6: Becoming a community of substance: The Mun, the mud and the therapeutic art of body painting

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'They roll around in the mud!' So said an educated Hamar agro-pastoralist from the Omo Valley of Southwestern Ethiopia. He was commenting on his Mun neighbours, and implying that they apply earth and clay, or 'body paint', carelessly and seemingly without investing any artistry, resulting in a shoddy-job. Yet, this belies the fact that the Mun (more commonly referred to as the Mursi) place greater value in the selection and application of specific and sufficient earths, ash and clays onto their skin –'eating it', as they say – than with the aesthetics of how it subsequently looks. The main reason for this is that clays rid people of serious afflictions. As a man called Lawari Tula explained to me in 2010, 'When one eats clay, your affliction (*muttan*) will end, for it is afraid of clay'. When I asked him why afflictions are afraid of clay, he explained, 'It is its custom. It dislikes clay'. When one consumes clay, affliction will say in irritation, 'Hey! Why have you eaten clay? I am tired', and go to 'its place below the ground'. I asked Lawari if affliction lives *deep* in the ground, and he replied 'Who knows!'.

The Mun's apparent artlessness in the application of body paints also seems anomalous when compared to the exploration of bodily aesthetics and wellness among photographic and anthropological works. For example, in the only East African ethnography devoted to body art, *Nuba Personal Art*, James Faris (1972) stresses the aesthetic and decorative centrality of body painting, which celebrates and displays a healthy body. Likewise, in other

contemporary and equally masterful analyses of body decoration, such as Andrew and Marilyn Strathern's (1971) examination of the Mount Hagen people of Papua New Guinea, they reveal self-decoration as the artistic expression to display beauty and health. Among the Mun too, is it common to find elder boys and young men who are particularly keen on displaying the aesthetic effect of a painted body, growing increasingly self-conscious and seeking to impress girls and their age-mates; they take prestigious care to wash regularly and apply clays, earths or pinky ash from burnt cattle dung to their face and often to their entire body. However, in general the aesthetic impact is neither paramount for the majority of Mun, nor does it generally celebrate a healthy body. Rather, they paint pragmatically in order to remain healthy or to return to good health, explicitly comparing the earthy substances to 'medicine' (*zibu*). In other words, it is the application process and the substances themselves that are paramount, not the display or aesthetic effect.

The importance of the materials, rather than the aesthetics, symbolism or meaning of the 'end product', is a crucial starting point in the analysis of the local healing qualities of Mun body painting. As I discuss below, the Mun are sometimes playfully and sometimes painstakingly aware of the emergent qualities of earthy substances, qualities that can simultaneously prevent and cure afflictions, but if handled incorrectly can themselves bring a host of afflictions. Through the handling of these substances, people gain insight into the dynamics of their own physiology as well as the substances themselves. As a result of these dynamics, they strive to cultivate relationships with various earthy substances over generations, confident that intimacy with certain substances will serve them as an anchor or provide safe-passage as they live in and traverse different localities from season to season. However, in order to explore these issues comprehensively, it is helpful to begin by framing this

discussion of the traverse web that emerges between a body that is not simply human in its sociality and earthy materials that are far from being inert.

Firstly, looking beyond the healthful-aesthetics and sociality of body painting requires broadening our considerations of 'the body'. As Michael O'Hanlon (2007, 4) pointed out, 'Until relatively recently the topic of "the body" in anthropology could be *defined* largely in terms of body arts'. Among early studies of body arts, this 'body' was often theoretically treated as 'a passive lump of clay or *tabula rasa*' (Csordas 1999, 178–9), generating a focus on body decoration as a cross-cultural method of producing a *social skin*, where 'the surface of the body… becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted' (Turner 1980, 112). Body art was seen as a microcosm of society, in which the body surface was key to transformations (van Gennep 1960), waiting for the imprint of culture (Levi-Strauss 1963), waiting to be inscribed (Schildkrout 2004). However, scholars such as Faris have subsequently argued against an over-emphasis on socialization theory by exploring the ways in which 'the body is paramount' in body art, without any 'deeper symbolic meaning' (Faris 1972, 49). Likewise, many Amazonianists have critiqued the model of socializing a raw biological substrate, pointing out that 'the body' is never asocial to begin with (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Vilaça 2005; Ewart 2007).

Thus, while there remains much that is sociable about body painting, with its capacity for 'border skirmishing' between oneself and others, within and between social groups (Fleming 2001, 111), there needs to be an approach which takes us beyond the sensory socialization and embodied morality implicit in the concept of a *social skin*. Consequently, we need to find ways of exploring corporeality that takes into account intimate sociality that extends beyond

the realm of the purely human. This chapter, taking its lead from the Mun, proposes just such an approach by revealing that at the heart of their local art of body painting is a 'bodyscape' (Porteous 1986) that is never separated from our wider environment; body painting is a bridge between human sociality and the plethora of other forms of sociality. Seen in this way, body painting is the art of negotiating untold interactions between the body and the wider environment. Body painting takes into account the ways in which,

> Our existence depends from one moment to the next on myriad micro-organisms and diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, on the material artefacts and natural stuff that populate our environment, as well as on socioeconomic structures that produce and reproduce the conditions of our everyday lives.
>
> (Coole and Frost, 2010, 1)

Therefore, to account for a medicinal body painting tradition, I have turned to theories of the body that frame just such a dynamic ecology of social life. This involves expanding upon the three pervasive medical anthropological approaches to 'the body'– the *social body,* the *body politic,* or the more phenomenologically informed *individual body* (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). Unlike these three bodies, which focus on contemporary socio-political processes, I have found much resonance with the work of another medical anthropologist, whose notion of the *body ecologic* approaches the body as something always informed by a plethora of ecological interactions (Hsu 1999; 2007; 2009). Furthermore, historical and local insights gained through living in dialogue with certain environments often translate into medical reasoning; as Elisabeth Hsu (2007, 92) explains, 'In many medicines, humans are considered co-substantial with the natural environment, and accordingly, as is argued here, many key terms, such as hot and cold or wind and fire, convey culture-specific knowledge about ecological processes.' While I take issue with limiting the analysis of the *body ecologic*

to a ‘natural’ environment, we can readily accept that our bodies are never anything but ‘environmentally situated’ (Ingold 2000, 170).

The second point I would like to highlight is how such a *body ecologic*, with the accompanying therapeutic insights, becomes apparent among the Mun when we focus our analytical gaze on the earthy substances themselves. The lack of academic attention given to this local expertise in soils and clays is partly due to its being overshadowed by their well-deserved reputation as a fervently cattle focused community – likewise for their Nilo-Saharan, Omotic and Cushitic agro-pastoral neighbours. As Brady (1990, 3) suggests, in *The Nature and Properties of Soil*, ‘Knowledge about soil comes from two basic sources: farmer experience based on centuries of trial and error and scientific investigation of soils and their management’. While the Mun do rely heavily on cultivated crops, they are neither famed as farmer nor scientist, and yet they have a rich and intimate knowledge of local soils and clay pits. This interest stems largely from a justifiable anxiety concerning health and wellbeing. Although they are brief in their exegesis of body painting – common explanations including ‘it is our custom’, ‘it is good’, ‘clay is potent’, ‘disease is afraid of clay’ – this pronounced reticence in engaging in abstract discussions is contrasted by a curiosity whenever they come across an unfamiliar nugget of ochre, clay or soil.[1] People would taste the texture of a clay with the tip of their tongue, rub it between their fingers, use spittle to moisten it and then rub some on their skin to evaluate the hue and intensity of the colour. Such ‘sensuous technology’, as historian Lissa Roberts (2005, 506) suggests, ‘enables us to consider the way natural investigators used their bodies as part of this dynamically interactive network’.

In emphasizing local insights into the qualities of certain earthy substances, I seek to avoid the emphasis of form imposed on matter, or a 'materiality' approach, and rather advocate something more akin to a 'materials' approach (Ingold 2007, 1), which allows for things being 'continually generated and dissolved within the fluxes of materials across the interface between substances and the medium that surrounds them'. When discussing the substances of body painting in this way it makes little sense to divide this material world, as Chris Gosden (1999, 152) does for heuristic purposes, into landscape and artefacts, since the earths and clays in body painting encompasses both. Rather than form being moulded out of substance, it is the dialogue that occurs where the two reach a certain compatibility (Ingold 2012, 433, discussing Simondon 2005, 41–2). Phillipe Descola (2010, xiii) eloquently describes such a possible confluence taking place between soil and body:

> as with the wind that cools us or makes us shudder, as with the sun that scorches us or barely warms us, the soil is like an outer envelope of our body and an expansion of our muscles and senses. It is not within ourselves, obviously, but it is not entirely separate from us either; it is the accomplice of our body and that which anchors it to the world.

This is in keeping with the Mun's discerning use of earthy substances in body painting as a way to manipulate the outcome of interactions with potentially dangerous aspects of their surroundings; clays and earths become a site of confluence as well as conflict between corporeality and things lurking at the watering hole or among one's relatives and neighbours. As Coole and Frost (2010, 13) suggest, such moments of merging or anchoring will not always be easy: 'It is evident from new materialist writing that forces, energies, and intensities (rather than substances) and complex, even random, processes (rather than simple, predictable states) have become the new currency'. Likewise for the Mun, earthy substances

are far from passive, since they can 'hit' people, 'recognize' people and certain clays even have their own 'customs', as we will discuss below.

In what follows, I explore three emergent qualities in the local use of earthy materials: 1) how daily uses of earth continuously make manifest the generativity of earthy materials; 2) how this generativity provides a window into underlying principles which govern the physics of physiology and transformations in the material world; and 3) how this ties into on-going efforts to become consubstantial with certain ecosystems by virtue of cultivating a confederacy between communities and the earthy substances of place. Not only can a place be tasted, as the literature on *goût du terroir* explores (Trubek 2008), but it is by so doing that one becomes autochthonous or consubstantial with the 'stuff' of a place, perhaps moving in the direction of microbiopolitics (Paxson 2008). While kinship studies have advocated the importance of an exchange of substances between people in the process of becoming related (Carsten 1995, 2000), here we explore the process of becoming a community of substance by revealing local insight that 'forces at work in the materialization of bodies are not only social, and the bodies produced are not all human' (Barad 2007, 33–4).

The generativity of materials

Like our Hamar interlocutor, who joked that his neighbours rolled in the mud instead of 'properly' decorating, local body painting initially appeared to me to be 'dirt': a smudge on the forehead or arm, a smearing of clay on the chest, or just a very dusty body. However, a particular event made it clear to me how great a conceptual jump was needed to comprehend

the beneficial and vitality enhancing properties of earth. It was when a three-year-old boy asked me to escort him beyond the village so that he could defecate. From behind a bush, he called my name many times, afraid I would leave him behind, but while waiting I began to wonder what he would do to clean himself; usually adults, eventually myself included, used a soft leaf or a smooth rock. As he jumped out onto the path, pleased to see me still there, I turned to walk back to the village. 'Wait!' he exclaimed; he had remembered something. He sat on the dusty path, legs horizontal in front of him, and then dragged his bare bottom across the earth. This was how he cleaned himself. Subsequently I observed many mothers doing the same thing with babies that were old enough to sit up-right, often adding a decorative flourish (see Fig. 6.1) to the cleaning process. The earth and the immediate surroundings, including semi-dried dung, were immensely malleable to those who knew how to make use of them. By focusing on such daily relationships with earths it became clear that these substances are being engaged with everywhere: in childhood play, daily cleansing of the body, in agricultural processes, and in a ritual context. Daily intimacy and ease of interaction with all forms of earthy substances provides valuable insight into the pervasive and persistent role earth has, including ritual contexts, and it also reveals how curiosity and playfulness are as important as more didactic instructions in the local appreciation of these substances.

[Fig. 6.1 near here]

Evans-Pritchard (1940, 38) was amongst the earliest to describe the use of earthy substances among agro-pastoral children: 'The kraal is their playground and they are generally smeared with dung in which they roll and tumble', while older children build mini-camps of mud that they fill with mud-models of cattle. Likewise, over fifty years later, Sharon Hutchinson

(1996) noticed Nuer children modelling guns from mud; similarly, in addition to bull and oxen heads and miniature villages, I found Mun children near the northern road modelling toy cars and roads from an amalgam of mud and dung. More often, however, children who had wondered off to the water-side would seize on any ochre, chalk or clay along the way to decorate one another, older children frequently joyfully embellishing their younger relatives. Such creativity reminds us that child's play can adhere to tradition, but may also reveal something unknown and potent.[2]

[Fig. 6.2 near here]

Along with the playful, cleansing and practical potential of earthy substances – such as to prevent scratches from the undergrowth or from sun-stroke – older adolescence and young adults seek to impress the girls as well as one another with their increasingly aesthetic concerns (see Fig. 6.2). However, it is more than playful, cleansing and aesthetic, since the regular practice of body painting is also felt to cultivate a renewed or revitalized body. Here the expression *sudê rrê* – to 'shed' or 'renew' the body – is illuminating; it was described as 'looking after oneself', 'to go to war', 'to run fast', 'to decorate one's body' and 'to beg for nice things from friends'. I came across the expression as justification from a group of young men who were rubbing moist mud over their body, from face to ankles, as they said, this 'renews the body'. Earthy substances are used as part of a daily cultivation of a healthy self, as *care of the self* (Foucault 1986). In the pursuit of this self-care, older boys and men develop a compulsion to sample earths as they come across them, rarely passing an outcrop of pigmented soil without stopping to rub some on their face, head and/or body. Indeed, throughout the landscape there are places where earthy materials seem to beckon them to stop and enter into a relationship. When I visit a place of beauty or religious significance it may

inspire a reflection or prayer, or perhaps I simply take a photograph; however, among the Mun, men of a certain age need to get their hands into the substance of a place itself, blurring the boundary between themselves and the land.[3]

Given this sociality with earthy substances that emerges from childhood, it is little wonder that earths are a fundamental mediator between communities and kin. The role of body painting at critical transitions has been well documented and the Mun are no exception. As Harriet Ngubane (1977, 78–9) found among the Zulu, developmental rites are held at vulnerable moments such as birth, during lactation and menstruation, following sexual intercourse, conflict or death; at such moments body painting provides resistance or protection from dangers or afflictions, allowing a degree of continued social participation. Likewise, among the Mun, after a long journey or period of absence, relatives use ash to greet one another; a kinsperson takes ash from the hearth (or earth from the ground if no ash is at hand), and drags their ashy fingertips down their forehead and then down their relative's forehead, then sprinkling some ash left and right, particularly around doorways. This practice of greeting with ash is as common as the western practice of kissing or hugging a loved one. The reason given is that the ash sends 'ancestor spirits' (*mênênga*) away, and stops them from striking one's kin. Such spirits are said to follow their kin on a long journey to assist them with any dangers they might meet on the road, offering them protection or guardianship. However, these spirits can also bring affliction and are an ambiguous force that must be mitigated or mediated through the contact with ash. As Evans-Pritchard (1956, 262) noted among the Nuer, 'When ashes are ritually rubbed on persons the meaning which fits the action best is unity, solidarity, or identification, the expression of the idea of "I am with you"'. Yet what I also find interesting, and which holds ethnographic parallels in the region,

is that the danger to kin appears after an absence. Here, Godfrey Lienhardt's (1961, 149) work among the Dinka is revealing: 'A man who has lived for a time in a place very foreign to him may think that that place (we should say, its 'influence') follows him (*bwoth cok*), as divinities are said to 'follow' those with whom they have formed a relationship'. The idea is that with new places come new threats that alter or 'influence' a person, and among the Mun the care taken upon re-contact suggests that they strive to avoid overwhelming those unexposed to similar influences.

It is through such daily and ritual involvements with a multitude of earthy materials that a community of substance emerges, where the value attributed to earths and clays 'materializes' through a dialectics in which substances themselves play a lively part. As Coole and Frost (2010, 26) remind us, knowledge is not acquired merely through the mirror of nature, since the materials with which social actors interact hold a generative quality. The use of earthy substances as lubricants in social life cannot be separated from the awareness of this generative quality of substances, one that a community such as the Mun know well, and which they try to harness, albeit not without knowledge that these substances can also cause harm. As Ginn, Beisel and Barua (2014, 115) point out in their discussion of animals that are tiny, disgusting, dangerous or alien, togetherness is not only made up of love, care and attention, but also 'friction, conflict, and misrecognition', as well as 'alien-ness, disconnection, detachment, or withdrawal'; in fact, relationships with awkward others is best understood through the respectful position of vulnerability.

The logic of the substantial world

Material causality is something that crops up in discussions about matter, where posthumanist orientations resonate with natural science, particularly concerning the vibrancy and dynamism of matter (Barad 2007; Coole and Frost 2010). Scholars of this approach critique the material implications of the 17th century Cartesian separation of intelligibility and materiality, knowing subject and the physical world, and its contemporary classical or Newtonian physics in which observation reveals 'preexisting properties of an observation-independent reality' (Barad 2007, 97). Instead, Barad seeks to clarify the nature of the causal relationship between discursive practices and material phenomena. For new materialists, such approaches request a rethink concerning causation, resonating with physics in particular, in order to understand dynamic physical systems, but also has implications in the treatment of biological organisms and their relationship to other aspects of their material environment (Coole and Frost 2010, 15).

Meanwhile, causality of illness has long been pivotal in medical anthropology, and drawing on the work of its frequent bedfellows – the anthropology of magic and religion – it has striven to diversify from purely biomedical reasoning. Therefore, when Christopher Davis (2000, 245) avoids asking, 'What do they mean by that?' and instead, 'What would the world have to be in order for this to be so?' she opens up many possibilities:

> illness, like the life of which it is a part, is a whole, though multifaceted, experience consisting of several distinct but tightly interwoven levels or domains: the physiological, the social and the metaphysical. Significant disturbance in one means a corresponding disturbance in another; and inversely, restoring the balance in one can mean restoration in all.

(Davis 2000, 34)

I find Davis's work among the Congolese Tabwa resonates with that of new materialists, and I have found it particularly helpful when seeking to better understand the causative connections found between people, places and the emergent qualities of materials. She illustrates how an investigation into materials can lead us deeply into local understandings of the literal capacities of the world. Influenced by medical terminology surrounding the undissected body, Davis (2000, 246) identifies a certain kind of unity between 'the material' and 'the meaningful' at the level of substance itself; she calls this the 'logic of the substantial world'. This refers to the relationship between certain people, places and materials united by shared underlying principles which govern the physics of physiology and transformations in the material world, principles 'emerging from associative detail' or points or places where hidden meanings or processes have been temporarily revealed (2000, 58). As a result, things of the substantial world are used together in rituals and can become embedded in medical terminology.

The need to utilize and manipulate principles governing physiology and materials, wherever they are recognized, evidently rests as much on local knowledge of the materials as it does physiological states. For example, the Mun know that earth, certain soils and even cattle dung, particularly when moist or watery, can be dangerous to certain people at certain times. A case in point is the young women I knew who came to me heavily pregnant to ask for my only cooking pot. She explained, rather convincingly, that she could not make herself a new little stewing pot, because 'you don't mould *dirr*', a certain clay, while pregnant; after handing this soil if you go near water, even while mixing water with the mud, something in the water called *kidho* will say '*Ai!*' and you will die. Persisting, I asked if her mother could

make her a pot, but she patiently explained that her mother doesn't mould clay either, because she is a healer (*ngerrê*); should a healer mould clay, she cannot then treat patients without the risk that they too will be 'hit' by *kidho*. Similarly, those with open wounds, including after giving birth, avoid places and people associated moist earth. Despite the pressing need following a machete accident to the leg, a man would not return to his flood-retreat cultivation site, concerned that *kidho* might strike at a time of year where a healer could not treat him, since they too were all cultivating their fields and therefore unable to handle patients.

In fact, healers *do* treat patients while cultivating their fields, but they first needed to apply dung along a patient's forehead and up along the crest of their head, down the centre of the face, and down the chest between the breast plates; dung 'cleanses' the hands of the healer, and deters *kidho* from hitting a patient. Smell here is particularly relevant, since *kidho* is known to be attracted or deterred by certain smells. Therefore, anyone with an open wound who cannot avoid watery sites and substances must take precaution to hide or remove the smell. For instance, after giving birth the vulva of a cow is smeared with cold ash from the fire. Likewise, after eating meat – purported to smell similar to an open wound – and before visiting the water, people first cleanse with dung and ash, coating the mouth, chin and often the shoulders with dung topped with ash. Soap is known to work in much the same way, but the Mun save what little soap they have for washing cloth.

However, in healing rites the main substance used is clay, with several types and sources of different potency and relevance to different communities. On such occasions, clays and the

techniques of application are used to gather or collect the body (*mugê rrê*), drawing on the verb *muga*, 'to collect together' (Turton et al. 2008, 132). As I was told by a priest at a communal healing ceremony, 'With clay the body is collected'; but how is the body collected and what hidden meanings or processes are temporarily revealed to justify the communal applications of clay? A helpful construal rests in the very permeability of the body interface, where the fluid boundary leaves people vulnerable to being 'hit' by affliction or to things entering the body – as earth and wood – through ill-wishers, but which also allows people to chase away affliction when earthy substances such as clays are 'eaten' by direct application to the skin. Herein lies the centrality of disequilibrium and indeterminacy, both at the level of the individual body and at the community level of humans and non-humans, in which 'marginality in biosocial becomings' produces changes and differences in almost imperceptible ways (Mangiameli 2013, 148–9).

Such a space for controlled disequilibrium and ambiguity is created at a ceremony called 'rounding up the cattle' (*bio lama*), which ultimately seeks to collect and strengthen people and cattle and send affliction back into the ground. During the first three days everyone zealously approached the priest, who applied 'grey' clay to their face, arms and chest each, morning and evening, and on the fourth day 'white' clay was applied to 'wash' the body so that affliction would be 'finished' (Fig. 6.3). Affliction is said to be afraid of clay, and yet in order to further understand the use of grey clay, it is necessary to appreciate the association between grey and black with dirt and indeterminacy, something that remains ethnographically very consistent from many corners of the world: understood in this way, 'eating' grey clay for three days, morning and evening, is a matter of displacement, where disease flees the inhospitable conditions. In a somewhat similar vein, Wendy James (1988, 8) describes Uduk

rituals in Sudan close to the border with Ethiopia, in which the 'hair of the dog' principle is central, so that the patient is treated with the very substance that made her sick, on the assumption that what is 'required' is controlled protective acclimatization; she likens this 'homeopathic' approach to the modern principle of vaccination, which likewise provides protective acclimatization. Similarly, in several of the collective healing ceremonies that I participated in, the use of clays left me with the impression of a mass inoculation (Fayers-Kerr 2012, 252). Those who live together in the same local group (*buran*) or along the same stretch of the Omo River, must 'eat' clay together, with the aim that the community continually and gradually relate through and with the properties of the substances around them.

[Fig. 6.3 near here]

In these mundane and ritual contexts, the colloquy between people, afflictions, and the emergent qualities of materials provides a window into underlying workings, whose nature might be human, non-human, biotic or abiotic, but into which a Spinoza-esque encounter-prone conative body (see Bennett 2010, 21) seeks to integrate in order to live healthily. Although the Mun are keenly aware that the outcome of this endeavour is not assured, they strive to engage in this logic of the substantial world, they strive towards 'becoming consubstantial'.

Becoming consubstantial

Beyond humans and non-humans, Whitehead (1926) held that agency and creativeness are characterized by ensembles of interlaced entities and potentially more complex or adaptive

systems; as the new materialists put it, in the dynamics of material becomings there are 'bodies composing their natural environment in ways that are corporeally meaningful for them' (Coole and Frost 2010, 10). From the perspective of medical anthropology too, Hsu's (1999; 2007; 2009) notion of the *body ecologic* explores the concerns people carry in their interaction with the environment, and how such intimacies between the body and the environment stem from a potential consubstantiality between them, and which become prevalent in many 'medicines' and body concepts.

This is seen in local ways of discussing body painting, revealing an awareness for the fluidity between 'eating', 'living', 'body painting' and 'dwelling'. For instance, people often discuss the act of applying clay to another or to oneself, as 'eating' clay, and the same word is used to describe 'eating' (*bhaga* / *ama*) clays and 'eating' food, albeit one through the skin and one through ingestion. The word *bhaga* can be unpacked even further when used to ask the question 'Where do you eat?', which more literally means 'Where do you live?'; if one lives in a place called Elisay, the answer might be, 'I eat Elisay' – not 'I live in Elisay' – just as one might say 'I eat meat'. 'To eat', in this way, alludes to a wider awareness of the potential for fluency between persons, substances and place. This sense of blurring of experiences of 'eating clay' and 'eating where one lives' initially inspired my investigation into the processes of becoming consubstantial with the material of a place, which is an integral part of becoming a community of substance. However, the absorption and transference of energy captured by the idea of consumption is also compatible with local concepts of bodiliness and personhood, which are inseparable from the notion of permeability between other people, places and experiences of the environment. Take the very word 'body' or *rrê* (Turton et al. 2008, 153), which also summons the notions of the self; as Lienhardt (1985, 78) found this

among the Dinka, ‘I body’ and ‘I myself’ or ‘yourself’ and ‘your body’ can be used interchangeably. Eczet (2013) elaborates upon this in his exploration of the verb *reg’e*, derived from ‘body’, which he translates as ‘appropriating’ and ‘incorporating’ in order to express the existential condition of ‘being’ through the things, people and experiences a person encounters during their life. Persons are understood as the sum of their sensory and material engagements with their social and environmental contexts.

The potential for consubstantiality also emerges from the association between *e’wu*, best defined as the custodians, owners or autochthons of a place, and a history of having survived the threats associated with living there. Here, the politics of belonging cannot be understood without an appreciation for the local insight into the complex network of inter-relationships between persons, substances, place and wellbeing. As we have already encountered, certain places or journeys can leave a trace on a person and on a community based on the inescapable necessity to interact intimately with one’s surroundings. The trace left by a place can hark back to an ancestral settler, who was able to survive the dangers of arriving in a new and unfamiliar place. In such cases, their decedents are often still recognised as custodians of that place, in possession of a certain authority or ability to enter into dialogue with the powers associated with that place. Such places, often referred to as ‘shrines’ in the anthropology of Africa, are frequently seen as sites where hidden meanings or processes have been temporarily revealed, to recall the work of Davis (2000, 58). Put another way, these have become ‘hot-spots’ in the landscape, as Murray Last (2010, 2011) discusses in relation to the Hausa of Nigeria, where spirits and sicknesses lurk dynamically in damp forested places, which can either serve the locals or strike outsiders who are not habituated to living amongst its challenges, taking on an aggressive quality that keep people away for fear of illness. So

too among the Mun, for non-custodians certain hot-spots can 'hit' and even kill you, while simultaneously holding a potency which custodians can tap into. Places where life has been known to triumph frequently become such hot-spots, shrines or sacred places. Likewise, among the Ghanaian Kasena, while any tree has the potential to become sacred, a sacred tree is one that has thrived in a hostile environment; as Gaetano Mangiameli (2013, 156) explains:

> Behind the sacralization of trees there is neither a merely biological understanding of species, in essentialist terms, nor any kind of superorganic cultural project superimposed upon material reality, but a process that involves both form and substance.

So too for the Mun, sacred groves (*baddi*) are places at which old trees, dating back to the time of the ancestral crossing of the Omo River, have flourished, and which now serve as portals at which various custodians hold ceremonies known as 'attuning the land' take place. Only those families who have a history of flourishing in an area – namely the *e'wu* of these places – are able to conduct 'attuning' ceremonies at these trees and are therefore held ritually responsible for the wellbeing of all the others who live nearby. For custodians, these ancestral places become tightly interwoven with one's bodily fabric. This is implicit in various local expressions; for example, just as one 'eats' the place where one lives, so too whenever someone sneezes, a bystander calls out the name of one's ancestral place, much as we might say 'bless you'.

In fact, among the Mun it is known that the substances of certain 'hot-spots', such as ancestral clay-pits, come to recognize custodians. However, even custodians have to renew their affinity with these places, because if one does not regularly commune with the ancestral clays at these sites, they may fail to recognize you. Here, remaining an elite sub-community

of substance is an ongoing process for *e'wu* families, where affinity with materials of place needs to be regularly renewed. This became apparent when a young man took me to visit his ancestral clays. In his eagerness to show me how well prepared he was for our adventure, he touched a small pouch hanging from his cloth and told me that inside was some black clay he (or one of his relatives) had collected on a previous year's visit. He explained that he had brought it with him just in case the clay in the river bed did not 'recognize' him as a custodian and therefore 'hit' him with affliction. Fully aware of the potential for a turbulent encounter with this potent place, which he had not visited in some time, he also realised that 'partners do not precede their relating', as Haraway (2008, 17) nicely sums up, inspired by Barad's notion of intra-actions. Even though he was from a family with a long relationship with the substance of this place, he had prepared himself in order to enhance the felicity of his visit by seeking an alliance with the substance of place, striving to cultivate a positive responsiveness.

Initially I thought that such efforts to manipulate the relating between people and the earthy substances of place, and the associated political narrative of *e'wu* or 'autochthons', would resonate with recent anthropological discussions of autochthony in Africa. However, this literature approaches the frequent stories of having 'sprung from the earth' or emerging from the places they now inhabit, as metaphorical and misleading, since they seem to contradict a history of dynamic population movement (Dove and Carpenter 2008, Geschiere 2009, Lentz 2013). Despite the numerous local allusions to communities of the earth collected from across Africa, the literature has not produced much discourse about the potential of soil or earth as a vital material in human-nonhuman dynamics. Instead of acknowledging that the locus of political responsibility need not start from humans, as Jane Bennet (2010) has suggested in

Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things, autochthony in Africa has largely been explored as the uniquely human politics of belonging, ethnicity and power over resources. How can we rather avoid privileging 'human efforts even when acknowledging the presence of other kinds of conative bodies' (Bennett 2012, 102)?

Becoming a community of substance

In this inquiry into the Mun pursuit to enhance their health through the process of 'becoming with' (Haraway 2008) by body painting with earthy and clays at certain places and times, I have found the anthropology of microbes more revealing than the anthropology of autochthony. Starting with the field of medical geology, for example, which shares in the Mun appreciation for the huge therapeutic potential of clays, this fledgling scientific research into bactericidal mechanisms demonstrated by natural clays reveals just how complex the dialogue is between microbes and the materials themselves. Even apparently similar clays can have different therapeutic outcomes (c.f., Williams et al. 2011, Londono and Williams 2016), lending further empirical weight to motivation behind the Mun going out of their way to gather some clays over others. Mun techniques for the preparation and use of clays also impacts the confederacy against lurking afflictions, for it is only when certain clays are hydrated at temperatures in the range of body temperature that they become antibacterial, with texture also being more impacting the use of clays as a physical bactericide (Haydel et al. 2008, Williams et al 2009). The Mun would certainly not be surprised to hear of these findings, although their respect for antibiotic medication would likely make it a revelation to learn that medical geology sees mineral-based antibacterial agents as an alternative to traditional antibiotics in the face of growing antibiotic resistance (Morrison et al. 2014).

Throughout this chapter I have stressed how this community of substance is continually provoked into existence by the inescapable confluence between people and the substance of place. Likewise, examinations of communities of microbes reveal just how interlaced the human microbial community is with a localized environmental microbiota, with transient as well as permanent bacterial members of this community hinting at the dynamic interactions with specific environments (Von Hertzen et al. 2011). Not only are there microbial similarities among human families, but also different microbiological heritage between people from different geographical locations (Benezra et al 2012, 6378), opening up the potential for what Heather Paxson (2008) refers to the 'microbiopolitics' that can emerge around the ambiguous potential of microbes to harm some people as well as enhancing others. In much the same way, the Mun acknowledge that certain clays will overpower one person and aid another. Just as the process of becoming a community of microbes involves a diverse flux of only partially understood ways of relating, becoming a community of substance is an on-going process of congregating potentially confederate encounter-prone materials.

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Notes

[1] Scholars of Melanesian art have similarly noted the misfit between the 'richness and evident significance of the art' and poverty of 'indigenous exegesis' (O'Hanlon 1992, 587). Reflecting on body decoration among the Wahgi of Papua New Guinea, O'Hanlon (1992, 590) emphasises that indigenous exegesis must also include 'assessment' which is informed by the practice and the materials.

[2] Likewise Marcel Griaule (1938, 2) comments: 'A revolution can destroy cathedrals, but one cannot see how it will deter children from playing with marbles', an observation that reminds Ramon Sarró (2008, 191) that even such marginal pursuits as child's play can generate and transmit potent religious notions or practices.

[3] Many anthropologists have observed the persistence with which the notion of 'landscape' retains aspects of its original usage as a genre of European painting, designating something viewed from a distance ((Bender 1993; Tilley 1994; Hirsch 1995; Humphrey 1995; Bender 2001; Leach 2004; Hsu 2008; Empson 2011). However, as Tilley (1994) and Bender (2001) have stressed, actions create places, which are always in a process of construction; Humphrey (1995, 135, in Empson 2011, 239) has also emphasised that it is not contemplation but interaction with the land that 'energizes' people, giving rise to many references to 'spirits' of the land.