
Yoruba Customs and Beliefs Pertaining to Twins

Fernand Leroy¹, Taiwo Olaleye-Oruene², Gesina Koeppen-Schomerus³ and Elizabeth Bryan⁴

¹Overijse, Belgium

²Olabisi-Olaleye Foundation, London, UK

³SGDPRC, IoP, King's College, London, UK

⁴Multiple Births Foundation, London, UK

The Yoruba are an important ethnic group mainly occupying Southwestern Nigeria. Mainly for genetic reasons, this very large tribe happens to present the highest dizygotic twinning rate in the world (4.4 % of all maternities). The high perinatal mortality rate associated with such pregnancies has contributed to the integration of a special twin belief system within the African traditional religion of this tribe. The latter is based on the concept of a supreme deity called *Olodumare* or *Olorun*, assisted by a series of secondary gods (*Orisha*) while Yoruba religion also involves immortality and reincarnation of the soul based on the animistic cult of ancestors. Twins are therefore given special names and believed to detain special preternatural powers. In keeping with their refined artistic tradition, the Yoruba have produced numerous wooden statuettes called *Ibejis* that represent the souls of deceased newborn twins and are involved in elaborate rituals. Among Yoruba traditional beliefs and lore some twin-related themes are represented which are also found in other parts of the world. Basic features of the original Yoruba beliefs have found their way into the religious traditions of descendants of African slaves imported in the West Indies and in South America.

Geography, Population and History

The Yoruba area is mainly located in Southwestern Nigeria and in the East of adjacent Benin formerly known as Dahomey (see Figure 1) but Yoruba people have also spread to Togo and Ghana (Massa, 1999). The twenty five million people or so who speak the Yoruba language (belonging to the *Kwa* language family) represent one of Africa's largest ethnic groups of which the main city is Lagos, one of the most rapidly growing cities in the world with a population of 1.4 million in 1972, 10.6 in 1996 and a projected figure of 20 million by 2010. The origin of the Yoruba is somewhat obscure. Classical theories maintain that they originated from Egypt, Arabia or Nubia and that they settled in their present homeland long before the 12th century. However, studies of mtDNA indicate that in addition to their kinship with close neighbours such as Hausas and Ibos, they are genetically the most closely related to two Western African populations located in the Senegalese region (Mandenka, Songhai) as well as to Tuaregs (Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1993; Watson et al., 1996). According to Yoruba lore, they originally came from the ancient city of *Ife* where their almighty god *Olorun* also known as

Olodumare created mankind (Bolajildowu, 1973; Chappel, 1974; Radin, 1924; Stoll & Stoll, 1980).

The Yoruba chiefdoms were united under the supreme authority of the powerful *Alafin*, king of *Oyo*, until the beginning of the 19th century. The great *Oyo* kingdom was then thrown into confusion by internal battles and wars so that new smaller kingdoms were created, generating the major Yoruba subtribes that exist today alongside the original *Oyo* (Chappel, 1974).

In 1886 began the British colonial period which ended with the declaration of Nigerian independence in 1960. In 1966, the Biafra civil war involved the Yoruba, Hausa and Ibo tribes and led to political turmoil and military government until the return of Nigerian civilian rule in 1979.

The Traditional Yoruba Community

The family unit is of vital importance in the life of every Yoruba. As in many African societies, the concept of the family extends far beyond one's own parents, siblings, wife and children. It includes a whole clan often composed of more than a hundred people among which mutual assistance is compulsory. The head of this extended family is the clan elder called *Bale* (Mobolade, 1971). Within the clan, the senior is always superior to the junior. The former, however, has the obligation to support the junior. If needed, he must, for instance, take over the role of the junior's father (Stoll & Stoll, 1980).

The next level of Yoruba social organisation is the village community assembling several clans that are closely linked to each other in a brotherly way. A number of village communities combine in the form of a principal Yoruba tribe occupying a given area (Figure 1). At the head of each tribe reigns a king called *Oba* who used to deal with supraregional matters. Nowadays, the *Obas* no longer have a say in official policy making although they are still honoured and respected as traditional rulers. Beaded crowns are worn by the *Oba* kings during festivities to emphasise their spiritual powers and royal lineage (Olaleye-Oruene, 1983).

Address for Correspondence:

F. Leroy, 18, Marnix av. 3090 Overijse, Belgium. Email: f.leroy@wanadoo.be

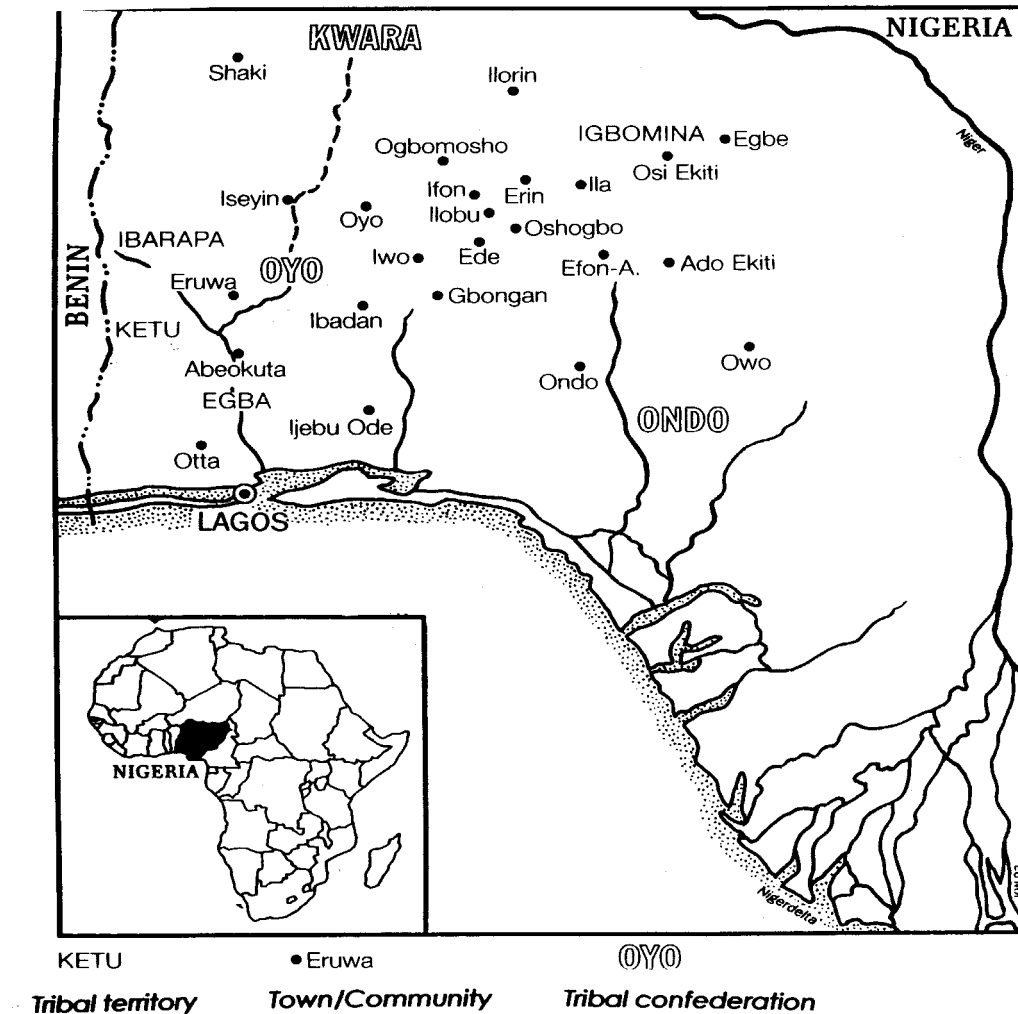


Figure 1

Map of Yorubaland in Nigeria (adapted from "Doppel Leben — Ibeji" by Jantzen and Bertisch, 1993).

Yoruba Religious Beliefs

Within today's Yoruba religious affiliations, more than 40% of the population are allied to Islam, less than 40% are Christians with the remaining 20% exclusively practising the traditional animist Yoruba religion. However, most Yoruba people belonging to the Islamic or to the Christian faith also adhere in one way or another to the traditional religious beliefs. The latter are based on the immortality of the soul and on its reincarnation, which are both essential to the *ibeji* twin belief.

Besides the creator *Olorun* or *Olodumare* the Yoruba pantheon is diversified into numerous gods or *Orishas*. The resemblance with the realm of ancient Greek mythology justifies the designation of the Yorubas as the "Hellenes of Africa" (Bascom, 1973; Chappel, 1974; Mobolade, 1971; Thompson, 1971). The main *Orishas* are (Courlander, 1973; Stoll & Stoll, 1980):

Shango: god of thunder and lightning whose emblem is the double axe (Yoruba territory is subject to the

second highest frequency of thunderstorms in the world, after Java);

Shopona: the god of smallpox, very powerful and much feared;

Eshu: the troublemaker, the magician and sorcerer who has many faces and may behave either favourably or balefully;

Ogun: god of iron and war and anyone who works with iron (smiths, hunters, carvers, taxi drivers, etc.) is a worshipper of *Ogun*;

Obatala: *Olorun*'s plenipotentiary who created the cripples while being drunk.

Besides these main figures, there are many secondary *Orishas*.

The belief in reincarnation is linked to the Yoruba ancestor belief. In Yoruba religion it is thought that about two generations after death, every human soul has a chance to return to earth in the body of a newborn, mostly within the

same family. The welfare of any family is entirely dependent on that of its ancestors. Therefore, regular prayers are said and sacrificial gifts are laid in front of a special family shrine devoted to the ancestors (Jantzen & Bertisch, 1993; Stoll & Stoll, 1980; Thompson, 1971).

As in other African social frameworks, the Yoruba have developed select and secret religious communities endowed with strong powers based on the use of black magic and powerful drugs. The most prominent of these groups is the *Ogboni* organisation which, in the past, could even force an offender to drink a cup of deadly poison.

In their very popular festival that takes place once a year, the *Egungun* worshippers represent the spirits of the departed by masks, in order to connect the living to the dead. Other such organisations are the *Gelede* and *Epa* societies which are well known for their display of elaborate masks (Thompson, 1971).

Twins in Yoruba Society

In traditional African societies, twins were considered of preternatural origin and raised emotional reactions oscillating from fear and repugnance to hope and joy (Leroy, 1995). In ancient times, the Yoruba used to reject and even sacrifice newborn twins (Leroy, 1995). Strangely enough, historical scales were tipped so that twins are nowadays not only well accepted but welcomed, their birth being an occasion of great rejoicing. A feast will be organised for the whole community and even for neighbouring villages if the twins are the children of a prominent member of the tribe (Chappel, 1974; Stoll & Stoll, 1980).

It is believed that twins are able to bestow happiness, health and prosperity upon their family. However, since they can also bring about disaster, disease and death, they will be treated with all due respect, loving and care. Their upbringing is therefore far more permissive than that of other children (Stoll & Stoll, 1980).

The first born twin, whether a boy or a girl, is always called *Taiwo*, meaning 'having the first taste of the world', whereas the second is named *Kehinde*, meaning 'arriving after the other'. Although being born first *Taiwo* is considered as the younger twin. His senior *Kehinde* is supposed to send out his partner to see what the outside world looks like. As soon as *Taiwo* has given a signal by crying, *Kehinde* will follow. *Kehinde* is supposed to be more careful, more intelligent and more reflective, while *Taiwo* is believed to be more curious and adventurous, but also more nonchalant (Olaleye-Oruene, 1983; Stoll & Stoll, 1980).

On the third day after the birth of twins, a visit is paid by the parents to the *Babalawo*, the *Ifa* priest of the community. Through the interpretation of the *Ifa* oracle which includes no less than 1,600 sayings, he is able to drive out whatever evil spirits may threaten the newborn twins (Chappel, 1974; Courlander, 1973; Thompson, 1971). He will dedicate the twins to the *Orisha Ibeji* god of twins and if deemed necessary will appoint for them an additional patron such as *Eshu* or *Shango*. Contrary to these latter prominent deities, the specific god of twins is a minor *Orisha* who is never figuratively represented.

The *Babalawo* communicates to the mother a series of instructions on how to treat her twins: which colours they

should wear or avoid, which food is recommended or prohibited, which animals are dangerous for them, etc. (Olaleye-Oruene, 1983; Stoll & Stoll, 1980). The powers of the *Babalawo* included the ability to give the order to let one of the twins starve to death if he was thought to be possessed by evil spirits that could not be exorcised. This custom is a reminder of the theme of "the good and the bad twin" which is part of the mythical beliefs of many archaic tribes (Leroy, 1995).

The Ibeji Belief System

As the Yoruba believe that twins share the same combined soul, when a newborn twin dies, the life of the other is imperilled because the balance of his soul has become seriously disturbed. To counteract this danger a special ritual is carried out. After consulting the *Babalawo*, an artisan will be commissioned to carve a small wooden figure as a symbolic substitute for the soul of the deceased twin. If both twins have died, two of these figures are made (Figure 2; Jantzen & Bertisch, 1993; Mobolade, 1971; Stoll & Stoll, 1980). These effigies are called *Ere ibeji* (from 'ibi' = born and 'eji' = two; *ere* means sacred image). By virtue of his immortal soul hosted by his *ibeji*, the departed twin



Figure 2
Pair of male *ibejis* from the region of Igbomina (photograph by Hugues Dubois, Brussels/Paris).

remains as powerful as the living one. The *ibeji(s)* will have to be cared for by the parents or later on by the surviving twin. Therefore, these figures are symbolically washed, fed and clothed on a regular basis, according to a popular Yoruba saying “*dead ibeji expenses are expenses for the living*” (Courlander, 1973). According to these customs, the mother enjoys certain privileges even if both her twins have died (Stoll & Stoll, 1980).

Yoruba people happen to exhibit the highest twinning rate in the world (Figure 3). In Caucasian populations, the tendency for dizygotic twinning has been found to be mainly hereditary (Meulemans, 1994). According to Nylander (1979), its high frequency among Yoruba people might also depend on dietary factors such as the consumption of special species of yams containing oestrogenic substances. Because of a high rate of premature delivery and the lack of adequate medical care and health infrastructures in traditional Nigeria, the perinatal mortality of twins used to be very high (Leroy, 1995). This explains why great numbers of *ibeji* statuettes have been produced in Yorubaland and that they may have accumulated on the domestic altar of certain families (Stoll & Stoll, 1980).

From the anthropological point of view, the *ibeji* belief provides a means of helping Yoruba people to cope emotionally with this high perinatal loss of twin babies (Leroy, 1995). At least once a year in some areas, Yoruba mothers of deceased twins dance with their twin effigies, either held tightly in the palms of their hands or tucked in the wrapper about their waist (Figure 4). On these occasions the mothers will also sing special songs in praise of the twins (Thompson, 1971). Some of these songs emphasise the belief that twins are related to colobus monkeys, the flesh of which they are expressly forbidden to consume. One of the popular Yoruba myths tells how twins came to earth as the consequence of the confrontation of a farmer with the monkeys in the ancient area of Ishokun (Courlander, 1973).

Two Yoruba songs in praise of twins (Courlander, 1973; Olalaye-Oruene, 1983).

Fine looking twins, natives of Ishokun,

Descendants of treetop monkeys.

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

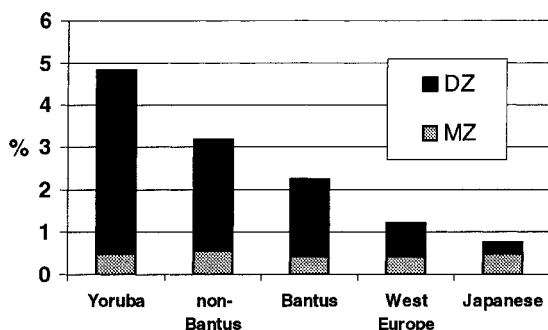


Figure 3

MZ and DZ twinning rates in Yoruba and other ethnic groups (see Leroy, 1995).



Figure 4

Dancing mothers of deceased twins (from *Black Gods and Kings* by Thompson, R.F., 1971; with permission).

*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.

*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*” (βοανεργες) 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).



Figure 5
Umbanda booklet on Cosmas and Damian (from 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.

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