The contemporary politics of citizenship in much of sub-Saharan Africa has become increasingly characterised by debates over ‘belonging’, ‘autochthony’ and ‘native-ness’. While this discourse and practice of citizenship has been strongly associated with violent conflict in several African countries, the focus on ‘terroir’ as the basis of citizenship also closely informs everyday struggles over both economic resources and political status and power. This resurgent discourse is often employed by political elites who effectively use colonial constructions of citizenship as a means of (re)establishing local hierarchies of citizenship within multi-ethnic communities (Eyoh 1999: 292), in ways that assure ‘natives’ privileged access to reproductive resources and political power ahead of ‘strangers’. In particular, these debates have exclusionary implications for social groups whose relationship to the land is shaped by non-agricultural forms of political economy and associated forms of cultural identity, and those groups whose historical and geographical patterns of settlement and migration differ from (or can be framed as being different to) the experience of dominant groups.

Over the past decade, Cameroon has arguably experienced a particularly virulent outbreak of this discourse of belonging (e.g. Eyoh 1999; Geschiere and Gugler 1998). In this context, several groups have become adversely incorporated into the forms and processes of politics and political economy that either emerge from or are reproduced by this discourse. Arguably the most famed example here are the hunter-gatherers and other forest people in Cameroon (Lewis 2000), who increasingly find both their livelihood and even identity under threat.

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