

LEGA SPOONS

*Daniel P. Biebuyck**Introduction*

Few peoples known in the ethnographic literature attach to the spoon the high symbolic significance that it has for the Lega. For them, the ivory or bone spoon reserved for high-ranking members of the bwami association is primarily a ritual object and not an implement. In multiple variations, but with a restricted semantic range, the spoons are found in all areas of the Lega and among the Nyindu.

The ceremonial importance of spoons is documented from antiquity and is well evidenced in catholic liturgy or British coronation ceremonies (Stutzenberger, 1953). In Zaire the Lega are virtually the only people who have made spoons into outstanding smooth, patinated, and glossy artworks rendered in many diverse forms. The Lega ivory and bone pieces exhibit the appealing artistry found in the exquisite sheephorn spoons of the Pacific Northwest Coast Indians.

The origin of the idea of using spoons in the bwami initiation ceremonies is impossible to ascertain with certainty. The Lega traditionally have little domestic necessity for spoons or ladles. Great hunters and plantain growers, they prefer to eat with their hands bananas and game meat roasted in leaf packages on a fire. It has not been established whether the spoons were copied for ritual functions from similar implements used among neighboring groups for domestic purposes or from models introduced into the area through the Baungwana slave raiders. Initiates owning spoons often claim to have inherited them at their initiations from their fathers' legacies, noting in several instances that their fathers had received them from their fathers and sometimes tracing origins back to their fathers' fathers' maternal uncles. Several considerations militate against a

rather recent foreign origin of the spoon. They are widespread throughout Legaland, used in several rites, and thoroughly integrated into the bwami context. Throughout its rites, bwami is extremely tradition oriented. When a few extraneous culture elements are incorporated in bwami, the Lega explicitly note their foreign origin (e.g., raffia cloth or camwood powder) or tend to simply borrow the objects without manufacturing them (e.g., light bulbs, madonnas, perfume bottles, sculptures in ivory and ebony obtained from Bausa traders). It is not altogether impossible that spoons originate in increasingly schematized versions of certain types of rather flat wooden anthropomorphic sculptures, with gradual reduction of the head to the convex-concave bowl supported by a stem. In some models the spoon clearly espouses the form of a human body with arms and legs; in others this form is gradually more and more reduced to a simple flat or rounded stem with arms placed like bows or handles against it. In many specimens the form of the handle itself closely follows the pattern of peg-shaped figurines and wedged double-edged knives. The development of Lega spoons from anthropomorphic to schematized models unfortunately cannot be established chronologically, but the seriation of the available specimens seems to indicate that there were various possible stages.

The diversity and artistic qualities of Lega ivory and bone spoons are truly remarkable. They vary in size but rarely are longer than 20 cm to 21 cm (the characteristic size measured from the tip of the middle finger to the wrist), with many falling into the 13 cm to 19 cm range. Like the ivory and bone figurines, the warm colors of the patina range from yellow to yellow-brown and yellow-gray (mainly for those in bone) and deep red to red-brown. The total form of the spoon reflects various conceptions in the way the bowl, the stem, and the knop are carved. The oval-shaped concave and rather shallow bowl is unadorned and sometimes almost transparent, but in some specimens the rim of the bowl is ridged and spouted towards the handle. A smaller bowl of the same type may adorn the other side of the handle in lieu of a knop or other feature. The stem itself is carved in the most unexpected ways, and the following are the major varieties.

1. The broad stem is sculptured like a full human body with falling shoulders connected with the bowl (the head) by a short neck or indentation, hanging stump arms carved loose from the body, and stump or full legs with feet. In some samples the female genitalia are suggested by a triangle. Other specimens are adorned

with circle-dot motifs or circular imprints around the chest or pubic area (Biebuyck, 1973, pl. 97; de Kun, 1966, pl. 31; Sieber, 1980, pl. 71). In some examples this type of carving is reduced to a bustlike figurine, the scoop representing the head, and the short straight stem intersected by falling shoulders and hanging arms forming a long neck and short trunk without legs (Périer, n.d., p. 807, spoon on the right).

2. A narrow stem connecting the concave bowl (serving as head) and the spread legs is flanked by two handlelike ajouré arms (like arms bent to the hips) that together form a lozenge. The stem and the handles are adorned with circle-dot motifs, and one circle-dot is placed at the intersection of the legs (Städtisches Museum, 1968, p. 34).

3. The entire stem is carved in the form of a bust with head and arms. The bent akimbo arms form the lozenge-shaped contour of the bust. The head replaces the knop so that the scoop at the end of the figurine clearly stands as *idago* (the concave part, i.e., the lower part of the belly, the vulva; plate 1). In a rare example, the handle is made into a full female figurine with breasts, navel, and large engraved genitalia, the figurine facing the convex part of the scoop (Biebuyck, 1973, p. 95).

4. Two scoops adorn the opposite sides of the handle, which is carved in the form of a human bust with a short full head with facial features and short stump arms and legs. Parallel striations occur on the forehead, the arms, and the legs. An oval concavity separating the legs suggests female genitalia (plate 2).

5. The bowl may be carved as a head with the upper part of the stem conceived as a lozenge-shaped ajouré bust delimited by the outer contours of akimbo arms on hips. The lower part of the stem is developed into a narrow waist with large slanting thighs and long straight spread legs.

6. A broad stem (straight, scalloped, wedged, elliptical, or oval) or two narrow bent stems connect the bowl and the knop. The straight stem sometimes has one, two, or three double superposed sets of arched ears, rhomboids, or dentelated patterns. The stem may be flat, spherical or angular, with an axial line running over its entire length and decorated with circle-dots, punched holes, or large cowries in relief (plates 3 to 7; Clouzot and Level, n.d., pl. XLVI; Parke-Bernet Galleries, 1968, pl. 37; Noll et al., 1972, no 146; Jacquot, 1977, p. 418, no. 4).

7. The entire stem or the knobless end part of it is carved as an elongated wedged double-edged knife or oblong flaring spear point (plate 8; Périer, n.d., p. 807, piece on the left; Sieber, 1980, p. 71).

In those specimens where the end of the stem, opposite to the bowl, is not carved in the form of a second scoop or legs, it may be squared or rounded off without a knob (plate 7). It is mainly finished into a knob that is carved like a single or double masklike face, a short or elongated cone, a diamond or octohedron, a lozenge, a fishtail, or a prong or chevron (sometimes suggestive of short legs; plates 5-6). The diamond-shaped knob sometimes suggests the gland, and when adorned with two circle-dots, a human lozenge-shaped face.

Given the clear-cut and restrictive meanings and usages of all spoons (regardless of their specific formal variations), the creative imagination of the artists seems to have been extremely great although limited by the very form of the spoon.

Spoons are one of many categories of artworks, artifacts, and natural objects by means of which the principles of the moral, legal, and social code of the Lega bwami association are illustrated and suggested in a ritual context that includes sung aphorisms, dance, and dramatic action (Biebuyck, 1973). The following exegesis is provided around the spoons.

Spoons as Permanent Symbols

Like other sculptured (figurines, masks) and natural (beaks, scales, carapaces, etc.) objects that act as status and initiation symbols connected with special rank, spoons are a testimony left by the dead initiates of the bwami association to their living successors (preferably close agnatic kin) as a sign of transgenerational continuity, a memory of a close kinsman's achievements. To stress this point of view, the following aphorisms are sung about spoons displayed and danced with in a ritual context: "Everything rottens, the limb (bone) of the arms does not rotten"; "Lukili: those who sharpened (filed) him the teeth have died long ago"; "Kakili sees (the thing) where Nkondo (Adz) Satwamaboko (Mr. Big-Arms) carved"; "I came to the place where Elephant rottened; (nothing else) but large ribs and large femurs." These four texts in their metaphorical formulations all point explicitly to the quasi-immortality of the high initiate. He has disappeared altogether with

no hope for return. His name and fame and his achievements, however, are concretized in the spoons passed on to his successors as the permanent signs of his transfiguration. The texts directly bear on the spoon as an object carved in elephant bone or ivory, as a permanent legacy, and as a person (the initiate).

Spoons Symbolizing Women and Sex

The convex-concave form of the bowl-shaped receptacle of the spoon symbolically stands for the back and the lap of a woman. During the rites the spoon, placed in a configuration of objects, is picked up in dance movement and turned to show the hollow then the convex part of the bowl. In this context, one of the most consistently recurring texts is sung; I have heard it in slightly differing versions among all Lega groups and among the Nyindu : "Kalukili you used to give me *idago* (the concave part, the lap, the vulva); you now give me the back." The variations pertain to the second part of the aphorism; instead of "the back," the buttocks or "the chest of ribs" are mentioned, or the entire phrase is modified as "you used to give the things we eat" (sexual connotation). Like many other texts sung during the initiations, this one is conceived as a complaint by a man (an initiate) speaking about a wife who now rejects him. A warning for the initiated kalonda or kanyamwa woman is implicit : the rites foster an indelible bond between wife and husband cointiated at the highest levels of bwami. The complaint goes beyond this point as a mild criticism directed against a tutor who refuses to give the candidate the advice and material help he needs and, in general, against any person to whom one showed respect and support but who fails to reciprocate. The ideas of rejection and refusal in other contexts are often dramatically enhanced by other initiates who sit turning their backs against each other, covering their faces or letting their heads hang.

In select communities the basic idea of rejection and its causes are further elaborated, but attention is focused on the material (elephant ivory or bone) in which the spoon is carved. In the exegesis of an object, focus shifts frequently from its form to its material or the type of action in which it occurs. The preceptor rubs the back of the spoon while dancing : "The buttocks are small and flat ! Nzogu (Elephant) does not listen to the words of people", a subtle allusion to a man who seduces the wives of his kinsmen. One preceptor places the spoon on the shoulder and dances around; a

second one seizes it and a third also tries to grab it : "Mulamba (Ivory), always placed on the shoulder will fall into pieces." Mulamba signifies a woman who runs around to other places too much and thereby ruptures the marriage bond. "The woman Mulamba must not be placed at the outskirts of the village (so that) she will not be eaten by Bush-Baby." In this context the verb "to eat" has sexual overtones. The aphorism is a statement of principle : when an initiate goes to participate in the bwami rites he must not leave his initiated wives behind not only because others may covet them while he is away, but also since women play an essential role in the rituals. The aphorism in general notes that a man must not neglect his wife ("placed at the outskirts"); if he does, he should not be astonished if she goes elsewhere.

Spoons as the Equivalents of Knives

In all bwami initiations the use of iron implements and weapons is avoided. Spears are replaced by wooden sticks, shields by a small plank door or an ajouré shieldlike piece of wickerwork. There are wooden, ivory, and bone miniaturized replicas of axes, billhooks, knives, and planting knives. This is in line with the nonviolent character of bwami that emphasizes the strict avoidance of all potential sources of violent quarrel. Near the end of the kindi rites, ivory and bone knives and spoons are used in the *ibago lya nzogu*, the ritual skinning and cutting up of the elephant (represented by the initiation house itself). There is much diverse action in this rite. Each of the initiates holding a knife or a spoon (held by the scoop) circles, dances, and runs around the initiation house, then places the knives and spoons on the roof. The candidate, who has by now almost finished all the rites, subsequently joins them; grabbing a knife or a spoon from the roof, he pierces the roof shouting his drum name. All initiates then take the knives and spoons and cut and pull leaves from the roof and place them in a pile (later burned and the ashes collected as hunting charms). This curious rite, which I saw performed in different communities, symbolically reenacts the trapping, killing, and distributing of an elephant. The candidate is likened to a *mutuma* (an expert elephant trapper) who has been successful in his endeavors and enjoys the results of his efforts : the former candidate has now become a full-fledged kindi. In this ritual the small ivory knives and spoons are used as a single functional and semantic category. The four aphorisms sung on this

occasion do not speak about spoons and only once mention "my little knife" (*kene kane*) when the initiates start circling around the house : "Give me my little knife, I am spending the night at the place of skinning of the elephant."

The use of spoons as equivalents to and replacements for knives obviously fails within the world view and general *modus operandi* of the bwami initiations. Throughout the rites many actions and objects are substituted for one another to convey identical meanings. A similarly worded aphorism, for example, may be sung about a wooden or an ivory maskette, a *lubumba* polished shell, or a *nsamba* fish skull because all are privileged objects that belong to the legacy of a dead initiate and become the insignia of a new one. Cryptic procedures (doing unusual things, giving unusual meanings to known objects) are cultivated deliberately to puzzle and to confuse non-initiates and initiates of lower levels. There is some indication, however, that in this particular rite the use of spoons as substitutes for knives has an additional meaning. In one community the above-mentioned text read "Give me my little knife, I am spending the night at the place of skinning of the elephant; I do not have my little knife." Its explanation was marked by a bitter complaint : in the past we were many *kindi* and used to be called upon for settling all affairs; now, many are dead without being replaced (because of the colonial prohibitions against bwami), and we are no longer called upon to settle the problems of the land; we are like *bagunda* (noninitiates, people of nothing). The spoons replacing ivory knives emphasized this idea of loss and distress.

In some other rituals where only one spoon occurs, it is used and identified as a knife or rather the person dancing and brandishing it is referred to as a violent trouble-maker. In one rite, the enactment of a confused divination scene is followed by false accusations and the drinking of a poison ordeal. One preceptor brandishes a spoon and makes a mock attack against his colleagues : "Sakyene (Mr. Big-Knife) destroys Mukunda (Bush) because of his fierceness" or "Sakyele (son) of Mulambu (person; lit. net hunt of long duration) disperses his *lutanda* (shack built in proximity of the place where the hunting nets are set up)." This denotes that a violent person cannot be a leader, or that an impulsive person who beats his wives and chases them away will remain alone and unprotected.

In yet another rite, a preceptor holding a spoon makes a mock attack against two women sitting close to each other, their foreheads

touching : "We spear Civet, the big animal of fear", to admonish one to speak with respect and awe before a person who is superior to him in force (in status); if that person came to realize that he is being scorned, there would be awesome results.

Other Ritual Usages

In a spectacularly enacted divination and "drinking of the *kabi* poison ordeal", the accusation had fallen on the wife of an initiate (the role of the wife was performed by a male preceptor). She denied having killed through witchcraft and was invited to symbolically drink the poison. A preceptor was already scraping some bark from the central pole of the initiation house. For this purpose he used an ivory spoon that had been lying in a configuration of objects on the *mukumbi* pit (symbol of a *yananio's* or *kindi's* grave). The wife's husband stubbornly protested, and so the diviner himself had first to drink the poison to prove the correctness of his verdict. Since he did not succumb, the woman was given the poison; soon she started trembling and fell down, but another actor (representing the wife's maternal uncle) now placed the ivory spoon in her mouth while the choir sang : "They place a little stick in her mouth; she was not unjustly incriminated." The entire scene is a criticism against the *bugila* mode of divination and the drinking of the poison ordeal, but the act of placing the spoon in the mouth of the moribund person bears on privileges exercised by maternal uncles and sororal nephews. Such persons could perform the act to save their kin (i.e., placing the spoon or stick in the mouth was the equivalent of a request that antedotes be administered).

In another rite an ivory spoon was used to symbolically feed a masker. A preceptor wearing a large *muminia* maski, fixed to the temple so that the long beard of the mask hung only partly before his face, fed himself some phrynium leaves with a spoon. He sat chewing slowly and with difficulty : "Old-Turtle is eating pounded bananas" and "Who eats much, come and see how he eats dried roasted bananas." The two aphorisms bear on the etiquette of eating (an aspect also illustrated by other means during the rites). Old men visiting as guests must be well treated. One does not let them eat outside where children could make fun of them; one's wife must prepare soft and well-done foods. When eating jointly with him, one must eat slowly in order to give him time to chew and swallow. The possibility that old initiates eat soft foods, porridges, and sauces

with their ivory spoons is not excluded, although I personally did not observe this practice. Delhaise (1909, p. 275) notes that "old men have spoons and eat porridge with them." I was informed that among the northwestern Lega they use a spoon with two bowls (one at each end of the stem); old men ate pounded foods with the larger scoop and well-done soft foods or sauces with the smaller one.

Those who hold the sacred objects of the lower *kansilembo* rite (that is, those who have the responsibility for organizing the circumcision ceremonies) have an ivory or bone spoon. Persons of this status have very special duties and privileges and are often compared to a *kindi* (only a person who has formally viewed the initiation basket of *kansilembo* can finish the *kindi* initiation; therefore when necessary they are inserted in the *kindi* rites). The spoon that is shown during *kansilembo* is called *lulami lwa bwami*, the tongue of *bwami*. The nomenclature bears on the custom of placing a stick in the mouth of the young man (so that he can bite it) while he is being circumcised.

The spoons, together with many other sculptures, are also displayed in the *belemuno* and *kinsamba* rites of *kindi*. They are exhibited and oiled on a mat in the *kingili* rite while the sacred mirliton sings.

Like many other carvings used in the *bwami* initiations, the spoon is a multifunctional and polysemous object. Part of its meaning lies in its very essence of being an inheritable permanent product of human activity; part of the meaning resides in its form (real and perceived) and in the particular manner it is used and manipulated. As an inherited status and initiation object, the spoon does not differ from other carvings. It is a reminder of one's own achievements and of those of one's predecessors, a linkage with the past and with the future, a guarantee of continuity. The generic term for spoon (*lukili*, *kakili*) stands for the name of the heir. Whether the spoon is clearly anthropomorphic or, to Western eyes at least, only a highly schematic rendition of the human form, the spoon combined with a particular mode of usage is suggestive of a woman. She is referred to as *Kalukili*, the generic term for spoon, or *Mulamba*, the generic term for ivory. In many examples, the form of the stem is clearly skeuomorphic; it reproduces a wedged, double-edged knife. If this shape is blurred by undulated and dentelated edges, it is still thought of as a cutting implement in a context where the spoon held by the bowl symbolizes cutting or attacking. Still other references are to general usages (the spoon can be used to feed)

and to specific ones (the spoon is placed in the mouth of a person who drinks the poison ordeal, and when someone wants to save that person; the spoon is the symbolic equivalent of a stick that is placed in the mouth of a young man when he is circumcised).

It is during the initiation rites that spoons, like other insignia of rank, are transmitted to the new initiates. All insignia before being transferred are the subject of verbal and kinetic exegesis. The new adept of the association first must learn the implicit and the explicit metaphorical references of the privileged objects he will own. Without insight into this intricate learning process, which is verbally condensed in terse aphoristic statements accompanied and amplified by dance movements and dramatic action, relationships between Lega forms and meanings cannot be understood.

NOTE

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PLATES

Plate 1. Ivory spoon, Lega (Tervuren, R.G. 35946; L. 21 cm).

Collected by Mr. Baude. The head, serving as a knob, is carved in concave style with cowrielike slit-eyes, sharp ridged nose and ovoid mouth carved in relief.

Plate 2. Ivory spoon, Lega (Tervuren, R.G. 55.3.111; L. 20.4 cm).

Collected by D. Biebuyck among the Banamwimba from a lutumbo lwa kindi. The stem carved in a highly schematic human figurine is unusual. Spoons with two scoops are called *lukili lwa matwe mabili* (spoons of two heads).

Plate 3. Spoon in bone, Lega (Tervuren, R.G. 55.3.94; L. 22.2 cm).

Collected by D. Biebuyck among the Banamugunza from a lutumbo lwa kindi. The mask-shaped head is janiform. The relief carving on the stem of cowries is unusual.

Plate 4. Ivory spoon, Lega (Tervuren, R.G. 55.3.68; L. 19.1 cm).

Collected by D. Biebuyck among the Baseide-Banakalela in north-western Legaland from a lutumbo lwa yananio who controlled the organization of circumcision rites.

Plate 5. Ivory spoon. Lega (Tervuren, R.G. 55.3.129; 24.8 cm).

Collected by D. Biebuyck among the Banamunwa-Banabulambo from a lutumbo lwa kindi.

Plate 6. Spoon in bone, Lega (Tervuren, R.G. 27512; L. 16.4 cm).

This is Tervuren's earliest registered spoon derived from the large collection of objects deposited in 1917 by the Secretary General of the Congo.

Plate 7. Ivory spoon, Lega (Tervuren, R.G. 55.3.113; L. 13.5 cm).

Collected by D. Biebuyck among the Banalwimba.

Plate 8. Ivory spoon, Lega (Tervuren, R.G. 38731; L. 13.7 cm).

Collected by Mr. Van Hooen before 1939. The form of the stem closely resembles the wedged ivory and bone knives used in bwami.

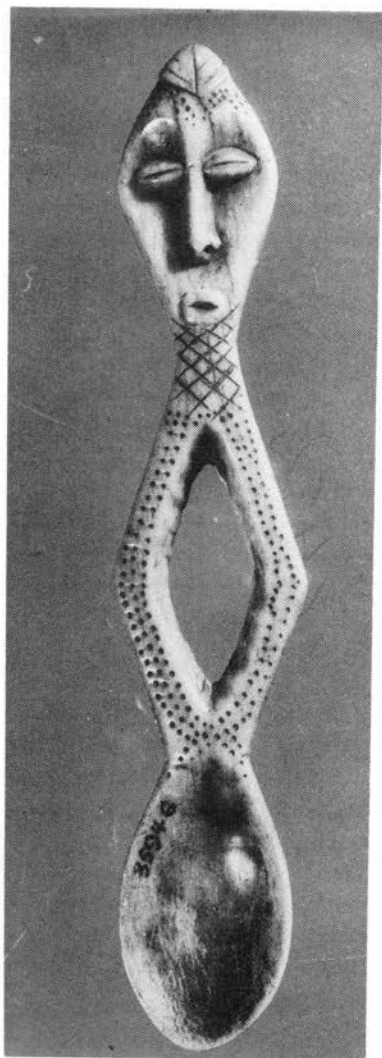


Plate 1.



Plate 2.

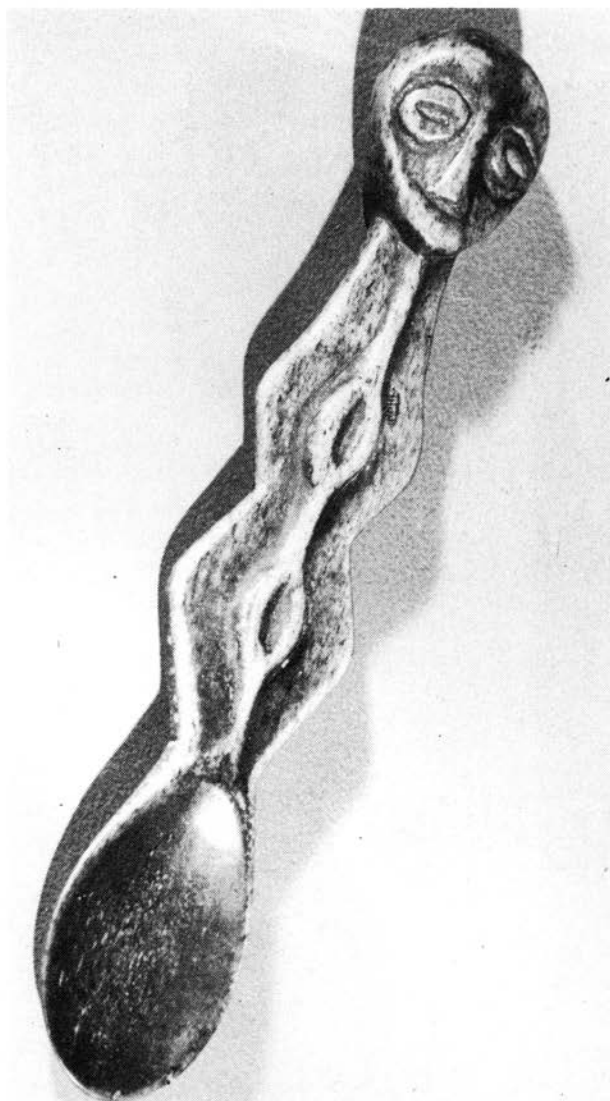


Plate 3.

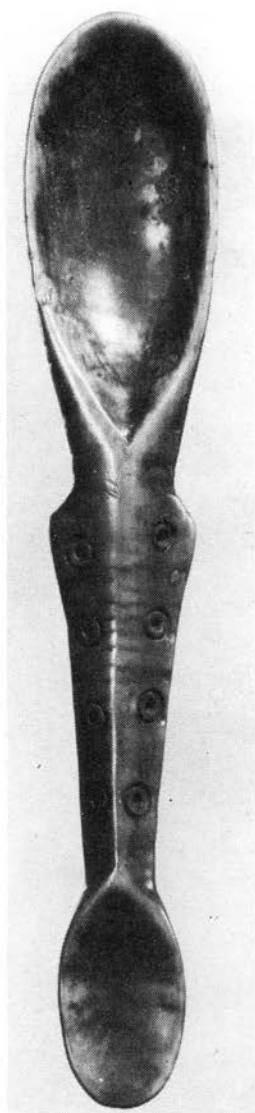


Plate 4.



Plate 5.



Plate 6.

Plate 7.

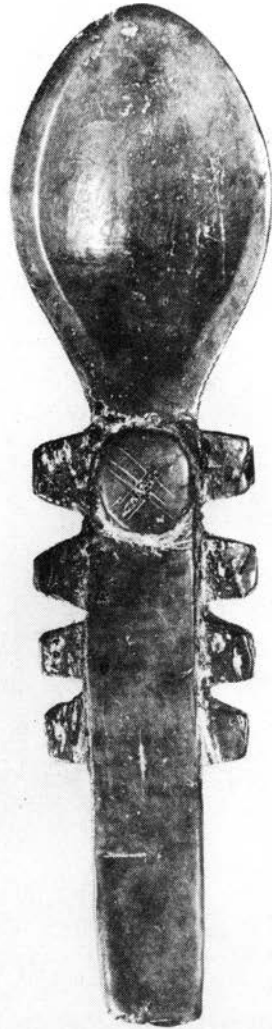


Plate 8.

