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The « CUDA » associations in West Cameroon,
Between autochtony and transnational virtual communities

My presentation deals with the kingdom of Mankon, in West Cameroon. I wish to address the way it articulates the politics of locality and autochtony with the transnational diasporas of its subjects. In the first place, I need to emphasize a few points concerning the said kingdom. Then, I will proceed to the question of its transnational connections.

I. A few basic points about the Mankon kingdom

- The kingdom has been in existence for at least 3 centuries ;
- It is one among some 150 kingdoms of various dimensions in the Western highlands of Cameroon ;
- Today, its population numbers some 60 to 80.000 people. It is a micro-kingdom ;
- In 1960, at the time of independance, it was generally thought that african kingdoms, including Mankon, would disappear within a few decades ;
- However, starting in the 1980s, there was a spectacular “return of the kings” in the forefront of the national political life in many african countries. It was due to the fact that they represented an important political resource in national politics, and that they enjoyed much legitimacy, which was not the case of most post-independance african states ;
- As regards the kingdom of Mankon, it was also due to the charismatic personality of its king, Ngwa’fo, who is at the same time an agricultural engineer, a prominent politician of national importance, a businessman, and a king ;
- Ngwa’fo practices a politically conservative modernization ;
- The kingdom was a geographically bounded unit until the 1950s ;
- Its population is linguistically and culturally diversified. It does not claim any shared origin ;
- It was, and still is, kept together by the monarch. How is this achieved ?
- The king’s bodily substances are believed to be transformed in ancestral life substances when the monarch makes offerings to his dead elders ;
- The king gives out these bodily substances (saliva, speech, breath, semen) to his subjects together with their extentions (palm oil, raphia wine, camwood powder), thus providing unifying life principles to a population of mixed origins ;
- By so doing, the king maintains his own bodily envelope as a container, and the limits of the kingdom as a container of its people sharing unifying ancestral substances ;

- He also maintains the openings of the containers, and insures that substances, goods and people flow both ways in and out of the various containers.

What, following Foucault, could be called a governmentality of containers and substances proves to be quite effective in the national politics of Cameroon. Let me provide a few examples :

- The king attracts within the kingdom the resources of the outside : Development NGOs, State resources in terms of investment, salaried positions, a share in the “national cake”, positions of power, trade opportunities, electricity, the internet, etc. This is in line with what he was expected to do in the past ;

- The king defines the limits of the kingdom and who is going to belong and to have access to what. He defines the limits of mankon autochtony.

II. The paradox of a transnational locality

In the past, the kingdom was entirely defined by a process of closure, producing locality and mooring people and things in the local. For numerous reasons beyond the scope of this paper, numerous mankon people have now migrated to major Cameroonian cities (Bafoussam, Yaoundé, Douala), to major cities in neighbouring countries like Nigeria, Congo, Gabon, and to Europe and the United States.

The outgoing migrations defeat the workings of the politics of closure on which the very existence of the kingdom and of the governmentality of containers is based. The substance of the kingdom escapes from the politics of closure and of the circulation of substances through the openings of the city as a container within the regional community.

The migrations defeat it all the more since the mankon diaspora includes many poor people who have severed their link with the kingdom, but also quite a few culturally and economically dynamic people who have established elsewhere : businessmen and women, lawyers, civil servants, medical doctors, professionals of various qualifications.

The king and the kingdom are facing a problem : now that the kingdom as a bounded container cannot any longer be defined exclusively by a given localized territory, how is it possible to achieve some kind of boundedness to preserve the governmentality of containers and keep the kingdom into existence ? Unless this is achieved, it will be the end of that particular kingdom, and of all the kingdoms of West Cameroon for that matter.

This is where the MACUDA association comes in. The acronym means “Mankon CUltural Development Association”. It was founded by the king at the end of the 1990s. It has a general assembly, an executive committee, a treasurer, an elected President who is not the king. It has a number of local branches in major towns, and a very active branch in the USA, Macuda-America, with a web page : [macudaamerica](http://macudaamerica.com). ...

I now wish to provide some ethnographic descriptions to flesh out my argument.

- King Ngwa’fo succeeded his father in 1959. In 2009, he will celebrate his golden jubilee. The people of Mankon will congregate at the palace for a grand festival in December 2009 ;

- The budget of the jubilee amounts to 100 million F CFA, that is, 150.000 €.

- In preparation for the jubilee, the king toured the USA from October 2007 to February 2008. He went to Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, etc. He delivered a lecture at Brown University. He was the guest of the Chicago City Council and visited a car factory ;

- The web page Macuda-america gives the program of his visits to the local branches of MACUDA, to various institutions, and, most importantly, a diorama of most of the events ;

- He collected money with the members of MACUDA in America ;

- A mankon internet forum gives the same kind of information regarding the touring of Cameroonian cities by the king in 2008 ;
- The means by which the kingdom is maintained as a bounded unit are :
 - the internet
 - the tours accomplished by the king
 - the financial contributions by the members of MACUDA
 - the performance at each visit of the king, of a ritual called *miyε*
 - plans to turn the annual festival into an occasion to gather mankon diasporas
 - the politics of autochtony
- Let me provide some more informations about the *miyε* ritual : in the past, it used to be performed when a person wanted to acquire the privilege to speak directly to the king. It consists in the king pouring raphia wine from his drinking horn into the hands of the incumbent who keeps them in front of his mouth like a gutter. This allows the person to absorb a royal bodily substance (the raphia wine which has touched the royal saliva) without touching the king's body or his cup that are sacred and untouchable ;
- Thanks to MACUDA, it is now performed in order to coopt mankon people into the elite of the kingdom ;
- A few words now about the politics of autochtony : in October 2007, the General Assembly of the United Nations voted a "UN Declaration on the rights of autochtonous peoples". Like most American countries except the USA, and unlike most African countries, Cameroon strongly supported the Declaration throughout the lobbying and the discussion period which lasted some 20 years ;
- MACUDA is a means to define the autochtony of transnational mankon communities, and therefore to define who is going to have access to Cameroonian citizenship through his belonging to an autochtonous people ;
- It creates a bounded virtual and translocal unit around the king, the *miyε* ritual and the web pages and the internet ;
- I should also mention that it is an elite thing. That is, the resources of the kingdom are being syphoned into a process of social divergence whereby ordinary migrants fall into anonymity and a kind of generalized Cameroonian second rate citizenship, and the elite keeps in touch with the king and with the resources of extraversion.

In conclusion, let me expand beyond the Mankon case.

The historian Marcel Destienne remarked that in Ancient Greece, autochtony was defined by a grand narrative about the origins, and by the burial of the autochtonous people : a narrative and a cemetery.

In the 21st century, at a time when many people and things have broken their moorage in the local and roam at large, as Appadurai would say, autochtony is a means to construct locality, moorage, and an access to first class citizenship. This is the case with the Cameroonian diasporas in general.

Many of the Cameroon kingdoms have made a –CUDA association. It is interesting to see the kinds of projects they engage in. Just one example : it is not possible to claim autochtony if you bury your dead in a foreign land. You have to bring them back home and bury them within the confines of the bounded community land. This raises practical problems concerning the corpses. Accordingly, the first project financed by the CUDA association of the kingdom of Bali-Nyonga, next to Mankon, was to built a mortuary, in order to keep the dead until a funeral ceremony can be organized. Non-Bali neighbouring kingdoms may benefit from this facility, but at a commercial cost. It was built in 2002 and proved to be a very successful and lucrative entreprise.

My ultimate conclusion is that the royal governmentality of containers is still flourishing. In the context of contemporary Cameroon, it dovetails with the politics of autochtony and increasingly tends to mediate first class citizenship at the local and transnational levels, and to achieve the closure and exculsiveness of local identities.

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