

## Stools in the Eastern Regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo

Daniel P. Biebuyck

In Central Africa, people at work, at home, or in gatherings may sit on a log, a leaf, a stone, a hide, a reversed mortar or a mat, and they may squat or be seated on a stool. Stools occur virtually among all Central African populations. Even the Pygmies (Batwa) of the Ituri forest and those called Baremba, living among the Nyanga, manufacture nest-like circular stools of thick vines that are supported by four wooden legs.

Congo populations have created an astonishing variety of stools, tripods, backrests, and chairs. **Seats** do not merely differ in form and size—there are also miniature replicas carved in wood, ivory, **and** bone—but also show a wide range of usages, functions, and meanings. In most cases, caryatid, backrests, **and complex** or simple stools are not merely devices on which a person may sit **but special objects that are** surrounded by **mystery** and much secrecy. They are linked with the political and ritual power and authority of kings, chiefs, headmen, and lineage and family heads, **ARE associated** with the privileges and special knowledge of the members of semi-secret and voluntary associations and the arcana of initiation systems.

The scientific understanding of the range of purposes and significances associated with simple stools has been obscured by overemphasis in the literature on the complex **and** aesthetically appealing stools supported by human or animal figures. **These caryatid** stools, for example, may be found **among** the Hemba, Luba, Kusu, Songye, Pende, Holo, and Cokwe. On the other hand, the historicized chairs **that feature** elaborate genre and other scenery **D0 OCCUR among** the Cokwe and Pende.

Early in my field research **in the 1950's with** the Bembe people located near the western shores of Lake Tanganyika, I was struck by their use of the term stool, '*ecumbe*, to refer to the sororate institution whereby a woman replaces her senior sister, who had died childless in her husband's family. It was said of her that she "akile u '*ecumbe* ya..." or went on the chair of so-and-so. It turned out that this type of terminology referred to the fact that the stool symbolized inseparable sibling solidarity, the junior sister losing her individual identity to become one and the same social personality as her older sister, and bearing children on behalf of her late sister.

As my work progressed among the Lega (1952-1953; 1957) people of the eastern forest region of Congo, I learned that the *kisumbi* stool, owned exclusively by ranking male members of the *bwami* voluntary association, stood as a multifaceted symbol for the formulation of numerous essential values and moral principles. It was also metonymically conceived as an expression of the oneness and total complementary solidarity between an initiate and his initiated wife (Biebuyck 1977). Furthermore, **in INTERPRETING THE MRANINGS OF THESE OBJECTS, the Lega placed** emphasis not only on the general shape and morphological details of a stool, but also on the generic name, the type of wood, the **choice of carving** tools, the various usages, and the permanence of the sculptured piece.

The idea of solidarity and oneness was further confirmed in other instances. In a final *bwami* initiation rite among some Lega **groups**, husband and wife, having reached a certain grade level, were seated next to each other on a double stool. The initiated spouses were presented to the community not merely as holders of new status, but as a perpetually linked, inseparable couple. In another instance of *bwami* rites among the Lega, the young *kigogo* woman, who had been selected to participate in one of the rituals leading to her brother's first grade level initiation, was presented in her new status position standing on a *kisumbi* stool and wearing a feather hat. This unusual way of behaving was a clear instance of publicly **PROCLAIMING** the new social importance of the young woman **and declaring that** certain taboos linked with stools and other initiation objects no longer pertained **to her**. In the epic *Wabugila Ntondi*, published by Lega scholar Nsanda Wamenka (1992), the hero Wabugila, who is an initiate of the *bwami* association, sets out in search of his *kisumbi* stool that represents for him the essence of his power. As happens in other societies, the Lega **HAVE** produced a **variety of symbolically rich stools**, and not only the **better known** four-legged circular *kisumbi* type (is that alright?). Mainly old men use tripods (*nkeka*) or the large-bedlike stools (*kaongama*), but none of the deep meanings of the four-legged stools are associated with these objects.

Among the Nyanga (1954-1957) of the Walikale region in the eastern Congo rain forest, I observed that hat stools, called *utebe*—circular in shape and supported by four straight legs or by a central column, enjoyed wide distribution among men as symbols of seniority (*bukulu*) and leadership (*butambo*). In **this author's** yet unpublished autobiography (Biebuyck ms 2003), the sage Sherungu Muriro of the Nyanga discusses the distribution of the *mwandu* legacy, **a collection of inherited** objects, animals, **and** medicinal knowledge left by his father. Whereas some objects and secret knowledge of medicines were passed on to his widow and the few animals he owned were distributed for food among relatives participating in the mourning ceremonies, the *utebe* stool of Sherungu's father went to the son of the late senior brother. This person had senior status in the kinship group and also received the copper bracelet of headmanship that combined the positions of *bukulu* and *butambo*. In the same Nyanga region, such stools were the focus of numerous taboos and prescriptions (*mahano*), which—the Nyanga say—flow from the fact that **great respect is accorded to stools because important persons sit on them. These stools are not respected on their own, because if they have not been used, they are regarded as simply blocks of wood.**

**The following** are examples of **NYANGA** prescriptions **associated with stools**. To steal a stool is an act of sorcery; to scratch away some surface material of a stool or to remove something else from it is also an act of sorcery. A daughter-in-law cannot sit on the stool of her father-in-law, it **shows** a lack of respect **and may cause** birthgiving to be long and difficult. Similarly, a son-in-law may not sit on the stool of his father-in-law, it is considered a **scornful** act in the mind of the father-in-law. He will think, the Nyanga say, that the son-in-law desires and wants **intimacy** with one of his wives. When father and son travel together and are given a stool as a sign of hospitality, the son cannot be first to sit on that stool. If a child accidentally defecates on a stool, the stool must be cleansed

from the inherent RITUAL pollution. The owner removes some surface material from the stool by means of a small billhook, sandpapers the stool, places it in the river for a day (river water puts an end to all taboos!), dries it in the sun, and then rubs it **down** with oils.

There are other uses for the *utebe* stool among the Nyanga. The *muembwa* title-holder, who **buries** the sacred chief and guards his tomb, also keeps in trust some of the most secret paraphernalia and insignia **called** *ncengeru*, **a collection that includes the** stool of the chief, until such time that a new chief is enthroned. On this occasion, the Shebakungu, who is the ritual father and supreme counselor of the new chief, remits an *utebe* stool to **THE MUEMBWA DIGNITARY** in order to receive the paraphernalia to be transmitted to the new chief at his initiation. In doing so the Shebakungu surrenders some of his power and authority to the *muembwa* dignitary.

There is an even more uncommon instance of the use of an *utebe* stool. On various occasions, mainly sickness and other misfortunes, Nyanga men and, particularly, Nyanga women perform the *kiyowa* ritual under the guidance of a drummer who owns the *ukenye* medicine bundle. During the performance of the ritual, one or two women dressed in animal hides and adorned with *ndorera* fiber bunches who have requested the performance and have, in cooperation with their husbands, paid large fees to the drummer and other participants, perform dance movements standing each on an *utebe* stool. This part of the ritual is executed secretly inside the house of one of the women. The stool emphasizes in this case, the Nyanga say, the respect due to the dancers, for whom no taboos apply during the *kiyowa* performances. Some Nyanga diviners also use the concave seat of the *utebe* stool to throw the divination bones and read the configurations. The stool provides an aura of sacredness and authenticity to the procedures. The Nyanga, great hunters and trappers in the rainforest, have numerous magical methods to attract animals to the traps and nets. One of these methods consists in placing near the traps a piece of the *irao* plant together with a fragment of *busonja* wood taken from a stool on which the young men are circumcised. The stated idea is as follows: “like the initiands (*batende*) arrive en masse and from far away near the stool to be circumcised on it, may the animals likewise be driven to the traps”.

**It is tradition among** the Nyanga to placate **THE** shade OF A DECEASED FATHER.. Special offerings are made to him in a newly built men’s gathering house where the men drink and eat together. Some banana beer is poured onto the concave seat of an *utebe* stool. Thereafter, the officiant (the most senior member of the kinship group concerned) dips bunches of leaves into the beer and rubs **these against** the back of a goat while invoking the help and goodwill of the late father and certain ancestors. The goat is then killed by a junior member of the group and consumed in a ritual meal by all participants.

**Among** the Nyanga, Bembe, Lega, Tembo, Komo and other populations in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, stools—generically known as *kisumbi*, *cifumbi*, *‘ecumbe*, *utebe*—are essential **OBJECTS** in the young men’s circumcision rites. One by one the young men sitting on a stool and supported by one or more tutors are circumcised before being **brought** to the circumcision camp. In addition, some Lega and Bembe initiates

own a miniature ivory or bone replica of the *kisumbi* stool as a token of special privileges **within** the organization of the *bwali* circumcision rituals

As a final example of stools **used for purposes other than repose**, among the Komo, masked dancers dressed in bark cloth and showing **ARTIFICIALLY** elongated legs and arms perform the *nkunda* initiation rites **while** seated on stools. In this instance, the stool lends power and authority to the maskers.

In most areas I've discussed, there are no kings or big chiefs as one would encounter among the Lunda, Luba, and Kuba. However, some of these forest societies have chiefs, often divine in nature, who rule over very small **political entities** consisting sometimes of only a few villages. This is the case among **the** Nyanga, Hunde, Havu, Tembo, **and the** Aasa-Tiri **subgroups** of Komo origin. The initiation and installation of these sacred chiefs are **highly secretive** and complex events that last for long periods of time. In these societies, some of the more ornate stools are part of the chief's insignia. At the end of the prolonged and secluded initiation process, the chief is officially and publicly enthroned and seated on an embellished stool **that is USUALLY** covered with leopard hides, **a symbol of leadership in this region of Africa** (for the Hunde, see Viaene 1952 who refers in this case to the stool as *mutambi*).

In conclusion, stools are much more than **furniture** to sit on or **important** tokens of hospitality, seniority, power, and authority in Central Africa. In many cases, they are employed as a **means of instruction CENTERING ON CODES OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE, ETIQUETTE AND PRINCIPLES OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY. On THE KINSHIP level**, stools express **the deep and intricate** social bonds between closely related persons. In yet other cases, some stools have inherent powers and provide **AN AURA** of immunity to persons allowed to use them during special ritual circumstances. **This brief account has endeavoured to show** that specific aspects of form and usage, the carver's **choice of** materials, and the **specially significant** nomenclature of these objects **stand as** symbolic expressions of **well-grounded** values and philosophical ideas that go beyond the general form and appearance of the ubiquitous stool in Central Africa.

### **Biography**

H. Rodney Sharp Emeritus Professor of Anthropology and the Humanities. Field research in the Democratic Republic of Congo (1949-1961) under the auspices of IRSAC (Brussels) and Lovanium University (Kinshasa). Formerly Professor of Anthropology at Lovanium University (Kinshasa), University of Delaware, University of California; Visiting Professor at Liège University, London University, Yale University, and New York University. -AND AERTHUR GOLDING DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF AFRICAN ART AT THER UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA, TAMPA , FLORIDA