Society of Young Nigerian Writer

Yoruba Fact-Finder

Compilations of Yoruba History, culture and tradition

Compiled by:
Wole Adedoyin
Twins for the Yoruba people are considered a blessing and a burden at the same time (Ulrich 2). Twins double the financial burden of the family; at the same time they are considered to be extremely beneficial in bringing about blessings to the family. The modern explanation for the twin cult lies in the high rate of twin births among the Yoruba people (Peran & Smith 147). Forty-five of every 1,000 births result in twins; this is four times the number of twin births in the United States (Ulrich2). The high birth rate of twins combined with the high infant mortality rate are thought to have brought about a natural reverence for twins (Gillon 242). However, the legends of the Yoruba tell otherwise.

Twins were not always revered by the Yoruba people. Often, twins of poor families were put to death to ease the family's financial burdens. However, when the twins of wealthy families began to die, the Yoruba leaders became concerned and consulted Ifa. Through divination, Ifa discovered the killing of the twins was offending Shango (Ulrich 2), the God of Thunder (Perani & Smith 147). The oracle informed Ifa that the mother of twins must dance to Ibeji, the spirit of the twins, every five days (Ulrich 2).

"You are the ones who open doors on Earth.
You are the ones who open doors in Heaven
When you awaken, you provide money;
You provide children; you provide long life;
You, who are dual spirits." (Perani 147)
This song reflects the belief of the Yoruba people that twins occupy three worlds at once: the bush, the spirit world, and the world of the humans (Ulrich 2). The Yoruba relate the twins to the bush (the forest) by linking them to the Colobus monkey. This black and white monkey often bears twins and can be seen carrying them, one on her back and one against her belly, very much like the Yoruba women. Twins like the Colobus have human traits but are very unpredictable (Ulrich 2).

Song of Ibeji:

"Ibeji re, omo edun ibeji re, omo edun kere-kere-yan"

"Behold twins, children of the monkey. They do not die."

(Ulrich 2)

The last line of the song above is true in that the Yoruba people believe twins share the same soul (Perani & Smith 147). Upon the death of a twin, the mother commissions an ere figure. This figure is thought to provide a resting place for the deceased twin's soul (Gillon 242-44). If the ere figure is not provided, the Yoruba people believe the soul of the deceased will seek vengeance by bringing terrible misfortune to the other twin, or the entire family (Perani & Smith 147). Ere figures are carved as the same sex of the deceased twin, but as an adult (Ulrich 3). Often the family Ila marks (scarification) are included. If both of the twins die, two ere figures are carved (Gillon 244).

The ere ibeji are placed on the household altar. There they are fed and clothed just as the surviving twin is fed and clothed. This is thought to placate Shango. Ere ibeji figures are dedicated to Shango by the application of campowder. Shango is also known as Oko Ibeji, "the husband of twins" (Ulrich 3). The twins' connection to Shango can also be seen in the clothing
provided for the figures. Often tiny capes of cowrie shells are made for the figures (Perani & Smith 147). Thes capes, called Ewu Shango, are miniatures of the ones worn by priests during the Shango ritual (Ulrich 4). The cowrie shell symbolizes Shango in that he is the god of material wealth and the cowrie shell is an ancient form of money (Ulrich 4). Often there may be an addition of black beads around the waist of the ere ibeji figure. These black beads are thought to protect the twin from Abiku, the spirit of those born to die (Perani & Smith 148). When the Europeans introduced the uniform "seed beads" to Africa, the Yoruba people incorporated these into their beadwork (Gillon 239). Beaded capes found on ere ibeji figures are those of royal families (Perani 148). Beads are traditionally part of the royal regalia (Conner 2).

With the death of the mother, Ifa is consulted. Ifa summons the spirit of Ibeji, and the spirit is asked what should happen to the ere ibeji. Sometimes, Ibeji will order the figure to be buried with the mother; other times, the figure will be passed to another family member to be cared for (Perani & Smith 147).

Many modern Yoruba women no longer dance every five days to Ibeji, and the commission of ere ibeji is not necessary. Traditional carvings are being replaced by modern means. Photographs and plastic dolls are now being used as the resting place for deceased twins (Perani 148).