

Effects on Lega Art of the Outlawing of the Bwami Association

by Daniel Biebuyck

I. Introduction

The Lega of the Eastern Congo (Kinshasa)¹ produced a large quantity and variety of sculptures (including masks, masquettes, animal and human figurines, heads, spoons, billhook knives, knives, pins, & axe blades) in ivory, bone, wood, and occasionally in clay, resin and soapstone.²

These sculptures were exclusively made for, owned, used and transferred by, members of the Bwami association. This association was not merely a source of entertainment, but also a channel for prestige, a form of *paideia* or system of education, a framework for political relationships, and a means of establishing cross-kinship and cross-village intratribal solidarities.

Control over the various sculptures was vested in the male and female members of the two highest grades (*yananio* and *kindi*); these grades were subdivided into many subgrades, steps and cycles of initiatory experience. Control over different categories of sculptures was intimately connected with this structure of levels within grades. The sculptures played only a minor and casual role in initiations leading to the lower grades, where most of the teachings were accompanied by the display of simpler artifacts and other natural objects. The male members of the two highest grades formed, in Lega society, an intellectual, moral, and political elite which exercised strong controls over the sources of wealth.

¹Field work among the Lega was carried out from 1951 to 1953 under the auspices of l'Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale. I revisited the Lega on various occasions between 1955 and 1958. This text is a slightly enlarged and revised version of a paper which I read at the IXth Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, University of Indiana, Bloomington, 1966, in a panel on "The African Arts in Transition," chaired by Prof. Roy Sieber.

²Almost all classic handbooks on African sculpture and all major exhibition catalogs give examples of the fine masks and figurines made by the Lega. However, the larger part of Lega works presented in these studies are figurines and masks in ivory. Many of the other objects mentioned here, and much of the Lega wood sculpture, are rarely presented. Very little has been written on the complex meaning and function of Lega art. The author is presently working on a comprehensive monograph on the Bwami association and Lega art, which will, among others, explain in greater detail, some of the general points discussed here.

In connection with the two highest grades, and the various initiations characteristic of them, the sculptures fulfilled many functions and conveyed multiple meanings. Among other things, they were emblems of rank and status, tokens of identity, initiatory objects used as iconic devices in a system of teaching, and symbols of continuity and solidarity in local kinship groups. Some of the more specialized functions attached to certain categories of sculptures are as embodiments of "force," as symbols of the unity of kinship groups and ritual communities, as objects to be exposed on the tombs of their dead owners, and as marks of appropriation.

But even for members of the two highest grades, the sculptures were not the sole category of objects distinctive of rank or used in initiation. They were complementary with a wide variety of other manufactured objects (such as stools, mats, doors, canes, rattles, hats and belts) and natural objects (including skulls, shells, claws, teeth, feathers, and skins). Most of the teachings, expressed in proverbial form during the display of sculptures, were basically similar, if not in form at least in content, to those conveyed by the other non-artistic categories of objects. As paraphernalia of rank and status, the sculptures were complemented by hats, belts, necklaces, rattles, and walkingsticks. The key values expressed during the initiations and held by its members centered around the virtues of moderation, non-violence, solidarity, respect, restraint and moral as well as physical beauty. The ethical code developed by the members of the Bwami association was, in other words, of unusually high standard, and the sanctions that sustained it made it into an effective and workable model for the good way of life.

II. The attitude of the Colonial Administration towards the Bwami association

Opinions expressed about this association by colonial administrators and missionaries were, as early as 1916, with rare exceptions, generally most unfavorable toward, and definitely biased against, its role and activities. The opinion generally held about the association was condensed in the following formula: "The association is a vulgar exploitation of the native. It must be annihilated."³ The Bwami association as a whole offered for the Lega a broad foundation for trans-village and trans-kinship solidarities and thus served as an effective instrument in resisting or rejecting some of the induced

³Occasionally, an administrative report strikes a dissonant note. In 1923, for example, one administrator wrote that a democratic spirit prevailed in the association and, very correctly, depicted the Bwami association as a guardian of austere morals and as a cohesive force in Lega society. Such remarks are truly exceptional but, unfortunately, did not exercise much influence on the predominant viewpoints.

changes. It was a coherent, numerically strong body of congeners, having a set of common values, a sense of commonality, and efficient methods for action. Administrators and missionaries conceived of the structure of the Lega society in terms of a set of stereotypes, based on misinterpretations of their social structure and of their value system. Chiefs, headmen, judges, councilmen, all appointed by the colonial administration (the Lega themselves had no centralized political system), were practically always recruited among Lega who were not members of the association, or among individuals who held rank in minor grades, or who were Christians and were therefore expected to reject Bwami. The very functions of these new authorities as intermediaries between the people and the administration, their obligations and the sanctions which weighed upon nonfulfillment of them, brought them into direct conflict with the Bwami in such matters as local political control, labor tasks, and education. Thus, Bwami as a whole came to be treated by those in power (administrators, chiefs, missionaries) as the source of stagnation, resistance, exploitation, and immorality. At the strictly local level, members of the association were continually importuned and molested at least as early as 1923. The association was outlawed in 1933, then somewhat tolerated again, officially at least. But this did not necessarily mean a *de facto* change of attitude at the local level of the administrative *territoires* and *circonscriptions indigenes* into which the Lega came to be subdivided. In 1948, directly as a result of dramatic reports by missionaries about the immorality and subversiveness of the association, the administration outlawed the Bwami as a "threat to tranquility and public order."

III. The fate of Lega Art

It is not the purpose here to study the social, political, or moral consequences of these radical outside actions for Lega society. Instead, we may examine the effects which they had on the functional significance of Lega art, which was intimately interrelated with the Bwami system. The results, as observed from 1951 to 1958, can be summarized as follows:

1. There were no traditional artists left in Lega country (a fact which had been mentioned in a rare administrative report of 1950). A very few of the younger Lega working in mining centers established within Lega country were involved in carving objects in ebony and ivory; but they had lost track of the traditional style. The Lega youth worked essentially for the local European market, copying objects and creating forms adapted to the taste of the European buyer. They learned their art of carving primarily from Zande-Mangbetu immigrants in the mining centers. In response to European demands, these immigrants brought into the area some carvings and carving techniques in ebony which had developed in the Uele regions of the northeastern Congo. The Lega referred to these sculptures as Bausa carvings and were attracted by their high gloss and patina (two criteria which were prominent in the Lega aesthetic judgments about their own traditional carvings), and by the generality of

their forms (into which they could easily read meaning of their own).

2. Hundreds of sculptures were still in the possession of the Bwami initiates, but many more had been lost (theft or destruction during police raids; theft or destruction by women converted to Christianity or involved in disputes with co-wives; outright sale of objects to Europeans by Bwami in need of money or compelled by the appointed chiefs; concealment and abandonment of objects in the forest; fire and termite action; general process of deterioration of sculptures). The decline of sculptural activity, combined with massive loss of existing objects, resulted in a general scarcity of carvings. Given the steady increase of the initiates and given the number of sculptures traditionally used and owned by single initiates, there were not enough pieces remaining to observe the normal patterns of ownership and transfer in the cycles of initiation. Some initiates of the two highest grades had no personal carvings left; some others who normally would have possessed a large number and several categories of them had managed to preserve only a few.

3. A limited compensation for this general loss had been found in the acquisition of Bausa ebony work and in the use of some European-made objects, such as stylized perfume bottles, dolls, madonnas, electric bulbs, and aluminum plates. Both categories of objects had come to be accepted as valid replacements for traditional carvings, but this acceptance was not generalized. Only in select Lega areas, and even then always in small quantities and within limited contexts, had the introduction of these new objects been permitted.

4. At this point it is relevant to ask the question why artists and artistic creativity had so radically disappeared from the Lega scene, whereas the Bwami association itself, although outlawed, persecuted and damaged, had maintained its vitality and significance. The phenomenon remains somewhat of a mystery, the more so since the Lega themselves have no theory for explaining it and since the numerous administrative reports on Bwami are completely silent on this issue. The reasons may well be found in a combination of factors which result in part from structural features in Lega society, and from the nature of colonial regulations among the Lega.

It seems artists in Lega society were not persons of social prominence, as no special status was attached to the position. Status was a matter of kinship and, above all, of achievements in the Bwami association. If initiates at all, artists were frequently members only of the lower grades of the association. It is typical that, whereas the Bwami have great knowledge about the chains of inheritors associated with individual carvings, they rarely know the names of the artists who created them. There are several indications that there were relatively few artists and that they were by no means evenly distributed over Lega country. In many villages there were no carvers specialized in making masks, figurines,

etc., used in Bwami). In the general insecurity that prevailed, at least from 1916 on, these artists and their ateliers were highly exposed targets for action against the association. Since these sculptors worked most frequently in ivory, the administration introduced strict regulations on the sale and ownership of elephant tusks (e.g., decrees of 1910, 1925, 1933 established the state's monopoly and also various rights and privileges ascribed to the appointed chiefs). During the critical period of 1910-1925, "natives" could not, according to government regulations, possess tusks obtained from elephants killed in legitimate defense or in the protection of property or from elephants found dead. The "natives" were expected to remit these tusks within thirty days to the nearest government post and were entitled to 1/4 of their estimated value. Those who had obtained a permit to hunt elephants had to pay a tax levied per kilogram of ivory. These stringent rules were gradually alleviated in the years after 1925 but had a disastrous effect upon the Lega ivory carver. Thus, if he continued to work in ivory, he was, from the point of view of the white authority, guilty of two illegal acts; being involved with Bwami and working in ivory. Moreover, the objects which he produced were, as "fetishes," thought to be symbols of evil and credulity by that same foreign authority. Appointed chiefs, because of their duties in the administration and because of certain material benefits which they might expect from the registration of ivory, maintained close control over its availability. Theoretically, woodcarving could have continued. However, since major functional distinctions were related to the differences between wooden and ivory products, wooden sculptures alone could not fulfill the fundamental needs of the Bwami system of paraphernalia, unless the Lega made a radical change in their system of symbols, which they were not inclined to do. It is true, however, that at the earliest stages of these developments, more use of elephant bone was made than was customary, in order to replace ivory.

As the years passed, ivory became more scarce in Lega society, not merely because of the government monopoly and export, but also because of a gradual decline in the number of elephants and in the frequency with which the Lega organized hunting expeditions. New labor requirements, (e.g., growing of commercial crops), affected all able-bodied men, and those who did not want to comply with them had to migrate to the cities and mining centers. These and other factors, such as fear, distrust, disinterest, or conversion to Christianity, often prevented the right kind of kinsman from being available for slowly learning, by apprenticeship, the art from the existing sculptors. The owners and users of these sculptures were Bwami of the two highest grades. Because they were traditionally the decision-makers in Lega society and therefore exercised ample control over people and wealth, these individuals composed that segment of the population which was most exposed to reactions by the administration. By custom, these high initiates were not allowed to indulge in certain types of labor now demanded of them; they were frequently involved in prolonged travelling, visiting and ceremonial activities of which a large part were secret, or at least not public. All this made them easy targets for incriminations of all sorts, so that they were forced to make their activities more and more secretive,

inconspicuous and intermittent. The irregularity and sometimes temporary absence of their activities destroyed the balance of cyclic substitutions in grades and automatically led at critical periods of time to the total absence of any demand for sculptures.

Finally, the sculptures themselves are nonessential in the association; they are epiphenomena without which the society can continue to operate. As stated above, the sculptures are relevant only for the two highest grades and even in this context they occur only in a very few of the many cycles of initiation. They are used complementary to a much larger variety of other initiatory objects and paraphernalia. The teachings and values which the sculptures express are not fundamentally different from those associated with other categories of objects. Moreover, some Lega groups traditionally had a much greater quantity and diversity of sculptures than others (nothing is more misleading than to think in terms of the *Lega tribal art*, and to infer from this the universal presence, even distribution, and uniform usage of the sculptures). Some categories of sculptures were totally absent from certain Lega areas. They had either never been present or had been abandoned or rejected on the basis of various considerations in pre-European times.

5. What happened to the patterns of ownership, transmission, and usage affecting the still existing Lega sculptures and the few introduced items?

a. Traditionally, some categories of sculptures were held individually by every member of the appropriate step in the relevant grade, others were held only by preceptors (*nsingia*), and still others were kept in trust by either the most junior or most senior member in the grade on behalf of the local kinship groups or of a larger ritual community. Some pieces were kept in a shoulderbag which was, if not carried to initiations, suspended in the house of one of the initiated wives, and some others were hidden in baskets together with other objects.

This pattern had been largely maintained, with the exception of wooden masks distinctive of the *Yanario* grade which were now, in several areas and for reasons of scarcity, jointly held by several agnatically related initiates, and of statues contained in baskets which were dispersed, for reasons of safety, among the members of the local ritual communities. In general, the objects were no longer suspended in the house of one's initiated wife, but hidden in safer places in the forest or guarded personally by the men.

b. Distinctive functions were traditionally attributed to objects in wood and those in ivory. When an individual moved from the *Yanario* grade to the *kindi* grade, he gave his wooden sculptures to his substitute in the former grade and acquired for himself ivory objects. Because of the earlier greater scarcity of ivory objects or their unavailability for new initiates, *kindi* would often keep at least some of their wooden sculptures as valid emblems of their new position. Sometimes they would possess wooden statues or masks which were delicately polished so as to somewhat

resemble, in gloss and patina, the ivory sculptures. It is probable that early in the century, when the stringent regulations in ivory were already felt but when Lega artists still operated, the Lega had begun to encourage this new type of highly polished small wooden figurine. The high functional value of ivory, however, was still fully recognized, and whereas *kindi* were now allowed to have wooden figurines instead of ivories, members of the lower *yananio* grade were still not permitted to hold ivory objects.

c. Within the *kindi* grade, the size of ivory objects was linked with levels of initiatory experience. Fully initiated *kindi* (*lutumbo lwa kindi*) possessed the larger ivory statues (*igingi*) as opposed to the *kindi* of lower initiatory experience (*musaga wa kindi*) who possessed the small *tulimbangoma* ivory statues. This distinction had now been omitted for members of the highest level of *kindi*.

d. The system of traditional interpretations of the sculptures, expressed in sung proverbs, had been fully maintained. Traditionally, any Lega carving could be associated with several proverbs and with different meanings; this pattern was maintained, but often, for lack of the necessary variety of figurines, more and more different proverbs could be linked with a single piece, and more and more natural objects or artifacts were used jointly with the carvings as substitutes for them. For the Lega, to add several meanings to a single object was an easy step to take, since only for a very few statues had there ever existed a direct relationship between specific form and specific meaning. In most cases, the connection between form and meaning was purely symbolic, with no direct justification for specific meaning to be found in the form of the object.

Traditional proverbs were also applied to the few introduced pieces of Bausa or European manufacture. Formally, the content of the proverbs was not altered. But some of the explanations given to clarify their meanings were concerned with problems resulting from the acculturative changes. Again because of the traditional lack of direct association between sculptural form and meaning, the Lega easily found in their patrimony, many sets of proverbs which could be readily applied to the introduced pieces, particularly to the Bausa carvings even if they represented unusual forms (e.g., a drummer, a cariatid, or an elephant crushing an animal).

e. Notwithstanding the irregularity of initiations, the statues suffered little loss of meaning. The patrimony of proverbs used in connection with the Bwami initiations reached into the thousands. Some individuals certainly knew very little about them, but the preceptors had no difficulty whatsoever in handling the hundreds of objects, interpreting them, & using them in the right associations of music, dance, gesture, and proverb.

6. It was customary among the Lega for a Bwami of highest rank to be buried in his house; a few of his paraphernalia, including a mask and

a statue, were then left on his tomb. Because of radical induced changes in burial customs, sculptures had lost their potential funerary function.

IV. Conclusion

We have examined some of the effects on Lega sculpture resulting from the disruptive action undertaken by the colonial government against the Bwami association. The tragic fate of one of the great arts of Africa is amply suggested by this limited analysis. The Lega case points to the fragility of an African sculptural tradition, functioning within a highly specialized social context, when this context is placed under severe stress. A rapid adaptation to new standards or a rapid shift in established goals do not seem to be possible. Yet, simple explanations for the continuity or the disparity of the art cannot be given. One could, as far as the Democratic Republic of the Congo/Kinshasa is concerned, contrast the Lega with the Yaka or Pende, or some other ethnic groups, which were also exposed to the severe stresses of a fairly uniformly operating colonial machinery, but which were nevertheless able to maintain, to some extent at least, the integrity of their sculptural traditions. These contrasting situations offer a vast field for detailed comparative and cross-cultural studies in order to isolate the various internal and external factors that cause one art to decline and disappear more rapidly than another. It would seem that the degree of specialization, of openness, the nature of the social contexts in which the art is used, rules about inheritance, traditions about the renewal of objects, attitudes of chiefs and other officeholders, and the role of prophetic and counter-prophetic movements would represent significant phenomena along which to search for explanations of some of these factors. The nature of local colonial rule, local missionary action, local economic and social conditions, and of various local historical events would also have to be scrutinized. The comparative study of the phenomena of relative decline, survival, or degeneration of several artistic traditions in the light of all these factors would undoubtedly contribute much to the general understanding of social and cultural change in Africa.