aux enterrements et au concept d' "appartenance." Cependant, le lien entre les enterrements et le principe d'appartenance n'est pas nouveau. Cet article compare trois différentes versions de ce lien dans le Cameroun du sud. Dans les années 70, les enterrements Maka dans le sud est du Cameroun mettaient en relief la notion d'appartenance familiale en tant qu'affinité et appartenance locale. Dans les années 80,

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Peter Geschiere is a professor of the anthropology of Africa at the University of Amsterdam (formerly at Leiden University). Recent publications include *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (University Press of Virginia, 3rd edition, 2003) and (co-edited with Gyanendra Pandey) *The Forging of Nationhood* (Manohar, Delhi, 2002).

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les enterrements Ewondo dans la province du centre réaffirmaient l'appartenance des élites urbaines à leur village d'origine. Dans les années 90, les enterrements de la province du sud ouest révélaient une préoccupation montante des notions d'«autochtonie» et d'appartenance sous l'avènement de la démocratie dans le pays. Ces trois exemples illustrent l'élargissement continu de la notion d'appartenance familiale en lui faisant rapprocher des communautés de niveau social différents et résidant à distance les unes des autres. Ils posent également la question des limites de la notion d'appartenance familiale.

A clear indication of the centrality of funerals in everyday life in southern Cameroon, both in the cities and in the countryside, is the proliferation of rituals that require ever greater investments of money and effort. Lavish funerals certainly are not a new phenomenon in this region. Colonial reports, for example, constantly complained about the rising costs of both funerals and bride-price and asked why the "natives" (*indigènes*) did not invest their money in more profitable ways. However, during the last decades this trend seems to have intensified in a dramatic way. According to the economist Célestin Monga (1995), the rapidly growing expenditures for death ceremonies amount to "une mauvaise gestion de la mort" ("a bad management of death")—especially in a context of continuous crisis, "structural adjustment," and growing impoverishment for most Cameroonians.[1] Monga stresses also that an "anthropological approach" permits one to doubt the "authenticity" of these costly rituals. Some anthropologists may be uneasy at still being designated as self-evident guides to "authenticity," but Monga is certainly right in pointing out the striking dynamics and innovative character of the funeral rituals throughout this region.

In this article I focus on a particular aspect of this ostentatious display at funerals: the emphasis on the obligation, including the obligation of urbanites, to be buried "at home"—which means, in the village of origin. To many people, being buried in the city still carries the stigma of social failure. The village funeral—especially the funeral of an urban elite individual—has become a great social event, marked by considerable expenditure and ostentation but also, frequently, by more or less canalized expressions of violence, which give these occasions the appearance of some sort of potlatch.[2]

In an earlier publication (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000), Francis Nyamnjoh and I related this continued or even increased emphasis on burial "at home," and the pomp that accompanies such occasions, to people's growing obsession with notions of belonging and "autochthony," especially since the onset of democratization. In Cameroon, as in many other parts of the continent, political liberalization has had the paradoxical effect of trig-

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gering a growing preoccupation with the exclusion of *allogènes* (strangers). Athough these strangers are mostly citizens of the same state as the so-called autochthonous groups, the renewed importance of elections has made the latter increasingly worried that they could be outvoted in their "own" region by more numerous immigrants. This is especially true in the coastal areas, which economically are of central interest. Belonging has thus became a primary concern, especially for ambitious politicians, and the new politics of democratization have turned rapidly into the politics of belonging. In this context, funerals are often cited—notably by spokesmen for autochthonous groups—as an ultimate test of who belongs where. For instance, one of the standard arguments of the "autochthons" from the Sawa areas of the country along the coast is that most of these immigrants still want to be buried "at home," in their village of origin. The implication, of course, is that these people should vote in their own villages instead of competing with the autochthons in their part of the country.

It is important to stress, though, that this linkage between funerals and belonging is nothing new. A nearly universal aspect of funeral ritual is that it emphasizes the reaffirmation of social ties. Especially if the dead person had been an important figure, that individual's disappearance risks creating a rupture in the network of relations. Funeral ceremonies are used to ease this precarious moment by affirming the position of those who remain vis-a-vis the dead and one another. It is clear, however, that different kinds of belonging can be at stake. The wild funeral rituals among the Maka in the forest of southeast Cameroon, which night after night shook the village in which I did my fieldwork in the 1970s, strongly emphasized the affinity between local groups and people's place—their belonging—in the network of kinship. It was the negotiation of this kind of belonging that seemed to be at the heart of the proliferation of death rituals and their constant innovation. In the 1980s, Luc Mebenga's doctoral work at the University of Yaounde I on funerals among the neighboring Ewondo highlighted a different aspect of belonging. Mebenga's work concerns people who, because of their proximity to the capital, Yaounde, had experienced very early contacts with the missions; they had become educated and also had developed an urban elite much earlier than the Maka. Although Mebenga's vivid ethnography sketches patterns similar to those of the Maka, he portrays Ewondo burial rituals as a struggle over a more "modern" type of belonging: funerals as the moment when urbanites are forced to act out their belonging to the village (or, to put it more cynically, as a moment when "their brothers" in the village can get even with them). In the 1990s, Francis Nyamnjoh and I collected funeral stories mostly from Southwest Province in the Anglophone part of the country which, for various reasons, had become a hotbed of autochthony movements. These stories highlight the role of funerals in the new politics of belonging that has been triggered by democratization. In the 1990s funerals "at home" seemed related to a new phase in national politics in which autochthony, instead of nation-

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building, is a priority for the government.

In the three examples above, death as a tragic moment of disappearance is balanced by a renewed stress on belonging, and in all three cases belonging is expressed in terms of kinship. Yet it is clear that in each situation very different notions of belonging prevail. In this article I would like to compare these three moments in order to understand the funeral as a key event in everyday life that can take on different implications in different contexts. Specifically, the different implications of the funeral highlight the striking ways in which kinship ties can be stretched in order to bridge new dislocations and inequalities. A central question is whether the ability of kinship ties to act as this sort of bridge will eventually reach its limit, and especially whether the appeal to kinship as a political form of belonging will retain its meaning in everyday practice.

Maka Funerals in the 1970s: Belonging and the Rivalry between Kin and Affines

When I began my fieldwork among the Maka in southeast Cameroon in the early 1970s, funerals constituted one of the most confusing experiences—at least for me. It was quite clear that these were very important occasions in village life. If the dead person had been a senior man, people came from all over the canton to attend his funeral.[3] These large funerals consisted of a staggering mixture of mourning and merrymaking, of solidarity and aggression. The funeral itself was a condensed and very intense event; the night after the deceased passed away there was a long wake, accompanied by constant drumming and dancing but also by fierce outbursts of grieving. The day after there followed a long series of ostentatious exchanges and gift-giving, culminating in a mock fight over the body, which finally was buried in the course of the afternoon. After the burial, people began to go home. On rare occasions a family would stage a repetition of this ritual—for instance, one year later—to formally end the mourning. In most cases, the descendants would talk about organizing a second event but keep delaying it—supposedly for financial reasons.

Only gradually did I discover—mostly thanks to the patient explanations of my assistant, Meke Blaise—some pattern in all the tumult and emotional outbursts. My assistant and my other informants emphasized especially the division of roles in these dramatic performances between the descendants of the dead (the people of his *njaw boud* = people of the house), on the one hand, and, on the other, those who were related by marriage (*ompombelou*)—the sister's sons and the mother's brothers.[4] Of course, all these terms have to be understood in what anthropologists call a "classificatory" sense: They refer to whole categories of people. Thus the "daughters-in-law" (*otsjol*) include all women who married into the deceased's group (or even the whole village); similarly, the "mother's

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brothers" (*ikougou*) consist of the whole group to which the deceased's mother belonged, and so on. One of the confusing aspects of a funeral was (and is) that a wide array of persons could be included in each category. The delegation of the mother's brothers could include any person who claimed some sort of relation to the group concerned. The same applied to the sister's sons, the sons-in-law, and so on.[5] A big funeral thus became a dramatic acting out of the map of kinship and affinity linking persons and groups. It also highlighted the staggering scope of this network. Strenuous genealogical efforts were often required for me to understand all the links that seemed self-evident to the people concerned. The funerals thus graphically illustrated the seemingly boundless elasticity of Maka kinship.

From the onset of the mourning ritual, the otsjol (daughters-in-law) played a key-role. As soon as the drummers began to beat the rhythm of mourning to announce that someone had died, they would put on their dancing gear and start to circulate with much "animation," as people described it, and with a big pot of white chalk in their hand, trying to "catch" all the descendants of the deceased in order to paint their faces. According to the explanation of my friends, this was intended to set apart the group of mourners, those who had "suffered such a big loss." In stark contrast, the daughters-in-law themselves enlivened the long nighttime wake with happy and even aggressive dancing, often pulling some of the descendants out of the mourning group around the bier and engaging them in a sort of dancing duel. People explained to me that the elated dancing was an expression of their rejoicing, as members of a rival group, over the humiliation of their husband's njaw boud, who had lost such an important member. Thus they would sometimes literally dance one of the mourners into the mud as a dramatic expression of "victory." Indeed, the Maka have a saying, "marriage is war" (*ba djisse domb*), meaning that one can only marry outside one's kinship (*bjel*)—that is, into a potentially hostile group.[6] All relations with in-laws are therefore marked by a precarious mixture of aggression and solidarity. Anthropologists call such relationships "joking," but this term can have the unfortunate implication that the show of aggression in such a context is only a joke. The Maka funerals are a good indication that the aggression is real, although there is an attempt to canalize it. They also indicate that such "jokes" can easily get out of hand.

In the course of the night the daughters-in-law would be joined by other in-laws—the sons-in-law and the sister's-sons—who engaged in similar behavior. For instance, one of the sons-in-law would enter the circle of dancers, stop the drum with exaggerated dancing steps, throw some money into a pot in front of the main drum, and give a speech that was clearly meant to shock. He might say that before his death the deceased had been too old to satisfy all his wives or that he was impotent from syphilis; or the speaker might criticize the meager reception. The sister's-sons would prowl through the compound grabbing chickens and pigs. This behavior was all

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the more shocking because in everyday life the daughters- and sons-in-law in particular have to show so much respect to their father-in-law that the relationship resembles one of avoidance. According to my friends, however, the aggressive behavior was meant to please the deceased, whose hovering *djim* (ghost) would be proud that now everybody could see the kind of "dynamic" daughters- and sons-in-law he had attached to his group. Indeed, it was an obligation (*devoir*) of the in-laws to behave in such a way.

Toward noon, the funeral ritual reached its climax with the *kombok*. The daughters- and sons-in-law would dress in unusual garments and gather in the bushes outside the village in a sort of military column. Some carried objects of the warriors of former days (old spears, camouflage branches); women sported men's clothes—jackets, caps—preferably of the deceased. In the front stood a man with a big spear. Then suddenly the whole group, yelling loudly, would rush into the village and charge the house of the deceased shaking it to and fro. The bereaved relatives would offer symbolic resistance but be chased away from the bier; furniture was thrown outside and set on fire, animals were clubbed to death, sometimes guns were fired, and the whole village was thrown into an uproar. The daughters-in-law would put on more of the deceased's clothing and dance frenziedly. Sometimes they performed complex pantomimes for observers. For example, one woman would "challenge" another, who would seek cover behind a bystander. The first woman would make furious mock attacks on the second woman until the harassed onlookers gave both of them money; then they would dance on contentedly. Indeed, the kombok was generally associated with mocking and scorn; women dressed as men, and everyone behaved in a crazy and deliberately wrong way—throwing live fowls into the fire, burning chairs, cooking palm-nuts on an unlit fire, and so on.

After a while, the kombok calmed down. Food would be distributed and the descendants would take up their positions around the bier. Now was the time for negotiations and payments. The groups of the various "houses" (patrilineages) would place themselves in front of the house and one by one, each son-in-law would be called upon by a blood relative of the deceased brandishing a long spear. The relative would run around and, pointing the spear at the son-in-law's village, ask questions in a booming voice that clearly were meant to be insulting (for instance, "isn't this the village where no cocoa can grow?"—meaning that the people of this village had a reputation for laziness). The son-in-law then would step forward, stop the drums, give a speech (once again, full of jests about the deceased or the meager reception) and throw some money in a bowl, with the amount carefully recorded by one of the deceased's descendants.

Next the daughters-in-law had to be paid. They would assemble in front of the house, still in their kombok attire, dancing and singing all sorts of songs: French songs they had learned at school and modern Cameroonian top hits, but also mocking songs about the deceased—how stingy he was, how hard they worked for him, how he had lived as long as he had only

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because they took such good care of him. The favorite theme of these songs was *minkounde njame*: Now the vengeance is mine. The elder of the deceased's group would offer them some money—on the order of a few thousand francs CFA—but the daughters-in-law would indignantly refuse to accept that amount with shrill cries and a lot of laughter. Encouraged by the sons-in-law, they would chase away the mourners, grab the bier, place it on their shoulders, and with much hilarity and mirth, rush off to hide in the bushes behind the house, the corpse bouncing up and down on their shoulders. The elder then had to follow them in order to "buy back" the corpse with a higher bid. As a rule the women would send him away scornfully a few times before accepting the money.

The most difficult negotiations followed next with the deceased's mothers-brothers, who had to dig the grave and be paid for their labor. The corpse also had to be "bought" from them; the deceased was their blood-relative as well, and if they were offered too little money, they might take the corpse and bury it in their own village. These negotiations often developed into a long palaver in which the elders of both groups confronted each other with much rhetorical prowess. The elders of the deceased's group would stress that they had little money at their disposal since the coffee and cocoa harvests had not yet been sold, or that the deceased never received much from his mother's brothers. The other elder, for his part, would emphasize that he and his people had come from afar, that the bride-price of the deceased's mother was never paid in full, and so on.

When the elders finally reached an agreement (in the 1970s, thirty dollars or less was the usual amount) it was time for the actual burial, and the mother's brothers would carry the corpse to the grave. In former days the elder of the deceased's group had to pronounce the funeral oration, but by the 1970s this was more often done by one of the deceased's sons, who would read out a written statement in French—which was seen as the more prestigious language—accompanied by a translation in Maka. Often a Christian catechist (Catholic or Presbyterian) would say a prayer and then the body was put into the grave. This was the moment when the mourning became general: The blood-relatives would writhe with grief, and even the sons- and daughters-in-law would show themselves deeply moved.

Once the grave was filled, the funeral was over. The further exchanges took place behind closed doors and gradually the participants began the journey back home.

THE ABOVE IS ONLY a very condensed summary of all the complexities of the funeral ritual. Moreover, it is strictly circumscribed in time. The activities involved in the funeral ritual are extremely dynamic—indeed, this is one of the reasons that people are constantly complaining about their proliferation and increasing costs—and throughout the 1980s and 1990s I noticed constant innovations and additions. Characteristically, these had to

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do with the payment of money. Even in the description above from the 1970s, it is quite striking how central a role money payments had come to play in a funeral. As elsewhere in Africa, the Maka were constantly complaining about the rising costs.

This became really dramatic toward the end of the 1980s, when there was a severe shortage of cash in the entire region due to the abrupt collapse of the world market prices for cocoa and coffee (the main cash crops). Around 1990 it suddenly became even more difficult and sometimes impossible for the villagers to sell anything from their harvests; bags with cocoa and coffee rotted beside the road, since no traders came to buy them, and the villagers suddenly had practically no money. Strikingly, the impossibility of making funeral and bride-price payments was seen as the most urgent problem. As one man complained to me in 1991, "What am I supposed to do? I have hardly any money left. My mother is ill and needs to go to the hospital. But my father is dying and I have to bury him properly." In this case, because the funeral payments had unquestioning priority, his mother could not be taken to the hospital and she died only a few months later.[7]

The complexities of Maka funeral ritual are such that all sorts of tensions are expressed, not only those between descendants and affines as emphasized above. For example, gender tensions are often apparent, also manifesting themselves around novel money payments. At the funeral of an elderly woman that I witnessed in the 1970s, the other women of the village had extended a cord across the road and were stopping all male passers-by to demand money from them. My assistant was quite troubled by this, muttering angrily, "This is completely new. These women are turning the funeral into a market." In addition, the deliberately outrageous behavior of younger men at the funeral—mostly nephews and sons-in-law—clearly relates to the tensions, omnipresent in village life, between elders and juniors. However, the main tension acted out is the one highlighted in the description above: the tension between the patrilineal groups related by marriage. As the elder of my village explained to me, "The funeral is very important. If an old man dies an important link disappears. We must remember that we are related. So all the people concerned have to be there and show how they are related." At least in the 1970s, the kind of belonging stressed by Maka funeral ritual had to do primarily with affirming one's place in the network of kinship and affinity.

The Ewondo in the 1980s: The Funeral in the Village and the "Excuses" of the Urbanites

I encountered a somewhat different link between funerals and belonging when, at the end of the 1980s, I supervised a thesis by Luc Mebenga (Mebenga 1991) at the University of Yaounde on funeral rituals among the

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Ewondo, the western neighbors of the Maka.[8] Mabenga's thesis was based on research he conducted in the course of the 1980s; the funeral of his own father in 1983 was the central case study. At the public defense of the thesis in Yaounde in 1991, a very interesting debate arose between Mebenga and, notably, those members of the jury who were *originaires* from the same forest area. The latter strongly emphasized a theme that had remained mostly implicit in Mebenga's thesis: the mixed feelings of urban elites when they have to return to the village for a funeral. Clearly, for these urbanites the funeral constituted an obvious moment to reaffirm their belonging to the village. But it was also clear that this more or less forced return to the village was a highly difficult, not to say dangerous, moment for them.

Mebenga's thesis describes ritual events that are similar to the Maka funeral. Here, as well, the funeral was marked by the wild behavior of the sister's sons, who terrorized the deceased's compound, destroying his property and roasting chickens, goats, and pigs. Together with the deceased's sisters they imposed all sorts of harsh rituals on the widow. Like the Maka funeral, the Ewondo funeral is a highly "animated" event, although here most of the animation is provided by music groups from the city.[9] Such resemblances are not surprising. The sociocultural organization patterns among the Ewondo correspond in many respects to those of the Maka. Ewondo society was (and is) also marked by strong segmentary tendencies; up to the colonial conquest there was no central authority in the area above the village level. Each adult male hoped to establish himself as an independent *nkukuma* (big man) by moving deeper and deeper into the forest and creating his own village.[10] As among the Maka, the links forged by marriage and affinity were crucial for relating the local groups to each other.

However, Mebenga's thesis also highlights an aspect of Ewondo funerals that was absent from the funerals I attended among the Maka in the 1970s: the special role of urbanites who return to the village for the funeral.

> Every Ewondo knows very well that, though one is allowed to leave one's natal village, coming back to it—be it to live there or to be buried—is a moral obligation that no one can neglect. This idea finds its concrete expression in the burying of the placenta of a newly born child. This is to remind the child that, even if he becomes a vagrant ("vagabond"), he should never forget to return to the place where his placenta is buried. This act ties any Ewondo to his village, like a child is tied to his mother by the umbilical cord. Indeed, this conception demands that every Ewondo be buried in his village of origin so as to reaffirm this union forged by his birth. Even the authorities respect this custom—which one finds nearly everywhere in Africa—by facilitating the transportation of the corpses of all civil servants to their village in order to be buried there. This is one of the few customary norms that are still respected today." (1991:234; my translation)

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The Ewondo live around Yaounde, the country's capital (indeed, the name of the city was derived from the German spelling of "Ewondo"). They were Christianized much earlier than the Maka, and had earlier access to modern education. As a result, they developed a modern urban elite much earlier as well; nowadays, for example, the Ewondo (like other Beti groups) are strongly represented in the administrative services of the postcolonial state. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that among the Ewondo this issue of urbanization came to the fore much earlier than it did among the Maka.

Mebenga analyzes the changes in the funeral ritual especially by contrasting the emphasis on the collectivity and solidarity in the "traditional" funeral, on the one hand (although he does not specify clearly which period he is referring to), and the rise of individualism marking present-day relations, on the other. He sees the enduring commitment of urbanites to being buried in the village as a highly positive sign that there still remains something of the old emphasis on the collectivity. While their socioeconomic interests oblige them to orient themselves toward their new surroundings (the city), it is their "spiritual interests" that make them retain their links to "the sacred place" of the village. And this is why they still want to be buried in their native soil, which "does not move despite all social change" (235).

During the public defense, however, a quite different view of the funeral "at home" came to the fore, notably from the interventions of the jury members from the same area. One of the professors, Marcien Towa, congratulated the candidate on his courage in taking this position, since everybody knew how difficult it was to return to the village for a funeral. Jean Mfoulou emphasized this point even more strongly: "It is like this among us: anybody who emerges has to excuse himself constantly with those who do not emerge."[11] And both professors stressed that the funeral in particular was an occasion when the villagers could make urban elites "excuse themselves." Many of my colleagues from the forest area told me stories of how they dreaded the moment of return, notably for a funeral. The wild behavior of the sister's sons of the deceased—but also of other people during these tumultuous occasions—could easily be directed against them, the urban visitors, who are always reproached for not sharing enough of their new riches. The funeral constitutes, indeed, an ideal moment for the villagers to get even with their "brothers" from the city.

In the Cameroonian context, people often emphasize that urban elites who originate from forest societies—like the Ewondo or the Maka—have a particularly ambiguous relationship to "their" village. These societies are pervaded by a strong egalitarian ideology, emphasizing the basic equality of every adult man.[12] Village life is marked by strong leveling tendencies: the segmentary nature of the kinship order and especially the omnipresent threat of witchcraft as soon as someone achieves success raise jealousy among the individual's relatives. And, as Mfoulou said so aptly at the defense, these new elites have every need to "excuse" themselves. People

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from the area often compare them with the elites from the much more hierarchical societies of the Grassfields (Bamileke, Bamenda) in the western parts of the country, who take their obligation toward their village of origin much more seriously. The elites, for their part, emphasize that their peers among the Bamileke are at least protected by the chief when they return to the village. In the forest, in contrast, chiefs do not have enough authority to restrain the villagers. Thus, there seems to be no end to all the "sharing" required by their "brothers." Indeed, many elites from the forest region insist that they have to keep a certain distance so as not to be "eaten" by the villagers.[13]

The role of these urban elites at the funeral expresses, therefore, a striking paradox. On the one hand, they clearly feel ill at ease. A funeral is a dangerous moment, when they are forced to venture again into the intimacy of the brothers and be assailed by all sorts of requests. It is risky to refuse these requests outright, since everybody knows the disastrous consequences that can result if the jealous relatives are not appeased by sharing. On the other hand, this situation does not erode an individual's commitment, at least on principle, to the village, the "sacred place," as Mebenga emphasizes, where the placenta was buried at birth and where the person will be buried after death. The political developments of the 1990s also suggest that more mundane feelings may play a role here. In a situation of rapid urbanization, funeral rituals may express new preoccupations of belonging. As the Ewondo example shows, funerals provide a special opportunity for urbanites—and especially urban elites—to reaffirm that they do belong to their village of origin.[14]

Funerals and Autochthony: The Southwest and the Littoral in the 1990s

The early 1990s were years of great turmoil in Cameroon. Even though the former one-party regime of President Biya had maintained itself in power through all sorts of authoritarian manipulations, the reintroduction of multipartyism brought spectacular challenges. Under Biya—and also under Ahidjo, Cameroon's first president, whom Biya had succeeded in 1982—and despite Biya's so-called *Renouveau politique*—any debate outside the single party's aegis was strictly forbidden. All this changed dramatically in 1990. Elections once again became crucially important. At least as important was the new scope of political debate: There was a sudden proliferation of newspapers and magazines, and in all sorts of public spaces—in the street, in the bar, at work, and also everywhere in the countryside—Cameroonians showed a hitherto hidden talent as political debaters. However, the contents of these debates soon developed interesting overtones. Especially after a few years, when the regime had succeeded in effectively dividing the opposition, it was less the differences among the programs of

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the various parties—which from the start had been quite difficult to capture—that incited the people than it was notions of belonging, notably the precarious distinction between *autochtones* and *allogènes*. And in this context the funeral took on new political importance—now in direct relation to national politics.

The first time I stumbled upon this somewhat unexpected link (at least to me) was in a 1997 interview in the *Herald*, an opposition paper in the Anglophone Southwest Province, with a certain Professor Bejanga, the founding president of the new "Association of the Elites of the Eleventh Province" (The *Herald*, April 16, 1997). The name itself of the association was quite strange, since Cameroon has only ten provinces. In the interview Bejanga explained patiently that his association gathered the descendants of immigrants to the area, who had come there—in most cases, generations ago—to work on the big plantation complex the Germans had created on the fertile slopes of Mount Cameroon, near the coast. Bejanga described also how he had tried to join the association of new elites of the Southwest Province—one of the associations that are flourishing throughout the country since political liberalization—but that he was ignominiously shown the door with the argument that he did not really belong. He was even called an allogène, although he was born in the Southwest and had lived there all his life. The interview then developed into a spirited debate about belonging. The journalist quoted another elite from the Southwest—certainly an autochthon—who proposed to "refer to somebody's home as the place where he is buried when he dies." At this Bejanga really became angry, probably because he foresaw that this criterion would make him a stranger in the area he considers his home.

> "Will I claim my home when I am dead and buried? I think my home should not be where I will be buried because I could die at sea and my corpse never seen.... We want to draw the attention of the government to tell them we are here, we are Cameroonians, but have no statehood.... The government should step in and stop people from calling others "settlers" or "strangers....

The interview graphically expressed the way in which the politics of democratization becomes so easily a politics of belonging. Moreover, it highlighted two key aspects of this: the role of the government and the place of the funeral. Bejanga's appeal to the government to step in and safeguard his "statehood" was clearly ironical. He must have known quite well that the Biya regime opted, on the contrary, for a strategy of support to autochthony movements. Elsewhere Francis Nyamnjoh and I tried to show that this indeed proved to be a very effective way to divide the opposition and thus circumvent multipartyism (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000). Especially in the coastal zone—a true hotbed of autochthony from colonial times on, since this economically developed area attracted many immi-

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grants—the regime has been quite successful in using this strategy to break the initial hold of the opposition.

In the Southwest—where the local populations had been protesting since the 1940s against the influx of immigrants as laborers on the plantations—the regime easily succeeded in winning the support of SWELA (the same Southwest Elites Association that had refused Bejanga so rudely) by backing their actions against "came-no-goes," as the immigrants are graphically called in Pidgin. In Douala, Cameroon's economic metropolis, the highpoint of autochthony politics came in 1996 with the municipal elections. The small Douala group (around thirty thousand people) has become a very small minority in this city of more than three million; it is confronted especially by a Bamileke majority. And indeed, with the 1996 elections, Bamileke candidates won the mayoral elections in most of the city's municipalities. This led to large-scale demonstrations by local "Sawa" people who brandished placards with evocative texts like: "No Democracy Without Protection for Minorities and Indigenes," "This Shall Not Happen in Our Homeland," or "These People Lied to Us."[15] Again, it was quite clear that the demonstrators had direct support from the regime, which intervened with special measures (such as the appointment of special government delegates) to neutralize the powers of the newly elected mayors.

Such events made notions of autochthony and belonging a central issue in debates among Cameroonian intellectuals as well. For example, the political scientist Roger Gabriel Nlep (now at the University of Douala) developed his theory of "le village électoral" in relation to such concerns. For him "integration" is the central issue in Cameroonian politics. People should be fully integrated in the place where they live and where they exercise their political rights as citizens, he says, "but this supposes that there is not *un autre chez soi*" (another home area). Therefore, if somebody who is elected in Douala defends the interest of "his" village elsewhere, this should qualify as "political malversation."[16]

The implication is clear: Immigrants should behave as "guests"—a term that comes up time and again in these discussions—and not try to dominate their "hosts" politically, even if they are in the majority. If they wish to engage in politics, they should go "home." This is also the regime's implicit position: by telling allogènes who are suspected as having voted for the opposition that they should go back to the village and vote there; or by refusing opposition lists with the argument that they contain too many names of allogènes; and so on. The fact that the Biya regime succeeded, against most expectations, in winning all the important elections of the 1990s shows how effective this autochthony strategy has been.

It is in this context that debates about belonging—like the exchange between Bejanga and the *Herald* journalist—become of such crucial importance. And it is striking how often the funeral emerges in such debates as the final test of belonging. The final argument of groups who claim autochthony is often that, ultimately, these "came-no-goes" do want to go

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home for their burial. No less a figure than Samuel Eboua, one of the grand old men of Cameroonian politics, who originates from the Mungo, another area overrun by Bamileke immigrants, makes this argument: "Every Cameroonian is an *allogène* anywhere else in the country... than where his ancestors lived... and where his mortal remains will be buried. Everybody knows that only under exceptional circumstances a Cameroonian will be buried elsewhere" (*Impact-Tribune* 1995, my translation). In such a view, very little is left of the idea of a Cameroonian citizenship that was emphasized so strongly in the times of Ahidjo, when nation-building and the creation of unity were still overriding concerns (at least formally). In Cameroon—and certainly not only there—political liberalization seems to have generated new forms of exclusion and new struggles over belonging.[17]

All this has had direct effects on the staging of funerals. The examples Francis Nyamnjoh collected in the Southwest in the 1990s indicate how their enlarged political significance can lead to struggles over corpses as crucial beacons of belonging (see also Nyamnjoh 2000, 2002). This is certainly not completely new. In Buea (the capital of the Southwest Province), people still tell the story of how in the 1970s—that is, still in Ahidjo's days—a certain John Nganso had his father's corpse exhumed in order to have it reburied in a Bamileke village in the West Province. His father had been born there but had migrated to the Southwest and lost contact with his people. John himself had been born in the Southwest. However, when he wanted to make a political career, he thought he had more of a chance as a Francophone. So he went back to his father's village of birth and tried to ingratiate himself with his father's people, who said, in effect, "We don't know you. Show us your father's grave." Unfortunately, Nganso's plans for a reburial became known and this was the end of his political career.[18]

In the 1990s such maneuvers were intensified because of the reinforced importance since democratization of belonging. Of interest is that the funeral "at home" now also became a central concern among groups that earlier on had not emphasized this so much. For instance, when in 1996 a general from Mamfe (a Banyangi) had his wife buried "at home" with great pomp and expenditure—all the more so since, because of the bad state of the road, the body and many elite guests had to be flown in—several people commented that this was a new "custom" to them. Formerly the Banyangi would often bury migrants in the place where they had come to live.[19]

In another example from the Southwest, reported by Francis Nyamnjoh from Buea, such concerns even led to a violent struggle over the body and an armed intervention by the gendarmes. The funeral was a particularly tragic one since it concerned a woman, a Banyangi from the Mamfe area, who unexpectedly had died during a period of study in the United States. Her husband, a Bamileke living in Buea, had gone to great lengths to have the body transported "home"— in his view, Buea—in order

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to have it buried near their house there. However, the woman's own family decided that her real home was in the family village near Mamfe. Therefore, they had the gendarmes interrupt the funeral (which had already started), "arrest" the body, and take it to Mamfe. Apparently, the husband's status as an immigrant weakened his claims to have his wife buried in Buea. The forces of order were ready to intervene in support of Banyangi "custom" that the corpse should be brought "back home"—that is, to the village.[20] With the emergence of autochthony as a central issue in national politics, funerals have, indeed, become truly political events.

Conclusion

In all three examples above, funerals constitute a high point for the reaffirmation of belonging.[21] However, quite different modalities of belonging are at stake. They all relate to kinship, but on different scales. The Maka funerals in the 1970s emphasized forms of belonging that were circumscribed by the networks of kinship and affinity between persons and local groups. Mebenga's study of Ewondo funerals in the 1980s highlights how kinship continues to be used in order to bridge the new distance (and inequality) between village and city: The funeral "at home" must reaffirm urbanites' connections to the village. Even the celebration of the funeral as an ultimate test of belonging by the defenders of autochthony in the 1990s refers to kinship, but in this context almost as a metaphor outlining a vague —not to say fuzzy—group of *originaires*. Yet even in this context, the funeral remains a celebration of family ties.

As my colleagues and I emphasized elsewhere, the dangers of a term like "autochthony" is that it is an almost empty notion that can be constantly reinterpreted and adapted according to the political context (Bayart, Geschiere, & Nyamnjoh 2001). Unlike, for instance, the term "ethnicity," it does not refer to a special name or a special history. It states the rights of the "firstcomer," but it leaves open the issue of how this category is to be delimited; even people who for a long time claim to be autochthons can at any time be unmasked as not being among the "real" originaires. Precisely because such fluid identities are at stake, the funeral acquires reinforced significance as a final identification of who "really" belongs (and who does not).[22] Thus the proliferation of funeral rituals—the increasing pomp and expenditure highlighted above—acquires a deeper meaning with the recent intensification of struggles over belonging under democratization. Moreover, the continuing role of the funeral as a final test ensures that belonging is still expressed in kinship terms, be it in such a politicized and overstretched sense that kinship seems to loose much of its substance.

One might suppose that when a kinship ritual like the funeral becomes a celebration of such a highly politicized form of autochthony, the limits of the resilience of kinship ties—their "elasticity"—have been reached. The

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kind of autochthony emphasized at funerals of important politicians represents an almost empty form of kinship, entailing very little real "sharing" with the autochthonous population—as many disappointed Sawa and Beti commoners increasingly complain. Yet the remarkable tenacity of the Biya regime—despite its record of increasing poverty and making things *not* work—shows the continuing resilience of this kind of belonging as kinship writ large.[23]

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Notes

1. Monga 1995. See also A. C. Ahmed (2002) for a parallel case from the Comores that shows that in Islamic Africa as well, the rising expenditure for funerals is seen as a serious problem.
2. In our introduction to a special issue of *Africa* on rural-urban relations (Geschiere & Gugler 1998), Joseph Gugler and I emphasized the central role of the funeral "at home" for the ongoing commitment of urbanites to their village of origin. However, we also emphasized that there are important variations in this respect. Islamization, for example, deeply affects the role of the funeral (even though in at least some Islamic parts of the continent people still tend to bring back their dead to the village). There are also many non-Muslim groups that do not stress the need to bury in the village, and even in the South Cameroonian cities (Yaounde, Douala), there are now some examples that point in the same direction, though these remain exceptions. Filip de Boeck (this volume) stresses that in Kinshasa, funerals no longer require a return to the village (see also Jewsiewicki [1993] and Noret [2002] on Shaba and Lubumbashi). De Boeck relates this to the dominant role of preachers (Pentecostalists and others) in the burial ceremonies. One could expect, indeed, that Pentecostalism, with its deep distrust of "tradition" and the family, would weaken the desire to be buried in the village. However, in Cameroon Pentecostalism is still a relatively recent phenomenon, and there are as yet no clear signs that it affects the practice of burying "at home."
3. The canton where I worked consisted of twenty-six villages along a mud road 80 kms long. The road had been created by the Germans, the first colonizers of Cameroon, between 1905 and 1910. It was also the Germans who had forced the small family hamlets, dispersed in the forest, to resettle in larger villages along the new road. After 1914 the French, who conquered this part of the German colony, continued to forcefully resettle the population along the road. In 1970 the total population of this canton numbered 9,779. The total number of Maka was estimated between sixty and eighty thousand (see Geschiere 1982).
4. I focus here on the funeral of an elderly male. The funeral of a woman often entailed extra complications since it could give rise to fierce conflicts about

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where she should be buried: in the village of her husband and her children, or in her village of origin with her brothers. Maka kinship reckoning is, at least formally, strongly patrilineal. Men should live in the village of their fathers, and married women should circulate between the villages. Thus the position of a woman is somewhat ambiguous: in some respects—certainly if she bears sons—she is included in her husband's njaw boud, but ultimately she is supposed to belong as *mame* (aunt) to the lineage of her brothers and their children.

5. This play of substituting and equating often had the effect that one person attended the funeral in two different capacities. For instance, during the first funeral I witnessed, I was completely confused by the performance of Djenadek, the mother of my assistant. Sometimes she was weeping frenziedly next to the bier, but the next moment she would be happily dancing along with the daughters-in-law. My assistant explained that his mother could, indeed, claim that she was both a descendant and a daughter-in-law—which is in principle impossible, since to the Maka kinship excludes marriage. It required some complicated genealogical reconstruction for me to understand the substitutions and equations that allowed Djenadek to claim such a double role.
6. Maka patterns of organization were (and are) highly segmentary. Up until the colonial conquest (1905), there were no fixed positions of authority above the small family hamlets, each under the supervision of its elders. Nonetheless, local groups that were related through marriage or through a claim of common descent could occasionally work together. But between unrelated hamlets, there was a constant state of *domb*. My informants always translated the latter term as *guerre* (war). However, a better translation might be *hostility*. the Maka area was certainly not in a state of permanent war before the "pacification" by the Germans; yet there was always the threat that violence might erupt between unrelated local groups (see Geschiere 1982).
7. This example illustrates that such processes of monetization of "traditional" rituals are to a large extent nonreversible. The same applies to bride-wealth payments. In the Maka area, for instance, the sudden disappearance of money from the village economy toward the end of the 1980s seemed to trigger a move toward some sort of matrilineality. The bride-price could no longer be paid in money, but this certainly did not encourage a return to former prestige goods. On the contrary, due to the lack of money, marriages kept being postponed. Young women often stayed at their parents' home and their children were raised there (see Geschiere 2000).
8. The supervisor for the University of Yaounde was professor Paul N. Nkwi.
9. See also Laburthe-Tolra (1977). It is striking, however, that in both Mebenga's and Laburthe's descriptions of the Ewondo funeral, the in-laws (the sons- and the daughters-in-law), who play such a central role during Maka funerals, are absent.
10. Like other Beti groups, the Ewondo emphasize their historical role as a conquering group. During their invasions from the savannah southward into the forest (which probably took place in the course of the nineteenth century), they pushed out other groups—among them the Maka, who were forced to flee to the east. In the literature these Beti (Ewondo) invasions are often characterized as a *saute de mouton* (sheep's jump); small groups were constantly splitting off, settling in a new part of the forest, beyond the most advanced Beti village (just like a sheep runs by putting its hind legs before its forelegs).

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11. "C'est comme ça chez nous: celui qui émerge doit s'excuser constamment auprès de ceux qui n'émergent pas."
12. These are (and were) certainly not egalitarian societies; there is a strong emphasis on gender and generation inequalities. But among adult men, there is also a strong emphasis on personal ambition, which can break through any hierarchy. Even the most respected village elder can be contradicted any time by an opponent in the village palaver if he shows a moment of weakness (see Geschiere 1982).
13. The word *eat* has particularly strong connotations in this context. It refers to the eagerness of the villagers to "sponge on" the elites' new wealth, but there is also a direct reference to local notions of witchcraft, which center on "eating."
14. In principle, all urbanites—elites and poorer persons—want to be buried in the village. However, it are especially the rich who have the means to turn such an occasion into a real celebration. Moreover, the pressure to share is the heaviest on them. Yet the villagers like to believe that all people from the city are relatively rich. So the funeral at home may even be a greater burden for less well-to-do urbanites.
15. The notion of Sawa-people is of special interest in this context. It means literally "sea-people" and it turned up only quite recently—since the end of the 1970s—in Cameroonian political discourse. Originally it referred to special coastal groups—notably the Douala and the Batanga—who are indeed closely related. But lately the notion has acquired an ever larger scope, now including even the Bakweri of Mount Cameroon (who used to describe themselves as mountain people in opposition to "sea-people") or the Banyangi around Mamfe (nearly 250 kms in the interior). The common ground seems to be that all these groups feel themselves threatened in their own area by the influx of strangers (notably Bamileke and Bamenda from the densely populated highlands in the western parts of the country).
16. *La Nouvelle Expression* (1996:18; special issue, "Minorités, autochtones, allogènes et démocratie").
17. It may be important to emphasize that such "autochthony" endeavors are not only encouraged by authoritarian regimes trying to divide the opposition and neutralize multipartyism. At least as important is the new style of development policies inaugurated by the World Bank since the end of the 1980s, which advocates "decentralization, "by-passing the State," and reaching out to NGOs. On the ground, NGOs are often highly localist in character. Supporting them, just like imposing simplistic formulas of decentralization, automatically triggers fights over belonging (who is entitled to have access to the new type of development money? that is, who belongs and who does not?). See Geschiere (2004) for an analysis of how the new forest law (1994) in Cameroon generates fights over autochtony even in the thinly populated eastern part of the country so that even close kin can abruptly be unmasked as being *allogène.* But there are other factors involved as well—for instance, the global concern with the protection of minorities and indigenous cultures. Indeed, there seems to be a true conjuncture of quite different factors that converge to make issues of belonging and autochthony primary concerns. Tanya Murray Li [2000] speaks of a "conjuncture of belonging; for a seminal analysis of this trend see also Barbara Oomen's thesis (2002) on how South Africa's customary chiefs—a few

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years ago still seen as apartheid stooges—succeeded in making a surprising comeback under the new ANC government by playing on a wide array of registers, local but also national and global. See also Bayart, Geschiere, and Nyamnjoh (2001) on Cameroon.

18. See Awasom (1999). A somewhat different version was recorded by Francis Nyamnjoh in Buea in the 1990s.
19. Such comments remind one of the famous case of SM in Kenya (see Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo 1992). The funeral of SM, a famous lawyer in Nairobi, led to a fierce fight—finally decided in the national Court of Appeal—between his Luo clan and his Kikuyu widow over where the corpse should be buried. The widow wanted to bury SM at their sumptuous farm in Nairobi and emphasized his identity as a modern Kenyan citizen. But the representatives of the clan insisted that modern or not, SM was a Luo and a Luo should be buried "at home." Yet surprisingly enough in view of all this emphasis on "custom," Oginga Odinga, the grand old man of Luo politics, sided with the widow and declared that this stress on burying at home was new. According to him, the Luo, as an expansionist group, used to bury their dead in the areas to which they had migrated in order to confirm new claims.
20. Like the previous case of the funeral of the general's wife in Mamfe, the Buea case illustrates that funerals of women can also become hot spots of negotiating belonging. The Buea case, however, shows that a woman's funeral can become complicated since, just as among the Maka (see note 4), it is never certain where she should be buried—in her husband's village or in her father's.
21. As emphasized in note 2 (see also Geschiere & Gugler 1998), this emphasis on the need to bury "at home" is certainly not equally strong throughout the African continent. On the contrary, a further comparison of the variations in this respect could be of great interest to deepen our understanding of different patterns in the relation of urbanites to the home village. It could also offer a strategic starting point for arriving at a better understanding of the variable contents of the politics of belonging that now seem to overrun the whole continent.
22. See Appadurai (1999) on ethnic killing as a final form of identification—definitively appeasing any doubts as to someone's "true" identity.
23. It is striking, for instance, that over the last few years—due to interferences of higher politicians—both the railways and Cameroonian Airlines domestic flights have completely ceased functioning. This means that the country's present-day infrastructure compares unfavorably to the situation in the 1960s.

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