CHAPTER SIX

THE CLOSURE OF THE COUNTRY

In order to make good use of the containers and their contents, they must be maintained and repaired, their openings looked after, their proper storage ensured and so on. Stoppers, lids and other contraptions are to be used to sort out the contents and protect them. For example, the stopper that is pushed half-way into the opening of a calabash of raffia wine is usually made of a palm leaf folded several times. It prevents the insects that are attracted by the sweet content of the calabash from entering, while letting out the fermenting gases. One does not have to care just for the containers; the contents too deserve care and attention. One has to fill the containers depending on their capacity, to avoid mixing up the contents, or to achieve the proper mixture, and to keep container and content in a place suitable for their preservation.

The Mankon king is responsible for providing the kingdom with ancestral substances. In addition, he has to watch the containers in which he stores them (and first of all his own body), to keep them in a good state of repair, to control what goes into them and comes out of them through their openings, and to care for the quality of the material content. The governmentality of containers enforces a logic which would almost allow one to predict beforehand the list of sensori-motor conducts and material appliances that must be used by the monarch to accomplish his task.

At first glance, one can identify three containers of first magnitude: the very body of the monarch (his ‘skin’, nyé—euphemized as his ‘thing’, azume), his palace (nto’) and the city (ala’a). These three containers are different realisations of one and the same thing: the material receptacle of ancestral productions. Each of them is equipped with numerous extensions or prostheses. This particularly applies in the case of the king’s body, of which the drinking horn, bags, drums, calabashes, pots and houses diversify and extend the ‘image of the body’. Side by side with these royal containers, one finds the individual and corporate bodies of the subjects and of the descent groups. Like Russian dolls, they are enclosed into one another (see chapters 2–4). The Russian
dolls metaphor also illustrates the fact that a given container (for example, a descent group) is at the same time an envelope containing a substance, such as subjects and descent group segments, and a substance contained in an envelope of higher order, such as a clan or the kingdom as a whole.

I prefer to avoid overtaxing the patience of the reader by providing an ethnography of the complete range of gestures and material contraptions that belong with the set of Russian dolls. In my opinion, a single case—that of the motor conducts and materialities used to control a number of openings and passageways at the beginning of the agricultural cycle—will suffice to validate the argument; this is called the ‘medicine of the king’ (ngang fo).

Enclosing the country with the ‘medicine of the king’

In March 1973, I was invited by the Mankon palace to observe a performance known as ngang fo (“[the] medicine [of the] king”). It takes place every year and aims at achieving the closure and protection of the country. Ngang designates any substance used in curing people, animals and things. The medicines are taken from the animal, vegetable or mineral worlds. When taken exclusively from the vegetable world, they are called $f\hat{\acute{ u}}$ (sg. ‘leaf’). A medicine man is called ngwon ngang (‘person [of] medicine’).

By mid-afternoon, on that day, six palace servants and two maskers came out of the palace quarter occupied by regulatory societies (already briefly described under the blanket term of Kwi’fo). The men carried four cylindrical baskets some 80 cm in height. The two maskers, named Mabu’, escorted the men. They wore hooded tunics that concealed their heads and bodies down to their calves. The tunic is made of woven vegetable fibres. It is spotted like leopard skin. They walked and ran bare-footed. Each of them carried a bundle of wooden sticks about 120 cm in length. One of the two maskers had a leaf of tabere (Piper umbellatum) pinned onto the hood on top of his forehead. The entire party walked briskly following each other through the dancing field extending between the palace and the marketplace (see photo n° 12 p. 134). They stopped by the stone and concrete podium on which the king sits when presiding over the meetings that take place on the dancing field (see map 2 p. 133). There, a palace notable, who was himself a medicine man, and was accompanied by the carriers and escorted