

Some remarks on Segy's « Warega Ivories »

I came only recently into touch with M. Segy's article on « Warega Ivories » ⁽¹⁾ in which he deals with the artistical qualities and stylistic peculiarities of these ivories, paying also some attention to their significance and use. M. Segy's article is one of these venturesome attempts to cope with subjects about which only scanty and incorrect information is available. It is a clear proof in itself of how much has yet to be done in the African field.

I had the privilege of working for a long time among the Lèga-complex ⁽²⁾ and of paying a nine months study to the *Bwamé* closed association to which these ivories belong ⁽³⁾. I think it therefore necessary to make some preliminary corrections on his article, leaving full details behind to be published in an extensive work on the *Bwamé* association.

1) *The name « Warega »* (p. 1041).

« Warega » is not the right spelling of the people's name dealt with. It is their tribal name as pronounced in Kishwahili speech, *w* and *r* being corruptions of the *b* and *l* of Kilèga. The people call themselves « Balèga » ⁽⁴⁾ as descendants of an ancestor variously referred to as « Lèga », « Alèga » or « Idèga ». The other variations of the name given by the author make no sense and are borrowed from Captain Delhaise's incorrect statements. Exception has to be made for the word « Ouregga », which has to be spelt « Bulèga » and which means the country of the Balèga.

2) *The meaning of the word « Balèga »* (p. 1041).

A meaning of Balèga as « all the people or humanity » never occurred to me in current usage. This was an explanation adopted by Delhaise in his book « *Les Warega* » (1909), in contrast with an interpretation proposed by Cordella (1906) « *popolo dal vaso di terra* ». In present-day genealogical statements all men are said

(1) L. SEGY, *Warega Ivories*, *Zaire*, V, 10, décembre 1951, pp. 1041-1045, with 18 figures.

(2) Over three year's field-work among the Babèmbè, Balèga and other smaller groups was carried out under the auspices of the « Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale — IRSAC ».

(3) We were able to bring home 180 carvings in wood, ivory and elephant's bone, which will be ceded to the Musée du Congo Belge, Tervuren.

(4) Basimwènda and Babèmbè groups pronounce the word as « Balèka ».

to be the descendants of « *Ntu* », who sprang from the creator-culture-hero « *Kénkunga* » (Kalaga) and gave birth to several children through incestuous intercourse with his sister « *Ikulu* ». Lèga is only one of his children, just as the ancestors of the neighbouring Basongola and Bakumu are said to be two others of his children. Neighbouring tribes are never comprised under the general appellation « *Balèga* », but are spoken of as « *Bazimba* », « *Bangobango* », « *Babilè* » (grouping Basongola and Bakumu), etc. Under the descendants of Lèga, *Balèga* group themselves and the *Balèga-Métuku*, whereas the neighbouring *Bazimba* and *Bangobango* are said to be sororal nephews (daughter's sons) of Lèga ⁽⁵⁾. The word « *Balèga* » is thus only applied to groups with which kinship links are supposed to exist. Even in this context, in reference to geographically remote Lèga groups a preference is given to such words as « *Babèmbè* », to denote *Baliga* and *Basimwènda* groups, or « *Bayoma* », to indicate *Bakabango* and *Bamuzimu* groups. In songs « *mulèga* » is often used as synonymous to « *muntu* », man : man of the kinship group, man of the same culture ⁽⁶⁾.

3) *Geographical situation* (p. 1041).

The geographical situation is not correctly described. If we only take into account groups which call themselves *Balèga*, and are considered as such by Administration, we notice that their territory extends between the 26th long. and roughly 28th30' long. (*Basimwènda* groups) and between the 4th lat. and a good deal passed 2nd lat. (*Bakwamè* and *Bakonjo* groups). It were however impossible to separate the *Babèmbè* congeries of tribes (*Fizi* Territory and *Itombwè* sector of *Mwènga* Territory) from the Lèga complex, because of the many genealogical, linguistic and cultural links between both. This extends the boundaries to the 29th long. up to the borders of Lake Tanganyika and to the 5th lat. passed, up to the neighbourhood of Albertville on the Lake's borders.

4) « *Later works in wood* » (p. 1041).

I cannot agree with the statement that carvings are « mostly in ivory with the exception of some later works in wood ». *Balèga* use several kinds of materials for their carvings : wood, stone, elephant's bone, elephant's ivory, hippopotamus' ivory (in some

(5) Attention may be drawn here on principles of an Omaha type of cross-cousin terminology.

(6) Cordella's interpretation is rejected by *Balèga*, the word for water-jar having another tone pattern than the word used for their ancestor.

regions) and « *ntutu* », the hard heart of dead trees. It was repeatedly asserted by various Balèga that, very long ago, wooden carvings were by far the commonest, if not the only, ones. Stone carvings are very rare — I saw only three of them in the Bani-sanga area (Beia sector, Pangi Territory) — and are said to be very old too. Nowadays ivory and wooden objects are used for the whole range of rites and initiations leading to the several degrees of the association, although wooden objects are primarily restricted to the lower degrees whereas ivory ones are mainly property of the highest degrees (« *hingwi* » and « *kidasi* » among the Bainyèndu; « *ngandu* » among the Babèmbè, Basimwènda, Bamuzimu; « *kindi* » among the other groups of Shabunda and Pangi Territories). This does not exclude that wooden objects may figure in *kindi* initiations or that ivory objects may occur in *kongabulumbu* (lowest degree) rites.

5) *Ivory masks* (pp. 1041-1042).

Ivory masks are regionally called « *lukungu* », « *idimu* », « *kélumè* », « *kéngungungu* », « *émangungu* ». I know ivory masks of all possible sizes. Some of them may only measure a few centimeters, others attain sizes up to 18-19 cm., whereas the largest ivory mask I got measures 23 cm. As a rule however, wooden masks (*lukwakongo*; *tulimu*) are larger than ivory ones, particularly the « *muminia* » and « *kayamba* » types. The holes on both sides of the masks are used to attach them, by means of a string (*lukusa*), not to a costume as Segy thinks, but before the face or on the forehead or on the side of the head or on its back or on a kind of fence (*pala*). During initiations, masks are often simply carried in the hand or held against the chin; they are often too simply disposed on the ground or drawn on by their beards. To the holes on the chin is attached a beard (*luzèlu*), which is very rarely made of raffia-fringes (*mpèku*) as Segy maintains, but generally consists of fringes of dried banana-leave stalks (*lunsaga*).

The use of all ivory masks is restricted to initiations into *kindi*, men's highest degree of the association. Wooden masks belong to the rites and dances of the second highest degree « *yananio* », although the large wooden masks of the « *muminia* » type may appear in rites of the lowest degree « *kongabulumbu* » or may locally be used in some *kindi* dances. In some regions, each *mwamé* initiated to « *lutumbo lwa yananio* » (the highest subdivision of the *yananio* degree) possesses a wooden mask. Elsewhere, a wooden mask is possessed, in the name of the extended family group or minimal lineage group, by the *mwamé* of « *lutumbo lwa yananio* » degree, who within the group has been the last one to be initiated to that degree. Each *mwamé* of « *lutumbo lwa kindi* »

(highest subdivision of the *kindi* degree) possesses an ivory mask, except for the local variation mentioned above. The very uncommon, and almost unique large ivory mask of our collection, was the only one existing within the Beiamisisi-clan and was possessed, in the name of the community, by the *mwamé* of *kindi* degree who was among all living kinsmen the first to have been initiated to that degree.

6) *Ivory statues* (pp. 1042-1043).

Segy's assertion that the statues are called « *bami* » has no sense. The word « *bamé* » only refers to all members, without distinction, of the *bwamé* association. There are several words used to term ivory statues : « *katémbétémbé* », « *kalimbangoma* », « *keitula* », « *igénga* », « *kétumba* », « *nyasompo* » ('*a'énga* among *Bai-nyéendu*; '*alèngè* or '*m'mèci* among *Babèmbè*). Moreover all statues have their individual names and specific songs.

I am not going to discuss here Segy's classification of statues into main groups, nor his morphological criteria used. As I am not a student of primitive arts, I prefer to abstain from such discussions. I will therefore concern myself here with the functional types of statues distinguished by the Balèga themselves and with their uses in general.

I cannot uncritically accept Segy's contention that statues where the body remains a simply column are phallic symbols. Wishful thinking and quite obvious seeming impressions deriving from our European mentality have to be clearly distinguished from Lèga modes and ways of thinking and interpreting. It often appeared to me that form had nothing to do with name or with symbolic interpretation or with function. Small ivory statues e.g. which morphologically have nothing to do with phallic symbols are called « *katémbétémbé* », the little phallus. They are propriety of women initiated into the highest women's degree of the *bwamé* association, are fixed to their waist-belts and have a preservative meaning : women initiated to *bunyamwa* are not seduced, are untouchable. The same statues may also be attached to the neck of a goat or to a seat in order to preserve them from being appropriated in joking relationships by sororal nephews. Next to that it may be pointed out that Balèga have real representations of phalli, carved in ivory or wood, which are used as sexual symbols in initiatory dances, though they are not named phalli, but « *yango* », teaching.

Statues with one arm contain a profound teaching : don't engage into vain quarrels with a kinsman, perhaps you might injure him and loose a precious ally if war comes. It is said that this type of statue has nothing to do with an ancient usage of cutting off

an arm of a killed enemy in order to take it home as a trophy (*bulélélé*).

Statues with raised arms symbolize the desperate gesture of an ill man in order to keep away the destructive and pernicious sorcery of his wife. There is implicit the Lèga notion of all women being potential sorcerers.

I got ivory statues ranging in size from 5 cm. to 22 cm., and I saw also a very old one measuring more than 30 cm. Moreover the differences of volume are as important as the variations of size. Balèga distinguish following kinds of statues :

a) « *Tutémbémbé* » : generally small statues, always in ivory. They belong to the « *banyamwa* », women initiated to the highest women's degree of the *bwamé* association. Women rarely possess more than one or two of them.

b) « *Tulimbangoma* » : are larger in size and more voluminous. They may be made of wood or of ivory, although wooden « *tulimbangoma* » do not occur in some regions. If made of wood they are individually possessed by *bamé* initiated to « *lutumbo lwa yananio* » degree. If made of ivory they are individually possessed by *bamé* initiated to « *musagé wa kindi* » degree. In both cases, only one figure is possessed by one individual.

c) « *Tuté* » statues : large in size and made of wood, used in some regions only in « *ngandu* » degree.

d) « *Keitula* » statues : made of wood, large in size and used in rites of « *bombwa* » degree. They are possessed, in the name of the community, by a « *nsingia* », a specialist of initiatory dances and songs.

e) To the « *magénga* » category (local variations : « *nyasompo* », « *bitumba* » ; « *'a'énga* » ; « *'alèngè* » or « *m'mèci* ») belongs by far the largest number of statues, made in ivory and wood.

We must distinguish two groups :

1) ivory statues individually possessed by *bamé* of « *lutumbo lwa kindi* » (by *bamé* of « *ngandu* » in regions where the *kindi* degree does not occur ; by *bamé* of « *hingwi* » or « *kidasi* » in regions where neither *kindi* nor *ngandu* occur). A powerful *kindi* who had many important kinship relations might formerly have up to 10 and 15 such statues.

2) statues possessed by an individual in the name of the whole community. We must distinguish three kinds :

wooden statues belonging to the « *mutulwa* », the basket which contains several initiatory objects (*masèngo*) of the « *lutumbo lwa kindi* » degree. This basket is generally in the possession of a *kindi* who, within the limits of a certain group, has been the last one to be initiated to that degree. The extent of the group within which such a collective basket exists varies from region to region,

according to the structure of the group, to its inner cohesion and to the number of members of the *kindi* degree. There may be one such basket for a whole clan or one for each sub-clan; there is rarely one for each maximal lineage. The number of wooden statues contained in such a basket varies, but some types are always present, such as « *Kémbayu* » (Bad Heart); « *Wayénda* » (The Guilty Pregnans); « *Sakématwématwé* » (Janus);

wooden statues possessed in the name of the whole group by a very powerful *kindi*. Such statues are extremely rare and have a very important meaning. I got one of them, called « *Bakwampê-go* » (Those who die of cold);

ivory statues of large size, generally unique for a whole clan or even for a series of linked clans. They symbolize the introduction into the group of the *kindi* degree and are symbols of the unity and continuity of the group. They are possessed in the name of the community by the *kindi* who was the first among living to be initiated to that degree.

7) Segy's statements about the use of these ivory statues are most incorrect. I cannot enter here upon the various functions of all these types of statues and must confine myself to only a few points.

a) These statues did belong nor to the elders nor to the chiefs of the tribe. *Lèga society* is a stateless society without chiefly clans of chiefly lineages, political authority being based on the segmentary lineage structure and being confined to a small localized kinship group. On the other hand, an elder who has not been initiated to the *bwamé* association cannot have such statues. Our list above shows moreover that the several types of statues are restricted to one or another degree of the association.

b) These statues were never used as a kind of seals to be sent by messengers. Messengers (*mégèenzi*) carried with them packets of « *masandi* » herbs or « *mézègèlè* » rattles to which raffia-strings tied in a particular way had been attached.

c) These statues have further nothing to do with twin-cult. It seems to me uncautious and unscientific together to try to draw general conclusions from seemingly parallel data presented by another tribe, even if this tribe were not far away, as the Nyamwezi are well. Although twin-cult is much in vigour among the Ba-bèmbè and some eastern *Lèga* groups, there is no kind of carvings at all attached to it.

All ivory and wooden carvings of the *Balèga* are the property of the *Bwamé* association. This association forms a hierarchy of several men's and women's degrees; it is, in principle, open to everybody and one accedes to the different degrees through an

almost life-long cycle of rites and initiations accompanied by remarkable exchanges and distributions of valuables and food. The use of all these carvings is quite definite, although several meanings and various functions may be attached to one object or a same use may be given to two different ones.

8) Concerning Segy's assumption that the circular sign represented on many Lèga carvings was adopted as a sign of the sun and of life-force and that it gave spiritual power to the statues, we can give following provisional remarks.

These circles are called « *bitondi* » and compared in initiatory songs to tatoos named « *nyona* » on the front-side and « *nkèmbè* » on the back-side. I noticed further the absence of these « *bitondi* » on all ivory statues which are unique in the group and symbolize its continuity. If these circles were the symbol of vital force it would be most appropriate to have them carved on this functional type of carvings. An important assembly of a two hundred *bamé* of the highest degrees to which I submitted this thesis had never heard about a similar meaning of the « *bitondi* ». May be a thorough study of the congruence of these circles with certain functional types will reveal us, in the future, a glimpse of the right meaning of these « *bitondi* ».

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