CHAPTER THREE

THE SKIN-CITIZENS

When I first exposed to different audiences the views described in previous chapters, some stressed that ‘containers’ are used by most, if not all, social groups or societies on a regular basis, and that ‘skin’ is inherently necessary to the psyche. Therefore the Mankon data should not lead to the conclusion that containers and skin refer to one social group in particular or the Grassfields as a whole. Nonetheless, it was argued, should I want to make my analysis more convincing, I ought to identify the psychogenetic determination which would elicit the forms of ‘over-investment’ of the envelopes and of ‘self-skin’, as conceived by the people living in the Grassfields. Exploring the educational systems among these social groups might give persuasive evidence of the way the mountain people in western Cameroon value so highly this moment in the making process of a human psyche.¹

However, in my view, such controversy results from a form of misunderstanding of the main issue. It is significant that in the Grassfields any form of over-investment of envelopes, containers, contents and conducts of transformations in the orifices is first and foremost political in character. Such fluid mechanics, as well their channelling, result from the microphysics of power pertaining to the hierarchy. Yet, it is true that this microphysical configuration of power has a hold on its subjects only inasmuch as they themselves identify with subjects-skin, envelopes, containers and contents. So, one feels that they tend to become over-invested in the face of other societies (and, more specifically, of current Western societies). Consequently, it is well worth proceeding to a comprehensive exploration of the elements of this psychological over-investment, particularly by analysing the specifics referring to the concern with skin (chapter 3) or with the habitat (chapter 4).

¹ I am grateful to Zaki Strougo who helped me clarify this point, and to Berthe Elise Lolo, MD, who attracted my attention on the anal component of the construction of limits and of the control exercised on contents.
As far as the subject’s ontogenesis is concerned, the processes of holding and handling a baby (the ways the baby is maintained or manipulated) contributes to creating links between the infant and the mother, to transforming the experience though the skin and to elaborating (or forging) the self-skin identity. A baby’s bath is one of the key events which help conceive exactly the specificities of these events in Mankon society. On several occasions in November 2002, I visited Perpetua (a pseudonym) with the aim of observing the process of bathing her baby.

On one such occasion, together with my research assistant, Ade, we reached Perpetua’s house at about 11 am. The sun had dispelled the cool night air. The baby could now be given a bath in the midst of the hamlet’s courtyard. Nts’o is a well-built eight months-old boy. He is wearing a T-shirt and leggings. He is playing joyfully in the courtyard. His clothes and skin are dusty. Ade holds him up and settles him, leaning on his back across his own thighs while sitting on a chair. Ade applies both hands on the legs of the boy who lays his own hand on Ade’s forearms. The child and the adult are touching each other. The baby is calm and keeps babbling while looking around.

Meanwhile, Perpetua comes out of her home holding a plastic basket filled with toiletries. She also brings a plastic baby’s bath, a towel and a bath cloth. She spreads them all under a mango tree, between the shadow and sun. She pours lukewarm water into the bath, then adds a small quantity of Dettol, a disinfectant. She then reaches for her baby, undresses him and sits him down in the bath. She sprinkles water over the baby, soaps the cloth, then rubs it all over the boy’s head downwards. Both vigorous and precise, she lathers the skin with the greatest care and delicacy, she rubs the cloth and her own hand around the boy’s earlobes and behind the fold of his ears. Then she lingers on his eyelids, around his nose, nostrils and lips. Nts’o does not seem to mind.

Perpetua then goes on to wash the baby’s chest and upper limbs. She reaches for one of his arms and goes on washing with the other hand. She sits him down in the bath again, lifts his legs one after the other and rubs them, and reaches between each toe with the cloth and brushes the soles of his feet. Once the child has been washed, she rinses him with water from head to feet. She helps Nts’o out of the bath, lays him down on the towel and dries him.