Some theologians and lawyers of the Middle Ages, attached to the European royal courts, elaborated a political theory and a common law based on the duality of the king’s body. This theory, discussed by E.H. Kantorowicz (1957), makes a distinction between the natural body, subjected to disease, decrepitude and death, and the social body which incorporates the subjects and is neither subjected to illness nor death.¹ This metaphor is borrowed from Christian ecclesiology. The king, with his natural and carnal body, is a mortal, as was Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified under Pontius Pilatus and put in a tomb. The very same king, anointed when he succeeds his deceased predecessor (‘the king is dead, long life to the king’), adorned with all the paraphernalia of the monarchy—the crown, the sceptre and the globe—is like the resurrected Christ who is the head of the church—his body on earth. The king in glory incorporates his subjects just like the Christ in glory incorporates the faithful members of the church. The analogy has its limitations, of which the theologians and E.H. Kantorowicz (1957/2000: 841) were well aware. They come from the fact that Christ, as the Verb of God, is eternal, whereas no earthly kingship can ever entertain such pretensions. However, limited as it is, this analogy, Kantorowicz said, had a considerable impact on practices, law and the European tradition concerning the ‘corporations’ or ‘corporate groups’. It is interesting to see that this theory has received unexpected developments in

¹ I am indebted to Nicolas Argenti (2004) who has picked up my argument regarding the king as a container (see Warnier, 1993) and has developed it with reference to Kantorowicz. Argenti conducted his research in the kingdom of Oku, which, as far as the king’s body is concerned, does not differ significantly from Mankon. Analysing the Mankon data, however, I am led to increase the number of the king’s bodies from two to three: the king himself, his palace and the city. I am also indebted to Anne-Hélène Allirot who brought my attention to the work of the historian Alain Boureau who qualified the point of view developed by Kantorowicz on the sacrality of the European kings (or, rather, its absence). This allows to cast an unusual light on African kingship, as becomes apparent in this chapter.
British social anthropology, with its application to the descent groups and kingdoms in Africa.

The critique addressed to E.H. Kantorowicz’s thesis by A. Boureau (1988) and A. Boureau and C.S. Igerflom (eds, 1992) bears specifically on the notion of ‘sacredness’ as applied to European kingship by the theologians and lawyers of the European royal courts, especially in Britain. A. Boureau and C.S. Igerflom remark that, despite the coronation ceremonies (even called ‘sacre’ in France), they failed to establish the sacredness of the king because the Church has always considered the king as a layman, and the coronation as no more than a benediction, and definitely not a sacrament. Besides, the Gospel establishes a clear distinction between what belongs to God and must be returned to him on the one hand, and what belongs to Caesar and must be returned to him on the other. In no way can the confusion be made between the king and a priest, Caesar and God, the profane and the sacred.

However, if I quote Kantorowicz, it is because his work seems far more relevant to Africa than to the European kingdom of Saint Louis or any other European king. Indeed, until very recently, no African king was reminded of his lay condition by a Christendom weary of maintaining its monopoly on access to a saviour God. An African king all alone saturates the space of the sacred. In comparison with European kingdoms, African kingships are really ‘sacred’ ones.

In Europe, the dual body of the nobility—king, count, bishop—is illustrated by the tombs in the form of a ‘double monument’, the photographs of which are reproduced by Kantorowicz (1957: figs. 28, 30, 31, see pp. 431–436). The tomb is decorated with two recumbent figures, one above the other. The one on the higher level shows the official adorned with all his paraphernalia: the mitre, the ring, the crook, the priestly ornaments of the bishop (for example, Archbishop-Primate Henricus Cantuariensis in dalmatic, the pallium around his shoulders, the precious mitre on his head, the feet in pontifical shoes; pp. 433–434); the armour, the sword, the gauntlets, the hunting hound of the count. Their faces are fleshy and healthy. Their eyes are closed as if they were having a rest. It is the face of a living, yet sleeping, man or woman. A metre and a half below, a recumbent figure of the same person shows a naked corpse, with the exception of a fold in the shroud which covers the sex. The figure is definitely that of a dead person, emaciated, eyes and cheeks hollow, ribs showing. The process of putrefaction has started. Some sculptors have gone as far as representing maggots on the abdomen of the corpse.