



LEGA

Geographically in the heart of Africa lies a region of rainforest and savanna larger than Belgium. Governed not by a single leader but by groups of secretive, privileged, and wise individuals. A culture rife with abstractions of metaphor and sculpture existed, complex, layered, signifying, and historic. A culture whose images and ideas were greatly respected: this being the world and art of the Lega also known as Rega.

The eastern Democratic Republic of Congo's regions of Kivu and Maniema are home to the Lega and other Bantu language speakers: the Songola, Binja, Zimba, Lengola, Bembe, Mitoko etc.

After the 1960 independence the region was divided into the three administrative districts of Shabunda, Pang'i, and Mwenga. Shabunda and Pang'i are inhabited almost entirely by the Lega. Mwenga is one half Lega and the remaining is comprised of the Nyindu, Rhinyirhiny and Hwinja peoples in the north and the Bembe and Fizi in the south.

Described as being the oldest group in the region, the Lega migrated to their present location from the Lualaba river area and from around mount Ruwenzori on the Congo Uganda border in the 16th century. Linked to a mythical ancestor named "Isamwati" and his pygmy wife, the numerous Lega groups scattered throughout this vast area of mountains, plateaus, rainforests, and savannas, share common social structures and beliefs.

The Lega are patrilineal, decentralized, and had neither chiefs nor kings. Their economy is based largely on shifting agriculture such as plantains and bananas. Slash and burn techniques are necessary in the less fertile south. Domesticated goats and chickens are more common in the densely forested regions.

Life was centered around a unique group of governance called *Bwami*. "The fruit that came from above", as *Bwami* is known, was a voluntary association for both women and men.

It was a cultural institution combining political, social, artistic, and economics with an ancestral cult. Its power, feared by colonial Belgium, was outlawed in 1947. It was *Bwami* and its related art forms that define the Lega from other ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa.

Bwami maintained the cycle of life, and moral goodness through group wisdom and decision-making. To the Lega and the other influenced groups who maintained it, *Bwami* was the essence of things. It was the ultimate aspiration for members to reach the highest grade possible and gain the powerful objects associated with each grade. The supreme goal of "*busoga*" (the idea of moral greatness and beauty) was attained through a life of virtue and the mastering of hundreds of aphorisms and metaphors (*bitondo*).

Given the broad dispersal of the Lega, *Bwami*'s structure varied from region to region where as many as seven grades, or as few as four were in practice. The most common grades, from lowest to highest, are: *Kongabulumbu*, *Kansilembo*, *Ngandu*, *Yanania*, and *Kindi*. Each level had objects of one form or another kept in shoulder bags (ill.1) ; from found items such as bird beaks used in the lower grades, to small carved busts (ill.2) and stylized figures in ivory (ill.3) or wood (ill.4) at the *Kindi* grade. Highest grades were only reachable if a man's wife was initiated at a complementary grade.

Women followed a similar path up the ranks of *Bwami* and had their own objects of rank such as, hats, diadems, and belts with carved ivory pendants, some of them being phalliform (ill.5).

The higher the grade one reached the more objects one was able to acquire. Upon death objects were placed on the grave and guarded by a family member for a specific period, then redistributed amongst the family. Some, however, were left permanently atop a grave.

All objects associated with *Bwami* were limited to initiations (*mpala*) of a specific grade. Each object exhibited a strict moral code and was seen as harmful to the uninitiated eye.



ill. 8



ill. 5



ill. 6



ill. 9



ill. 12



ill. 11



ill. 10



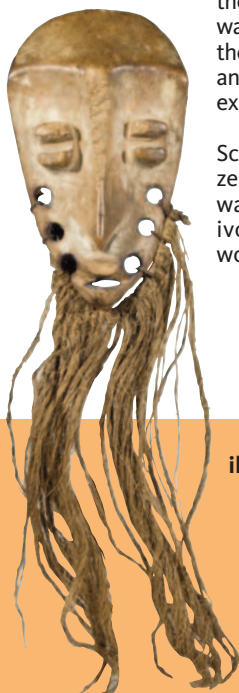
ill. 15



ill. 16



ill. 22



ill. 18

Sculptures are highly stylized and carved in elephant, warthog and hippopotamus ivory, but also in bone, wood, clay, resin and stone.

Although Bwami was secretive, all Lega were aware of its existence as it acted on the behalf of society as a whole rather than for a limited few. Its esotericism, however, was held closely amongst the initiated. Many of the objects in this exhibit were never seen by the uninitiated; furthermore, the Bwami members only understood the metaphorical attachments to these objects through education.

Understanding the objects and complex metaphors and aphorisms of Bwami was difficult requiring many years to grasp. Things were made clear by a preceptor or "master of metaphor" who presented an object, specific qualities of it were announced, and subsequent objects were added resulting in complex messages. It is this esoteric quality that maintained the power of the object.

Two general categories of objects existed in Lega society: public and private. All termed *Isengo*, or "heavy things" given their symbolically loaded state. Public objects called "*bilondo*" were visible in everyday goings-on such as: hats (ill.6), necklaces (ill.7), armbands, diadems, aprons, belts and the skullcap called "*bwami*", all indicated an individual's Bwami membership.

Objects used within the private realm of Bwami were oiled before use and were called "*bitungwa*" including: maskettes, masks, stools (ill.8), miniature hammers/anvils (ill.9), axes, spoons (ill.10), sickles (ill.11), billhooks, pegs (ill.12), scepters, pounders, and a variety of small anthropomorphic and zoomorphic (ill.13) sculptures. Many objects had intrinsic sacred power, acting as symbols of continuity with the living and the dead. The great majority was visible to, and owned by, the two highest male grades and was considered a prime example of "*busoga*."



ill. 13



ill. 24



ill. 20

In general, often sexless, figurative anthropomorphic sculptures consist of: heads on necks (ill.14), Janus-faced, multi-headed (ill.15), or double figures, one armed, having one or both arms raised (ill.16), faceless, one eyed, etc. These gestures are deliberately cryptic and were only understood through instruction in the Bwami context. Zoomorphic sculptures, in wood, bone or ivory depict elephants, chameleons, frogs, snakes (ill.17), and other hard to precisely identify quadrupeds.

Masks and maskettes were one of the most important insignia for members of the highest grades. Maskettes (*lukungu*), carved in wood (ill.18), ivory or bone (ill.19), ranging from 5 to 10 centimeters, were usually held in the hands while dancing.

Slightly larger, carved in wood is the bearded maskette (*lukwakongo*) (ill.20) with a whitened kaolin face, which was worn on the side of the head, on the waist, or hung on display fences during initiation. Both of which were visual reminders of the ancestors.

Larger mask types (*idumu* and *muminia*) whether in wood (ill.21, 22) or ivory (ill.23) were very similar in form to the smaller, and in general symbolized the common origin shared with other Lega. Preceptors owned a rare mask type with horns (*kayamba*) (ill.24) depicting "expert swimmers drowning in their own water."

We, the viewers will never fully understand the greater significance of these forms in this exhibition. The fact that Bwami was banned in the mid 20th century does not allow for further scholarship in the field, thus hindering the possibility of a deeper read into the Lega world of thought and sculpture.

We can at least know that the Lega associate beauty "*busoga*" with their art. We hope you can do this as well.

H. Kellim Brown June 2010



ill. 19



ill. 23



ill. 21



ill. 17



ill. 14

CONGO GALLERY

Exhibition LEGA

From June 9TH
till October 1ST 2010
CLOSED DURING AUGUST

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Wed - Thu - Fri
2,30PM - 6,30PM
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