DANIEL P. BIEBUYCK

Schemata in Lega art

Field based in-depth studies of African artworks increasingly reveal the difficulty of interpreting form without the fullest possible knowledge of its cultural determinants[1]. Forms, even those that seem to be widespread, are subject to specific interpretations, and, therefore, are not easily readable for those who have not learned to read them in the particular cultural context in which they are created and used. It may be relatively easy to describe objectively the various aspects of the forms; but inferences originating with the analysis of particular forms, as to their function or meaning or manner of usage, are often proven to be deceptive. Great difficulties face us in primitive art studies partly because of the variety of cultural systems in which artworks occur.

More significantly, the interpretation of these forms has not been condensed in systematic treatises by the bearers of those cultures. The knowledge of them is contained in a great many ritual practices and orally transmitted formal and informal statements. Much of that knowledge is not readily available to all the members of the society but restricted to segments of it, such as the participants in exclusive cults, associations, and rituals.

Field-based empirical enquiry is, therefore, a *sine qua non* for learning to understand these forms. One has to learn these forms in the same manner and in the same context as do the members of those societies. This is not a simple matter, because of the secrecy that may surround this learning process, and also because of the highly complex symbolic formulations and interpretations that go with it. Theoretical constructs are valid, but must not be assumed to be self-explanatory; they must be tested. The first, and essential test, is in the field itself.

With reference to the Lega of the Zaïre Republic, I want to examine some aspects of their interpretation of the artworks which they create[2]. Lega sculpture is widely known as one of the major stylised and abstract arts of Africa. It is a miniature art in ivory, elephant bone, wood, and occasionally in stone, resin, or clay. The vast

1. Various observations that were presented by me during the sessions on Schematisation in Art are both condensed, and somewhat expanded, in this article. I would like to thank the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and its Principal, Dr Peter Ucko, for having given me an opportunity to participate in these proceedings.

2. Field research among the Lega was sponsored by the *Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale*, Brussels. For further references to the Lega, and for visual examples, see Biebuyck (1973). Recent library and museum research on the arts of the Zaïre Republic as a whole, including the Lega, was done with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, D.C. All sculptures illustrated were collected in the field by the author and deposited in the *Musée royal de l'Afrique Centrale*, Tervuren (Belgium). All photographs were made by the *Musée royal de l'Afrique Centrale*. For other examples of Lega sculptures and more information about their usages and meanings, *see* Biebuyck (1973).

'late 1 Lega; wooden masquette (height 13.8 cm) used ı initiations of the second highest grade of the *bwami* ssociation.

'late 2 Lega; ivory masquette (height 7.1 cm) used in ıitiations of the highest grade of the *bwami* association.

majority of masks are less than 28 cm long (e.g. plate 1); the bulk of the wooden anthropomorphic figurines fall between 8 cm and 40 cm; and the ivory (e.g. plate 2) and bone ones range between 6.5 cm and 28 cm. Some colouring (mainly white, but also red and black) occurs on most wooden carvings; the ivory sculptures are conspicuous for the wide range of patination, their smoothness and gloss (the objects in bone are always duller in tone). The small size of the sculptures, the overwhelming use of ivory (e.g. plates 3-5) and bone objects and their very striking patinas, combined with distinctive morphological and stylistic features (e.g., system of proportions; predominance of the concave heart-shaped face), give this Lega art a character of uniqueness.

An analysis of Lega sculptural production reveals that the artists derive their inspiration from a few basic forms that are observable in their physical universe. The two most frequently used form categories are derived from the physical environment: the human (e.g. plate 6) and the animal (particularly, the four-legged animal, e.g. plate 7) shapes[3]. Several other recurring forms are inspired by the general technology; at least one other is a *sui generis form.* At the outset, it must be noted that there is little overlapping between these categories. However, the artists produce a few anthropomorphic figurines with bird-like heads, some masks with animal horns, and some spoons that closely follow the anthropomorphic model.

For the Lega artist the human body constitutes the major source of inspiration, i.e., by far the majority of Lega sculptures are anthropomorphic. But the manner in which the human body is used and represented in the carvings covers a vast range of possibilities. The anthropomorphic figurines exhibit a wide spe trum of degrees of 'completeness', from wh may be considered as a complete body (hea with its various details; neck and shoulders; arr and hands; torso; buttocks and genitals; legs a feet) to a mere head or face (i.e., the mask). In b tween these extremes fall a great number of i termediate forms which are the result of elabc ation or simplification and amplification reduction of details. A few examples of inte mediate recurring forms may be given. Amo the 'full' figurines, some have no hands; othe have no arms, or only one arm or mere upp arms. The arms may be carved, loose from t body, or rigidly sticking to it; but they may positioned in characteristic ways, such as touc ing the chin, the chest, the hips, the navel, and t knees, or raised high above the head. Among t 'half figures' only the legs and feet may be a sent, but one or two arms may be missing als The pole-shaped torso itself may end in a f bottom; it may be flattened out like a handle, finish in a sharp point like a peg or pin. Ma other variations do occur as the result of t exaggeration of proportions (e.g., huge hea long or short and massive legs), or of the a dition, amplification, or suppression of physi or ornamental features. A few more examples these recurring variations are provided he Some figurines have a large head and only short, columnar or flattened torso, ending stump-like legs; others consist of a large he placed directly on huge legs. Some figurir have no sexual indications; some others exhi enlarged and heavily emphasised male or fem genitalia. In certain figurines the navel is pr tuberant; in others, the belly or buttocks are e tended; and again on others there are fem breasts. Eyes may be absent from the face, they may be engraved, carved in relief, or re resented by natural cowrie-shells. They may circular, square, coffee-bean or cowrie-shell l in shape, and placed symmetrically or asy metrically in the face. There are double figu

3. These and the subsequent data on Lega sculptural forms are based on the scrutiny of several thousands of objects (in the field and in collections) and of published and unpublished photographs.

ate 3 Lega; full standing figurine in ivory (height cm) used at the highest level of initiations into the *kindi* ide of the *bwami* association.

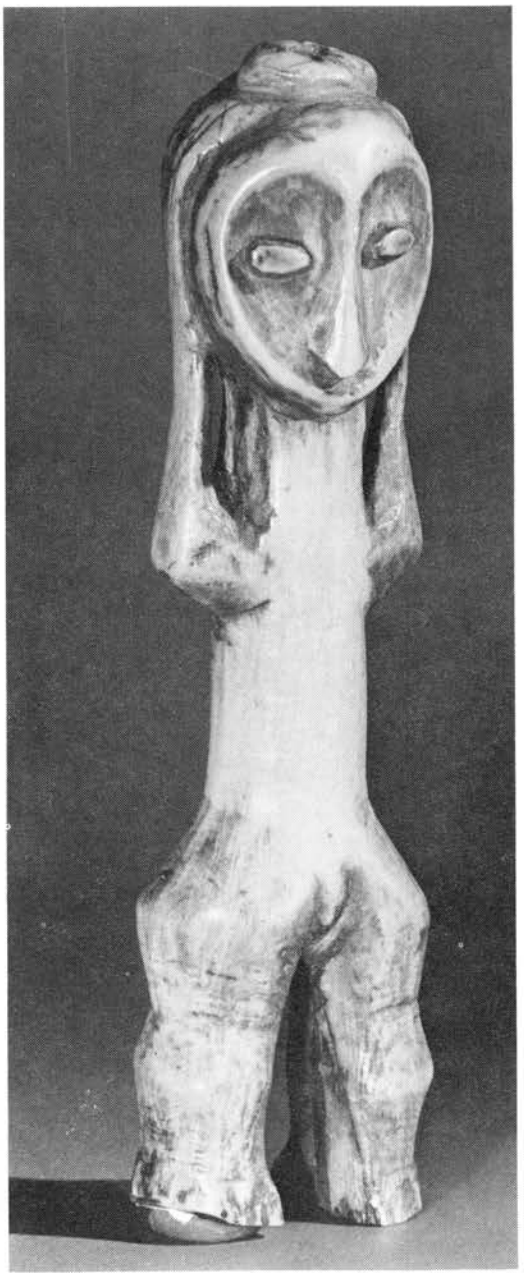


Plate 4 Lega; bifrontal half-figurine in ivory (height 5.3 cm).

Plate 5 Lega; peg-shaped figurine in ivory (height 21.1 cm).

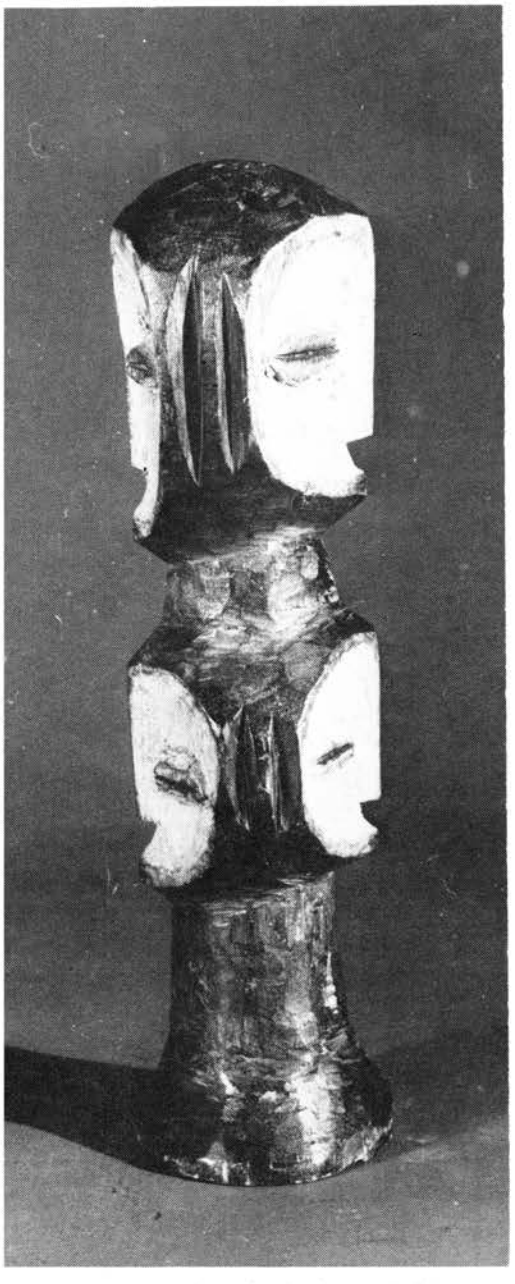
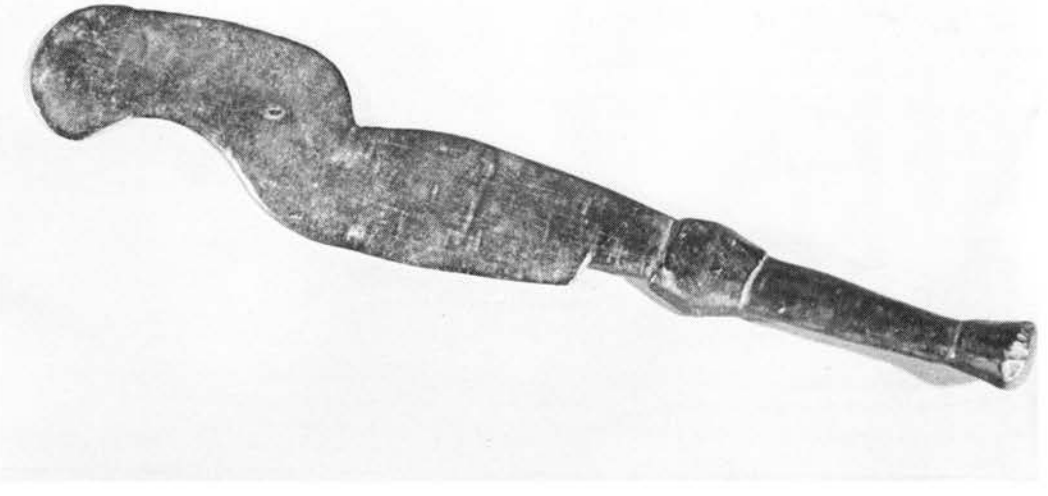


Plate 6 Lega; multi-faced figurine in wood (height 12.4 cm) used at the highest levels of initiation.

Plate 7 Lega; animal figurine in wood (length 20.6 cm); depending on the rite and its action context, these generalised quadrupeds can represent different animals, such as dogs, antelopes or goats.

Plate 8 Lega; miniature billhook knife in ivory (length 30.4 cm). The form is a replica of the iron billhook knife with wooden shaft which is used to clear away forest undergrowth. The ivory billhook occurs at various levels of the initiations into *bwami*.



ıes, comprising two full bodies, of differing or lentical sex, that are fully or partially joined by ıe backs. Many single figurines have two or ıore heads, and/or faces, carved in opposition r superimposition (e.g. plate 6). Circle-dot or ot designs may adorn the figurines on the face r on the body; some have a carved hat or a real r carved cowrie-shell on top of the head; a few arry a beaded necklace. In contrast to the ıthropomorphic figurines, the anthropoıorphic face masks and masquettes do not xhibit this wide range of morphological sub-ypes. Except for a very few larger masks and ɔme horned wooden ones, the bulk of them fol-ɔw a uniform pattern with minor variations, but o clear-cut subtypes.

The Lega artists produce a sizeable number of oomorphic figurines. This category of art-orks is dominated by a standardised four-:gged animal figurine that consists of a head and nout, a fairly uniform cylindrical torso, four hort legs, and a tail. Most of these four-legged nimal carvings constitute a very general oomorphic category (plate 7). Some specifiations are the result of the addition of horns, ells, pangolin scales, and beads, and of a bent ack. In the latter instances, the forms become eminiscent of an antelope, a dog, a pangolin, a hameleon. In addition, there are recurring, but nuch less numerous, types of more 'realistic' nimal carvings that represent a bird (often only ıeck and beak), a snake, a lizard, a crocodile, a rog, a centipede, a turtle head and neck, an aard-ark.

Among the other sculptures, the spoons reminiscent of the universal spoon form, but ometimes carved as a stylised human body) and he small monoxyle stools (consisting of two qual spheres, used as seat and bottom, that are nterconnected by four bent legs) form *sui generis* categories. Finally, the miniature carved ıammers, billhooks (plate 8), knives, axes, dice, ɔells, pins, pegs, bark beaters, percussion bones, ınd seals, are replicas in ivory or elephant bone of similar objects used in daily life. There are also some carved objects which derive from a part of the human (more or less explicit phallic-like sculptures; carved forearm with hand) and animal forms (carved imitation leopard teeth).

These, then, are the sculptures which the Lega artists make in large quantities for exclusive usage in the *bwami* association. The objects are commissioned by the members of the two highest grades in this association for usage as emblems of rank and status, as symbols of social solidarity, and, above all, as initiation devices. It should be noted that the initiates use a very large number of natural objects, slightly modified or in their original state, and manufactured items as initiation devices.

It is quite obvious that some of the earlier mentioned diversities and variations of artworks, and many of the unmentioned differences in small details (finish; polish; patination; general appearance of the object), must be linked with individual creativity, tradition, inventiveness, and taste; with inequalities in workmanship; with local ateliers, 'schools', and intratribal regional art traditions. However, the narrow range of sources of inspiration and the unquestionable recurrence of morphological categories and types within them and across individual, local, and regional boundaries point to the existence of prescribed models and a well-defined canon of demands.

I will not discuss such aspects as the prescribed materials in which the sculptures are made (certain types of light wood; elephant ivory and bone; and more rarely, a casual object in soap stone, resin, clay, and *ntutu* (the core of a dead tree). It must be remembered that functional categories (e.g., the sculptures as indicators of rank and status) are intimately connected with the opposition between wooden and ivory or bone carvings and that a great many recurring formal types of anthropomorphic figurines are found within and across each of the two major sets of primary materials. Some of the more striking and more obvious recurring typ among the anthropomorphic figurines ar multi-headed and/or multi-faced figurines, distinct from figurines with one head; armless one-armed figurines; figurines with characte istic position of the arms and hands (raised abo the head; hanging along the body; touching tl chin, or the chest, the navel or the knees); asexu figurines in opposition to others that have eith male or female properties; figurines with e tended bellies, or with a huge head, or powerf legs and feet, or developed buttocks; figurin with a peg-like or zigzag-shaped torso; figurin covered with a generous amount of circle-d designs and others with none of these characte istics, etc. Each of these formal types exhibi minor variations of detail. In the frequency ar large-scale geographical distribution of tl above-mentioned types, and many others th are less self-evident, the Lega artists reveal ar stress through the processes of stylisation ar abstraction certain features that, in the view those who commission the artworks, are esse tial or inessential. Their artworks follow close a set of principles, of concepts, of models, ar schemata that are imposed by the nature of tl demands made from the artists by the hi initiates.

The Lega have a system of taxonomic classi cation in which the various categories of ar works are designated by well-circumscrib generic terms. Their classification, which revealing for the general ideas that the Lega e tertain about the nature and the purposes of t artworks, provides, particularly for the high differentiated category of anthropomorpl figurines, only a limited amount of informati about the schemata. For example, the sing term *iginga* clearly delineates the anthrop morphic figurines as a whole from other ca egories, such as zoomorphic figurines (*mug gundu*) or spoons (*kalukili*). However, there a no generic terms to distinguish within this ca egory the wooden from the ivory and bone figu

s (an otherwise functionally significant oppo-
on) or to oppose, for example, the asexual
ırines to those that have male or female attri-
:es. On the other hand, four generic terms dis-
guish between the masks on the basis of the
terials of which they are made, their size, and
addition of horns to the wooden masks (all
ır categories are linked with different func-
ns). In order to know and to understand the
'ious schemata that underlie the recurring
)es of anthropomorphic sculptures, one must
:ome a part of the initiation system itself. One
ıst come to grips with the ideas and concepts
ıt are exposed in the course of the initiation
:s, as a whole and particularly in those rites in
ich anthropomorphic figurines occur. Here is
ıtained and exposed the doctrine that under-
s the schemata. It should be stressed that the
:ire doctrine of the *bwami* association is con-
ısed in what, at least to the outsider, initially
)ears to be an unsystematised and very large
of aphorisms and succinct, highly symbolic,
etic statements. These are sung and dramati-
ly acted out. The initiates, led by the precep-
's, dance, gesticulate, sing to the sound of
ısical instruments, and manipulate large
antities of objects.

The hierarchically organised rites are closed;
:ir secrets and procedures are known only to
)se persons who hold, through initiation, the
propriate rank, status, and experience to par-
ipate in the rites. Among the high initiates
:mselves some have deeper knowledge,
nply because of differences in intelligence,
ill, age, maturity, and experience, and because
their correlated function as preceptors in the
es. This means that the exact understanding
d interpretation of the artworks are a part of
is privileged knowledge. For the outsiders,
:n, the artworks are not immediately readable;
:re is something secret, ambiguous, and
ceptive about them. Moreover, for the new in-
ate the artworks are not meant to be immedi-
:ly readable. The forms *per se* cannot be thought of as unambiguous or descriptive; uncertainties about their precise meaning are left wide open. It is a part of the purpose of the rites in which the artworks occur to make the meanings clear. In initiatory procedure, we encounter an important principle that is vital for a complete understanding of the art forms. The artworks occur in a context of song, dance, and dramatic enactment; they are manipulated during the rite. This context of usage helps clarify a large number of aspects of the forms. Moreover, the initiations to each grade level consist of a hierarchically organised concatenation of rites. A particular artwork, or group of artworks, may be used in more than one rite, that is in more than one ritual context where the modes of manipulation, the configuration, and sequences of simultaneously used artworks are different. This procedure provides for multiple possible interpretations around a single object. Going back to the earlier mentioned examples, one might be inclined to think that the meanings connected with the highly differentiated category of anthropomorphic figurines are more elaborate and more nuanced than those associated with the fairly undifferentiated category of masks. This *a priori* conclusion is disproven by the facts. An unexpectedly large number of meanings are expressed through the masks, which are used in many different ways in a cascade of rites.

Initiations aim at the explanation not merely of the self-evident, but at a deeper understanding and interpretation of things which people assume to know. The objects have many properties that can be the focus of clarifications during the rites. For example, a small stool called *kisumbi* (plate 9) occurs in some of these rites. It is a piece of monoxyle wood, consisting of two opposing spheres (one used as seat, the other as bottom) that are interconnected by four bent legs. In the open space there is a protuberance carved out as if a fifth leg in the centre were missing. The surface of the stool is very smooth; it is

Plate 9 Lega; two stools and a heap of wickerwork rattle displayed during an initiation to the second highest grade of *bwami*.

darkened and glossy; sometimes the top part c
the upper sphere is adorned with the heads c
copper nails. Obviously, this is a small stool o
which people can sit. Its form is radically dif
ferent from two other types of chair which th
Lega use (a trident-shaped backrest; and a larg
monoxyle bench-like chair on which one can s
or lie down). The stool in question belongs to ir
itiates of the *bwami* association; they carry i
hanging with a piece of string from the shoulde
when they go to the initiations. New initiates ac
quire it, as a privileged possession, at the end c
certain rites. The stool is used in several ways a
an initiation object in a set of closed rites. Her
it becomes the focus for symbolic interpre
ations, a source of inspiration, so to speak, for th
formulation and conveyance of several idea
Some of the interpretations flow from the obje
as a form and centre on specific aspects of it, suc
as the two opposing spheres, the four legs an
central proclivity, the smoothness, and gloss c
the surface. Other explanations focus on th

eneric appellation of the stool, which also bemes the name of a character, Mr Kisumbi. ince the object is manipulated during the ances in a variety of ways (e.g., they sit or stand n it; they rub it, smell it, swing it around, or oint at it), different explanations are connected ith these specific usages. The interpretations rther address themselves to the processes and ols involved in the carving of the stool, the ood of which it is made, the particular species f tree from which the wood is obtained, the lace of the tree in the forest, and its associations ith human activity and animal life. Finally, the xegesis centres around the durability of the tool as a product of human technology that is estined to be transmitted from generation to eneration and to outlast the tree from where it omes.

This simple example clearly shows the many nexpected explanations which originate with he form as a whole, its parts, its name, its origin, nd its usage. This full range of symbolic meanngs cannot be known outside the initiatory conext and by far transcends the superficial meanngs and functions that might be ascribed to it rom the outside. Thus, the initiates know all the lues of the object. As sponsors and commissioners of the art, they set up the conceptual schemata that must guide the artists. They need or purposes of initiation certain categories and ypes of forms and reserve for themselves the ighly complex explanation of them; the demand for these objects is clearly formulated in generic taxonomies and terms. For example, the demand is made for an *iginga* (i.e. an anthropomorphic figurine) and the specification is for a *akimatwematwe* (many heads and/or faces), a *kakinga* (young woman), a *kubokokumozi* (one arm), a *waiyinda* (a pregnant, adulterous woman), and so many others that are part of the inventory of recurring types. Some of these demands are more specific and descriptive; others are vague statements that can be formally expressed in many ways. For instance, the demand for a multi-headed figurine is a much more precise statement than the request for a beautiful-youth (*wankenge*). The first demand requires that the figurine have certain explicit morphological features (more than one head and/or face); the second one makes a much vaguer statement which is counter-balanced only by general aesthetico-moral concepts that the Lega cherish. In both cases, however, there is much room for the imagination, the skill, and the taste of the artist and the local traditions to which he adheres. The request for a multi-headed (multi-faced) figurine does not prescribe the number, or the size, or the colour, or the placement of the heads and/or faces, or whether or not it should be a full figure with short legs or a half figure ending in a peg-shaped torso. It says nothing about the possible usages, functions, and meanings.

Hence, different artists have worked out this theme in a variety of ways; many morphological variations do occur within the multi-headed type of figurines with reference to the number of heads and faces, their relative position, their colour, and the size, the volume, and the type of torso. These morphological variations on a single conceptual theme, that is known only to the initiates of appropriate status, greatly add to the mystery of their possible meanings. Knowledge acquired during the initiations indicates that striking morphological variations may be meaningless, that identical meanings may be conveyed by different objects, that diverging meanings may be expressed by objects of the same type, and that any object can express more than one meaning, mainly because of differences in the contexts of usage. For the outsiders, all these factors enhance the character of ambiguity and uncertainty as to the meaning and purpose of the artworks; and for the insiders, they increase the perplexing diversity, complexity and difficulty of the sculptures. Their meanings cannot be inferred or guessed. They are all part of a covert, highly complex system of initiations, and intimately linked with elaborate ethical doctrine and intricate procedural process. The sculptur are meant to sustain and to illustrate diverse, b essential, principles of the moral philosoph They do so, not as pure descriptive forms, but symbols used in a certain manner in a ritual a social context for specific purposes. The e ements of surprise, bewilderment, uncertaint and ritual deception form essential aspects of t initiations, as much as profound exegesis things and ideas, acquisition of positive know edge, and moral self-education and improv ment.

Forms have all too frequently been studi for their own sake, to establish and delinea styles, and to trace geographical distributio historical connections, origins, etc. In this r gard, the social and ritual contexts in which t forms appear are also too frequently handl lightly and superficially. However, both for and their content are intimately related with t wider socio-cultural field of which they ar part. Much more advanced work has to be do on the contexts of usage, and on the ideologi principles and patterns that underly the forn from the point of view of the artists and the co missioners, patrons, and users of the artwor This is not merely a matter of analysis of a thetic and creative criteria, but also of phi sophical, moral, and other humanistic conce that pervade the arts.

Reference

Biebuyck D. 1973 *Lega culture. Art, initiation, moral philosophy among a central African peo* University of California Press: Berkeley.