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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Francis Nyamnjoh: nimble-footedness versus closure

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A central theme in Francis Nyamnjoh's rich IAI lecture at the 2025 ECAS conference in Prague, as in his work in general, is the ongoing struggle over exclusion and closure all over the continent (and throughout the modern world). But in this lecture he adds a new term: nimble-footedness. My question is: to what extent can this poetic term provide a counter-weight to the powerful tendency towards closure that he illustrated with such cogent examples in his lecture?

Reflecting on my longstanding collaboration and friendship with Francis, two words come to mind: courage and hope. Courage in facing hardship and an enviable talent for finding reasons to remain hopeful. His struggle with exclusion and closure is central. However, there is a new term for a counterpoint that brings hope: nimble-footedness. I love that term. As far as I know, Francis first used it in his 2013 article 'The nimbleness of being Fulani', which is about the struggle between two elite associations among the Bororo-Fulani in Cameroon's North-West Province and how commoners dealt with this rivalry (Nyamnjoh 2013). Initially, I thought Francis had coined the term, but the Oxford Dictionary states that it dates back to 1592, when it was first used by a certain Abraham Fraunce, who was, most appropriately, a poet. My question is: to what extent can this poetic term provide a counterweight to all the sombre examples of closure that Francis analyses so cogently in this text?

As I mentioned in my improvised speech at the birthday party organized by Divine Fuh after Francis's ECAS lecture (to celebrate his sixtieth birthday), the latter knows from first-hand experience what he is talking about when he addresses belonging and exclusion. After Cameroon gained independence in 1960, the Anglophone part of the country quickly became the scene of complicated struggles over inclusion and exclusion, that as elsewhere in the continent were the result of equally complicated colonial policies. The pidgin expression 'came-no-go', a current label in this region, sums up the politics of belonging that beset most of postcolonial Africa. In present-day South-West Cameroon, the large plantations on the fertile slopes of Mount Cameroon, created under German rule before 1914, became a magnet attracting workers from the interior who did not return after their term had ended. Many of

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these migrants launched new economic pursuits, often with considerable success, which triggered fierce reactions from the 'autochthons'.

Living with such tensions must have contributed to make the themes of autochthony and exclusion central to Francis's work. I became interested in these terms in the 1990s, when, to my surprise, many Dutch people started to define themselves as *autochtonen* in an attempt to distinguish themselves from *allochtonen* who also decided to stay – the Dutch equivalent of 'came-no-goes'. I was delighted to publish about these parallels in a joint article with Francis on the 'seesaw of mobility and belonging' (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000) as an unfortunate byproduct of what I referred to as a 'global conjuncture of belonging' (Geschiere 2009). Moreover, this Dutch obsession with autochthony as a counterpart to allochthons led me on an adventurous quest into the origins of this heavily charged terminology. This quest led me back to classical Athens, the cradle of autochthony thinking. There, towering figures such as Plato and Euripides employed a discourse reminiscent of the propaganda of autochthony's protagonists in present-day Africa and Europe.[1] It is worth dwelling on the arguments of these classical figures, as they highlight certain ambiguities that may serve as a warning for contemporary appeals to autochthony, belonging and identity in general.

Apparently, in the fifth century BC, Athenian citizens were prone to boasting about their autochthony, which supposedly made their city exceptional among all the Greek poleis. All other cities had histories of having been founded by immigrants. Only the Athenians were autochthonous – born from the land where they had always lived.[2] To the Athenians of Pericles' time (the golden age of Athens), this was the very sign of their city's excellence, as well as the secret behind their special propensity for democracy. Classical texts such as those by Euripides, Plato and Demosthenes vividly describe this aspect. In one of Euripides' most popular tragedies, *Erechtheus*, the playwright has Queen Praxithea, wife of the mythical King Erechtheus, celebrate her new city in the following glowing terms:

> I could not find any city better than this. Firstly, we are an autochthonous people, not introduced from elsewhere; other communities, founded as it were through board-game moves, are mixed, with people from different places. Someone who settles in one city from another is like a peg ill-fitted in a piece of wood – a citizen in name, but not in his actions.[3]

In his well-known *Menexenus*, Plato has Socrates instruct young Menexenus on how to deliver a funeral oration for fallen soldiers (a significant event in fifth-century Athens), and has him celebrate Athenian uniqueness in similar terms:

[1] Indeed, in the 1990s, Le Pen's New Right followers in France invoked these venerable classical examples in order to defend their xenophobic ideology (Loraux 1996; see also Geschiere 2009 on autochthony in Cameroon and the Netherlands).

[2] Of course, the city already included a large number of immigrants from other cities (the *metoikoi*), not to mention an even larger number of enslaved people. Neither category qualified for citizenship, which remained reserved for people who could prove their autochthony.

[3] See Detienne (2003: 36). Unfortunately, only a few fragments of the text have been conserved.

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> The forefathers of these men were not of immigrant stock, nor were their sons declared by their origin to be strangers in the land, sprung from immigrants; but natives, sprung from the soil, living and dwelling in their own true fatherland. (Detienne 2003: 21)

The interest of the Athenian example is that it also highlights the other side of autochthony thinking: deep uncertainty. In Athens, as elsewhere, the very idea of autochthony was based on a denial of history, claiming an impossible purity since family histories did refer to more or less mythical stories of migration. Therefore, one's autochthony, and consequently one's citizenship, could always be called into question. If someone put a citizen's autochthony and therefore his citizenship in doubt, the target of such gossip could summon the slanderer before a city tribunal. However, this entailed a significant risk: if the tribunal judged that the slanderer was right, the man whose autochthony had been put in doubt would not only lose his citizenship but also his liberty, and could be sold into slavery (Loraux 1996: 195).

For me, delving deeper into the complex history of autochthony and its implications for contemporary Dutch politics offered compelling reasons for pessimism. My 2009 book, mentioned above, was built around this idea of a 'global conjuncture of belonging' and emphasized the dangers of people becoming increasingly obsessed with belonging. One effect was that the 'new world order', so optimistically announced by US President Bush Sr following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, turned out to be as much about a return of parochial identities and fights over exclusion as it was about global flows and growing cosmopolitanism. Indeed, a sombre prospect. But pessimism is not for Francis. I deeply admire the ways in which he has promoted – particularly over the last decade – ideas about the 'incompleteness of the person', the 'African as a frontier person' and, more recently, this 'nimble-footedness' as an answer to the sombre prospect of a global conjuncture of belonging and exclusion (Nyamnjoh 2017). This does require courage. Francis also knows (probably better than I do) the misery of people being harassed at Cameroon's frontier posts or at its numerous roadblocks – locals suffering even more than expatriates or elite citizens. 'Nimble-footedness' is hardly a term that comes to mind in such everyday situations, people fearfully looking up at policemen and soldiers knowing they will be asked for bribes – requests that can be reinforced by physical violence.

Yet Francis is right that the frontier also evokes very different associations for people: new opportunities and open horizons. His appeal to the baroque imagination of Amos Tutuola (1952) works as a real eye-opener in this respect. This Nigerian author graphically showed already around the middle of the last century what an African vision of reality as profoundly animated means. I recently realized that there is a surprising parallel to all this in the work of the late Jane Guyer. She is generally known for her work in economic anthropology. However, there is an interesting convergence between Francis's emphasis on the 'incomplete' person and Guyer's consequent effort to preserve what she terms 'African multiplicity'. In her challenging book *Marginal Gains* (2004), Guyer notes a tendency among leading economic anthropologists (and even anthropologists in general) to reduce such a multiplicity to binary oppositions. However, for Guyer, it is precisely this African multiplicity that is the secret of the 'marginal gains' through which African economies keep defying

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general economic theorizing. Francis's emphasis on 'incompleteness' has similar wide-ranging implications. Thus, invoking Tutuola as a saving grace becomes a hallmark of Francis's talent to find reasons for hope. It is probably also the ease with which his texts link social science analysis to novels and poetry that is crucial to his ability to move beyond Afro-pessimism.

I also admire Francis's courage in attempting to preserve the concept of 'African identity', which sits uneasily with his focus on the person as incomplete and his broader call for openness. However, on this point my doubts are probably due to my uneasiness with the term 'identity' itself. I have become increasingly concerned about the way the notion of identity has invaded the social sciences since the end of the last century. In certain respects, it seems to have replaced class and, more generally, a focus on socio-economic inequalities as central to our disciplines. In the 1970s, identity was for me still a somewhat scary term, associated with psychology, particularly psychotherapy, as a last resort for people suffering from an 'identity crisis'. What has struck me in particular is how quickly the notion lost its progressive slant and was appropriated by the New Right all over Europe (as in America). My increasing doubts about the notion may therefore stem from a European view. In the Netherlands, for instance, the debate about *autochtonie* from 1989 onwards highlighted the other side of the notion of identity as inherently linked to closure and exclusion.

In 2009, I presented a series of lectures for Livio Sansone's Fábrica de Ideias at the Federal University of Bahia – a highly original and creative annual series for students, mostly from various parts of Latin America. I was happy to present chapters from my 2009 book on belonging, autochthony and exclusion, which had just been published. I also was fortunate to have a splendid interpreter who translated my hesitant phrases with such enthusiasm that I became increasingly inspired myself. However, as the lectures progressed, I noticed mounting unease among my students regarding my negative comments on notions such as identity and belonging. Apparently, my title *The Perils of Belonging* in particular was frustrating for them. It was only after some heated discussions that I came to understand the gap in our experiences. For them, belonging and identity were related to the struggle of so-called 'indigenous' peoples for the recognition of their rights. This confrontation made me realize how cynical I (and many others in Europe) had become, given how quickly the New Right had hijacked these notions to defend border closures and the exclusion of people who, for one reason or another, could be classified as 'not really belonging'. A student from Colombia asked me, somewhat indignantly, if there were no intellectuals defending the progressive charge of identity and related notions. I had to answer that many of my colleagues felt they had lost control over the notions they had introduced themselves with great enthusiasm.

Striking in the Dutch case was the artificial way in which some sociologists tried to define – fix – the notion of autochthony. A particularity was that the Dutch authorities for a long time refused the notion of 'immigrant'. After the end of the Second World War, official policy was that the Netherlands – at the time seen as one of the most densely populated countries in the world and suffering from a heavy slump after the 1930 crisis and the destruction during the German occupation – was an emigration country. People were encouraged to emigrate (to Canada, South Africa, Australia). Reality soon became different because of an unexpected quick economic

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recovery. As soon as the 1950s the government launched unofficial campaigns to recruit labourers from southern Europe to cope with the urgent need for workers in the booming industrial sectors. At first, these people were marked as 'guest labourers', implying that they would return after their contracts were finished. The government remained adamant in refusing to use terms such as migrant that could imply that these people would stay in the Netherlands.

This stubborn refusal became a problem in the 1970s when it became clear that many 'guest labourers' did intend to stay, and there followed a somewhat haphazard search for other terms. In everyday parlance, people continued to speak of guest labourers or minorities, but these terms were seen as unacceptable for official use. Finally, in 1989, the WRR (Scientific Council for the Government) proposed the term *allochtonen* – which also meant that, in contrast, the Dutch became *autochtonen*. Both terms were certainly not current in Dutch society; they had a rather academic aura (especially *allochtoon*, which was used in geology and physical geography), but the WRR saw this as an advantage – choosing such 'cool', scientific terms could help neutralize the often heated tone that dominated debates about migration. A crucial step was that the CBS (Central Office for Statistics) decided to adopt this terminology. The very fact that, following that decision, the Dutch media regularly presented statistics about demographic changes in terms of *autochtonen* and *allochtonen* made the terms part and parcel of everyday speech within a few years. It was only in 2016 that the Dutch parliament passed a motion to stop official use of *autochtonen* and *allochtonen* because of the confusion they created. And now they are mainly used with an ironic slant. In retrospect it is surprising how quickly these supposedly 'cool' terms acquired a heavily emotional charge throughout society; indeed, they became central issues themselves in fierce debates on migration and the need to close society and borders.

Yet when the CBS decided to grant official status to these concepts, the very need to define them properly showed how elusive they were, despite their apparent clarity (remember what was said above about the slipperiness of 'autochthony' in classical Athens). The CBS finally opted to define an *allochtoon* as someone with at least one parent born outside the Netherlands. This, of course, sat uneasily with the idea of 'integration' as the official aim of government policy: it seemed to imply that an *allochtoon* could never become an *autochtoon*. Another issue was that mixed marriages only increased the number of allochthons. Moreover, the literal meaning of the term ('other soil') seemed to contradict the fact that an increasing number of *allochtonen* were born in the Netherlands. The CBS also felt obliged to introduce a distinction between Western and non-Western allochthons in order to differentiate between immigrants from richer and poorer countries. Consequently, Japanese people appeared in the statistics under the heading 'Western allochthons'. The Dutch struggle with the autochthon/allochthon terminology thus became a striking example of how misleading the self-evident appearance of these notions is: their self-evidence evaporates when they have to be defined. It is precisely this tension between apparent clarity and fuzzy reality that gives these notions a violent potential – an implication that might affect identity and related concepts in general.

In the wider European context, autochthony was just one of the notions that the New Right used to defend national closure and the exclusion of migrants. In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen (father of Marine Le Pen, who is now on track to succeed Emmanuel

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Macron as France's president) was one of the first to formulate a coherent New Right programme as early as the 1960s. I have already referred briefly to his flirtation with Athenian autochthony thinking. However, this notion already had quite negative overtones in France – rural and backward – and so Le Pen looked for other terms to address his potential following. Initially, he experimented with *Français de souche* (literally, 'French from the tree stump'), which he defined as meaning that all four grandparents were born in France. However, when further enquiries revealed that many of his voters had at least one Spanish, Italian or Polish grandparent, he swiftly abandoned any attempt to define his people. In Germany, the notion *das Volk* (the people) made a comeback in the 1980s amid growing unrest in East Germany against the Marxist dictatorship. I remember being moved by the quiet dignity with which East German protesters marched against their oppressors with the slogan *Wir sind das Volk* (We are the people) in the lead-up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. However, similar expressions are now being used by the AFD (Alternative für Deutschland) to call for the exclusion (or even extradition) of immigrants. Indeed, the New Right in Europe has been very successful in hijacking the language of identity and turning it into the opposite of minority emancipation.

The well-known French political scientist Jean-François Bayart had already begun his crusade against the 'identity craze' (*l'illusion identitaire*, as he calls it; see Bayart 1996) in the 1980s. For him, this illusion was a logical consequence of the nation state becoming a global model. In his first, more general book, *L'État en Afrique* (Bayart 1993 [1989]), he linked the serious issues facing postcolonial states in Africa to the proliferation of the 'politics of the belly'. However, underlying this was the author's idea that the persistence of the nation state in an era of increasing globalization raises issues that remain understudied due to the widespread acceptance of this type of state as a normal phenomenon of our time. In his monumental last book *L'énergie de l'État* (Bayart 2022), he provides a brilliant analysis of various trajectories in the interplay between seemingly opposing tendencies: on the one hand, the increasing globalization promoted by capitalism; and, on the other, the universalization of the nation state. In this book, he introduces a third element: the proliferation of identitarian consciousness, which promotes an exclusive conception of citizenship. Taking a somewhat related approach, the French sociologist Luc Boltanski emphasizes that promoting national identities by the nation state is an impossible effort to create a closed national space, since it constantly clashes with inevitable internationalizing tendencies (see Boltanski 2012). In both approaches, the notion of identity as something that brings closure is taken for granted.

However, listening to Francis's inspiring ECAS lecture made me realize that the invasion of identity into the social sciences, mentioned above, was promoted not only 'from above' by state authorities or other people in power, but also by emancipatory movements 'from below'. In postcolonial Africa, nation building was certainly high on the agenda of the new political elites. Yet the success of these initiatives, which were often quite artificial, was highly variable. Identity was mostly a weapon of the weak here, used by groups who saw themselves as disadvantaged. It was mainly adopted by ethnic groups who felt marginalized, or by advocates of so-called 'indigenous' peoples. In the West, too, the concept of identity acquired a strong emancipatory charge, calling for a breakthrough in the status quo. No wonder, then, that it acquired such a progressive aura. It is all the more important, therefore, to highlight how easily it can

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be hijacked by well-established groups and used to call for closure and the confirmation of historical privileges. In my 2009 book on autochthony and exclusion, I ended with a warning about the dangers of entitlement and resentment as a macabre twin: large groups in society feeling that the privileges to which they feel entitled are being undermined by global changes. The last decade has provided striking examples of what the ensuing resentment can do.

Of course, we cannot simply abandon the term 'identity'. The fate of the social sciences is that, in order to retain contact with society, we must work with everyday notions that are in constant flux. Yet it is all the more important to highlight the implications that these notions carry with them. If we go back to its source, the term 'identity' turns out to be associated with a tendency towards closure rather than openness. It comes from the Latin *idem* (literally, 'the same'). However, this fixedness proved problematic when the term was applied to the complex realities of the modern world. All sorts of adaptations were necessary. Already by the 1980s, colleagues started referring to 'multiple identities' (in my memory, this variant emerged in particular in what was then known as feminist studies). Such terms are laudable in that they reflect the realization that people (or categories) cannot be locked into one identity, but instead combine several ones that are not always consistent. However, 'multiple identity' is by itself a linguistic monster: it literally means 'the same multiple'. What clarity can we expect from such a peculiar construct?[4]

Back to Francis's courageous effort to preserve the concept of African identity. As mentioned, the notion of identity will certainly remain with us, and I do not regret this for 'African identity', which is a beneficial notion. It confirms that there is still a lot of emancipation to be done in this area. So my doubts above are mainly intended to demonstrate how vital Francis's consistent efforts are in opening up the notion of identity, combating its closing implications and undermining its uniformizing tendencies. This is why his explorations of African personhood as incomplete and multiple and his celebration of Africans' 'nimble-footedness' are so precious – as is his work on frontiers, not as closures but as challenges. Amos Tutuola remains a wonderful guide to all of this, showing the original contribution African perspectives can make to a truly global culture.

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[4] Francis refers to identity as 'multilayered', which is already much better. Another problem following from the inevitable tenor of the identity notion towards closure is that it seems to invite ever more subcategories. A good example is the LGBTQ+ terminology, which – as a replacement for the general category of homosexual or for older labels such as 'gay' or 'lesbian' – seems to invite a delimitation of ever further categories, each claiming its own pigeonhole. In the recent debate over the new 'anti-gay' law in Ghana, the original delimitations of four letters (LGBT) has been stretched – by those both pro and against – to no fewer than eleven letters, each referring to a separate category. Irreverent observers of such multiplication speak of an 'alphabet soup' (see Hekma 2016).

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