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REVISITING THE POLITICS OF BELONGING IN CAMEROON

Ben Page, Martin Evans and Claire Mercer

Subjectively, the issue of 'national' identity is that indistinct domain of psychic and historical experience which transforms identity into belonging: 'I am' becomes 'I am one of them', 'to be' becomes 'to belong'.

Julia Kristeva (1995: 140)

Modernity and belonging just don't go together.

Michael Ignatieff (1996: 85)

Conviviality takes hold when exposure to otherness involves more than jeopardy.

Paul Gilroy (2005)

INTRODUCTION: HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS IN CAMEROON

Rural home areas have taken on new significance as a source of political legitimacy for urban-based elites in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This appeal to 'home' focuses attention on who is an autochthon – a 'son or daughter of the soil' – capable of acting (and voting) in the perceived interests of their place of origin. It also focuses attention on who is not an autochthon but a 'stranger' and how to treat them (Shack 1979). A hardening of identities around claims to belong is wedded to a process of excluding outsiders. Over a decade ago Peter Geschiere and Josef Gugler (1998a: 309) edited an influential issue of *Africa* in which they argued that an 'increasing obsession with "autochthony" throughout the continent . . . triggers a politics of belonging'.

The politics of belonging has proved to be a powerful analytical framework with almost global application,¹ but its African inflection

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¹Peter Geschiere's *The Perils of Belonging* (2009) illustrates the global salience of this framework by including a chapter on belonging in the Netherlands. For other work presented

seems to have gained particular traction (Broch-Due 2005; Englund and Nyamnjoh 2004; Eyoh 1999; Kuba and Lentz 2006; Nyamnjoh 2005; Schipper 1999). Evidence for this comes both from countries where nation building has been problematic, such as Cameroon (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005), Zimbabwe (Hammer 2002) and Côte d'Ivoire (Marshall 2006), and those where it has been deemed relatively successful, such as in Botswana (Nyamnjoh 2006, 2007), South Africa (Bangeni and Kapp 2005), Ghana and Burkina Faso (Lentz 2006, 2007a).

But how is this politics of belonging practised? In the Cameroonian case the national government has been shown to have instrumentalized the sentiments associated with home in its own interest (Eyoh 1998; Fonchingong 2005; Gabriel 1999; P. Nkwi and Socpa 1997; W. Nkwi 2006; Nyamnjoh 1999; Yenshu 2006). It does so in order to help secure regional power bases and to undermine political rivals by nurturing localist movements and so pre-empting the emergence of any ideologically coherent opposition (Geschiere 2004). Thus the rise of the importance of autochthony was closely associated with the rise of multi-party politics; it emerged as an opportunistic strategy by which the effect of democratic innovations could be annulled. The resulting ethno-territorialization of national politics risks overturning gains in promoting national-level identity, as a rural Africa of fictive ethnic homelands becomes 'the mainspring of xenophobias and destructive subnationalisms' (Boone 2003: 1). From the perspective of local elites, this politics can be used to mask or justify interventions in baser local material conflicts. For example, where population densities are high, fertile land is scarce and agriculture provides a degree of security, the language of belonging can license land disputes. Where central state resources are distributed in relation to bureaucratic institutions (such as MPs or via divisional headquarters) the language of belonging can permit claims to be made for a new parliamentary constituency or some other government space. The politics of belonging in Cameroon sanctions the establishment to pursue their interests.

Key contributions in this area (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 1998, 2000, 2001; Konings 2001; Ndjio 2006; Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998) highlighted the spatial variability of the politics of belonging across Cameroon. They also drew attention to the elusive and treacherous nature of autochthony, which is 'subject to constant redefinition against new "others" and at ever-closer range' (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005: 385). This iterative process of redefining who is an autochthon

under the banner of 'the politics of belonging' outside Africa see Castles and Davidson 2000; Croucher 2004; Crowley 1999; Dieckhoff 2004; Fortier 2000; Gilroy 2005; Ignatieff 1996; Savage *et al.* 2005; Westwood and Phizacklea 2000; Yuval Davis 2003, 2004, 2006. While the earliest published reference we can find for the phrase is Margaret Roff's *The Politics of Belonging: political change in Sabah and Sarawak* (1974), its extraordinary recent proliferation in the social sciences seems to date from around 1998. Writing on Africa seems to have played a very prominent role in the development of this framework.

binds people into ‘ever-diminishing circles’ of deciding who *really* belongs in any particular place (Nyamnjoh 2007). The illusory divisions represented in such dynamics – what Englund (2004: 11) calls ‘the spectre of discrete identities’ – presume and encourage the construction of ‘independent’ ethno-territorial entities, each pursuing its own agenda within the nation. Such a drift into parochialism is potentially dangerous because of the ‘epistemological and ideological vacuity of the discourse of “belonging”’ (Hickey 2004: 11), an emptiness that the unscrupulous can fill with ethnic chauvinism or other sectarian notions. All too often a politics of belonging is divisive and dystopian.

The central concern of the three articles presented as a group here is that such strong claims about home, belonging and politics are often difficult to reconcile with the much hazier reality observed on the ground in Cameroon. This blurring of belonging often stems from the fact that the relationship between people and place is not always paramount in the way individuals imagine themselves. The ‘identity’ of any individual often draws on other territories and on gender, kinship, religion, profession and education, as well as a rural ‘ethnic homeland’ (Mohan 2006). Actually-existing ‘homes’ are often experienced as multiple and mobile and are based on a complex calculus of family, ethnicity, language, lifecourse and work. In the literature on belonging, home is often physically located as the prospective burial place (Gugler 2002), but this definition risks becoming self-validating as the wish to be buried at ‘home’ appears to have grown stronger as the language of the politics of belonging has become entrenched – providing the lens through which to view these ceremonies (Geschiere 2005; Jua 2005; Mazzucato *et al.* 2006; Page 2007). The notions of ‘primary patriotism’ (Geschiere and Gugler 1998b) or ‘local patriotism’ (van den Bersselaar 2005: 54) demonstrate that this analytical framework has always been aware that individuals sustain multiple patriotisms alongside their loyalty to a rural home. Against this diverse background of obligations the political leverage that can be derived from calling on autochthony starts to look less effective.

Whilst it would be perverse to ignore the horrors that have been licensed elsewhere by elite discourses of autochthony (for example in Côte d’Ivoire), the aim in these articles is at least to disturb any inevitable or overly tidy segue between belonging and political segmentation in Cameroon. Too often the existing literature moves too quickly to an analysis that foregrounds the worrisome dimensions of a politics of belonging, thus leaving little space for other interpretations. Undoubtedly the increased emphasis placed on ‘home’ is an empirically discernible process with significant material impacts, but the more that observers look for evidence of autochthony, the more they will find – and, as a result, what they find may shade out other equally meaningful stories about home and belonging.

Paying attention to other ways in which to analyse affiliations to home (for example, by foregrounding forms of cooperation and the achievements of local solidarity) does not mean ignoring the reasonable

anxieties about the social risks associated with a national politics that validates autochthony. Work over the last decade provides abundant evidence of social segmentation and other 'perils of belonging' (Geschiere 2009). However, the history of many places can be read in terms of belonging (with its implications of division) or in terms of conviviality (with its implications of living peaceably with difference and of amalgamation), or both (Dafinger and Pelican 2006). Stories of collaboration across social differences are no less vulnerable to exploitation by cynical politicians than stories of autochthony, but drawing attention to those interpretations is the first step in articulating the possibility of 'a progressive politics of place' (Massey 1993, 1994).

After this introduction, this article uses a case study of a boundary dispute in Mezam, North-West Cameroon to continue to develop this theme of the tension between belonging and conviviality. The two articles that follow this are based on studies of home associations (more usually named 'cultural and development associations' in Cameroon or 'hometown associations' in the literature). Existing analyses argue that these associations are an instrument of power and a crucial tool in the politics of belonging that links urban elites to their rural homelands. The rise of elite home associations reflects a national politics of self-serving political entrepreneurs and regional elites seeking personal platforms and the approval of the ruling party bureaucracy (Bayart 1993; Mbuagbo and Akoko 2004). In contrast, the articles presented here join a small literature that has viewed the contemporary work of home associations in more sympathetic light, either because they assert meaningful political rights (Hickey 2002, 2007; Lentz 2007b; Pelican 2008) or because they deliver improved goods and services (Kabki *et al.* 2004; Mercer *et al.* 2008; Yenshu 2008). Evans's article explores ideas about how home associations linked to Manyu in the South-West Province could potentially contribute to a new form of nation building (emerging from below) in Cameroon. It suggests that they are not necessarily a barrier to cohesion because they can be sites for civic engagement and citizenship formation. Feldman-Savelsberg and Ndonko's article draws attention to the importance of gender and status in these debates. By looking at Bamiléké women's home association and non-elite home associations it emphasizes the partiality of the view that results from treating male elites' associations as emblematic of *the* hometown association's influence in the politics of belonging. Their article draws attention to the diverse meanings of 'home' for different types of home associations—and in particular makes it clear that the idea of home as a 'refuge' is only one of these meanings.

THE BALI-BAWOCK CRISIS OF 2006–7

In early December 2006 government surveyors began work physically demarcating the boundary between Bali Subdivision and Santa Subdivision in Mezam Division, in Anglophone north-west Cameroon

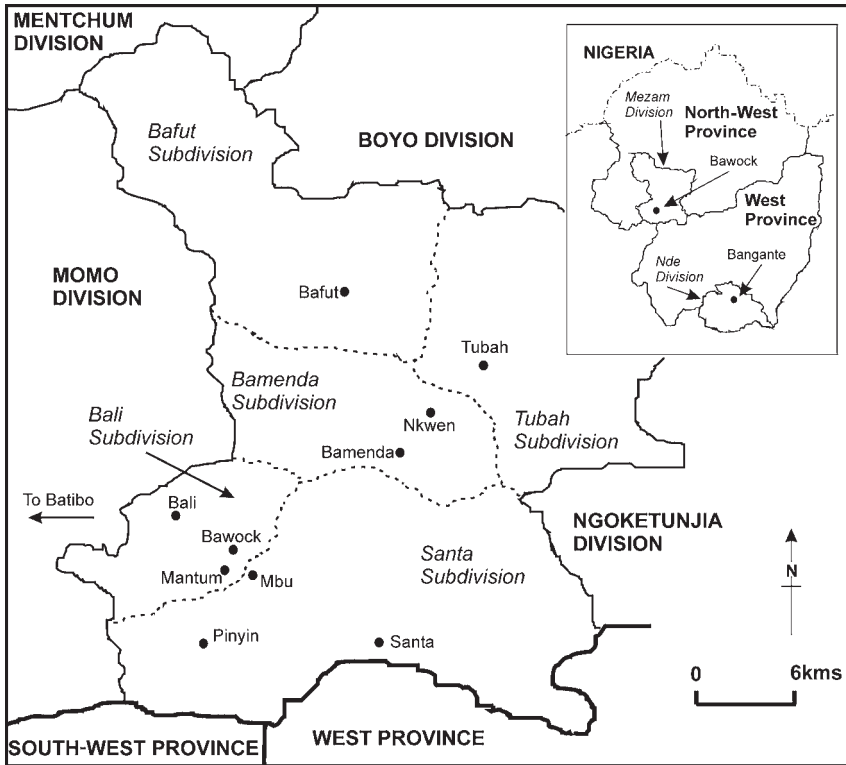


FIGURE 1 Mezam Division, North-West Province

(Figure 1). They were working in the area of four villages: Mantum and Bawock (in Bali Subdivision) and Mbu and Pinyin (in Santa Subdivision).² Soon after they started work in Mantum their boundary markers were destroyed and they were forcibly prevented from continuing their task by Bali Nyonga³ youths in the village. The surveyors were obliged to call in the forces of law and order to extricate

² This account of the dispute between Bali and Bawock is not based on first-hand fieldwork in Cameroon at the time of the 'crisis'. We have drawn on fieldwork carried out in 2005 (including interviews with both the Fon of Bali and the Fon of Bawock). The account developed here also relies (1) on information sent to us in early 2007 by a research assistant in Bali; (2) on information provided to us by the Bali diaspora in the UK throughout 2007; (3) on discussions with Bali elites and other informed commentators in Buea in December 2007; and (4) on published sources. Most of the published sources were accessed online and include the statement of the Fon of Bali's Traditional Council (which was until relatively recently available on the website of the Bali-Nyonga Development and Cultural Association), interviews conducted by Cameroonian journalists and published in the Cameroonian press, and comments and internet discussion groups.

³ The subdivision is called Bali, the main town of the subdivision is referred to as Bali Town, and the dominant identity within the subdivision describe themselves as Bali-Nyonga, in order to distinguish themselves from other Bali groups (such as Baligham and Balikumbat) living elsewhere in the North-West Province. All these different Bali groups claim a shared

themselves from the *mêlée* and the boundary demarcation exercise was abandoned.

Despite cohabitation and intermarriage with neighbours for over a century, Bawock village is now often perceived to be significantly different from the villages surrounding it, both those in Bali and those in Santa. Around 1905 a group of people moved from the town of Banganté (some 60 miles away) in Ndé Division in the southern part of the Francophone West Province (Figure 1, inset) to the area of Bawock (Chilver 1964). Increasingly in recent years the village has emphasized its historic connections with Banganté. For example, it has sent dance groups to participate in cultural events in the West Province and campaigned for a bilingual secondary school in Bawock teaching in both English and French. Most of the population of Bawock are Anglophone, but they are happy to identify with French speakers (for example, their public signage puts French first and their Fon sometimes chooses to speak in French during public meetings). In so doing they signify affinity to the predominantly Francophone national administration and also assert their claim to minority status. These strategies are symptomatic of the national political climate in Cameroon with their emphasis on 'true' ethnic homelands and ideas of who is a son or daughter of the soil.

But the differences between Bawock and its neighbours are mostly organized around ideas of ethnicity. Most people in Bawock now identify themselves as Bamiléké. Most people in Bali Subdivision identify themselves as Bali Nyonga, whilst the Santa Council describes its Subdivision as 'a melting pot of ethnic groups' comprising Ngemba, Moghamo, Chamba, Bamiléké and Mbororo elements (Santa Council 2008).⁴ However (with the exception of the small numbers of Chamba, Bamiléké and Mbororo) the different groups in Santa all claim to share a common Widikum origin. There are, then, three key ethnicities that are becoming crystallized in the telling of this story: Bamiléké, Bali Nyonga and Widikum.

During interviews in 2005 the Fon of Bawock (the 'traditional ruler') claimed that his people had been given their land when another group (the BaTi) left Bali in 1911. He also claimed that the villages of Mbu and Pinyin (in Santa) had always been their immediate neighbours.⁵ The village of Mantum (the Fon of Bawock argued) had been created after that time by Bali Nyonga in an attempt to take land from Bawock, and the sub-chief of Mantum had been installed to support this claim. In contrast the people living in Mantum claimed that theirs was a Bali Nyonga village that lay between Bawock and Mbu, so that Bawock had no direct boundary with Santa Subdivision. From the Bali perspective, the boundary-drawing exercise was a covert attempt

Chamba genealogy, though since the Bali-Nyonga are the largest of these groups they sometimes just describe themselves as Bali.

⁴ On ethnicity and citizenship among the Mbororo see Dafinger and Pelican 2006; Hickey 2007.

⁵ Fon of Bawock, Bawock, 2 March and 6 March 2005.

by Bawock to acquire land at the expense of Bali Nyonga. As the Bali Traditional Council put it, it is as if 'Lesotho would be asking that a boundary be demarcated between herself and Namibia on the one hand and between herself and Botswana on the other hand and pretending that there is no South African Territory between' (Bali Nyonga Development and Cultural Association 2008). It also claimed that an important Bali Nyonga shrine is located at the Ntsi-Su'fu stream, which runs through the disputed land. The flags used in the annual Lela dance (the most important ceremony in the Bali Nyonga calendar) are ritually washed at this shrine (Fardon 2006). According to the Fon of Bali, access to this site had been an issue for some years:

Every year we have tension with Bawock over the Lela shrine. I am embarrassed that one group who came to settle in Bali are trying to insulate themselves. The traditional ruler of Bawock pleaded that he be called Fon, so we call him Fon. Why do the Bawock people see themselves as separate? We don't want them to be Bali. We simply want them to allow us to use our shrine. (Fon of Bali, 15 March 2005)⁶

The Bali Traditional Council claims that the land had been given to Bawock not by the BaTi but by the Bali Nyonga people in the early twentieth century. Since the Fon of Bawock was recognized as a second-class chief within the first-class chiefdom of Bali Nyonga by a government order,⁷ they claim authority over the Bawock land and argue that the Fon of Bali should have been involved in any boundary-making exercise, which in this case he was not – or at least not until a very late stage.⁸ The Bali Nyonga felt that they were being deliberately excluded from the demarcation exercise through the machinations of the Fon of Bawock, who was being led astray either by Widikum interests in Santa Subdivision or by those in West Province, or by persons in the Bawock diaspora overseas. The uncharacteristic alacrity with which government officials had responded to the appeal for a boundary-marking exercise from the Fons of Bawock, Pinyin and Mbu was evidence to those in Bali Nyonga that there was some foul play or corruption at work. After the skirmish in Mantum all the traditional rulers appealed for calm, and their instructions were obeyed for a while.

Three months later, in early March 2007, there was further conflict between Bali Nyonga and Bawock. Again, the basic facts of the story are contested. According to the Fon of Bawock and his representatives, on 3 March a Voma group (a Bali Nyonga cult who perform fertility rites associated with the agricultural year)⁹ entered Bawock land. It is

⁶Fon of Bali, speaking at Bali during the Socio-Economic Tour of the Governor of the North-West Province, 15 March 2005.

⁷No. 36/A/MINAT/DOT of 19 January 1982.

⁸Comment (20 March 2007) in response to an article in *The Post* newspaper, (http://www.postnewsline.com/2007/03/bawock_refugees.html), accessed 21 July 2008.

⁹The Voma society is a male cult associated with Chamba kingdoms. Its presence in Bali Nyonga has ebbed and flowed. Major annual Voma celebrations take place at the end of the

claimed that the ceremony performed by the Voma continued inside Bawock land, despite the tension between the two groups that had followed the events of the previous December. The people in Bawock viewed this as an attempt to taunt them by asserting Bali ownership of their land. Various Bawock sources describe this as effectively a declaration of war by Bali Nyonga on Bawock. On the other hand (according to the Fon of Bali Nyonga's Traditional Council) the Voma always comes out annually at the start of the farming season to bless the farmlands in order to ensure good yields and on this occasion it was on its way back to Bali Town from Mantum and was passing through Bawock along the main road. Bali accounts suggest that the group accompanying Voma was attacked by youths from Bawock who seized the sacred Voma bag and burnt it. This was interpreted in Bali Nyonga as an act of desecration and a declaration of war by the Bawock on Bali Nyonga.

On 5 March there was a fire in the Fon's palace in Bali Town, starting at around 4.30 a.m. According to Bali Nyonga accounts this was an arson attack by a group from Bawock who threw a petrol bomb onto the grass roof of a holy shrine (the Chum) attached to the palace. Parts of this building had originally been constructed in 1889 and it was used to store a number of the Fon's sacred and secular treasures. The palace gong brought the people of Bali Town out to fight the fire, but palace officials maintain that, despite their efforts, the building and its contents were destroyed.

The next day around 300 buildings in Bawock were razed to the ground, livestock was butchered and crops destroyed. Government troops were brought into Bali and Bawock to control the situation and prevent further violence. According to Bali Nyonga accounts, the Fon of Bali urged restraint on the morning after the fire and his people responded to that appeal. They claim that the Bawock people torched their own homes and then made themselves refugees in order to cast suspicion onto the people of Bali Nyonga. This was said to be a replication of the strategy used by the BaTi people against Bali Nyonga in 1911. According to Bawock accounts (and most press reports) a group of youths from Bali Nyonga seeking revenge for the fire at their palace attacked the village of Bawock. They destroyed property, looted stored food and commodities, and forced the Bawock people to leave their homes and flee. By the end of the day between 500 and 5,000 people from Bawock had fled the village and large numbers of them stayed away for several weeks.¹⁰ Ultimately around 2,200 people

dry season though the society performs rituals and ceremonies throughout the year, notably in October and in January–February when it celebrates the festival of 'first fruits' and the closing of the Voma year, known as *vommunga'a*. For more on the political organization of Bali see Chilver and Kaberry 1961 and TintaNji *et al.* 1988.

¹⁰ Estimates of how many people fled vary considerably. Accounts are also unclear about who fled where, and at what point they started to return to Bawock. See <http://www.postnewsline.com/2007/03/bawock_refugees.html>, accessed 29 March 2010. Recent council statistics from Bali suggest that Bawock had a population of 5,341 inhabitants prior to these events.

formed a 'refugee camp' in the Bamenda Congress Hall, the main public building in the centre of the provincial urban headquarters, where they received official and charitable aid.¹¹

After some time the people of Bawock began to return to their village and the process of rebuilding began. This has been assisted by those who see the Bawock people as a victimized minority in the Subdivision who were overpowered by Bali Nyonga aggression. However, attempts have also been made by the people of Bali Nyonga to offer support to Bawock as a gesture of reconciliation under the guidance of their Fon.

Bali Nyonga found little support from neighbours in the 2007 crisis. Current relations between Bali Nyonga and its neighbours are profoundly affected by the events of the early colonial era (Chilver 1967). In the two decades around the year 1900 Bali Nyonga was a sub-imperial power within the Grassfields¹² because of an alliance with German colonialists. In 1891 the Germans trained a 'Balitruppe' and armed them with breechloading rifles, enabling them to achieve dominance over neighbouring polities. In 1905 the Fon of Bali was recognized by the Germans as regional paramount chief. The consequence of the alliance was a long history of animosity between the Bali Nyonga and their neighbours. Not only are the Bali Nyonga accused of using their power to acquire more land, but they are also accused of being directly involved in the supply of forced labour from their neighbours for work on the German plantations on the coast (Chilver and Rösenthaller 2002).

From the perspective of the Bali Nyonga elites the sympathy within North-West Province for Bawock and the animosity towards Bali Nyonga appear to have come as a shock. Speaking at a subsequent annual general meeting of the Bali Nyonga Development and Cultural Association, the outgoing President-General commented:

The recent Bawock crisis revealed the actual depth of feeling against us throughout Mezam. For although we had clearly acted in legitimate retribution, we were still vehemently condemned, with a fanatical bias that was totally inconsistent with the love of truth and fairness that was once the hallmark of this Province. And much as the violence of the propaganda came as something of a surprise, it also confirmed what we have always suspected: that when the chips are down, we in Bali have no one but ourselves to count on. And for that reason, we have a duty to stick together and be doubly vigilant.

The tone of wounded surprise is somewhat disingenuous given the widespread consciousness of Bali history and their self-ascribed martial identity, but the sentiment is absolutely of the current moment in Cameroonian political rhetoric.

¹¹ UNHCR, *Cameroon Tribune*, 12 March 2007.

¹² This term is used to describe the area covering large parts of the West and North-West Provinces and a small part of the South-West Province. It is largely (though not perfectly) coincident with an area of open highlands and of around 150 hierarchical polities (mostly referred to as chiefdoms).

THE 'POLITICS OF BELONGING' A DECADE ON

The dispute between Bali and Bawock can clearly be used as evidence when interpreting events in Cameroon in terms of a 'politics of belonging'. It is a conflict about claims over who belongs where, who has the right to call a particular place their homeland, and who gets to write the most widely accepted story of particular events. It welds together questions about land ownership, home, ethnicity and history. Rival claims over scarce resources (land) are being justified using ideas of ethnic rights over particular territories. Competition over the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies are also in the background in this dispute, with the Santa-Bali constituency ultimately being split to give Santa its own seat, while Bali has been appended to a Bamenda seat. The experience for those caught up in these politics is of increased insularity and inward-looking social relations—the outcome of these events is the conclusion that 'we' can only trust 'ourselves'. When John Crawly described the politics of belonging as the "dirty work" of boundary maintenance' (Crawly 1999: 30) he probably did not envisage the boundary in this literal sense, but his definition perfectly captures the events described. In this instance the reification of social boundaries in contemporary Cameroon is materialized through a battle over real territorial boundaries. But in what ways does this case study suggest that the character of the politics of belonging has changed over the last ten years?

First, as time passes the metaphor of 'ever-diminishing circles' to describe these politics increasingly seems less apt than the idea of 'the ground being taken from under your feet'. An imagined geography of Cameroon in which there is a drift towards smaller and smaller units, each containing 'true' autochthons, has become harder to sustain as the years have passed. This is particularly the case in parts of the country (such as the North-West and West) where there has been considerable mobility over the last two centuries. Foregrounding belonging has not produced a reordering of the population into a static one-dimensional 'map' of homelands; rather, it has generated a sense of the strata of belonging. The search for the true owner of land will often be fruitless because, as Carola Lentz says, 'land rights have always been ambiguous, negotiable and politically embedded, in the pre-colonial past just as under the colonial regime and in present times' (Lentz 2006: 34). The idea of the search for the authentic owner of the land rests on a false idea of the past as both static and separate from the present. Her argument is only amplified by recognizing the anachronism of speaking of these ethnic identities in the pre-colonial past as if these labels carried the same meaning as those operating today.

The Bali Nyonga claim that they gave the people of Bawock their homeland and that therefore Bawock is both geographically within and politically under Bali Nyonga rule. Yet Bali historians make no secret of the fact that they themselves are not the original inhabitants of the territory they call their homeland. Before this place was Bali it was Meta and the Bali Nyonga make their claim to ownership of the land

through an act of appropriation in the mid-nineteenth century.¹³ The Bali Nyonga are themselves widely perceived to be relative latecomers to the Grassfields. A reply to a newspaper article perfectly captures this widely held sentiment:

the Balis were the last ethnic group to move into the graffiland (Northwest and Western province) and are a group of the Chamba people ([from the] Extreme North province and part of Nigeria). The Bamilekes (from Adamawa), Bamouns and Bansa (from Adamawa), Tikars and Balis moved into this region in that respective order and the Balis were hosted by the Bamouns [and] Bamilekes before they moved up to the NW.¹⁴

The accuracy of this account can be contested, but its importance is that it is pervasive. It even implicitly introduces the idea that the Bali Nyonga are not really Cameroonian because their 'Chamba cradle' is in present-day Nigeria. If (as some Bali Nyonga elites suggested in the heat of the crisis) the Bawock people belonged 'back' in the West Province, then others (Bali Nyonga's critics) could equally argue that the people of Bali Nyonga belonged 'back' in Nigeria with the other Chambas. Furthermore, other influential groups in the region (such as those from Bamoun or Bansa, or who claim a Tikar genealogy) know that their claims to be autochthons stand in contradiction to their claims to have originally come from elsewhere. As time has passed there is a greater consciousness of the risks of claiming the status of autochthons.

A second difference relates to the increasing importance of Cameroonian diaspora groups to local politics at home (Mercer *et al.* 2008). Discussions about the Bali-Bawock dispute between Bali Nyonga individuals in Cameroon, the USA, Western Europe and Asia almost universally showed unquestioning support for the Bali side. The only Bali Nyonga criticism of Bali Nyonga actions at home tended to be cast in a rather moralistic Christian register. In addition some members of the diaspora have very specific anxieties related to land inheritance and this provides an incentive for direct involvement in disputes. However, interviews among the Bali Nyonga diaspora in the UK also show a weary frustration with Cameroonian politics. Whilst interviewees clearly expressed their sympathy for those in Bali Nyonga during the dispute, they were also more cynical about the way in which events there were being manipulated by some Bali Nyonga elites out of personal interest and for party political purposes. They expressed anxieties about the structural conditions of Cameroonian politics that made the resolution of land disputes very difficult and acted as a barrier to reconciliation.

¹³ There is another peril here too, though it has never been articulated to us in these terms in Cameroon. If a past act of appropriation can ensure subsequent 'belonging', then logically another act of appropriation in the present or future will also presumably be an acceptable means of asserting ownership.

¹⁴ Comment (20 March 2007) in response to an article in *The Post* newspaper, < http://www.postnewsline.com/2007/03/bawock_refugees.html >, accessed 21 July 2008.

A third difference relates to multi-party democracy in Cameroon. Whereas opposition parties represented a significant challenge to the establishment in Cameroon in the 1990s, they no longer do so. The elections of the 1990s had real meaning in Cameroon. Twelve years on, the challenge presented by the political opposition has largely evaporated and the same elite who controlled the ruling party, the administration and the main routes of economic accumulation in 1990 are still in power now. In the most recent parliamentary elections (2007) opposition parties were reduced to 15 per cent of the seats, and some of those parties are overtly allied to the ruling party anyway (Table 1). Furthermore, if opposition parties do still retain a foothold in the legislature their power bases are highly localized and only the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM)¹⁵ can plausibly claim a national mandate, having even recently taken seats such as Jakiri in the Social Democratic Front's (SDF)¹⁶ heartland (Table 2). So confident is the CPDM that it has now retrieved its political monopoly in Cameroon that it is demanding that the 1996 constitution be changed in order to allow President Paul Biya to run for election again in 2011, when his second seven-year term ends.¹⁷ Such a change would be a potent symbol of the evanescence of multi-party politics in Cameroon, given that a limit of two presidential terms was one of the opposition's main tangible outcomes after protests in the 1990s. A bill to amend the constitution was tabled in April 2008. Street violence in urban centres across Cameroon in February 2008 may partly reflect frustration with the arrogance of the political establishment.

The argument made a decade ago was that the politics of belonging in Cameroon and elsewhere was a response to the rise of multi-party democracy:

In many parts of the continent democratisation seems to encourage the emergence of a particular form of politics, centred on regional elite associations, as some sort of alternative to multi-partyism. (Geschiere and Gugler 1998a: 309)

The idea that 'settlers' or 'strangers' might influence parliamentary representation prompted an obsession with questions of origins. Since the government of Cameroon associated settlers with opposition political parties it was happy to support home associations (unions

¹⁵The CPDM is the ruling party in Cameroon. (French: Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais, RDPC).

¹⁶The Social Democratic Front, founded in 1991, is the largest opposition party in Parliament. Though it has not been co-opted by the CPDM, it has struggled with internal factionalism.

¹⁷Paul Biya became Prime Minister of Cameroon in 1975 and has been President since 1982. He was re-elected during one-party rule in 1984 and 1988. He was then elected in disputed multi-party elections in 1992. After the introduction of the 1996 constitution a limit was placed on the number of Presidential terms that could be served. Paul Biya was re-elected under this system in 1997 and 2004.

TABLE 1 Legislative election results, 1992–2007

	CPDM	SDF	Other opposition
1992	88	-	92
1997	109	43	28
2002	149	22	9
2007	153	16	11

Source: African Elections Database, (<http://africanelections.tripod.com/index.html>)

TABLE 2 Legislative election results by province, 2007

	CPDM	SDF	UNDP	CDU	PM
Adamawa	9	0	1	0	0
Centre	28	0	0	0	0
East	11	0	0	0	0
Far North	28	0	1	0	0
Littoral	17	1	0	0	1
North	8	0	4	0	0
North West	7	13	0	0	0
West	19	2	0	4	0
South	11	0	0	0	0
South West	15	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	153	16	6	4	1

Source: *Cameroon Tribune*

Political parties: Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), Social Democratic Front (SDF), National Union for Democracy and Progress (NUDP), Cameroon Democratic Union (CDU), Progressive Movement (PM)

of urbanites who claimed affinity through sharing a common rural home) precisely because they helped to marginalize 'strangers'. These associations were seen as a vehicle that could be used to bypass multi-party politics among rural electorates. Since most of the leaders of the associations were civil servants it was easy for the ruling party to bring pressure to bear on them to go 'home' on campaigns to mobilize votes. Francis Nyamnjoh and Michael Rowlands went so far as to claim that some of these 'ethnicized elite associations' were 'the prime movers in local regional politics' and signalled 'the attempt by the ruling party to maintain local support at all costs' (1998: 320–1). New and established politicians asserted their interests in their place of origin through participating in the association. By pursuing local interests these associations undermined any attempt to develop a united national opposition during an extended period of economic and political tensions in the first half of the 1990s.

A decade or so on, the 'threat' to the political establishment from opposition parties has gone and as a result the political salience of elite hometown associations is reduced. The work of home associations in many places is consciously disconnected from politics. The vast bulk of the time in home association meetings is directed towards discussing the welfare of members or self-help development projects. In some cases association members and leaders are almost aggressively wary of those individuals who seek to use associations as personal political platforms. Even allowing for the fact that the language of development is well known for its capacity to depoliticize the politically contentious, there is little doubt that because the 'threat' from multi-party politics has gone the political urgency to use these associations has also waned.

If the rise of the politics of belonging was a consequence of the rise of multi-party democracy, why has the former survived the latter? It is much harder to erase the idea that autochthons have particular rights than to validate them through speeches, laws and bureaucratic regulation. The politics of belonging is not quite a 'Pandora's box' because there are many examples (including Cameroon during the 1970s and 1980s, see Kofele-Kale 1981) where a concerted effort can dull differences, but nevertheless 'political tribalism' (Lonsdale 1992, 1994) has become the standard lens through which many Cameroonians outside the main cities understand politics (Nyamnjoh 1999). Having endorsed this view it is hard for the establishment to change it, even if they now wanted to do so. The emphasis on belonging still serves established interests as it capitalizes on a powerful sense of local loyalty, whilst containing opposition within those areas that steadfastly refuse to be co-opted by the ruling party. The apparent 'naturalness' of autochthony also makes it ideologically resistant to change. This has become the way in which Cameroonian citizens 'do' politics and imagining other ways of national political being is hard. Cameroonian politics treats the idea of 'belonging' as axiomatic and incontrovertible (Nyamnjoh 2002; Fonchingong 2005; Jua 2005; Ndjio 2006; W. Nkwi 2006).

However as the significance of multi-party democracy as an explanation for the rise of autochthony declines, so other explanations become more apparent. At a global scale there has been a resurgence of place-based politics. According to Nira Yuval Davis, belonging is 'about emotional attachment, about feeling... "safe"' (2006: 197; see also Yuval Davis 2003, 2004). Belonging provides a feeling of security in an apparently unpredicable world through inter-subjective acknowledgement. In Cameroon this desire for security is driven by a sense of powerlessness over the fluctuations of prices for basic foods, the hikes in energy prices, the retreat of the state from service provision, the end of familiar forms of employment on plantations or in the civil service, the lottery for American visas, the capricious rules governing international migration, the erratic sending of remittances. It might well be a delusion, but a 'home' where familiar people rehearse familiar rituals and where the lineaments of power are recognizable and

visible appears to offer some refuge in a changing world. A political strategy that naturalizes and endorses autochthons' rights over the space called home promises (however fictitiously) increased control over that space. That the real result of such a strategy can include the maintenance of the political status quo and the efflorescence of conflicts like the violence in Bawock is of less relevance than the fantasy it offers.

THE 'POLITICS OF CONVIVIALITY'

An analysis of Cameroonian politics that identifies the risks of emphasizing autochthony is convincing, but it is rather negative because it treats 'belonging' and ethnicity as malevolent forces in politics. Such a position is in line with three decades of social science in Africa, which has assumed that strong ethnic identities are a barrier to effective political accountability. The manipulation of place-based loyalties is indeed 'worrying' (Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998: 330), but it is also possible to identify an alternative facet to the politics of belonging. Belonging not only articulates with 'political tribalism' but can also be associated with 'moral ethnicity' (Lonsdale 1992, 1994):

Political tribalism flows down from high political intrigue; it constitutes communities through external competition. Moral ethnicity creates communities from within through domestic controversy over civic virtue. It ascends from the deep antagonism to the very forces on which political tribalism thrives. (Lonsdale 1992: 466)

John Lonsdale uses this distinction to argue that 'an ethnic imagination may not be so subversive of modern African states as is generally believed; it may be constructive' (Lonsdale 1992: 317–18). Gikuyu political values can be used by a public to hold its leaders to account. Or as Chabal and Daloz ask, 'is it conceivable that... a political compact based on ethnicity could bring together, rather than separate, the constituent members of what now form African countries?' (1999: 58).

Political belonging describes a process of exploiting the desire for a secure home for elite political ends. In contrast moral conviviality describes local ideas about the right and wrong ways for diverse groups of people to live together and the process by which local elites can be disciplined for transgressing such norms. Public deliberations about the right way to be a good member of a community, which draw on deep values, are the hallmark of a more co-operative but still local scale of solidarity. Moral conviviality is closely aligned with a progressive politics of place (Massey 1993, 1994, 2006), which acknowledges the internal heterogeneity of communities within any location, tolerates internal differences, is open to change and newcomers, and has an outward-looking attitude concerned with developing connections

across space. Conviviality is no less about being ‘one of the group’ than belonging, but it is an extroverted rather than an inward-looking group.

There are two dimensions to the way in which moral conviviality works in Bali. First there is the history of the agglomeration of different ethnic groups who come together under the umbrella of a single Bali Nyonga identity. Internal ethnic differences are neither erased nor forgotten as time passes, but they are contingently set aside. An exchange of languages, ceremonies and institutions binds these different groups together by remembering their differences. There is some evidence that Bali historians are well aware of these internal differences, but in the current climate there is little incentive to draw attention to them. Second, there is the need to collaborate and connect with neighbours (external differences) in order to achieve development goals that operate at a scale other than the most local.

Both these aspects appear to be instrumental. Framed this way, it is reasonable to ask whether this should not really be called pragmatic rather than moral conviviality. However, many Bali interviewees started debates about social relations from the proposition that a peaceful environment in its widest sense is *better* for a contented family and community life. This *betterness* is inherent rather than instrumental. Bali political values claim that it is *right in itself* for different groups to cooperate within the community. There is no doubt amongst the leaders in Bali that the political ideal is of peaceful internal coexistence. For long periods of time in the twentieth century this goal was achieved. Of course Bali has no monopoly on asserting such values, but the point is that they stand in stark contrast both to Bali’s regional reputation and to the common idiom of current political language, which emphasizes defence and competition over cooperation. That recent political practice in Bali has not always reflected such values is a reflection of the dominance of political belonging over moral conviviality at the current time. At certain times and in certain places belonging seems to be dominant. But even in the wake of all the violence and displacement, moral conviviality was quickly expressed through attempts at reconciliation. The issue is less one of ‘dominance’ and more one of a never-ending tussle between the two ideas.

The first dimension of conviviality concerns internal heterogeneity. A politics organized around places inevitably draws attention to the way in which the groups that live within those places are rarely actually ethnically homogeneous. Bali Nyonga comprises several groups with different histories who have coalesced over a period of at least two centuries (Titanji *et al.* 1988). One powerful group (closely associated with the palace) claim a Chamba ancestor and describe a journey as armed raiders from Adamawa in the late eighteenth century. But on that journey the Mubakoh-speaking Chamba were joined by Bata, Pare, Mbum, Buti, Tikari and BaTi elements. This alliance was defeated militarily by a Bamiléké force in 1835 and then split into a number of separate rival groups. One of these splinter groups (led by Nyongpasi—thus Bali Nyonga) joined up with a large group of BaTi, from whom they acquired the language (Mungaka) that most

Bali people now speak. For a few decades Mubakoh and Mungaka co-existed, but by the late nineteenth century Mubakoh had become only a court language. By 1860 this amalgam had acquired their current homeland by force from their 'cousins' the Bali Nkohntan (who had in turn taken it by force from its Meta inhabitants) and who were then incorporated into the new polity. Some of those Meta groups who were resident on the site also subsequently became incorporated into the Bali Nyonga polity. Further BaTi groups adhered to Bali just after 1900 and brought the Bawock with them around 1905. Whilst some of the details of the different groups who amalgamated to form Bali Nyonga may be lost, different lineages still preserve these numerous internal differences through male lines of succession, differential roles within the palace hierarchy, different names and different sub-chieftaincies (Fardon 2006: 4–5). The Bawock, for example, were respected by the Bali Nyonga for their wood-carving skills and were actively engaged in such activities, not least contributing to the construction of pillars in the palace (Geary 1988: 19–20 and 34).

These internal divisions are well-known within Bali. As one person put it, 'you know, Bali is like America. No one can claim indigeneity',¹⁸ or, as another (who consciously combined loyalty to Bali with a loyalty to one of its sub-villages, Mbufung) said:

Mbufung was originally settled by the Widikum. Bali did not attack, and they lived together. But now there have been many intermarriages with Bali people, and the other Widikums fled. So Bali tradition encroached into Mbufung. Mbufung speaks Mungaka. Only the very old speak the language of the Widikums. The Tikali, Buti, Ti peoples – they are all strangers. The real original Bali people are very few. Bali is now very cosmopolitan.¹⁹

Not only that, but people from Bali in the international diaspora are conscious that questions of belonging are being manipulated for personal political ends amongst the elites in Bali, Santa and Bawock. This does not mean they do not care about the issue or the loss of property, but it does show that they are conscious of the way in which individual ambition is creating tensions in a context where cooperation is actually part of the history and the everyday reality. The right way for people to live together in Bali involves acknowledging the value of different groups, absorbing but not erasing such differences. Such a strategy has been very successful over a long period of time.

Bali culture and political organization draws from its Grassfields neighbours as well as its Chamba roots. The Bali Nyonga established themselves in the nineteenth century by becoming embroiled in a web of alliances with other Grassfields polities, particularly Bafreng and Nkwen (Yenshu and Ngwa 2001; Yenshu 2003). The Bali template for social and political organization was not Chamba, but the successful neighbouring Grassfields kingdom of Bamun. The model for Bali

¹⁸ Member of Bali elite, Bamenda, 29 March 2005.

¹⁹ Member of Bali elite, Bamenda, 29 March 2005.

Nyonga carving and material culture in general is not the spare style of the Chamba, but what Richard Fardon calls ‘the Baroque aesthetics of the Grassfields’ (Fardon 2006: viii). Like Bamun (Geary 1988), Bali Nyonga embraced the novelty of German material culture and continued to adopt and adapt new influences throughout the twentieth century. Far from building on a single Chamba past, Bali culture has appropriated liberally from a multiplicity of sources over two centuries. Even the most significant links to Chamba culture (the annual Lela festival and the Voma secret society) are different from the current Chamba variants (Fardon 2006). This process was not uni-directional and aspects of Bali ceremony and political organization were also adopted by other Grassfields states. However, because of the current ‘need’ to define Bali Nyonga in distinction from its neighbours this collaborative process of exchange and engagement is an anathema to some of Bali’s historians.

When the Bali Nyonga elite emphasize their Chamba roots and their martial past to present contemporary Bali Nyonga as a pure, homogeneous ethnic identity with an unchanging character, they are producing a narrative of political belonging. They set out to assert their difference from their Grassfields neighbours and their capacity and need to continue to ‘fight’ for their own land. Of course the Bali Nyonga are not alone in the Grassfields (or indeed anywhere else) in their selective interpretation of history (Yenshu 2003), but more importantly many Bali people are well aware of an alternative history of a process of successfully amalgamating difference.

The second dimension used to exemplify moral conviviality concerns the need to collaborate with neighbours in order to achieve development goals. Bali Subdivision, though densely populated, is small. So although it has some influential elites in key positions in national government, there are limits to its capacity to capture state funding to deliver development goods. However, by cooperating with their neighbours they can secure mutual benefits. In Bali Nyonga’s case the new tarred main road is a key example, a project in which the elites worked alongside their historic ‘competitors’ in Batibo (to the west).

Bali and Batibo are both on the Lagos to Mombasa line of the Trans-Africa Highway Network. However, for many years the earth road has been in a very poor state, and the short distance to Bamenda could take travellers most of the day. In 2002–3 Chinese contractors were given the job of producing a new line for the road and tarring it, which they did. Taxis now ply the route and the journey takes about half an hour. This CFA19,500 million project (about £19.5 million) was primarily funded by the African Development Bank (Fonjong 2004) but the Cameroon government was closely involved.²⁰ Local elites from Bali and Batibo believed it was necessary to ‘lobby’ government officials in Yaoundé to ensure that the road project was not diverted to the

²⁰ Prime Minister’s speech in the North-West Province, 5 April 2001.

north to pass through Mbengwi.²¹ They collected money to pay officials in Yaoundé in order to guarantee that the relevant papers moved through the system, that the contractor was paid promptly, and the work completed. One member of the Bali elite described this process to us by comparing their strategy with an earlier episode further west along the road in Manyu Division of South-West Province:

A similar road plan from Momo to Mamfe collapsed because the Manyu people were not as organized as those from the North-West. The contractor was not being paid, the papers were not being given out, they left the project. With the Bali road they had the same problem but they learnt from this previous experience. I gave CFA100,000, I got CFA50,000 out of Mr X although he is staunch SDF and he thought it was going to CPDM—we paid and got a person to go in, get the papers out, they paid the contractors and they finished the road. This was the elites—not only from Bali, some from Batibo.²²

Here we see political belonging and moral conviviality at work simultaneously. Bali and Batibo (with their history of conflict) cooperate across the boundaries of belonging, though they do so at the expense of Mbengwi and (rhetorically) of Manyu.

This example shows that the differences on which the politics of belonging are founded can be set aside relatively easily for the practical necessities of economic interest. The same point emerges through interviews with Meta people in Bossa village, who prefer to live in Bali Subdivision rather than in the largely Meta Subdivision of Momo:

If you asked everyone in Bossa, 80–90 per cent of them would tell you that they prefer to be in Bali rather than Momo Subdivision. Why? Because Bali is a small subdivision. When [government resources] come to Bali, Bossa always gets a share. But if we were under Mbengwi, where there are no roads, no schools, and twenty-something villages, we in Bossa will not get our share of the cake.²³

Conviviality is not unambiguously benevolent. It often rests on the exigencies of self-interest, but it does at least open up possibilities of a politics that exploits local loyalties to home without necessarily leading to conflict.

CONCLUSION

The initial motivation for emphasizing the rights of autochthons was to undermine multi-party democracy. This specific context has been replaced by habit and by the local impact of the general context of global integration. The politics of home and belonging go with the grain of current popular sentiment because it speaks to the anxieties of rapid

²¹ Member of Bali elite, Bali, 15 February 2005.

²² Member of Bali elite, Limbe, 20 April 2005.

²³ Member of Bossa elite, Bali, 5 March 2005.

social change. A desire for belonging is not only a force that can lead to increased local conflicts; it can also simultaneously be a platform for conviviality. Local ideas about the merits of internal cooperation across ethnic difference and external neighbourliness all rest on the idea that conviviality is both inherently good and also useful. As one elite interviewee put it: 'We do not want to put fire under any other pot. We want Bali as a peaceful unit. Let whatever people do be for the interest of Bali.'²⁴ Unobtrusively there is a great deal of successful living together despite differences at a variety of scales (from individual marriages to shared village development projects). There is a long history of absorption of other peoples and their cultures into Bali; the resulting mix makes Bali what it is. Becoming conscious of belonging can foster recognition of internal differences, which might also help to cultivate better external relations.

Yet such ideas do not exist in a vacuum. They have to compete with the alternative ideas that are associated with political belonging.²⁵ Evidence of people thinking of Bali as a homogeneous, unchanging place with clearly defined boundaries is easy to find. Such an imaginary produces a narrow account of history and an introverted sense of place with an internalized search for origins. This is the source of the bellicose stereotype of 'Bali man'. It would be perverse to pretend that this set of ideas is not common at the current time. For example the formal, high-profile elements of Bali ceremony (such as Lela), which are demonstrations of the Fon's wealth and military strength, lend themselves easily to an interpretation that emphasizes conflict rather than cooperation. The overt violence between Bali and Bawock is the consequence of allowing political belonging to dominate.

In 2005 the Governor of the North-West Province rebuked the population of Bali Subdivision:

You are fighting yourselves – Bali Nyonga, Bawock, Mbororo – where are you going to? You should consider yourselves as people of the same subdivision. This is a problem of tribalism... you know your problem is not chieftaincy, it is tribalism [laughter in audience]... You must accept each other.²⁶

There is considerable chutzpah in the representative of the Cameroon government castigating citizens for tribalism, given the government's role in reviving political belonging. Such a move tries to relocate the origin of the struggle between political belonging and moral conviviality to the local level. It is a distancing gesture that enables the state to slough off responsibility for the circumstances it helped to create.

²⁴ Member of Bali elite, Bali, 15 March 2005.

²⁵ For similar debates in the Kenyan context, see Orvis 2001 and Klopp 2002.

²⁶ His Excellency Koumpa Issa, Governor of the North-West Province, Bali, 15 March 2005.

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ABSTRACT

The article introduces a themed section in the journal on hometown associations in Cameroon. It outlines the impact of ten years' work in this field and argues that notions of autochthony remain central in understanding Cameroonian politics. However the three articles go on to argue that some of the claims about home, belonging and politics are difficult to reconcile with the hazier reality observed on the ground. The articles aim to disturb any universal, inevitable or overly tidy segue between questions of belonging and claims of political segmentation. Too often the existing literature moves too quickly to an analysis that foregrounds only the worrisome dimensions of a politics of belonging, thus leaving little space for other interpretations. To explore this dilemma the article continues by exploring a land dispute in Bali Nyonga, north-west Cameroon. It shows (1) how ideas of belonging remain central to the practice of politics; (2) how the politics of belonging has changed over time; and (3) how it is possible to foreground an alternative 'politics of

conviviality', which would otherwise be shaded out by the dominance of the politics of belonging within the literature.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente une rubrique thématique de revue consacrée aux associations de ressortissants au Cameroun. Il décrit brièvement l'impact de dix années de travaux dans ce domaine et soutient que les notions d'autochtonie demeurent centrales pour comprendre la politique camerounaise. Or, les trois articles affirment qu'il est difficile de concilier certaines assertions concernant le lieu d'origine, l'appartenance et la politique avec la réalité plus floue observée sur le terrain. Ces articles cherchent à troubler toute articulation universelle, inévitable ou trop ordonnée entre les questions d'appartenance et les assertions de segmentation politique. La littérature existante s'empresse trop souvent de proposer une analyse qui ne met en avant que les dimensions préoccupantes d'une politique d'appartenance, ne laissant ainsi que peu de place à d'autres interprétations. L'article étudie ensuite ce dilemme à travers un contentieux foncier à Bali Nyonga, dans le Nord-Ouest du Cameroun. Il montre (1) comment les idées d'appartenance demeurent centrales dans la pratique de la politique, (2) comment la politique d'appartenance a évolué au fil du temps et (3) comment il est possible de mettre en avant une autre politique, une « politique de convivialité », que risquerait d'éclipser la prépondérance de la politique d'appartenance dans la littérature.