

THE FROG AND OTHER ANIMALS IN LEGA ART AND INITIATION (*)

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Animals (a few domestic ones and many wild species of mammals, reptiles, birds, fish, mollusca, and insects) have a pervading significance in Lega life. The general importance of game is easily understandable among a people inhabiting an abundant forest environment where hunting and trapping have remained central activities. The nutritive value of the most diverse animal foods (from elephant to turtle, from snakes to mollusca, from fish to frog eggs) has long been recognized by the Lega. With all the social implications that the distributions of animals entail, it is easy to assess the broader economic and social value of animals as items for exchange, gift giving, hospitality, and payment of fines and indemnities.

For example, the system of prescriptions and proscriptions surrounding the distribution and consumption of animals is guided by complex rules and ideas. Whereas the Lega generally consume virtually all types of meats (to the exclusion of parrot, owl, and in some regions, leopard), many animals (e.g., the *nziga* animals, those exhibiting some physiological anomaly; and the *munkuli* animals, those that died in an abnormal manner, like monkeys or guinea fowl that were caught in the hunting nets) specifically are forbidden to women in general or to pregnant women in particular.

Other animals (e.g., pangolin, aardvark, leopard, crowned eagle, genet, dendrohyrax, certain species of turtle, wild cat, three species of snakes, the *kabugi* antelope) classified as *kitikolo* are not merely prohibited for nonmembers of the bwami association, but also they must be distributed — sometimes with much ritual and dance action — in prescribed villages or hamlets inhabited by certain status holders within bwami (Biebuyck, 1953). In other cases goats or antelopes are consecrated for a special purpose and their distribution therefore follows definite regulations. In still other instances, only part of the exuviae of designated animals are subject to restrictions, e.g., the tail, molars and tusks of elephants; or the hide of the bongo antelope.

More complicated, however, are the systems of ideology and ritual (values, taboos, symbolism, initiations, aphorisms, tales, sculpture), in which

animals rank prominently. This essay focuses on the symbolism surrounding animals in general and the frog in particular in the context of the bwami initiations. In earlier writings on African art, Lega zoomorphic carvings were almost never mentioned. For example, in his pioneering study, Olbrechts (1948, pp. 91-92) simply discusses Lega masks and anthropomorphic figurines. In his brief description of a Lega *kindi* initiation, Delhaise (1909, pp. 231-239) notes several kinds of animal figurines and assemblages (stuffed animal hides with cowrie eyes; two big superposed « rats »; a fetish in hide with the small skull of a carnivore; and, representing a goat and a sheep, two wooden animals that are dragged over the ground by means of a rope). In more recent works (e.g., Maesen, 1959, n° 306; Delange, 1967, pl. 166; Fagg, 1968, pl. 276; Claerhout, 1968, AE 55.4.1; Krieger, 1969, pls. 351 and 354; Olderogge, 1969, pl. 135; Cornet, 1972, pp. 267-268; Bassani, 1977, pl. 470; and several catalogs of Sotheby), animal figurines are referred to and at times illustrated. But all together these works still give only limited, sometimes erroneous, descriptions and tend to show only some of the more realistic snake and crocodile figurines in ivory. The work by de Kun (1966, pp. 93-95 and pls. 28 and 29) offers more information, but the data is incomplete and sometimes incorrect. Biebuyck (1973, pp. 221-226 and passim, also pls. 88-94) provides a summary of Lega zoomorphic art.



Fig. 1. — 55.3.6 (cl. 52714), 125 mm long.
A type of generalized quadruped carved in wood.
See Biebuyck, 1973, plate 88.

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It should be noted that the economic and social importance of animals in bwami is enormous. A few examples amply illustrate this point. At all levels of the initiations, great quantities of game meat must be distributed, exchanged and consumed. Frequently this requires large-scale cooperative hunts

preliminary to or coinciding with the period of initiations, also expressive of social solidarities and inter-group relationships. Generally only certain types of game (e.g., prominently the duiker antelope) may be dispensed, and some rites and types of exchange require specific, sometimes hard to find, species of animals. In the initiations the rules of sharing game meat follow precise lines of kinship, group affiliation, status, seniority, and special ritual functions. Many items of paraphernalia, distinctive of grade levels or simply worn during the initiation dances by men and women, are made from animal exuviae (e.g., leopard teeth; hats of monkey, goat, antelope, and leopard hide; aprons of wild cat and genet; belts of the hide of the bongo antelope; feather bunches and tufts).

In the conceptualizations of the initiations themselves, however, the central importance of animals is exhibited most profoundly. This is apparent at once from the frequency with which the initiates like to identify themselves and also their association with certain animals. For example, the initiates metaphorically refer to themselves as elephants, leopards, bats, guinea fowls, *binyangi* birds, butterflies, *nkamba* fish, turtles and certain insects to express ideas such as awesome power, and their systematics, exclusiveness, circumspection, oneness, etc.

Bwami is a hierarchically organized association, based on a number of named grades and grade levels for men and complementary units for women. Membership at each level is achieved through initiation sets which are arranged into named cycles and rites. Some rites are labeled after an animal (e.g., the *musimba*, genet; the *kilinkumbi*, drum name for pangolin; the *nkulu*, turtle) to mark the central significance of symbolisms based upon a particular animal.

All initiations, from the lowest to the highest levels, from the simplest to the most complicated, are structured like dramas around varied combinations of verbal, kinetic, and musical activities and iconic displays. The aim is to formulate and to interpret in multiple symbolic ways principles, moral and philosophical values, and rules of the bwami association, to teach and inculcate them, and to bestow upon the initiates the paraphernalia pertinent to their grade level together with their symbolic references. The verbal exegesis rests on innumerable aphoristic statements, which are sung and interpreted in a dance and action context with or without the use of material objects. The texts of the aphorisms are filled with references to animals often conceived as human characters, to their habits and characteristics, and to the metaphorical implications for human social life and morality. The meanings contained in the verbal statements are nuanced, clarified, and amplified through the initiation context in which they are sung, the configurations and sequences in which they occur, the dance movements and gestures that complement the singing, and the material

objects that eventually accompany the song and the dance, along with the manipulation of these objects.



Fig. 2. — 55.3.72 (cl. 59791), 180 mm long. A realistic carving in patinated ivory representing a crocodile. See Biebuyck, 1973, plate 90.

In the formidable displays of dramatic skill and inventiveness, hundreds of character types are introduced, singly or contrastively, with special emphasis on their behavioral, intellectual, and moral traits. The character names are derived from the animal, vegetal, or mineral world, from humans or from objects; or they are purely fictive (compound terms, deverbatives, teknonymic constructions). The contents of the aphorisms, however, are anthropocentric; the boundaries between, e.g., an animal character and a human one represented by it are obscured. The actions, attitudes, and physical or moral peculiarities ascribed to the character uncompromisingly allude

to human types. Characters are always represented verbally : they are evoked and typified in an aphorism. Most characters, however, are also simultaneously elicited either by gesture, dance movement, and general dramatic action (e.g., Nyakinumpi, Mrs. Bad-Odor) ; by a natural object (e.g., Kisibula, Destroyer, represented by a warthog tusk) ; or by a sculptured object (e.g., Mukobanya, Divider, indicated by a two-faced figurine). In most cases the character is fully elaborated through the conjunction of verbal, kinetic, and iconic elements. Many characters are associated as complementary or antithetical pairs and triads, or as series. To illustrate, Kaku-lu ka mpito, Little-Old-one-of-Mpito, is linked with the adulterous pregnant wife Waiyinda ; the sick Mpondo is used with his wife Nyabikuba and Crocodile, who seduces the wife of Mpondo, considered to be his father, senior brother, or maternal uncle.

A verbally formulated character is not necessarily represented by one kind of action or object. The pangolin, for example, occurs as a generalized wooden or ivory zoomorphic sculpture, as a wooden animal figurine adorned with some pangolin scales, or as the stuffed scaly skin of a small arboreal pangolin, and it may be evoked simply by some pangolin scales. The character « What-does-not-stop-quarreling will quarrel with What-has-a-wide-open-mouth » is illustrated in one case by a crocodile figurine, and in another by a hook-shaped stick resembling a stylized bird's neck and beak. In another context, the same hook-shaped object refers to Lungaga (an antelope species) symbolizing « What-is-with-Horns is being hooked (in a place) where there is no vine ». Sculptures and natural objects are closely associated in the initiations. One performance pictures the initially vain, then successful, hunt of the skillful dog Kafyondo. Chasing a porcupine that has climbed on the roof of a house, Kafyondo is symbolized by a generalized animal figurine and Porcupine simply by one of its quills.

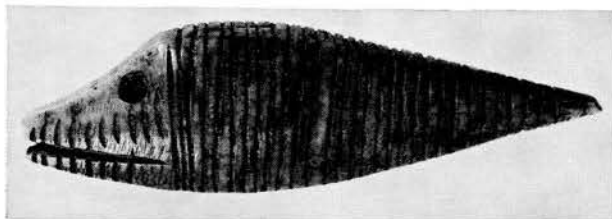


Fig. 3. — 51.11.38 (cl. 112572), 111 mm long.
A realistic sculpture in ivory probably depicting
one of the ritually important fish
(such as *nkomo*, *nsamba*, or *nkamba*).

A sculpture, however, does not have to indicate one character. Many zoomorphic and anthropomorphic carvings are so generalized in form that there is no way of telling which character they illustrate, unless the owner himself has made the identification in the initiation context. Consequently, similar looking statues are identified differently by their owners.

Even more eidetic sculptures, such as the multiheaded and multifaced ones, may express two or more contradictory characters. For instance, a two-headed figurine is rendered in the same rite as Sakematwematwe, the wise, all-seeing, and fair leader and judge, and also as Mukobanya, the Divider.



Fig. 4. — 62.46.2 (cl. 70574), 144 mm long.
A realistically carved bird figurine in wood,
with inflated chest probably symbolizing a pigeon.

The range of material objects - natural and manufactured - utilized in bwami initiations has been described elsewhere (Biebuyck, 1973). This discussion, therefore, will be limited to those items and forms derived from the animal world. In the rites animals are frequently represented by their parts. The scales of a pangolin ; the claws of an aardvark or eagle ; the skull of a chimpanzee, monkey, or forest crocodile ; the carapace of a turtle ; the hides of many different animals ; the beaks of a hornbill or an ibis ; the red tail feathers of a parrot ; the shells of giant snails and mussels ; the quills of a porcupine ; the molars of an elephant ; and the jaws of certain fish are only several examples from the bewildering panorama of animal exuviae that in the initiations help to illustrate meanings partly contained in the proverbs. Some of these items occur in their natural state, although they are often enhanced through age ; others are presented in a temporarily or permanently modified form. Thus the mussel shell may be polished ; the aardvark claw may sit in a piece

of wickerwork ; the skulls may be whitened ; the hide of a small anteater or a rodent may be stuffed with mosses ; the turtle carapace may be wrapped for a time in a feather rope.

In some rites, ephemeral assemblages representing an animal character are also constructed. In one instance, Kagelia (a species of monkey) is impersonated by a piece of banana stipe embellished with hides and feather rope ; in another case Mukumbi (a species of golden mole) is portrayed by a piece of banana stipe arranged in the hide of this or of another animal. The animal character is sometimes simply enacted by particular gestures, dance movements, and sound imitations of the preceptors. In these cases to emphasize the *sui generis* nature of the character mimed, the preceptors might wear a purely anthropomorphic mask or one of the rare horned anthropomorphic masks. All these devices add to the dramatic display so essential to the initiation rites in their emphasis on effects of wonder, awe, astonishment, and secrecy. Their ambiguity and the frequency with which one object is substituted for another enhance the cryptic nature of meaning provided through initiation.

The Lega initiates have no difficulty in replacing one visual symbol by another. Each ritual community and each preceptor have some specialities that others do not possess. The preceptors draw rather freely from a seemingly inexhaustible storehouse of material objects to visually illustrate their thought. They take delight in the unusual combinations and manipulations of objects to heighten the element of surprise and the cryptic aspect of the initiation procedures. It is no wonder then that the prolific Lega artists have created zoomorphic sculptures as substitutes for and complements to the rest of the animal symbolism.

Animal figurines are sculptured in wood, elephant bone, and ivory, and occasionally in clay and *ntutu*. They vary in size, form, finish, and degree of stylization. Although found in large numbers only in some ritual communities, they nevertheless occur throughout Legaland. The zoomorphic sculptures are an intrinsic part of the initiation and privileged status systems of the bwami association. It should be reiterated that bwami is hierarchically organized into a graded set of statuses for males and a complementary series for women. Accession to any grade level requires passage through the appropriate rites of initiation. Distinctive paraphernalia are associated with each grade. Some of these emblems, which also function as initiation objects are obligatorily owned by every person who has passed through a certain initiatory experience. Others are stored in collectively held bags and baskets, or kept by select individuals. As unifying symbols expressing group solidarity and autonomy, such emblems are entrusted either to the most senior (i.e., first among the living initiates in a ritual community to have achieved a particular grade level) or to the most junior (i.e.,

the most recent initiate to a certain level within the ritual community). Still other emblems are in the custody of only those initiates representing a particular group that holds an inherited and exclusive privilege or by the preceptors. Called « thinkers » and « expert dancers » by the Lega, these preceptors preside over the actual organization and planning of the rites : they supervise sequences of actions ; prepare the configurations of objects used ; start the songs and dances ; lead the row of dancers ; perform solos, duos, etc. ; and, solely or aided by other initiates, manipulate the objects in dance context.

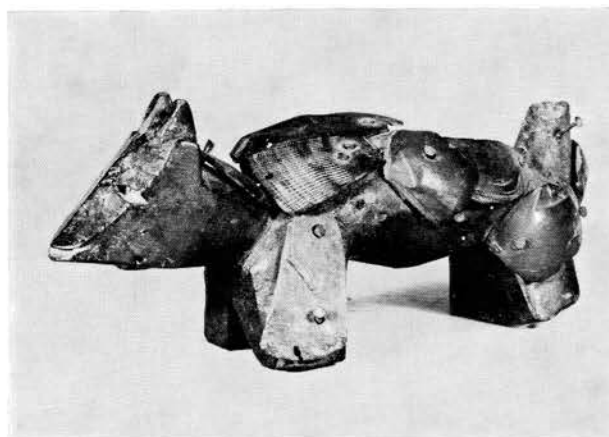


Fig. 5. — 63.48.1 (cl. G 4587), 239 mm long.
A wooden quadruped with pangolin scales, most likely identified as a pangolin.

There are considerable differences in the ownership patterns of the animal figurines. In some autonomous ritual communities they are possessed only by the preceptors, in others they are part of the contents of the collectively held baskets, in still others every male initiate of a specified grade level has one. Any combination of these patterns is possible, however, and in some communities all three coexist.

In contrast to some other types of carvings (e.g., billhooks, knives, ax blades, pegs, hammers, dice, and spoons), the zoomorphic pieces exhibit considerable morphological differences. The animal sculptures may be roughly divided into two categories : a generalized group of stylized quadrupeds (fig. 1), and an individualized set of animal figurines that more or less realistically represent distinct animal species (fig. 2-4). Among the stylized quadrupeds, some degree of realism may be achieved by the addition of diacritical marks (fig. 5) or by some particular sculptural feature (e.g., horns, cocked ears, or a bent back ; fig. 6) or by a design (e.g., circle-dot decoration ; fig. 7). Most stylized sculptures represent a single animal with one head and a tail, but a few of them have a head on each side of the body (fig. 8) and some are carved in the form of two superposed animals (Altman, 1963, pl. 22 ; Bassani, 1977, pl. 470).



Fig. 6. — 51.35.2 (cl. 62058), 334 mm long.
A wooden quadruped with hornlike excrescences,
which may evoke a *lungaga* antelope.

In the category of more realistic sculptures various degrees of stylization are discernible : the figure of a bird may be rendered rather naturalistically or only by a beak and a neck that sometimes looks like a hook or a gaff ; the crocodile may be presented only by a short neck and a large head with a wide open mouth ; the snake figure may have four stumplike legs. In some cases the realism is not explicit enough to distinguish a crocodile from an iguana or a lizard ; rather it is a type of reptile that is represented.

This dual formal classification corresponds to Lega linguistic categories. The homogeneous group of generalized animal sculptures is known by its generic term *mugugundu*. For the heterogeneous set of realistic figures, there is no generic term. Such animal sculptures are denoted in the dance context by specific terms, such as pangolin (*ikaga* or *kilinkumbi*), aardvark (*ntumba*), a species of snake (*ngimbi*), crocodile (*ngandu*, *kinyenge*, *mukondekonde*, or *kimena*), centipede (*nyongolo*), frog (*kitende*), ibis (*kakulikuli*), heron (*nyandende*), pigeon (*kilinga*). It must be pointed out that in the dance and song context of the initiations, the generalized animal sculptures usually receive a distinctive animal name, whether or not they exhibit some of the above-mentioned identifiable elements. Thus a generalized quadruped is defined either as a dog or as a hunting dog, a nonexpert dog, an antelope, a *lungaga* antelope, or an *ikaga* pangolin (*Manis gigantea*), with the identifications depending on the action context. Also, the realistic animals may be designated in the dance not just by their class name, such as frog (*kitende*), but by their species name, such as *isilia*, *mutuku*, or *nyangulanga* (three frog species). Again, sculptural resemblance to a particular animal species does not guarantee semantic concomitance. During the initiation songs, for example, I have heard a crocodile-like sculpture being identified first as a varan (*mpamba*) and then as a chameleon (*mugugu*). I have observed in the same rite how a rudimentarily carved wooden snake (with a flat head and a long

straight body) was used as a visual symbol to illustrate aphorisms evoking successively a nonvenomous *mulinde* snake, the death-bringing *ngimbi* and *igilima* snakes, and snakes (*nzoka*) in general.

As already noted, the Lega like to introduce either natural or man-made things into the initiations and they easily substitute one object for another. Particular ritual communities hold certain rites which use uncommon materials and objects : quartz stones ; *busise* insect nests ; carved wooden hands and arms ; small oval *ajouré* shields ; imitation leopard teeth carved in ivory ; and figurines fashioned in unusual materials, such as stone, the clay of a termite nest (*muntita*), or hardened mushroomlike or resinlike excrescences growing on fallen trees (*ntutu*, *kitutu*, *kabwagabwaga*). The turtle (*nkulu*, *izezekumbe*) is visually represented in the rites either by a real carapace with or without a sculptured neck and head, or by a realistic carving. In various instances Yango, a major character symbolizing the living or the dead « master of the land » and also the principle of fertility, is represented by a large wooden phallic object, by an ivory bark beater, or by a rudimentary stick with gland and urethra instead of the usual piece of banana stipe wrapped in feather rope and adorned with a feather tuft.

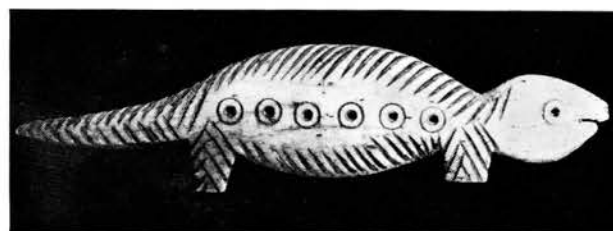


Fig. 7. — 32499 (cl. 112561), 132 mm long.
An ivory quadruped with bent back, a long tail and
circle-dot designs. Similar zoomorphic sculptures with
circle-dot designs apparently representing pangolin scales
tend to be identified as pangolins (*ikaga* or *kilinkumbi*).

Several of the naturalistic animal carvings sculptured in wood, ivory, bone, clay, *ntutu*, *kitutu*, and *kabwagabwaga* are included among these rare and unusual objects. Invariably these items are kept in the collectively held baskets or they are owned by the preceptors. Whereas realistic representations of crocodiles, snakes, pangolins, and birds sometimes occur more frequently, those figuring aardvarks, fish, centipedes, lizards, porcupines, elephants, turtles, and frogs are uncommon. As described in Biebuyck (1973, pp. 224-226), these rare animal figurines may help to illustrate the most unexpected ideas. For example, in the elephant figurine the Lega do not merely perceive the elephant (*nzogu*), but also certain of his striking features. The elephant figurine is identified as *Kabukutu*, the strong leading male who breaks trees (comparable to a man wishing his son to do something worthy of a man), or as *Kobakila*, « one who knows to build so as not to be beaten by rain » (a symbol of the high *kindi* initiate

who must not fail or delay in the discharge of his duties). Or the plump elephant figurine recalls the idea of an elephant's pregnancy « which is not like that of any other animal » to show the unique position occupied by the master of the land.



Fig. 8. — An initiate of *kindi* grade holding a two-headed wooden sculpture said to represent *mukondekonde*, the forest crocodile. Field Photograph, Daniel Biebuyck.

On purely stylistic grounds, it would be difficult to ascribe to the Lega the beautifully patinated frog figure in the Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale collections (fig. 9-10). Some of the conjoined sculptural features, however, clearly do fit in with the Lega artistic production. The object is made of ivory, a major material used in Lega sculpture, and its deep reddish color is reminiscent of certain patterns of Lega patination. The length of the object (14.8 cm) fits well the Lega canon of measurements. The rounded irregular lozenge shape of the head is found in some anthropomorphic figurines. The tail part of the frog, excluding the backward rolled lower legs, is similarly found in some crocodile carvings. Several design features, singly or in combinations, appearing on the frog figure recur on other Lega carvings : the circular slightly hollowed out nostrils, the double circle and dot for the eyes, the hachure pattern on the back, the lozenges in slight relief on the flanks and legs, and the straight and

slanting parallel engraved lines. The complete sculpture can be included among the remarkably realistic animal carvings (particularly the crocodile figurines), which the Lega do produce (Biebuyck, 1973, pl. 90).

Since there is no well-known frog style developed among the Lega or the neighboring groups, however, formal considerations alone should not be used to ascribe this object to the Lega. But, there is the field of conceptualizations in the bwami initiations. Lega initiates consider the use of frog figurines to be derived from their ancient traditions. The frog occurs sporadically as a character in their aphorisms, occasionally illustrated by one or two wooden or ivory frog figurines used either alone or in conjunction with a crocodile like sculpture. I have seen them utilized in rites connected with the *ngandu* and *kindi* grades, and I have heard them mentioned in rites of the female *bombwa-kampumba* level. The range of meanings linked with the frog is limited. I noted only seven aphorisms directly bearing on the frog. In the text « Kitende Kituku does not play with children », sung without the use of a figurine, the new initiate called Frog (known here by its generic term *kitende* and by one of its species names *kituku*) is warned not to get involved with children and junior people.

Also sung unaccompanied by a frog figurine, the second aphorism, « My Mutuku fills a package for me » celebrates the joy of a tutor who has helped his protégé through the *kindi* rites and in so doing has achieved full-fledged status for himself. An initiate does not reach the plenitude of his status unless he successfully sustains one or more candidates throughout the high level of initiations he himself has achieved. Mutuku (the same species of frog as in the previous aphorism but identified with a different class marker, *mu-* instead of *ki-*) symbolizes the new initiate ; the filling of the package is the acquisition of complete status. The fact that a small animal is capable of filling such a package refers to the effects of initiation that make persons bigger

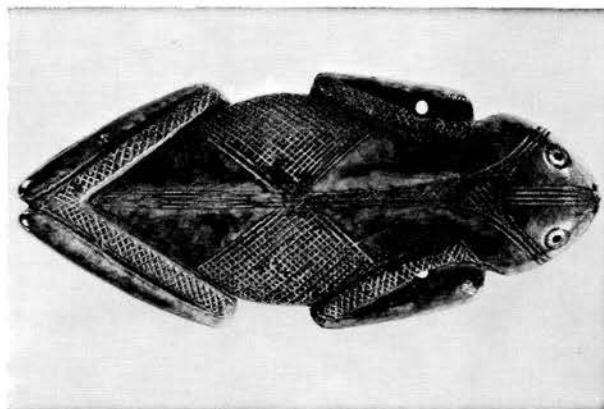


Fig. 9. — 77.17.1 (cl. 118080), 148 mm long. Beautifully patinated frog figurine in ivory, symbolizing Kitende.

than life size. Sung in a female rite without the use of an object, a third aphorism, « Frog of Malambo calls for the male geidambo », the allusion is sexual, like most of the symbolism expressed in that rite. Malambo, the plural form of *idambo*, is the general term for those parts in the forest where many animals converge (e.g., for salt licking).

The next aphorisms are sung in conjunction with one or two frog figures. In the text « Frog sees ; Stupid-One (Miserable, Cripple), at the end (finally) he goes (jumps) into the river », the new initiate is told not to leave the place of the initiations unless authorized and not to go to other initiations unless invited. This is expressed by the first part of the aphorism ; the second part designates the uncautious new initiate running into trouble. Another aphorism also cautions the new initiate to act with circumspection : « Isilia (a species of frog), Great-Old-One, I shall look (let me look) at the ones in the river ». The text « Nyangulanga (a species of frog) does not experience the swelling on account of which (because of which) Nyangunu has died » literally refers to two females (indicated by the morpheme *nya-*), one of whom (Nyangunu) seems to have died because of ritual pollution during pregnancy. But the deeper interpretation signifies that if an experienced senior tutor in the lineage dies without replacement, then there is little hope for the juniors to easily rise further in the hierarchy of initiates. A tutor is a vital spokesman, organizer, and mediator between a candidate and the rest of the initiates. To rely on tutorship outside the group is always more difficult. In one case, the frog and the varan are evoked in conjunction with an ivory sculpture resembling a crocodile but alternately identified as varan (*mpamba*) and chameleon (*mugugu*) : « In the hole Varan is calling ; he resembles Frog », criticizing the boisterous impatience of a seasoned initiate behaving like a freshman.

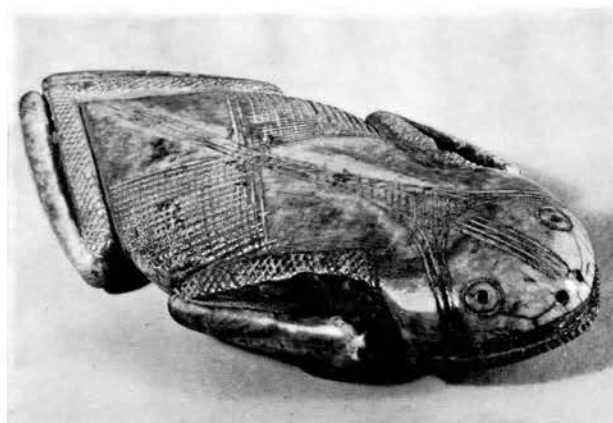


Fig. 10. — *Idem* fig. 9 (cl. 120567).

As is customary in Lega thought, the image of the frog stands for a human character, particularly the new (fresh) initiate. There may be semantic reasons

for this characterization. In the generic term for frog, *kitende*, the root *-tende* is close to that one used in *mutende*, candidate, novice, person being initiated. The term for frog thus becomes a metonymical designation for a new initiate. It is possible that the light, somewhat defenseless, hopping and the swelling of the frog enhance the image of an inexperienced light-headed and rather arrogant new initiate.

This frog figurine, then, may be considered as one of the many types of iconic devices used as visual, mnemonic and dramatic aids and as status symbols in the bwami association. Such objects simply may be carried in the hand, dragged over the ground, displayed, or hung from a fence during a dance performance connected with a specific initiation ritual. The two small holes near the shoulder blades of the frog sculpture probably functioned to fix a string in order to fasten the object to a fence or to pull it over the ground. It therefore must not be assumed that the sculpture was used as a pectoral. Lega initiates wear around the neck a necklace with leopard teeth ; rarely is a figurine attached (Altman, 1963, frontspiece). As is the case for other rare but unusually well-made and highly patinated Lega sculptures, the frog figurine was probably owned either by a preceptor of *kindi* grade or by a senior *kindi* holding the object in trust for the broader ritual community.

The general significance of the frog as a character has been discussed in this essay. The exact meaning conveyed by this particular frog sculpture in ivory may fall within the range of symbolizations analyzed, or it may also be more specific. Objects of identical type and their correlated aphorisms do communicate diverse meanings at different levels of initiation, and sometimes the interpretations provided at the highest levels are deeper and more restricted. Since this figurine apparently was collected outside the initiation context in which it occurred, its specific connotations cannot be guessed. Initiates have a profound sense of the loftiness of their thought, saying about themselves « we sleep on the slopes of mountains, on mountain tops rising into the sky ». They are aware of the intricacies (« the knottiness ») of their symbolisms, identifying themselves with « the (unknown, invisible, and primordial) knotters who knotted the inextricable parts of the forest ». Thus among the Lega like for many other ethnic groups whose artworks form an intrinsic part of a verbal, musical, and kinetic context, only general, albeit valid and revealing, information can be gained from comparison of their static form with similar and different sculptures and from their inclusion in the appropriate conceptual framework. The exact determination of the modes of usage and the specific types of functions and meanings can be made only if the action context is known for each object.

Figure 11, picturing a generalized wooden quadruped with short horns (or perked up ears), clearly illustrates the importance of the context of use for

the full identification of such a simple sculpture. In the area where I obtained it, the object, although fairly small in size (206 mm long), was nevertheless contained in a collectively held basket used in the *lutumbo lwa yananio* rites. The basket's contents included mostly exuviae (chimpanzee skulls, a turtle carapace, a fish skull, a *ngate* beak), some sticks, a small gaff, a piece of twisted vine, and a few sculptured items (a miniature slit-drum, a wooden phallic *katimbitimbi* carving, and a carved wooden hand with lower arm). Each type of object was successively interpreted in a dance and song context organized inside the initiation house by the leading preceptor.

As a generalized quadruped, the carving (as part of the contents of the basket) was identified by its appropriate generic name *mugugundu*. In the dance and song context surrounding the symbolic interpretation of the contents of the basket, the quadruped figurine was the last object to be employed. Frequently the relative sequence in which objects occur signifies the degree of importance attached to them. In this case, the ultimate appearance of the *mugugundu* figurine helped to synthesize some of the key ideas presented during the rite. In none of the four aphorisms sung in conjunction with the quadruped figurine, however, was reference made to a dog or to an antelope as might be expected when such a generalized figurine marked by a certain diacritical sign (the short horns or perked up ears) is handled. All symbolic references were made either to *mumbilumbilu* (drum name for a giant otter) or to *mukondekonde* (a forest crocodile). The aphorisms read as follows : « Giant Otter, the big animal that drinks water », « Forest Crocodile does not eat catfish in its hole », Forest Crocodile, as is the animal so is the skinner », and « Forest Crocodile, the child whom I bring forth laughs at my scales ». The exegesis of the aphorisms aptly summarized some of the major themes of the rite : the initiates' joy in being together in a large gathering ; the impossibility of the high initiate to ignore or neglect any of the persons living in his village ; the praise for the new initiate whose excellent conduct and performance is due to the quality of his tutor ; the need to respect one's father or senior brother.

There is no way in which these symbolic references could have been conjectured outside the initiation context. Certainly the initiates like this kind of unexpected identification and interpretation because it enhances the cryptic character of their actions and helps to protect the secret knowledge from easily being diffused to the outside. But there is also another aspect : the stereotyped aphorisms that are similar in their formulation, content, and standard interpretations throughout Legaland tend to survive the frequently ephemeral objects with which they were originally linked. Objects decay, burn, or are destroyed by animals and insects ; they are replaced by others that may be identical (particular-

ly if they are exuviae) or, if carved, they may be only vaguely reminiscent of the replaced item since they are not copies. Yet, the original interpretation condensed in the aphorisms remains. Some of the apparent discrepancies between the form of the object and the concomittant verbal interpretations, therefore, may be due to these replacements of objects unaccompanied by corresponding shifts in the interpretative aphorisms. The gap between the two may be narrowed by the gestures, the dance movements and the mode of handling of the object.

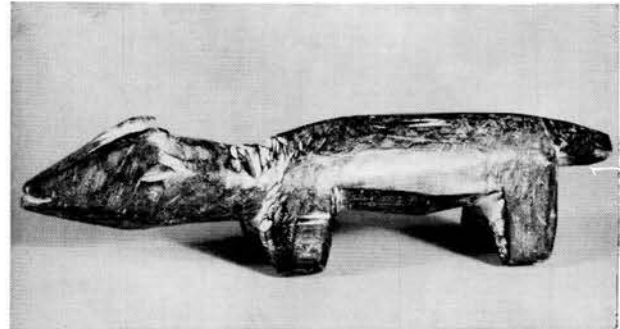


Fig. 11. — 55.3.99 (cl. 59810), 206 mm long.
A generalized wooden quadruped with short horns or perked up ears, symbolic in the rites of a giant otter and of a forest crocodile.

In the case analyzed, the danced drama varied for each of the four aphorisms and definitely contributed to a clearer understanding of the proposed exegesis. In all cases the leading preceptor carried the quadruped figurine in his hands. Throughout the performance, he acted as if he were the impersonation of a character called Big Otter or Forest Crocodile and this identification was established by his handling of the animal figurine. For the first aphorism the initiates, led by the preceptor, danced joyfully in a large circle, making swift turns to mark the idea of completeness of the gathering and the frolicsome movements of the otter in the water ; the preceptor repeatedly pointed at the open mouth of the figurine. Next the leading preceptor and some other initiates danced around in a group until they split, the preceptor gesturally scorning and rejecting one of the dancers. In the third dance, the preceptor and his aides moved towards the seated new initiate and his sponsor pointing at them to show that they were of equal quality. In the final dance, the preceptor alternately rubbed the back of the animal and his own chest, while one of the wildly dancing aides made fun of him. In this subtle interplay between dance movement, verbal behavior, and sculpture lies the key to the understanding of the deeper meanings of Lega art and the logical justification of apparent inconsistencies. The study of these interconnections remains one of the most urgent and promising, but difficult, tasks for the entire field of African art studies.

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SAMENVATTING

De kikker en andere dieren in de kunst en de initiatie bij de Lega.

Bij de Lega, die grotendeels een woudrijk gebied bewonen (Maniema-Zaire) neemt het wild uiteraard en in mindere mate de huisdieren een belangrijke plaats in het voedingssysteem dat trouwens door velerlei restricties wordt bepaald.

Bovendien wordt aan het dier een zeer bijzondere rol toebedeeld in het bestel van het gesloten *bwami*-genootschap waar het bij het initiatieritueel van de talrijke

graden voorkomt hetzij in de vorm van aforismen hetzij in de vorm van kleine beelden. Men onderscheidt enerzijds de abstract weergegeven dierfiguurtjes anderzijds de meer realistische vormgeving.

De A. beschrijft achtereenvolgens verschillende zoomorfe beeldjes en weidt wat langer uit over de voorstelling van de kikker in de Lega-iconografie.

RESUME

La grenouille et autres animaux dans l'art et l'initiation chez les Lega.

Il est évident que chez les Lega (Maniema-Zaire) habitant en grande partie une région forestière, le gibier et subsidiairement le bétail domestique jouent un rôle important dans le régime alimentaire conditionné d'ailleurs par des règles normatives.

L'animal occupe en outre une place toute particulière dans le contexte de l'association fermée du *bwami* où, dans le rituel initiatique de chacun des nombreux

grades, il apparaît généralement sous forme d'aphorismes, mais aussi dans différentes sculptures.

On distingue d'une part les figurines stylisées, d'autre part les figurines réalistes.

L'A. décrit successivement plusieurs représentations d'animaux et s'attache plus particulièrement à l'étude de la grenouille dans l'iconographie lega.