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Sense and Non-Sense in Understanding Lega Culture: Reflections on Research and Sociopolitical Structure, the Bwami, Initiation, and the Arts of the Lega

Objects do not speak;
the Lega made them speak.[1]

When you enter the Lega men's house you enter closed space;
You have nothing to say.

Until the 1950s, Lega culture and the art that was a part of that culture were ignored, dismissed, misrepresented, misinterpreted, or treated with casual indifference. These treatments appeared in a variety of works such as anthropological and art historical publications, sales catalogs, museum exhibitions, private collection displays, and unpublished writings by colonial administrators. If it was mentioned at all, Lega art was routinely relegated to the end of books on African art. The descriptions typically were superficial, often limited to features such as size and material, type of object in Western terms, and a few pictorial representations, all with little indication of an understanding of a work's fundamental essence and importance.[2] By the end of WWII, increasing mention of the schematic features of the Lega, the Bwami association, and the sculptures can be found in such publications as Gaffé (1945) and Henri Lavachery (1954). The descriptions say nothing of the substantive value of the works.

The trend to incorporate pictures and texts on Lega culture and Lega art in highly varied publications has consistently increased since then, but many of the old catchphrases, stereotypical explanations, preconceptions, misconceptions, and inaccuracies published in these early works persist to this day. Authors seem to have difficulty comprehending that Lega sculpture and its intimate association with factors such as ancestral culture, animism, spirits, fetishes, and healing and divination practices, do not easily fit into the numerous functional and other categories that predominate in the Western presentation of African sculpture.

In general, in the early publications, nothing was said about the meaning and function of the object. Authors contented themselves with very general comments such as: "figurine" or "mask from the Warega (sic)." Rarely, were they identified as objects figuring in the Bwami association (often misidentified as Mwami or Moami). The focus was placed on the aesthetic quality of the object, its morphology, material, size, and whether the owner was an individual or museum. Eventually, the concept of provenance gained in importance, an unfortunate development as it is primarily dependent on relative value in reference to

[1] *Ukwingila mu numba widega ukwingila mu lukando ntune itenda*

[2] These are found in publications such as: Clouzot and Level, 1919; Coart and de Hauleville, 1906; Culin, 1923; von Sydow, 1923, 1926, 1930, 1932; Maes, 1924; Guillaume-Munro, 1926, 1929; Locke, 1927; Clarke, 1929; Soupault, 1929; Chauvet, 1930; Lavachery, 1930; Maes-Lavachery 1930; Frobenius, 1933; Cunard, 1934; Sweeney, 1935; Kjersmeier, 1937; Olbrechts, 1946.

dealers, sales catalogs, and current or former owners. Provenance may have nothing to do with the absolute authenticity of an object or its contextual importance to the Lega.

It is a fact, however, that Lega art objects, removed from their traditional context, were available at least from the early twentieth century onward in various museums and in private ownership widely throughout Europe and elsewhere. They included sculptures brought back by known and unknown colonial administrators and military personnel such as Belgians Glorieux, Laurent, Delhaise, and the Swede Arrhenius; explorers and ethnographers such as the German Frobenius (1905); the Italian Brissoni (1902); The Russian Tevyashov (1926); and private Norwegian travelers. The earliest published reference to Lega sculpture seems to be Masui, *Guide de la Section de l'état indépendant du Congo* (1897). When writing about "artistic manifestations" shown at the Salon d'Honneur (Brussels), he notes: « Entre le Lualaba et le Tanganyika, les féticheurs de Misisi ont des masques d'ivoire sans grande expression et des fétiches grossiers tirés du bout d'une petite dent[3] ». This is a clear and rare reference to an area called Misisi (or Micici), where one of the early military posts in Legaland was located.

The 1928 auction of the Pareyn collection, which included works bought at the Antwerp docks from returning colonials between 1900-1928, yielded objects of diverse quality, some very fine, including certain Lega pieces, but virtually always without any cultural data. How did these colonials returning to Belgium for a vacation, after a term of service in the Congo of three or five years, acquire these Lega sculptures? No one seems to have clearly indicated how and where they were obtained. There are several possible explanations. During the first thirty years of contact with the Lega, many of the local colonial administrators were opposed to the Bwami initiates and initiations for various reasons. The primary objection was a perception that they played a subversive role in the colonial process, instigating a lack of cooperation and giving them excessive power and authority. As a result, numerous sculptures were confiscated in the course of police or military operations and raids. Other objects may have been acquired from converts to Catholicism or Protestantism, as the missions were very much opposed to the Bwami association and its members, which were considered to be source of all evils, including immorality. Some sculptures may have been acquired in a more conciliatory manner through the intermediary of one or other of the "new chiefs," "notables," and "village headmen," all of whom were appointed by the colonial administration. The latter were opposed to Bwami and strongly encouraged initiates, and occasionally initiated relatives and simple subjects, to surrender one or another object in order to reward a colonial officer for favors received. All in all, few if any of the sculptures were seen in contextual usage or paid for.

Early on, these sculptures were kept as private possessions by the collectors themselves or by members of their families, gradually deposited in museums or sold to a number of enlightened collectors and incipient dealers such as Brummel, Bela Hein, Tristan Tsara, Claude Level, Louis Carré, Charles Ratton. These collectors/dealers seem to have had an appreciation for the quality of form and patina of Lega objects, although with no regard for what their function or meanings might have been. They did not have any particular interest in understanding the context in which the objects were made and used. Early

[3] This is translated into English as "Between Lualaba and Tanganyika, the fetishists from Misisi have ivory masks without great expression and fetiches and fetiches made from the tip of a small tooth."

important museum exhibitions of African art included a few publicly- or privately-owned Lega sculptures shown at the Brooklyn Museum (1923), the Museum of Modern Art (1935), and by Olbrechts in Antwerp (1937-1938). Some were illustrated in the catalogs and others not. In the reprint edition of Sweeney's *African Art* (1952), great Lega masks and figurines, originally included in the New York City exhibition of 1935, are simply identified as Warega, Congo Léopoldville, with sizes and the name of the collections (Carré, Ratton, Stoclet, Bela Hein, Tristan Tsara).[4]

In ensuing years, enthusiasm for these predominantly undocumented artworks of varying quality began to spread. Reacting against the general lack of knowledge, Soupault (1929) remarked correctly on « la quantité prodigieuse de faux renseignements, les voyageurs rapportant des objets ont souvent oublié le lieu et improvisent[5] ». In 1898, the Belgian government recognized the value of gathering information on Congolese people, cultures, and material objects. In connection with this interest, they issued a « Questionnaire ethnographique et sociologique » and a « Questionnaire ethnographique » that encouraged administrative personnel to systematically compile information. In 1894, administrators in Congo were urged to send objects for the Antwerp exhibition, and in 1895, instructions were sent by government officials to the district officers in Congo about the type of information that should be sent together with every object selected for the 1897 Brussels exhibition. In 1908, Professor de Jonghe sent to all Catholic missionaries a « Guide pour la récolte des objets ethnographiques en vue de la formation d'un musée universitaire d'ethnographie congolaise à Louvain[6] ».

The persons who acquired sculptures in Legaland, far from the situational context in which they were used, for the most part never bothered taking into account these government directives to note the place where they acquired the object, the name of the owner from whom they got it, its Lega name, and the circumstances in which it was obtained. As a consequence, at every stage of interest in Lega art, we find, apart from an almost complete absence of information, all sorts of unfounded statements, several of which still pervade the present literature on Lega art, such as the following:

- Some writings incorrectly refer to the Lega as "Warega," which is the Swahili version of their name. Such writings also incorrectly place the Lega west of Lake Kivu, or in the northeast, or even in the northwest of the Congo. In point of fact, they are situated in eastern Congo, west of Lake Tanganyika, in the highland savannah and forest regions of southern Kivu and Maniema.
- Lega sculptures were erroneously referred to as Luba, Pende, even Eskimo. Ivory spoons from the Bwa in the northeastern Congo were, and sometimes still are, mistakenly attributed to the Lega[7].

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[4]Two masks are said to be "used in the rites of the Mwami secret society." Two ivory neckrests are not Lega, but were made by Lega-influenced Binja.

[5]Translated into English as "The tremendous amount of false information, travelers bringing objects back with them often forgot and improvised their place of origin." « L'art africain au Congo belge » (1929, p 208)

[6]Translated as "Guide for the collection of ethnographic objects in view of establishing a university museum of Congolese ethnography in Louvain."

[7]The fact that they were made by the Bwa already had been confirmed previously by ~~a~~ the Brissoni collection in Italy in the late 19th century.

- Figurines were and are identified as "insignia," "amulets," "emblems," "cult figures," "ancestral figures," "magical figures," "petits *dieux lares*," "symbolic figures," "fetishes," "fertility images," "signs of prestige," "symbols of fertility," "dance scepters," "ritual ornaments," "symbols of a secret society," "objects used in village rites," and, in a rare case, as "proverb images, which is the most accurate description among these otherwise imprecise terms, some of which may perhaps be applicable to other art besides Lega. Some of the large figurines were said to be obtained only after a "sacrifice," with no explanation of the sacrifice in the reference. One 1934 writing describes the "savage Warega" and the "decrepitude and barbarism" of their "highly synthetic ivory carvings."
- Masks of disparate sizes, shapes, and materials were identified under various Western categories as ritual masks, unspecified "masks playing a role in relation to sorcery," and "liturgical objects."
- Wooden and ivory statues were described as being part of ritual baskets. The wooden figurines were said to be oiled during the rites and worn on the head. Ivory masks were said to be attached in front of the face.
- Incorrect statements were made about the Bwami association itself. It was often mistakenly called "Bami," which is the Lega identification for "Bwami initiates." "Bwami," a voluntary but closed association, was variously identified as a: sect that destroys the authority of chiefs; secret society; political confraternity; social hierarchy; revolutionary organization with the terrible practice of administrating poisons.

These are merely a few samples of the numerous misnomers that have recurred in the literature.

Ethnographic, socio-cultural field-based studies by professional anthropologists, linguists and other scholars, only began in the late forties in Congo, mainly with the creation of the Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale. The institute supported a few anthropologists and linguists, mostly of Belgian origin, but also some British and American, and it contributed to the work of several established missionary researchers.[8] Most of the research, however, was oriented towards socio-political and economic structures and historical phenomena and was not primarily concerned with the artistic output and contexts. There was little or no coordination of the research efforts and no large-scale planning. The Musée royal de l'Afrique Centrale (Tervuren) sponsored a few "collecting missions" which resulted in wide-ranging but superficial inventories.

All in all, in the enumeration of African art-producing groups, Lega art was for a long time considered to be a minor art and was, thus, treated quite summarily, as compared to the "great arts" of the Kongo, Kuba, Luba, Hemba. There were even more misrepresentations about the social structure within which these sculptures were created, used, and interpreted. A complete misunderstanding of the socio-political structure of the Lega prevailed. Some authors assumed that the Lega were organized as a centralized kingdom with hierarchies of chiefs, as is obviously the case of neighboring populations from Rwanda, Burundi, from the Shi of Kabare and Ngweshe to the Luba and Hemba. Many confused traditional socio-

[8]Some missionaries had far greater knowledge of the language and a much longer experience than many ethonographers.

political organization with the new structures imposed by the colonial administration ("*secteurs militaires*," "*groupements*," "*chefferies*," "*secteurs*"). In this administrative process, these new structures involved the appointment of "*chefs de secteurs*," "*chefs de chefferies*," "*chefs de groupement*," "*chefs de village*," "*notables*," "*juges*" in an ever-changing environment wherein populations were merged, split, resettled, and new boundaries were drawn. These new structures were the result of the involuntary fusion and dislocation of populations. The situation was such that in 1926, a local colonial administrator deplored the "*morcellement*" (the administrative fractioning of the existing structures), noting seventy "*chefferies*" in the Haute Ulindi and thirty-six in the Haute Elila (both areas referring to parts of Legaland). Others argued, more simply, that Lega society was composed of a loose amalgam of distinct clans, headed by chiefs!

In point of fact, the Lega were organized into territorially dispersed, polysegmentary clans and lineages, systems well-known in many other parts of Africa, in which there is interaction of numerous clans that were internally subdivided into a cascade of interrelated lineages of diverse genealogical depth. Extended families play an essential, but differential and complementary, role in all spheres of economic, social, political, and ritual life. These social entities are dispersed in numerous local groups such as smaller and larger villages and hamlets headed by elders, among whom seniority positions prevail in terms of clan and lineage structures, and/or by some of the highest-ranking members of the Bwami association.

Even less adequate information was presented on Bwami itself, the central institution within which all sculptures were owned and used. Being a closed association, the social and ritual activities and ideological principles of which were hidden and not public, Bwami was subject to a great deal of speculation, which is apparent in the administrative reports that I was able to read.[9] Many local colonial administrators presented extremely negative views on Bwami, while at the same time, a few held positive views. Reports from 1916 onward decried "the destructive effect of Bwami, their opposition to the spread of new ideas, their 'esprit de domination' (domineering spirit), their secrecy, their solidarity, their refusal to pay taxes, their methods of coercion (poisoning, etc.), their wealth, etc."

A few early sources, however, presented a more thoughtful approach, considering Bwami not as a secret, disruptive association, but as a complex institution with a cohesive organization. Some even came fairly close to a basic understanding of its structure, although they were puzzled by the grades and the associated initiation systems. When they acquired sculptures, mostly through seizures and confiscation, a few colonial administrators wrote down important facts about the hierarchical organization of the Bwami association. Far from talking about fetishes, etc., these very few colonial administrators noted correct names of individual figurines and masks that seemed to allude to characters rather than to spirits or ancestors. Thus, despite the many negative perspectives on Bwami contained in reports from various areas in Legaland in the years 1916, 1917, 1918, 1920, 1922, 1923, 1927, 1929, 1931, 1932, 1934, 1935, some local officials wrote accounts and compiled dossiers that were never published but were retained

[9]Such reports were deposited in the various administrative centers from Kivu, Kindu, Bukavu, Shabunda, Mwenga, Fizi, Pangi, and Uvira.

at local administrative centers. These actually contained valid information on the association and its artworks, including the following:

- Much valuable information about Lega culture and Bwami was provided by Delhaise, a military commander in charge of a large Lega area during the earliest period of White presence there in 1905. Despite its merit, this information was largely ignored by colonial officers and scholars. More specifically, he presented an adequate, albeit incomplete, perspective on the association, its organization, and rites, as viewed from the outside. While Delhaise only observed some staged performances in 1906 and referred to the sculptures as "fetiches," he correctly noted that most animal and human figurines in wood and ivory belonged to the *kindi* grade and were often cared for by a man's senior initiated wife. He also noted that these artworks were not displayed in shrines and that they appeared only within the context of the initiation rites. He stated that Bwami was not a secret society but a social organization and a moralizing institution, that the grades were not "hereditary," but had to be achieved, and that a large, democratic spirit prevailed in Bwami ideology.
- In 1930, Corbisier-Ledocte correctly identifies the names of certain figurines, without explanation, such as *keitula*; *sakasala*; *kutula*; *kalimbangoma*. Among the masks, he identified *lukwakongo*; *lukungu lwa kindi*; *binumbi* (see Biebuyck for an explanation of these terms, 1973).
- Another source of that time correctly identifies a figurine as *nyasombo* (sic) and animal figurines as *mugugu* and *mbwa za kindi*.
- In 1930 – 1931, Merlot was a third source who mentions figurines such as *keitula*, *mwelwa*, *waiyinda*, *kasisi ka kindi* (sic); an *ikemeno* cane. He identifies general terms for masks: *kasisi ka yanano* and, very correctly, mentions, the highly secret fact that the *kindi* possess two large and two small quartz stones from Mount Ruwenzori. Most of these names are correct, but the authors have not linked them with specific sculptures, nor have they explained their uses, meanings, or functions.

In addition, the Afrika Museum at Tervuren in Belgium had obtained before 1940 important collections from colonial administrators; these were accompanied by limited, but pertinent, descriptions, including the names of certain so-called "fetishes."

- A 1931 file available at Tervuren (N° 557) refers to two ivory masks called *likwakongo* (sic), eight ivory figurines, some of small size. Most of them are accurately identified as *kalimbangoma* from the Kunda region.
- The same source in 1934 mentions several unidentified ivory figurines and one in wood.
- Another file dated 1931 (file 561) sent from Shabunda refers to some ivory figurines, a stone figurine identified as "tête de grand chef *kindi*," an ivory mask, and spoons "with which to eat," which were inaccurate and incomplete descriptions.
- In 1939, the Museum received a large number of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines in wood and ivory that were unidentified, and three wooden masks that were correctly named as *kingungungu*, *kibome* (sic), and *kalimu*.

Most of this information, readily available although to a limited public, has been ignored in published sources.

In 1946, the pioneering work of Frans M. Olbrechts published under the title, *Plastiek van Congo*, was finally published.[10] The manuscript was based on the earlier Antwerp exhibition Olbrechts had organized in 1936. A weak French translation was available only in 1959. A sketchy English translation was published in the sixties. The work contained two hundred thirty-two black and white plates, ethnic identifications, and outstanding sculptures selected from about forty private collections and museums in Belgium, Congo, Germany, England, Sweden. Despite its great merit, this work did not contribute much to an understanding of the significance of Lega art. Only two figurines and one mask were included and identified solely in terms of their contemporaneous ownership. Olbrechts' aim was to situate this art into his general scheme of stylistic regions by defining certain morphological features[11] thought to be essential hallmarks of Lega art. He said very little about its use and failed to consider the ethnographic data at his disposal in published works by Cordella and Delhaise, and in unpublished reports of by colonial administrators available at the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren (See Biebuyck 1986, pp. 5-7). He also did not tackle questions regarding the context in which these various forms of art occurred, limiting himself to vague references on the Bwami association. He did, however, correctly note that there was no trace of "fetishism" among the Lega, as was the case among the Luba, and that they had no ancestral statues. He correctly observed that Bwami initiates used the sculptures in rites and ceremonies, but rashly stated that nothing was known about their "religious" and "magical" significance. For many years, numerous authors writing about African art who could read sources in Dutch or French in general limited themselves to data gleaned from his work.

By the early fifties, important ethnographic information had become available in public and archival collections, and significant compilations of Lega art also had become available in numerous private collections. Nevertheless, writings about sculptures remained incomplete and confusing, mainly because there was no clear understanding about the many layers of meaning in connection with factors such as their form, use, and function.

In addition to these, the secretive nature of the Bwami society necessarily mandates that extreme circumspection be used when making assertions about any particular item. The art is hidden and not intended to be readily visible. Additionally, an idea can be expressed in the initiation context by several very different representations, which assist in protecting the secrets. A word or name cannot be used accurately without understanding the entire constellation of objects and actions that represent it. For example, the word *kakenga* literally means "little maiden" or "dear maiden." Kakenga is represented by six or seven distinct ivory figurines. These multiple representations of the character protect the secrecy, and a fundamental misunderstanding is demonstrated by the association of a character, the knowledge of which has been acquired through field research, with something that is not known through the means of such study.

Paradoxically, as Lega art became increasingly known, collected, and sold, the number of fantasies written about it increased correspondingly. The literature on African art abounds in unfounded speculations about the particular meaning of Lega sculptures. Writers

[10]The underlying manuscript was available as of 1939 but could not be published at that time because of World War II.

[11]Ultimately, it became clear that these stylistic features pertained only to a limited part of Lega sculptural output.

uncritically apply the names of characters associated with the sculptures that they have derived and isolated from published aphorisms or other information. One of these assemblages of information taken out of context are outright inventions, as when one authors speculates that a certain ivory figurine, collected without any information, represents the epic hero Mubila[12]. Another writer misidentifies as Fon a Lega wooden mask and claims it represents the supreme god. Other identifications were derived from hasty and wrong conclusions made about sculptures with a similar appearance that and that may or may not have been identified scientifically. Even if objects are similar in form, other criteria are equally or perhaps more important, such as when and where they were used, and what was sung or said about them.

Many statements about objects have no foundation. In 1966, for example, Cornet wrote, without basis, that a three-faced figurine represented the triad of father-mother-son. In 1970, Duponcheel wrote that a certain figurine represents: "une statuette d'un coureur à l'arrêt."[13] Lega art does not fit within common stereotypes of other African art denoted by terms such as ancestral figure or nkisi. In spite of this, many authors continued to describe Lega art with words such as magical figures, ritual figures, ritual ornaments, amulets, totemic arrangements, and masks related to sorcery. Herreman in 1986, speaks about a mask that is "commonly associated with sorcery." Wassing (1986), described three Lega masks as "amulet masks. (p. 235)" In 1993, Nooter refers to a wooden figurine as an object that a woman may wear on her head to show that she has been initiated into the highest rank of Bwami." (p. 151). Some authors, like de Heusch (1964) are satisfied with indicating that the sculptures are "symboles de prestige d'une association fermée."[14] In *l'art d'être un homme* (2009: 349), reference is made to the *masengo* as "objets lithurgiques" and to ivory as symbolizing the bones of deceased great *kiondi*. Bouttiaux (2009) speaking about three ivory masks, says: "They are not portraits but likenesses of past initiates called collectively *madumba* grave." All of these statements have no basis in fact. Mistakes such as these, resulting from the systematic ignoring or misreading of primary source material, are perpetuated. There are also numerous misspellings and misreadings of Lega terms. For example, Maesen in 1967 writes of the "ritual masks" used by "Lukwakongo, Tulimu, Malumba, members of the Bwami society," and in so doing confuses the generic terms for "masks" with those for "grades."

Although from certain points of view they may be right, some authors think that the depth and degree of patina is necessarily an indication of age. This is not entirely true. Other factors must be considered in assessing patina. Forest elephant ivory darkens faster than savannah elephant ivory. Additionally, the body of the Lega initiates who handled the ivories were, traditionally, rubbed daily with oils containing a reddish substance. Its depth may be a product of use by several generations. The frequency and intensity with which the ivories were used also play a role in the development of the patina. At the start of the *kindi* rites, aides of the *kindi* oil the objects in the rite of *kubonga masengo*, which literally means "to bring harmony in the sacra." Aside from the fact that some of the aides do a more intensive and careful job than others, much depends the frequency with which the owner of such ivories has participated in these *kindi* rites. In addition, the quality of the

[12] Neyt (2010), but the respective authors of these misinterpretations are well known; since there are so many that could be mentioned, I have preferred to reference only a few.
[13]Translated into English as "a sculpture of a runner in stopped motion."
[14] De Heusch, 1964: 99; translated as "prestige symbols of a closed association."

patina may also be determined by the different types of oils used, variously called *mwambo*, *ikumu*, *kinkinda*. They are made from different types of nuts or kernels such as *busezi*, *bunzeke*, and *kilandu,* which are dried, split, pounded, and steamed by women. In the oily mixtures, they also use red clay called *mukusu*, red powder from the *nkula* tree, *kibonge* red stones; resins, saps of leaves, charcoal; perfume called *bulago* made with resins, leaves, bark, charcoal.

Numerous writings make no adequate distinctions between the various categories of Lega masks. These speculations, misunderstanding, and misspellings have been perpetuated from one author to another. The worst approach to Lega Bwami and sculpture is linked with guesswork, when authors attempt to read specific usages, functions, meanings, and contexts, in single, un-documented sculptures.

Following the war years, numerous general catalogues and handbooks on African art increasingly used Lega visual materials and some basic information.[15] In recent years, more extensive introductions to the Bwami association and related artworks may be found in additional works.[16]

In numerous of the above publications there are scant references to:

- the multitude and diversity of initiation objects
- the complex links of these objects among themselves within Bwami
- their correct association with specific grades
- the specific statuses of individuals and groups owning and guarding them
- the type of relationships an initiate has with his objects
- the contents of collectively-kept baskets
- how the objects are acquired, transmitted and replaced
- the generic and specific names of objects and their use
- the content and meaning of thousands of specific associated aphorisms in the framework of dramatic and musical group action.

There is also a striking misunderstanding of Bwami, which is not a secret society, nor a "means to exploit people," but a closed graded initiation system that pervades all aspects of culture and society. In the absence of centralized political institutions, the sense of solidarity created by Bwami is a most powerful element of cohesion, cooperation, and, eventually, of resistance to imported institutions.

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[15]Among them are Gaffé (1945) who calls the Lega "les plus parfaits sculpteurs de l'ivoire[15]; Fagg (1951); Segy (1951); Fagg and Plass (1953); Lavachery (1954); Stillman (1955); Maesen (1959); Himmelheber (1960); Krieger (1960, 1965, 1969); Burssens (1962); Altman (1963); de Kun (1966); Delange (1967); Leiris and Delange (1967); Cornet (1971, 1972); Willett (1971); Leuzinger (1972, 1977); Bascom (1973); Fry (1978); Lema Gwete (1980); Sieber (1980); Vogel (1981); Bastin (1984); Kesckesi (1987); Felix (1987, 1989); Herreman (1988); Kerchache (1988); Utotombo (1988); de Heusch (1988); Schmalenbach (1988); Herreman-Petridis (1993); Koloss (1999); Neyt (2010); Roy (1992)

[16]These include, for example, Delange (1967, 1973); Cornet (1972); Zuesse (1978); Anderson (1979, 1989); Brain (1980); Layton (1981, 1991); Hunn in Cole (1985); Beumers and Koloss (1992), Bastin (1998); Herreman-Petridis (1993), Tervuren Museum (1995, 1996); Perani-Smith (1998); Arnoldi-Kraemer (1995).

> Essential concepts underlying the nature and functioning of Bwami are summarized by the following terms: hiding (*kubisama*), seeing (*kumona*), witnessing (*kumonene*), teaching (*kubwana*), learning (*kukema*), "paying" valuables (*bikulo*), sharing (*kubegana*), creating harmony (*kubonga*) and joy (*kuboga*). There can be no initiation without harmony. Moreover, it is not enough to come to a place that has harmony at the moment. The harmony must be maintained.

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Given the repeated misinterpretation of numerous features of Lega culture in general, and the Bwami association and sculptures in particular, it seems appropriate to provide a succinct statement of their major criteria.

Although the same structural and ideological patterns of Bwami are pan-Lega, even found among related Bembe, Konjo, Kwame, and some Binja, there are regional differences. There is no fixed written canon or an overall authority to set exclusive rules and regulations. The initiations operate on the basis of a network of well-defined territorial and kinship groups. Depending on the level of initiation, these territorial groups range from hamlets to villages to groups of villages to large-scale ritual communities made up of dispersed villages. The kinship groups involved range from extended families to lineages of various genealogical spans to historically or ritually related clans (called ritual communities). In each of these groups, autonomous decisions are made by the local membership. Preceptors (those who know the detailed procedures, aphorisms, dance movements, dramatic actions, associated objects, sequences, and requirements) can, to some extent, introduce some of their own inventions or preferences.

In some groups or regions within Legaland, the advent of Bwami is historically later than in others and so is the degree of elaboration of rituals and related themes. Moreover, in some areas, the pro- and contra- colonial opinions, attitudes, and reactions to Bwami have differed markedly over decades, as did the local reactions by the Lega themselves.

There are considerable differences not in the ideology or basic structure but in the actual internal organization of Bwami across Legaland. The most complete features are found among groups situated in the Shabunda and Pangi territories, from the Babongolo clans to the Banisanga and Bagilanzelu clans, ranging through many other clans and ritual communities. In order to fully understand Bwami, conclusions cannot, therefore, be based on observations made in only one community; they must include data obtained in all ritually distinct groups of Lega society.

Lega sculpture occurs in the extremely complex Bwami association, most of whose practices and ideas are only known to the initiates themselves, depending on levels of initiation. Bwami is a closed hierarchically organized, graded association that is open, in principle, to all Lega men and women, accessible only through fixed sequences of initiations. However, there are numerous limitations, restrictions, and requirements as one moves up in the hierarchical structure. A general requirement for men is to be circumcised and for women to be married to a male initiate (after they have undergone the youthful *kigogo* rite).

In areas where the most elaborate forms of Bwami occur, the sequence of grades, for men and women, is as follows (from lowest to highest): *kongabulumbu* (including the *kigogo* rite); *kansilembo*; *ngandu*; *bulonda*; *musage wa yananio*; *lutumbo lwa yananio*; *kyogo kya kindi*; *kantamba ka kindi*; *musage wa kindi*; *lutumbo lwa kindi*; *bunyamwa*.

Traditionally, for any individual, to move from the lowest grade to the highest is a quasi-lifelong process of personal endeavors and those of his kinship group[17]. However, for some individuals, because of special circumstances or events, the process may be shortened. The foremost criterion is acceptability: the candidate must have the necessary moral qualities and the required support within and outside his own kinship group. The supportive efforts of the candidate's kinship group are fundamental. As one moves from grade to grade, the initiations involve larger and larger ritual communities and groups of appropriate participants and status-holders, and thus the material aspect of the initiation becomes more and more significant. They require progressively longer preparations, the accumulation and storage of vast quantities of food supplies and shell money for entertaining participating initiates and for paying specific fees or fines to certain status holders. For the candidate and his kin, the acquisition of these necessities involves widespread travel and negotiations with the most diverse groups of kinship relations (close and remote agnates, maternal uncles, sororal nephews, in-laws, blood friends). It also requires interactions with initiates of appropriate grade and status-holders of various importance. The preparations also include the building of the initiation house and, for the highest grades, the construction of a special village where the rites will be held and the invited participants will be lodged in temporary long-houses. Thus, all these preparations involve the increasing cooperation of a large network of kinsfolk drawn not only from one's own lineage and clan, but from many groups related through close or remote affinal, uterine, and cognatic ties. They also include the recruitment, and subsequent participation, of initiates who will act as preceptors, tutors, sponsors, distributors of food and valuables, and controllers of foods and valuables amassed or promised for the initiations. In general, some of the initiates exercising these special functions spend time waiting before accepting to participate, in order to make sure that all requirements are met. It is also of utmost importance that an atmosphere of calm and peace prevails in the village of the person to be initiated.

The higher initiations of *yananio* and *kindi* invariably begin with the impressive ceremonial entry (lukenye) of the participants into the village. They form a hierarchically conceived row of men and women (according to grade levels and special functions in the initiations). In the course of these formal entrances of the participating initiates, there are no songs, but drums carried from the shoulder are beaten, and bunches of reeds or wickerwork rattles are shaken. When all participants have arrived in the village, a dramatic dialogue generally ensues between a leading preceptor and the entourage of the waiting candidate concerning the purpose of the visit, the assurance that all requirements have been met, and that an atmosphere of peace prevails.

Any initiation, from the lowest to the highest grade, consists of sung aphorisms, dances, dramatic actions, use of sound instruments, and the usage of vast quantities of initiation

[17]Reasons for accelerating the process of initiation: a powerful or wealthy father exercises pressure so his preferred son is initiated earlier than others; kinsman must replace must replace a relative who died unexpectedly while preparing the initiation; one must be initiated because a major precept has been broken.

objects. Any initiation entails smaller or larger distributions of food, payment of fees, and remittance of gifts to musicians, singers, dancers, and preceptors. It also involves the cooperation of kinsfolk in hunting, trapping, building, collecting supplies, cultivating, and providing services.

The aphorisms are highly symbolic, succinct, and often proverb-like statements about the moral code, the social structure, the history, the importance of Bwami in Lega society itself and the power, fame, and greatness of its members. They are sung by a preceptor alone, by some of the participating initiates, by singers who are members of a small orchestra (two drums, a slit drum, mirlitons, rhombos, percussion sticks, hand clapping, rattles, rhythmic tonal mumbling, some male singers, and a highly specialized female singer). The dances are performed in solo, in duos (by preceptors), by a small selection of participants or by the entire group (male and female, male only, or female only).

There are no special dance costumes. For most of the dances, the initiates wear the normal paraphernalia of their grade (hat, necklaces, bangles, belts, animal skins, barkcloth, aprons, loincloths made of woven raffia). In some rites, however, they wear only a small pubic cloth. In others, some dancers wear a collaret of fibers, dried banana leaves, or feather-trimmed snakeskin Exceptionally, they wear a wooden mask and carry various objects in certain rare rites. In other rites, the men's headdresses are worn by their initiated wives. In still other rites, women wear small discs adorned with feather bunches atop of their head.

The dramatic action always includes music and song, and occurs with or without the use of special objects. Much of the dramatic action involves the representation through dance filled with mimicry and performed by one or more preceptors of a wide spectrum of different characters (e.g., frivolous woman, sex-obsessed male, diviner, suffering old man, sick person, stranger, beggar, gambler, wealthy braggart, individual exposed to the poison ordeal, etc.). These characters symbolize different aspects of social behavior and morality. Dramatic actions may include very special treatments of the candidate who must remain completely passive, whatever the initiates ask him to do or wish to do to him (they may roll him on the ground, tease or threaten him, push him, or even beat him).

Hundreds of objects are seen in the initiation rites. The objects range very widely in form and number from the lower to higher grades. They include the simplest, natural objects in their natural state (e.g., a shell, a carapace, a pangolin scale, an animal hide, a chimpanzee or leopard skull, many varieties of plants and leaves, vines, bark, lichens, and moss), more intricate manufactured items (e.g., wickerwork rattles, assemblages of viper fangs and beads glued in a resin ball, mats, collarets), and diverse sculptures. All objects are seen either singly or in displays of complex arrangements within a symbolically closed space. They are explained through sung texts and dramatic actions mostly in the closed milieu of the initiation house and only in the presence of initiates of the appropriate grades. Very few items are worn or carried in open performances.

Sculptures constitute only a small part of this vast array of objects; some reoccur in different rites at different levels of initiation with similar or related but expanded meanings; others are seen only in a specific rite characterized by strikingly rigid forms of use and meaning. In some ritual communities smaller wooden and ivory zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines occur in *lutumbo lwa yananio* and musage wa kindi (they are known by generic

terms such as *mugugundu*/*migugundu* and kalimbangoma/tulimbangoma. Skeuomorphic ivories (known by the tools they represent such as nyondo hammer, *mugushu* billhook, etc.) and by the forms they represent (katimbitimbi). Rarely, and then only in very small numbers, do sculptures occur in the lower initiations without ever being owned by an initiate who is not an incumbent of the two highest grades (*yananio* and *kindi*). In the intermediate *ngandu* initiation, a limited number of objects (ivory/bone axes, hammers, knives, billhooks, wooden masks) may be seen as a reminiscence of the fact that in many communities and for many decades *ngandu* was the supreme grade.

It is well known that the sculptures are manufactured in certain types of soft wood, in elephant ivory and bone (very rarely in ivory or bone from other animals), and, sometimes, in clay, stone, resin, epiphyte (*ntutu*) and very rarely in thick *idendo* bark. The Lega are among the most prolific and greatest carvers of masks and figurines and other objects in elephant ivory. It is noteworthy that from 1910 on, the colonial government had formulated strict rules about the killing of elephants, the ownership of the tusks, etc. Despite the severe legislation, the Lega nevertheless continued to carve in ivory, at least until the forties. It is also well-known that the range of sculptures includes stools, masks, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines in wood or ivory/bone, spoons, and many other small carvings such as billhooks, spearheads, knives, pegs, hammers, blades (always in bone or ivory).

Wooden masquettes (*lukwakongo*) are associated with the *lutumbo lwa yananio* rites. Large wooden masks (*muminia*, *idimu*, *kayamba*) are associated with the *kindi* grade. Large and small ivory and bone masks (*lukungu*) are linked with *kindi*. In the initiation process, these masks are used or seen in the most different ways: carried in the hand; carried before the face or resting on the forehead; attached to small fences made of sticks and vines; laying on the dance floor; and sometimes, rarely, worn before the face, on the cheeks, or resting on top of the head. While wooden figurines may be held in the hand during dance, most of the time the ivory ones are displayed statically, in front of the seated initiates, laying on the floor of the initiation house, or resting against the *kindi* hats displayed on the ground. In all cases, the sculptures are associated with a large number of aphorisms, most of which are sung. But in the most supreme rite of *kindi*, these aphorisms, and their interpretation, are "thought" by those who detain the object, and the aphorism is expressed through a pattern of rhythmic, tonal mumbling.

Invariably, initiation objects occur in a closed context in which an initiand, supported by several initiated kin (tutors and sponsors), witnesses the visual and verbal interpretations provided by initiates called "thinkers-preceptors" (*nsingia*). These representations always take~~s~~ place in the presence of numerous initiates of appropriate grades. These thinkers manipulate a wealth of knowledge expressed in aphorisms and related-actions. The exact identifying aphorisms for each piece and their interpretations are known only to the initiates involved and are not known outside of the initiation context. The most surprising and diverse meanings may thus be associated with morphologically similar objects. As far as the figurines are concerned, there are a few prototypical forms, such as multi-faced or multi-headed, one-armed, one-eyed, pregnant, but most of the figurines per se do not show what they are or what they mean. Hence, these figurines are linked with meanings that we cannot guess, that are only known to the preceptors and possessors of these objects. Even the so-called prototypes are subject to multiple interpretations, always in the context of

their use. Any kind of deduced meanings or analogies, of which there are many examples in the recent literature, thus constitute a vain exercise, because of the closed aspect of the initiations and the particularities of individual interpretations.

At the end of the higher initiations, the new *kindi* initiate receives, as a token of his status, not merely appropriate paraphernalia but also one or more appropriate sculptures. Thus, at various levels, the higher initiates (men and women) become "possessors," but not owners, of art objects. The individually possessed objects are only in the temporary control of the initiate because as one moves, for example, from *yananio* to *kindi*, one must surrender one's objects. If one dies, these objects are temporarily kept in trust by the guardian of the grave until such time as someone in the kinship-based ritual community is ready to be initiated to the grade of the deceased. No one is an owner of such an object. Neither can it be subject to the concept of inheritance, as it is destined only to be conveyed through a specific system of transmissions to initiates.

Ivory sculptures, which have been intimately associated with a line of very important people, have a power of their own. They have, so to speak, absorbed the power of the sequence of initiates through which they have passed. Moreover, because they have been temporarily placed on the grave of the *kindi*, their sacred meaning has actually increased, as if the life force of the dead *kindi* has passed into them. Therefore, the pieces may also be used as therapeutic devices that can reinforce the initiates or help them recover from sickness. For this purpose, some "dust" is scraped from the figurine, mixed with water, and drunk. In general, the process of transfer of figurines is not simply between a father and a son, or between an older and younger brother; it involves a range of possible choices: from close agnatic relatives to more remote agnates, maternal uncles, sororal nephews, or in-laws. This aspect of transfer, together with the progressive expansion of the *kindi* grade in different clans, accounts for the widespread geographical movement of individually possessed sculptures.[18]

Many of these sculptures, though, are not distributed to the new initiates because they are guarded or destined to be guarded by designated status-holders, either in baskets or shoulderbags, on behalf of the entire ritual community. These collectively controlled objects have meanings and functions that often differ considerably from those that are individually "possessed" and transcend their meanings and functions. They stay within historically fixed lineage groups: within the clans and ritual communities. They have profound historical meanings about the origin and acquisition of grades and rites and are often regarded as the "mother" (*nina*) of all the other figurines. In displays, they stand at the center of the other sculptures.

In conclusion, Lega art is hidden, portable, small, abstract, tactile, non-deiktic, mnemonic, multifunctional. It often contains its own contradictions. While objects can be seen as

[18]Objects move on various occasions: one goes from *yananio* to *kindi*, his wooden mask goes. The knife the pangolin (*mwene w'ikaga*): when the possessor dies, the knife is to be guarded by another possessor of the knife, as close in kinship as possible; the person who later receives it and is a kinsman of the one who died gets the knife only when a pangolin is killed within the area of his lineage. When one holds the knife and moves to *kindi,* it must be removed at the *kusamba* rite to another appropriate kinsman with *lutala*; the *kindi* cannot have a pangolin knife or be a *mwene we ibago* (skinning the elephant=destroy the initiation house rite).

emblems of grades, they are multivocal. This is especially true of the figurines, which are individualized: regardless of context, they have their individual name, which is inherited when the piece passes from one to the other. This name only takes full meaning in a particular rite. The masks, on the other hand, are part of a generic category; they represent certain characters only in the context of dance and song. Because some artworks are exposed temporarily on the grave of a *kindi*, they can also be called funerary figurines. The artworks are mobile also because they are transported in shoulderbags or baskets from one village to another as the initiations of different members of the group demand. They are also mobile because they move as people move from one grade to another or die.

The sculptures are thought of as timeless: they are traced (whether or not in the course of time and transfers a specific sculpture may be replaced) in a line of kindred initiates who over generations have been associated with the sculpture. For all these reasons they are historical documents, a pleasant memory of great people of the past (*kasina*); mementos of identity, social cohesion, the code of ethics and social behavior; expressions of the glory and perenity of Bwami and its members.

While the objects can be appreciated and admired sui-generis by Western observers, any real understanding of Lega objects (as for many pieces in Western and non-Western art) must take contextual factors into consideration. This lesson not only holds true for Lega art and it is all the more important today with the advent of Internet and the increased commercialization of African art objects. The demand for African art has increased prodigiously: there are more collectors than ever and many are wealthy novices guided by fashion, bad taste, and bad advisors; the number of dealers, auctions, and other Web offerings have grown and so have the specimens and choices they present. Many are bad copies or made in the style of traditional objects. In the meanwhile, there is less and less "globally integrative" expertise and knowledge. Too much of the field has been monopolized by dilettantes and "interested parties" who abuse of or ignore ethnographic and socio-anthropological data, make wild comparisons or analogies. Some dealers, agents, writers of catalogs are arrogant and have no scruples, using secondary sources, hashed materials, without going back to the true compendia of information.[19] Genuine ethnographical, historical, and linguistic knowledge is missing from the entire picture.

[19]Already in 1970, William Fagg wrote on the occasion of the famous exhibition of African Art at the National Gallery, Washington DC: "… almost the whole of the vast flood of information about Africa which circulates throughout the world is second-hand in the sense that it is filtered through the minds of westerners or westernized Africans; the specifically African content is thus obscured or totally eclipsed" (p. 11). Add to this statement that much information was collected using the wrong methods from the wrong people, by untrained persons ignoring languages, by persons suffering from prejudice or doctrinaire presuppositions.