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## LEGA CULTURE CLUSTER

Lega and related peoples East-central Zaire (the rainforest overlapping into parts of the highland savannas), is inhabited by a cluster of peoples who although not immediately related exhibit some common fundamental institutions, and artistic achievements. These populations speak diverse languages within the central branch of Bantu languages, and historically immigrated into this area from different geographical regions. All of them were to some extent influenced by the culture of the pre-established Twa or Mbuti Pygmies and other hunters, whom they thoroughly assimilated. Segments of these populations subsequently came into contact with one another; the contacts were followed by reciprocal exchanges of cultural elements and also, to some extent, by partial or complete assimilation and incorporation. These factors account for the occurrence of select cultural similarities across ethnic boundaries and subtle cultural transitions.

The peoples that form the core group of this cultural cluster are the Lega and the Bembe, the southeastern neighbors of the Lega. To the south and southwest of this core group, are the Bangubangu, the Southern Binja (Zimba), and the Ngengele some clans of which fit closely within the Lega cluster, while others are influenced by Hemba, Luba and Songye. To the northwest, most Songola (Northern Binja) clans exhibit features of Lega culture; to the north, such small groups as the Kwame, Kanu, Konjo, and Tembo show various degrees of affinity with the Lega, but they also exhibit northern influences from the Komo, Nyanga, Hunde, Havu, and Shi. Further northwestward, but not in immediate contact with the Lega, subgroups of the Leka, Mitoko, Lengola, Mbole, and Yela, although strongly influenced by the Komo and Mongo, present a certain cultural proximity to the Lega, particularly in the sphere of their art-producing institutions.

In sharp contrast to the Hemba, Luba, and Songye populations to the south, and the Nyanga, Havu, Hunde, Nande to the north, the Lega and related groups have no centralized political systems. Their segmentary lineage organizations are overbridged by a unique type of closed voluntary association, called Bwami, Bukota, Esambo, Lilwa. This hierarchically graded association has both male and female membership; access to Bwami is based on initiations that presuppose the right moral and social attitude, support of patrilineal and cognatic kin, acceptance by the pre-established membership, payment of fees, and distribution of gifts.

In conjunction with, and exclusively for, the elaborate initiations into the various Bwami grades, the Lega and Bembe, and to some extent the other groups mentioned have created a unique type of sculpture. Lega sculpture in particular is widely represented in museums and private collections. The Lega have produced masks and masquettes, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines in wood, ivory, bone. Occasionally, there are masks in elephant leather and figurines in stone, resin, and tree marrow. The Lega also created other artistically carved objects, such as spoons, small daggers, dice, hammers, billhooks, ax blades, stools in wood, ivory or bone. The sculptures are small: ivory and bone figurines are all less than 30cm tall and the wooden ones are typically smaller than 40cm. Most masks in wood, ivory or bone fall between 10cm and 19cm. The sculptures are carved in a highly distinctive style: a heart-shaped concave face with bulging forehead, a narrow nose-bridge, open slit eyes and open

mouth. But both in the figurines and the masks there are deviations from these norms; some masks have flat or convex faces; some figurines are angular, others rounded. The figurines are compact with emphasis on certain parts of the body (e.g. short bent legs on massive feet), or on prototypical features such as one arm, one leg, protuberant belly, multi-facedness or multi-headedness. Many figurines show no sex. In general, the male and female sexual parts are not emphasized. Among other standard features are: the faces of most wooden masks are rubbed with white clay; perforations near the lower rim allow beards to be attached to the chin and cheeks; few decorative designs (e.g. dotted lines) occur on wooden masks. Ivory and bone masks lack fiber beards, but some have circle-dot and dotted line designs. The ivory and bone figurines are either full-bodied, but stylized with short arms and legs, or they are reduced to busts or sheer heads, or the upper part of the body ends in a blade or pole-shaped extension. Many of the ivory figurines are adorned with circle-dot designs or dotted lines (which are embellishments); some have glued-on cowrie eyes, others have glued-on cowries on top of the head to signify the Bwami skull cap (Plate 1).

Within the spectrum of the Lega style, there are variations and differences that cannot be associated with any particular regional subgroupings because of the merging of groups caused by ancient movements of kinship units and individuals. Patterns of initiation into the highest grades of Bwami also account for the distribution of objects across wide geographical areas. For centuries, until the rapid decline of Lega artistic traditions in the twenties, sculptures travelled crisscross Legaland, with initiates settling with agnatic, cognatic and affinal relatives of their choice. No one has convincingly designated stylistic periods in Lega sculpture. On the one hand, our documentation in time perspective is too shallow; on the other hand, the values of Bwami are structured on tradition and conservatism preserving uniformity across time.

One of the most typical aspects of Lega sculpture, particularly of ivory and bone carvings, are the extraordinary patinas achieved by the regular rubbing of these objects with castor oil and with hands imbued with camwood powder. At the onset of the relevant rituals, the sculptures are removed from the shoulder bags in which they are always kept, and rubbed with oil "to bring harmony among the heavy things of initiation". The extreme secrecy of this rite is enhanced by the playing of the sacred instruments (mirlitons, bullroarers, blowpipes). All Lega sculptures occur in the action context of the initiations leading to membership in the Bwami association, mainly at the two highest grade levels.

Initiations are dramatic events that demand the participation of many male and female initiates of appropriate rank. The action context includes aphorisms that are sung by groups of participants with the accompaniment of percussion music, dance and gestural movement, the display and manipulation of many objects (sculptures, assemblages, manufactured and natural items). It involves the transfer to the initiand of paraphernalia and art objects. Most of the contexts in which the artworks occur are closed, that is the actions unroll within a closed space, in early morning or late evening. Lega sculpture is not an art of public display and of ostentation, it is not an art to be seen or to be understood by non-initiates. Lega sculpture is hidden, secret and cryptically interpreted.

What then are the key features of this art?

Differently from many other African arts, Lega sculpture is not part of a cult for divinities, culture heroes, ancestors and nature spirits, nor an art used as a receptacle for ingredients that capture forces present in the universe in order to protect groups and individuals. Lega art is first part of the exclusive paraphernalia that initiates of distinctive levels obligatorily receive at the initiations. For example, a *yananio* (member of the second highest Bwami grade) must obtain a wooden mask (plate 2), that will itself be replaced by an ivory or bone mask when the initiate ascends to the highest *kindi* grade. Possession of the mask demonstrates legal membership in the highest levels of the association. Since different categories of artworks and of materials in which they are fashioned are linked with different grades, the sculptures are status symbols among the cognoscenti. During the initiations, the sculptures are displayed obligatorily by all invited participants; they are danced with, placed in configurations, and used in certain sequences, all this with the accompaniment of sung aphorisms, drum and rattle music, dances, gestures, even light effects. The carvings are an intrinsic part of an elaborate exegesis whereby the philosophical, moral, and social precepts of the association are presented and explained to the initiand while the essential principles are also reformulated for the seasoned initiates. The art is understood from the inside, its meaning must not be accessible, communicable to outsiders or lower grade initiates. The interpretations are cryptic, often contradictory and multilayered so as to avoid divulgence; some meanings even belong to the domains of the aposematic, the deliberately incomplete, the unspoken and unspeakable. The poses, unusual features and gestures of the figurines, for example, can be understood only in terms of the Bwami exegesis: a figurine with raised arms and hands is not imploring celestial powers for rain but imitating the typical gestures of the high initiate acting as an arbitrator of conflict with numerous explanations around this function. A figurine with one visible eye is not the image of an injured person or of one who is blind in one eye, but a symbol stressing the vigilance of an authority figure (feeble minded persons think the elder is asleep but in fact he is watching out of one semi-closed eye). The examples of intentionally puzzling interpretations could be amplified by the hundreds. Suffice it to add that anyone of the sculptures serves as a didactic tool in the elucidation of the Bwami value code. Select sculptures are not owned individually by initiates, but are collectively held sacra. Some are temporarily entrusted to the most recent initiate in a socially and ritually defined group; others are kept by the most senior of all initiates within a clearly circumscribed community. These collectively held objects, also used as didactic devices, symbolize the unity and cohesion of distinctive ritual communities whose members act together for the purpose of initiation; their presence is a prerequisite for a socially sanctioned initiation to be held. The deep significance of the sculptures goes further in that such objects are not discarded when their owners die or move up to higher levels. The objects are transmitted within ritual communities as members die and others move up in Bwami rank. They are symbols of interpersonal bonds across generations. The sculptures which also are temporarily exposed on the tombs of their deceased owners constitute a linkage between the living and the dead. The carvings represent not merely pleasant memories of dead relatives but, by association, are powerful objects permeated with the "forces" inherent in their previous owners. They contain a transcendent power, beneficial to the rightful owner, lethal to offenders. The transcendent significance of the sculptures, mainly the ivory figurines, is most vividly illustrated by the fact that surface scrapings from the sculptures are administered to sick persons as ultimate remedies, when all others have failed.

Among the Lega virtually all sculpture had come under the exclusive control of the Bwami association. Among the related Bembe the Bwami association, although of great socio-political and ritual

importance, was never able to monopolize the artistic patrimony. In fact, very few sculptures are known from the Bwami association of the Bembe; their number was never large and the sculpture was less diversified and mainly restricted to anthropomorphic figurines in ivory or bone, some in wood, some larger wooden face masks, wooden zoomorphic sculptures, awl-shaped pegs and miniature stools in bone and ivory, all used in the higher grades of Bwami, in ways similar to Lega practice. The Bembe are a less exclusive and less homogeneous ethnic group than the Lega. Profound influences of the pre-Bembe hunters (some of whom have produced unique ancestral figurines, whose style is linked with Tabwa, Hemba, and other unknown styles) have molded many ritual aspects of Bembe culture. This is manifest, for example, in the 'Alunga association of the Bembe, which is found only in some groups located near the shores of Lake Tanganyika. This association's activities center around a spectacular bi-frontal, bi-chrome, concave-faced, sometimes monoxyle, bell mask. It is worn with a huge raffia costume and a large headdress of feathers and quills. In a performance context, this otherwise carefully hidden mask comes out publicly to reinforce the rules of the association. The mask represents the bush spirit 'Alunga. Other extremely rare Bembe sculptures are: a composite face mask used for social control by members of the 'Elanda association; small rudimentary figurines for the Mpunga association to protect members and inflict harm on antagonists; clay figurines for the earth spirit Iyangya; polychrome wooden plank-board masks for the circumcision rites. Details on Zimba (Southern Binja) art are sparse, and some works ascribed to them are of Luba or Hemba type. But the Batali (a Zimba subgroup), adhere to Bwami; they are initiated among the neighboring Lega (because of bonds of affinity) or organize their own initiation rites. For Bwami, they have made or borrowed typical Lega figurines in wood and ivory. Some subunits of the small, mixed ethnic groups, called Kanu, Kwame and Konjo are in close contact with the northern Lega and have adopted some lower grade levels of Bwami. Except for a skull cult of important initiated men among the Kano and Konjo no Bwami sculptures are known for any of them. Further north, the Nyanga, Hunde, and Pere, who cannot be included in the Lega cluster, have nevertheless produced for the Mbuntsu and Nsindi associations small figurines that have astonishing stylistic resemblances with some of the rarest Lega work in clay, resin and tree marrow.

The Leka are an extremely mixed group of peoples, showing some affiliations with the Enya and the Mitoko. Some wooden face masks with horns close in style to the horned *kayamba* masks of the Lega, were used in circumcision rites that were organized by members of a Bwami-like association. Little or nothing is known about other members of the Lega cluster, such as the Songola, the Babemo, the Sengele. These groups have associations, called Nsubi and Esambo that are patterned after the Bwami model, but are much less elaborate. Since distinctive paraphernalia and sacra are invariably linked with such associations, it is quite possible that some artworks were made for initiation purposes. Very significant for the absence of permanent works in the collections is the fact that throughout the Lega cluster numerous very fine assemblages representing humans and animals were made, which because of their ephemeral nature were not recorded nor preserved.

The Mitoko, Lengola, Mbole and Yela have the Bukota and Lilwa associations, similar to Bwami. In their context, they use wooden sculptures, mainly figurines, for initiation, social control and burial purposes. The figurines differ considerably in size, and finish, but exhibit the facial features of Lega masks and figurines. This is not accidental, for there are strong historical linkages between the Lega and the Mitoko and, as pointed out already, much cultural borrowing across the region, mainly

because of the secret networks of the initiations. All of them are structured on a common ideological and sociological pattern. The names of the sculptors who created this vast artistic legacy are unknown. In fact, very few of these artists have ever been observed in the field. One reason for this is the extreme secrecy in which they worked. But, more significantly, the associations that sponsored the artworks were early colonial times on categorized as secret, subversive, and immoral. Strong legal and police action against the membership of the associations contributed to the decline of at least the more external manifestations of their activities. Moreover, for the Lega and Bembe, the emphasis was never on the makers of the artworks but on their owners and the cross-generational linkages among them. Initiates will quote four, five previous initiated owners of a particular artwork, but not remember the sculptor responsible for its making.

### References

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