



THE ART OF THE BWAMI IVORY CARVINGS OF THE LEGA PEOPLE

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Most of the objects in European collections of African art which are carved from ivory and originate from the Lega people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire) were intended for use by the Bwami society. This society is the key to an understanding of Lega art. One of its tasks is to uphold the moral rules which are enshrined in proverbs connected with the small wooden and ivory sculptures. The aim is to teach new members of the society respect for their elders and their wisdom and respect for the family, and to instil responsibility. Membership of the society is voluntary.¹ New members are usually men aged about twenty. However, women may also join, provided that their husband has attained the third level of initiation.

The Bwami society and the moral code

The Bwami society is a stratified organisation, and advancement from one level of the society to another is always accompanied by initiation rituals (*mpala*), which take place at secret sites outside the village. The society has five levels (*Kongabulumbu*, *Kansilembo*, *Ngandu*, *Yananio* and *Kindi*) as well as many sublevels. The various initiations are complex ceremonies governed by strict rules and may comprise up to eight different sections. It is during these initiations that members of the society learn the meanings of the different sculptures, which vary according to the particular levels of the society. They are relatively small objects ranging in size from 10 to 20 cm. The significance of these small wooden or ivory objects is, however, great, because they enshrine the moral code of the Legas. Each figure contains within itself wisdom related to the religious, family or political life of the whole society. Each level of the Bwami society has its own particular set of figures. The figures for the lowest levels are carved from wood. Only the members of the highest levels (*Yananio* and *Kindi*) are permitted to use objects made from ivory or elephant bone.²

¹ 95 % of all Legas belong to the society.

² The only objects which may be used by all members of the Bwami society, irrespective of their level of initiation, are the spoons (*kalukili* or *kakili*). These spoons are a symbol of the wisdom which is handed down from generation to generation. (The expression *kakili* means "inheritance" in the Lega language). The highest-ranking members of the society are allowed to eat porridge using ivory spoons, thereby showing the others what status they have attained within the society.

During the initiation ceremonies the initiates are acquainted step-by-step with the various objects and their meaning (*izu*). A knowledge of the meaning of the objects is very important, so the teacher may show the objects to the initiates and explain them several times. The members of the lower levels of the society often do not even know of the existence of the objects used by the members of the higher levels of the Bwami society.

Lega objects made from ivory are notable for their stylistic purity and simplicity. Their decoration is usually limited to parallel lines, or in some cases intersecting lines, or two small concentric circles.

The ivory objects may be divided into three main groups. The first group consists of human figures, the second group of small animal sculptures, while the third group is masks.

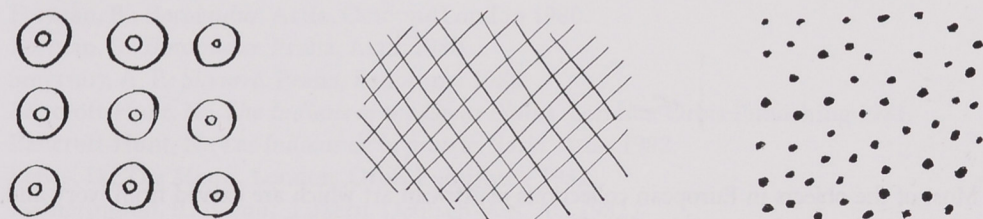


Table no. 1: Samples of decoration. The most widely used decoration is a motif of two concentric circles. Other popular patterns are those consisting of sets of parallel lines which intersect. The third type of decoration used by the Legas on their sculptures consists of small dots.

Human figures

The ivory human figures are an emblem of a high level of initiation. They tend to be highly stylised, and all detail considered unimportant either by the maker or the user is suppressed.

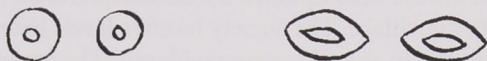


Table no. 2: Eye shapes on the ivory figures of humans. Lega ivory figures display two types of eyes. The first type of eye consists of two concentric circles, while the second type is lentic-shaped.

The various figures and their significance are presented to the members of the society in stages. Each figure nevertheless has its own meaning, which, of course, may vary according to the level of initiation, including, for example, the figure with several heads known as *sakimatwematwe* ("Many Heads"). According to Biebuyck, who researched the meaning of the ivory figures in the 1950's, that particular sculpture means "Many Heads who has seen an elephant on the other side of the river".³ Another type of figure are those in the form of a sleeping mat (*katanda*). These sculptures are a symbol of unfettered sexuality. The bodies of these figures are usually pierced with several holes, which represent the holes eaten through a mattress by ants. The related proverb which the teacher pronounces to the

³ Daniel P. Biebuyck, *Plurifrontal Figurines in Lega Art in Zaire*. In: *Shape of the Past: Studies in Honor of Franklin D. Murphy*, Los Angeles 1981, p. 120.

initiates is: "I used to love you. Fondling destroys the good ones. It has destroyed Katanda."⁴ Most of the figures represent a man or an asexual being. There are, however, figures which represent a pregnant woman and which are known as *Wayinda*. The male counterpart of this figure is the figure known as *Kakulu ka Mpiko*. These two figures (*Wayinda* and *Kakulu ka Mpiko*) are displayed together in the ceremonies.

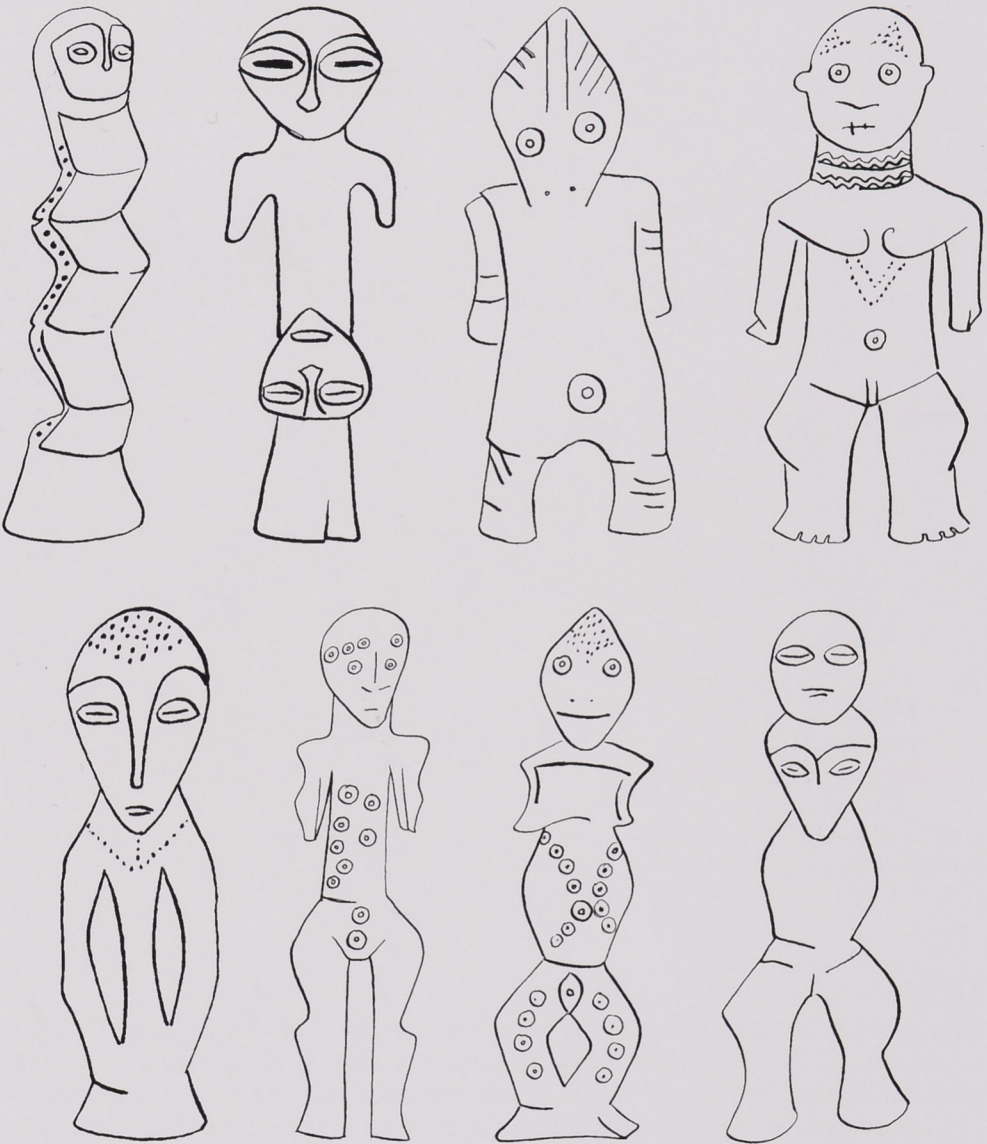


Table no. 3: Human figures. The various types of human figures differ from each other not only in their overall design, but also in the treatment of detail.

⁴ Daniel P. Bieybuck, *Lega Culture: Art, Initiation, and Moral Philosophy among a Central African People*, Los Angeles 1973, p. 63.

Animal figures

Animal figures made from ivory are intended only for members of the two highest levels of the Bwami society (*Yananio and Kindi*) and are their private property. Animal figures, however, do not necessarily have to depict an animal in full detail. Sometimes just a tooth or bone of the animal is considered sufficient. The highly stylised animal sculptures with four legs do not represent any particular species, but are simply a symbolic representation of an animal. These sculptures are known as *nugugundu*. As well as the group of symbolic animals, there is also a group of sculptures depicting particular animals, usually a dog, antelope or pangolin. However, only the highest ranking members of the society are allowed to possess sculptures of birds.

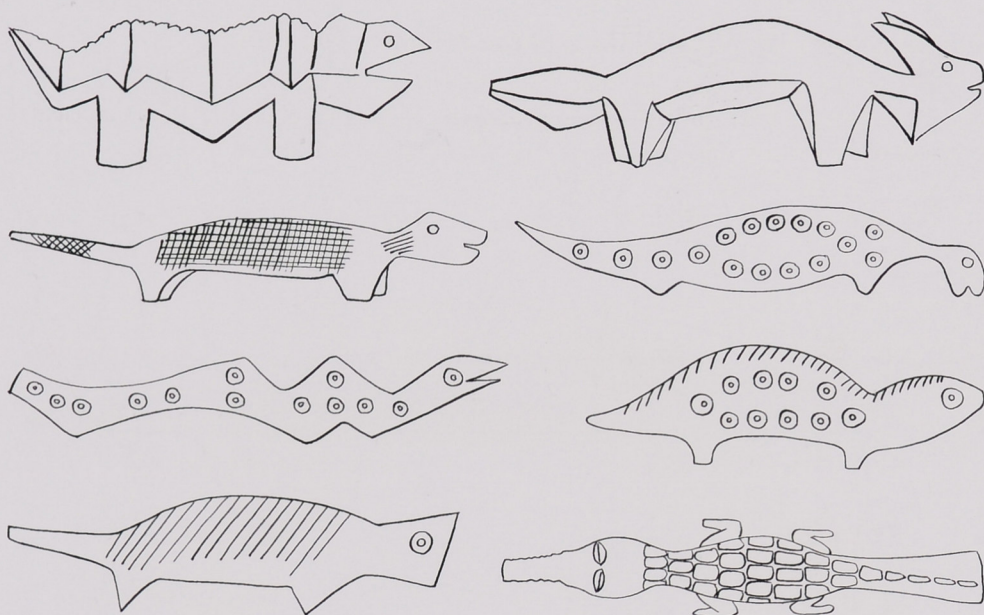


Table no. 4: Animal figures, which are usually made from ivory and are intended for the highest ranking members of the Bwami society.

Masks

Lega masks differ in many ways from other masks used in Subsaharan Africa. In many traditional African societies women are forbidden to use masks and to attend events involving them. Lega society is more liberal. Not only may women watch ceremonies involving masks, but there are also recorded cases of women being allowed to perform in masks. These women were, however, the wives of high-ranking members of the society. Lega masks have their own special names such as *lukwakongo*, which means "death gathers in". They are often regarded by members of the society as a link between the past and the present. The meaning of the various parts of Lega masks is well known to all members of the society. A mask with a closed mouth represents a dissatisfied teacher. A mask without eyes represents an old, blind, high-ranking member of the Bwami society.

The artist and his work

The Legas refer to their artists by two different expressions: *mubazi wa nkondo* (carver of the adze), and *mulongo* (person who fits things together). A carver who works for members of the society must not be a member himself. A client comes to the carver and orders an object from him. He describes to him how the object should look and, importantly, from which material it should be made. The carver learns his craft from his master, and his aim is to make his own work as similar as possible to the master's, ideally, in fact, indistinguishable from it. This means that the artist is not able to use his own fantasy or create his own style. He is bound by tradition and by the fact that every element of his work has a meaning that has been firmly fixed for many years and should not be changed.

Human figures in the collections of the Náprstek Museum

In the collections of the Náprstek Museum in Prague there are six ivory objects of Lega origin. The ivory bracelet (inventory no. 25 534) has a diameter of 8.5 cm. This bracelet is decorated with a pattern of dots. It was probably used by members of the Bwami society who had been initiated into the *kindi* level.

In the museum's collections there are also two ivory spoons (inv. no. 32 021 and 28 187). Spoon no. 32 021 measures 17.8 cm and is carved in the shape of a human figure. The



Table no. 5: The ivory carving of a man (inv. no. A 13 901), which have crossed legs (h: 17 cm). The ivory carvings of a woman (inv. no. A 13 800), which have crossed legs (h: 17 cm)

head is decorated with a row of concentric circles, which are meant to represent the Lega headgear known as *mukuba*. The second spoon (inv. no. 28 187) measures 16.7 cm and has an elongated decorated handle.

Another object in the collection is the miniature ivory head (inv. no. A 13 902), which measures 8.8 cm. This small head is pierced and was probably part of a necklace. Such heads are known as *iginga* and could be owned only by members of *kindi*, the highest level.

The ivory carvings of a man (inv. no. A 13 901) and a woman (inv. no. A 13 800), which have crossed legs and are 17 cm tall, come from the collection of B. Forman (see picture no. 5 and 6). The material used is evidence of the fact that these objects were probably owned by the highest ranking members of the Bwami society. Because both figures are carved in the same style, we may assume that they were displayed together in the initiation ceremonies and thus formed a pair. The teaching relating to these figures was connected with the relationships between men and women. The style of carving suggests that they come from the same workshop.

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