



# **Cultic Powers of Yoruba Twins:** *Manifestation of Traditional and Religious Beliefs of the Yoruba*

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The birth of twins was believed by the earlier Yoruba communities to be an omen. Drastic measures were adopted in the form of infanticide, or, sometimes, banishment of the twins with their mothers. The ritual killings were gradually replaced by acceptance and reverence of the twins, and thus evolved the kinship cult of twins in which the orisa ibeji, a tutelary deity of twins, became part of the Yoruba pantheon. Twins could be identified in the community by their fixed names of Taiwo and Kehinde. The community prescribes occupations to the mothers, which is learned through consultation with the oracle. The usual forms of occupation, which reflect the nature of the twins, are trading in oil, beans, or clothing, or requesting alms. The orisa ibeji and, by association, the twins were attributed powers of fertility, prosperity, avenger, detector of thieves, and rainmaker. Propitiation and supplication with offerings and sacrifices are an integral part of the cult of twins.

**Key words:** Twins cult, Ibeji, Yoruba, Infanticide, Magic powers of twins

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## **INTRODUCTION**

From time immemorial, the birth of twins has inspired awe and wonder. Like any other unusual event in ancient societies, the community sought the most propitious form of dealing with the phenomenon and, through consultation with the oracle, discovered what actions to execute. When this phenomenon was deemed to be an omen, the means whereby its annihilation could be effected was adopted. But the oracle could pronounce that the incomprehensible which has inspired awe should become an object of worship and that sacrificial rituals should be performed for the purpose of propitiation and supplication.

This ambivalent attitude toward the twins forms the theme of this paper, in which I propose that the powers associated with the Yoruba twins evolve from this attitude which is a reflection of the traditional religious beliefs of the people. To date, the Yoruba appear to have the highest twinning rate in the world [6], four times higher than in Europe and even higher than in other ethnic groups of Nigeria [4].

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## ANCIENT BEHAVIOR TOWARD TWINS

According to an account given to me by an Onibeji (custodian of the twin statuettes, or *ibeji*), in ancient times when the birth of twins was announced, the news was dreaded, because it was believed that the event portended evil and in order to eschew the calamity which would ensue, drastic measures were adopted, the methods varying from community to community. The most common methods were a combination of ritual killing and banishment: 1) The mother and one or both twins were put to death either by ritual killing or by abandoning them to the mercy of the jungle. 2) When banishment was adopted, it was either temporary or permanent. In the case of the former, the mother was usually allowed to return to the community after a specified period either with one twin or alone. In the case of permanent exile, her offsprings may accompany her, as the sole objective of the banishment was to rid the community of the omen. The mothers were usually banished to twin-towns (on the outskirts of the village), so designated because they were set apart from the community for exiled twins and their mothers. Elaborate rituals of purification were performed for the benefit of the community and of the mother.

The Onibeji claimed that the reasons for this aversion could be seen in the cultural and traditional beliefs of the Yoruba. First, it was believed that there was a problem of paternity, as two infants must mean that there had been two fathers. Thus, the mother must have committed adultery either with an evil spirit or with another man. In either case, it would mean that she had been defiled, and the paternity dispute which would ensue would disturb the peace and the stability of the whole society. Secondly, the social structure of the community would be threatened if two people of similar age were accepted into a society where the principle of seniority was of great importance. Finally, multiple births were believed to occur in lower animals; particularly in species of monkeys that bear twins. By analogy human twins and their mother should be regarded as animals and therefore unfit to exist among humans.

## ADORATION OF TWINS

The practice of ritual killing was gradually abandoned (according to Harris [3] it still existed in the seventeenth century) and it is believed that the initial end of infanticide was localized but later became widespread. The period and reason for the acceptance of twins into the Yoruba community is a matter of conjecture. The homage of twins became ritualized and is widely observed even to the present time both in rural and urban areas among families where twins have been born. (My family has been observing the ritual since my twin sister and I were born, and the significance of the ritual eluded me until my research into the subject.) The adoration of twins was due to a number of factors, eg, the ambivalent feeling connected with their birth and death; twins were feared, and to escape from this fear, it was transformed into joy. Furthermore, twins were believed to be of divine origin and were regarded as the representatives of the twin-god (*orisa ibeji*), possessing supernatural powers and therefore subject to reverence. Finally, with the high incidence of infant mortality, it appeared prudent to accept the birth of two infants in the hope that at least one would survive infancy. When one twin died, a wooden statuette (called *ibeji*, the generic name for twins, and representing the deceased twin) was carved in the image of the deceased twin.

## YORUBA CONCEPT OF SOUL IN RELATION TO THE IBEJI

This concept evolves from the belief that twins possess one soul between the two of them, and with the death of one, the living twin could not be expected to live with half a soul.

By hypothesizing the *ibeji*, the deceased twin's half soul is believed to reside in the *ibeji*. The Yoruba distinguishes three separate souls.

*Èmí* (the breath) is the first type of soul. There are differing views on the *èmí* (breath, blood, heart, something that exists throughout the body). The general meaning was that the *èmí* is a man's spirit, the mysterious vital principle that distinguishes a living person from the dead.

*Èlédáa* or *Ori* is the second type of soul. A distinction is made between *orí* in the nonphysical sense, that is, the head in the "invisible" or "intangible" sense. Some claim that *orí* means the head and the brain, the "thinking part of the body." In the second sense, *orí* refers to one's destiny. If one is fortunate in life, it is due to a good *orí*. If one has many misfortunes, these are due to a bad *orí*. In this sense, *orí* also means "double," "partner," or "guardian spirit." Bascom [1] refers to the *orí* as the ancestral guardian soul "which resides in the head and is associated with the individual's destiny and with the Yoruba belief in reincarnation." Idowu calls the *orí* "the essence of personality, the personality-soul in man," and points out the complication which arises when the *orí* is conceived as "a semi-split entity in consequence of which it is at the same time the essence of personality and the person's guardian or protector."

*Òjiji* (the shadow) is the third type. According to Bascom [1], the shadow, *òjiji*, has no function during life; "it does nothing but follows the body about."

The *ibeji* is treated in an identical manner to the living twin; that is, it is clothed in similar garments and fed during meal times by brushing food against the lips, and it is carried around by the mother when the other twin accompanies her on visits to friends and relatives and when going to the market. When the living twin reaches maturity, the *ibeji* is handed over to the twin who then takes care of the *ibeji*. (In some societies this occurs after the initiation of the rites of passage. In my case, my *ibeji* was placed in my care by my mother when I was fifteen years old.)

## GENESIS OF YORUBA TWINS

The oral tradition transmitted to posterity forms the basis of the acceptance of the twins into the community and of their origin as descendants of monkeys, and it is embedded in the cult which encompasses the twins. The *oriki* (praise names) and taboo (that twins must not eat the meat of monkeys) associated with the twins cult also stems from this oral tradition, which involves a farmer and some monkeys.

The narrative, which is popular among the Yoruba to the present day, concerns a farmer of *Ishokun* (which later became *Oyo*) who would not tolerate his crops being consumed by monkeys from neighboring bush. He employed different tactics against the monkeys to avert further losses to his crops by hunting, and through vigil on the farm to frighten them off; but all to no avail. The monkeys, on the other hand, were successful in counteracting the farmer's measures by utilizing their supernatural powers, which were a manifestation of their divine origin. These powers were demonstrated by causing rainfall, distraction of the farmer's attention from one area of the farm, or becoming changelings to enforce their rights to the farmer's crops. And as a result of one of them becoming a changeling in the womb of one of the farmer's wives who was pregnant at the time of the confrontation, a series of *abiku* (children believed by the Yoruba to be destined to die in infancy) resulted from this substitution.

In the end, after the rejection of a *babalawo's* (seer) oracle that the farmer should allow the monkeys on his farm, he was compelled to resign himself to the prescription of the oracle when his wife suffered a series of infant mortalities which a second *babalawo* confirmed as being the retribution of the monkeys. After the cessation of the monkeys' slaughter, the farmer's wife gave birth to twins (the first in the area) and they survived infancy. The cult

surrounding the twins was believed to have originated at this stage when sacrifices and offerings decreed by the oracle were performed for the orisa-ibeji. The farmer in turn became prosperous, renowned far and wide, and was blessed with more twin offspring.

## FIXED NAMES

The Yoruba principle of seniority [1] and tradition of nomenclature [5] is reflected in the names given to twins, Taiwo and Kehinde. These are fixed names that are universal among the Yoruba. The principle of seniority is manifested by the fact that Taiwo (which means “Tò aye wo” (to taste the world) was given to the first of the twins, regarded as the junior one, sent before the senior one, Kehinde (“he who lags behind”), to see what the world was like. According to the system, it is only the senior who sends the junior on errands. Both names are applicable to both sexes.

The names of the twins are known as “oruko amuturunwa.” These are sets of names which the Yoruba believe to have been brought from the sky-heaven. The criteria used in giving such names are discernible in the condition in which the child was born. The names of other children born in a family where twins have been born are Idowu, the child who follows the twins, and Alaba, the child who follows Idowu.

## TWINS CULT: SUPPLICATION AND PROPITIATION

As twins are believed to be of divine origin, their parents fear the repercussion that would result from neglect. Thus, sacrificial rites are performed in the nature of gift offerings to the orisa ibeji every 8 days on the birthday of the twins. It is the mother of the twins who is expected to prepare the offerings (beans and palm oil) and to give some to her twins and then share the rest with the neighboring children. If she is unable to perform the rite, she could delegate the task to another member of the family. (Our mother did just that on a number of occasions, and the aunt who performed the rites in her place is now a mother of twins herself.) One of the reasons for offering beans is the fondness of the twins for beans and this is expressed in the twins’ song:

Epo mbe, ewà mbe o	There is palm oil, there are beans
Epo mbe, ewà mbe o	There is palm oil, there are beans,
Aiya mi ko ja o ni'ye	I am not afraid,
Aiya mi ko ja,	I am not afraid,
Lati bi ibeji	To give birth to twins
Epo mbe, ewà mbe o	There is palm oil, there are beans

The sacrifice must first be offered to Idowu (that is, the child next to the twins, whether he has yet been born or not) because he is regarded as “Esu behind twins.” Esu, also known as the Trickster, is a major orisa (deity) who is claimed to be the messenger of the gods. He is regarded as an avenger, mischievous, a deity of fate. The Yoruba always sacrifice to him before any orisa to enable the other orisa to receive their sacrifice (otherwise, as the force that could thwart any plan at the last minute, he could come in as an unforeseen element after all the gods have been pacified.) [8]

After the offering to Idowu, the orisa ibeji is offered his own through the twins who are his representatives. The orisa ibeji is the tutelary and a minor orisa in the hierarchy. These orisa are regarded as the principal subjects of Olurun (oni-orun, owner of heaven)

who is the Creator, the Supreme God who inhabits the realms of the universe. They collectively control or regulate the affairs and relations between the environment and the cosmic forces. After the initial offerings, children of the neighborhood share the rest. This cult of the twins is a family cult, because only the parents (normally the mothers) or relatives of the twins can perform the sacrifice. It is connected with both the birth and death of the twins as well as with the well-being of the family.

From this sacrifice, which is mandatory and which forms the basis of the cult, one could infer that the awe in which the twins are held as representatives of orisa ibeji is connected with the powers with which they are credited. In this case, the twins are feared because they are believed to possess certain powers that are manifested according to the nature of the treatment given to the twins. The powers are also reflections of the belief of the Yoruba that all orisa are endowed with some powers.

## MAGICAL POWERS

The magical powers of the twins form the basis of the oriki. "Oriki is a form of salutation in which the illustrious names, emblems and praiseworthy attributes of the person or deity are proclaimed, his deeds and exploits recalled" [2]. It is the most common type of Yoruba poetry which may be sung by professional bards or played by drummers. The association of twins with extraordinary powers is manifested in the belief of their powers of prosperity, healing, fertility, detecting of thieves, avenging, and rainmaking.

### Decreed Occupation and the Power of Prosperity

The birth of twins proclaims joy, happiness, good luck, and prosperity to the parents. Apart from the traditional mirth shown at the birth of all children, the birth of twins is an extra special occasion, because they are usually born to parents of limited means who, as a result of the birth, are expected to become rich. The wealth is the reward to the parents for the pampering shown to the twins through the sacrifices and offerings made to the orisa ibeji for the twins. The reward is also bound up with the obedience of the mother to the decree of the oracle consulted soon after the birth of twins, concerning her and the twins' employment in certain occupations. The preference of the twins to be born to poor rather than to rich parents is manifested in the oriki:

Èjìrẹ̀ wọ̀ ile Olówó kọ̀ lẹ̀	Twins saw the houses of the rich but did not go there
O wọ̀ ile ọ̀lọ̀lọ̀ kọ̀ yá'bẹ̀,	Twins saw the houses of great personages but did not go there
Èjìrẹ̀ okin ara Isokun	Twins, natives of Isokun
Ile alá́kísà I'ọ̀ tí kí wọ̀n	Instead they entered the houses of the poor
Èjìrẹ̀ sọ̀ alá́kísà dì aláṣọ̀	Twins made the poor rich
O sọ̀ alágbẹ̀ dì olóúnjẹ̀	They changed beggars into bread-winners
O sọ̀ òtòṣì dì ọ̀lọ̀rọ̀	They changed poor miserable persons into wealthy individuals
O sọ̀ 'Kini o se' dì Olokikí	They changed persona non grata into celebrities
Òkíkí owó òkíkí ọ̀mọ̀	With reputation of wealth and fecundity

The occupation of the mother is determined by the nature of the twins through consultation with the babalawo. The three common forms are 1) If the twins are dancing

twins (onijo), the parents will engage a drummer who will accompany the mother and the twins to the market place where she will dance to the music while carrying the twins in the traditional manner, that is, having one twin tied to her back and the other tied to her front. In some instances, the twins may be carried by young girls, with the twins tied to the back. These girls are usually from the same household as the mother and they would accompany her on this occasion. There is much dancing to the rhythm of the music of the drums like *dundun*, *Bata*, and sometimes a musical instrument called *şekere*. While dancing, the mother may sing this song:

Edun lo ni ki n jo	Edun(ibeji) compels me to dance
Emi ko ma şo pe n o jo	I have no wish to dance
Edun lo ni ki n jo	It is Edun who asks me to dance

2) The twins may be alate (requesting alms). On this occasion the mother and the twins will go to the market place of main streets and requests alms saying:

E ta ibeji loşe o	Make friends with twins
Eji a gbe o o	Twins will honour you
Eji a mu oja ya o	Twins will make your business profitable
Eji a şo nyin di olowo o	Twins will make you prosperous

3) The twins may be traders (*oşoja*) and so the mother is expected to sell any commodity specified, notably, palm oil, beans, or clothes. As a result of the remuneration from these activities, the parents become wealthy and this gives them great joy and happiness. It is generally believed that failure to comply with the prescription would result in the illness of the twins who could eventually die. The deceased twin or twins may punish the recalcitrant mother with illness or death.

### Power of Fertility

Although the cult of the twins is a kinship one, nevertheless, because of the power associated with it, supplication could be made to the orisa *ibeji* by a childless woman to be blessed with an offspring:

Èjiré okin ara Isokun	Majestic and beautiful looking twins, natives of Isokun
Jẹ ki nri jẹ ki nri mu	Let me find the means of eating Let me find the means of drinking
Èjiré òkín wa tẹ'wọ mi bọ osun ọmọ	Majestic and beautiful looking twins, come and give me the blessing of a child

The *onibeji* informed me that a number of women who visited the shrine of *orisa ibeji* and made supplication to be blessed with a child have later conceived and quite a large number have given birth to twins. He confirmed that at least five women in his neighborhood of Tokunbo have had twins and the remaining petitioners have also been blessed with offspring. Once the offerings have been accepted by the *orisa*, it is only a question of time before the desire is realized. So strongly is this belief held that mere association with twins or their mothers would enable a barren woman to conceive. Some friends of my family claimed that we were responsible for their good fortune of bearing twins after years of trying to start a family without success until contact with us realized their wish.

Èjìrẹ̀ òkín ma sai ba wọ̀n ya L'òdọ̀ mi      Majestic and beautiful looking twins, do not  
hesitate to come in my direction

### Power as Avenger

The ibeji could be used to avenge a wrong with the assistance of Sango, god of thunder and lightning, traditional medicine, and incantations. One procedure was described by Simpson [7] as follows: "Whatever is taboo to both Sango and Ibeji are rubbed on the ibeji figure with hot pepper. The petitioner says to Sango: 'Mr X (the prospective victim) asked me to give this to you. I know you don't eat it and he knows you don't eat it. This is the same Mr. X who asked me to paint your ibeji with pepper.' He then asks Sango to arrange the injury. A votive offering of ram must be made as soon as the person has been injured."

### Power of Detection

This power of tracking down thieves is widespread among the Yoruba but with variations with regard to regions. "One method is that of tying two ibeji figures together; palm oil is mixed with pepper and the mixture is rubbed on the figures which are then placed on Esu's shrine and a special preparation of traditional medicine is placed on top of Esu. The figures would remain in this position until the thief is caught, or punished through illness or death. Then the ibeji are removed from the shrine, washed and rubbed with camwood and a votive offering of cock, ekuru, and snails would be offered to the ibeji." [7].

### Power as Healer

The power of healing is manifested when the "ibeji emblem is washed in water and with certain plants which grow in water. A mixture of shea-butter, water, leaves, palm oil and juice of snails are made. The juice of the leaves is squeezed into the mixture and the leaves are used as sponges in washing the emblem. This water in which the ibeji has been washed would then be poured in the bath and anyone who bathes there would be cured of their illness." [7].

### Power as Rainmaker

Being descendants of monkeys (as shown by the genesis of twins), by association, the twins are endowed with the powers to cause rainfall after the observance of the appropriate ritual. The rites involved in rain making are elaborate and the uninitiated is excluded from gaining access to the knowledge.

Èjìrẹ̀ òkín ara Isokun

Majestic and beautiful looking

Ọmọ̀ Ẹ̀dun nṣere l'ori igi

Twins, natives of Isokun

Descendants of treetop monkeys

### CONCLUSION

The Yoruba twins are regarded as special children. The unusual event has become ritualized as is customary in the Yoruba community. As a result of the rituals, a kinship cult evolved. The object of the rituals, the twins, were assigned an orisa, orisa ibeji, the tutelary deity of the twins. In common with other deities in the Yoruba pantheon, powers

are attributed to the twins through their association with the orisa ibeji. But, although predominantly a family cult, the twins' powers are utilized for individuals outside the family and for the benefit of the community as a whole when the necessity arises. The rituals and cult of the twins are demonstrations of the socioreligious tradition of the Yoruba, and while it is exclusive to the twins, it is a reflection of the belief and practice of the Yoruba.

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