

DB. Entries on Lega and Bembe in For Spirits and Kings: African Art from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection, Central Africa pp. 221, 234. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981.

134. HEAD ON A NECK OR POLE

Zaire, Lega

Ivory, cowrie shells, H. 6 in. (15.2 cm.)

19th-20th century

Among the Lega, stylized anthropomorphic ivory sculptures are used and owned, or kept in trust, by male members of the two highest levels of the highest grade (*kindi*) of the Bwami association, and sometimes also by the highest female initiates (*kanyamwa*). Among the many formal categories of Lega ivory figures, that of a large head set on a pole is found infrequently. Sculptures of this sort differ in detail (some have two heads; others end in a socle or an elephant foot), but they differ most importantly in size and volume.<sup>1</sup>

The function and meaning of these sculptures also vary. Because it is out of context, this figure cannot be identified with certainty. It may represent Wankenge, Beautiful One (literally "[child of] bongo antelope," a symbol of beauty), a name for the master of the land, who has a large following.

This example has features that recur in many Lega figures: a large head, a bald skull (sometimes adorned with a small fiber cap or cowrie shells signifying the Bwami skullcap), toothless mouth (the elder), eyes indicated by glued-on cowries (often this designates the heightened vision of the initiate), and a smooth and shiny surface (considered beautiful). The oval concave face marked by a ridged line connecting the eyebrows with the nostrils, the prognathous jaw, the sharp ridged nose, and the slanting plane between nose and upper lip seen here are traits found in some Lega substyles that may originally have been linked with traditions developed by autonomous local communities.

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1. For somewhat similar sculptures, see Olbrechts 1946: pl. 179; Schmalenbach 1954: pl. 138; and Leuzinger 1963: pls. 202 and 203. All these range in height from 6 to 6½ inches. For smaller ones, see Radin and Sweeney 1964: pl. 157, and Robbins 1966: pl. 268; for larger ones, see Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago 1961: pl. 74, and Biebuyck 1973: pl. 87.

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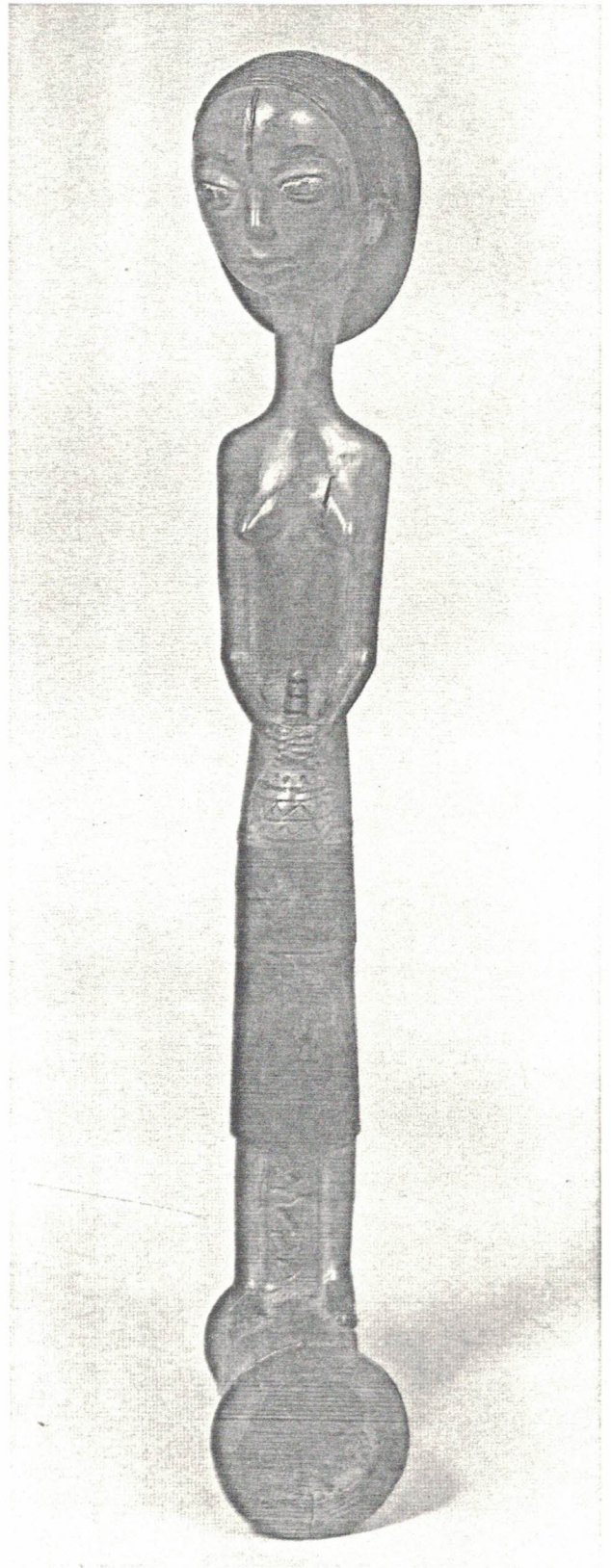
135. PIPE WITH FEMALE FIGURE

Angola, Ovimbundu

Wood, metal, H. 11½ in. (29.2 cm.)

19th-20th century

The carved stem of this Ovimbundu pipe represents a graceful young woman holding an incised calabash. The figure is made of light yellow wood, with hair and wrapper areas darkened by fire. The Ovimbundu, numbering one million, inhabit the Benguela plateau in central Angola, not far from the Atlantic coast. Ovimbundu art is associated with the cult of the sacred chief, in which the magic ritual of enthronement gives the chief



## 145. MASK

*Zaire, Lega or Bembe**Wood, traces of resin and coloring, H. 9 in. (22 cm.)**19th–20th century*

It is difficult to place this mask in a precise geographical and cultural perspective. The striking concave ovoid eye sockets and open crescentic eyes with rims in relief are reminiscent of some large Lega masks, and of Bembe masks found in the Bembe variant of the Bwami association, and in some Bembe circumcision rites.

Horned masks (the horns in this piece are broken) occur in the *ngurwe* and *pinji* rites of the Bembe Bwami association (Biebuyck 1972: pl. 15) and in the *yananio* initiations of the Lega, where they tend to be completely whitened (Biebuyck 1973: pl. 37). The incised linear designs around the eye sockets, on the forehead, and along the mouth are unusual, but the reversed triangle above the nose was known in Lega facial scarifications and occurs on some Lega figures. The holes on the rim of the mask indicate that a long, broad fiber beard and also perhaps a rim of feathers were attached there. This was a strongly developed custom in Lega wooden mask art. The protuberant trapezoidal mouth is found on a similar mask collected by Stahlschmidt (1921, Krieger and Kutscher 1960: pl. 74) among the eastern Lega, who are in intermittent contact with the Bembe.

It is possible that this is an unfamiliar type of Lega mask. Unusual large wooden masks, completely different from the classic heart-shaped concave faces, are occasionally found in Legaland (Biebuyck 1973: pls. 39 and 42). They are owned by high initiates who represent particular lineages holding traditional rights (of untraceable origin) to them. Bwami initiations also use these unusual masks to represent stock characters such as Little Eyes, Scout Bee, Pygmy-Son-of-Honey, and other characters who are dramatically and iconically depicted during the rites as illustrations of social, legal, and moral principles.

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