



Kakulu ka Mpito figure

Not on display

Title/Description: Kakulu ka Mpito figure

Measurements: h. 275 x w. 105 x d. 70 mm

Accession Number: 603

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Africa

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1975

Until the late twentieth century, carvings produced among the Lega people of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo were made almost exclusively for use in the Bwami Society – a semi-secret group of initiates which existed in villages across the region in lieu of any centralised political authority. These circles of initiates included both men and women and were considered central to the preservation of a specific Lega communities' moral order. Within Bwami society, carvings such as this one played an important role in ritual of solidarity and enrichment since they served as visual prompts (or mnemonic devices) among initiates - used for recalling proverbs circulated orally between members and passed down between higher and lower-ranking initiates. These proverbs related to the proper moral conduct of Bwami members and of the community at large, covering everything from personal decorum to collective religious customs to interpersonal economic relations.

As the custodians of higher moral truths and greater social responsibilities, higher ranking members of the Bwami society had access to the most powerful sets of carved artworks, made of local ivory rather than wood. Such precious items were generally kept in shrines hidden away from the wider community. More recent and lower-ranking initiates, however, took charge of wooden artworks, which were used in public performances and were more readily visible. As one anthropologist described in the 1970s (following the revival of Bwami among the Lega in the post-independence period following its criminalisation in 1948, a selection of around 58 distinctive characters were portrayed in Bawmi society carvings – each embodying different virtues and expressing different moral messages in their individual forms and through their interaction with other characters. [1]

The figure depicted in this carving appears to be that of *Kakulu ka Mpito*, the 'Great Old One'. Though made of wood, *Kakulu ka Mpito*'s scalp is covered with a patch of monkey fur and his face is covered in white pigment. These features, combined with the figure's enlarged head and missing upper limbs, evoke the story of an unfortunate husband killed by a curse after being lured to a beer party and duped by his adulterous, pregnant wife [2]. In the series of ceremonies in which he featured in the final part, *Kakulu ka Mpito* (often accompanied by his unfaithful wife Wayinda) illustrates how senior Bwami must always be prudent and consider the consequences of their decisions before deciding on a particular course of action.

Theo Weiss, December 2021

[1] Daniel Biebuyck, *Lega Culture; Art, Initiation, and Moral Philosophy Among a Central African*

People (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 218-20.

[2] Elisabeth Cameron, 'Art of the Lega: Meaning and Metaphor in Central Africa.' *African Arts*, Vol. 35.2 (2002), 57 (Fig 23).

Further Reading

Daniel Biebuyck, 'Sculpture from the Eastern Zaire Forest Regions.' *African Arts*, 9.2 (1976) 8-80

Mary Nooter Roberts, 'The Inner Eye: Vision and Transcendence in African Arts', *African Arts*, 50.1 (2017), 68-9

Provenance

Purchased by Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Merton D. Simpson in 1975 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
