CHAPTER 6

ROYAL BRANDING AND THE TECHNIQUES OF THE BODY, THE SELF, AND POWER IN WEST CAMEROON[1]

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In one strict sense, a brand is a red-hot iron. Branding is done by pressing a brand sign into the surface of a thing or onto the skin of the person to be branded. The mark that is left often cannot be removed. Branding has been applied in the past to human beings to mark them as slaves, as convicts, or for a ship's galley. It is still done to cattle. Branding is applied to a surface, to the skin. It is practice that is related to the process of commodifying or decommodifying a person or thing. A cow may be branded so that its owner may claim ownership, and/or sell it for his or her own benefit. Branding a slave for the royal galleys removes that person from the slave market. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that, in dealing below with branding in an African kingdom, I start with the description of a mother working the skin of her toddler. This will provide a case on which I will subsequently expand.

MASSAGING A CHILD

In December 2002, I watched and filmed the massaging of a 1-year-old boy by his mother. It was in the Western Highlands of Cameroon, also called "Grassfields" (for an overview, see Warnier 1985). It took place around 11 a.m., when it was becoming warm enough to give a bath to the child in the open. The mother brought a plastic tub into the courtyard of her compound. She put it on the ground next to a chair. She also brought a plastic basket full of various cosmetics and some warm water that she poured into the tub. She added some Dettol into the water as a disinfectant. Then she gave the baby a bath. After that, she sat on the chair, lifted the baby boy from the tub, dried him, (suppress the comma) with a towel and laid him on his belly across her own lap. Then she took a container of Pears Baby Lotion from the plastic basket (Figure 6.1). She poured some into a smaller container the size of a drinking glass. She then took hold of a container of

Figure 6.1. Massaging a baby (2002, author's photograph).

Pears Baby Oil, added some of the oil into the small container, and mixed together the oil and the lotion.

Then she proceeded to massage the boy. She sat him on her lap, put some of the mixture in the palms of her hands, rubbed her hands together, and started massaging her baby, beginning with his scalp, which was shaven, and working down. She took more mixture into her hands as they got dry. She worked every square millimetre of the baby's skin, taking great care when rubbing the ear folds, the nostrils, the folds in the skin, the buttocks, the genitals, and the spaces between the fingers and the toes. As she went, she shifted the baby. She also worked and turned all his joints around (Figure 6.2). The whole business took about 15 minutes. The baby was relaxed and calm. After that, she dressed him with clean pants and a t-shirt and sat him down on the ground.

This woman had performed this type of massaging to her baby every day since his birth. She intended to do so until he would be able to walk. Most if not all women do likewise in the Grassfields. All the women use branded/labelled cosmetics for that purpose. The most popular brands at the time of my fieldwork were Pears, manufactured by Unilever in Nigeria for the African market, and Bébé Hygiène.[2] There were half a dozen more branded baby lotions, including Johnson's. Each woman had her own preference. Some, for financial reasons, used locally manufactured palm oil, which is much cheaper. In the past, it was the standard body lotion for babies and adults as well—mostly women. Palm oil was also extensively

Figure 6.2. Branded cosmetics and disinfectant in use in 2002 (author's photograph).

used for cooking. It came from different places outside of the kingdom, and people differentiated the oil according to its place of origin, its technique of manufacture, colour, taste, etc. As a body lotion, it has been almost entirely displaced by industrial ones. As a cooking oil, it is still a common staple.

The Techniques of the Body, the Skin, and the Self

I now want to relate cosmetics and palm oil to various concerns with the body and its skin. Massaging a baby is one of the techniques of the body practiced in the Grassfields. Many of those bodily techniques apply to the skin as an envelope, to its openings and its contents.

The techniques include: shaving the scalp and other parts of the body, rubbing the skin with various substances, applying pigments such as camwood and kaolin, washing with decoctions, introducing substances into the skin by scarification, introducing substances through the skin's openings (mainly the eyes and the mouth) and, until the advent of colonisation, administering the sasswood ordeal to suspected witches by having them absorb a mixture of the pounded bark of the tree *Erythrophlaeum guineense*.

The substances used are: water, raphia wine, decoctions of vegetable substances "washed" with water or raphia wine, camwood (a red pigment taken from the wood of the tree *Pterocarpus soyanxii*), red palm oil, the oil extracted from palm kernels, a mixture of oil and camwood, saliva, various kinds of medicines, ashes from charred animal and vegetable substances,

a mixture of saliva and medicines or raphia wine, animal fat (the most valued one being that of the python), a mixture of medicines and fat or oil, white or pink kaolin, and all kinds of cosmetics purchased on the marketplace.

Brands clearly matter in this context, but it is not easy to know in what way. It depends on sensory perceptions that are notoriously difficult to verbalise, and it also depends on origins and the way they trigger various fantasies. People are choosy. I have little doubt that advertising is important in the recent history of consumerism in the Grassfields and in other parts of Africa (see Burke 1996; Presthold 2008). However, in the Bight of Biafra and its hinterland, successful brands or advertisements for cosmetics usually capitalise on bodily techniques that are widely shared in the whole area, especially when it comes to the skin. In "Wes Kos" or pidgin English, "*ao fo you shikin*?" means "How for your skin?" (i.e., "How is your health?").

As many primatologists and psychologists such as John Bowlby (1958) and Didier Anzieu (1985) have noticed, the skin is extremely important as a surface of contact with the outside world, as a container for internal organs and as a means to exchange and vet heat and cold, UV rays, moisture, sweat, food, drink, noises, and the like. The external senses—sight, taste, smell, hearing, and touch—are located around its surface and openings. From a psychoanalytical point of view, in the ontogenesis of the subject, the earliest experiences of the foetus and the newborn with regard to its skin surface allow him or her to construct its psyche via the fantasy of an envelope with an inside, an outside, specific psychic contents, and a capacity for introjection and projection.

This is, so to speak, the universal substratum behind many cultural variations in the way human beings deal with the skin. What is peculiar to the Cameroon Grassfields is that this universal dimension of the human experience has been put to use to construct a monarchic political organisation. In the Grassfields especially, the skin is involved in power relationships and below I elaborate on this point.

There are some 150 kingdoms in the Grassfields. To this day, the king's body is perceived as containing a number of substances (saliva, breath, speech, semen). These substances are extended or multiplied by other substances (palm oil, raphia wine, camwood), exterior to the king's body but attached to it through the use of royal embodied containers and by specific bodily techniques (e.g., the king puts raphia wine into his mouth and sprays it onto the people; see Warnier [2007, 2009] for further details). These substances are perceived as being transformed into ancestral life substances when the king makes offerings to the dead monarchs while uttering performative words. The burden of kingship consists of storing, accumulating, transforming, and giving out material substances as life

substances. The king acts as a container. People receive those substances on the surface of their skin as a container or within their bodies through its openings. Royal power is addressed to the body of the king and of the subjects.

The king is the one who constructs the inside, the outside, the openings, and the one who ensures the circulation of substances, things, and people through the openings. He also acts as the opening in the container. The king may be considered as having (or being) three bodies—his own personal body, the palace, and the city—as these three bodies have a similar material structure: an envelope with its openings, irrigated throughout by the same royal substances. The king achieves the closure and opening of the three spaces by so many envelopes, their openings, the difference between an inside and an outside, the circulation of substances, things, and people through the openings, taking in the "good" things and expelling the "bad" ones as so many excreta.

The government of the kingdom may be a matter of making decisions and implementing them. But, above all, it is a matter of opening up, closing down, pouring in or out, and taking in and pushing out material things and people in transit, that is, commodities. As regards taking things and people into the kingdom and storing them, or pushing them out, the king is in charge of branding everything that is in transit through the openings. How does he achieve this? He applies royal substances and words on their surfaces or skins. He does this himself or has it done by palace notables and stewards on his behalf, using royal substances such as camwood powder and palm oil from the royal stores. Spraying his own saliva or a mixture of saliva, breath, and raphia wine on things and people may be seen as the epitome of his action in branding things and people.

In Foucauldian parlance, we are facing a governmentality of containers. The techniques of the self apply to the skin, its contents, its openings, and to the way things go into it and out of it again. They belong with the technologies of power.

Looking back into the Past: Standardized, Packaged, and Labelled Commodities

Why is it necessary that the king imprint his mark on things and people in transit through the openings of his three bodies? I would argue that, in the past, the Grassfields were characterised by high population densities, a monarchic political organisation, the practice of long-distance trade between notables and kings, and a regional trade in subsistence goods for several centuries (Rowlands 1979; Warnier 1985: 9–173). This political and economic organisation has carried on well into the 20th century when industrial consumer goods began to be added on top of the local

commodities or actually replaced them. In addition to practicing intensive trading, people were, and still are, highly mobile, and kingdoms were and still are composite organisations federating descent groups and kinship groups that do not share any common ancestry. Kings are in charge of producing the unity of their bounded, internally composite kingdoms by branding everything they contain or take from the outside, with ancestral unifying life substances. Let me expand on this point with regard to the practice of trading.

In the Grassfields, intensive trading in subsistence goods can be documented for the past several centuries at the very least and has been associated with the production of standardised goods. It is most obvious in the case of iron smelting and smithing, the carving of utensils, furniture, musical instruments, and masks in the production of both ordinary and luxury earthenwares, and the manufacture of raphia textiles.

Packaging was extensively used. There were standardised bags, baskets, and calabashes of different sizes for the measurement and trade of grains, palm oil, raphia wine, etc. However, one unusual feature is worth mentioning: The price of certain given goods was the same all over the trading network, but the standardised containers change successively from larger ones to smaller ones as one travelled away from the place of manufacture. Thus, the price of one calabash of palm oil was identical all over the trading network, but the size of a standard calabash diminished as one went further away from the palm-oil producing communities. Smoked fish, caterpillars, grasshoppers, and so on were packaged in stylish and elaborate pieces of basketry. Iron goods were standardised in the form of blanks for hoes or machetes, bound together in bundles of a given number, and traded both as commodities and currencies.

In my view, there is clearly more than a mere analogy between the techniques of the body applied to the human skin as an envelope, the techniques of wrapping and packaging applied to containers and content, and the technologies of power applied to the king and his subjects. For example, producing a successor through a ritual of succession implied anointing the skin of the incumbent and wrapping his body in clothes, herbal medicines, and various adornments (Figure 6.3). The civilisation of the highlands is one of containers, surfaces, openings, and contents, all the way from the kingdom as a bounded body politic down to the baskets, bags, and drinking horns.

The origin of goods and their carriage out of a bounded kingdom, into the bounded space of a marketplace, and all the way into another bounded kingdom and into a given compound was and still is a matter of concern. This is because substances, especially but not only iron objects and medicines, carry power—either nefarious or positive. The origin of a commodity was and still is a problem. It could be tracked down by

Figure 6.3. Anointing a successor (1973, author's photograph).

reference to the shape and nature of the container (bag, basket, calabash, and so forth specific to a given place of origin) or else by the shape of the commodity itself. The shape of hoes, manufactured in large numbers in several kingdoms specialising in iron production, was different in each different kingdom. Another clear example is provided by pottery with recognisable styles. The shapes, wrappings, and styles acted as so many *labels* of origin.

The next question I wish to address is: In such a context, what does branding by the king achieve? What is its effect, or, at least, what do the king and his subjects assume to be its effect? How does it impact on people and things? There is no denying that a brand or a label may be seen as a sign in a system of connotation or communication. It makes sense. However, the underlying assumption behind my question is that it may also be taken as an efficacious action on things and people in a system of agency. In which case, the relevant question is not "What does it mean?" but "What does it achieve? What is its impact? What does it transform and how?"

Let me make an analogy: Branding the skin of a human being with a red-hot iron in the form of a lily or iris (a *fleur-de-lys*) in ancient France certainly conveyed a clear meaning. It imprinted the sign of the crown on the shoulder of the convict. It definitely had a sign value in a coded system of connotation and communication. But it also acted on the person in a system of agency. It transformed that person and directed him (in this

example, most commonly male) towards the prison and the galleys with their specific material culture and repertoire of actions. It also prevented the man, should he escape, from acting like any other nonbranded person. Right from the start, this man had been a problem and he had been branded as such and directed towards specific repertoires of action. He had been manufactured as a convict and royal slave (see also Wengrow 2008: 12).

Similarly, the king and his subjects feel concerned about what is in transit through the openings of the king, the palace, the city, and, last but not least, the bodily envelopes of the subjects themselves, and about what is in contact with the envelopes of these various containers. Commodities are a matter of concern.

A good example of such a concern is provided by the imaginary of witchcraft conceived as the action of patronising an occult marketplace to which witches go at night to purchase packaged goods for which they pay by giving away the life of their kin. At the time of purchase, they do not know what is in the parcel. When they bring the parcel back into the kingdom and unpack it, they either discover fantastic riches or things that will cause decay, ruin, and death. In the kingdom of Bum, this occult marketplace is called *msa* (for a more detailed description, see Warnier 1993: 157–62).

This fantasy of an ambiguous market located out there in the occult world illustrates a dichotomy between the outside of the kingdom—made up of the dangerous world at large, where there is a vast diversity and multiplicity of goods and people, labelled in all kinds of ways by all kinds of agents—and the inside of the kingdom in which the king (and the notables) vet and brand both goods and people at the gates of the city (and inside it), thereby achieving a unity of content—a diversified, labelled, external offering met with a unified, branded reception.

Let us go back to the question what does branding achieve under such circumstances? It impacts on the subjects to subjectify them and turn them into the citizens of a kingdom and into the subjects of a given, named, physical king. In other words, it is a political process.

In the past, I assume that the trade in European imports raised specific problems of branding because they came out and from an unknown space and intruded into the kingdom through long-distance trade. They strengthened the political hierarchies but could become a threat to the kingdom and its inhabitants. Accordingly, origins, labels, and branding by the king mattered. They mattered all the more when imported things were close to the skin and to the body, that is, medicines, textiles, ornaments, weapons, gunpowder, etc.

One neat case of a labelled, imported good is provided by guns. The most popular one in the area has been a flintlock manufactured in Birmingham, England, especially for the African market between 1812 and 1840. It was a good-quality musket and many of them are still in use

in the early 21st century. This standardised musket bears the proof and view marks of the Birmingham Gunmakers proofhouse (Figure 6.4). It was clearly labelled and was recognised as an authentic version in the Cameroon Grassfields, especially by the inscriptions on the barrel and on the plate, which bear the royal crown of England and the word "tower"—a clear reference to the Tower of London. I have no doubt that other European imports were also labelled, and that the concept of labelled standardised commodities was familiar to the African market before the arrival of the Europeans, paving the way to the success of labelled/branded industrial commodities.

The "Tower" Birmingham flintlock inspired an enduring trust. However, because it was a weapon and, because, furthermore, it was coming from

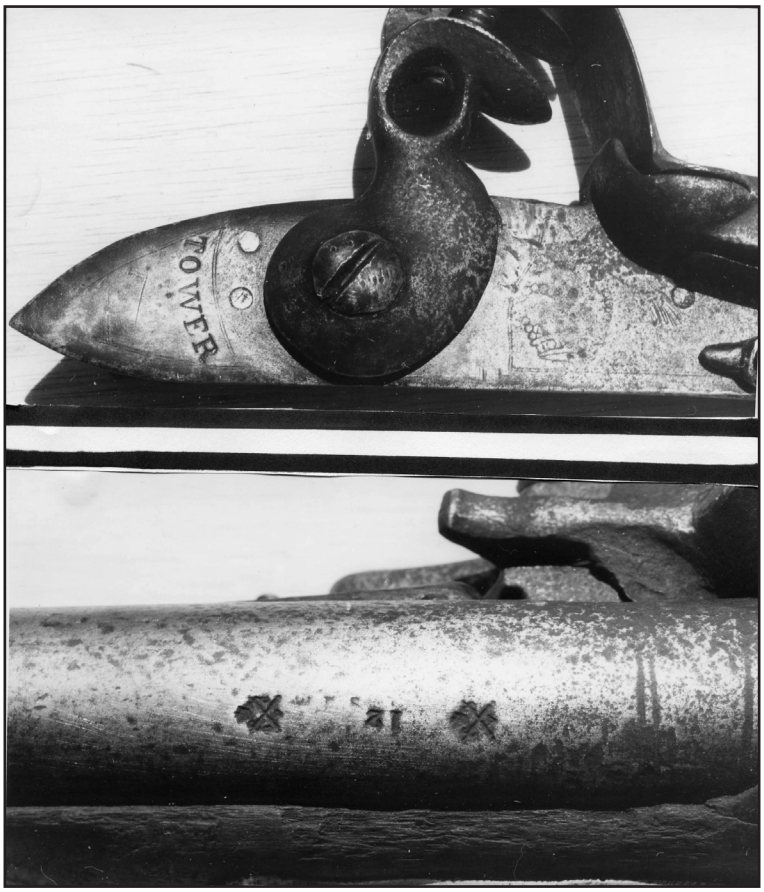

Figure 6.4. The Birmingham flintlock: "TOWER" and crown, proof and view marks (author's photograph)

the outside, the label was not enough. It had to be branded by the king who medicated the guns once a year to remove the threat they represented within the kingdom. This medication is still practiced in the 2000s, on the first day of the annual festival. Branding is and was all the more necessary because iron is perceived in the Grassfields as an ambiguous substance: at the same time very powerful and effective and potentially violent and dangerous—much as nuclear energy is perceived in contemporary society (Warnier 2004).

Branding as a Technology of the Body and of the Self

By now, it should be clear that the gestures performed by the king, and the substances he uses, belong to a broad repertoire of techniques of the body shared by himself and all his subjects. The only difference—albeit a major one—is that these techniques, when used by the king, cleanse people and things and achieve their unity within the kingdom. The king is a monarch, that is, a single principle of boundedness and unity. As such techniques apply both to people and material things, they blur the divide between subject and object. People are containers and containers are people (David et al. 1988; Warnier 2005).

If one goes back to the daily massaging of a toddler by his or her mother, it may be seen as a health-related practice, but, in light of the technologies of envelopes implemented by the king, it may also be seen as a daily branding of the child with the double purpose of constructing his skin as a leak-proof, healthy envelope, and of including it into the household of his or her parents and into the kingdom. However, there is more to it because the unifying substances of the king flow out from the palace and cascade over the entire kingdom and its subjects and invest all the material substances used by them. They also brand the commodities entering the kingdom from the outside, including Pears Baby Oil and Lotion manufactured by Unilever in Nigeria for the African market. Thus, the massaging may also be seen by the anthropologist as a means to include the toddler into the kingdom.

To conclude, in such an African context, branding relates to the skin, the body, openings, and envelopes. It is the permanent responsibility of the king, and it concerns both the closure of the kingdom as an envelope and the circulation of things and people in and out of its openings. It is achieved by the use of material royal/ancestral substances and by gestures that, most of the time, are not verbalised and do not elicit any verbal comment or explanation. They belong more to the realm of procedural knowledge and sensori-motricity than to verbalised knowledge. They draw on human motions and emotions regarding the human body and intrusion. They extend to each individual subject and to its concerns with the skin

and its treatment, as exemplified by the daily massaging of babies presented in the introduction to this chapter.

Branding may apply to individual nonstandardised things and people. But, it may also apply to standardised commodities. It may be considered as a dialectical and transitional process between outside and inside, diversity and unity, "good" and "bad," the other and the self, the world at large and the kingdom. Branding, in this context, may be performed either to commodify or to decommodify things and people. When an artisan sells something in the marketplace, he may spit on it just before parting with it and handing it over to the buyer. Conversely, the king will anoint a piece of furniture such as a wooden statue with palm oil and crimson camwood to decommodify it and take it as an inalienable possession into the royal treasury.

Notes

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2. I have conducted fieldwork in Mankon since 1971. My last stay in the kingdom dates back to September 2002–January 2003. I acknowledge with thanks the financial help of the "UMR-LMS" (CNRS-Université Paris-Descartes).

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