

# The Mbole and their *lilwa* Sculptures (Central Zaïre)

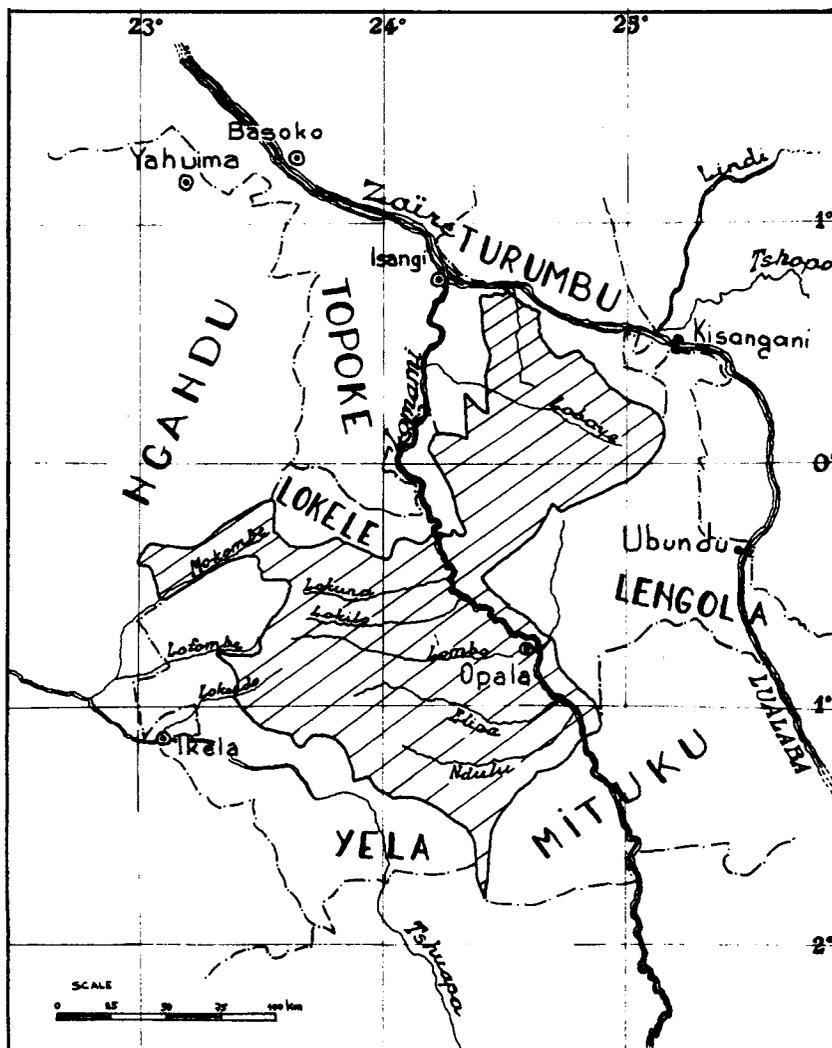
A Case Study of Traditional Tribal Art seen in its Context

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A thorough morphological analysis of those anthropomorphic Mbole statues currently known to us has made it possible to establish the general characteristics of these sculptures and to discover different categories, under which they can be classified. These artistic creations cannot be studied out of their context as they are inextricably bound to the whole cultural organisation. Therefore a concise summary of the ethnographic information on the Mbole is given for its relevance to a better understanding of their sculpture and its function, use and meaning.

The Mbole live in the Province of Upper-Zaïre in the region of Opala, which is the capital of their

zone, virtually in the centre of Zaïre. Their residential area, situated south of the confluence of the Lomami and Luapula rivers and south-west of Kisangani, forms a long strip alongside both banks of the middle reaches of the Lomami river and broadens from the north-east to the south-west. The territory of the Mbole is situated in the Central Basin at the Equator; this central depression is covered by extensive and often marshy forests. In these regions one cannot speak of dry and rainy seasons, for the Equatorial forests receive rain the whole year through. The average annual temperature is above 25°C; the soil varies from sabulous to gritty clayey ground.<sup>1</sup>



Map taken from  
G. Van der Kerken, 1944.  
Hatched area: Mbole territory.

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The name Mbole (previously Bambole) is generally considered to have a geographical origin and should be translated as 'gens du bas, de l'aval'<sup>2</sup> or 'the people of downstream'.<sup>3</sup> They speak a Mongo-language, which according to Vansina would be related to those spoken by the Eco, Mombesa, Olombo and Lokele, living more to the north.<sup>4</sup>

The Mbole depend primarily upon agriculture as a means of subsistence. The system of crop rotation is unknown to them, as they simply employ the association of crops.<sup>5</sup> Their agricultural production is supplemented by whatever food they gather, hunt or fish for.<sup>6</sup> The production of palmoil seems to be an important aspect of their economic life. The nuts are gathered by the men, while the production of the oil is exclusively in the hands of the women.<sup>7</sup>

They practise such crafts as metal-work, wood-work, wickerwork, the weaving of raffia and the carving of other materials such as ivory and horn. The blacksmith produces several iron tools, weapons with copper decoration such as knives in sophisticated forms, lances, etc. as well as arm- and anklebands, sometimes of considerable dimensions.<sup>8</sup> The objects they make out of wood are masks, statues, stools, shields and musical instruments such as slitdrums (called *ongungu* and *ikombe*) and drums covered with a skin (called *ngomba*).<sup>9</sup> The wickerwork is represented by baskets, shields and mats.<sup>10</sup> The Mbole weave raffia to provide their own local fabrics.<sup>11</sup> Ivory and horn are the materials which they prefer for the making of aerophones, namely the horn (called *ponge* or *panda*).<sup>12</sup>

Trade and industry are hardly developed, although iron tools and copper bricks or rings such as the *konga*<sup>13</sup> are widely distributed as means of payment and exchange.<sup>14</sup>

The Mbole form a patriarchal society, based on segmentary and localised patrilineages, with patrilineal succession and with patrilocal residence. According to Van der Kerken they can be subdivided into families, family-groups and clans.<sup>15</sup> The smallest lineage is called *letono*, the head of which is designated by the name *wilangi*. *Okenge* is the name of the major lineage and the *ise l'okenge* is the head of this group.<sup>16</sup> One clan can, depending on the number of inhabitants, comprise several villages; sometimes, however, only one village or even a part of it forms a clan.<sup>17</sup> Marriage is exogamic and this prohibition to marry within a certain degree of kinship extends to the clan.

General polygyny is made possible by the abundance of women and the rather low bride-price, which is paid in kind: lances, knives, goats, textiles, armbands, etc.<sup>18</sup>

Concerning religion, the great god, god-creator or god-ancestor of the Mbole is believed to be Mongo.<sup>19</sup> This supreme being is never or seldom honoured and invoked. The most important place in their religious life is occupied by spirits. The Mbole believe in the existence of good and bad spirits, feel themselves dependent on them and try to protect themselves against their nefarious influence by swearing, magic, etc.<sup>20</sup> Some confusion exists about the nature of these spirits: it is not known whether these impersonal forces are water spirits, ghosts of animals, small supernatural creatures or nature spirits.

One cannot accurately speak of their worshipping ancestors. Apart from several obligations to be honoured during, and a few weeks after the funeral for the soul of the deceased to find rest and peace, nothing in particular is to be done.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the Mbole believe that the spirits of the deceased are reborn in the womb of the woman with their previous characteristics.<sup>22</sup>

Where the spirits are not involved, the Mbole consider witchcraft or black magic to be the cause of illness and disasters, for which no reasonable explanation can be found.<sup>23</sup> They believe witchcraft to be a kind of congenital disease and locate it in a specific organ, namely the *liloka*. This internal organ enables a person to kill and to do harm without material means. People, however, do have means at their disposal of protecting themselves against witchcraft. Crushed bark of a tree, mixed with many other ingredients, is stored in the horn of an animal and suspended or buried in front of the dwelling. The occupant is protected against witchcraft by his spirit, which has united with that substance. The Mbole also possess a large number of charms to avert witchcraft.<sup>24</sup>

Apart from witchcraft the Mbole also believe in contagious magic. They strongly believe that, if one possesses a small shock of hair or a small piece from the loin-cloth of a specific person, he/she can cause illness or pain to that person. For it is generally accepted that the actions performed with a part of a person or something belonging to him will be transmitted to the person in question.<sup>25</sup>

According to Kalala Nkudi<sup>26</sup> the cultural institutions are constantly controlled and conditioned by a secret society, called *lilwa* or *lilwakoy*. The *lilwa* exercises its restrictive control over society

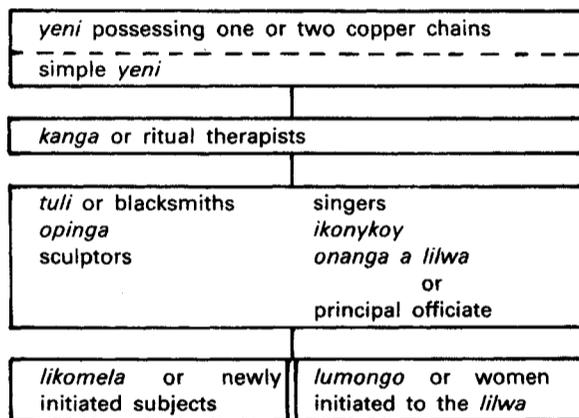
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through the *lilwa* tribunal, which condemns and punishes each individual transgressing the rules and norms postulated by those traditional institutions and by the *lilwa* itself. This normative control extends from the daily life of the members of the residential group to the relations between the larger lineages or *okenge* and applies to all spheres of life.

The *lilwa* is a complex ritual institution to which membership is compulsory for all male subjects of the Mbole society. Women are not allowed except for a few privileged women, normally the daughters of the men highest in rank within the *lilwa*.

The internal structure of this secret society is hierarchical: it consists of four closed classes to which access is obtained by successive initiations, the highest categories being reserved for privileged men.

### Scheme of classes of the *lilwa* according to Kalala Nkudi



All male Mbole belong to the class of the *likomela*; most of them remain on this level for the rest of their lives. They do not have to perform any special ritual tasks within the *lilwa*. Membership is obtained by initiation, which takes place when the young man is considered to be socially mature. This implies that he must be able to participate actively in group-hunting, to trap animals, to construct a house and, eventually, to get married.<sup>27</sup>

The decision to initiate a group of candidates is taken by the *wilangi*, who have several ritual charges within the *lilwa*, but still depends on the approval of the parents.

The initiation takes place in the *liala li kumi*, to be translated as 'the place of the dignitaries'. This is the place where the ritual dignitaries of the *lilwa*

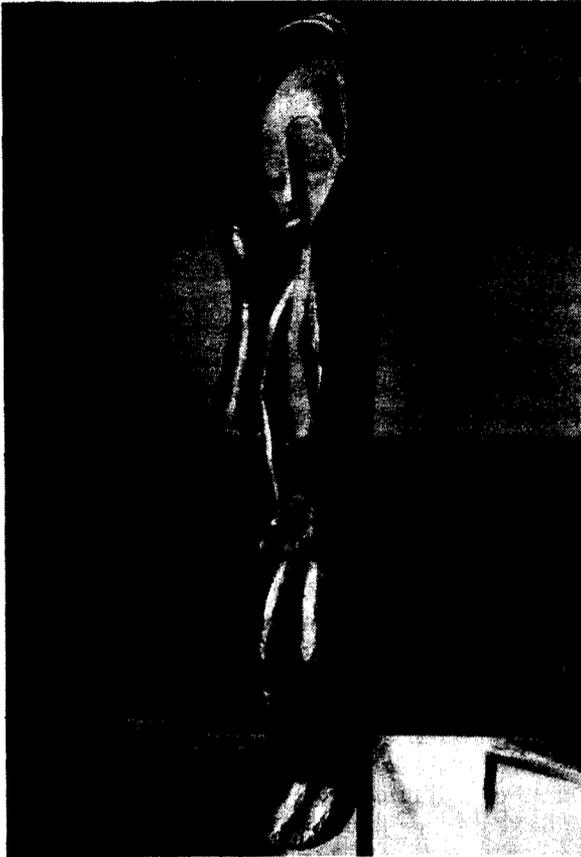
have their gatherings. The *liala li kumi* is situated outside the village, in the forest and near to a river. It is a rectangular open space in the forest, which is neatly deforested, cleared of bushes and stumps. At one end a large dwelling is constructed for the ritual dignitaries; at the other end a shelter is erected where the newly-initiated men can spend the night. They stay there for about a fortnight after the first initiation rites and are educated during this time.<sup>28</sup> Normally the *liala li kumi* is dominated by an old termitary and enclosed by a hedge of palm branches.

On the day of the initiation itself, the candidates are taken to the *liala li kumi* where all the members of the *lilwa* of the residential group are present. The leader of the ceremonies is the *onanga a lilwa*. All participants, *lilwa* members as well as candidates, are naked.<sup>29</sup> From the moment that the candidates enter the *liala li kumi*, they have to endure several tortures, such as flagellations, pepper on their bodies, etc. When the novice has undergone the different ritual trials, he is led to the top of the termitary. At that moment the *onanga a lilwa* invites the candidate to sleep on the termitary and gives him a banana stalk in the middle of which a hole is made, saying: "here is a woman, sleep with her". The officiate orders the young man to introduce his penis into the hole. After this rite a plant infusion is poured into the eyes of the novice, the burning effect of which is alleviated by the introduction of a second plant infusion into the candidate's eyes.

This rite can be understood as permitting the novice to be the eyewitness of the secrets of the *lilwa* by 'opening his eyes' in a symbolic way. This specific rite, designated by the term '*lilwa*', seems to determine the actual passage of the candidate to a new condition of life. It is practised in all the ceremonies of the *lilwa* when it comes to the transition from one class to a higher one.

The initiation rites are concluded by festivities, starting with eating and drinking and later on followed by dancing, in which all *lilwa* members participate.<sup>30</sup>

For about two weeks after their admission to the class of the *likomela*, the young men stay in the forest, where they are informed about the ancestral customs. These instructions are given in the form of stories and myths and continue to be given during the rest of the neophyte's life. During these two weeks of reclusion, the newly-initiated learn only some of the most important precepts, of which the following are particularly insisted on:



1 Male figurine. 72 cm. Private collection. (Photo: M. Steyaert)

- respect for tradition, especially concerning the importance of the distribution of goods. The neophytes are taught the names of the animals or parts of animals, which every hunter has to hand over to the *ise l'okenge* and to the *wilangi*. By learning this, the young man is initiated into the hierarchy existing within the group;
- respect for a certain number of rules of conduct of which some imply a basic attitude towards others and oneself. The most important of these rules are the following:
  - \* respect for the elders of the *letono*, for the mother and the eldest brothers and sisters;
  - \* not to utter any impudent insults with reference to the genital parts in the presence of women;
  - \* not to slander the other men;

- \* not to remain quiet with arms crossed when one is insulted, but to avenge oneself and avenge any companion insulted by a stranger;
- \* not to kill without reason;
- \* not to take another man's wife;
- \* not to steal;

— the importance of keeping the secrets of the *lilwa* is stressed, as well as the gravity of the punishment inflicted on traitors.

The young men already know most of the norms and rules to be adhered to, but their sojourn in the forest makes them more sensible to the *lilwa* morals and to the implications of the transgression of those rules.

Although the *lilwa* is an institution to which access is generally reserved for men, a *yeni* can have his favourite daughter initiated into the *lilwa*; she then receives the title of *lumongo*. It is a great honour for a woman to be admitted to the *lilwa* as the initiated are supposed to know the secrets of the men. The Mbole say she becomes a man.<sup>31</sup>

When the *yeni* desires his favourite daughter to become a *lumongo*, he invites the *wilangi* and offers them the following goods, which represent the sum total of matrimonial goods presented to the family of a future wife to conclude her marriage: a goat, a chicken, a considerable amount of smoked meat and big bananas, a bag of salt, four copper lances, two *konga*, a knife and a machete.

Once the *wilangi* have received those goods, they bring the girl to the *liala li kumi* in the forest for initiation into the *lilwa*. After she has passed through the same rites to which the men are subjected, the *wilangi* give her the following objects:

- *ngola* or red powder and *mpembe* or white powder, to be used for skin care;
- four or five leopard's teeth to be worn in a necklace;
- an *itume* or staff at the middle of which two little bells are attached and which is marked by bands of white powder to form black and white rings. This represents the male genitals and thereby her male status;
- an *opika* or female servant charged to assist her on trips or during the *lilwa* rites.

A *lumongo* is allowed to have sexual relations only with a *yeni* and consequently can only be married to a *yeni*. She belongs to this class for the rest of her life. Although she cannot pretend to

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ritual charges of a superior level, she is linked with the highest rank within the *lilwa* through her marriage to a *yeni*.

The second class within the *lilwa* consists of men having specialised ritual functions within the *lilwa*:

- (a) the singers who are charged to sing about the traditional events;
- (b) the sculptors who produce wooden statues representing the ritual victims and those persons convicted to death by the *lilwa* tribunal;
- (c) the *tuli* or blacksmiths who manufacture the *konga* or copper objects used within the *lilwa*;
- (d) the *opinga* or ritual assistants of the officiates and of the *yeni*. The *opinga* helps the *onanga a lilwa* during the course of the initiation rites. He accompanies the *yeni* on all the trips he has to undertake regarding his ritual charges; on those occasions the *opinga* helps his master in his material needs. It is also the *opinga* who is delegated by the *yeni* to communicate his decisions or his orders. In daily life the role of the *opinga* is comparable to that of our police officers;
- (e) the *onanga a lilwa* or father of the *lilwa* who is responsible for the efficient conduct of the initiation rites and of the instruction of the newly-initiated young men;
- (f) the *ikonikoy* who are charged with the execution by hanging<sup>32</sup> of the ritual victims of the *lilwa* or of persons convicted to death by the tribunal. *Ikonikoy* is also the name of the apparatus used to hang people.<sup>33</sup>

The *kanga* or traditional therapists constitute the third class. The *kanga* are invested with a mystical political power. They assist the heads of the lineages in governing the group. They fulfil the function of medicineman, since they possess the power to detect and remove the causes of illness. They are also considered capable of detecting the malefactors in the community and of imposing sanctions of mystical order upon them, thanks to the ritual objects they possess. Since it is the *kanga* who know the secret of the preparation of the deadly poison, the *ise l'okenge* and the *wilangi* call upon them for the elimination of a person convicted to death. Furthermore any Mbole person who wishes to gain a personal settlement will appeal for the *kanga's* help.

No rigorous rules of succession such as those determining the recruitment of a *yeni*, are applicable here. Candidates for the function of *kanga*

must, however, be descended from a *letono* comprising a *kanga*. It would appear that the new *kanga* has to possess some special qualities. The old *kanga* sanction this appointment by virtue of their own supernatural powers.

The final initiation rites to the class of the *kanga* are held in public. They correspond to a large extent to those accompanying the enthronement of a *yeni*. Kalala Nkudi only mentions those episodes which seemed to him characteristic of the initiation of the *kanga*. About fifty other *kanga* act as ritual officiates in the ceremony. After the candidate has undergone the rite of the instillation of the plant infusion in his eyes, the leading officiate besprinkles his head, chest and limbs with a liquid taken from the corpse of a *kanga* in decomposition. The candidate is then buried in a pit. A few moments later the traditional therapist presiding over the rites approaches this symbolic tomb and, shouting, compels the man to come out. The latter has to free himself instantly from the ground covering him, jump out of the pit and rush into the forest in search of an object hidden by the officiates in a secret place. If he succeeds in discovering this particular object, it is proven that he is capable of entering into a relationship with the souls of the deceased who communicate to him this knowledge and this extraordinary power to discover and perceive things that the common mortals can neither discover nor perceive.<sup>34</sup>

The men belonging to the class of the *yeni* are invested with the highest rank within the *lilwa*. The *yeni* are the most highly esteemed ritual dignitaries of the *lilwa*. Access to this class is strictly conditioned: one *letono* can have only one *yeni*. A person will only be enthroned as *yeni* after the death of a *yeni* whose name he will bear. The heads of the *letono* are the sole candidates to pretend to the status of *yeni*. Succession is patrilineal: the successor is the eldest brother of the deceased *yeni*. The brothers become *yeni* one after another until the extinction of the members of their generation. At that moment the descendants of the eldest are entitled to take over the leadership.<sup>35</sup> Although the candidature is designated by tradition, it is, however, necessary that the *wilangi* express their approval.

The enthronement rites of the *yeni* are public: they take place in the village, in the presence of many assistants playing an active part in the rites. They are followed by dances and sumptuous meals. The officiates of those rites are the *kanga* or traditional therapists. The essential rite consists in

making the candidate sleep on top of a termitary and in pouring a plant infusion into his eyes.

The class of the *yeni* must be subdivided into two hierarchical orders. The *yeni* belonging to the lower order possesses as signs of his dignity a *likayi* which is a necklace of pearls, and an *otono*, which is a bundle of palm-leave nerves fastened together by a metal ring.<sup>36</sup> The *yeni*, who entered the higher order and therefore is the highest in rank within the *lilwa*, owns, apart from the *likayi* and the *otono*, a copper chain of eight links, each having a diameter of approximately 6 cm as well as a head-covering made of the skin of a *ngila*.<sup>37</sup>

The initiation providing access to this superior order within the class of the *yeni* is very expensive. Apart from goats, chickens, smoked meat and *konga* to be paid to the officiates in compensation for their ritual services, the candidate has to offer one of his own children. This person is then hanged in the greatest secrecy.<sup>38</sup> After the death of the victim, the *wilangi* ask the sculptor to carve a wooden statue representing this ritual victim.

As mentioned before, the *lilwa* exercises its control over the Mbole through the *lilwa* tribunal, which is composed of the ritual dignitaries of the *lilwa*. It is presided over by the highest-ranking *yeni* of the residential group. The decisions of the *lilwa* tribunal require total unanimity of all the judges. Once the case has been settled, the execution follows immediately. The *lilwa* tribunal only deals with serious matters, which threaten to compromise public peace and ancestral tradition, whether or not the members and rules of the *lilwa* are involved. The less offensive transgressions without any far-reaching consequences are handled by the ordinary tribunal of the village.<sup>39</sup>

It is only within the context of this secret society that the Mbole produce wooden statues and masks. When studying the style of the Mbole statues, it is necessary to employ a detailed stylistic analysis, although it is possible to postulate general characteristics applicable to all figures. Since the total design is roughly the same, the difference is rather to be located in details, which are relevant in view of a correct allocation and a classification into different categories.

The Mbole statues can be subdivided into several categories based on the head-dress. This criterion seems to be the most obvious one, since the other characteristics are either so general or so exceptional that they are unsuitable as a possible basis for classification. What is more, figures which have a specific head-dress in common more or less form



2 Male figurine. 83 cm. Private collection. (Photo: L. Van de Velde)

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a stylistic unity based on general design and quality of the statues.<sup>40</sup>

Initially general characteristics will be discussed, which seem to have evolved as traditional conventions. The Mbole produce hanging and standing figures, mainly male but also female, generally showing a dark brown to black patina. By the term 'hanging figures' we mean statues of which the feet do not stand flat on the ground, but hang down obliquely. The height varies from 20 to 120 cm. Generally the height of the statue corresponds to its quality: the largest specimens are worked out in greater detail, while the smaller ones are carved in simpler and more generalized forms. The majority are decorated with paint: the face is painted white or ochre as well as the front of the torso, the latter in a longitudinal strip in the middle from the neck to the genital parts. Red pigment is sometimes applied to the head-dress and to the legs from the knees to the feet. The head is finished with great care in contrast to the rest of the body.

The head-dress consists of a semicircular or rectangular upright ridge running transversely across the crown of the head. In other cases the hairstyle is completely circular or appears as a kind of helmet stretching out into the neck. Sometimes the top of the head-dress is provided with a small hole made to contain a small bunch of feathers. The forehead is high and rounded or in some cases flat. The big curved eyebrows starting at the bridge of the nose are indicated by a single or double incision which can be darkened. In other cases the eyebrows are simply suggested by the concave carving of the eye-pits and the cheeks. Following the line of the eyebrows this depression continues to the jaws and includes the chin so that the face acquires its typical heart-shape. It sometimes occurs that in other cases the concavity is limited to the central part of the face and extends from the eyebrows across the cheekbones only as far as the upper lip. The slit-shaped eyes are indicated by a long narrow horizontal elevation, which is split in two parts by a central groove to separate the eyelids from each other. In other statues the eyes may plainly consist of a simple or double horizontal incision. The nose is small, straight and narrow, the front and sides are carved flat, as well as the underside which is often provided with two round holes. Sometimes the nostrils are more rounded and the nose widens towards the point. The small protruding mouth can be open or closed. Some specimens have the teeth indicated by small vertical grooves. Generally the jaws are strongly

bevelled and merge into a protruding chin, which is short and round. The ears are heavily schematized and represented by a small triangular or semicircular evagination, sometimes provided with a small hole.

The cylindrical neck may be rather heavy and thick. But in most cases the neck is drawn back and narrows towards the head or is occasionally not visible at all due to the forward position of the head and shoulders. The shoulders have the same width as the hips and are slumped forward, while the arms, bent and detached from the chest, are pointed forwards or backwards at the elbows. The hands often have the same shape as the feet and rest on the thighs next to the groin or somewhat higher on the hips. Usually the fingers are indicated by light vertical incisions. Viewed from the front the narrow, rather drawn-out torso may often appear no more than a continuation of the neck, whereas it is considerably broader when seen from the side. A long flattened strip appears in the middle of the chest and stomach from the neck to the genital organs and is generally painted. The navel is represented by a large rounded evagination. The male genitalia are rendered in a realistic way. The female genital parts are also worked out in detail by way of point- and stripe-shaped incisions.

The legs are bent at the knee and if the arms are bent forwards at the elbow, a similar angle is created in both. But when the arms are bent backwards, they form an opposite angle to the legs so that the forearms and thighs run in the same direction. The thighs are generally slim and the calves rather thick. The feet point downwards and recall the downward position of the hands resting on the slanting thighs. In other examples the feet stand flat on the ground and are usually high and rectangular. They can be connected to each other by a cylindrical bar. After the analogy of the fingers, the toes are rendered by light grooves.

When the back of the head is left uncovered, it is most often rounded and narrows down towards the back. The back is usually bent, but in some cases may be completely straight. Two horizontal transverse holes may be provided in the back at the height of the shoulder-blades and of the pelvis in order to attach the statue to a stretcher. It happens that the spinal column is indicated by a light vertical incision. In many cases the buttocks can then also be distinguished by the presence of a wide shallow groove.

As mentioned above, the Mbole statues of which a total number of 89 could be traced, can be subdivided into four main groups using the head-dress as point of departure.

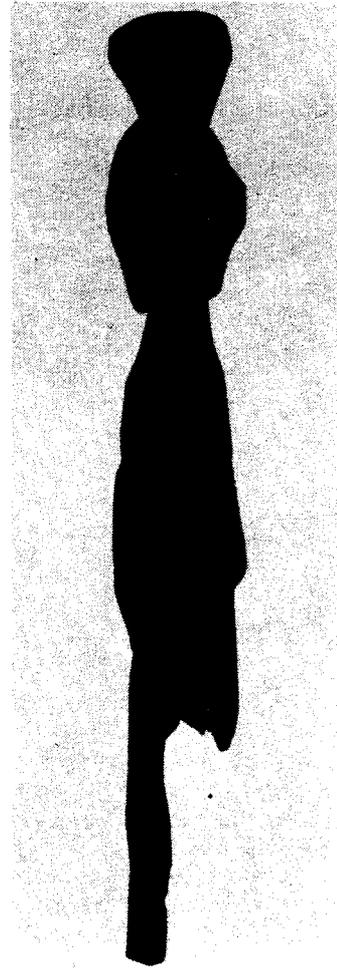
The first group, numbering 30 specimens, consists of figures with an aureole-like hairstyle. To this category belong the most beautiful and most detailed examples. The high head-dress consists of a semicircular upright ridge which runs across the top of the head. The width and height of this transverse rim diminish towards the ears. The head-dress passes beyond the ears or stops at, or a few centimeters above the ears. The ridge inclines forwards at an angle with the result that the back is more convex and the front more concave. The forehead, and in most cases also the rounded back

of the head, remains uncovered. This main group can be split up into two subdivisions. The 18 statues of the first subgroup are characterized by a double projecting rim: a wide shallow groove is sculpted in the middle of the top side of the ridge stretching over the whole length of the head-dress so that the latter is split into a frontal and a rear part (fig 1 and 2). The second subgroup consists of 12 figures with a simple ridge (3).

Figures with a circular head-dress constitute the second category and 16 specimens of this kind could be traced. The hairstyle varies from a kind of crown around the head to a semispherical, funnel-shaped (4) or ellipsoid coiffure crowning the head. In the latter case the head-dress covers the back of the head.



3 Male figurine. 40 cm. Private collection. (Photo: P. Dartevelle)



4 Female figurine. 36,5 cm. Private collection. (Photo: B. Van Haute)

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5 Male figurine with brass anklebands. 51 cm. Private collection. (Photo: M. Steyaert)

6 Male figurine. 35 cm. Private collection. (Photo: P. Dartevelle)



To the third group belong 37 figures with a rectangular or trapezoidal head-dress. A significant fact is that these statues begin to differ markedly from the more standard norms. In this category a distinction must be made between:

- A. 21 figures with an upright head-dress that is considered as a separate element and not as an integral part of the head. The rectangular ridge running transversely across the crown of the head is almost always simple. Sometimes, however, the hairstyle is more trapezoidal and narrows towards the top or the bottom. The more nearly the ends of the ridge approach the ears, the higher the coiffure and the more it inclines at an angle. The ears, forehead and occiput are always uncovered. The receding forehead is rounded. The parting between hair and forehead follows a curved line (5).

- B. 16 figures with a rectangular or trapezoidal head-dress that is conceived as an extension of the head. Either the hair is carved out deeper than the forehead, or both are worked out on the same level and are only to be distinguished from each other by a horizontal groove; occasionally there is a small ridge projecting obliquely above the forehead. The ridge is usually simple. The forehead is flat and forms a vertical plane. A typical characteristic of these figures is the straight horizontal parting line (6).

The fourth and last category consists of 6 figures. Although from their stature they are clearly of Mbole origin, the design and form of their head-dress do not correspond with any of the descriptions of the categories mentioned above (7).

Concerning the meaning of the anthropomorphic Mbole figures, it is generally accepted that they represent the smoked bodies of hanged persons condemned and executed by the *lilwa* tribunal for betraying the secrets of the *lilwa*, or for being detrimental to the community or to the *lilwa* society itself.<sup>41</sup> Not only executed criminals are represented in effigy: statues are also made of ritual victims, sacrificed by the candidate-*yeni* in order to acquire the superior status of *yeni*.<sup>42</sup> Not only male, but also female figures are found. The statues even bear the name of the person they represent.<sup>43</sup> So, although in form and appearance, they 'are not individual portraits of hanged persons' as Biebuyck<sup>44</sup> observes, they are, at least in conception, effigies of particular individuals.

The Mbole figurines are used on several occasions. During the period of reclusion following the initiation rites which provide access to the class of the *likomela*, the *onanga a lilwa* shows the statues to the young candidates as a terrifying example and symbol of the fate that will befall traitors and law-breakers. Therefore the actual function of the figures is to impress upon the young men the importance of secrecy concerning the *lilwa*, and of the adherence to ancestral tradition and common law. The candidates are told the names of the persons represented, as well as their crimes and shortcomings towards the community. They are informed of the names of the judges who passed the sentence of death, and of the executioners. Usually they are shown the effigy of a well-known high-ranking personage recently executed, of whom the newly initiated know the descendants living in the village and whose grandchildren are amongst them. On each suitable occasion during



7 Male (?) figurine. 40 cm. Private collection. (Photo: B. Van Haute)

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this period they are obliged to stroke the body of the figurines to fix and strengthen their fear of reprisals.<sup>45</sup> In later life, when the behaviour of a *lilwa*-member is doubtful, he has to swear on the figures to remind him of the lot that will befall him, if he persists in his evil ways.<sup>46</sup>

In daily life, the Mbole statues are used when the village is experiencing problems, for example when game is scarce or when an epidemic strikes the village.<sup>47</sup> The *wilangi* then go to the forest to fetch the figures, attach them to a litter and carry them in procession through the village, having chased away all persons not initiated into the *lilwa*. The objective of this procession is to obtain the beneficent intervention of the spirits of the deceased represented by those statues.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the Mbole believe that the force or soul of the hanged person passes to his effigy.<sup>49</sup> It may be remarked that this specific use and function of the figurines demonstrates the character of the *lilwa* as an encompassing and controlling institution, since the power of the *lilwa* extends to the domain of daily communal life.<sup>50</sup>

There are certain conditions pertaining to the use of the figurines. The whole collection of statues is hidden somewhere in the forest in a place known only to the *wilangi*.<sup>51</sup> Before they are shown to the *lilwa* members, they are repainted, decorated and attached to a stretcher by means of straps, which are slipped through the transverse holes in the shoulders, the hips and occasionally the heels.<sup>52</sup> The appearance of the statues is announced in the village by the roll of drums. This is a sign for all women and persons not initiated into the *lilwa* to stay away from the village, for they are not allowed to see or to touch the effigies. The *lumongo* have the privilege to be present, but blindfolded. As soon as the figures are hidden again, their function and meaning change. They are then regarded as tutelary spirits watching over the village and the community.<sup>53</sup>

The carving of these statues, which takes place only on the instruction of the *wilangi*, is assigned to sculptors belonging to the second class of the *lilwa*.<sup>54</sup> The sculptors are thus invested with a special status within the secret society. Much still remains unknown about these sculptors. For example it is not known whether, besides carving the figurines, they have to fulfil other functions within the *lilwa*, and whether they are respected for their qualities as woodcarvers.

The figures and litters are made of two types of wood, namely *okaoka* and *wembe*, both resinous

trees. The right to use the wood from these trees is reserved to the *lilwa* alone and uninitiated persons are not allowed to touch or even see this wood.<sup>55</sup>

The forms of the statues and the colours they are decorated with, appear to have a specific meaning or *raison d'être*. The fact that the figures display an upright coiffure is not coincidental, since it is fashionable amongst the Mbole people to wear their hair very long at the top with the curls hardened by an ointment, which makes them stand upright in the form of a ridge.<sup>56</sup> The heart-like concavity of the face, which is a widespread convention in African sculpture, appears to have no particular symbolic meaning. The face is not contorted with agony as one would expect of a hanged person, but rather reflects sadness and calm acquiescence.

It is the sculptor's concern to render the attitude of a hanged person convincingly: the drawn-out and curved body, the drooping shoulders, the bent arms and legs leave nothing to the imagination. The pendant and sometimes shackled feet are distinct reminders of this form of execution.<sup>57</sup> The position of the torso and limbs accentuates the sculptor's overriding concern with rhythm, obtained through symmetry and parallelism, which are the dominating principles. The dramatic effect of the sculptural expression may be heightened by the addition of a rope around the neck, which, however, only a few specimens still possess.

Not only the forms themselves, but also the colours applied are meaningful. The sculptures generally display a dark brown to black patina. According to Carrington the statues are burnt black above a fire to represent the dried corpse of the victim.<sup>58</sup> On the hanging and burial of persons sentenced to death by the *lilwa*, Rouvroy reports that the hanging, which requires a long preparation, takes place in public. Once the victim has been hanged and is dead, the whole population has to leave the scene, after which the corpse is detached. In the neighbourhood of the village at some distance from the pathway a pit is dug in which to place the dead body. After filling the pit and replacing the vegetation, no ornaments, food or personal belongings are put on the grave, for nothing may reveal or suggest the presence of a burial-place. Shortly after the interment, at a short distance from the actual grave, some garbage and bones gathered in and around the village are set alight. This is done in order to create the impression that the victim has been placed on a pyre. The population, still horrified by the spectacle of the

hanging, are inclined to believe — and they are kept under that impression — that this has in fact taken place.<sup>59</sup> However, Carrington differs and does not accept that the corpse is immediately buried, but that it is actually dried above a fire after execution. According to this theory, the shrivelled body is then dressed up in fine clothes and carried around the village in procession as the 'spirit' of the *lilwa*. All the uninitiated have to flee when it appears.<sup>60</sup> According to this interpretation, the dark tint of the figurines symbolizes for the *lilwa* members an actual event. But if we are to accept Rouvroy's statements, then the darkening of the statues is most probably meant to convince the *lilwa* members that the burning or drying of the corpse has actually taken place.

The face is painted with white pigment (*mpembe*) or ochre. In some cases the white concavity of the face is accentuated by the application of ochre colouring-matter on the forehead, nose and sides of the head. The front of the torso is also usually white or yellow. There is little doubt about the meaning of the white colour: as in many African statues, it is the symbol of death. Therefore the fact that *mpembe* is used on these statues indicates that they are indeed representations of dead persons.

It is interesting to note that, according to Kalala Nkudi, the Mbole use the white pigment only within the context of the *lilwa*. The *lumongo* decorate their bodies with *mpembe* in two parallel stripes from the middle of the chest down to the groin. These two white stripes are separated from each other by a central band of red colouring-powder or *ngola*. This red powder is also used outside the *lilwa* as a cosmetic, by women as well as men. Kalala Nkudi was informed that the *ngola* serves to embellish the skin and to procure good health. Another man, however, informed him about the deeper meaning of both the white and red colours: the white powder would symbolise the sperm of the man while the red pigment would be the symbol of the blood of the woman from which a child is formed. Thus the *ngola* represents life and fertility. The association of the red and white colours on the body of the *lumongo* would indicate her bisexual nature.<sup>61</sup>

The application of red pigment to the head-dress of the statue refers to the Mbole fashion of smearing the hair with a mixture of oil and *ngola*.<sup>62</sup> Sometimes the legs of the figures are also covered with this red powder from the knees to the feet. There probably is a connection between this



8 Face mask. 48 cm. Private collection. (Photo: M. Steyaert)

phenomenon and the fact that the Mbole paint their bodies partially red.<sup>63</sup>

Apart from anthropomorphic statues the Mbole also produce masks, but the fact that only seven specimens of these are currently known to us, could suggest that they have ceased producing them. The seven known to us comprise four oval (8), one rectangular and two round masks, which

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are worn in front of the face. They are made from slightly convex planks and represent extremely stylized human faces, of which the constituent parts are accentuated by the application of different colours. Along the outer edge of the mask small holes are provided for attaching a net of fibres, which the wearer pulls over his head in order to keep the mask in front of his face.

Some confusion exists concerning the function, use and meaning of the face masks. Darteville states that occasionally a person, convicted to death by the *lilwa* tribunal, fled to escape from the gallows. He would then be chased and killed by a lance in the back. According to this source, the abstract polychrome masks called *elema*, are carved to represent such persons.<sup>64</sup> The author of *Oerkunsten van Zwart Afrika*, however, maintains that this mask would be worn by the hangman on the occasion of an execution, or during the ritual processions through the village when the statues are shown.<sup>65</sup> Finally, according to Claerhout<sup>66</sup> and Bascom<sup>67</sup> the masks are used for the initiation of new members into the *lilwa*.

Biebuyck mentions the existence of 'a zoomorphic figurine, called crocodile of *lilwa* (*ngonde yalilwa*), which is said to punish those who commit indiscretions during the *lilwa* ceremonies.'<sup>68</sup> This author is the only one who refers to this kind of sculpture. Since his information about it is scant, no source or reference is mentioned and visual evidence is lacking, we should remain doubtful about the existence of such objects.

### NOTES

- 1 G. Derkinderen, *Atlas van Belgisch Congo en Ruanda-Urundi* (Brussel, 1955), pp. 34–36 + maps.
- 2 S.J. Van Bulck, *Les recherches linguistiques au Congo Belge* (Bruxelles, 1948), p. 543 and A. Moeller, *Les grandes lignes des migrations des Bantous de la Province Orientale du Congo Belge*. Bruxelles: Inst. R. Col. Belge, 1936, Mém. 8°, VI, p. 192.
- 3 D.P. Biebuyck, 'Sculpture from the Eastern Zaïre Forest Regions: Mbole, Yela and Pere' in *African Arts*, October 1976, vol X, no I, p. 54. (Hereinafter, Biebuyck, 'Sculpture from the Eastern Zaïre Forest Regions').
- 4 J. Vansina, *Introduction à l'ethnographie du Congo* (Kinshasa, 1966), p. 82. (Hereinafter, Vansina, *Introduction à l'ethnographie du Congo*).
- 5 H. Beguin, 'A propos de la densité de la population dans la région de Yangambi (Congo)' in *Bull. Acad. Roy. Sci. O.M.*, 1961, VII, 6, pp. 934–935. (Hereinafter, Beguin, 'A propos de la densité de la population').
- 6 Vansina, *Introduction à l'ethnographie du Congo*, pp. 83–84.
- 7 O. Elskens, 'La production de l'huile de palmiste dans la région de Yangambi (District de Stanleyville)' in *Bull. Agric. Congo Belge*, 1913, IV, 3, p. 706, 709.
- 8 J. Jak, 'Van land en volk in den vreemde. Een en ander over de stam der Bambole in Belgisch Congo', I + II. 'De initiatie-ritus tot de Lilwa bij de Bambole', I + II in *Rijk H. Hart Jezus*, 1936, XXXV, p. 21. (Hereinafter, Jak, 'Van land en volk in den vreemde').
- 9 Anon., s.a. Information sent to us by Mr. Lema Gwete of the Institut des Musées Nationaux, Kinshasa, Zaïre (unpublished). (Hereinafter, Anon., s.a.). See also Documents Ethnographiques. Tervuren, Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale. A.P. Huys, Doc. ethn. no 836, 1934 (unpublished). (Hereinafter, Doc. ethn. no 836). See also J.S. Laurenty, *Les tambours à fente de l'Afrique Centrale*. Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1968, 2 vols., pp. 9, 48–49.
- 10 Anon., s.a.
- 11 H. Loir, *Le tissage du raphia au Congo Belge*. Tervuren: Annales du Musée du Congo Belge, 1935, p. 57, 59 + maps.
- 12 Doc. ethn. no 836.
- 13 The *konga* is a heavy copper ring, which is worn around the legs.
- 14 Jak, 'Van land en volk in den vreemde', p. 21, 23, 56. See also G.P. Murdock, *Africa, its Peoples and their Culture History* (New York, Toronto, London, 1959), p. 285.
- 15 G. Van der Kerken, *L'Ethnie Mongo. Histoire, groupements, sous-groupements, origines, visions, représentations et explications du monde, sociologie, économie, ergologie, langues et arts des peuples Mongo, politique indigène, contacts avec les peuples voisins*. Bruxelles: Inst. R. Col. Belge, Sect. Sc. Mor. & Polit., 1944, Mém. 8°, XIII, 2 vols., p. 352. (Hereinafter, Van der Kerken, *L'Ethnie Mongo*). See also Vansina, *Introduction à l'ethnographie du Congo*, p. 85.
- 16 Kalala Nkudi, 'Le lilwakoy des Mbole du Lomami: Essai d'analyse de son symbolisme' in *Les Cahiers du CEDAF*, Bruxelles, 1979, no 4, p. 32. (Hereinafter, Kalala Nkudi, 'Le lilwakoy').
- 17 Beguin, 'A propos de la densité de la population', p. 929.
- 18 Jak, 'Van land en volk in den vreemde', p. 23.
- 19 Van der Kerken, *L'Ethnie Mongo*, p. 354.
- 20 Jak, 'Van land en volk in den vreemde', p. 54, 55.
- 21 Ibid, p. 57.
- 22 Biebuyck, 'Sculpture from the Eastern Zaïre Forest Regions', p. 58.
- 23 Jak, 'Van land en volk in den vreemde', p. 54, 55.
- 24 H. Mathijsen, 'Tooverij en hekserij bij de Topoke en de Bambole' in *Aequatoria*, 1939, 2e jg., 4, pp. 46–48. See also Jak, 'Van land en volk in den vreemde', pp. 344–345.
- 25 Jak, 'Van land en volk in den vreemde', pp. 54–55.
- 26 Kalala Nkudi, 'Le lilwakoy', pp. 2–32. The information given here on the *lilwa* society is primarily based on the results of Kalala Nkudi's research, for this author

- did professional fieldwork amongst the Mbole over several months and he himself was initiated into the *lilwa*. The facts related by him seem more reliable to us than the data provided by the earlier sources and also reflect the situation at present.
- 27 As Kalala Nkudi ('Le *lilwakoy*', p. 13) correctly remarks, the age of seven to twelve attributed by V. Rouvroy ('Le "Lilwa"'. District de l'Aruwimi. Territoire des Bambole' in *Congo*, 1929, I, 5, p. 783. Hereinafter, Rouvroy, 'Le "Lilwa"') and Biebuyck ('Sculpture from the Eastern Zaïre Forest Regions', p. 56) to the candidates is excessively low considering the fact that the initiation rites to the *lilwa* consecrate the admission to adult life.
- 28 According to Rouvroy the newly-initiated men do not stay in the forest after the initiation rites are completed, but are returned to two houses, located on the outskirts of the village. The tenants of the neighbouring houses have to move, since no sound of what happens in the residence of the neophytes, may be heard by outsiders. The complex is surrounded by a high fence of palm-leaves so that no one but the assistants of the initiation leader can enter it ('Le "Lilwa"', pp. 784-787). Biebuyck adopts Rouvroy's statements ('Sculpture from the Eastern Zaïre Forest Regions', p. 56), while Carrington mentions that the teaching takes place in the forest near the village (J.F. Carrington, 'Lilwaakoi — A Congo Secret Society' in *Congo Mission News*, 1949, 145, p. 12. Hereinafter, Carrington, 'Lilwaakoi').
- 29 The *lilwa* members are naked not only during the first initiation rites, but also during all the *lilwa* activities which none of the uninitiated may observe. The Mbole associate nudity with the extra-human: it is believed to enable a person to come into contact with the world of the spirits and the souls of the deceased. This again emphasizes the exceptional and mysterious character of the *lilwa* (Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', pp. 14-16).
- 30 On the symbolism of these rites, see Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', pp. 2-32.
- 31 According to Kalala Nkudi there also exists a ritual institution called *otuku*, to which all Mbole women belong. The author's attempts to obtain some information about this institution remained fruitless ('Le *lilwakoy*', p. 8).
- 32 For fear of reprisals from colonial authorities, the Mbole have replaced the public hanging of offenders by poisoning them (Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', p. 21; see also Rouvroy, 'Le "Lilwa"', p. 787).
- 33 This apparatus essentially consists of a long flexible pole planted in the ground. To the upper end of this pole a cord is attached which is placed around the victim's neck. Another cord which pulls the pole down in a deflected position, is then detached so that the victim is projected into the air and strangled. Kalala Nkudi mentions the existence of a class of persons, who have the ritual charge of making this engine ('Le *lilwakoy*', p. 21). Unfortunately he does not specify this class by name.
- 34 Kalala Nkudi's informants maintain that during his race into the forest the candidate meets an albino woman or *lokake-lowali* (who is supposed to dwell in the forest after her death). Having had sexual relations with the candidate, she reveals to him the place where the object is concealed ('Le *lilwakoy*', p. 26).
- 35 In general the same rule applies to the succession of the political heads of the major lineages, who, after all, are but the *yeni* belonging to the eldest *letono* (Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', p. 20).
- 36 When exercising his functions, the *yeni* holds the *otono* in his hand. He uses it to separate people having a quarrel or in a ritual manner to prevent an undesired shower of rain (Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', p. 21).
- 37 A *ngila* is a kind of ape with long black hair (Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', p. 21).
- 38 Hanging is probably not practised any longer, but has been replaced by poisoning (Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', p. 21).
- 39 Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', pp. 2-32.
- 40 The question here remains whether this variation, although limited to such details as the hairstyle, must be attributed to the originality and creativity of the sculptor, to a historical evolution based on interrelationships with other ethnic groups, or simply to a change in fashion and taste within the community. Still another cause could be the wide geographical distribution of workshops.
- 41 See D. Fraser, *Primitive Art* (New York, 1962), p. 70. (Hereinafter, Fraser, *Primitive Art*). See also A. Maesen, 'L'Acquisition du Musée du Congo Belge' in *L'Eventail*, 1951, 63e ann., II, janv. (Hereinafter, Maesen, 'L'Acquisition du Musée du Congo Belge'). See also E. Leuzinger, *Afrikanische Kunstwerke. Kulturen am Niger. Handbuch zur Ausstellung*. Essen, Villa Hügel, 1971, p. 322. (Hereinafter, Leuzinger, *Afrikanische Kunstwerke*).
- 42 Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', p. 21. See also R.V. Abbeloos, 'De Sekte "Lilwa"' in *Band*, 1949, 8e jg., 8, p. 313. (Hereinafter, Abbeloos, 'De sekte "Lilwa"').
- 43 See Abbeloos, 'De sekte "Lilwa"', p. 313. See also Maesen, 'L'Acquisition du Musée du Congo Belge'. See also Leuzinger, *Afrikanische Kunstwerke*, p. 322.
- 44 Biebuyck, 'Sculpture from the Eastern Zaïre Forest Regions', p. 56.
- 45 These facts underline the strongly repressive character of the sanctions decided upon by the *lilwa* tribunal.
- 46 Rouvroy, 'Le "Lilwa"', p. 787. See also Biebuyck, 'Sculpture from the Eastern Zaïre Forest Regions', p. 58 and Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', p. 16, 30.
- 47 Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', p. 22. See also Abbeloos, 'De sekte "Lilwa"', p. 312.
- 48 Kalala Nkudi, 'Le *lilwakoy*', p. 22.
- 49 See Fraser, *Primitive Art*, p. 70. See also R.S. Wassing, *L'Art de l'Afrique noire* (Fribourg, 1969), pp. 156-157.

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See also E. Elisofon and W. Fagg, *La sculpture africaine* (London, 1958), p. 313. The fact that the Mbole believe that the statue houses the soul of the person it represents, combined with the fact that the statue in this particular case is used to gain assistance from that specific spirit, seems to confirm our impression that we are dealing here with a sort of ancestor-worship. The belief in the incarnation of the soul in the statue also implies that the rebirth of the souls of criminals is prevented.

- 50 Kalala Nkudi, 'Le lilwakoy', p. 24.
- 51 *ibid.*, pp. 21–22.
- 52 Rouvroy, 'Le "Lilwa"', p. 790.
- 53 See Abbeloos, 'De sekte "Lilwa"', p. 312 and Rouvroy, 'Le "Lilwa"', p. 788.
- 54 Kalala Nkudi, 'Le lilwakoy', p. 9, 21.
- 55 Rouvroy, 'Le "Lilwa"', p. 790, 795.
- 56 Carrington, 'Lilwaakoi', p. 11.
- 57 In our formal analysis we stated that the feet can also stand flat on the ground. Since this feature does not seem to have any *raison d'être* and can hardly be attributed to the technical inadequacy of the artist, it remains something of an enigma.
- 58 Carrington, 'Lilwaakoi', p. 11, 13.
- 59 Rouvroy, 'Le "Lilwa"', p. 792.
- 60 Carrington, 'Lilwaakoi', p. 13.
- 61 Kalala Nkudi, 'Le lilwakoy', pp. 18–19.
- 62 Carrington, 'Lilwaakoi', p. 11, 13.
- 63 J. Mestach, 1979, verbal communication.
- 64 P. Dartevelle, 1978, verbal communication.
- 65 *Oerkunsten van Zwart Afrika*. Catal. Studio 44, 1977. Text: Ph. Guimiot & L. Van de Velde, p. 76.
- 66 A.G. Claerhout, *Afrikaanse Kunst*. Nederlandse Stichting Openbaar Kunstbezit en Openbaar Kunstbezit in Vlaanderen, 1971, p. 11.
- 67 W. Bascom, *African Art in Cultural Perspective. An Introduction* (New York, 1973), p. 176.
- 68 Biebuyck, 'Sculpture from the Eastern Zaïre Forest Regions', p. 58.