

Foreword of the author

'Events told by one who dwelt in the hunting camp are as they are.', i.e. the information reflects reality.

No major exhibition of Lega sculpture has ever been organized in Belgium. Yet, remarkable collections of Lega artifacts are available in Belgian private and public collections. In fact the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale at Tervuren (near Brussels) possesses by far the most extensive and best documented Lega collection in the world. But the Museum has never attempted to put this collection into perspective through a global exhibit and specialized publications. The initiative taken by a private Belgian institution to organize a representative exhibition of Lega art for the broader art-loving and culture-conscious public is noteworthy.

The choice of objects made is almost entirely restricted to Belgian collections (this was not the author's decision). Significant public and private collections exist elsewhere in the world (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Holland, France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Russia, Italy, Great Britain, Canada and the United States of America). Some of these sculptures have been published in countless catalogs and books on African art and can therefore be compared with the objects selected for this presentation.

For the majority of Lega carvings there are almost no reliable data about the precise date when or the exact place where they were collected, and even less about the dates when and places where they were made, the individual artists who carved them and those persons who owned or used them. In cases where dependable information exists about the precise date that an object was collected in the field or brought to the West an *ante quem* date can be proposed. This is the procedure followed in the plate descriptions. As far as the Lega are concerned, art itself and individual works of art are timeless. The *bami* (initiates) might well quote a number of names of persons of different generations associated with a carving, but it is never certain whether they are speaking about the piece at hand or about the replacement of a lost, abandoned or confiscated sculpture. Until the fifties little was known about the diversity, contexts, usages, functions and meanings of Lega art. Assertions about these various properties were mostly reduced to stereotypes and unwarranted generalizations. The early documents by Commander Delhaise on the 'Warega' (1909) and the unpublished reports (from 1916 onward) by some colonial administrators contained scanty, but sometimes useful and correct data. However, almost nothing of the available information was incorporated in publications. The analyses presented in this work are essentially based on my own field researches among the Bembe, Lega and Nyanga in eastern Congo between 1949 and 1957 under the sponsorship of l'Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale (Brussels). Wherever possible or useful, the data have been complemented by published and unpublished documents that were examined in the course of ongoing library and museum research.

The essence of the information was obtained in 1952 and 1953 in the course of in-

itiations and conversations, which involved members of various social and ritual Lega groups. During that period hundreds of high initiates – the last breed of truly knowledgeable *bwami* – participated in a persistent endeavor to impart their knowledge within the dynamics of elaborate rites. Some data were completed in short field investigations in 1954 and 1957.

During the numerous initiations in which I was involved (in over twenty autonomous ritual communities) I observed closely the association's requisites (the material requirements, such as payments of fees, donations of gifts, exchanges, provisions of food supplies and the behavioral expectations such as restraint and simplicity). In return I received detailed information and insignia of status. This close collaboration between *bami* and myself culminated in 1958 when the higher administration of Kivu Province decreed to lift the ban on the *bwami* association, notwithstanding continued objections from certain milieus.

Thus the information presented here is not the result of reconstructions of a lost past nor an attempt to depict the dramatic changes that resulted from different forms of harassment to which the owners of these artworks were exposed in recent decades. Obviously the situations described for the early fifties are intrinsically the result of processes of transformation, adaptation, intervention that have affected Lega society for centuries. But initiation systems and the associations based on them transform slowly or simply dwindle. From the vitality, structural and organizational coherence of the *bwami* association and the nuanced uniformity of ideas and procedures across vast stretches of Legaland one may conclude that, for a long period of time, cultural persistence has been a predominant feature of *bwami*. The Lega are keenly aware of the timelessness and the conservative characteristic of their association. Early administrators have constantly emphasized the fact that, the strict repression notwithstanding, the initiations continued uninterruptedly, only that they had become more secret.

In the course of my researches among the Bembe and Lega, I have systematically crossed their lands, from east to west, in the zones of Fizi, Mwenga, Shabunda, Pangi, Walikale and some parts of Kindu, Kabambare and Kasongo, in the highland savannahs and forests of eastern Congo. I did work on the relevant art-using institutions, particularly *bwami* among the Bembe, Nyindu, Basimwenda, the so-called 'Bamuzimu' and 'Bakisi', but I found the strongest retention of the vibrantly alive, art-using *bwami* institution among various Lega subgroups in the Shabunda and Pangi regions. In other words, wherever the exact dividing line within the two major segments of Lega may be, the data are based on the Balega Bakumalinga rather than on the Balega Bakuntata. No attempt is made to describe and analyze the numerous regional variants in organizational and procedural aspects. The focus is on those groups that were known in the fifties under the general denominations of Baliga, Bakabango, Babongolo, Bakisi, Beia, Babene and the heterogeneous Ikama grouping (sometimes known as Banakubunga). These were also the Lega subdivisions where the artistic traditions were best preserved and where large numbers of male and female initiates were actively engaged in the initiation processes.

When I began my researches among the Bembe and Lega in 1949 the *bwami* association, which was the central driving force in these two societies and the creator and sponsor of the arts, had been dissolved by administrative decree (1948) on the grounds that it was a subversive institution counteracting the aims and ideals of the colonial government and the work of the missions. This interdiction was the culminating effect of decades of changing and conflicting opinions that colonial admin-

istrators and missionaries had cultivated about *bwami*. Major problems had already started at the time of the Congo Free State and before that, when Legaland fell within the fief of Swahilicized raiders. The sometimes severe repression against the members of the *bwami* association, combined with regroupings of the populations, the appointment of 'chiefs', the intrusive missionary activity, the creation of mining centers with a lot of foreign Congo laborers, and new agricultural demands obviously had a negative effect on the functioning and operational effectiveness of the association. The underlying structural and ideational bases were intact. Overtly and covertly, the sociopolitical influence of *bwami* continued to prove itself in all spheres of life. Because the information on which this study is based concentrates on a particular time period when great Lega thinkers, closely linked with the thought of their fathers, were still alive and active, the 'ethnographic present' is used in the description and analysis of the phenomena.

An attempt is made to present complex African material in as simple a manner as possible so as to allow the intelligent viewer and reader to gain insight in the very original and profound world of art, aesthetics and thought among a Central African people.