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SYMBOLISM OF THE LEGA STOOL

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"Great-Old Initiate has come for
the dances from a faraway place."

Sung to praise an old kindi who,
supported by his two initiated sons,
made a few dance passes carrying
his kisumbi stool in his hands.

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INTRODUCTION

It is well known that stools occur in many different shapes and sizes in Africa and that they are manufactured and used for a great number of diverse purposes. Detailed studies of the range of forms and usages of stools in single cultures are few. The available information in such cases is generally provided in a piecemeal manner in monographs, mostly as an adjunct to some discussion on ritual or political organization or as part of a descriptive enumeration of the items of material culture. Comparative analyses, either on a small or a larger scale, are nonexistent.

Many superficial observations indicate the possible significance of stools in various cultures. Stools are obviously made in such a way that they can serve as a device for sitting, but they are, of course, not a vital necessity. Logs, mats, hides, leaves, and cloth can easily fulfill this function, and in many societies these are the primary objects on which people sit, unless they prefer the bare ground. In those instances where stools apparently are used for sitting and may be identified as pieces of furniture, they exhibit interesting features for consideration because of their formal diversity and their connections with patterns of etiquette, social status, and prestige. Certain types of stools are distributed over wide geographical areas among closely related as well as unrelated populations. Their distribution presents intriguing problems relating to migration, diffusion, and creative innovation. Thus, the elementary tripod backrest occurs in a number of variations and in differing degrees of refinement among the Ituri Pygmies and many forest-dwelling peoples of the Zaire Republic, where Pygmy influence is more or less directly attested. In these areas, this type of backrest is, at the same time, in competition with other kinds of stools.

Although the stool may be primarily a device for sitting, there are always specialized meanings possible, and there are definite prescriptions and proscriptions about its usage or misusage. Among the Nyanga of Eastern Zaire, numerous rules pertain to the utebe stool (a small and low piece of wood carved as two concave spheres forming the seat and base, which are interconnected by a column or pedestal). This object is essentially a support for men to sit on; women are normally seated on a piece of wood or on a hide. However, women do sit on such a stool when, at the end of the mourning rites for a deceased husband or son, their hair is shaved. A person must not throw one's stool at its rightful possessor or threaten him with it. Until the breach of this taboo is settled (by ritual eating and blessing), the two individuals can no longer eat together. One must not remove scrapings or splinters of wood from someone else's stool (this is an act of sorcery); unless the owner finds out who did it, he will throw the stool away. Stealing a stool is also an act of sorcery; the thief must provide a new one. A person must likewise give a new stool if he removes one from a man's house and sleeps with a woman in another house while the object is there. If a child defecates on a stool, the seat is

lightly grazed with a knife, smoothened with leaves, placed near the fire, dried in the sun, and rubbed with oil. Only then can its keeper sit on it again. One may not turn the stool of a village or lineage head upside down after he has stood up from it in the men's house. If the violation of the taboo is not rectified by ritual eating in the men's house, the object will be left upside down and the men's house abandoned. A son-in-law must not sit on the stool of his father-in-law; this is a form of scorn and an indication that the son-in-law might seduce his mother-in-law when she becomes a widow. In addition, the stool has special relationships to the chief; it forms an essential part of his paraphernalia (in this case it tends to be called kitumbi ce wami). Sitting on his stool in front of his people is an act of authority and dignity for the chief.

There are other more particular utilizations of the stool among the Nyanga. Some diviners always repose on a stool during the divination performance. For example, the "divination by trembling" is done by a man who, dressed with raphia bunches around his arms, shaking a rattle, singing or smoking, reaches a state of trance during which he interprets the causes of distress. On the occasion of the great celebrations for the chiefly ancestors, beer is poured in the concave seat of the stool for the aspersion of a sacrificial goat. When a leopard is killed, he is brought to the village and, fully dressed with paraphernalia (beads, raphia rings, copper bracelets, a crown of vines, bow, arrows, and quiver), he is seated on a stool to "attend" elaborate dances before being skinned. In certain heroic tales, some heroes fly through the air sitting on a stool and chase furious animals away by throwing the device at them. In others, two impious brothers receive stools from a diviner; they stick to their buttocks, causing the deaths of the two men.

These examples drawn from the Nyanga show at once the range of symbolic connotations that may be associated with an apparently secular and utilitarian piece of furniture. This is a matter not just of etiquette and prestige, but also of a quasi-mystic relationship between the stool and its owner; moreover, the stool intrinsically has a power which can be activated in the right context.

In general, the connections between stools, political authority, and high status are best documented. The examples from the Asante of Ghana (Fortes, 1965; Kyerematen, 1964; Rattray, 1923; Sarpong, 1971) are a case in point; there are many similar, less well-known illustrations from, for example, the Bunyoro of Uganda (Beattie, 1971; Roscoe, 1923), the Rwanda (Pauwels, 1955) and the Luba (Burton, 1961; Flam, 1971). But as was indicated in the Nyanga case, stools are more than insignia and symbols of power and authority. In Rwanda, they are used in one type of divination and furthermore act at the court as supports for the royal drums. In Zaire, we find many instances of specialized usages of stools. Among the Cokwe and some Pende subgroups, the elaborate chairs, adorned on the backs, feet, and rungs with assorted genre-like sculptures, codify values, synthesize ideas, and celebrate events. With the Komo, the concave seat of mbata stools is treated by female healers as a vessel in which to prepare their medicines (Moeller, 1936, p. 360). Women

in child delivery amid the Budu squat above a stool, while they are supported by assistants (Van Geluwe, 1960, p. 64). Among the Metoko and Pere, young men are circumcised sitting on a stool.

Along with many types of wood carvings such as neckrests, staffs, vessels, cups, musical instruments, and shafts, stools tend to be ignored as works of art and relegated to the categories of non-art and marginal or minimal art, not merely by aestheticians and students of Western art history but by specialists on African art themselves. Studies intending to be comprehensive frequently attempt to illustrate the styles, purposes, and meanings of art on the basis of an almost exclusive consideration of figurines and masks. Yet, apart from the fact that some of the finest artistic jewels of Africa occur among these "minor" objects (think about Luba, Dogon, Baule, Akan, and Cameroun stools, or Kuba cups and boxes, or Mangbetu harps, or Kongo whistles), such carvings are in the minds of their makers and users inseparable from the rest of what we call the artistic patrimony. Sociologically, ritually, and semantically many of these "minor" items are loaded with meanings and purposes that equal and sometimes surpass by far those conveyed by the "major" objects. Griaule (1938, pp. 194-197), for example, has carefully described the crosse-siège (dolaba) of the Dogon of Mali, which works both as a crook and as a stool. This rarely mentioned object is the principal accessory carried by the participants in the sigui rites. A short forked piece of wood on which the dancers sit to rest, it is sometimes richly ornamented and carved in human form. From the point of view of the onlookers, resting on this kind of "crutch" is a sign of wealth and ease. The forks are carved in advance of the rites from specified wood in the men's house, while texts in the secret sigui language are recited. At the end of the rites, they are carefully kept among the small beams of the principal room and may not be removed until the death of their owner. When they make their appearance during the burial ceremonies, the maskers go to take these crosse-siège in the house of the deceased and hide them in faults of the rocks. Similarly, the so-called throne of the Nyoro (a spherical stool with eight legs covered with hides) was utilized not merely at the installation of the king and his mother, but also to receive the body of the queen before burial. In Asante, the stool is "the sacred vehicle of the presence of the ancestors and both the source and the symbol of politico-ritual office, from the kingship down to the headship of a local lineage" (Fortes, 1965, p. 138).

The analysis of the stylistic, sociological, ritual, and semantic fields of the Lega stool is an appropriate case to measure the symbolic scope and depth of such an apparently simple and utilitarian object.

FORM AND STYLE OF THE LEGA STOOL

In many Central African populations, there are several types of stools simultaneously in use in the society (Van Geluwe, 1957 and 1960, for the Bira, Komo, Bali, Ndaka, Lika; Schweinfurth, 1875, Table XVII, for the Mangbetu). This is also the case among the Lega. There are the wooden tripods (nkeka), which are sometimes heavy and rudimentarily carved aerial roots of trees, but

may yet be light, smooth, and well-patinated (Plate 1). These tripods, found also among the Pygmies and many forest groups, are used as backrests by young men and even by high initiates. Little symbolism is directly attached to these objects, except that they are thought of as the semantic and sociological inversions of the centrally important kisumbi stools, which we will discuss in a moment. Next, there are the heavy, oblong monoxyle wooden stools, consisting of a slightly concave and slanting seat resting on four legs. Some of them measure in length more than three feet, but there is much variation in size, which is also reflected in the terminology (the terms used are itanganika, kankumba, kalenga, and kaongama). Similar bedlike chairs are found outside Legaland as far as the Mangbetu in Northeastern Zaire. Old men of any status can sit or recline on them to sleep or bask in the sun. Typically, such stools are used by very old men "who no longer remember a thing," while they stay behind in the village as guardians. To them is applied the frequently quoted Lega aphorism: "I thought my father to be asleep! but lo! he is staring at me with one eye," to celebrate the quiet, scrutinizing vigilance of these old men. The Smithsonian Museum houses a unique sculpture representing a man lying on such a long stool.

Finally, there are the kisumbi stools which are the focus of this study (Plate 2; see also Biebuyck, 1973, Plate 101). I have seen hundreds of them, in various situations and contexts of usage (Plate 3; see also Biebuyck, 1973, Plates 18 and 50). There are minor differences in size, height, weight, volume, craftmanship, and patina, but all kisumbi adhere to a clear-cut canon of form. They are carved from a single piece of light wood (muntonko, also used for the masks, is the preferred wood) and are low to the ground like a bench (the average height ranges from 4 1/4" to 5"). They consist of a slightly concave quasi-spherical seat and base of almost the same diameter (e.g., seat 9" and base 9 1/2"; seat 9 1/2" and base 8 1/2"; seat 8 1/2" to 8 3/4" and base 8 1/4"; seat 6 3/4" to 7" and base 6 1/2"), which are interconnected by four short, supporting, outwardly bent or convex legs or props. In the open space between the four legs, there are sometimes two central, conically shaped protuberances, one facing downward from the seat to the base, the other facing upward from the base to the seat. The seat is without back or arms. The surface of the stools is smooth, glossy, and well-patinated, the color shades ranging from light to dark brown and black. The adz marks have been carefully evened out with sandpaper leaves, except the underside of the base where the markings remain. The stools show the same glossy smoothness as the fine ivory figurines and masks of the Lega, thus exhibiting the highest aesthetic quality in Lega thought. This surface finish is the hallmark of the Lega stools, and it makes them comparable to the exquisite caryatid stools of the Luba and sets them apart from the more rudimentary objects of a similar type that occur in adjoining areas. The seat of some stools is adorned with a circular rim of copper nailheads, but otherwise the stools are not embellished with any kind of decorative design.

It must be noted that the Lega produce miniature replicas of the kisumbi stools. In contrast to the full-size versions, the miniatures have a restricted range of functions and meanings. Small-scale wooden replicas are sometimes used in female initiations (bombwa) of the bwami association. Miniature

stools are also carved in elephant ivory or bone (I also saw one made of a lion's paw), serving as emblems held by those who have the right to initiate and organize circumcision rites (Biebuyck, 1973, Plate 100). Finally, some rare ivory figurines represent an anthropomorphic head and neck standing on a stool-like socle (Biebuyck, 1973, Plate 87).

This highly distinctive form is, from several points of view, not uniquely or exclusively Lega. Small and low stools with discoid seat and base supported by a number of separate legs (rather than by one central pedestal) are found widely among different Bantu-speaking and other groups, in- and outside of Zaire. The number of legs and their general shape (straight, convex, bent on a sharper angle, broad or narrow) vary considerably. Some spherical Boyo stools, for example, have six legs, while in Rwanda there may be two or three supports, and eight among the Ngbaka (the Nyanga and some Komo have spherical stools supported by a pedestal; the Tembo stools have five props). I do not know the area of extension of four-legged spherical stools (in Zaire examples of them occur as far as the Riverains in the northwest). However, in the areas immediately adjoining Legaland, only the closely related Bembe use the four-legged stools. But the Bembe stools do not have the smooth and glossy patination of the Lega works (unless acquired or copied from the Lega), and the outward-bent legs are at sharper angles and less voluminous.

So the most general aspect of the constant form of the Lega stools (two spheres interconnected with separate legs) belongs to a wide range of populations. It seems impossible to locate its origin, to follow the pattern of distribution, or to decide whether it was independently invented in several places or diffused through migration, exchange or barter. A specific aspect of the constant form (four angularly bent legs) relates to a much narrower group of peoples; it may be a typical creation of the ancestral group from which the Lega, Bembe, Metoko, and fragments of otherwise named ethnic units developed. The well-polished glossy surface of the stools and their characteristic shades of patination are a specific Lega addition to a type of carving which they probably did not originate. These latter features fully integrate the stool form into the Lega artistic patrimony and aesthetic code.

ACQUISITION AND OWNERSHIP

I have analyzed elsewhere the overwhelming role played in Lega life and thought by the *bwami* association (Biebuyck, 1973). This is a vast corporate body of persons (male and female) who have achieved membership through a system of initiations; there are many levels of achievement possible, and correspondingly the association is hierarchically structured in a series of grades. It must be noted at once that the *kisumbi* stools are owned by men who have achieved the two highest grades (*yananio* and *kindi*). As part of their new status, men and women receive, during and at the end of each initiatory cycle, distinctive insignia and paraphernalia. Depending on the grade levels, these include skullcaps, hats, belts, masks, figurines, and other artifacts and natural objects. The *kisumbi* stool is one of several

objects acquired as a distinctive emblem of rank during the yananio initiations. In contrast to many other regalia and emblems which are passed on to another newly initiated kinsman when their owner moves up in rank, the stool is a lifetime acquisition. In other words, persons obtain the stool at their yananio initiation and keep it if they eventually reach the highest grade (kindi). Like other insignia and paraphernalia, the stool passes after its owner's death to the initiate who is thought to be his substitute in the grade. That is, the person who receives a stool as part of his yananio initiation may "inherit" it from an agnatically close or more remote deceased kinsman who preceded him in that grade. Since an individual must not await the death of an initiated kinsman in order to become a yananio, stools may therefore be commissioned through the good offices of the candidate's tutor (himself a high initiate).

These facts indicate that the stool as part of the bwami patrimony is a sign of rank and an object of prestige. Like other carvings that are inherited, it marks continuities across generations and groups and close spiritual solidarities between the living and the dead. More than this, like all items associated with bwami, the stool is an isengo, a "heavy object" that forms a focal point in the sacer ludus of the initiations as a conveyer of symbolic meanings. Within the semantic taxonomy, the stool (kisumbi) represents a separate subcategory and constitutes, together with such other sets as wooden masks, ivory masks, wooden and ivory anthropomorphic figurines, wooden and ivory zoomorphic figurines, and other sculptures and assemblages, the class of bitungwa (literally, something that is being tied together; something unifying). This class closely corresponds to what we would call artworks in a broad sense. In this classification, the stools are not considered as minor or inferior things, but as the vitally complementary equivalents of the masks, figurines, etc. Like other carvings, the stool is something "good and beautiful" (-soga), intrinsically by its very nature and destiny, regardless of its fluctuating, individual qualities of form. The generic term kisumbi, used to designate this type of stool, is based possibly on the same root (-sumb) as the term for ancestor (mu-sumb-u) and as the Komo word for esoteric knowledge and practice (e-sumb-a), which is another indication of the weight of mystic meaning it entails.

SOME CONTEXTS OF USAGE

One would learn very little from merely observing what is done with the stool in daily life. One could obviously see individuals, male and female, dressed in a certain manner (according to the standards of their grade), sitting on it outdoors or indoors (particularly men in the men's house). In the nineteen-fifties, however, the stool was not conspicuously visible or much used in such ordinary circumstances. Before the fateful interdictions were imposed on bwami initiations by the colonial government, one might have noticed one or more initiates and some of their initiated wives journeying from one village or hamlet to another, carrying their stools hanging from a string generally fixed over the left shoulder. They were on their way to an initiation. If one was lucky enough to be admitted to a village where

initiations were held, one might have seen high initiates and their wives sitting on the stools in the shade of their houses, relaxing, eating or smoking, or watching a dance performance by their colleagues. One could even have witnessed a performance in which initiates were dancing in a row, carrying stools in their hands (Plate 4). Full participation, however, in the initiation rites themselves is the only guarantee to see the complete range of usages, to analyze the contexts, and to grasp the meanings and purposes of the stool as a symbolic icon by means of which information about moral philosophy and values is communicated. As is frequently the case with other classes of objects used in initiation, the stools occur in several contexts of ritual performances: in several of them, they are simply accessories in the ceremony and do not carry the primary significance; but invariably there is one rite in which the stool is the focal point of symbolic communication.

Before getting to the main context, we should briefly summarize the other occurrences. In the preliminary rite of "ceremonial entry," the row of initiates silently enters the candidate's village; two preceptors are seated on stools in the middle of the village plaza, facing each other, their foreheads and knees touching (Plate 5). The seated preceptors are identified as "a fallen tree" that bars the trail. A dialogue develops between the leader of the row of incoming participants and the candidate and his tutor who stand near the men's house at the opposite side of the "fallen tree." The inquiry revolves around the identity of the seated personages and their intentions. Do they want obstruction, quarrel, and strife? Are they peaceful? Is there sorcery or witchcraft in the village? Are all the necessary material ingredients for initiation available? But the seated preceptors also symbolize for the candidate his forthcoming crossing-over from ignorance to knowledge achieved through initiation. In this instance, the candidate is compared to a stool "who does see nothing at all" in contrast to the fallen tree "who looks up at nyabungu." Allusion is made to the fact that when a person sits on a stool, his loincloth is neatly folded between the stool and the buttocks (Plates 6-7), with the result that the stool--as a personified being--does not see the genitalia (nyabungu). When people step over a fallen tree, however, the loincloth hangs loose and the fallen tree can perceive the genitalia. Kisumbi (stool), Kikinduko (fallen tree), and Nyabungu (genitalia) are metaphors for the ignorant candidate, the wise initiate, and the hidden knowledge which the initiates share.

In the initial sequence of another rite, a preceptor sits motionless and in state on the stool, while all participating initiates pile their wickerwork rattles, shoulderbags, or giant snail shells up around him. The seated preceptor impersonates Big Turtle (Kikulu), i. e., the big man who has finished all the initiations, who has an abundance of things, and for whom there are no secrets. In yet another cycle, the preceptor sits shivering and gesticulating on the stool, his hands resting on the ibondo staff; he wears full ceremonial dress and many beaded necklaces about the neck and chest and around him are placed many snail shells (Plate 8). The actor poses as a wealthy initiate who has a bad character, is boastful, and does not know the virtue of generosity in giving (his gesticulation is a way of

telling those who come to him to get out). But imperceptibly in the dance progression that follows, one person after another arrives to steal his things (Plate 9), until he is denuded of everything (snail shells, paraphernalia, bags, and stool). He is now Mugingi (Limper, one who walks badly because of injury or sickness), walking painfully around supported by his cane and begging vainly for help.

In all these cases, sitting on a stool in the presence of the assembly of high initiates is a sign of status, wealth, and intelligence. The loss of the stool, on the contrary, is synonymous with the return to abjection and poverty; it is caused by one's own stupidity and lack of character. Possession of the stool is not just a matter of wealth, but a question of moral principles. It is the attribute of the fully wise man, wisdom not being an abstraction of accumulated knowledge, but a *praxis* that guides behavior.

It is not uncommon for artworks and natural objects, which are all primarily associated with a well-defined ritual sequence and grade by which ownership of these things is determined, to be used or mentioned in initiations lower or higher than the level to which they belong. This is so for the *kisumbi* stool. On the negative side, however, *kisumbi* is not used or mentioned in the *mutanga* teachings. These systematic teachings, done by means of visual aids (miniature replicas of larger artifacts and samples from the natural environment) and proverbs, bear on moral philosophy, values, and behavior patterns. They follow the circumcision rites in which much systematic learning occurs, and precede accession to the lowest level of initiation (*kongabulumbu*) into *bwami*. Among the more than one hundred objects which I saw employed as visual aids in this system of teachings, *kisumbi* was neither used nor mentioned, but two other objects generally linked or contrasted with it did occur: the sandpaper leaves (*lukenga*) and the tripod (*nkeka*). The leaves with which the stools are sandpapered are personified as "Mr. Lukenga, my beautiful and good one, makes me shine in the face." In this manner, the importance for the individual of having a mentor, a teacher, a sponsor, a tutor, and for the group of having a wise leader, is stressed. The tripod is interpreted in three aphorisms. "If a great-old one takes away the tripod, then you sit on the knees": this evokes the state of abjection of the young man who does not receive help or advice from the elders, or rather of the young man who alienates them because of inordinate behavior. Another saying, "The master of this place sets a tripod for me and other little things that hurt and hurt," alludes to a person who, although well-treated, fosters an evil scheme or plays dirty tricks upon his well-doer. The third aphorism, "The master-of-the-land is a tripod; he straightens those who are bent," presents the leader as one who is able to "change the heart of anyone"; that is, he is capable of transforming the wrongdoers into good and beautiful persons.

In other rites at the lower levels, the new initiate is seated in state on the stool amidst the crowd of cheering participants. This is an act of public recognition which officially establishes a person in his or her new role and position. The *kigogo* woman, who goes with a kinsman through the

lowest grade (kongabulumbu), is standing on such a stool, wearing a feather hat and loaded with shoulderbags (Plate 10). At the climactic final rite of kongabulumbu, the new male initiate wearing the bwami skullcap, his hands resting on a staff, stands on the stool, while the kigoga woman sits on the ground in front of him (Plate 11).

Other occasions also demand that some of the actors sit on stools. For example, during kongabulumbu two initiates sit on stools to blow the sacred moza bamboo pipes; in yananio, initiated women dressed in white cloth and holding wooden masks before the face repose silently on stools behind a feather rope to observe the preceptors performing a masked dance; in kindi, the high initiates are seated during the kinsamba display of ivory figurines. On several occasions, the candidate himself is seated on a stool to mark that "he is now in his place, that he has not failed to achieve what his father did." The act of sitting does not by itself convey this notion, as the accompanying dance performance indicates. In these instances, a feather rope is fixed around the head of the seated candidate; the other end of the rope is held at a few yards' distance by his tutor; the dancers run from one end to the other, sliding their hands along the rope, tapping the hand and knee of the tutor, then the head of the candidate, to mark this link of continuity between a man and his father and to emphasize that one cannot neglect what one's fathers did. Following this dance, the tutor symbolically pulls the candidate from the stool towards him; the candidate crawls on all fours and goes to rest with his back against the chest of the tutor to stress the principle of respect and obedience ("when one is called, one must come fast"). The context of other dramatic action signifies that the act of sitting is not necessarily interpreted as a gesture of dignity and status. For example, in the initiation leading to the grade of bulonda (female grade corresponding to, and complementing, the male yananio), an initiated woman wearing a feather hat and sitting on a stool is encircled by the crowd of dancers. Here the symbolism focuses on a woman of bad disposition (Kiluku) who has the external trappings of initiation (Mrs. Bad-Disposition, and her beaded necklace and her stupidity!) but does not possess the moral attributes of greatness (My wife, Mrs. Bad-Disposition, hides away from me among the crowd of men).

Finally, and on rare occasions only, in kongabulumbu, the kisumbi stool and its opposite, the nkeka tripod, are referred to; but the objects are not actually used. In this context, the candidate is pushed forward by some dancers and backward by others, with the song "The Backtalker has given me a tripod and some other little things that hurt me," to express the idea that one must not stay in a village where one is not liked, where one is rejected and does not receive his rightful share. While this action continues, the next song emphasizes the need for hospitality and generosity in giving: "Give him a stool, for the stranger does not journey with his own one."

THE KISUMBI RITE

In the initiation series that leads to the highest level in the grade of yananio, there is a particular rite which is called kisumbi, after the stool itself. In this phase, since the stool is the only object used, the full range of its hidden symbolic references can be placed in clear perspective. There is no Lega or outsider who could even guess the full meaning of this apparently simple artifact without learning it in all its details at this level of the initiations. As is the case with many objects utilized in other situations, the stool becomes the focus around which the central values of the bwami association and the essential moral and social state of its membership are affirmed. Part of the genius of the bwami initiations resides in the fact that its members are able to formulate over and over again the same basic values and principles of conduct by a wealth of symbolic interpretations clustering around divergent objects and differently expressed in words and dramatic action. Identical words and meanings may attach to diverse objects; antithetical meanings may be conveyed by one and the same object, or contrastingly by the opposition of two linked items. The words are condensed into succinct aphoristic texts filled with images and into simpler, straightforward exegesis of these texts. The vivid action evolves in song, music, and dance, which includes the varied manipulation of the object and theatrical performance. The total performance, not merely the object and its associated words, is the real channel through which the communication of precise ideas is made. There are many initiated participants in this drama acting as primary performers (who sing, dance, and manipulate objects, led by the masterful preceptors), secondary performers (who sing and dance, following the row of leaders of the dance), musicians (among whom there are some singers), initiated onlookers (who sit around), and the candidate with his entourage of tutors and sponsors.

Initiations are organized at various levels by autonomous ritual communities which have an agnatic kinship base but differ in size and amplitude according to the level of rite. These ritual communities act on their own within a framework of universal procedures and principles that are the hallmark of bwami. Thus, differences in the actual ways of doing things can be expected. I went through the kisumbi rite in several such ritual communities. The striking divergences among them resided in the degree of elaboration and duration of the rite rather than in their scope and thrust. In some communities, as many as twenty-five aphorisms were sung and performed in a dance context about the stool (or with the stool as primary referent); in others, this number was reduced to seventeen or to as few as six. Across ritual communities, however, certain aphorisms were sung in identical or only slightly different wordings (e.g., usage of another word or of a synonym). In other cases, the wording might differ, but the action and/or the exegesis remain constant. In all instances, the stool is invariably manipulated and danced with during the performances. It must be noted that a great number of stools all of identical type occur in the rite, whether all participant initiates or only the leading preceptors carry their own stools. But regardless of this, the emphasis is on the stool, not on its multitude or on its minor varieties of external form.

In all of the dances, the stool is carried in the hand or hung from a string. When hanging, it may be held on the back or pressed against the lower ribcage or under the armpit. When held, it may be grasped by the two hands around the rim, or by the right hand at one of the legs, or by the left forearm inserted between the legs. The arms may move the object in different directions and positions: the stool is held with outstretched arm forward or upward, clasped against the belly or the buttocks. The free hand may point at it, rub over the seat, or imitate a chopping movement. The dancers may also smell the seat. The actions are meant to underscore and elucidate the meanings contained in the aphorisms. The dance pattern may change as well from the slower rhythm of a closely knit or widely circling row of dancers to a more nervous and faster dance pace followed by the same circle or by a scattering, criss-crossing group of performers. In some dances, one by one, or two by two, the dancers move away toward the middle of the circle to perform solos or duos, while the main row continues its dance movement.

In a few cases, the action is not structured around manipulation of the stool but involves distinctive modes of sitting behavior: stretching the left, then the right arm out, finally placing the hands on the ground; stretching the arms out, then lowering them, the hand sliding along the body; spreading the arms and legs out wide; waving one hand, then the other, in the air; sitting motionless on the stool, while another dancer stands close by, covering one eye with the hand and stretching the other arm out; pulling the stool away while one attempts to sit down on it; sitting on the stool with closed fists; and sitting on the stool surrounded by valuable objects.

INITIATORY KNOWLEDGE AND SYMBOLIC REFERENCES OF THE STOOL

The data contained in these pages are derived from well over one hundred and fifty aphorisms and the action context within which they are sung in the kisumbi rite. It must be remembered that these aphorisms originate in different ritual communities, that from community to community there are differences as well as similarities in text and context, and that in no single community is the entire range of aphorisms discussed here ever sung. There is no prescribed order in which the aphorisms are produced. One can, however, perceive a certain tendency on the part of the preceptors who "give" the songs and lead the dances to progress from relatively simple and self-evident explanations to more complicated and remote symbolisms. For the rest, the inspiration of the leading preceptor sets the tone, rhythm, speed, and sequence of the sung and danced action. For convenience and in order to provide, at least for the outsider, a more cogent overview of the initiatory experiences conveyed by means of the stool, I have grouped the interpretations under some basic headings. This method of grouping proverbs under separate headings is not used by the preceptors. Theirs is a quasi-improvised, inspired, and inspirational procedure which contributes to the general atmosphere of suspense and surprise created by the initiations.

Form and General Usage

As a general form, the kisumbi stool is "beautiful and good" (-soga) because it is an object of the bwami association. Its glossy smoothness, which recalls at once the work of the sandpaper leaves (lukenga), is remindful of the state of the high initiate. The initiations and his will and capacity to follow their principles have transformed him from a rough (inconsiderate, intemperate) into a smooth (generous, poised, wise) being. The glossy smoothness stands in contrast to the nkeka tripod, which is roughly carved and acts as the symbol of the unpolished noninitiate who lacks savoir vivre and virtue. This formal opposition between the two types of seats is at once applied to their general purpose, which is sitting. To provide a visiting stranger with the stool is an act of hospitality and etiquette, an expression of friendly intentions. In contrast, it is a fool (kibazonga, a person who does not listen or understand well) who gives a tripod to a distinguished visitor, for this is a way of hurting and rejecting and a form of insult ("Fool, as you set the tripod for me, you launch vituperations against me"). Special emphasis in this regard is placed, in the initiation context, on the exceptional treatment which the candidate owes his tutors and the participant initiates. The person who calls others together for the rites must have, and constantly give proof of having, "a heart that is smoothened" (like the stool).

Specific features of form are vehicles by means of which, always in the action context, statements, either positively or negatively, are made about the bwami code. In these and so many other cases, the stool is a metaphor for a human being (specifically a male or female initiate), and its name (kisumbi) and many metonyms come to designate particular characters. The four legs of the stool remind one of a certain "Mr. Kisumbi, a man with four arms who fools me," i.e., of an initiate who received the teachings, but went wrong: he is not good, he is ambiguous and follows other patterns. The spherical seat, held under the armpit, is reminiscent of a small shield (kakololo), hence of a "Mr. Kakololo, who was Mr. Ibamba" (dangerous situation, war); but the tempering influence of bwami has taught him to avoid aggressiveness and perilous actions. The empty space between the legs (kampengenge) is suggestive of a toothless mouth, a symbol for old age, weakness, and peace-mindedness. The term itself allows wordplay with a quasi-homophone (mwengelengele, a fairly old man). Emptiness is also symbolic of danger, evil, badness, and therefore the open space recalls the idea of a bad son ("Kisumbi, father of Mr. Very-Bad"), who ignores the teachings and patterns of his father and predecessors. The light brown color and the glossy smoothness of the stool, combined with the fact that the stool is a faithful companion wherever one goes, lead to two other metonymic images. The stool is no longer Kisumbi but is personified as Nyawenga (woman with lighter, reddish skin color, which is synonymous with beauty) or Nyakabombo (woman who likes to run away from the homestead). The aphorism sounds like a complaint: "I go to the initiations with Nyawenga (or Nyakabombo), I go to be ridiculed." There are two different interpretations of the texts. The more literal one presents Nyawenga or Nyakabombo as an adulterous woman who brings shame to her husband (continued stress is placed on the notion that

initiations are not an occasion for debauchery). In the less direct interpretation, nyawenga refers not to a person but to the beautiful objects which one brings to an initiation, where it turns out that one is ridiculed because there are not enough valuables to be carried back home (in opposition to food, which is consumed in situ).

I have already indicated that the nomenclature applied to the human body is used for the stool. Thus, the spherical seat and base are called "face" (meiso, literally, eyes, but the plural term also means face). The stool with its two faces belongs for the Lega to the morphological and semantic category of two-faced (or double-headed or multifrontal) objects which include a number of anthropomorphic figurines. Whatever secondary meanings they convey, all these objects represent the concept that "Sakimatwematwe (or Sameisomabili, literally, Mr. Big-Heads, Mr. Two-Faces) has seen an elephant on the other side of the large river." This aphorism alludes to the penetrating vision, the wisdom, and the omniscience of the high initiate, as the leader and counselor of his community. This value is commonly manifested by multiheaded or multifaced figurines, but in at least two ritual communities that I studied, it was also expressed in conjunction with the stool.

Some configurations used in bwami consist of five objects temporarily assembled or permanently fixed in such a manner that one object is surrounded by four others (one could vaguely conceive of the formation as a circle with a point in the middle, which recalls the frequently used circle-dot design on some of the ivory carvings). For this purpose, several kinds of objects may be utilized; for example, four cowries and a kizombo nutshell placed in the center of them. This arrangement of objects explicitly refers to a principle of social structure: "The clan: four branches (mitula, like the burning logs which are the hearth on which women cook) and a kidande" (an incorporated branch originating with a female agnate of the clan). The ideal manipulated structure of a clan consists of four agnatically related branches or primary lineages (starting with the four "sons" of a clan founder) and an assimilated lineage (beginning with a female who is agnatically related to them). In none of the kisumbi dance sequences was this aphorism sung. Yet initiates told me that the stool also belonged to this category of icons because it comprised a formal configuration of four legs in the center of which was a protuberance (as if a fifth leg were growing there). The middle position of the protuberance, like that of the kizombo nutshell in the center of the four cowries, alludes to the main place occupied by the sororal nephew in the Lega social system. The sororal nephew is "a kidney (mpiku) that sleeps deep inside the animal"; the center is the female side where the sororal nephew is firmly established; he is a mbandi, one to whom nothing can be refused.

Finally, the joining of the two surfaces (seat and base) of the stool into an inseparable structural unit connotes the essential link of complementarity between the initiate and his initiated wife, between an initiate and his tutor, and between a man and his kinsfolk. This unity is also a reminder of bwami itself, which joins people together in a deep bond of solidarity.

Similar ideas are equally expressed in relation to a needle and its raphia thread, or to a pod and the raphia fibers (used as threads) which are preserved in it, or to a mat and its rim. The teachings of bwami are not preoccupied with cosmology; they are anthropocentric, reaffirming in endless variations the theory and praxis of a moral philosophy that must produce harmony in social relationships and individual happiness and beatitude. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Lega initiates do not perceive a cosmic dimension in the form of their stools. This is in contrast with the famous Dogon spherical stools, supported by human caryatids (four or four pairs representing the nommo twins) and by a central pedestal (Laude, 1973, Figures 34-37). In Dogon thought, these stools are an imago mundi, and their central prop is an axis mundi, depicting the earth and the sky which are conceived of as two discs that are linked in the middle by a tree. The nommo figures are the progenitors from whom the inhabitants of Dogon country descend; chevron designs around the rims of the seat and base relate to other cosmic principles (e.g., the vibration of water, light, speech). The Lega stool is not a cosmic or historical archive; it is an image of morality.

Common Usages of the Stool

A second set of interpretations center on ordinary usages for which a stool is made: it is an object that serves to sit on and that can be carried along. The stool comes indirectly in contact with the genitalia, and it experiences the fetid odor of the buttocks; people who are sick or have wounds (including leprosy) are allowed to sit on it ("Kisumbi, I smell something bad, I smell the fetid odor from between the buttocks"; "Son-of-the-one-who-surpasses-them-in-wisdom allows one to sit who has a leprosy wound on the anus"). In both instances, the personified stool stands for the high initiate who excels in equanimity and tolerance. This is an often repeated theme which accents the sense of moderation and poise, hence wisdom, with which the high initiate acts when he is assailed by problems or becomes the target of vexations. The aphorism "Kisumbi, I smell something bad, I smell the fetid odor from between the buttocks" is, at the same time, a kind of complaint because his wife, whom the initiate treated well, abandons him for others, and a kind of warning to the adulterous woman (the initiate's wisdom will help to discover her deceit). In a third proverb, the personified stool and the fallen tree (from which it is carved) are contrasted. The stool is only in indirect contact with the genitalia, for they are covered by the loincloth or apron; so "Stool does not see Nyabungu" (the ensemble of the sexual parts, meaning here the ensemble of hidden knowledge). The fallen tree, however, does see Nyabungu for when one crosses it the clothing hangs loose from the buttocks, revealing the genitalia. Stool and fallen tree, in this context, allude to individuals of different levels of initiatory knowledge; the member of yananio (here symbolized by the stool which is a characteristic object of this grade), although wise and well-informed, can still learn much through fuller initiation at the kindi level (here symbolized by the fallen tree). The text also contrasts the relative knowledge of the candidate with the deeper one of his tutor.

Initiates carry their stools hanging from a string over the shoulder to go to an initiation. If, however, many people together carry their stools, it is a sign that something important has happened: "Stool does not go abroad, unless the village burns." The aphorism emphasizes the idea of belonging; the initiate is not a vagrant who rambles around settling in one village after another. If he leaves the village, his departure is caused by major upheaval and does not fail to leave emptiness.

The Wood and the Tree That Produce a Lasting Object

The stools are preferably made of muntonko wood cut from the mu- or kantonko tree; this softwood tree grows in old forest clearings, not far away from the village site (which is preferably built in secondary forest). These basic facts give rise to a large number of interpretations in the kisumbi rite. The wood of which the tree is made is perishable ("Muntonko does not have an imputrescible core"), but the work of the adz gave it mwegele (imputrescible core), that is, made it into a durable form. A human is weak and fragile, but the bwami initiations transform him into something that lasts and transcends. This leads the preceptors to apply the opposition "perishable-durable" to the human body: "Everything rots; the humerus of the arm does not decay." The terms humerus (kiganza) and arm (kuboko) respectively refer in this aphorism to a person's works and achievements (kiganza, i.e., one's children; one's initiation objects), which remain long after that person (kuboko) has disappeared.

The kantonko tree, which grows close to the village, is for the men a preferred target to try the sharpness of their axes, spears, and knives. Hence there is an aphorism which states that "Kantonko experiences the blows" (mabango). Kantonko is compared to the elder, the great initiate, who is in charge of many in his group; all problems are brought to him; he is the target sometimes of unwarranted insinuations, but he must treat them with equanimity, imperturbability, and a deep sense of justice. But the exegesis of this text also points to a person who survives in a family group where many died in rapid succession. He may become a scapegoat, the target of false accusations of sorcery and witchcraft (buganga). Thus, in line with this interpretation and to emphasize it, the aphorism "Kantonko from close to the village has experienced the blows" is immediately followed in some ritual communities by: "He/she who remains in this polygamous household has experienced sorcery/witchcraft (accusations)."

A certain species of strangler vine (kagumo, whose bark is one of the possible materials for manufacturing barkcloth) tends to grow symbiotically with the kantonko tree. This fact encourages the formulation of two aphorisms which have antithetical meanings resulting from the ambiguous position of the strangler vine. On the one hand, it is coveted for its bark ("The piece of wood between the branches has taught the young man to climb"); on the other hand, the strangler vine may destroy the tree ("Kantonko has called Kagumo to sit in its branches; see, Kagumo dries him out"). In the first instance,

the vine stands for the bwami association and the initiations that underlie it; for every young man, to achieve membership is a major goal, one which is never fully reached because one wants to climb higher and higher in the hierarchy of grade levels. In the second instance, vine and tree represent two personages: Kantonko is the elder, the headman, the initiate, the tutor, and the maternal uncle who have taken someone under their guard and protection; but that someone (Kagumo) destroys them, disrupts their lives because of illicit behavior.

The kantonko tree is then opposed to the bugubi tree, which grows further away from the villages and from which more perishable items are made, such as the yango stick (which sometimes occurs in the initiations as a symbol for the phallus and as the name for a character who likes to roam and to seduce women). Two aphorisms contrast kantonko and bugubi: "Yango of Bugubi rots; Yango of Muntonko cannot grow rotten" and "The core of bugubi grows rotten; of muntonko, it cannot rot." In the first text, the two sons (Yango) of the men Bugubi and Muntonko are opposed; one has not achieved bwami and is doomed to obscurity; the other has gone through the initiations and is destined for lasting greatness. The second proverb conveys a similar meaning, placing the emphasis on the quick degeneration of objects made of bugubi wood and the permanence of those manufactured with kantonko.

Kantonko is also contrasted with the nkungu tree. This is a tall tree whose branches sink down because of their length and weight; women cut the branches for firewood; it sheds its leaves during the relatively short dry season. Two aphorisms address themselves to these features. One of them, "The large (branch) of Nkungu: hanging down because of length is the reason why it perishes (is troubled)," implicitly states that this proud tree does not resist the cutting, but continues to grow. This is symbolic of the Master-of-Wisdom, the Master-of-Achievement, the truly great initiate (mwizakisi). If someone scorns him, he does not retort, he is not pusillanimous; if he took offence at the pettiness of others, he would not be great. The nakedness of the tree after it has shed its leaves is reminiscent of "the house of death" (a group in which many people died) and the loneliness of the senior of that group: "In the manner nkungu sheds its leaves, so does the house of death crumble." This image flows from the negation implied in the preceding aphorism; a truly great initiate is not easily perturbed, he does not take revenge by practicing malice on his people; if he did, it would be disastrous for the group.

Other interpretations are structured around the symbolism of trees, which are felt to be the opposites of kantonko; but as we shall see further, the conveyance of meanings necessitates special dramatic action.

The Tools, the Techniques, and the Maker That Produce a Lasting Object

The essential tools that give shape to the stool are the adz (nkondo) and the sandpaper leaf (lukenga). The blacksmith makes the adz, and sometimes he is the carver of the stool as well. In the carving process, the work of the adz is fundamental; yet, as one aphorism states, the hands that guide it (or Mr. Hands) get praised for the results. Nkondo (adz personified) stands for the poor old man who does things for which the headman, the leader (Maboko, Arms), receives the benefits; or, more generally, the proverb alludes to Little-Old-One who is responsible for many achievements from which others reap the fruits. Another text praises the candidate, the "young man," for following the patterns set by his father: "I recall the things that Nkondo, Mr. Arms, did." The wise teachings and admonitions of the father helped the weak young man to be transformed into a person of lasting fame: "Muntonko has a putrescible core, but Adz gave it an imputrescible core."

The adz consists of the iron transversal blade (nkondo, properly speaking) and of a straight wooden handle (musaka). Three aphorisms elucidate the symbolic references to this. "On the handle, on it goes the adz blade" refers to the paraphernalia which make the initiates dressed in them beautiful and loveable. In the next aphorism, musaka stands for the name of a village and nkondo for a person in that village: "In Musaka, in the place of Nkondo, in it he (Nkondo) speaks big things." The text alludes to a great initiate with many wives, children, and goods, who speaks up on all matters before the others. The allusion is obviously derived from the bond between the adz blade and the adz handle and, in addition, from the sound produced by the blade when it is used to carve. With the same symbolic identifications in mind, the third proverb speaks of Nkondo who flees Musaka because of poverty: "He flees Musaka; Nkondo flees poverty." The inspiration for this text is derived from an adz that comes loose from the handle. The initiate is identified as Nkondo, that is, as a cutter, a carver, a shaper of things. The term poverty (muzambo) stands also for a personage who wrongs Nkondo, compelling him to leave. But there is implicit criticism of Nkondo: as the blade must remain firmly attached to the handle, so must Nkondo remain in his village; there is no reason to abandon it precipitously or light-heartedly.

The final frame of reference relates to the act of chopping for which the adz is made and to the carver-blacksmith who fashions the tool and the object. The adz reminds one of a penis, and the person who handles it is Byembo (a symbolic term for penis). The act of chopping and carving recalls sexual intercourse: "Each blacksmith forges iron objects; Byembo has known to forge (excellently)!" and "The child of your father is not shown nkondo (here, penis); the wound of nkondo (i.e., inflicted by nkondo) does not heal." Two major values are placed into perspective in this context. A man must have offspring, particularly sons who can follow his footsteps; Byembo is praised for his sons who owe him their progression in bwami and perpetuate his name. Adultery within the group, and a fortiori incestuous relationships, are disruptive for they cause permanent tensions.

The stool is smoothened and polished by means of a lukenga leaf; one proverb very literally emphasizes this aspect: "Stool was very bad" (in other versions: Stool would not have been good and beautiful, or stool would not have been in good order); "Lukenga has made it shine around the face" (or in another version, Lukenga has cleansed it). It is clear, once again, that the two terms are used for two personages, either the new initiate and his tutor or a man and his wife. The leaf also stands for bwami or the initiations themselves. In general, lukenga is thought of as one's musoga (good and beautiful) and can therefore easily symbolize all those persons, institutions, or things which help produce a better and more accomplished man. The text celebrates the emergence of the new initiate from ruggedness and darkness into light and smoothness. In one interpretation of the proverb, a subtle allusion was made to the fact that the leaves do not merely remove dust from the stool's surface, but at the same time also produce its beauty. This applies to the membership of bwami: the initiates are not merely eager to receive things, to eat much, and to carry presents home at the expense of the candidate and his sponsors; but, additionally, they give him greatness and the possibility of participating in future similar exchanges. The concept of cleanliness brings to mind, in the next proverb, the attitude of Mr. Clean-Clean (Kolokolo), "one who is used to saying that in his place they do things like this or like that, that things are better in his place." This unwanted character stands out in contrast to the true initiate who is poised, parsimonious in words, and not boastful or overzealous.

Special Dramatic Action Contexts Where a Particular Mode of Sitting or Action Becomes the Primary Vehicle of Interpretation

In all previously analyzed action contexts, the stool is carried around in dance movement. As we have already indicated, this is done in various ways, eventually with additional gesticulation. But there are distinctive phases and dance sequences, interlaced with the preceding ones, where the act of sitting in a particular manner, with or without further body movement and ambient action is the focal point of the interpretations. Following are the action and verbal contexts.

A preceptor sits in a quiet dignified manner on the stool while others place giant snail shells on the ground around him: "In the village of an initiate, parrots lay their eggs on the ground." This signifies the wealth and well-being which are held up as a promise for the initiate who adheres to the principles and moral standards of bwami.

Sitting on the stool, the preceptor waves one hand then the other in the air in a gesture of receiving and thankful joy: "Mukumbi harvests the fruits and from his stool he does not rise." Here the promise is fulfilled; wherever the initiate goes (Mukumbi in this context refers to a great initiate who has at last achieved the grade of yananio), he is sure to receive his shares of meat, oil, salt, shell money, etc. Even if, because of sickness or old age, he cannot go to the initiations or no longer actively participates in the dances, he is still certain to secure his part from kinsmen and colleagues.

Two preceptors are seated on stools; a third one, standing nearby and covering one eye, searches for them with outstretched arm: "The great hunter encircles (pursues) the mpombi antelope with one eye." This passage stresses the vigilance and cleverness of the senior, the older kinsman, or the initiate; he will soon detect sources of disorder. The image of "Mr. One-Eye," which is also conveyed through figurines and in reference to an old man (guardian of the village) lying on a bedlike chair, invariably bears on the diligence of the well-informed initiate; he has the wisdom and the connections (through the network of bwami solidarities) to discover all sources of evil. The image of "Mr. One-Eye" (Liso Limozi) brings at once to mind its opposite, "Mr. Something-in-the-Eye" (Kakuliso), one of the many metaphors for an evil-minded person. Thus, the aphorism following the preceding one in the same context of action reads: "Mr. Something-in-the-Eye has informed Leopard about the place in which to catch goats." This alludes to a person who is meddlesome and likes to antagonize people, exactly the opposite of what a great initiate must be.

A preceptor tries to sit down, but another dancer steadily pulls the stool away: "The stool of Wabalenga (Subduer): on it must not sit the one who has the beginnings of leprosy." Wabalenga, the personage who pulls the stool away, is intransigent and intractable; he does not like people and causes futile displeasures and quarrels, the opposite of what a true initiate does.

Preceptors sit on stools silently with clenched fists to express the despair of "Child-of-Poor-One" who builds a village that cannot flourish and live.

Seated on stools, the preceptors stretch their arms out as far as possible in different directions: "Lutunda calls (by stretching out the arms) those who are far away and those who are close to the village." Lutunda is a tree with wide crown which, like the earlier mentioned kantonko, grows near the village; its leaves and fruits attract many animals, therefore making an excellent place for trapping. In this proverb, Lutunda is synonymous with the initiations or with the great initiate; both are the confluence of many people, and both create wide-ranging relationships.

The seated preceptors spread their legs and arms out as far as possible: "The great initiate (other version, the Master-of-Wisdom) is a lukundu (tree); he has made his large aerial roots arrive far." The previous image about the far-stretching branches of the lutunda tree brings to mind the lukundu tree and its powerful wide-reaching aerial roots, thus illuminating the solid position of the great initiate who is a center of attraction for all. But the lukundu tree also produces a deadly poison, hence its opposite connotation. "Lukundu, lower the branch, in the forest plain there is no other tree (like him" is sung while the seated preceptors first stretch the arms widely out, then bring them back along the body. Lukundu is here symbolic of a person who speaks excessively and arrogantly; the admonition (in words, "lower the branch"; in gesture, lowering the arms) is for an initiate to remain low-keyed.

In those communities where there is the greatest dramatic and verbal elaboration around the stool, the initiates tend to sing a beginning and ending aphoristic formula (as they also do for other important objects). The dancers, having rested at the end of a preceding cycle, are called together: "Let no single person stay behind in the house." The stools are brought out with the proverb "Give him a stool, (for) the stranger does not go (journey) with his own one," which places emphasis on etiquette and hospitality. However, the elements of sacred deception and of cryptic statement are contained in this simple formula. For the outsider, it sounds as if the stool were nothing else than a means to sit and to display one's savoir vivre. For the candidate, it marks that moment of doubt which is found at all levels of initiation, when he does not know if he is being fooled or what is going to happen; that moment of tension and disappointment which is soon overshadowed by the revelation of unexpected symbolisms and types of knowledge. The final formula is even simpler and more general in scope. The closing aphorism "Kisumbi goes to idima" (give a last goodbye) is also used with minor variations in the burial rites of high initiates.

CONCLUSIONS

Among the enormous array of natural objects and artifacts that form the support and vehicle for symbolic interpretations in the bwami initiations, the kisumbi stool is definitely one of the richest in content. Yet many of the moral principles which it helps to express are adequately conveyed in other contexts by means of different types of objects and actions. I have already pointed out that part of the genius of bwami is manifest in the capacity of its members to formulate over and over again the same basic ideas in a never-ending, always fresh and unexpected flow of images. The presentation of ideas is visual and kinetic as much as verbal and musical; it is invariably part of a dramatic action context. To the foreign mind, the mere summary of ideas communicated might sound tediously repetitious and redundant. But precisely these abstracts would leave aside the vital, creative, and suggestive power of the performances themselves. Each performance is for the Lega a non-repetitive event because of the unique conjunction of original combinations of words, objects, configurations, dance movements, gestures, physical and social settings, effects achieved, sentiments aroused, and purposes sought. There is never a feeling of déjà vu or a sentiment of boredom, because of the inexhaustible qualities of novelty, surprise, and inventiveness that underlie every performance. Moreover, the organization of rites is not uniform throughout Legaland (though the structural principles on which they are based are). For the arrangement of the higher initiations, there are distinctive, autonomous ritual communities, each of which gives preference to its own ways of doing things; hence, there are considerable differences, not necessarily in the types of objects or aphorisms or dances, but in the manner in which the staging is done: variations in emphasis, elaboration, combinations, and sequences. The preceptors in each ritual community take charge of this orchestration; as creative performers, they look for new effects and for

originality. This conscious search is enhanced because high initiates travel widely to participate, as tutors, sponsors, performers, and/or guests, in the rites held by different autonomous ritual communities.

The shapes, natural properties, primary usages, and denotations of the great majority of objects utilized in this system of communication are widely known throughout Lega society. Only the figurines, masks, stools, and some miniature carvings and assemblages have no direct basis in the broader world since they are specifically made for bwami, but even here the materials from which they are fashioned and the properties of the entities they are derived from (vegetable, animal, mineral) are well known. Thus, the network of symbolic references originates in very simple, manifest facts: formal features of the objects, intrinsic properties of the materials and of the entities from which they are derived, modes of usage, processes of collecting and/or manufacturing, associations, contrasts, oppositions, and names given to the objects. The initiates make unpredictable selections among these "realistic" features and attach additional perceived qualities to the sets. The poetic formulation of the concepts and their kinetic expression are part of the initiatory process. The interpretations of these concepts and their application to the world of moral philosophy of bwami belong to the membership and are part of their "ineffable secret." What adds greatly to the special color of these symbolisms is the outstanding genius for transforming the primary and derived names of objects into persons and human characters, viewed as the quintessential embodiments of the virtues upheld and vices castigated by bwami. The generic terms for stool (kisumbi), for mat (katanda), for families or species of plants or animals--all of these are bound to be the names of personages: Mr. Kisumbi, Mr. Katanda, Mr. Nzogu (elephant), Mr. Ibulungu (tree). This constant tendency to shift, almost imperceptibly, from the inert and inanimate to living substance, from the material to the spiritual, from the empirical to the conceptual and affective offers the initiates limitless resources for images, associations, contrasts, synonyms, puns, and allusions.

Initiations constitute a very special and particularly receptive setting for this exuberant imagery to operate. Many of the procedures and ideas that underlie them, at each stage of the progression, are based on a type of knowledge that is exclusive and secret. For those that aspire to them, the initiations hold the promise of revelation of hidden things (the Greek notion of epopteia, "having seen") and communication of the "ineffable secret" (see Kerenyi, 1967, passim). For the initiates themselves, i.e., those who have "seen," they confer a feeling of fulfillment and happiness and the guarantee of greatness, wealth, and fame. During the initiation procedures, the candidate must not question or evaluate, but, in the Aristotelian sense, "undergo" (pathein) and "be brought into a state" (diatethenai)--a state of wonder and bewilderment that creates a vision. In the Lega rites, the initiates learn to understand icons in action, in their most diverse expressions: form, material, intrinsic properties, semantics, associations, contrasts, ordinary and ludic usages. Through the rites, the initiate does not merely acquire rank and status; he experiences a state of beatitude, a feeling of well-being and confidence, and a

conferment of moral excellence because he has seen and learned to see. As is the case in Greek initiations, there is a special potency in the act of "seeing" "hidden" things, i.e., in witnessing the dynamic situations in which objects, whether they can or cannot be viewed otherwise, are part of an unusual, unforeseeable, surprising context.

The Lega stool is an interesting example of the complex position that artworks hold in an African society. I have already noted that this type of object is widespread and that the present-day Lega could hardly be its inventors. The Lega have assigned a special place to the stool as an initiation device; there is nothing exceptional about this fact because the Lega employ hundreds of different kinds of items, simpler or more complicated, with this purpose. However, unlike many of these objects, and like all carvings, the stool is exclusive and emblematic, i.e., it is only an object of bwami, and it is characteristic of a particular grade level. In cases like these, it is virtually impossible to decide whether the advent of the stool historically precedes or follows the development of bwami, or whether they are synchronic and concomitant, for bwami and bwami-like institutions exist outside Lega society in Eastern Zaire. Nothing in the bwami ideology militates against the introduction of extraneous objects or their elimination, replacement, or duplication. But no object has a place in the rites unless it fits the needs and purposes. The prolific imagination that finds meanings applicable to the moral philosophy in the most diverse and wide-ranging entities has no difficulty in accommodating "new" items. Thus, basic formal aspects of the stool are not the iconic outgrowth of ideas that were there to shape them. Rather, the advent of the form has stimulated new formulations of old ideas. In the historical process, ideas grow and in turn affect the forms--at that point, the object is a fully integrated part of the system.

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PLATE 2

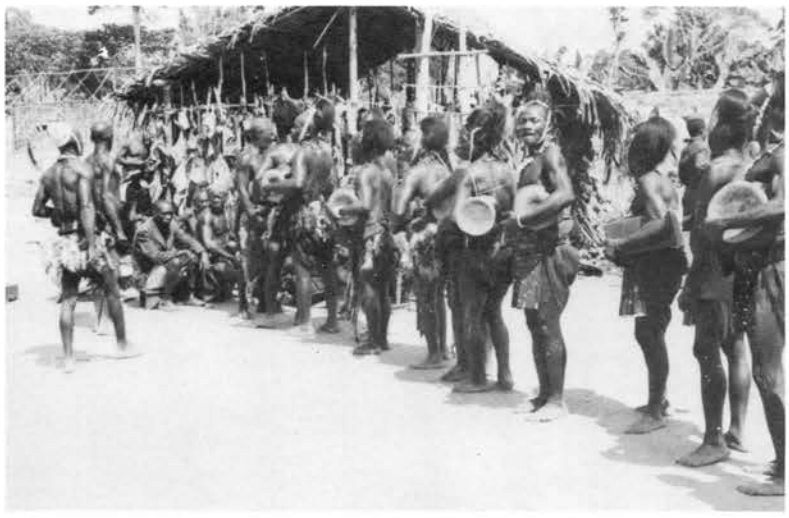

PLATE 3

PLATE 4

PLATE 5

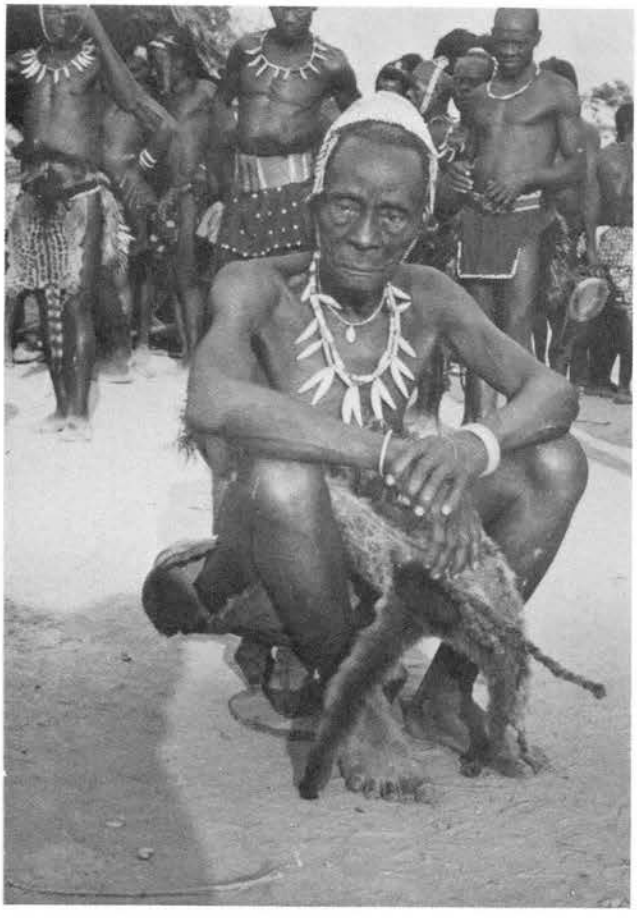

PLATE 6

PLATE 7

PLATE 8

PLATE 9

PLATE 10

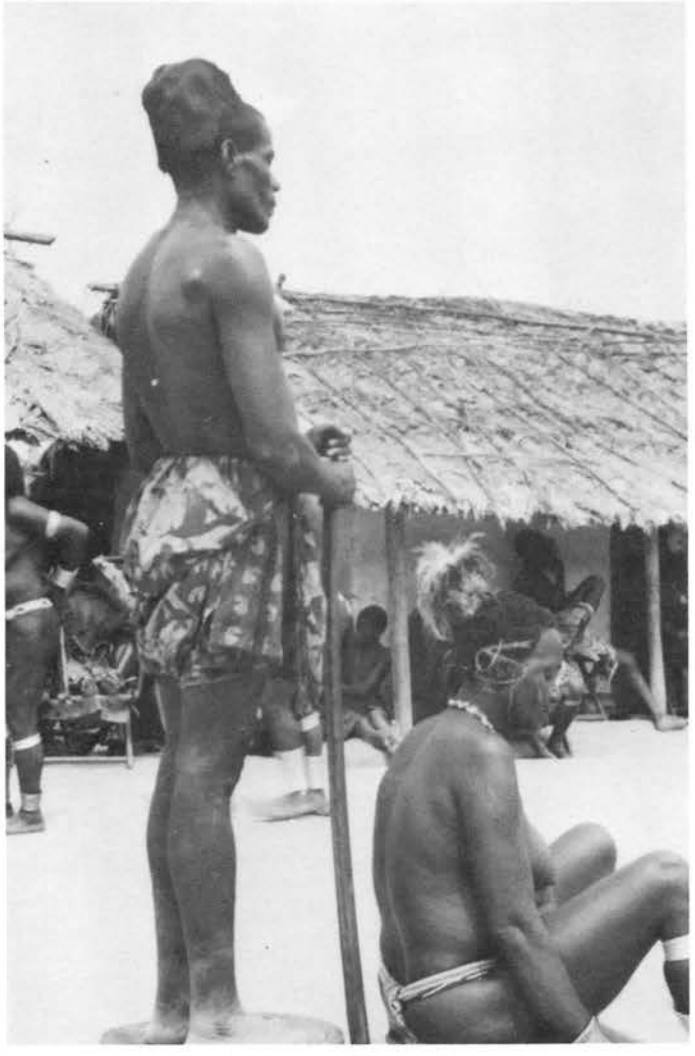

PLATE 11