

INTRODUCTION

THE URBAN–RURAL CONNECTION: CHANGING
ISSUES OF BELONGING AND IDENTIFICATION

Peter Geschiere and Josef Gugler

A special characteristic of urbanisation in Africa is the continuing commitment of many urbanites to ‘the village’.¹ In the 1960s researchers were already emphasising that life in the cities could hardly be understood without reference to the continuing involvement of urban residents with their rural area of origin. Nor is it possible to understand village life without due attention to the role of the ‘sons’—and ‘daughters’—in the city.² It is clear, moreover, that such links remain of great importance. In his 1971 piece on south-eastern Nigeria, Gugler characterised the involvement of Igbo resident in the cities with their home village as ‘living in a dual system’. In a re-study in the same area, at the end of the 1980s, he found that the involvement had increased rather than decreased (Gugler, 1997).

However, it is also clear that, underneath this apparent continuity, important changes and reorientations are taking place. The general disappointment, not only among social scientists but also (and more important) among the population, with models of modernisation and their promises affects the village as well—certainly not weakening its importance, yet profoundly changing its meaning.³ The vision of the state and the city as self-evident intermediaries in a victorious spread of modernisation over the ‘traditional’ countryside is less and less tenable. Structural adjustment seems to impose a *retour à la terre*—even if it mostly remains a slogan rather than a reality. The impact of recent political changes is even more confusing. 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. The increasing obsession with ‘autochthony’ throughout the continent—as elsewhere in the world—triggers a politics of belonging in which the village and the region assume new importance as a crucial source of power at the national level.

Thus the articles by Nyamnjoh and Rowlands and by Dickson Eyoh in this issue highlight a trend towards what one might call the ‘villagisation’ of national politics.⁴ The other contributions also raise questions as to how the changing meaning of the village and the region affect the continuing urban–rural connection as a pivotal relation in developments in Africa.

THE RURAL CONNECTION: VARYING TRAJECTORIES

Four of the articles in this issue were originally presented at two panels we organised at the 1994 annual meeting of the African Studies Association in Toronto.⁵ We are very happy to include, moreover, a fifth paper, by Dickson Eyoh, on South West Cameroon, since it relates to the general theme and notably to the article by Nyamnjoh and Rowlands on the same area. The aim

of our panels was to explore varying patterns in the relation between urbanites and their place of origin. In many respects this relation is a kind of nodal point for understanding the varying trajectories of modern change in different parts of the continent. It is clear, for instance, that it plays a key role in the emergence of new entrepreneurial groups and the forging of new commercial networks (cf., for instance, Warnier, 1995). It is of equal importance in the cementing of the ethnic networks that ever more openly dominate politics throughout Africa.

General as the continuing involvement of urbanites with their place of origin may be,⁶ it is equally clear that this trend follows highly differentiated patterns. There are wide variations in the concrete content—the goods, services and other forms of support—of the exchanges between villagers and urbanites. There are equally broad variations in the morality of these relations—in the values invoked to maintain such connections and in the sanctions applied to those who seek to dodge their moral obligations.

Precisely because of this variability the urban–rural connection is, in many respects, a key relationship. It is affected by a wide range of factors: by the economic and political context, as the contributions below by Trager on the Yoruba and by Nyamnjoh and Rowland and by Dickson Eyoh on South West Cameroon show, by the role of ‘customary chiefs’ and the quest for ‘traditional’ (or rather pseudo-traditional) titles by the urban elite (cf. Fisiy and Goheen on the Grassfields of North Western Province), and by religion and gender, as van Santen shows in her analysis of how deeply Islam and its varying implications for men and women affect urbanisation in north Cameroon. The varying content of the urban–rural connection marks the specific trajectories of political, economic and social changes in different regions: the struggle over resources, but also the varying coherence of kinship networks and the ways in which ethnicity is organised on the ground. All this makes the specific patterns of relations between urbanites and ‘their’ village an obvious point of departure for comparative analysis of the striking regional variations in post-colonial Africa.⁷

From the literature⁸ a basic, more or less general model of the urban–rural connection in Africa emerges. The rural pole is supposed to provide some sort of social security for urbanites. Children and women may stay there, to cultivate the land; even when the whole family lives in the city, people plan to return to the countryside on retirement. The village’s ‘sons’ and ‘daughters’ in the city, on the other hand, function as a kind of bridgehead to the outside world: they are supposed to receive, feed and lodge their fellow villagers when they come to the city to look for a job, to attend school, to undergo medical treatment or to deal with the authorities. This basic pattern indicates that both parties have a clear interest in maintaining the relation. Moreover, such a concrete interest is often overlaid by strong normative elements. It is not just a matter of individual calculation whether a migrant chooses to remain involved with the village. His place in the city often depends on his relations with other ‘home people’ there. Thus a true ideology of ostentatious loyalty to the rural home community is forged, which holds sway even over the few who succeed in establishing themselves securely in the urban setting. Links with home people in the city and ties with the common home in the countryside tend, therefore, to be mutually

reinforcing. The language of kinship and solidarity is often evoked to reaffirm the self-evidence of the moral obligations that connect members of a community, whether they are in the city or in the rural home area.

This connection between ties with home people in the city and with people at home is at its most poignant and dramatic when home people are called upon to bring one of their own to be buried on the ancestral land. Then the reception accorded to the corpse depends on the deceased's standing in the rural community (see, for instance, Lentz 1994, on northern Ghana; Vidal, 1991, on Côte d'Ivoire). Indeed, in many parts of Africa the moral necessity of being buried in the home village—a burial in the city being the ultimate sign of social failure—forms one of the most potent factors that tie city people to their rural 'home'.

However, all these aspects exhibit great variation. The mutual interest of villagers and urbanites in maintaining the connection varies greatly—depending, for instance, on how important it is for city people to retain access to land in the village or on their ability to provide concrete support for their rural relations when they come to town. Even the funeral, in many areas a climax of urban–rural solidarity, is a highly variable factor. In most islamised regions it loses much of its significance. Being buried in the village would be unthinkable when the countryside is considered still 'pagan' (see van Santen, in this issue). In other areas the sumptuous funerals of elite persons in their home village appear to be a fairly novel institution—a kind of imitation of neighbouring groups, whose ethnic coherence seems to be so strongly enhanced by the wealthy ritual of their rural funerals.⁹

The contributions that follow highlight a wide array of other variations. Thus the degree to which urban–rural connections are institutionalised differs strongly by region but also in time. In some areas more or less formal unions of urbanites claiming a common rural origin, had already developed by colonial times. Well documented examples are the *associations des originaires* in Côte d'Ivoire and the 'improvement unions' of south-eastern Nigeria.¹⁰ Members of such associations see it as their task to 'bring development' to the village by launching more or less ambitious projects and enforcing more or less sanctioned co-operation among the 'home people' in the city. Elsewhere, attempts to create such ethnic associations fail time and again because of the distrust and suspicions of witchcraft between urbanites and their 'brothers' in the village, or because the authoritarianism of the post-colonial state allows little scope for the development of more or less autonomous associations.¹¹

Trager and van Santen also draw attention below to the importance of variations along gender lines.¹² Whatever the formal principles of the kinship organisation, men and women have emphatically different positions in it and, therefore, different access to resources. The extent of a husband's control over his wife's resources and even her very movements may vary equally, and all this directly affects the involvement of women and men in urban–rural exchanges.

The contributions that follow indicate most of all the need to deconstruct the label 'rural'. This seemingly simple term obscures the fact that connections are made with a great variety of actors at the rural level:

more or less closely related kin, kinship groups, non-kin groups, villages and larger political entities. Of course, some such distinctions need to be drawn at the urban level as well—above all, the distinction between individual urban residents and the rurally oriented organisations they may have established. Providing closer distinctions will help to refine the quality of our comparisons. To take just one obvious example: assessments of transfers by urban residents to rural areas, such as have been repeatedly undertaken in Kenya, for instance by Anker and Knowles (1983), tell us very little about the urban–rural connection as long as we remain ignorant of who are the intended beneficiaries. Wife and children? Parents? A communal development project? Or perhaps the sender, on whose behalf an investment is to be made—farm labour to be hired, cattle or land to be bought, a house to be built?

The great majority of adults in most African cities continue to be first-generation migrants from rural areas because much of the rapid urban growth that has characterised Africa over the last half-century has been due to rural–urban migration.¹³ A great many ‘urban–rural’ relationships consist primarily of what are in practice no more than the connection between a male migrant and the wife and children he has left in the countryside, where he anticipates retiring eventually. This pattern continues to be common, even among long-term urban residents.¹⁴ In this context much rural visiting is simply a matter of (nuclear) family visits, and transfers for the most part constitute (nuclear) family support and investment in (nuclear) family assets. Such an arrangement may have advantages for the nuclear family concerned, but family separation, of course, creates problems of its own. It is striking how little attention researchers have paid to the stresses inherent in such a situation—all the way down to the condescending notion that African marital relations are ‘different’, privileging a romantic reading of Western marriage and dismissing the practical requirements whether a family is Western or African.

In most cases such ‘nuclear family connections’ are complemented or—if the family moves to the city—replaced by what may be termed ‘parental connections’. Indeed, rural–urban exchanges often involve a much wider network of relatives than the nuclear family itself. The exchanges may be less intensive but they have become nonetheless of great importance in the daily life of urbanites and rural people alike. However, in most cases the continuing urban–rural connection does not depend only on such relations between people. Most urban residents in Africa never break the rural connection altogether, even after the death of their parents and similarly significant relatives. Gugler’s original characterisation of urbanites as ‘living in a dual system’ emphasises a continuing commitment to a rural *collectivity* (Gugler, 1971). Migrants settled with their family in the city over the long term, perhaps for their working life, all the while remain involved with their community of origin. This dual commitment is rooted in rural collectivities that continue to control resources, in particular access to ancestral land.

Such connections with a rural collectivity differ in important respects from (nuclear) family or parental connections. The latter are individual connections which are terminated by death and are subject to the vagaries of personal relations. Or they cease to be urban–rural connections when the

individuals concerned move to the city. 'Collective connections', on the other hand, are much less affected by changes in personal networks. It is precisely because urban–rural relations involve such 'collective connections' that they—and the variable patterns they exhibit—are nodal points for the understanding of regional variations in Africa.

RECENT CHANGES: THE VILLAGE AS A SOURCE OF POWER IN THE POLITICS OF BELONGING

'Collective connections'—reaffirming the importance of the village as a self-evident point of identification—have acquired new dimensions due to the political changes of the last decade. In many parts of Africa 'democratisation' has had quite confusing implications. Formally it brought the reintroduction of multi-party politics. In practice a much more important effect has been renewed emphasis on 'autochthony' and 'belonging'. Now that elections have real meaning again, the fear of being outvoted by 'strangers'—whatever their origins or the precise definition of their otherness—has evoked an obsession with roots and origins. In many regions—and certainly not only on the African continent—politics are increasingly dominated by issues of autochthony and of who 'really' belongs. Indeed, the conceptual antithesis of 'autochthons' and 'allochthons' seems to have become a dominant political issue in many parts of this 'globalised' world.

Characteristic is the increasing role of elite associations in this shadowy political field. In many African countries such associations are strongly encouraged by national regimes that want them to play an intermediary role—often as a more manageable alternative to party politics (which have become unpredictable, owing to multi-partyism)—in their relation with the population. This means that questions of origin and, therefore, rural connections, become of vital importance to ambitious politicians. In such a context the village, or more generally the region of origin, acquires renewed importance as a crucial power base in politics.

A good example is the enigmatic Association of the Elites of the Eleventh Province in South Western Cameroon (the area discussed by Nyamnjoh and Rowlands and by Dickson Eyoh below). The name is itself striking, since every well-informed citizen knows that Cameroon has only ten provinces. In an interview with *The Herald*¹⁵ Professor Beltus I. Bejanga, founding president of the association—who teaches at the University of Yaoundé (the capital) but considers himself an 'indigene' of Kumba (the main town of the South Western Province)—explains the strange name:

The members of this association . . . are the children or grandchildren of our forefathers who came over from the former East Cameroon to the then Southern Cameroon. Their movements were in three phases—before the German occupation, during the German occupation and after the partition of Cameroon into British and French Cameroon.¹⁶ These children or the grandchildren of these migrants had their education, training and everything in the British Cameroons and therefore they are members of what we call the Eleventh Province Association.

Asked why he chooses to call himself a member of an Eleventh Province Association instead of 'identifying with where he was born', Professor Bejanga continues with more heat:

Exactly. We thought we belonged to where we were born—until recently SWELA was formed [the South Western Elites Association]. In one of their meetings some of us attended but were driven out and called strangers who had no right to take part in the meeting. So we concluded that we didn't belong to English-speaking Cameroon, nor are we accepted in French-speaking Cameroon. . . . We want to draw the attention of the government, to tell them that we are here, we are Cameroonians but have no statehood. The government should decide what to do with us.

The interview rapidly develops into a heated argument about the question of where someone belongs. In Professor Bejanga's view ' . . . someone's home should be where you are born, where you went to school, where you live, where you have all your property—I think that place should be my home.'¹⁷

But the *Herald* journalist quotes a certain Mr Njoh Litumbe, 'Chartered Accountant and politician', also from Kumba, who wants ' . . . to refer to somebody's home as the place where he is buried when he dies'.

Professor Bejanga clearly foresees that, according to this criterion, he may become a stranger in the area he considers to be his own:

Will I claim my home when I am dead and buried? I think my home should not be where I will be buried, because I could die in the sea and my corpse never seen . . . The government should step in and stop people from calling others 'settlers' or 'strangers'. It is sometimes provocative. The government should say no to this.

The South Western Province is certainly a special case. Ever since 1900, when the Germans began to create a large-scale plantation complex in this fertile, volcanic area, it has attracted a growing influx of 'strangers' from the more densely populated grassfields (the present-day North Western and Western Provinces of Cameroon) and also from eastern Nigeria (notably Igbo people). These 'strangers' often outnumber the 'autochthons'. However, the fierceness with which issues of belonging are fought out in this area seems to be increasingly echoed in other areas where migration developed later.

A common characteristic is also the active involvement of the national regime in such politics of belonging. Indeed, Professor Bejanga's appeal to the government in the quotation above—imploping the government ' . . . to step in and stop people from calling others . . . "strangers" '—is clearly ironic. After all, everybody knows that the present regime in Cameroon is actively encouraging such elite associations, precisely because they may help to marginalise 'strangers' who are generally imagined to support the opposition. Again, this seems to have become a quite general trait in present-day Africa. There is, for instance, a striking parallel with the famous case of 'burying S.M.' in Kenya—the drawn-out conflict, outlined in note 9, over whether 'S.M.', a well known Nairobi lawyer, should be interred on his opulent farm near Nairobi, by his widow, or in his Luo village, by his clan.

What is striking about the outcome is that, in the final instance, the Kenyan Court of Appeal upheld the right of the Luo clan: S.M. was eventually buried in the village. Even more striking is that the court's decision seems to have been heavily influenced by President Arap Moi himself (Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo, 1992). Apparently, in other parts of Africa too, national regimes are intent on encouraging the kind of neo-traditionalism and the obsession with origins that play such a key role in the ethnicisation of politics.¹⁸ In this diffuse political field of elite associations and regionalisms, in which elusive issues of who 'really' belongs become crucial criteria, the urban-rural connection acquires new political significance.

The contributions below highlight different implications and trajectories of these issues in present-day Africa. In the process of publication the collection acquired an unforeseen Cameroonian bias (because other papers were published elsewhere and we took the opportunity to include Dickson Eyoh's article). However, that does not necessarily limit the broader relevance of the themes discussed. Not without reason is Cameroon called 'the crossroads of Africa'. The four articles on Cameroon in this issue show the striking range of variation between the different regions of the country. Trager's contribution on the Yoruba indicates that similar processes take place in Nigeria.

The main merit of this collection may be that it clearly shows how the urban-rural connection in Africa is not a matter of 'either . . . or'; it is not a connection which is either maintained or broken (as is suggested, for instance, by the question—often raised in the literature—of whether second-generation urbanites will cut the ties with the home village or not). It is clear that the connection is resilient, highly variable, with dynamics of its own, and not just dependent on personal choice. On the contrary, there seem to be structural reasons why it remains crucial in the struggle over access to resources and, increasingly, over the definition of citizenship.

The deeper causes of this resilience may become clear in relation to Mamdani's powerful analytical model of the split between 'custom' and 'civil society'—between 'subject' and 'citizen'—as typical of the (post) colonial state in Africa (Mamdani, 1996). In a broader perspective, the continuing importance of the urban-rural connection in Africa stems from the fact that everybody, not only urbanites but villagers as well, is at the same time citizen *and* subject—the fact that everyone partakes to some extent at least in civil society but remains at the same time part of the community, defined by custom, as a crucial point of identification. Mamdani's conclusion that post-colonial regimes have been incapable of overcoming the basic split, imposed by the colonial state, between civil society and custom is certainly important, but it is also much too general. Crucially, in post-colonial Africa, the two sectors are no longer clearly separate: to a varying degree people are both 'citizen' *and* 'subject'. Therefore it is the highly variable articulations of citizenship and the role of the subject that matter. The urban-rural connection, in all its variations and dynamics, offers a concrete entry point to the study of such articulation.

NOTES

¹ In many parts of Africa present-day villages are, to a varying degree, colonial creations—products of the efforts of the colonial state to fix and concentrate more mobile and dispersed forms of settlement. But nearly everywhere the notion of ‘the village’ has become part of colloquial speech as some sort of counterpoint to the city (cf. van Santen, below, who, for the Mafa in north Cameroon, consequently puts the term ‘village’ within quotation marks).

² Cf., for instance, Aronson (1971, 1978). Gugler (1971), Hart (1971) and van Velsen (1960). Significant rural–urban relations have been reported elsewhere in the ‘south’ (see Carrier and Carrier, 1989, on Papua New Guinea; Dandekar, 1986, on India; Laite, 1981, on Peru; Mossbrucker, 1997, on Peru and Mexico, and Trager, 1988, on the Philippines). However, they are particularly important and resilient in Africa south of the Sahara.

³ For a seminal attempt to capture these changing meanings see van Binsbergen (in press) on the village as a ‘virtual form’ in urban life in southern Africa—as a continuing orientation point for urbanites that is, however, increasingly detached from rural realities. One of his fascinating examples concerns urban women in Lusaka re-enacting girls’ initiation rites that extol rural virtues which the townswomen concerned certainly do not want to emulate.

⁴ Cf. Devisch (1996) on the ‘villagisation’ of city life in Kinshasa as a consequence of people’s disappointment with the dream of modernisation.

⁵ Other papers presented at these panels, but published elsewhere, included a comparative paper by Gudrun Ludwar-Ene and Gabriele Wurster on women in Port Harcourt and Nairobi, and a contribution by Karin Willemsen on women and urbanisation in Darfur (Sudan). We thank, moreover, the discussants—Jean-François Bayart, Peter Ekeh, Achille Mbembe and Joel Barkan—for their trenchant comments.

⁶ If these rural–urban networks have often reached beyond national boundaries, they are now increasingly becoming transcontinental, owing to the continuing commitment of migrants in Europe and North America to their ‘home’ village. Serious research into the effects of such transcontinental networks on the village is still lacking.

⁷ See Geschiere and Konings (1993) for an exploration of different regional ‘itineraries’ of accumulation in Cameroon.

⁸ For summary accounts see Gugler (1996), Gugler and Flanagan (1978) and O’Connor (1983).

⁹ See Monga (1995) on funerals and ostentatious consumption in post-colonial Africa in general. In some parts of South West Province, for instance, such elite funerals in the village seem to be fairly new, following longer-established customs of the neighbouring Grassfields of North West Province and the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, whose supposedly stronger ethnic solidarity is regarded with some envy in the more segmented groups of South Western Province. The same applies to the Maka of Eastern Province. A striking example, from another part of Africa, is provided by the spectacular case of ‘burying “S.M.”’ (the title of a pioneering study by Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo, 1992), which became a *cause célèbre* in Kenya in the 1980s. The question of where ‘S.M.’—an eminent Nairobi lawyer, who died suddenly—had to be buried became a fiercely contested issue between the elders of his Luo clan and his widow (a Gikuyu). The Luo elders claimed that, whatever his position in Nairobi, S.M. was a Luo and ‘therefore’ had to be buried in the village. However, the leading Luo politician, O. Odinga, sided with the Gikuyu widow and declared that all the emphasis on burial at home was something new. According to Odinga, the Luo used rather to bury their dead in the area where they had migrated to, in order to confirm new claims.

¹⁰ See respectively Chassard *et al.* (1972), Gugler (1971), Smock (1971) and Van den Bersselaar (1997). See also Barkan *et al.* (1991) on south-western Nigeria, Lentz (1995) on Ghana and Woods (1994) on Côte d’Ivoire.

¹¹ See Geschiere (1982, 1997) on the Maka region (Eastern Province), where the pressure of the one-party state and the fear of witchcraft both severely hampered the involvement of urban elites with ‘their’ village. It is striking that, after 1989, the area suddenly witnessed a proliferation of elite associations, now strongly encouraged by the regime. Apparently the regime hopes to use the elite associations—directly under its control, since the associations are mostly composed of civil servants—as a reliable channel to mobilise votes during electoral campaigns.

¹² See also Gugler and Ludwar-Ene (1995).

¹³ There are some indications that rural–urban migration has slowed down, while return migration to rural areas has accelerated in recent years because of the economic crisis of the 1980s and the impact of IMF structural adjustment programmes (Ferguson, 1999; Potts, 1997).

¹⁴ Thus in Kenya, where Weisner (1972) baptised this pattern of ‘one family—two households’ more than a generation ago, the same strategy is revealed in more recent studies (Curtis, 1995: 16; Tostensen, 1991).

¹⁵ *The Herald*, 16 April 1997; this journal is one of the many opposition papers in Cameroon.

¹⁶ Cameroon was brought under German colonial rule in 1885. After the First World War it was divided between the British (Southern Cameroon—now South Western and North Western Provinces) and the French (the rest of the German colony). In 1960 French Cameroon became independent. After a plebiscite in 1961, British Southern Cameroon opted to reunite with the former French Cameroon, while British Northern Cameroon joined Nigeria.

¹⁷ It is characteristic that Bejanga does not refer to the place where he works, since that would instead make him a citizen of Yaoundé.

¹⁸ Cf. also the way in which, in 1995, former President Kaunda was eliminated from the presidential elections in Zambia because of his supposedly ‘non-national’ origins. Recently similar arguments have been used to discredit established politicians in Tanzania and in several other African countries.

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s researchers have emphasised the continuing importance of rural–urban connections as a special aspect of urbanisation in Africa. It is clear that since then, in many parts of Africa, the involvement of urbanites with their 'home' village has increased rather than decreased. Four of the articles in this issue were originally papers presented at two ASA panels (Toronto, 1994) which set out to explore these rural–urban connections. The content of the exchanges and the moral involvement of city people and villagers in such relations vary greatly. The variations have important implications for regional differences in, for instance, the development of new modes of accumulation or the cementing of ethnic networks. The other article (by Dickson Eyoh) addresses the effects of recent political changes in this context—a theme also raised by the other articles. In many parts of Africa democratisation seems to evoke an obsession with 'autochthony', origin and belonging. The increasing role of elite associations, as an alternative to multi-party politics, makes the rural connection of vital importance to urban politicians. Hence 'the village', and more generally the region of origin, acquire new importance as a power base in national politics.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis les années 60, les chercheurs soulignent l'importance constante des liens entre la ville et la campagne dans le processus d'urbanisation en Afrique. Il est clair que depuis cette période les liens que les citoyens entretiennent avec leur village natal ont augmenté dans de nombreuses régions d'Afrique. Quatre articles publiés dans ce numéro sont des papiers qui ont été présentés devant deux commissions ASA (à Toronto en 1994) chargées d'étudier ces liens entre la ville et la campagne. Le contenu des échanges et la part morale jouée par les citoyens et les villageois dans ces liens varient considérablement. Les conséquences de ces variations sont importantes quant aux différences régionales observées dans le domaine, par exemple, du développement de nouveaux modes de rapprochement ou de consolidation des réseaux ethniques. L'autre article (par Dickson Eyoh) évoque les conséquences des changements politiques récents dans ce domaine, thème également soulevé par les autres articles. Dans de nombreuses régions d'Afrique, la démocratisation semble susciter une obsession pour l'"autochtonie", l'origine et l'appartenance. Le rôle croissant des associations élitaires comme substitut du multipartisme politique donne aux rapports avec la campagne une importance vitale aux yeux des politiciens urbains. Le village, et plus généralement la région d'origine, revêt ainsi une nouvelle importance en tant que base politique nationale.