Society of Young Nigerian Writer

Yoruba Fact-Finder

Compilations of Yoruba History, culture and tradition

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TWO YORUBA SONGS IN PRAISE OF TWINS

(Courlander, 1973; Olaleye-Oruene, 1983).

**Fine looking twins, natives of Ishokun,**

*Descendants of treetop monkeys.*

*Twins saw the houses of the rich but did not go there,*

*Twins saw the houses of great personages but did not go there*

*Instead they entered the houses of the poor.*

*They made the poor rich, they clothed those who were naked.*

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**Majestic and beautiful looking twins, natives of Ishokun,**

*Let me find means of eating, let me find means of drinking.*

*Majestic and beautiful looking twins, come and give me*

*The blessing of a child.*
Ibeji Statuettes

Yorubas are the heirs of the prestigious artistic traditions that prevailed in the ancient kingdom of Benin and the sacred civilisation of Ifa. Yoruba traditional craftsmen have hence produced some of the most elaborate and classical examples of black African art (Bascom, 1973). Ibeji statuettes are among the best-known Yoruba wooden carvings. Although representing deceased babies, the latter are never referred to as dead. Rather they are said to “have travelled” or “gone to the market”. Ibeji effigies appear as wooden erect adult beings about ten inches tall. They stand in a
“hands on the hips” position, generally on a round or quadrangular baseplate.

Following this general pattern, they nevertheless show marked stylistic differences according to region of origin. These differences are especially apparent in the shapes of the heads, facial expressions, tribal scarring, and hairdos or head covers. These latter are often dyed in bright blue with indigo or even with dolly blue (Jantzen & Bertisch, 1993; Thompson, 1971). Many ibejis are partly covered with a crust of dried camwood powder. They may also present facial smoothing and a patina due to frequent ritual use. Very often, they are decorated with metal, cowrie-shell or pearl necklaces, bracelets and belts. The colours of these ornaments refer to deities such as Shango or Eshu whereas cowrie shells, which were used in the past as currency, remind the twins’ power either to bestow riches or to inflict misfortune (Massa, 1999). Some ibejis are enclosed in a large coat covered with eight rows of cowrie shells or decorated with brightly coloured pearl designs. In some regions this design may appear as a zigzag lightning pattern in honour of the god Shango (Thompson, 1971). In this context it is interesting to recall that worldwide, twins have been linked to thunder. Even in the bible, Jesus Christ called the twin apostles James and John “Boanerges” (boanergeV) meaning “sons of thunder” (Leroy, 1995).
Transatlantic Spread

The population of the West Indies and of the Eastern coast of South America largely originates from the previous African “Slave Coast” corresponding to the present-day coast of Nigeria and Benin. It is therefore not surprising that traditional Yoruba twin beliefs have been transposed in Latin America. Such is the case of Brazilian traditions of the Candoble and Macumba in the region of Salvador de Bahia and of the Umbanda in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. These traditions have maintained the Yoruba Orishas including the sacred Ere Ibeji. In the Umbanda, the sacred twins are assimilated to the Christian twin saints Cosmas and Damian (Figure 5). The latter are colloquially called “the two young men” and are celebrated at the end of September in a feast especially devoted to children (Zuring, 1977).
In Cuba, a legend of the Santeria belief tells how the twins born from Oshun, the goddess of water and pregnancy, saved the god Shango (see above). In this tradition, the god of twins is called Jimaguas and is represented by
two statuettes, male and female, united by their navels and
ritually used to cure the sick (Zuring, 1977).

Conclusion

Superstitions and customs pertaining to twins are universal
and often share converging features among cultures without
any mutual geographical or temporal contact (Leroy, 1995).
This would point to the twin cult as one of the earliest
religious beliefs that has been widely spread and diversified
along human history. In relation with their high frequency
and high perinatal mortality of twins, the Yoruba have
developed special beliefs and customs related to twins and
allowing, in particular, to ritualise the bereavement process
when one or both of the twins die.

References


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