

# Preface

LATE IN 1951 I finished two years of intensive fieldwork among the Bembe in the highlands west of Lake Tanganyika. In the course of that research I did some work on the bwami association<sup>1</sup> which induced me to make further investigations among the Lega, where the association had its roots. Basically, the shift from Bembe to Lega was facilitated by the fact that the linguistic transition is a fairly easy one; the eastern forms of Lega, particularly as spoken by the Basimwenda and related clans, are very close to Bembe. In addition, the existence of a number of related groups on both sides of a loosely defined Bembe-Lega boundary enhances the sense of continuity. Finally, Lega and Bembe share many common historical and cultural features. Early in 1952, therefore, after taking a few rapid soundings among neighboring ethnic groups such as Vira, Furiiru, and Nyindu, I began my research among the eastern Lega. My prolonged work among

<sup>1</sup> In order to keep the italicization of foreign words within reasonable limits, I have made certain exceptions to the customary typographic rules. The word "bwami," and the names of all the levels and grades of the bwami association, are not italicized, though the names of the rites leading to membership in the different grades are handled in the usual way. Furthermore, French administrative terms, such as "secteur" and "chefferie," are printed in roman type.

the Bembe and the linkage between the two groups made easier my first contact with the Lega, to whom the character and the scope of my investigations were well known. Wherever I went I was referred to by my prized Bembe nickname "Mtoca ntaule," meaning the asker (inquirer) does not die (i.e., is strong).

The real obstacle I had to overcome was bwami itself. This voluntary association is not secret insofar as membership is concerned.<sup>2</sup> Most of its initiations and ceremonies, however, are closed to outsiders, as are also the special knowledge and the symbolism on which they are based. The situation was further complicated because the association had been dissolved in 1947 by a decree from the colonial government, allegedly because it constituted a threat to order and peace. Before 1947, ever since Arabs and Arabized slave raiders had operated in and around Legaland and missionaries and colonial administrators had penetrated the area, the association and its members had been treated largely with suspicion and contempt, and rarely with indulgence or indifference. Occasionally a more enlightened Belgian official would place bwami in its proper perspective, but such tolerance brought only temporary relief.

About the time I finished my Bembe studies, debates were again raging at different levels of the colonial administration concerning the validity of the ban on bwami. As always, some Belgian administrators, for a variety of personal reasons, were favorable toward the association and therefore questioned, or even regretted, the radical actions taken in the past. At the time of my research, as it happened, men of this persuasion were rather well represented at the higher echelons of the provincial government. Because of this prevailing intellectual climate, and also because of the favorable research position occupied in the Kivu Province by the Institut pour la Recherche scientifique en Afrique centrale (with which I was then associated), it was not too difficult to receive from the provincial authorities full assurances that there would be no interference with my work on bwami. In subsequent months I lived and worked with my wife in Lega villages, having little if any contact with the scattered and relatively few groups of whites—territorial administrators, missionaries, mining personnel, and a few traders—in Legaland.

Although I was well known to the Lega and had been widely accepted by them even before I started my work among them, it took about three months of intensive relationships before they decided to give me real information about bwami. Their early reticence stemmed from a number of causes. Bwami is an association and therefore, by definition, a closed body of people and knowledge. Because of persecutions and other milder interferences, the members of the association were suspicious about any

<sup>2</sup> The ethnographic present used throughout this book to describe situations and institutions relates to the period from late 1951 to 1954.



outside attempt to approach them closely. They had developed, as a protective screen in their dealings with outsiders, attitudes of reticence and feigned ignorance. Furthermore, events of the past four decades had made the Lega cautious about the motives of whites; superficial inquiries had been undertaken by a few administrators and missionaries who were eager to solve practical problems, and many traders, administrators, agronomists, and the like merely wanted to witness a dance for fun or acquire a carving for the lowest possible price. Consequently, the Lega found it difficult to take my investigations and purposes seriously. They had received little in return, except frustration, for dispensing their knowledge or giving away their artwork. And, of course, the human approach had not always been so mild. Occasionally members of the association had been raided, beaten, insulted, imprisoned, or exiled.

My difficulties, however, arose not merely from the mental attitude of the Lega, but also from deficiencies in my early methods of approach and modes of investigation. Except for the references to bwami and the Lega in Commander Delhaise's work, *Les Warega* (1909), no significant published material was available. As a student I had scrutinized the rich Lega and other Congo collections in the Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale at Tervuren. I had seen and read, in the provincial capital of Bukavu and in the relevant administrative centers of Mwenga, Shabunda, Pangi, and Kindu, all available reports and letters on the Lega in general and on bwami in particular. Some of these materials dated as far back as 1912 and formed a direct follow-up of the data recorded by Commander Delhaise in 1906. Most of these studies, based on opinions, reflections, or suggestions, gave few ethnographic facts. I did, of course, find useful hints about the nature of the hierarchies in bwami, about dances and ceremonies, practices and objects, but such information afforded little insight into useful methods for gaining a deeper understanding of bwami.

My first three months in Legaland were therefore devoted mainly to general orientation. I spent some time in a number of communities, moving out rapidly whenever I felt there was little hope of making further progress. I took censuses of villages, collected data on kinship and ethnohistory, and annotated the elaborate and detailed charts of descent groups. In acquiring this kind of information about Lega culture, I also secured substantial but general documentation about the organization, the structure, and the ceremonialism of bwami. Above all, while learning the language and picking up cultural facts, I tried to submerge myself in the Lega world through constant, but discreet, contact. Areawise, I followed a well-defined pattern of preliminary inquiries, beginning with the Basimwenda, the Bakuti, and the Bakabango in the eastern part of Legaland, where the Lega are in direct contact with the Bembe; then northward among the Beigala-Banangoma and the Bamuguba, farther northeastward among the Baliga, and northwestward among the Ba-



kyunga. By the time I had completed my work among the Bakyunga I was more than ready to make a definite breakthrough in the study of bwami. It would be found among the western and southwestern Lega in the administrative divisions of Beia, Babene, and Bakabango in Pangi territory.

As I proceeded from the Basimwenda to the Bakyunga, enthusiasm, mutual appreciation, congeniality, acceptability, and confidence had steadily grown. This favorable climate resulted not only from the time and effort I had spent, but also from the fact that the bwami association was a more pervasive institution among the southern, western, and northern Lega than in the areas where I had begun my research. It had, therefore, proved more resistant to the onslaught of the colonial system. Gradually I became familiar with the grade system, the exchanges, the use of art objects and other artifacts during initiations, the methods of succession in and accession to bwami, the distribution of grades and initiations, the linkages between ritual communities. Quite a few initiation procedures were reenacted for me by large groups of initiates, but most of my information was gleaned from open discussions and interviews. These conversations were always conducted among rather large gatherings of initiates, never in private, and only to a limited extent did I use observational and participant methods.

In subsequent months I operated exclusively in Pangi territory, where the bwami traditions are the most strongly developed and the best preserved. I worked successively in the following areas: Baziri-Banakeigo-Banalyuba, Beianangi-Beiamisisi, Beiankuku, Banasalu, Beiamunsange, all of them in secteur Beia; Banamunwa and Banisanga-Batoba-Bagilanzelu in chefferie Babene; Babongolo in secteur Bakabango. In each of these clan groups or ritual communities I dealt with practically all living initiates of at least the two highest grades, yananio and kindi. My method of procedure required careful advance planning. For example, I would ask to be initiated into any given group I wanted to study, either alone or jointly with a Lega man designated by the initiates in the traditional way. The higher-ranking initiates, in charge of the ceremonies at the lower as well as at the higher levels, would then assemble, as agreed upon, in the village of one of the group. Large quantities of food (bananas, oil, salt, game meat, and goats) were collected for the occasion. Large-scale hunts were organized. The appropriate initiation hut was built. I paid the providers for services and food, distributing the latter according to custom during the initiations, together with Congolese money (in lieu of Lega shell money). I worked directly with high-ranking initiates, without interpreters or clerks. By the time of my main breakthrough in Pangi, however, I had availed myself of the good services of Lumbeku and Beikalantende, both of whom were members of the association and judges appointed to the *tribunaux indigènes* (so-called native courts). They were



intelligent, well traveled, and widely acknowledged as speakers. Extremely dedicated to this work, and fully aware of my needs and problems, they acted as my *hommes de confiance*, spokesmen, and intermediaries whenever necessary. With them I discussed and analyzed questions of translation, interpretation, procedure, and so on. I also benefited from the generous support of Omari Penemisenga, an able and well-liked chef de secteur in the Beia division (Pangi territory) and a strong defender and enthusiastic admirer of the bwami association.

By this time I had come to be truly liked and accepted by the Lega. Ritual communities vied with one another to have me participate in initiations in their villages. I had come to be classified as “our *mwigwa*,” that is, as the sororal nephew of all Lega, a perpetual position by which members of the neighboring Bangubangu find themselves intimately linked to the Lega. I greatly benefited from this position, which carries immense prestige and bestows many privileges (see Part 2, below). (It is difficult for a maternal uncle to say no to a reasonable, or even a half-reasonable, request from his nephew!) I had received the bwami names of Mambwe (personification of a men’s latrine, explained in the aphorism, “Mambwe scrutinizes the defecators”; i.e., Mambwe knows esoteric things) and of Kilinkumbi (a drum praise name for the pangolin explained in the aphorism, “Kilinkumbi, the wise animal for which danced the big ones”). I had also acquired my own slogans—“Mr. Many-Halting-Places [Isamalomengi], Yango [symbolic term for penis] is dancing on the trail,” and “Progressing slowly [Kasigesige] has made chicken arrive at eleusine; progressing slowly has made seducer arrive at vulva”—which in their own way emphasize the value of circumspection, of slowness in action and decision making. In time the initiates applied to me one of their most famous aphorisms—“The little child of a mwami [is] a *nkamba* fish; in deep pools, that is where it is used to swim”—meaning that I had sought deep knowledge from them and that I had been allowed into the inner fastnesses of bwami.

In the course of my fieldwork among the Lega I worked in the following communities: some Bainyindu groups that have the bwami association, Basimwenda and subgroups, Bakuti and subgroups, Bakabango, especially Babongolo and Basitabyale, Banagabo, Banangoma, Beigala, Bamuguba, Baliga, Bakyunga, Baziri, Banakeigo, Banalyuba, Beianangi, Beiamisisi, Beiankuku, Banasalu, Beiamunsange, Bakabango/Babongolo of Kasambulu, Banamunwa, and Banisanga-Batoba-Bagilanzelu. To complete my work in each group required from eight days to more than three weeks. At the earliest stage I restricted myself almost entirely to verbal discussion, but later, in some ritual communities, I personally went through the entire cycle of initiations, from the bottom (kongabulumbu) all the way to the top (lutumbo lwa kindi). In other ritual communities I underwent only a selection of initiations, particularly at the lowest and the highest



levels. The ceremonies took place in the appropriate setting at the appropriate time of day (very early morning, daytime, evening and night).

The cooperation I received from high-ranking initiates and from famed experts was exceptionally loyal. As the members of the association often stated in late evening conversations, they hoped that my findings would soon be known to top officials who, at last enlightened about bwami, would once and for all decide to let the Lega and their association alone. And, indeed, the climate was favorable for the realization of these expectations. Moreover, the basic philosophy of bwami stresses individual effort and achievement combined with an attitude of piety and temperance. The personal effort my wife and I made to live with the members of bwami, and only with them; our perseverance in the quest for the highest initiatory experience; our attitude of genuine respect and understanding—all these, sharply contrasting with a background of poor black-white understanding, greatly contributed to the success of the enterprise.

In the process of going through initiations, which cost me a vast amount of money for both services and commodities, I collected certain objets d'art, paraphernalia, and other initiatory objects (natural items and artifacts). In the pattern of the initiations, these objects, which are tokens of membership and insignia of status, are given to the initiate who achieves certain grades or levels within the association. The initiations are centered on a combination of dance, display and manipulation of objects, and sung aphorisms. My collection of these verbal texts numbers close to seven thousand. In them, and in the contexts in which they are used, is condensed the entire ideology of bwami.

By participating in my initiations and entering into discussions, thousands of members of the bwami association have contributed in one way or another to my knowledge. I am indebted to them all, yet I would like to mention especially a few spokesmen and preceptors (*nsingia*) to whom I owe probably the most, such men as Lumbeku, Beikalantende, Kandolo, Balumya, Bikenge, Kagila, Nzogu, Kaswende, Kilumbu, Bimpa, Penemisenga, Alimasi, Busile, Aliamuntu, Simbo, Mizeni, Mindo, Nyaulingu, Munyange, Kisubi, Penekenye, Kabundilila, Luzoni, Moke, and Bunzuki. Some of these were outstanding as initiators and preceptors, others as analysts and exegetes, others as advisers and counselors. Still others were able spokesmen and orators whose talent as arbiters, catalysts, and organizers was always in demand. Others were especially valuable in retracing the intricate fields of kinship relationships they used in preparing for their initiations, in soliciting commodities, in sharing goods, and so on. After many years I am still awed by the immense knowledge possessed by some of the high-ranking members of the association and am still overwhelmed by the generosity and grace that moved them to share their knowledge with me.

There are, in Lega culture, wide differences in actual ways of doing

things, clearly manifested as one travels across Legaland from east to west or from south to north. These variations are seen in the language and the social structure, in the economy and technology, in rituals and beliefs as well as the initiation system. They are caused by differences in outside contact and influence, in ecology, and in local experience, but above all, perhaps, by the very social system and the ideology itself. Each separate Lega group in the bwami association has a deep-lying instinct to do things somewhat differently from other groups, with the result that every autonomous ritual community in Legaland has some ways peculiar to itself. The structural principles on which the system operates are, of course, fundamentally the same, so that the concept of a Lega culture is a valid one. Yet possible differences in details must constantly be kept in mind. In the course of my fieldwork among the Lega I have studied all their main subdivisions, some in greater detail and over a longer period of time than others. Being thus aware of nuances and variations, I incorporate them whenever they are vital to the understanding of certain aspects of bwami and art.

My main arguments on the bwami association and on art are directly relevant to the southwestern Lega of Pang'i territory, entities grouped at the time of my research in the administrative units of Beia, Babene, and Bakabango. My concern is with traditional Lega society as it had, in the 1950's, survived repeated assaults from those engaged in colonial administration, missionary activity, mining operations, and trading. The bwami association and its arts, on which this study is focused, suffered from the activities of these extraneous agencies. The association had been compelled to go underground; its membership had frequently been persecuted and prosecuted. The rich artworks either were no longer made or were produced in small quantities and were of mediocre quality. Few Western items had been admitted into the richly diversified set of initiation objects. About the only imported things I saw being used during initiations, casually submerged in the vast number of Lega items, were electric bulbs (obviously not for lighting), small madonna statues (not for worship), delicately shaped perfume bottles (not for their contents), aluminum plates, and white china dishes (not for serving food). A few modernistic carvings in mahogany ascribed to the Bausa (Mangbetu-Zande) and purchased from young men working in mining compounds within Legaland were occasionally used. The theme of the white man and his works was barely touched upon in the aphorisms sung and the interpretations given.

Bwami is an organization characterized by immense pride and greatness. Its members are men of profound wisdom and mature poise. Misunderstood and suppressed, they looked with skepticism, regret, and yet self-assurance at the pitiful conditions around them. "The hammer that remains with the children shatters the *nkoku* shell" (i.e., the land, if left to uninitiated individuals, will be ruined) and "The hunters find the



*nkola* shells, but he who guards the village is master over the shells" were among the frequently quoted proverbs that gave expression to these attitudes. The initiates were not ready to discard their customs for something else because that something else, about which missionaries and other Europeans talked, was already present in their own system: "The stone [= our customs and ideas] is not heavy [and therefore to be abandoned]; inside there is something else [i.e., something that gives meaning and substance to it]."

My field research among the Lega was sponsored entirely by the Institut pour la Recherche scientifique en Afrique centrale (IRSAC) in Brussels. The idea for my undertaking a study of the Lega was first conceived by the late Professor Frans M. Olbrechts, director of the then Musée royal du Congo Belge, Tervuren. Professor Olbrechts was one of the earliest and best-informed authorities on African art, and I owe much to his stimulating influences. Over the years the vast documentation I collected in the field has been translated, classified, and partly pieced together with the help of the African Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, of the University of Delaware, and of the Social Science Research Council (Joint Committee on African Studies). I gratefully acknowledge their financial assistance.

Numerous colleagues in various universities, centers, and museums have given me frequent opportunities to lecture on aspects of Lega art and on the bwami association and its structure and moral philosophy. The questions and comments of both scholars and students on those occasions have been a powerful incentive for me to clarify the interpretation and presentation of data. I am especially grateful to Professors Roy Sieber of Indiana University and Robert F. Thompson of Yale University, and to many of their students. All viewpoints expressed are, of course, my own responsibility.

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