CHAPTER 1

The *Kindi* Aristocrats and Their Art among the Lega

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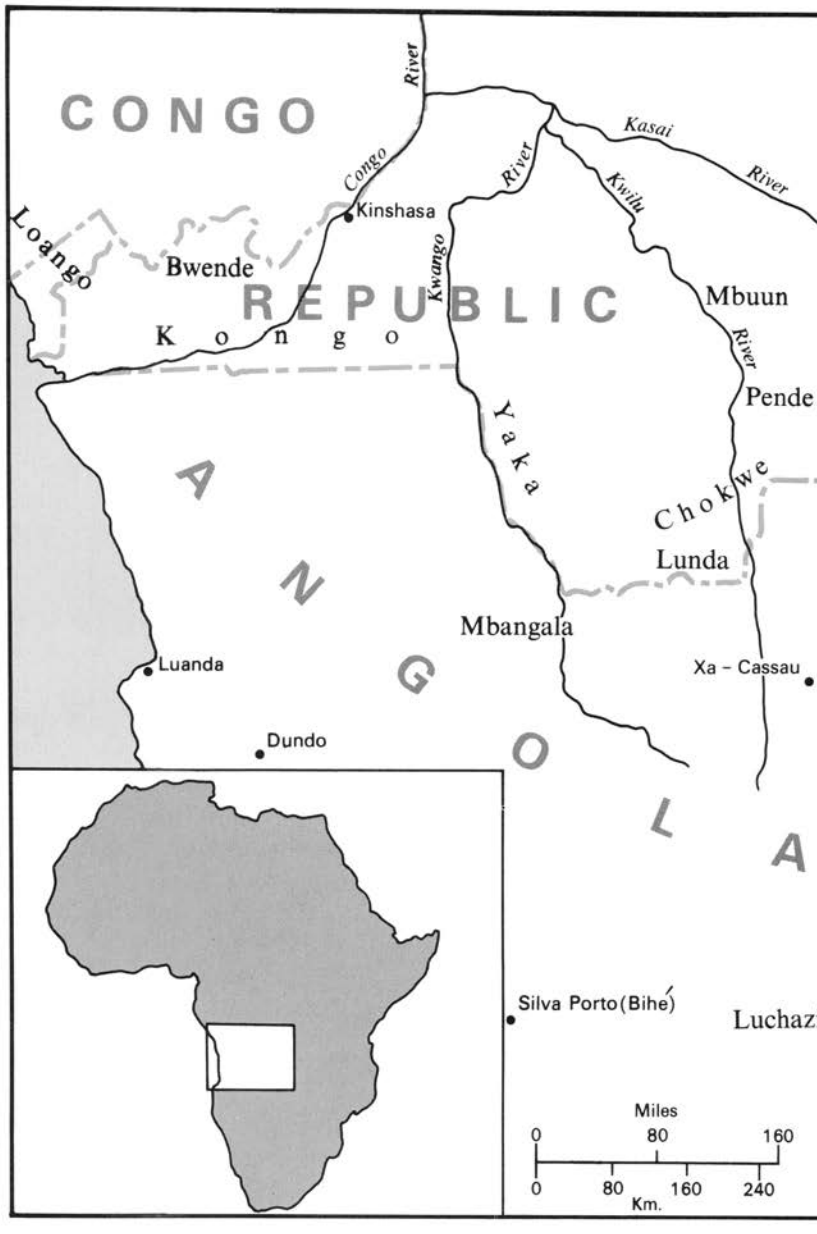
In order to gain a full understanding of the background of meanings and functions associated with Lega wood and ivory carvings, a precise knowledge about certain key aspects of the culture of the Lega is necessary A discussion of the details of various significant features of their social institutions cannot be undertaken here. I shall, therefore, restrict myself to a succinct examination of some of their basic characteristics. The Lega have developed a large number of functional groups of carvings, all of which are connected with different stages of initiation into the *bwami* association. I shall concentrate only on those ivory figurines that are made for, used, owned, and transmitted by the members of the uppermost initiatory level of the highest grade of the association.

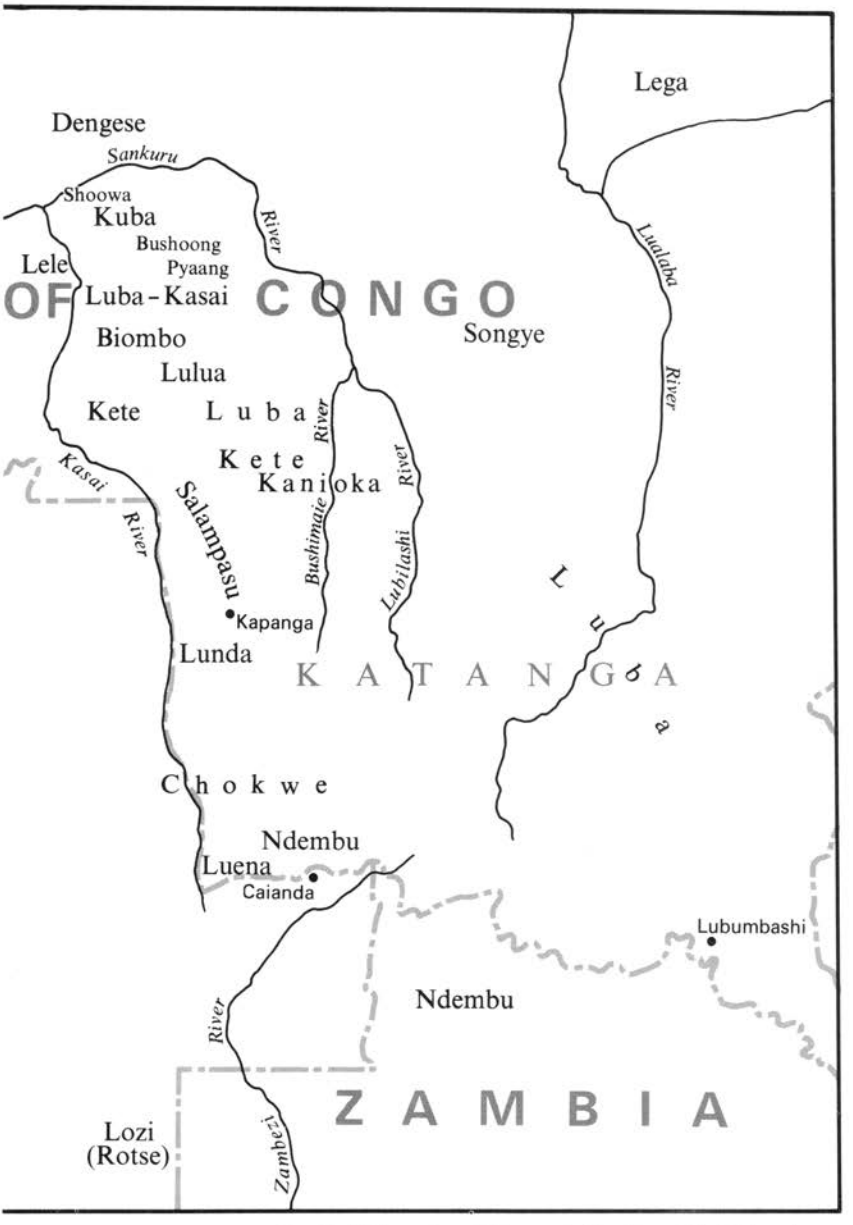
BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LEGA

The Lega people number about 250,000 and live in the eastern part of the Republic of the Congo, Kinshasa, some five hundred kilometers south of Kisangani (Stanleyville), in an abundant forest environment. They are a culturally and linguistically homogeneous people, who are strongly aware—as is evidenced in their ethnohistorical traditions—of their common origins, common experiences, and common culture. There

Note: Field work among the Lega of the territories of Mwenga, Shabunda, and Pangi was done in 1952–1953 under the auspices of l'Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale. The author has revisited the Lega on various occasions since 1954.



MAP 1. Congo Area.



Map by University of Wisconsin Cartographic Laboratory.

are, of course, striking regional differences within the group which are the outcome of various contacts with other cultural entities, of local experience, and so on; these differences, however, manifest themselves more in form and amplitude than in structure or function. This is evidenced, for example, in the styles and the quantity of art objects produced in the various Lega areas. The subsistence economy is centered around the growing of plantain bananas, hunting and trapping (game is still found in very large numbers), the gathering of natural produce, and, to a lesser extent, fishing. Game and plantains are prominent in the diet and in technology, exchanges, initiations, symbolism, and the value system. The meanings conveyed by many of the initiatory items, including carvings, are intimately connected with these central activities and the values placed on them.

The Lega are organized into corporate, localized patriclans. These clans are segmented into a number of lineages of different span and depth, which perform diverse but complementary functions. Relations traced through the nonconnecting parent (mother), and the nonconnecting grand- and great-grandparents, with their respective patrilineages, are particularly strong and provide individuals and family groups with a broad framework of social interaction outside their own lineage and clan. Many features of initiation and correlated acquisition of emblems, including carvings, must be interpreted in the light of these kinship connections. Transfer of carvings, and individual or group control over them, can only be understood through this perspective.

The Lega are not organized into states; they have a segmentary lineage organization. Political relationships are thus rooted in the localized clans and their component lineages. The *bwami* association, which is universal among the Lega, cuts across the existing kinship and territorial subdivisions. It thus provides a framework for many forms of solidarity and cooperation that transcend immediate kinship relationships.

THE *BWAMI* ASSOCIATION

All Lega plastic art is connected with this association, whose members use it for a variety of purposes in well-defined contexts. *Bwami* is a hierarchically constituted body of initiates. Basically, it comprises five grades for men and three complementary grades for women. The men's grades are subdivided into a vast number of initiatory cycles which, in the case of the two highest grades, are grouped into levels and subgrades. The women's grades are more simply structured in a limited number of initiatory cycles. All male Lega have potential access to *bwami* after circumcision. All aspire to it and all endeavor to reach the

first grade and to work themselves up from there. It is fair to say that 95 percent of Lega males achieve rank in the lowest grade of the association, but the bulk of them never get further than the three lower grades. Only when a woman is married to an initiate can she be initiated herself, and even then she can never achieve a grade that would be higher than her husband's. Initiation into any of the grades is not merely a question of individual enterprise; rather, it is conditioned by a wide variety of factors, including support from kinsmen and initiates even from other lineages and clans, sponsorship by prominent members of *bwami,* and the availability of large numbers of diverse (but specific) goods to be used as fees and gifts. In addition, admission is affected by the internal structure of the kinship groups and by that of the broader ritual communities within which initiations are organized, as well as by the moral qualities of the candidate, and so on.

Every cycle of initiations (with increasing complexity and amplitude as a man moves higher and higher in the hierarchy of grades and subgrades) is characterized by appropriate rituals, dances, songs and teachings (all in proverbial form), initiatory objects, paraphernalia, and emblems. Many of the objects used are derived from the natural environment: chimpanzee skulls, hornbill beaks, turtle carapaces, pangolin claws and scales, giant snail shells, and hundreds of similar objects. Others are man-made artifacts done primarily in wood, ivory, and bone, but occasionally also in soapstone or resin. In this classification would be included not only the well-known human and animal figurines and masks and masquettes, but also strictly ceremonial objects, such as hornbill knives, daggers, hammers, axes, pins, and spoons, as well as miniature wooden doors, shields, and chairs.

Figurines and masks represent only one of the many categories of objects used by the *bwami,* and they convey but one set of teachings and meanings within the total framework. From the Lega point of view, the top part of a pangolin tail is just as significant, just as charged with symbolism and meaning, as any of the beautiful statues.

THE *KINDI* ARISTOCRATS

In most areas of Lega country the highest *bwami* grade is called *kindi* (see fig. 1.1). It is subdivided into three or four subgrades, each with its own set of initiatory cycles. The various initiations that lead from the lower grades to *kindi* are time- and energy-consuming. Few individuals get as far as *kindi,* and no one makes it before the age of 50. Attainment of this highest grade, however, is not restricted to members in certain privileged lineages or clans, nor is it related to a man's structural

FIGURE 1.1. Lega. *Mwami* of the highest level in the *kindi* grade, wearing paraphernalia of his rank: hat with elephant tail, belt from bongo antelope skin, skirt of wild-cat skin. Kivu Province. (Photograph: author, 1952.)

position in these groups. Males in almost all known clans in both junior and senior lineage groupings have been initiated into *kindi*. Most clans at any given time will have more than one member who has reached *kindi* grade.

The completion of all cycles of the highest subgrade of *kindi* is considered by the Lega to be the greatest possible ritual and social achievement. Persons who have reached this grade have shown themselves to be masters of social relationships (since they needed much cooperation from many people to reach it). They are looked upon as outstanding examples of virtue and morality. They have successfully passed through all initiatory experiences, assimilating the teachings and values connected with them, and for that reason they are also considered the very wisest. We would be inclined to call them aristocrats, although the simple Greek concept *aristoi* (very best) would be a better designation for them. Lega have many comments to make about the *kindi*. Among other things, the *kindi* are said to be unifiers, men of love (*malebo*), men of peace (*kinkutu*). They are men with a heart; compared to them, all others are like "shoulderbags with a mouth but with no heart." They are sharers and distributors, generous and responsible (*mukota wa kabilundu*). They are strong men, "strong as the stam-

FIGURE 1.2. Lega. Large ivory statue considered to be *nina* (mother) of all smaller statues held by the *kindi* of a single ritual community. A symbol of social cohesion and ritual autonomy, the statue was called Wankenge (the Beautiful Youth). Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren (55.3.145). Ht. 7.4" (18.7 cm). (Photograph: Museum.)

peding of elephants." It is noteworthy that these virtues are represented iconically in ivory statues (see figs. 1.2–1.4).

Kindi members of highest achievement, in principle, all have equal status; membership in specific kinship groups certainly does not influence their position. Nonetheless, there are distinctions based on seniority in the grade and on prestige and fame connected with generosity, equity, and skill as a preceptor. To be a complete *kindi,* a man must have at least one of his wives initiated into the highest female grade (*bunyamwa*), which establishes an indissoluble marriage bond between the spouses.

FIGURE 1.3. Lega. Ivory statue individually held by a *kindi*. It represents Kuboko Kumozi (One Arm), the quarrelsome man who became disfigured as a result of his aggressiveness. Author's collection. Ht. 5.4″ (13.7 cm). (Photograph: author.)

FIGURE 1.4. Lega. Ivory statue individually held by a *kindi*. It represents Kakinga, the little woman who indulged in adultery and disturbed the social and ritual balance of the group into which she married. This is an example of the frequent absence of form-meaning equivalence in Lega art. Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren (55.3.24). Ht. 4.4″ (10.9 cm). (Photograph: Museum.)

MEANING AND FUNCTION OF *KINDI* ART

Practically speaking, all wooden, ivory, and bone animal and human statues are made for, owned, and used by members of the two highest *bwami* grades (*yananio* and *kindi*). There are marked differences in the usage of these objects and in the conditions of their ownership and transfer. In some areas, members of various subgrades within the two highest grades are entitled to particular categories of masks and statues; in other areas, only members of the highest subgrade in each of the two highest grades may own and use them. Regardless of geographical origin, ownership of ivory objects is the privilege of members of the highest grade; wooden objects are shared by members of the two highest grades, but are most numerous among those of *yananio*. Members of the three lower grades are not entitled to possess or manipulate these objects; this, however, does not prevent their occasional use and interpretation in the context of lower initiations (in which members of the highest grades invariably participate). The question now is: what do these carvings do in these initiations and what do they mean to their owners? I will focus my attention on the ivory and bone human figurines used by the highest *kindi* (see figs. 1.2–1.5).

The major display of these statues usually occurs in one of the very last initiatory rites of *kindi*. This rite is known both as *kinsamba* (a word which refers to a multitude of very white and highly coveted mushrooms) and as *bele muno* ("those who are among us"). In contrast to most others, this rite is always extremely simple. The group of *kindi* initiates sits in a circle, either in the initiation hut (*lubungu*) or in the middle of the village (from which noninitiates and all initiates who have not gotten as far as this stage in the rite have been cleared). The new initiate is led in by his tutors. A proverb, "His one, his one, the great one of the *kabilundu* tree," is sung by one of the preceptors; this is a sign. The initiates who are present take off their hats, place them on the ground in front of them, and from their shoulderbags take one or more statues, which they rest against their hats. One of the initiates then places a large ivory statue (see fig. 1.5) in the middle of the circle of hats and smaller statues. There is none of the drumming, dancing, or singing which occur in almost all other rites. The situation is unique in that some of the statues are explained by means of proverbs. A considerable distribution of goods takes place, and following this exchange the initiate receives one or more statues from his *mukomi*-tutor. This statue (or these statues) may have been left by a dead *kindi* of the new initiate's kinship group whom he now replaces. There may not be any such statues available, in which case the new initiate receives in temporary trust the above-mentioned large statue until his own smaller statue

FIGURE 1.5. Lega. Display of ivory statues in the middle of the *kindi* hats at the *kinsamba* rite. The larger ivory figurine is the "mother" of the others. The hats have a raffia framework on which buttons or beads (formerly cowries or small nutshells) are sewn; they are surmounted by an elephant tail. The number of hats and statues displayed is generally much greater than that seen in this photograph, depending upon the number of participating *kindi*. Kivu Province. Ht. ranges from 4″ (10 cm) to 8.5″ (21.5 cm). (Photograph: author, 1952.)

has been carved. At the end of the rite, the order to "pluck the *kinsamba* mushrooms" is given by one of the preceptors, and all *kindi* put their statues back in their shoulderbags. The entire rite is impressive both because of the magnificent display and because of the unusual parsimony of words, gestures, and rhythms.

Some of the meanings of the ivory statues can readily be derived from this context.

a. They are badges or emblems of rank, like many other objects which the same *kindi* possess. Only persons of the right initiatory experience can hold and manipulate these objects. None of the *kindi* are permitted to participate in the *kinsamba* rite if they fail to produce their statue(s).

b. They are prestige symbols. Few individuals get to the initiatory level where they are allowed to possess these ivory carvings. Once they have achieved this level, however, they become involved in an effort to

acquire many statues, either permanently or temporarily in trust. When, for example, a *kindi* dies, a colleague known for his wisdom and virtue is chosen to act as *mukondi we idumba,* guardian of the grave. After the mourning period is over, that person receives in temporary trust statues and masks which were in the dead *kindi*'s possession. It is understood that these sculptures are to be transferred ultimately to the new initiate who will replace the dead *kindi,* but several years may elapse before such a successor is found. Nobody is thought to be a perfect *kindi* until he has fulfilled the guardianship function at least once in his lifetime. When an individual at the *kinsamba* rite displays several statues, it is an immediate indication of his virtue and perfection, a source of his prestige and reputation.

c. All statues are associated with proverbs, one or more for every piece. The proverbs contain valuable teachings for the initiates. They express the ethical code of *bwami,* either positively (fig. 1.2) or in a contrasting negative way (figs. 1.3, 1.4). The values which the statues convey are not fundamentally different from those expressed through the medium of much simpler objects at other stages of the *bwami* initiations. But these teachings, when iconically represented in *kindi* art forms, reach a dramatic climax of intensity and directness. Yet nothing is more deceptive than to try to read meanings into the forms of Lega ivory statues. Only the Lega know those meanings and their associations with specific forms or contexts. The forms of Lega statues only occasionally exhibit a visible connection with the meanings associated with them. For the large majority of carvings, equivalences between form and meaning are totally absent or, at least for us, not directly understandable.

Let us take a few examples. Many Lega statues have more than one head or face; some have two heads, some others have from two to six faces. Regardless of the number, these carvings invariably represent "The man with many big heads who has seen an elephant on the other side of the large river." In one set of interpretations they illustrate one group of qualities expected from a *kindi:* equity, wisdom, discernment, and the gift of looking in various directions. In another set of interpretations they represent the idea of continuity: one *kindi* dies, another *kindi* will be initiated; a father dies, his son succeeds him. In this case one can certainly find some link between form and the meaning conveyed by it. There are also statues with one arm which symbolize the aggressive and quarrelsome individual (what a *kindi* never should be!) who lost an arm as a result of hot temper (fig. 1.3). There are still others with huge raised hands which represent the *kindi* as peacemakers

and arbiters and express the threat of *kitampo* (the destructive effect originating from the nonobservance of the *bwami*'s decisions). In most cases, however, these fairly easy form-meaning equations cannot be found. This holds particularly for the many statues that represent the Trouble-Maker, the Old Man, the Beautiful Youth, the Young Maiden (fig. 1.4), the Ill-Tempered One, and so on.

Basically, all Lega ivory statues fall into one of two categories of meanings: those that stand for *bunene* (good, good luck, perfection, greatness, achievement, success, and reputation) and those that illustrate *bwanya* (evil, bad luck, lack of moderation, and any other behavior patterns which a real *kindi* should not exemplify). Finally, more than one meaning may be conveyed by a single statue, and two or more statues may have complementary meanings and be used jointly.

We have already mentioned the larger ivory statue that is placed in the middle of a circle of hats and smaller figurines during the *kinsamba* rite (fig. 1.5). These larger pieces are not possessed individually. Members of a localized clan or, in some cases, a number of ritually linked maximal lineages, eventually of different clan origin, share but one such carving. These statues are kept in trust for the whole community either by the most ancient *kindi* of that group or by that lineage, one of whose members is said to have reached the *kindi* grade in the remote past. Such statues are not classified by the Lega under a special generic term; they are called *iginga* like all the others. But in their interpretations the *kindi* tend to conceive of them as *nina* (the mother), as female progenitors from whom all the other individually held ivory figurines originated. Whatever the case may be, these pieces are symbols of social cohesion and of ritual autonomy. The final *kindi* rites within a given community (a localized clan or linked maximal lineages) cannot be held without the presence of such a statue. Mock resistance on the part of its guardian must be overcome by gift-giving and dialogue. On the other hand, any community which has acquired such a statue can autonomously organize its highest *kindi* rites.

It is noteworthy that one of the names of the rites in which the main display of statues occurs is *kinsamba.* This term, as mentioned before, refers to a particular species of very white mushrooms which grow gregariously. As does the name for the bongo antelope, the word *kinsamba* stands for everything very beautiful and good. In this ceremony the *kindi* implicitly emphasize the great beauty and goodness of both their statues and themselves. These two concepts, expressed as *busoga,* arise over and over again within the context of all *bwami* initiations. The great *kindi* is beautiful and good. Utmost care, in this respect, is given

to the ivory statues, which are oiled with castor oil and perfumed in the same manner as the *kindi* oil and perfume their own bodies.

Some other meanings and usages of the ivory statues are not fully illustrated within the framework of the *kinsamba* rite. It is clear that none of them serves as a medium through which worship for ancestors or spirits is channeled. Yet connections with basic religious ideas are apparent from the following usages. A dead *kindi* is buried in the house of his first *kanyamwa,* the wife with whom he passed through the *itutu* (roof-top) rite. His ivory statues, ivory mask, and some other paraphernalia are displayed on the tomb until after the end of the mourning period, at which time these objects are taken into temporary trusteeship by the guardian of the grave. Rather than asserting that the spirit or the soul of the dead *kindi* enters the statue, the Lega, on the contrary, repeatedly stress the fact that the dead are *kiligeza,* that they disappear altogether and never come back. What continues to exist, the people affirm, is the *bwami* association in which the dead *kindi* represent a vital chain, together with the objects that were associated with them and are destined to pass on to the succeeding *kindi.* One could say then that these statues, among other things, are the external symbols of this never-ending chain of initiations and thus of the perenniality of *bwami* itself. Any ivory statue which has passed through several hands over a number of generations symbolizes a chain of linked dead *kindi.*

The supreme rite in which the ivory statues are used en masse is also called typically *bele muno* ("those who are among us here"). The inference that might be drawn from this is that the *kindi* ranks are composed of two entities: the living *kindi* and the statues, which represent a known chain of successive generations of *kindi* linked through common kinship and ritual substitution for one another. It is not strange, then, that for the Lega, these ivory statues contain and present *magala* (force). In cases of distress or illness, the *kindi* sandpapers the back of his statue with leaves until he creates some dust, which he then mixes with water and drinks as a potent protective.

The story of Lega sculpture within the context of the *bwami* association is an intricate and multifaceted one. In the total system of initiations, the human figurines in ivory and bone represent only a minor fraction of the entire set of devices used dramatically to underline the ethics and ideas for which the association stands. The analysis presented here has established the multivalence of meanings and functions attached to a single category of carved objects. Simple stereotypes cannot account for this multivalence. Lega sculpture is deeply embedded in a system of ideas and social relationships which are typical, though

by no means unique, for the Lega. Their art cannot be arbitrarily isolated from this system without gross distortion, nor can it be readily reduced to our current functional interpretations. The ivory statues are the iconic abstracts of these ideas and values. They do not depict these things, but rather they *are* the values. They—the statues, the values—sustain the *bwami* association and the Lega society at large and symbolize the cohesion and endurance of both institutions. Perhaps coincidentally, the generic term *iginga,* which is used to refer to all the human figurines, is paralleled by the Lega with the verb *kuginga,* "to sustain, to protect from falling or collapsing." The *bwami* association itself acts as an integrator of Lega society, preserving among potentially conflicting kinship groups an ethical code built on goodness, virtue, and peace.