In *Lega Culture: Art, Initiation, and Moral Philosophy among a Central African People* (1973a), I briefly discussed general aspects of the Lega social and cultural system and analyzed the organization, function, and ideology of the bwami association. I also examined the significance of sculptures and other initiation objects in the bwami context in their interplay with grade levels, statues, ritual action, and sung aphorisms. Several later publications (Biebuyck 1974a, 1976a, 1977a–b, 1979, 1981b–d) provide additional data on the rites of the bwami association and on specific artistic subjects (e.g., stools, animal figurines, spoons, bifrontal figurines, schematization). *Lega Culture*, however, is the essential background for the detailed study of Lega art undertaken in the present volume. I reemphasize, mainly in the introduction, only those intersecting aspects of bwami history, structure, ideology, and rites which are vital for comprehension of the arts in their socioritual and conceptual framework.

Although I do supply morphological descriptions, the approach is primarily contextual. Lega art in all its manifestations is bound so intimately with the bwami association that no valid interpretation is feasible without stressing the structural and organizational principles, the philosophical outlook, and the performance contexts of bwami. The art is an essential channel through which the basic tenets of the association are illustrated and expressed, and many specific performances require the display and exegesis of prescribed artworks. Bwami is organized hierarchically into a system of complementary grades to which men and some of their wives are initiated, step by step. Initiations to all grades consist of mandatory sequential ritual enactments. Dances, gestures, dramatizations, sung aphorisms, and displays and manipulations of initiation objects are combined to communicate fundamental messages about the moral philosophy and the values, the modes of savoir vivre and etiquette, and the socijural and ritual principles cultivated by the members of the association. Although the framework for the interpretation of artworks is the graded bwami association with its structure, principles, and goals, the actual contexts vary widely. Artworks form only a part, albeit an indispensable one, of the initiation objects. In numerous rites, at the lowest as well as at the highest grades, no sculptures are exhibited. The primary contexts for the study of the artworks are not the bwami rites as a whole but rather particular ritual performances, mainly at the two top grades for men (yananio and kindi) and at the highest
female grade (bunyamwa). A few art objects of a certain type, however, do appear—in some Lega communities more than in others—in rites leading to the lower grades.

The artworks used in the rites are never chosen randomly. Certain ritual observances demand that all participants display wooden or ivory masks, whereas others require the presentation and revelation of collectively owned masks or figurines. In any ritual featuring prescribed artworks, the way they are used may vary. For example, a performance may begin with each participant dancing, holding his own mask in his hand, under his chin, or against his hat. The initiates may then place their masks on the ground, in a row or in a pile; some dancers in solo or duo performance may then pick up selected masks and swing them around, drag them over the ground, or simply point at them. This procedure may be allowed in one ritual context but prohibited in another; one type of mask may be used while another is excluded.

Clearly, the functions and the meanings of sculptures can be understood only through comprehensive observation and analysis of the contexts, the actual performances, the types of artworks, the social backgrounds, the interrelationships of actors and owners, and the purposes of each rite. Observation of a particular sculpture or a type of sculpture in a single rite does not necessarily convey the complete meaning of that work. An object used in more than one rite may be treated and interpreted differently in each instance. Although organized in accordance with the same principles and structured on identical themes and goals among all Lega, the bwami initiations are arranged independently by different socioritual communities. When these communities are historically, geographically, and socially close to one another, similarities will emerge; when they are more remote from one another, fewer features will be shared in common. All autonomous communities cultivate originality and uniqueness, which are particularly striking when truly gifted preceptors preside over initiations. Thus the contexts in which artworks appear may vary, either slightly or significantly, from community to community.

Initiations are exclusive and secret not only to noninitiates but also to initiates, depending on their personal status. Kindi of the highest level may, and usually do, participate in all ritual performances leading to any grade. Yananio at the top level are admitted to all initiations up to lutumbo lwa yananio. Because artworks are the prime initiation objects, they are seen only at the higher grades and levels, and their secret uses and meanings are not revealed to those in the lower echelons. Only initiates entitled to own the artworks know their contextual interpretations, and some preceptors and tutors are more knowledgeable than others. Initiates are thinkers; they have learned to find meanings in things that others take only at face value. A needle and its bone sheath are not simply useful objects; they are also symbols of the bond between a man and his wife, a tutor and his protégé. A figurine that looks like a chameleon does not necessarily represent that animal. A figurine that resembles a pregnant woman is not just any pregnant woman; nor is it a sex or fertility symbol. Many figurines superficially similar in form represent different characters; others
that vary morphologically may symbolize a single character. The revelation of hidden meanings is an intrinsic part of the initiatory experience. Because the real meaning of an object is defined by its ritual context, its symbolic interpretation varies widely. The exegesis is not limited to its general or specific form, its generic or individual name, or its overt usage; rather, it extends to materials and manufacturing processes, to structural details, to prescribed associations with persons and activities, to the object’s position in the rite, and to its complementarity to or its difference from other objects. Lega art is therefore a hidden art par excellence. Artworks are not made for display in shrines, chiefs’ palaces, men’s houses, or cemeteries. They are not meant to be acquired, owned, manipulated, seen, interpreted, or understood by all.

It is understandable, then, that few Europeans who lived and traveled among the Lega attempted to comprehend the purposes and meanings of bwami and its art. Delhaise (1909b), who lived among the Lega around 1903, was an astute observer of Lega culture but provided little information about Lega art. He repeatedly stresses the secrecy enveloping the artworks. When he was finally permitted to view kindi dances in which some figurines were handled, the performance seemed to him to be staged. In later years, when initiates agreed or were forced to reveal some of their secrets, they proved to be masters of the staged performance, interesting to observe but devoid of real content.

Books and catalogs on African art have long treated Lega sculpture in a haphazard way. Until Olbrechts’s work was published in 1946, most writers simply ignored the Lega (see, e.g., Einstein, 1920; Fuhrmann, 1923; Vatter, 1926; Hardy, 1927). Lega (incorrectly called Warega) carvings were occasionally illustrated, but no identification or interpretation was provided (e.g., Lega spoons in Clouzot and Level, n.d., pl. 36; a wooden mask ascribed to the Kasai in Locke, 1927, pl. 9; a Lega mask in Chauvet, 1930, fig. 62; figurines and an ivory mask in von Sydow, 1932a, pl. 133, 1932b, pl. 25; figurines in Frobenius, 1933, pl. 101). Maes (1924, pp. 44–46 and fig. 49) illustrates as Lega a wooden polychrome horned mask collected for Tervuren by Dargent. Using the information given by Delhaise (1909b), Maes notes that this and two other similar masks were most likely connected with the highest grade of the bwami association, but they are not representative of the Lega and possibly were made by groups such as Bakwame, Baleka, and Bakonjo, who are transitional among Lega, Komo, Nyanga, and Havu. Clarke (1929, p. 68) mentions an ancient ivory mask and two small ivory figurines “standing back to back on a common pedestal which are now at the British Museum” (Fagg and Plass, 1964, p. 144). He associates the double figurine with bwami because of the headdress and because the mask has “the mark of the mwami on its forehead.” The Museum of Modern Art exhibition organized by Sweeney in 1935 included several wooden and ivory masks, figurines, heads, ivory spoons (nos. 440, 446–447, 450, 455, 461–462, 464–465, 504–506, 509–510, 512, 514–516, some illustrated in seven plates), and a rare ivory neck rest (no. 472). The only information given relates to size, material, and collection. The description of no. 455, for example, is “Mask of the Miwami [sic] secret society.”
Kjersmeier (1937, vol. 3, pp. 33–34, pls. 54–56), finding Lega art to be “l’art le plus spontané du Congo Belge,” evokes its technical perfection and its expressive value. There were two types of ivory masks and figurines: those dominated by rounded forms and those featuring straight lines. The “ornamental tattoos” on the sculptures, when present at all, consisted of dots, circle-dots, and short lines; the eyes were often indicated with encrusted cowries. Wooden figurines were artistically less interesting than wooden masks, but there were exceptional pieces. One multifrontal figurine, which Kjersmeier identifies as a dance baton, had a “captivating effect.” Wooden masks occurred in so many different forms that division into style groups was impossible. Lega sculpture was closely linked with the rites and ceremonies of the “seven grades” of the “mwami secret society.” The ivory masks carried in the hand were symbolic insignia of high dignitaries, but no other information is supplied about their alleged “magical and religious function.”

Gaffé (1945, pp. 55–56 and unnumbered plates) reproduces three Lega ivory masks, praising them for the unique blend of simple effects and rigor (severity in some, serenity in others). He thought one mask was the “living portrait of death” (an ancestor come to life again); another depicted “a personage who serenely entered immortality.” The Lega, though “the most perfect sculptors in ivory,” were less successful in wood carving. Their masks were used as rallying signs by secret societies whose members carried them in their hands on important occasions. The extraordinary patination of the pieces was achieved because their users anointed their bodies and the sculptures with oil. Herskovits (1945, p. 53) merely notes that there was little information on the arts in northeastern and eastern Zaire. Specimens from the Lega and Mangbetu, however, suggested “that these two localities may in the future become designated as the seats of distinctive styles.” Several sculptures that had already been illustrated (e.g., the L. Carré and the A. Stoclet ivory masks) were reproduced repetitiously in the few publications that considered Lega art.

In contrast with these crude or subjective analyses, Olbrechts (1946, pp. 37, 39, 64, 84, 87, 90–91, pls. 177–179, 198, figs. 12 j–k, 17, 36) was more objective. He included Lega art in his northeastern style region at the periphery of the Luba style complex, with the Zimba (Binja) forming a gradual transition between Lega and Luba. The general sculptural poverty of the northeastern region was offset in the south by the “rich sculpture” of the Lega, who together with the Bembe had been strongly influenced by Luba styles. The “productive but not extensive” Lega center linked the realistic art of the southeast with the stylized arts of the north. Lega art (mainly in ivory) was characterized by its “consistent and impressive stylization, its patination, and its compactness.” Olbrechts divided the artistic output into two groups: ivory and rare wooden masks, and male and female anthropomorphic figurines, mostly in ivory. The oval masks of the Lega had style characteristics in common with the figurines: a convex face in which a flat or concave space was delineated by the eyebrows, the cheekbones, and the lower lip; eyes, nose, and mouth were carved in relief. The
heaviness of the swellings between hips and knees or between knees and ankles was striking in the figurines.

It was uncertain whether the morphological diversity otherwise noticeable in the figurines was owing to regional or individual differences. The face was sometimes elongated as in the masks, or lozenge-shaped; the head was occasionally round and heavy like the rest of the body; eyes were often cowrie-shaped or were fashioned of real cowries. Nowhere else in Africa could more blatant disregard for natural proportions (e.g., huge hands, thin arms) be found; fantastic human forms (e.g., huge head on one leg) were frequently seen.

Olbrechts deemed two other stylistic characteristics to have particular significance: the circle-dot motif and the "concave-face" type. The circle-dot was applied to some pieces to indicate the eyes; in other sculptures it was used for decorative (not for representational) purposes. Although widespread in the world, this characteristic motif seemed to be linked with Islamic influence in this part of eastern Zaire. The concave-face type (rendered on a spherical head or a convex mask form) was found from the Lega to the Fang in Gabon, and among the Zande, Mitoko, Ngbakia, Gobu, Togbo, and Bolia in Zaire, but it was absent from the southern Zaire style regions. A great deal of Lega ivory sculpture functioned within the "moami sect," but most of its ritual and social significance was undocumented.

Olbrechts's classification and morphological characterization were significant and innovative in the light of earlier discussions of Lega art. His work obviously dealt with only a small sample of Lega figurines and masks. He understated the importance of wood carvings, overstated the number of ivory masks, simplified the extreme diversity of forms, and ignored other types of sculptures (zoomorphic figurines, spoons, axes, billhooks, knives, hammers, dice, etc.). The most striking omissions from Olbrechts's writing (and a fortiori in those of his predecessors) are the socioritual contexts of the artworks.

Neglect of already documented information about these contexts persisted for many years after publication of Olbrechts's work, and it has not entirely subsided (e.g., Griaule, 1947; Wingert, 1947, 1950; Kochnitzky, 1948; Maesen, 1950; Olbrechts, 1951; Périer, 1952; Radin and Sweeney, 1952; Lavachery, 1954). Many recent works on African art seriously understate or misrepresent the scope, diversity, and significance of Lega sculpture and its context.

It is important to assemble the data available by 1946 about Lega art and its context. The principal published sources are Cordella (1906, pp. 974–975), Delhaise (1909b pp. 23, 94, 103, 133, 199–201, 209–210, 227–239, 245, 275, 337–343; pls. 23, 94, 103, 133), Maes (1924, 1933), and Moeller (1936). Unpublished documents include the information on collected objects at the Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale (Tervuren, Dossiers, 1930–31 by Ledocte and Corbisier, Baude, and Zographakis; 1938 by Van Hooren) and elsewhere (e.g., Stockholm, Berlin). Less readily attainable are reports written between 1916 and 1931 by colonial administrators (Corbisier, de Villenfagne de Loën, Fassin, Fivé, Laurent, Marmite, Merlot, Pestiaux, Schwers, Teeuwen, Uyttebroeck,
Voukovich, Van de Chinste). The following synthesis is constructed from all these sources. In view of the paucity of data incorporated in catalogs and art books, they offer valuable information.

The central element in Lega culture and society is the bwami association (variously referred to as moami, mwami, or buami sect or secret society), which dates from the beginnings of Lega society. Through an elaborate system of initiations it spread among the component Lega units and also to fractions of neighboring groups (Bembe, Binja, Kanu, Komo). Bwami exhibits structural and organizational features in common with associations of adjoining populations (Songola, Ngengele, Binja, Komo, Nyanga). Bwami consists of a hierarchy of grades for males and females, although the sources differ on the number and the names of these grades. In principle, accession is open to all Lega males and their wives through initiations that are kept secret from outsiders and noninitiates. The rites require the participation of initiates from different villages, long preparations, and distributions of goods. Uyttebroeck (1935) was the first to note the aspects of social structure which are reflected in the bwami organization: the significant role of maternal uncles (mother's and father's mother's group; mother's mother's and father's father's mother's lineages), of the nenekisi (master of the land), and of the preceptor (whom Uyttebroeck regards as a guardian of custom and jurisprudence).

The initiations center on dances, songs, speeches, and artworks. The initiates receive paraphernalia and insignia appropriate to their rank. The most frequently mentioned artworks are wooden and ivory masks, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, ivory spoons, and phallus-shaped ivories. The figurines are male, female, or asexual; they are sometimes multifrontal or extraordinary stylizations (e.g., a large head on a single leg). Masks are worn on the face or on the forehead or are carried in the hands in a dance context. After removing the figurines from a closed initiation house in the center of the village, the initiates hold them in their hands or place them on the ground. Most sources link the manipulation of sculptures with the highest grade (kindi), but at least one author mentions masks in the context of the second-highest grade (yananio). The objects are taken to the initiation house before the dances, but they are usually guarded by initiated women on behalf of their initiated husbands.

The authors call masks kingungungu, gande, kibome, kalimu, lukungu lwa kindi, binumbi, lukwakongo lwa lubumbu (sic) lwa yananio. Generic terms for anthropomorphic figurines, such as kalimbangoma, tulimbangoma, or nyasombo (sic), are rarely cited, but specific names (often misspelled) are used: Sakasala, Keitula, Kalaga, Kasisi ya kindi (sic), Kiniembe, Kilinga, Golombe, Yinga. Most of the sources provide valuable but unexplained documentation. Merlot (1931a–b) gives the most extensive terminology and explanations. He describes figurines (probably wooden, as the author speaks about their whitened faces) used in mosaqi (sic; probably musage wa kindi): Kakulu ka mpinda (an asexual figurine representing an old man); Muzumbi (a man) and Wayinda (his wife who died while pregnant); Kasongalala (a figurine with raised arm, the hand held in a protective gesture; Merlot thinks it is a divinity); Mwelwa (a man); Kabalama
and Katembo (women); Samukulusongo (a figurine with spread legs; a prostitute); Kimatemate (a bifrontal head on a pole). Merlot also designates other objects: an ivory phallus (katimbitimbi), an ivory pounder (moketo, sic), and an elongated quadruped on short legs representing a dog (mukukundu, sic). One source calls the animal figurines mugugu or mbwa za kindi; another identifies twin animal figurines as wamuse and musiramu.

There is little or no information about the meaning of these terms or about the songs and dances associated with the objects. Zographakis claims that a stone head represents the kindi initiate. Delhaise does suggest some meanings: one sculpture depicts a person who sees everything, one is symbolic of evil, one is an emblem of hospitality and another of friendly understanding; a female figurine with swollen belly refers to the dangers of infidelity, while another suggests an evil and overly inquisitive woman. Although Delhaise applied the term “fetish” to the sculptures, he notes that the Lega “n’invoquent pas les fétiches, ils ne leur demandent rien et ne s’occupent d’eux que dans le mpara [initiation].” Delhaise nevertheless concludes that the fetishes exhibited during the initiations have certain magical properties: they protect fields, procure game, punish evildoers, preside over death, and oversee everything. In a similar manner, Ledocte and Corbisier note that the objects are not “fétiches” but simple insignia that enable kindi initiates to identify themselves. Only noninitiates, who never see the mysterious objects, believe they have an occult power.

Among other carvings, ivory spoons are said to be used either by kindi for eating or for administering medicines to the sick. Cordella describes phallic sculptures that women hang from their belts. Delhaise notes that the paraphernalia of a dead initiate (who was buried in the village near or on the threshold of his house) are placed on his tomb. The skull of a dead kindi is preserved as a reliquary in the house; when the dead man’s son achieves kindi, the skull is placed in a small shrine built on poles near his house. Hautmann (Tervuren, Dossier 1045 of 1940) has seen similar constructions in which the reddened skull was visible; an offering of cassava and bananas was placed before the skull in an iron pot.

Maes concludes that the bwami rites confer upon initiates the privilege of owning the highly symbolic sculptures. Moeller, however, speaks about the display of male and female figurines (with large genitalia) within the enclosure where the circumcision takes place (note that these rites are organized by members of bwami).

Much of the information given in these pre-1946 sources, although sketchy, is correct. It is surprising that so little of it was used in publications on African art.

From 1950 to 1981 Lega sculpture has received increasing attention in exhibition and sales catalogs, museum inventories, and handbooks on African art. Few of them fail to take notice of the Lega, who tend to be placed with other northeastern Zaire peoples at the end of surveys because most authors follow a geographical progression from west to east. The range of illustrated artworks has broadened, in contrast with the period when most of the objects reproduced, mainly ivory figurines and masks, belonged to a very few private and
public collections. Scholars and connoisseurs have come to recognize the diversity of forms and materials in Lega sculpture: maskettes as well as larger masks, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, and a wide range of other sculptures including spoons, billhooks, knives, ax blades, hammers, dice, pegs, pins, pounders, and phalli, some of which are miniature replicas in ivory and bone of larger objects. Lega artists have not worked primarily in ivory, as has been suggested, but also in bone, wood, stone, resin, copal, clay, elephant leather, and ntutu. As the extraordinary diversity of form and of morphological detail within each category of sculpture has been acknowledged to some extent, changes have been made in the characterizations of Lega style and its relationships to other style areas of Zaire. There has been a tendency to categorize the Lega and some related units as a distinctive style group or region. Little effort has been made, however, to place the multiple types of Lega art into morphological and thematic categories. The least progress has been made in incorporating into general works on African art the known data about socialritual and ideological contexts, and about uses, functions, and meanings of the artworks. Some of the old stereotyped generalizations and unverified simplifications continue to plague writers of treatises that include Lega art.

Some authors still prefer the Swahili term “Warega” to the correct spelling of Balega (Lega). They see no aesthetic merit in Lega art and are unable to distinguish genuine Lega art from degenerate, fake, or modernistic pseudo-Lega sculpture. Too many others are still guilty of making loose, unrelated, haphazard, and uncritical statements. In some instances an amazing trend has emerged: a Lega term, sometimes misspelled and certainly misused, is placed as a caption under a sculpture that was not identified in the field situation but was found undocumented in some collection. This feat is apparently accomplished through the method of comparative guesswork. Numerous authors (e.g., Thompson, 1974; Rosefielde, 1977; Fry [Delange], 1978; Anderson, 1979; Brain, 1980; Celenko, 1980; Sieber, 1980) fortunately have incorporated substantive Lega data in their recent works. Because the scope of Lega sculpture is so much broader than the stereotypes and generalizations about African art would suggest, because its analysis requires so many nuanced statements, some authors find it easier simply to dismiss the bulk of the evidence.