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**«THE WORDS OF THE LAND».  
TEACHING THROUGH PROVERBS**

Few systematic studies have been conducted on formal teaching methods, applied to particular age groups, in traditional African societies. The contents of such teachings are often presented in the context of ritual and social analysis or as part of works dealing with oral literature, with little information on the didactic framework within which the proverb texts occur, the personnel involved, the circumstances, the exact purposes and goals.

Among the outstanding studies that mainly deal with the pedagogical aspect of social and intellectual life in African societies, special importance should be given to works by Audrey Richards (1945 ; 1956), Hans Cory (1956), Eberhardt-Roumeguère (1986), Dominique Zahan (1960).

This article centers on the use of proverbs and their associated objects in the *mutanga* system of teaching among the Lega of the Democratic Republic of the Congo<sup>1</sup>. Ellen Burk *et al.* (1956) have published a brief study on what they refer to as the «corde de la sagesse», including twenty-five proverbs for the area of the Beigala, Banagabo and other groups in the Shabunda territory. George Defour's (1981) substantial study of the «corde de la sagesse» includes 232 proverbs and related objects and meanings, collected over a period of about ten years in various areas, from different spokesmen. Presented in French with abundant annotations, this piecemeal concatenation of otherwise important data does not do justice to the essential coherence and intellectual thrust of a single teaching session.

Unexpectedly, I was able to witness and record such a session when I returned among the Lega in 1953 for a short period of time to complement information on the *bwami* association. The present article describes this event (the *mutanga*) in detail and analyzes the use of proverbs not only as pedagogical devices but as vehicles of condensed knowledge interpreted on

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<sup>1</sup> I have already analyzed the use of aphorisms in the specific initiation rites for each grade of *bwami* in *Lega Culture* (1973) and *The Arts of Zaire* (vol. II, 1987). I was not able to observe *bwali* rites nor could I make any adequate descriptions of them because of the severe sanctions levied by the colonial regime. The *mutanga* rites have already been described by Burk (1956a) and more recently by Defour (1981).

numerous symbolic levels. The systematic linkage of, and constant interplay between, proverbs and objects is a powerful and effective means of transmitting a maximum amount of meaning. But before turning to the *mutanga* itself, it is necessary to briefly outline the Lega system of formal teaching.

### Lega teaching methods

Among the Lega, there are three basic consecutive, but interrelated, stages of formal teaching for men<sup>2</sup>, called *mutanga*, *bwali*, *bwami*. The earliest, referred to as *mutanga*, involves some of the most intelligent and motivated boys and their teachers. The second is linked with the prolonged period of seclusion coincidental with *bwali* circumcision ceremonies which all adolescents must, in principle, undergo. The third is associated with the life-long initiations connected with membership into the hierarchically graded *bwami* (theoretically, a voluntary association, but *de facto* a precondition for social recognition and the exercise of power and authority). Information on the *bwali* is scant (Burk, 1956b, notes that since early colonial times there was severe repression of the circumcision rites), but there is extensive data on the total context of initiation to all grades in *bwami* (Biebuyck, 1973, 1987)<sup>3</sup>.

The *mutanga* is a preliminary introduction to the Lega conception of «deep thoughts» conveyed through «simple things». Knowing the range of potential meanings of even the most rudimentary objects is fundamental to all subsequent training. Any material (wood, ivory, etc.), any manner of acquiring the material, any method of shaping it into a useful object, any tool or other device employed, any type of use (common or ceremonial), is subject to manifold interpretations, beginning with the simplest and most overt and progressing to the complicated, metaphorical, and esoteric propositions. Quills, for example, are interpreted not merely a part of a

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<sup>2</sup> Women do not go through these educational rites, outside of their daily family routines (cooking, cultivating, childcaring). They receive from their aunts and grandmothers some intensive formal instruction pertaining to female duties, roles and privileges at the time of their first menstruations. Most young women receive additional knowledge through the *kongabulumbu* rites (lowest *bwami* grade) ; when they marry and their husbands attain higher grades, the women also benefit from the knowledge imparted in the requisite rites.

<sup>3</sup> Among them, the rites for the lowest grade, *kongabulumbu*, most closely elaborate on ideas presented in the *mutanga* (cf. Biebuyck 1973, 1987 ; Burk, 1956b).

porcupine's anatomy but also as objects with numerous functions for the human community : hair adornments for women ; «forks» with which to eat when one's body is freshly rubbed with oil and red powder ; substitutes for hooks or nails to fix something on a house wall ; replacements for ivory and bone pegs around which sacred initiation fences are built to present *sacra* in a closed initiation space ; materials with which prickly little caps are made to stress the untouchability and inviolability of high initiated women<sup>4</sup>.

There are major variations in the three modes of teaching. The materials used, the type and amount of objects shown, the form of presentation, the kinds of texts, and the clarity of the explanations depend upon the mode and individual differences in elocution, formulation, and range of knowledge. In *bwali* circumcision ceremonies, for example, most of the aphorisms are songs without words, reproduced on two kazoos (*kimbilikiti* : male ; *kabili* : female) in semantically significant sound alternations of high and low tones. In *kongabulumbu*, the verbally expressed aphorisms are sung and dramatically presented in the context of dance and music, with anklet rattles and percussion sticks and/or axe blades beaten together.

At all three stages, there also are grammatical variations in the same aphorism from region to region, from group to group and from preceptor to preceptor ; they may be minor, but they add stylistic variety and shades of meaning to recurring expressions. An example of a minor, formal variation is the following aphorism which stresses the importance of kinship cooperation and solidarity ; it may be expressed as : *Gateike kuboko igobo wa nina ntugabase gamagu* (lit. «Where Arm does not reach [the branches], Mother's Gaff<sup>5</sup> does reach the branches») or as : *Gateike kuboko igobo wa nina nti akeikago* (lit. «Where Arm does not reach, Mother's Gaff does get there»).

Whereas the information provided in the two other stages (*bwali* and *bwami*) repeat and elaborate upon the *mutanga*, its nature and quantity is intensified, leading to deeper insights into all domains of Lega life. Indeed, the «elementary» aspect of the teachings in the *mukanda* stand in sharp contrast with the elaborate and sophisticated symbols and explanations underlying objects in the *bwami* association. In *kongabulumbu*, for example,

<sup>4</sup> These caps, used in the climatic rites of *bwami*, are fixed near or on the women's pubic area. One by one, initiated men simulate a seductive «grabbing» ; no sooner have they approached the caps than they immediately «retract».

<sup>5</sup> Gaff also symbolizes the uterine brother or another very close kinsman.

there are fewer objects than in the *mutanga*, some identical, some different, but the number of aphorisms sung about a single object is much more extensive. For example, a raffia fiber or a water snail shell which are interpreted in only a couple of aphorisms in the *mutanga* teachings are the subject of as many as thirty different aphoristic interpretations in *kongabulumbu*. Another example is that of the mat (*katanda*). Made from *nkombe* cane strips, this mat is mainly used for sleeping. In the *mutanga*, where a piece of this type of mat hangs from the vine, two aphorisms and two explanations are associated with the mat. In the *kongabulumbu* rite, called *katanda* after the mat which is the focus of interpretation, there are from 26 to 33 sung aphorisms (depending on the skill of the preceptors and the ritual communities where the rite takes place) with their explanations in a context full of action. During the *kongabulumbu* rite, one or two preceptors manipulate the mat in diverse ways. They place the mat on the ground ; roll it up and unroll it ; roll it tightly ; carry the rolled-up mat on their shoulders ; wrap a preceptor in the mat ; hold the mat under their arm; bring it close to a burning torch ; roll up the mat and use it as if it were a fishing trap.

Some of the vivid action surrounding these manipulations gives rise to staged altercations and arguments. There is a long episode where the preceptors treat the rolled-up mat as a trap from which fish is removed while a quarrel erupts : if one insults and mistreats people, one will soon be left alone in the village ; but, in preparing for the initiation, one must be cautious in dealings with in-laws who visit too often and run away with valuables reserved for the initiations. Then, the preceptors pretend to throw things into the trap, thereby warning those initiates who might often visit a candidate simply to take as many goods as possible away from him before the actual initiations begin. By dancing wrapped in the mat, holding a burning torch, the preceptors warn the initiates that if a great *kindi* does not like someone, he will do his utmost to influence others not to support a candidate. By holding the mat under his arm, the preceptor informs the others that he is going fishing (in the Kamiluka river), thus expressing the idea that he is preparing to leave for an initiation. As they simulate the idea of placing the fish trap in the river, the participating dancers break into an argument about how it should be disposed in the water (with its opening up - or downstream). The idea expressed here is that one should abstain from counselling where one does not belong ; one should only participate in those councils where one belongs. One must also avoid self-praise or excessive praise of one's children. An initiated woman must not have a bad character

for she would chase away the other wives. Sitting on the mat and showing its seam signifies that if your wife takes good care of your person, you must reciprocate. An aphorism sung in the middle of these lessons praises the greatness of *bwami* : *bwami* is self-sufficient, omnipresent and universal and affects everywhere ; it is boundless like the sky.

Although the richly formulated aphorisms differ considerably in the two communities where I observed this rite, the essential ideas conveyed are constant. If the adept hopes to move ahead in the initiations, he must be as flexible and malleable as the mat. For continued progress, he must also be circumspect and show no arrogance or excessive pride. He must be of good disposition toward elders, initiates, and women (for example, one must treat an inherited woman and her children with the greatest circumspection). The adept must not be a vain talker.

#### *Learning the deep meaning of things*

Any male individual who wishes to advance in the sociopolitical sphere must progress through the different stages of formal teaching outlined above<sup>6</sup>. He is thus gradually initiated to the «hidden» meaning of things, learning not to restrict his view of life to its face value but to go beyond the surface appearance. In order to do so successfully, he must have a teacher/tutor/sponsor whom he must respect unconditionally and whom he should never pretend to surpass in knowledge and social importance. The following proverbs emphasize the importance of such a preceptor :

He who has no Great-One (preceptor) to bring together the logs in the hearth (to stir the fire), will see that his fire has extinguished.

A billy-goat cannot grow a beard if it has no breeder<sup>7</sup>.

The greater part of the teachings consist in displaying simple objects visible and accessible to all in daily life, but whose hidden meanings in the framework of Lega material culture, social system, and moral philosophy

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<sup>6</sup> Although the lowest grade of *bwami* is accessible to all males who have undergone the *bwali* puberty rites, many persons are not well prepared for it and therefore cannot readily find a tutor/sponsor to support them in attaining higher levels in *bwami* hierarchy.

<sup>7</sup> In Lega society, goats have many exchange and ritual functions ; unless there is a specific reason for someone to keep the goat alive, it will never become old.

have to be learned and assimilated. The same objects occur at different stages, with persistently recurring interpretations and increasingly new and more complex ones. At each stage, teaching is based simultaneously on visual and oral presentations. In the more developed forms of education (*kongabulumbu* and all the other grade initiations of *bwami*) dramatic and musical performances are combined with the other two techniques. Much of the teaching process involves demonstrations *ex contrariis*, which make the learning more difficult and fascinating in the surprises it reveals.

Poetic aphorisms, associated with the display of objects, are recited and/or sung at all stages. As a proverb states, «They (aphorisms) are as many and as diversified as the knots of a reed». Although these poetic aphorisms could be identified under the term of *mishumo* (the general word for proverb), the expression *bitondo bya kisi*, «the words of the land», best applies to these teachings that demand profound knowledge and contain the gist of Lega thinking. *Bitondo* (sg., *kitondo*) simply means «word», expression, statement. *Kisi* is a much more complicated concept defined by a group of high initiates as «everything, the entire world in all its components, natural and human-made, everything that is of importance and meaning to human kind»<sup>8</sup>. The *bitondo bya kisi*, in other words, encompass ideas of universal significance for the Lega touching on all aspects of life. They are condensed versions of ultimate «truths» shrouded in poetic imagery.

The *bitondo* are not the privilege of a few. Most persons know several of them (without necessarily apprehending the full range of their symbolic implications); those initiated into *bwami* command an even broader spectrum. But veritable experts and exegetes do lead all procedures at the lower and higher levels of initiation. Some of these experts (*nsingia*) master countless numbers of aphorisms spoken and/or sung in conjunction with the relevant objects, gestures, dances, rhythms and nuances in interpretation. In one *kongabulumbu* initiation, for example, the expert<sup>9</sup> sang, danced out, and dramatically presented a flow of about three hundred *bitondo* over a session of approximately three hours. In cases like these, the full performance, the rhythm and concatenation of aphorisms has much more significance for the participants than any individual statement.

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<sup>8</sup> The term *kisi* is mostly used in combination with *nene-* as *nenekisi*, translated here as «master of the land».

<sup>9</sup> Mr. Kandolo was over 60 years of age, an initiate of the highest *bwami* grade, and widely regarded for his status and his knowledge and skill in dancing and singing.

Although it would be most interesting to pursue a comparative study on these highly involved methods of transmitting knowledge, the present study will limit itself to the procedures, methods, and content of the *mutanga* and the concepts and values expressed therein.

### The *mutanga*

The term *mutanga* is linked with the verbs *kutanga*, «to provide teachings», and *kwana*, «to teach», and it is often translated in Kingwana as *kutaja*, «to mention by name», «to give a name to», «to enumerate». Indeed, the method consists in showing and enumerating a number of material objects, citing their name and reciting/singing one or more associated proverbs that provide a linguistic and semantic context for understanding them. Another term frequently used for this type of instruction is *mukungwa* (*bikungwa*, «things that are put together», «things that are assembled»), which are said to be *bimpa*, «variable like the clouds», and *bigulu*, «high and deep, as the sky»<sup>10</sup>. The term is specifically used in reference to the numerous miniature items hung from a liana in an apparently haphazard manner. It also incorporates in a single category all manufactured objects, including artworks, in opposition to unaltered objects derived from the natural environment. Occasionally, the denomination *kyakwibanda*, which refers to a very large and high fence/screen<sup>11</sup>, implies that the teachings are «high», «deep», and «mysterious». As a proverb states, these teachings also are difficult : «If a high fence falls on your comrade, do not laugh» (i.e., «do not laugh at someone who has trouble understanding the full range of meanings of words spoken or objects seen»).

The early formal instructions are preferably given to a most able or promising boy, beginning at the age of about five or six years. Some are only taught the rudiments ; others may barely receive any formal teaching at all for lack of intellectual curiosity and propensity ; in their case, learning is more pragmatic, focused on such practical matters and their application, as hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering activities, social etiquette, kinship obligations. At this stage, basic survival skills and a sense of *filia pietas* are

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<sup>10</sup> The term *bikungwa* (cf. Biebuyck, 1973) is also used to refer to all manufactured objects from the simplest tools to the art works.

<sup>11</sup> Used in *bwali* ceremonies to separate the initiates from the rest of the world, adding to the mystery within.

underscored<sup>12</sup>. Any male of a certain age and experience (known as *kikundi*, tutor) may dispense the teachings to his son, grandson, or sororal nephew, but some elders will obviously be better equipped or more disposed to engage in these activities.

### *The pedagogical procedure*

The procedure observed in the *mutanga* can be described as follows. The session takes place in the open air, but is conducted discreetly. There is no specific time period, but such sessions usually occur in a tranquil atmosphere, when most people have left the village for the hunt or for the groves<sup>13</sup>. Most frequently, the instructor attaches different miniature objects to a long *lububi* liana stretching, for example, from his house to the men's house (anywhere from five to ten meters)<sup>14</sup>. The instructor and one or more children are seated, not far from the liana from which the objects hang. Pointing to one object at a time, the instructor says *nazigo* («and this other one») and then cites (without singing) the appropriate aphorism(s) and the pertinent explanations. In most cases, only a couple of aphorisms are associated with a given object, though as many as six can sometimes be cited. The complete sequence of objects is interpreted with few interruptions. It is always presented as a whole, not in a piecemeal manner. Throughout the process, the pupil(s) remains silent, motionless, disciplined, emotionless. This demonstration of humility, respect, and self-control is required at all stages of formal teaching, even at advanced levels in the *bwami* initiations. Sessions of this type are frequently repeated at irregular intervals until the boys concerned master the essence of the precepts and are ready for another level of learning. As this learning process is repeated over time, the young men themselves are invited to hang objects on the vine and to quote the relevant texts.

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<sup>12</sup> More specialized métiers like blacksmithing, sculpting, drumming require periods of formal apprenticeship under the guidance of those who master these techniques.

<sup>13</sup> Among the Lega, it is customary for certain «big men» (*bakulu*) to remain behind and watch over the village while men and women are gone to the forest. Lounging on long, beautifully carved wooden chairs (*itanganika*), they keep control over all village happenings, hence the proverb, «I thought father was asleep, but lo ! he is looking at me out of one eye».

<sup>14</sup> The number of objects used depends upon the knowledge or the personal whim of the instructor, as does their spacing and sequence.



In the *mutanga*, rarely more than fifty to eighty items are shown and interpreted. Although certain patterns recur, their selection and sequence are mainly determined by each instructor. The majority of objects are collected and/or manufactured *ad hoc*. By contrast, in *kongabulumbu*, they are permanently stored in collectively-controlled baskets and bags, and displayed time after time. Procedures in the selection and combination of objects exhibited, danced with and interpreted in dramatic action are also more precisely circumscribed. In addition, whereas in the *mutanga* each piece is interpreted separately as a single entity, in *bwami* initiations, it is presented in configurations whose integral meaning transcends the sum total of the individual components<sup>15</sup>.

From instructor to instructor and place to place, there are considerable differences in the amount and kind of items displayed, the sequences in which they occur, and the number of aphorisms quoted. It is impossible to know with precision which aphorism will be associated with a particular item, for there exists in advance a range of possibilities from which the instructor may choose. Some objects invariably reappear with only minor variations in the wording of the aphorisms. Contradictory statements may be made about one and the same object and similar meanings may be attributed to different items hanging from the liana. Diverse objects may be contrasted or be complementary to one another.

### *The objects*

Whereas the number and sequence of objects differ from case to case, there is always a mixture of natural and manufactured items. In the present example, 67 objects are suspended from a liana (150 proverbs referring to them). Some are borrowed from the natural environment: in addition to spontaneously growing plants from virgin and secondary forest (trees, reeds, leaves, shrubs, lianas), domesticated plants are included (food crops such as bananas, corn, manioc, sugar cane, tomatoes, aubergine and tobacco). Relatively few items are derived from the animal realm (e.g., monkey skull,

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<sup>15</sup> In one of the many rites that constitute diverse stages in the *kongabulumbu* initiation process, the sacred configuration (*ziko*) of objects (*masengo*) shown and interpreted simultaneously includes *maseza* nutshells, raffia fibers, a mat, a *bwami* skullcap, straw, a torch and oil, a miniature dugout, a *lusolo* game board, a wild boar's tusk, all kinds of pods and nuts, a walking cane, a forked stick, a pangolin scale.

mussel and snail shells); this is rather surprising because the Lega, great trappers, hunters and fishermen, attach major symbolic significance to animals<sup>16</sup>. Apart from a clod of dirt, no items from the mineral world are included<sup>17</sup>. The manufactured items are sculpted (canoes, mortar, pestle, door, game board, tripod chair), molded (pottery shard, pipe head), plaited (baskets, mats), or woven (nets). Others include barkcloth, raffia fibre, the perforated midrib of a banana leaf, unthreaded shell money.

The emphasis is placed on visible, commonly-used things<sup>18</sup>. Artworks (figurines and masks) are absent from these demonstrations, as are such «noble» materials as elephant ivory and bone. They represent a hidden dimension of Lega society and are thought to be the channels for imparting «deep» knowledge. The *mutanga* is intended to impart basic knowledge, hence it has recourse to elementary objects.

### *The lessons learned*

What does a young boy derive from these sessions? He sees many familiar items, from the forest and from the village, and familiarizes himself with the materials, their shapes, properties and uses, where they may be found, how they are manufactured. He learns that everyday objects have a wide range of meaning that can derive from numerous sources: material, basic form, general and specific use, as well as names and the associations they elicit. He also learns that the name of an object can stand for a person, a character, a quality, an activity, both in the positive and negative sense.

The aphorisms are formulated in a terse poetic format and contain a rich, specialized and diverse vocabulary, which the young person slowly assimilates before he achieves higher levels of education. Gradually, he becomes familiar with some of the hallmarks of Lega language and thought: succinctness of terse expressions, personification and animation of animals, plants and objects, metonymical and metaphorical manipulation of terms.

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<sup>16</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to *bwami* initiations in general where a large number of items derived from the animal world (hides, skulls, tails, scales, claws, teeth, tusks, carapaces, horns, shells, etc.) are the subject of elaborate and sometimes very esoteric interpretations.

<sup>17</sup> In *bwami* a few more of these items (crystals, rocks, termite-nest clay, red earth) are used.

<sup>18</sup> As is the case in *bwami* initiations, lethal iron objects (knives, billhooks, spearheads) are excluded from the configuration (though they may be replaced by their sculpted equivalents).

Throughout the process, the young man is instructed in the basics of Lega social and moral codes that prepare him for adulthood and the future initiations into *bwami*. He learns to be silent, to listen, and to be disciplined. He also learns practice patience, restraint, modesty and humility. He comes to the realization that greatness is not the privilege of a few, a form of acquired status linked to kinship position, but can eventually be achieved by anybody. Indeed, the teachings contain the promise of greatness for those who orient their behavior in accordance with the norms and values expressed.

The concept of *busoga* lies at the root of Lega thought and is the transcendent locus of all *bwami* values. Without this quality, no-one can achieve «greatness». The young pupil learns that the supreme manifestations of *busoga* are temperance, moderation, justice, respect, filial piety, truthfulness, friendship, help, solidarity, generosity. The term stands for a combination of goodness and beauty, something equivalent to the Greek principle of *kalokagathia*. The one who manifests this quality (*musoga*) is *de facto* a moral and spiritual leader or benefactor, one who excels in wise decision-making, generosity, fairness in word and deed, one who creates harmonious cohesion in the group. Anyone can be a *musoga* vis-a-vis someone else if the relationship is shaped by such qualities as mutual assistance, understanding, counseling, cooperating, advising.

External appearances (a nice body but no heart<sup>19</sup>) are meaningless for the well-being of the group. Those who have *busoga* are likened to the *lukenga* leaf (used as sandpaper to smoothen the glossy surface of ivory and wood). In other words, a good person, by providing guidance and leadership, makes others shine and brings out the better in them.

Those who have acquired the highest degree of *busoga* are *mukulu* and *nenekisi* par excellence. The term *mukulu* usually refers to various categories of social personalities : the older people (also identified as *bakungu*), the seniors of kinship groups, the initiates of *bwami*, one's older brothers, father and his brothers, one's maternal uncles. In the teachings, however, it refers mainly to persons who demonstrate a high level of *busoga* in their personal relations with their juniors. Birthright or seniority do not automatically position someone as *mukulu* ; it flows from intelligence,

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<sup>19</sup> An empty shoulderbag is often used as a metaphor for this idea of «form without content» : «the non-initiate is a shoulderbag ; he has a mouth, but no heart» (he is empty, has no substance).

learning, and the behavior that goes with it<sup>20</sup>. In any given community, the *bakulu* are bound by solidarity (they are likened to the *lububi* lianas whose barbs hook together) ; like the *lububi* (used for innumerable purposes), they can perform any kind of duty. To antagonize them is to arrive in a place of dizziness and emptiness (failing to receive any support) and to wrong all the others.

The *nenekisi*, «master of the land», is a *mukulu* par excellence. The term refers to someone who wields great power in the community, meaning a person of authority, in control of a group of people and its resources, a person of power. Among the *bakulu*, he is the *primus inter pares*. From a kinship point of view, he is not necessarily the most senior representative of a community but has achieved this status because he continuously manifests the many qualities inherent in *busoga*. For example, not all senior *kindi* who are *mukulu* can become *nenekisi*, only a most senior *kindi* initiate who has sponsored and tutored many persons through *bwami* may be in an ideal position to achieve this status. As the following proverb indicates, he must be fair and cannot favor one person over another : «The master of the land cannot speak for only one person, or he will die lonely.»

In the teachings, emphasis is placed on the *continuity of the group* (from lineage to extended, polygynous, and nuclear family), its unity, esprit de corps and mutual solidarity. The *mukulu* and *nenekisi* are precisely the ones who guarantee the continuity and cohesion of the group by their intelligent leadership and by ensuring the equitable distribution of all resources. Everyone needs a support group in order to strive forward but effort is necessary in all enterprises, as are actions that foster group unity and harmony.

Ultimately, the neophyte learns that one cannot escape control by and support from the group. All disruptive actions (inside and outside the group) are identified as immoral, unwise or anti-social and must be averted. Violence in words and deeds must be avoided. He also learns that continuity of the nuclear family, especially in terms of having children (*ibuta*) must be stressed ; children are the ultimate goal of a marriage and barrenness represents grounds for selecting an additional wife. Children (especially male children) guarantee group continuity and are a sign of individual advancement ; through them, a man grows in importance, a woman enhances her status, and a family can thrive. The neophyte also learns that affinal and cognatic relations cannot be underestimated for they are essential to progressing in social life.

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<sup>20</sup> «Centipede is not *mukulu* by birth ; Scales [the instructor] gave him *bukulu*».

### Inventory of Objects and Associated Proverbs

The following inventory reproduces exactly the type of objects and the materials from which they are made, their position in the hung sequence, their associated aphorisms and interpretation. For greater clarity, a description of the other usages of certain objects has been added.

#### 1. Liana (*lububi*/pl., *mbubi* ; bot., *Eremospatha*)

**Description** The liana is of extraordinary importance in Lega technology for plaiting, tying, house building (see # 7).

**Proverb 1** «All things originate at the central beam».

**Interpretation** Like all rafters rest on the central beam of the roof, so all objects in the *mutanga* are suspended from this liana fixed between two houses. The liana is a symbol of the «master of the land» who is at the center of all affairs concerning the society.

#### 2. Piece of sugar cane (*iseke*/pl. *maseke*)

**Proverb 1** «Kinship is sugar canes ; you brush up against one another but do not reject one another».

**Interpretation** Smooth kinship relations are as sweet as sugar cane. There may be conflict within a group, but it must be resolved through leadership and not lead to fission. Sugar canes, like well-ripened bananas, are a delicacy, in a culture where sugar is absent.

#### 3. Leaf of a ficus tree (*mugumo* species ; bot., *Brachystegia*)

**Description** The bark of this tree is used for making high-quality barkcloth. It is mainly found in secondary forest formations and in abandoned village sites.

**Proverb 1** «The one you meet playing with *mugumo* is a child of the abandoned village site».

**Interpretation** Someone «playing» (cutting it and taking it home to work it) with this piece of bark is a genuine member of the local group because individual family rights are established in the trees and lianas growing in abandoned village sites. These sites are considered «dangerous» (sacred) and are the subject of numerous behavioral taboos.

**Proverb 2** «When you cut its stem, *mugumo* will still sprout».

**Interpretation** The kinship group survives internal conflicts and scission.

#### 4. Basket (*kakumba*, *kaluba*, *kumba*)

**Description** A miniature basket representing the larger ones made of strong *mbubi* lianas in which women carry fish, crabs, peanuts, medicine, and presents of various kinds.

**Proverb 1** «A *nkumba* basket is not plaited for one woman [alone] ; little basket picks up all sorts of things».

- Interpretation Do not give excessive privileges or rights to a woman or she may abuse of them. The basket could also be a symbol of sorcery ; all Lega women, except perhaps the high-initiated *kanyamwa* women, are universally considered as potential witches, a notion that provides women with great intrinsic power.
- Proverb 2 «*Kaluba* basket breaks ; the rim still speaks» [is still visible].
- Interpretation A person dies but survives in his children and personal achievements.
- Proverb 3 «A *kaluba* basket with no ears can still carry loads» [meaning it can still be carried on one's head].
- Interpretation You only have strength if you have a helper.
- Proverb 4 «Little maiden, poor thing, had asked for some elephant meat in her basket».
- Interpretation It is impossible to try and uplift someone with little intelligence ; his tendency is to vegetate.

### 5. Giant snail shell (*nkola* ; *Achatinina*)

- Description In its unmodified form, this shell serves in some ablution rituals and as an initiation object. In its modified form, it is used for making *musanga* money.
- Proverb 1 «Hunter caused strife between Giant Snail and Fire».
- Interpretation The liar, represented by the hunter, causes hatred and strife among kinsfolk, represented by Snail and Fire.
- Proverb 2 «*Nkola* turns around in its shell ; oh, it turns around all by itself».
- Interpretation A liar (represented by *Nkola*) exposes himself by getting mixed up in his own lie.
- Proverb 3 «*Nkola* is intelligent ; in the dry season it buries itself into the ground».
- Interpretation A smart person (represented by *Nkola*) seeks the company of the Great Ones who are the living symbols of learning, counsel and help.

### 6. Chicken basket (*bulumba*)

- Description This miniature chicken basket, *kalumba ka nkoko*, imitates the one used, for example, to carry chickens as gifts for cognatic and affinal kin ; at night chickens may be locked in such a basket to being set free in the morning to roam in the village.
- Proverb 1 «They put it aside in the morning ; they pick it up again in the evening».
- Interpretation You must not seduce your father's wives or those of any other kinsmen.

Proverb 2        «The land is a chicken basket ; it does not burn on only one side».  
Interpretation    One must maintain an equilibrium in social relations with kin on all sides (from agnatic to affinal, and cognatic).

**7. Piece of liana** (*lububi, kakwambubi, kabubi* ; bot., *Eremospatha, Kalamus deerratus*)

Description        This type of liana is used for plaiting, house-building, tying poles, roofs, rafters.

Proverb 1        «A Great One is a *lububi* ; there is no work of which he is incapable».

Interpretation    Just like the liana is used for the most varied tasks, so the masters of the land are able to solve all kinds of problems.

Proverb 2        «Liana, I was searching for its young leaves ; they are wilted».

Interpretation    Someone may have a nice body but a bad disposition.

Proverb 3        «Little liana stretches far into the deep and impenetrable forest».

Interpretation    A man of little physical stature can become a great man.

Proverb 4        «Weak liana is not suitable for tying-up tall man's package».

Interpretation    A person who does not have the right character or intelligence cannot be given *bwami* or the greatness that goes with it.

Proverb 5        «The Great Ones are lianas ; their prickly leaves are intertwined».

Interpretation    Even if you go far (e.g., to European centers), do not think you stand alone, that you can deny your group affiliations or are free from their control.

Proverb 6        «*Kakwambubi* [liana] had children and *Segele* [liana] remained childless».

Interpretation    Your name remains in your offsprings ; if your wife is barren, get a second wife.

**8. Small calabash** (*kibaza*)

Description        A small, unadorned calabash with a long stem used for administering enemas («giving water»).

Proverb 1        «When you give water to a Great One, you count the doses».

Interpretation    When you wrong a Great One, he will never forget it.

Proverb 2        «Giving water to a Great One is [like] looking at an empty sky».

Interpretation    When you wrong a Great One, you put yourself in jeopardy.

**9. Canoe** (*bwato*)

Description        A miniature carved representation of the very large *mukamba* type of dugout.

Proverb 1        «A child is a dugout canoe ; you carve it ; it takes you across».

Interpretation    One can always anticipate support from one's child.

**10. Canoe (*kato*)**

- Description A miniature carved representation of the light, small *katiki* type of dugout.
- Proverb 1 «If you see Large Dugout, you, Small Dugout, must not leave the harbor».
- Interpretation A child must not scorn his father even when he achieves higher social status.

**11a. Dustpan**

Description A sheet of *lukuku* bark used as a dustpan.

**11b. Brush**

- Description A bundle of *kikuko* reeds tied together used as a brush.
- Proverb 1 «They pick up dirty things, Dustpan and Brush».
- Interpretation A person who acts well (takes care of the poor, the children, the difficult problems, the painful legal and social situations) is at the center of village life.
- Proverb 2 «A woman is a used brush ; she will sweep in every village».
- Interpretation A woman does not belong to one man alone.

**12a. Mortar (*kilunga*)****12b. and pestle (*mututo*)**

- Description Miniature carved representations in wood of two of the most essential, permanent implements owned by a woman. The mortar and pestle are among the few implements (grinding stones, baskets, calabashes, knives) people will move when they settle in a new village.
- Proverb 1 «Old one moves ; her mortar and pestle are with her».
- Interpretation When one is old and no longer has teeth, one returns to babyhood. A person's evil disposition accompanies him wherever he goes.

**13. Leaf (*limbalu* tree ; bot., *Gilberthodendron dewevrei*)**

- Description When termites are going to swarm, they are smoked out with these leaves.
- Proverb 1 «I love to cut the *limbalu* but I hate its thundering noise».
- Interpretation One may like people for their beauty but hate their attitude and character.
- Proverb 2 «Termite (*muswa*) would not have died, but *Limbalu* Bundle came to kill it».
- Interpretation When bad people join good company, they end up sowing discord.

**14. Piece of stick (*nkoma*)**

- Description A piece of freshly cut branch representing the walking cane used by the sick and the cripple to support themselves. In a more ornate



form, such a cane is one of the distinctive paraphernalia of high-ranking *bwami* initiates.

Proverb 1 «The walking cane of cripple, of leper, is what he defends himself with».

Interpretation Exchanging valuables (means of support such as shell money, goats, salt), will help solve big problems. In *kongabulumbu*, the same aphorism means that the initiand is ready to give all his belongings without any afterthought in order to acquire the desired knowledge.

### 15. Piece of wood (*munsongensonge* ; bot., *Barteria fistulata*)

Description A small branch from the tree, with hollow branches, that attracts fiercely stinging *bulembo* black ants which devastate the surrounding vegetation. The larvae of these ants are used as fishing bait.

Proverb 1 «*Munsongensonge*'s greatness : *Bulembo* ants never dwell with others».

Interpretation A bad person cannot stay in a village.

Proverb 2 «Black-ant larvae : small bait with which fish are hooked».

Interpretation When people work together, some have good luck, some have bad luck. One hates those with bad luck.

### 16. Sandpaper leaf (*lukenga*)

Description A leaf with a rough surface used for polishing wood and ivory.

Proverb 1 «My good and beautiful one : a *lukenga* leaf that makes my face shine».

Interpretation A benefactor is someone who cares for you, does things for you, advises you, respects you. This proverb often applies to a man's senior, initiated wife.

### 17. Pipestem (*mutondo*)

Description A piece of the perforated mid-rib of a banana leaf (*Musa paradisiaca*) representing a pipestem. The perforations are made in a freshly-cut mid-rib with a very fine *kasala* (a split *lububi* liana). Some of these pipestems measure up to two meters long. Smoking usually takes place inside the men's house. It is a congenial sociable event, especially when members of the village recount their journeys or hunting expeditions. Usually one pipe is passed around according to principles of seniority. The pipestem, which does not have a mouthpiece, is disposable, but its terracotta bowl is kept for future use.

Proverb 1 «In the mid-rib there was no passage ; *Kasala* found the way».

Interpretation Your maternal uncle or your brother-in-law opens the road to better things.

Proverb 2 «Do not refuse the pipe to your companion ; tobacco is the meat of men».

Interpretation Smoking together provides a good setting for exchanging substantive information and sealing relationships.

### 18. Pipebowl (*kabali*)

Description These small terracotta pipebowls are fixed onto the *mutondo*.

Proverb 1 «The pipebowl sticking out beyond the wall poles will get broken».

Interpretation Someone who does not listen to authority will perish somewhere else.

Proverb 2 «If you find a crooked pipebowl, it is not the pipestem's fault».

Interpretation If someone follows a wrong path, it is not necessarily the fault of those responsible for that person.

### 19. Pod from the *nkumbi liana* (bot., *Schotia rubriflora*)

Description A large, flat, circular pod in which the Lega store raffia thread for sewing ; in times of hunger, its meat is also eaten.

Proverb 1 «The pod thrown by *Ntambwe* (lit., lion) has depleted his assets».

Interpretation If you have a quarrel with your companion, do not threaten him with a knife, a stick, or even a clod of dirt, to avoid hurting him. Injury leads to serious social and legal ramifications. In *kongabulumbu*, the proverb is sung while one initiate hands over one *nkumbi* after another to the preceptor as a critique against those who criticize the distributions of food and valuables. The *kongabulumbu* version reads as follows : «The *nkumbi* pod that *Ntambwe* launched injured (broke) his eyeball».

Proverb 2 «*Nkumbi*'s patrilineal kin are used to helping each other».

Interpretation People must not reject or scorn one another ; mutual aid and solidarity result from cooperation.

### 20a. Wooden axe (*isaga*)

#### 20b. and handle (*mwini*)

Description A miniature carved representation of a real axe. Each man usually has his own, for axes usually are not shared ; there are different sizes depending on the activity, from carving to felling enormous trees.

Proverb 1 «When you meet a colleague who is felling trees, grip his axe by the handle».

Interpretation If you meet by chance a person felling a tree, you should not simply greet him and go your way but lend him a hand. Mutual help is necessary in all circumstances.

Proverb 2 «The axe, old but strong, was weakened [worn] by excessive borrowing».

Interpretation One loses one's good reputation by meddling in other's affairs.

Proverb 3 «Axe Blade's iron spindle battles many fires».

Interpretation If one interferes in many things, one will inevitably meet one's match. The axe blade's iron spindle breaks easily. It has to be frequently replaced and is thus heated and reheated in order to fit into new wooden handles.

### 21. Reed (*isani* ; bot., *Setaria megaphylla*)

Description The *isani* is a reed growing near village entrances. It rustles at the slightest wind or passage of a small animal. It is used to make broom-like bundles with which high initiates make their ceremonial entry into the village.

Proverb 1 «My child did not go over there, yet the reeds rustle at the village outskirts».

Interpretation If something was said or done and you were absent, do not act as if you were present. In *kongabulumbu* they sing : «The reeds sound at the village entrance, we are listening attentively», to criticize a person who brings discord to the village.

Proverb 2 «Yale's relatives do not pass swiftly through the reeds».

Interpretation *Yale* expresses the latent tension existing between a man's co-wives who are often referred to by the same term. Discord lingers and gradually grows worse.

Proverb 3 «A Great One who is not one of yours [on your side, of your kin group] may lead your way through the reeds».

Interpretation An evil-minded person will not tell you the truth or may betray you.

### 22. Gaff (*igobo*)

Description A hooked branchlet represents this otherwise long, hooked branch used by everyone to pick fruit, pluck leaves, etc.

Proverb 1 «Where Arm cannot reach, Gaff, mother's child, will reach».

Interpretation Stress is placed on solidarity among uterine kin. The aphorism occurs in *kongabulumbu* together with a second one that repeats the same idea : «Arm is not a gaff to pull down a branch from a tree».

Proverb 2 «We are only little, little children who remain, little billy goats butting their horns».

Interpretation Members of a group cannot all be at the same level. A group without leadership is doomed ; there must be someone who can direct, manage, administer, arrange.

**23. Piece of dried banana** (*igoma* ; bot., *Musa paradisiaca*)

- Description** Plantains and bananas are essential ingredients in daily diet. The distribution of cooked or grilled banana preparations are tokens of hospitality. The generic term is *igoma* ; the first proverb refers to the *katukulu* variety.
- Proverb 1** «Banana : A fruit you never come upon haphazardly».
- Interpretation** You must labor the land in order to get its fruit. Even bananas that grow here and there in the thick forest are the result of earlier agricultural activity.
- Proverb 2** «Banana is smart : it is the meat that spreads joy among guests».
- Interpretation** The staple of Lega diet are bananas and game meat. Even if you have no meat, offering a banana is a sign of hospitality. One's elders insist on the idea of being generous toward strangers and guests.

**24. Aquatic snail shell** (*lukoku*)

- Description** When the Lega fish with nets, this snail manages to slip through the finest meshes.
- Proverb 1** «*Lukoku*, my maternal uncle, helps me cross the rapids».
- Interpretation** Where others cannot be helpful, maternal uncles can. In their network of social relations (based on the Omaha system of classification), the Lega recognize no less than five categories of maternal uncles, ranging from the mother's agnates to the mother's father's mother's agnates.
- Proverb 2** «*Lukoku* travels with his door and his house».
- Interpretation** An evil person travels with rancor and hate in his heart. In *kongabulumbu*, however, the proverb «*Kikoku*, smart-one, went into the forest with his door and his house», refers to the initiate who travels with his initiated wives and grade paraphernalia and insignia.

**25. Small banana shoot** (*kampoko*)

- Proverb 1** «What was just a rizome, now is the shoot of a banana tree».
- Interpretation** If a woman seems to be barren, marry a second one.
- Proverb 2** «Stout banana tree, you were once carried in your mother's basket».
- Interpretation** Do not despise your mother, father and other close kin ; you owe your wellbeing and greatness to them.
- Proverb 3** «*Kampoko* was eaten by Elephant even though he heard the stampeding».
- Interpretation** One who does not listen to his kin will never improve, has no chance to make it in life.

- Proverb 4      «Toughness of young banana leaf : Hail has broken its back».  
Interpretation      If you always cause problems (symbolized by *nduma za kyanga*, toughness of young banana leaf ; *nduma* is applied to a callous person), no one will help you.
- Proverb 5      «The small banana shoot that rejects the cultivator cannot grow new leaves».  
Interpretation      A scornful person cannot become a leader.
- Proverb 6      «The small banana shoot grows slowly, slowly».  
Interpretation      Gradually, children help you grow in importance.
- Proverb 7      «Dripping water destroys the lower, young banana leaves».  
Interpretation      Kin who create constant problems destroy their leaders.

**26. Potsherd (*luginga*)**

- Description      Potsherds are used for roasting, mainly medicinal plants.  
Proverb 1      «When you get a new pot, do not discard the shard».  
Interpretation      If you marry an additional woman, do not abandon the first one.
- Proverb 2      «The bottom of the pot felt the flames».  
Interpretation      A person of some age or stature who stays in his village with only very young people must be able to cope with all their problems.

**27. Piece of charcoal (*mukangania*)**

- Description      Charcoal is used to roast bananas either in the peel or in leaf bundles. Corn may also be roasted in charcoal. It is also a means of coloring (e.g., the face in various rituals, warfare or mourning).  
Proverb 1      «Charcoal remains ; ashes have flown away».  
Interpretation      Among people of the same age and background, some have more knowledge, others have more wealth. Charcoal also symbolizes an ill-intentioned person who remains in the group causing the others to flee.

**28. Small dried tomato (*kasongo*)**

- Proverb 1      «*Kasongo*-Evil-Tongue has a mouth, but never gets married».  
Interpretation      Someone with a bad attitude cannot be loved or receive preferential treatment.

**29. Nut (*lubala* from the *bubala* tree ; bot., *Pentaclethra macrophylla*)**

- Description      A species of tree that attracts many different kinds of animals ; the nut of this tree is used as *pars pro toto*.  
Proverb 1      «Nut will grow if not eaten by animals».  
Interpretation      A wise child cannot scorn a Great One, because he is a protector.
- Proverb 2      «Clusters of nuts scatter as they drop».

Interpretation Kin who foment daily disputes will be responsible for the dispersal of the group. In *kongabulumbu*, reference is made to the Banambala (*mbala* nut people) who disperse as they fall.

### 30. Piece of barkcloth (*nsulu*)

Description Barkcloth is made from the bark of different species of trees and strangler vines, such as : *kinsembe*, *mulundu*, *mugumo*.

Proverb 1 «Bad barkcloth (*Kisulukibe*): On a journey, Good barkcloth (*Kinsembe*) must not spend the night with him».

Interpretation Do not travel in the company of a bad person. If you travel with a Great One, show respect and do not draw attention to yourself.

Proverb 2 «*Kinsembe* (tree) with a broken top is not easily stripped of its bark».

Interpretation Do not enter into a discussion involving your father or another Great One.

Proverb 3 «*Mulundu* may be useful but *Kinsembe* is master of the abandoned village site».

Interpretation One who makes bad decisions cannot become a leader.

### 31. Piece of corn husk (*ibela*)

Proverb 1 «He who does not know how to dress must look at how corn husk dresses».

Interpretation Someone who does not know his kin well, must look at the positive interactions others have with them.

Proverb 2 «Greatness of corn husks : each one grows a beard».

Interpretation Not all persons in a group are destined for greatness (within a group there must be diversity ; not everyone is at the same level).

### 32. Piece of mat (*katanda*)

Proverb 1 «Do not throw away the leper's mat : lo ! he may return».

Interpretation A young child should not scorn or laugh at cripples or sick persons. In *kongabulumbu*, a similar aphorism with an identical meaning is sung with reference to a rolled-up mat.

Proverb 2 «Wife of a Great One : the forest is a mat !»

Interpretation When one encounters a woman in the forest, one must not attempt to seduce her. Particularly, if she is the wife of a Great One or a kinswoman, one must fear her and/or avoid her.

### 33. A fiber from the *lukusa* liana (bot., *Cordia abyssinica*, *Polycephalum poggei*)

Description This liana has a rasp-like surface. It has many uses, such as plaiting and manufacturing traps, hunting and fishing nets.

Proverb 1 «*Lukusa*'s resilience has forced *Ntundu* (*Boocercus antelope*) to struggle».

Interpretation A youth must not be arrogant or preposterous; he must first listen to advice. A *kongabulumbu* aphorism states that *ntundu* antelope is caught in a small trap because it runs wild.

Proverb 2 «*Lukusa* does not wipe an anus : greatness is goodness».

Interpretation As a leader, you must leave your childhood habits behind.

**34. Piece of raffia fiber** (*lweku* ; pl., *mpeku* from the *ibondo* tree)

Description *Lukusa* fiber (see above) makes the best hunting nets ; *mukinga* (fiber within the raffia stem) makes the best snares ; *lweku* the raffia derived from the leaf stem is employed for many objects, including aprons and devices to transfer messages. The raffia palm tree is fundamental to Lega material culture : parts of it, like the fruit and the insect larvae within them, are eaten ; other parts are used for plaiting aprons, making traps and snares, and still other parts for walking canes (out of the leaf rib), etc.

Proverb 1 «Raffia's suppleness led it to the initiation».

Interpretation A respectful person gradually receives power over the land.

Proverb 2 «*Lukusa* and *Mukinga* sent *Lweku* to the village».

Interpretation Three brothers ; two spend all of their time in the forest hunting and trapping while the third divides his time between the forest and village learning from his father and the elders. In *kongabulumbu*, the proverb reads : *Lukusa* and *Mukinga*, young men who sent *Lweku* to the forest (rich in animals) to mean that one must not scorn the owner of the village even if he is still young.

Proverb 3 «Raffia fiber remained in the stitch where it went with Needle».

Interpretation Needle symbolizes someone who cares about nothing ; Raffia represents someone who listens to what is told. In the *kongabulumbu* rites, vivid action with raffia fibre and sewing needle illustrate this proverb, by imitating the act of sewing.

**35. Miniature game board** (*lusolo*)

Description The game board is a rectangular flat piece of hardwood divided into a number of three or four parallel rows of holes. It is played with wild banana kernels or pebbles by two or four people ; the rules of the game differ considerably from group to group.

Proverb 1 «He who does not count the number of holes in the game board is defeated from the start».

Interpretation Not listening well is self-defeating. In *kongabulumbu* the aphorism sheds more clarity : «*Isawaluganina* (He who counts everything) : *Isolo* (Game Board) is burnt right at the outset of the game». *Isawaluganina* symbolizes the one who listened well to the

teachings, whereas *Isolo* did not apply himself, and therefore lost even before he began.

Proverb 2 «You kill me out of hate ; may the one who dies suddenly not have ten wounds».

Interpretation If you have a quarrel with someone, do not add new sources of conflict. This proverb must be understood in light of the rules of the *Iusolo* game in which the number of seeds in one hole define whether one is losing or winning : 10 or 16 seeds in one whole means one is losing whereas 15 means one is winning.

### 36. Leaf (*lubeketa*)

Description A very tall and frail tree whose branches are used for firewood or to make poles for tending and linking several large hunting nets.

Proverb 1 «*Lubeketa* hid an elephant, hid something big».

Interpretation A master of the land must not interfere in everything; he must be able to be silent and forgive.

Proverb 2 «The offspring to which *Lubeketa* gave birth grew on his back».

Interpretation One must listen to the words of the Great Ones and must show them respect.

Proverb 3 «*Limbalu* tree (*Macrolobium*) : Even though you are big, *Lubeketa* is the master of the forest».

Interpretation Someone who has a clean heart or a clean mind is the master of the village.

### 37. Piece of partially burnt wood (*kisingu* or *kikongo*)

Proverb 1 «If there is not a Great One to assemble the logs of the hearth, they will extinguish».

Interpretation It is impossible to become a master of the land without the support of others.

Proverb 2 «A burnt-out log has no use ; take it out».

Interpretation This applies to a group in which there is much tension because it is composed of young people and the only remaining old man is unwilling or unable to counsel them.

### 38. Unpolished mussel shell (*lukese*)

Description This shell is used by potters for smoothing pots. When polished it also figures as an initiation object in *bwami* ceremonies and an insignia placed on the hats of high initiates (where it is referred to as the crescent of the moon).

Proverb 1 «*Lukese* goes down the river because it did not get a helping-hand».

Interpretation A group in which there is no real esprit de corps and continuity in leadership will disintegrate.



Proverb 2      «The potter who has no *lukese* shell : Her lips start getting dirty».  
Interpretation      She licks the pot to make it smooth and the clay clings to her lip. If you sleep without restraint with a woman, she will not give birth. In *kongabulumbu* the text reads : The potter who has no *lukese* shell, *Katunda* (insect) mastered the art of pottery-making.

**39. A piece of *igungu* leaf (*igungu* ; bot., *Sarcophrynium* ; *Amorphophallus*)**

Description      The leaf is an excellent covering for roofs. It is also essential for packaging food.

Proverb 1      «*Muliku* (dense foliage) scatters *igungu* leaves (on our roof) : this is why we get wet».

Interpretation      When you marry a second or third wife, do not send away the first because she may have more children. She can also have other outstanding qualities.

Proverb 2      «*Igungu* (husband) was big, *Mugungu* (wife) weakened him».

Interpretation      If you hold a senior position and have a wife who cannot properly receive your guests, she will diminish your social status.

**40. A piece of *kalububi* liana**

Proverb 1      «*Kalububi* : Wherever there is a root, there is also a shoot».

Interpretation      One who has listened to counsel will find friends and helpers everywhere.

Proverb 2      «The *Balambubi* (those who peel off the liana bark) leave me with the dirt».

Interpretation      It is wrong to integrate someone with bad ways into your group, because that person will create more problems than there already are.

**41. A bent piece of wood representing wooden tongs (*Iwenia*)**

Description      Used to remove burning charcoal.

Proverb 1      «Bent, it is two ; straight, it is one».

Interpretation      Born you are alone ; married you are two. Out of your blood comes an offspring. A maternal uncle or a sororal nephew are like the tongs ; they help you achieve things you cannot do alone or even with the help of your patrilineal relatives.

**42. A small bunch of weeds (*kinsale*)**

Description      Sort of crabgrass.

Proverb 1      «Crabgrass : You leave it behind in the abandoned village ; it will find you on the village commons».

Interpretation      People may hate you, but if you respect them or show no evil intention toward them, you will escape their hatred.

Proverb 2      «Crabgrass covers a village ; yet it has no branches».

Interpretation A person may be the heir of an entire kinship group, but if he has no children, his social position has no significance because no one will receive or accept him fully.

#### 43. A small package of leaves (*kakwe*)

Description Most Lega packages are made with folded *igungu* leaves, to wrap salt, meat or fish. The *kakwe* packages can also contain secret messages in the form of knotted raffia fibers and other objects sent from one initiate to another.

Proverb 1 «A package belonging to two is difficult to open».

Interpretation A plan made by two people cannot be revealed to others without the partner's consent.

Proverb 2 «A package of salt has much taste, yet it is not big».

Interpretation Women have much appeal.

Proverb 3 «A package wrapped in red phrynium leaves is not beautiful for nothing ; there is a little, little something inside».

Interpretation Nothing must be pursued if it is not good, positive, or beautiful. A beautiful body is meaningless unless it has a beautiful mind.

#### 44. A chicken feather (*lusala*)

Description Chicken feathers have many ritual uses : the *bwami* initiates dance with large feather bunches tucked on each side of their belt ; a thin rope which is used as a sacred fence is made with raffia and chicken feathers.

Proverb 1 «The plumage of a dead chicken is the demise of the living one».

Interpretation The desire to be initiated into *bwami* has led others to become members.

Proverb 2 «When chicken opens its beak, there is a little insect inside».

Interpretation A person cannot be denied something without reason.

Proverb 3 «Chicken, poor thing, dwells with those who eat its eggs».

Interpretation Applies to someone who obstinately tries to befriend a family that rejects him and thinks nothing but bad of him.

Proverb 4 «Rooster chases after the salt you spill».

Interpretation Your bad reputation follows you wherever you go.

#### 45. One fragment of a perforated polygone piece of snail shell. When threaded in different lengths this is used as shell money (*musanga*)

Description To make shell money, the Lega use the *nkola* shell (*Achatinina*) which is cut into polygonal fragments of slightly uneven sizes. These fragments are pierced and strung on raffia strings of different lengths. Their value is determined on the basis of measurements made on the hand, leg, or feet (Biebuyck, 1954).

- These various measures have differential economic and ritual significance.
- Proverb 1  
Interpretation «Shell money, the enticer, attracts the sorcerer, attract the thief».  
Do not hurriedly take a woman as wife ; you must first get to know her and her family.
- Proverb 2  
Interpretation «Ten-measure-*Musanga* : You get it ; it will destroy you».  
One marries a woman thinking she is a nice, good woman ; you don't know the evil in her heart that will destroy you.
- Proverb 3  
Interpretation «He who has no shell money cannot be initiated».  
*Bwami* initiations, at all levels, require the distribution of a great amount of shell money.

**46. A fragment of a manioc stem (*muzongu*)**

- Proverb 1  
Interpretation «Manioc stem : You throw it ; it grows spontaneously».  
If they reject you from your kinship group, be strong and you will still succeed with the help of your maternal uncles and other affinal relatives<sup>21</sup>.
- Proverb 2  
Interpretation «Manioc stem : They eat its bottom ; they eat its top».  
The Lega eat the tubers and the leaves ; manioc is eaten both in the lowlands (*malinga*) and in the highlands (*nkunse, ntata*). Emphasizes the growing significance of manioc in the dietary system, in competition with plantain and banana.

**47. A small torch (*kasuku*)**

- Description Torches are made of phrynium leaves in which chunks of resin are wrapped ; the pack of leaves may be more or less opened depending on the desired brightness of light.
- Proverb 1  
Interpretation «*Kasuku* : Those who make it (look) nice, tear it open at the mouth».  
One may treat people well, but they still talk behind your back.
- Proverb 2  
Interpretation «*Kasuku* : One who hates what *Kasuku* does, will go in darkness».  
If one scorns someone who provided help and advice, one will run into problems.
- Proverb 3  
Interpretation «*Kasuku* whom you saw well-oiled is now emaciated».  
All things are transient.
- Proverb 4  
Interpretation «Half of *Kasuku* looks for ivory».  
A full-fledged *kindi* unless he has a *kanyamwa*. An initiate of the lower grades searches for the top grades.

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<sup>21</sup> For more information on the key role played by maternal uncles in Lega society, cf. Biebuyck, 1973.

**48. A piece of a shrub that produces burrs (*lukolokosi*)**

Description The grains of this plant, which grows in fallow lands, stick to the clothings and skin.

Proverb 1 «*Lukolokosi* that sticks to your barkcloth is yours».

Interpretation The one who loves you among your kin is one to whom you are bound by mutual support.

**49. Tomato leaf (*lukambo*)**

Proverb 1 «*Lukambo* : One who does not look up in the tomato patch, does not see the red one among the tomatoes».

Interpretation The person who does not pay respect to or care for the Great Ones cannot get anything.

Proverb 2 «Old one, get out of the village ; let *Lukambo* (tomato) just stay with me».

Interpretation A bad person in a kinship group should be thrown out.

**50. Bukongo Nut (bot., *Antrocaryon manaceae* or *Panda oleosa*)**

Description The *bukongo* nut (which spreads a good odor, even before opening it) seems to symbolize the evil effects that certain actions produce.

Proverb 1 «*Bukongo* : When you split it with a stick, you smell its penetrating odor».

Interpretation When you are close to someone who is well-off but who is not master of the land, he will still take care of you.

Proverb 2 «The *bukongo* nut that *ntundu* sucks, transforms it (mouth) into elephant's things (pointed mouth)».

Interpretation If one exceeds in arrogance, pride, bad behavior against one's kinsman, everyone will speak badly of that person. In *kongabulumbu*, the same proverb warns against doing things one cannot manage. In another instance, the aphorism alludes to a person who once was powerful because of his generosity but who has now become a miser and lost his power.

Proverb 3 «The trouble your mother engaged in, depletes your reserves».

Interpretation The shell money and goats that were reserved for initiation ceremonies must now be paid as fines and indemnities because of the problems caused by a subordinate kinsman.

**51. Tobacco (*kwanga, kungu*)**

Proverb 1 «Beautiful tobacco plant "dies" a bad one».

Interpretation Applied to a person who has a nice body but has a bad character and mind.

Proverb 2 «The stranger sees tobacco, does not see *malangalanga*».

Interpretation None provided.

Proverb 3 «*Milengelenge milindi za kwanga ntakengele mute mu kiluma*».  
 Interpretation Not translated

**52. Itungulu Stem** (pl. *matungulu* ; dim., *katungulu* ; bot., *Afromomum latifoliae*)

Description These strawlike stems are placed on the roofs as an upper layer to keep the *magungu* leaves in place.

Proverb 1 «*Katungulu dances (in the wind) ; little spear does not dance*».

Interpretation The implication is that an *itungulu* stem cannot pierce an animal or a person, but a little spear can. The meaning is that a Great One discretely points out one's unacceptable behavior. The same aphorism occurs in *kongabulumbu* while the preceptor makes a mock attack against the initiand.

Proverb 2 «The reeds on the side of village announce my arrival on the trail».

Interpretation One's bad reputation precedes one.

Proverb 3 «The young (junior) *matungulu* laugh without knowing what caused their seniors to dry out».

Interpretation A critique of the stupidity of uninformed persons who fall victim to their own illusions.

Proverb 4 «*Itungu* a smart-one : roots on the side of the trail put dew on it».

Interpretation The words, decisions of elders reach out far, even though a certain elder has his roots in a particular village.

Proverb 5 «*Itungulu* breed : everywhere a root, everywhere a shoot».

Interpretation About a person who has maternal uncles close and far.

**53. Dwarf antelope skull** (*lukungu lwa kaseti*)

Proverb 1 «He who quarrels relentlessly, will quarrel with something having a wide-open mouth».

Interpretation One always meets one's match or someone more powerful.

Proverb 2 «What has horns gets stuck in a jumble of lianas».

Interpretation Troublemakers get trapped by their own doings.

**54. Piece of ripe banana** (*mututu*)

Description A ripe, sweet banana is a delicacy mainly reserved for children and the elderly.

Proverb 1 «The piece of ripe banana caused *Kwale's* (guinea fowl) death in the trap».

Interpretation Lured by the bait, Guinea fowl was caught in a trap used to catch other animals.

Proverb 2 «The little child : you take away its ripe banana ; you leave him with his snot».

Interpretation The child will lick the snot as a sweet substitute. This aphorism was often used in reference to Europeans who were destroying vital institutions (such as *bwami*, *bwali* and *ibuta*) without trying to adapt to them and without proposing appropriate replacements.

Proverb 3 «A woman : A ripe banana carried in a basket».

Interpretation Women are an asset ; you are nothing without a wife.

Proverb 4 «Ripe banana, smart one, is meat that makes the stranger rejoice».

Interpretation If there is no other food available, give freely from the things you have.

### 55. A miniature door (*lwibi*)

Description Lega doors are made of lightwood planks joined together with vines. The door in its real or miniature form plays a major role in initiation rituals mainly «because it sees things on the inside and on the outside».

Proverb 1 «The young child knocking at your door is your true companion in the village».

Interpretation Refers to a young man who will discreetly bring back a little rodent or other animal he found in the forest to his father or someone else, rather than eating it himself. It is a supreme gesture of *filia pietas*.

Proverb 2 «Who opens the door for me ? The door of a woman is a trap».

Interpretation A man must be cautious in his dealings with women.

Proverb 3 «Door knows things from both inside and outside the house».

Interpretation Door refers to the vigilance of the «Great One» who is thoroughly informed about everything that happens in and outside the village.

### 56. *Moli* leaf (reddish variety of the *igungu* leaf ; bot., *Amorphophallus*)

Proverb 1 «Phrynium leaf can serve to wrap a packet of meat, but *moli* is better than any».

Interpretation There are many great people in the position of *bukulu* but there are few who can truly be called «Great ones» (*bakulu*) because of their outstanding intellectual and moral qualities.

Proverb 2 «*Mpamba* (iguana) is not packed in a phrynium leaf».

Interpretation Obviously a phrynium leaf is too small to wrap an iguana.

### 57. Pod from the *ibulungu* tree (bot., *Chlorophora excelsa*, *Austranella congolensis*)

Proverb 1 «Every forest stretch has an *ibulungu* tree, even though it may be somewhat to the side».

Interpretation Every group has a leader. This impressive tree is a symbol of the elder, of the high initiate, the village headman.

Proverb 2 «*Ibulungu of kamamba* (big elephant) : The forest domain begins and ends with him».

Interpretation Elephants like to eat the pods of this tree ; alludes to the fact that a leader defines a group.

Proverb 3 «When a *nenekisi* dies, we are like the pods of *ibulungu* that disperse».

Interpretation A group that loses its leadership or does not find an appropriate replacement is doomed to fall apart.

Proverb 4 «*Mwaswalile mulunda buno ibulungu akolama biguma*».

Interpretation Not translated.

Proverb 5 «*Ibulungu lya mupolu banzogu bamwanda bisenga*».

Interpretation Not translated.

### 58. *Isasamuna* Leaf

Description Used by hunters to magically reactivate their hunting nets if they fail to catch animals.

Proverb 1 «To encounter the hunting nets lacking game. *Isasamuna* will come to cut them down».

Interpretation Various kinds of help may come from many sides of the kin group.

### 59. *Kamukuta* Liana

Proverb 1 «Though lianas are plentiful, *kamukuta* is master of the forest».

Interpretation There are many seniors, but few are *nenekisi*, represented here as «master of the forest».

### 60. Piece of moss (*kiselia, kiseya*)

Description Moss that grows in trees.

Proverb 1 «*Mutima likama kiselia alikama ku bundu*».

Interpretation Not translated.

Proverb 2 «There are many *tuzimu* insects in the *kiselia* where snake sleeps».

Interpretation None provided.

### 61. Piece of palm tree (*kibila* ; bot., *Elais*)

Proverb 1 «A *mwami* initiate : A raffia palm that cannot be embraced».

Interpretation None provided.

### 62. A miniature tripod (*nkeka*)

Proverb 1 «If a Great One takes away your tripod, you then sit on your knees».

Interpretation Reference is made to a host who provides a visitor with a stool (symbol of hospitality) and starts arguing before he even presents his host with some food.

Proverb 2 «The Master of this place prepares a tripod for me, and some other things prick me».

Interpretation Refers to someone who initially acts well but has something else in mind.

The situation evoked in both proverbs is vividly enacted in *kongabulumbu* where a preceptor attempts in vain to sit on a crude pole. The following proverbs are sung : «The headman of this place gives me a tripod and some other things that prick» and «Father's child prepares a tripod for me and some other thorny things».

Proverb 3 «The master of the land : a tripod who straightens those who are bent».

Interpretation Master of the land has the power to change anyone's behavior or character.

### 63. Clod of dirt (*kilongo*) from a termite mound

Proverb 1 «*Muswa* (Termite) is dead ; the *magani* (termites) flee to the top of the mound».

Interpretation The leader dies or disappears and the group disperses.

Proverb 2 «*Kaswakenge kabikila nkili mu lwindda*».

Interpretation Not translated.

### 64. A small piece of a house beam (*mutondo*)

Description *Mutondo* is the central beam of the saddle roof on which the rafters and leaf and straw coverings rest.

Proverb 1 «*Mutondo* on the men's house falls down ; the *Binankati* (the Rafters) disperse and disperse».

Interpretation The leader dies or disappears and the group disperses.

Proverb 2 «If you are tricky, place the barkcloth where there is no belt and place the rafters where there is no beam».

Interpretation This proverb refers to someone who tries to do many things on his own and makes mistakes without the help of the others ; mutual help is necessary.

Proverb 3 «Parasol tree succumbs because of its straightness, yet it is not the central house beam».

Interpretation Refers to someone who loses his power and the confidence of his people because of his meddlesomeness.



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**RESUME**

Cet article décrit la première étape de l'enseignement traditionnel chez les Lega de la République Démocratique du Congo. Il s'agit d'une série d'objets, alignés sur une liane, qui représentent différents aspects de la vie quotidienne et du milieu naturel. Chaque élément est interprété à l'aide de proverbes par un ancien, souvent le grand-père, qui en dévoile la signification. L'enfant apprend ainsi à reconnaître les éléments qui constituent sa culture et s'initie à la face cachée de son environnement. En mûrissant, et à l'aide d'autres formes d'enseignement, il appréhendera progressivement la polysémie des mêmes objets et comprendra qu'il faut toujours aller au-delà de la surface des choses pour en déceler la signification profonde.

**ABSTRACT**

This article centers on the use of proverbs and their associated objects in the *mutanga* method of teaching among the Lega of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. An elder, usually a classificatory grandfather, interprets each object by means of proverbs that are vehicles of condensed knowledge interpreted on numerous symbolic levels. The child thus learns to recognize the elements that constitute his culture and is initiated to the range of overt and hidden meanings and uses. Here and throughout his life, the young man learns to transcend surface appearances and delve into the depths of real and possible interpretations of even the most matter of fact material and spiritual components of his culture.

*Daniel Biebuyck*



Illustrates part of the vine and hanging objects used in the specific *mutanga* discussed in this article.

*«The Words of the land». Teaching through proverbs*



Illustration of a Lega stool, interpreted at its most basic formal level in the *mutanga*.  
For the complex interpretation given this stool in the Bwami, see Biebuyck, 1977.