The Yoruba *Ibeji* Sub-Culture

The contributions of Yoruba people to the advancement of art, drama, literature, folklore and fabric design are commendable, but where they generate the most intrigue is in the rate at which they give birth to twins, *Ibeji*. Boasting a twin birth rate of 4.5-5 percent, the Yorubas are statistically ahead of any other ethnic or racial group worldwide, resulting in the creation of socio-religious and artistic belief systems that inform this phenomenon.

With a population of over 25,000,000, the Yorubas constitute the second largest ethnic group in Nigeria, and mainly occupy the southwestern portion of the country. Large Yoruba communities also reside in the West African nations of Benin Republic, Togo and Ghana.

Governed by unique rules and practices that are strictly adhered to, the Yoruba world of *Ibeji* has evolved into a sub religio-cultural entity within the larger Yoruba worldview. Unlike other cultures, the twin that emerges first from the womb is considered by Yorubas to be the younger of the two. Whether male or female, this twin is named *Taiwo*, which literally means, "experiencing the first taste of the world." Allegedly curious and laid-back, Taiwo is believed to be directed by the older twin, *Kehinde* (also male or female) to explore the world outside the womb and confirm whether it is okay to come out. Taiwo's cry, after he or she emerges, is a sign to the older twin that it is safe to come out; Kehinde then makes his or her way out of the womb. Kehinde, which means "comes last," is considered to be wiser and more cautious than his or her younger sibling.

With the remarkably high rate of twin births among the Yorubas, twins are revered and perceived as a sign of fertility. They are also believed to possess powers over wealth, health and happiness, as well as over suffering and destruction. For the latter reason, care is taken to accord them substantial respect, love and care.

Yoruba people typically celebrate the birth of twins in elaborate ceremonies that involve eating, drinking, singing, making music and dancing. The festivities are even more lavish when the twins are born into royalty or to prominent members of the community.

It is common for parents who practice indigenous Yoruba religions to seek the blessings of the *Babalawo* (the divination priest) three days after their twins are born. The *Babalawo* drives out any evil spirits that may harm the children and educates the parents on

how to raise them. This includes among others, instructions on the color and type of clothing or jewelry to wear them, the foods that they should eat and the animals they should avoid.

Because Yorubas believe that twins share one soul, if one twin dies at a young age the balance of the soul is upset and thrown into disarray. Subsequently, a ritual is carried out to reestablish harmony and balance between the souls. To do this, the *Babalawo* would direct a renowned carver to sculpt a small figure that symbolizes the dead child. In the rare instance that both twins die, the carver recreates two figures. After the carver completes his task, the souls of the dead twins are transported into the figures and housed there. These figures are called *ere ibeji*, which essentially means, "the sacred image of twins." Ibeji figures are believed to possess as much powers as the twins they represent, and are therefore treated with tremendous respect. Like real children, these statues are bathed, *fed* and clothed. They are particularly special to mothers who pamper them and keep them close to their beds, occasionally rubbing them with red wood powder in order to give them a glossy look. They are caressed frequently and their birthdays are celebrated with rituals and prayers.



Carving of Yoruba Twin Figures

Source: "Yoruba Ere-ibeji." Rand African Art. N.d. Web. 4 Apr. 2013

The head of the Ibeji figure is about one-third the size of its body because the head is where the spirit resides. Often depicted as adults, these figures are adorned with the type of scarifications that are prevalent in Yoruba culture while full-sized breasts are carved on female figures. The image negates the notion of death at a young age and suggests living to adulthood. Sometimes the figures hold symbolic items like shells or beads, which invoke certain gods or indicate wealth.

Although some have speculated that the large consumption of yams, which contain estrogenic substances, is responsible for the high birthrate of twins in Yorubaland, the truth is that there is yet to be a scientifically proven explanation for this phenomenon. After all, the intake of yams among other Nigerians and West Africans is no less frequent than it is among the Yorubas.

-- Philip U. Effiong

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