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## The Trouble with Twins: Image and Ritual of the Yoruba ère ibejì

### ABSTRACT

The Yoruba peoples of southwest Nigeria, West Africa – many of whom have linked the phenomenon of human twin birth with instability, disruption and the unnatural – see twins as a cause for both anxiety and celebration. Yoruba twin sculptures [ère ibejì] are a sculptural and ritual form of 'working' on twins to manage the threat they pose to the everyday realm of the family and to the wider society. The rituals associated with twin sculptures are a means of incorporating the dangerous power of the twins into a meaningful sphere of human action in a way that celebrates and copes with their powerful presence. This essay looks at the 'trouble' of Yoruba twins by analysing the ritual, belief and image-making practices surrounding them, and, in a reading informed by René Girard's 1977 text *Violence and the Sacred*, by showing how ère ibejì touch on issues of social distinction and violence.

A photograph taken in 1983 by Marilyn Houlberg shows a woman sitting on a wooden seat in the Yoruba town of Ila Orangun in Nigeria (Fig. 1). On her lap the woman holds an old photograph representing herself and her twin brother as children.<sup>1</sup> At first glance there seems nothing unusual about the framed image, which like many photographs of twins, shows the siblings with similar poses, similar clothing and identical faces. The circumstances of the image's production, however, set it apart from most conventional family photographs. After the boy twin had died his parents commissioned an image of their two children from the Simple Photo studio in Ila Orangun in which the surviving girl twin was photographed twice, once in female clothing and again in male clothing, on a single glass plate negative. The line separating the two exposures was then elided by the photographer to make it appear as if the two live twins are seated next to each other.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, it is an image of one person standing for an image of two people. Although the photograph functions as a form of memorial or remembrance, from a Western standpoint it strikes one as inappropriate; after all, it is not an image of the twins at all, but a picture of the surviving twin, and could presumably serve no useful purpose as a true memorial of the deceased male twin. The image is also unsettling because neither the concept of "one" nor that of "two" satisfactorily renders the subject of this photograph; it is both and neither. Human beings' faces, moreover, are not supposed to be completely identical, unlike the product of the camera which produced this image. As C. Angelo Micheli has argued, in reference to the broader tradition of double portraiture in West Africa, such photographs 'achieve disturbing likenesses' through 'symmetric composition and rhetorics of poses which juxtapose or combine them, leading to fusion or even confusion.'<sup>3</sup> In spite of this disturbing quality, the photographer and the twins' parents evidently saw value in this repetition that seems to rob its subject of

1. A different print of the photograph representing the twins is reproduced in Sprague, 1978, p. 56, fig. 10. Simple Photo, *Ere Ibeji Twin-Cult Photograph*, late 20th century. Gelatin silver print matted with border, 40.8 x 50.8 cm. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, inv. No. 83:098:022.

2. Sprague, 1978, p. 57. For an interesting discussion of Yoruba twin photographs concerned with different issues to those dealt with here, see Oguike, 2002, pp. 576 - 79.

3. Micheli, 2008, p. 72.



Fig. 1. Marilyn Houlberg, *Twin girl (survivor, holding double exposure photograph representing herself and her deceased twin brother)*. Ila Orangun, Nigeria. 1983. Photograph, Marilyn Houlberg Collection, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, EEPA 2005-0002-01289

identity, even as it intensifies and splits it. We are faced with something different to a simple memorial, and/or a different notion of personhood and representation to that encountered in European culture. The apparent gulf between Western and Yoruba conceptions of subjectivity and commemoration suggested by this image raises an important issue of interpretation: can a Western viewer's aesthetic responses be relevant to understanding such an image or do such responses need to be put aside to reach a more accurate and informed perspective? To answer this question, an understanding of the representation of twins in Yoruba art is required.

The Yoruba represent and commemorate twins, those exemplary living doubles, in a variety of different ways. Five years before this photograph was taken, three Yoruba women in Ajilete, Egbado carried statuettes representing their deceased twins close to their bodies, and danced in a household ceremony for twins. One woman made cradling actions with her hands, with the statuettes tucked into her wrapper. Another cradled the images in her palms, holding them upright. A third joined in, more vigorously. They all rocked side to side.<sup>4</sup> One of the women finally handed one of the images to a friend and bent over with the other one, bringing it close to and parallel with the ground, in a sweeping motion first to the left and then to the right.<sup>5</sup> Of this ceremony, Agbeke of Ajilete is quoted as having said: 'We are begging the twins not to trouble us, we are saying *mo degbe O!* - I prostrate myself! - as the royal wives do before the king.'<sup>6</sup> This prophylactic aspect of the ceremony is not unusual in Yoruba rituals that deal with the dead. All Yoruba ancestors must be respected with the appropriate rituals. However, twins in Yoruba culture have a special power reserved to them; they are thought to be especially dangerous, even while alive. Although in recent times twins have come to be looked upon more as a cause for rejoicing than of fear, for the Yoruba, the phenomenon of twins remains a source of ambivalence, accompanied by equal amounts of anxiety and celebration.<sup>7</sup> This essay looks at the 'trouble' of Yoruba twins by analysing the ritual, belief and image-making practices surrounding them, and, in a reading informed by René Girard's 1977 text *Violence and the Sacred*, by showing how Yoruba twin sculptures [*ère ibejì*] touch on issues of social distinction and violence. Through this reading, I will demonstrate that the troubling nature of the twins photograph taken at the Simple Photo studio for a non-Yoruba viewer is not a misreading but rather can bring us closer to an appreciation of the unsettling significance of the *ère ibejì* figures for Yoruba peoples.

## I.

The best known works of art relating to Yoruba twins are the carved twin figures (Figs 2-7). The figures are between 21 and 37 centimetres high, carved in wood, in the form of a human figure of either sex, possessing genitalia and elaborate headdresses. Sometimes differences in head ornament between a pair reflect gender; other times, the ornament is the same for both. They are often naked, although some are partially clothed. The heads are large in proportion to the body, making up to as much as one-third of the total height. The figures are usually adorned with accessory beads and cowry shells, at times even vests made of cowries. The arms are always held straight

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4. Thompson, 1971, p. 77, figs. 14-19.

5. Thompson, 1971, p. 78, fig. 20.

6. Thompson, 1971, p. 78.

7. Leroy *et al.*, 2002, p. 134.



down close to the body as if standing to attention, leaving interstices between the arms and torso. The hands are shown either attached to the legs, resting together on the stomach in the front, or in certain areas, placed on the hips. Eyes, nose, mouth and ears are indicated by prominent shapes in relief. Markings on the face, *ila*, that indicate social or clan affiliations, may be present. All the figures have a base that is part of the overall design of the sculpture carved from one piece of wood, and can be either rectangular or circular, or simply an extension of the feet of the figure, which allows them to stand up independent of any other support. In some examples the feet are shown wearing sandals. A recurrent feature is the abrasion of the face during ritual. Washing the figure in coarse black soap is part of the regular practice that follows the arrival of the twin figure into the house, as are feasts in which the *ibejì* is fed by rubbing its mouth with food. This leads to the obliteration of the facial features seen in some examples. This erasure points to the poverty of an analysis that fails to take into account the use of the figures in ceremony. An examination of formal aspects of the twin figures needs to be informed by a study of the rituals that apply to them and their living counterparts.

The birth of Yoruba twins is itself a special event, marked in ritual. It is normal practice in Yoruba societies to take all infants to a diviner who determines the baby's nature, its name, and its impact on the family. These events will often prescribe certain actions for the parents.<sup>8</sup> Val Olayemi relates that the parents may be asked to make a sacrifice to the twin deity, or that the mother should dance in the market for alms.<sup>9</sup> The reason for these instructions is that the twins are regarded as divine beings capable of bringing affluence or misery to their parents. Their wishes with regard to the parents must be divined and obeyed. As Mobolade relates, 'In order to cure or prevent what may result from the twins' indignation because of the improper care given to them by their parents, the *ibejìs* are usually well brought up and deified by their parents.'<sup>10</sup> Upon their death, the same conditions apply.

If one or both of the twins die, a divination priest is consulted who prescribes if a carving is needed for the spirit of the deceased twin. The elected carver then places a sacrifice at the base of the *ire ona* tree (that used for making the figure). Although only one figure is required to commemorate a dead twin, when both twins die, two figures are created. The faces of the figures are expected to be the same, even if the twins were non-identical.<sup>11</sup> When the sculptor has finished the carving he invokes the spirit of the deceased twin by applying oil, butter and concoctions of leaves to the figure. When the parents arrive to collect the figure, they bring food for the carver. The figure is placed before a shrine and a sacrifice is offered. The mother then offers a prayer to the twin, tucks the figure into her wrapper, and dances and sings an *orin ibejì*.

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8. Drewal, 1992, p. 55.

9. Olayemi, 1971, p. i.

10. Mobolade, 1971, p. 15.

11. Lawal, 2008, p. 35.



Fig. 2. Unknown Yoruba artist (Nigeria), *Standing Male Figure (Ère Ìbejì)*, late 19th or early 20th century. Wood, 24.5 x 7 cm, Brooklyn Museum, Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund, inv. No. 22.1459.

Henceforth, the images are installed in a shrine in the home of the parents, and the mother makes offerings to the figure by applying camwood powder, indigo and white chalk to its surface. This activity complements the ritual feeding, washing and care that represents intense motherly devotion. Beads and cowries are attached to the waist, neck, ankles and wrists of the figure. These may refer to the particular deity that the mother worships. One of these is Aro, who prevents the mother's future children from early death. Bangles [*ide*] on certain figures are an appeal to Aro to allow future children to remain on earth. Some figures are clothed in dresses, jackets and hats. As mentioned above, washing the figure in coarse black soap is part of the regular practice that follows the arrival of the twin figure into the house, as are feasts in which the *ibejì* is fed by rubbing its mouth with food, which leads to the obliteration of the facial features seen in some examples. There is some evidence that the food and clothing that a living pair of twins accepts are to be identical. This is continued when one of the twins dies by offering the same clothes and food to the statuette and the surviving twin.

It is interesting to compare a normal Yoruba funeral and the deceased twin ritual to get a sense of the specificity of the latter. Normal funerary ceremonies involve the relatives and friends of the deceased parading around the town with musicians.<sup>12</sup> These parades may include an image of the deceased.<sup>13</sup> In such cases, the images used do not become permanent shrines of the dead person; unlike the *ibejì* figures, the effigy may be destroyed or just left to perish.<sup>14</sup> The *ère ibejì* differ from these examples in that there is a regular, ongoing relationship to the deceased twin that is manifested in ritual practice referring to a specific individual and not just a mythic ancestor. While the word *ibejì* refers to the name of a deity as well as to the specific individuals, twin figure rituals are distinct from other funerary and death-related rites: there is an importance placed on maintaining a steady observance of ritual for an individual *ibejì* that other deceased figures do not receive.<sup>15</sup> The *ère ibejì* are not just memorials of the dead; they are the physical focus of the sacrifices and rituals that must be performed to maintain a balance that the twins have disturbed. Although there is evidence to suggest that these practices have been declining among Yoruba peoples in recent years, for others the rituals still have meaning and purpose.<sup>16</sup> To ask about the significance of the *ère ibejì*, therefore, is to ask the same question of the practices surrounding them. One way of answering this is to examine the rationale for the practices, the beliefs in which they are grounded.

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12. As Ositola explains, this performance is necessary, otherwise 'the deceased who is joining the ancestors will be concerned and unhappy - and be wandering - because he has not been remembered.' Drewal, 1992, p. 42.

13. For example, in Imosan in 1986 a photograph was held aloft by the performers. In the 1960s a carved effigy was used, dressed in the clothes of the deceased. Lawal, 1977, p. 52.

14. Egungun masks may also represent the deceased, not in masquerade, but in a funeral context and reassure the deceased's family: Drewal, 1992, pp. 212-13, n. 1.

15. Abraham, 1962, p. 266.

16. Although a Yoruba woman identified as Madame D. recently argued that 'Most of our people are longer giving importance to the care of twins', another noted of her deceased twin sister that 'since I have given her due respect and recognition, I have been living in abundance.' See Renne, 2001, p. 69, 74.

## II.

In 1968 Onikpe Adesomi, Olufunso Adesomi, Sikeade Akinbade and Apeke Adeyanju took their living twins to Ibadan and sang in public for alms, as they were told to do by Ifa, the god of divination. They were well dressed and danced as they sang to the accompaniment of a *dundun* drummer:

I greet you all.  
My twins bear no malice to anyone.  
I greet you all.  
My twins bear no malice to anyone.

Taye greets those who are bent over,  
Kanyinde greets those who are seated.  
May you never lose your grown-up children.  
May the Lord never let you die in childbirth.

...  
My husband despised me and went to the ocean;  
My lover despised me and went to the lagoon.  
When they returned they found me with twins.  
My husband was full of remorse and so was my lover.

...  
I plucked no magic leaves to teach me songs;  
I ate no memory charms to prod my memory;  
The twins came with no effort on my part.  
O my Creator save me [from my detractors]  
My fame has spread.  
Children are the essence of life.

.....  
I dread wagging tongues,  
I dread human beings.  
Mother bore no one but me alone.  
I dread wagging tongues,  
I dread human beings.

.....  
Ejire Mobolane!  
Affluent twins!  
I will throw my lot in with the twins.  
Ejire Mobolane!<sup>17</sup>

This text reveals the ambivalence with which twins are viewed in Yoruba life. The opening lines assure the listeners that the twins are benevolent. The second verse consists of greetings and well-wishing. The next verse claims that the twins are the offspring of neither the woman's lover nor her husband, broaching the theme of infidelity, and pointing towards the twins' miraculous origins. Later verses deal with defamation and allow the mother to disassociate herself from the phenomenon of twin birth. The fact that *ibejì* evoke these subjects demonstrates their ability to signify both fortune and disruption in a broad sphere of social life.

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17. Olayemi, 1971, *passim*.



Fig. 3. Unknown Yoruba artist (Nigeria), *Female Twin Figure (ère ibejì)*, date unknown. Wood, with mound base, long breasts, scarifications, tall coiffure, and strands of beads, 28.6 x 8.3 x 7.6 cm, Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gift of Rod McGalliard, inv. No. 1990.14.129





Fig. 4. Unknown Yoruba artist (Nigeria), *Female twin figure (ère ibejì)*, date unknown. Wood with scarifications, bases with zig-zag carving, plaited coiffure, strands of blue grass beads, and pigment, 22.9 x 9.2 x 6 cm, Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gift of Rod McGalliard, inv. No. 1990.14.123.

Twins are thought of as dangerous figures, associated with potential misfortune, as well as affluence. Ritual practices, including *ibejì* praise songs, can be viewed as a means of simultaneously celebrating and coping with their powerful and disturbing presence. While the *orin ibejì* uses words and dancing to perform this function, the *ère ibejì* are a sculptural and ritual form of “working” on the twins to manage the disruption they pose to the everyday realm of the family and the larger society.

The birth of twins suggests the unusual. Although twin births are relatively common among Yoruba peoples, with almost 5% of births resulting in twins, compared to just over 1% in Western Europe, a strong sense of anomaly still attaches to them.<sup>18</sup> This is connected to the Yoruba belief that everyone on earth has a spiritual double. In the case of twins, that double has been born onto earth rather than remaining in the spirit realm, and as there is no telling which is which, both of the twins must be treated as sacred.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, as Babatunde Lawal argues, ‘though they are physically two, twins are spiritually one.’<sup>20</sup> One of the ways in which the Yoruba represent this anomalous nature of twins is by equating them with the Colobus monkey, known as *edun*. This is reflected in sung greetings to the monkey, of the type used by hunters:

O Colobus Monkey,  
Whose young are born as twins,  
Who hails from Isokun.  
Twin-born monkey, dweller on the tree-tops.<sup>21</sup>

*Edun* are born as twins, and their mothers carry them one on the back and one on the front, just like Yoruba mothers. Another hunter's song conveys something more of the peculiar nature of the Colobus for the Yoruba:

Those who wake early must sweep the ground.  
Colobus says: the eagle sweeps the sky;  
Let me sweep the top of the tree.  
Abuse me - and I will follow you home.  
Praise me - and I will stay away from you.  
Colobus is a friend of the man in rags  
and a friend of the man in the embroidered gown.<sup>22</sup>

The first lines of the verse reflect something of the perpetually liminal aspect of the Colobus; the sense in which, as Victor Turner argues, the animal is ‘neither here nor there... betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial.’<sup>23</sup> The arboreal monkey lives in the trees, between the sky and the ground. While humans sweep the ground, and birds sweep the sky, the *edun* sweeps that which is in between ground and sky.

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18. Leroy *et al*, 2002, p. 135.

19. Houlberg, 1973, p. 23.

20. Lawal, 2008, p. 35.

21. Babalola, 1963, p. 35.

22. Gbodamosi and Beier, 1963, p. 23.

23. Turner, 1977, p. 95.

Human twins are thought to be capricious and likely to escape to heaven in the same way that the monkeys run up a tree to avoid capture. Human twins are weak at birth and are more likely to die than single born children.<sup>24</sup> Thus, while twins are looked upon as increasing family wealth, they also threaten loss. A Yoruba father of twins once expressed the idea that *edun* and *ìbejì* are parallel because both ‘come down and go up again’; the monkeys in their cheeky play to avoid capture, the twins in their propensity to die and be reborn in quick succession. For these reasons, the ritual surrounding twins can be seen as a means of countering the capriciousness of the monkey-like children. When they are alive, they are implored not to die young; when they are dead, they are asked not to be reborn as *abiku*, children born to die.<sup>25</sup> Whether dead or alive, they are asked to bring no mischief on the family.

The connection with Colobus monkeys brings up another issue that the birth of twins invokes; the impropriety of multiple births among humans. For the Yoruba, only animals are supposed to have multiple births. This is another sense in which twins are a challenge to Yoruba modes of classification: the twins seem somehow part of the animal world as well as the human. T. J. H. Chappel goes so far as to argue that the Yoruba see multiple birth as the outcome of promiscuous behaviour on the part of the female of the species, whether animal or human, and that the twins therefore pose a problem for the assignment of legitimate paternity, crucial to inheritance and succession.<sup>26</sup> Twins may therefore conjure up images of illegitimate sexual practices as well as animality. In another instance of category confusion, the last lines of the song of the Colobus assert that the monkey is equally friendly with both rich and poor. The animal bridges distinctions between social classes, as well as earth and sky. Clearly the twins in their association with the Colobus take on the qualities of ambivalence, disruption of categories, and mischievousness.

The Yoruba also register the anomalous nature of twin birth by inverting the expected order of first and second born. The first born is called Taiwo, who is considered to be younger than Kehinde, the second-born. Kehinde will be the first to inherit from the siblings of his parents when they die, and Taiwo will inherit from Kehinde.<sup>27</sup> This inversion of the usual order of succession based on chronological age points to the disturbance that the twins represent to Yoruba; it conveys the anomalous nature of twin birth by attaching an anomalous inversion to their respective social positions.

Having gained some insight into Yoruba thought about twins, their equation of twin birth with moments of instability, disruption and the unnatural, what remains to be answered is the relationship between these beliefs and the rituals and art forms associated with the *ìbejì*. The rituals incorporating the dangerous power of the twins into a meaningful sphere of human action chiefly take place through sacrifice of food and substances offered to the twins. In what follows, I will discuss the significance of sacrifice and its relationship to twinning.

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24. Leroy *et al.*, 2002, p. 135.

25. Houlberg, 1973, p. 23.

26. Chappel, 1974, p. 257. References to infidelity in the *Orin Ìbejì* recorded by Olayemi indicate that there may have been some connection between twins and promiscuity in 1968. See Oyewole and Oyewole, 1992, p. 151.

27. It is believed that Kehinde was born first and sent Taiwo out to “taste the world” for him. Houlberg, 1973, p. 22.

René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* argues that sacrifice as a cultural phenomenon arises from a need to control the spread of violence in a community. In his terms, sacrifice acts as a deflection of the retributive nature of violent acts; it intervenes in a process where one violent act calls for another of equal nature and magnitude, which in turn requires another similar act, and so on, until a vicious circle of violence snowballs and threatens to devour a whole community in *mimetic* acts of destruction. Sacrifice, therefore, is a performance that substitutes a symbolic form of violence for an act that would instigate a vengeful and excessive reciprocity of spreading violence.



Fig. 5. Unknown Yoruba artist (Nigeria), *Female twin figure (ère ibeji)*, date unknown. Wood with scarifications, bases with zig-zag carving, plaited coiffures, strands of blue grass beads, and pigment, 24.8 x 9.8 x 8.3 cm, Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gift of Rod McGalliard, inv. No. 1990.14.124.



The emphasis on violence in Girard's thesis may suggest that it has little relevance to Yoruba twin ritual. However, a number of writers have provided oral and published sources demonstrating that in certain areas the Yoruba used to kill twins. As Chappel argues, this practice of twin infanticide only ceased around the 18th century, due to the influence of the Fon and Egun people, as well as Christian missionaries.<sup>28</sup> Other sources suggest that the practice of twin infanticide disappeared more recently. Elisha P. Renne, for example, notes that in the eastern and north-eastern areas of Yoruba country, the practice of disposing of twins continued into the 1920s.<sup>29</sup> Chappel, speaking of Yoruba people in 1960s Nigeria, argues that the original impulse that led to the destruction of twins is still present; the belief that twins are undesirable in that they pose a threat to the social and moral order.<sup>30</sup> We are dealing with a reversal and transformation of an earlier violent practice. Historically and psychologically, then, there is evidence to suggest that underlying the worship of twins in Yoruba culture may be an impulse towards violence.

If we see twin ritual as emerging from an earlier tradition of violence, Girard's argument becomes more persuasive. The key to his idea of the "sacrificial crisis", that situation where repeated acts of violence threaten to engulf a community, is the concept of "mimetic desire". This is the phenomenon whereby people's needs and wants come to reflect each other and mimic each other to the point where, in a world of limited resources, conflict and violence are the result. One of the factors limiting this scenario is cultural distinction, or "degree", that keeps human beings apart from each other in terms of their needs and expectation, ensuring that not everyone demands the same treatment, the same goods, and the same identity. As Girard argues,

"Degree" or *gradus* is the underlying principle of all order, natural and cultural. It permits individuals to find a place for themselves in society; it lends a meaning to things... it is not the differences but the loss of them that gives rise to violence and chaos... This loss forces men into a perpetual confrontation, one that strips them of all their distinctive characteristics – in short, of their "identities". Language itself is put in jeopardy.<sup>31</sup>

It is distinctions that prevent the kind of sacrificial crisis where desires come to mimic each other to the point of an interminable rivalry that would overtake the society. What such rivalry enacts is precisely the erasure of distinctions; this is the source of its power and its ability to produce the meaninglessness of unrelenting violence.

In his discussion, Girard refers explicitly to the significance of twins, and their taboo nature in Nyakusa society. For him, twins are capable of suggesting the outbreak of violence inherent in the dissolution of degree. As he puts it, 'Twins suggest, through their similarity, the dangerous violence of mimesis and reciprocity in human relations that the removal of social distinctions evokes. Girard argues that where twins are not destroyed, but on the contrary, enjoy a privileged position, such reversal can only take

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28. Chappel, 1974, pp. 250-1, 258-9. This thesis is maintained by several authors including Meyerowitz, 1944, p. 105 and Leroy *et al.*, 2002, p. 134.

29. Renne, 2001, p. 65.

30. Chappel, 1974, p. 263.

31. Girard, 1977, p. 50.



Fig. 6. Yoruba, Kisi or Old Oyo, Oyo region, Nigeria, *Twin Commemorative Figures (Ère Ìbejì)*, early/mid-20th century. Wood, glass beads, and string, Left: 25.4 x 8.3 x 6.7 cm; Right: 25.4 x 7.6 x 6.7 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Deborah Stokes and Jeffrey Hammer, inv. No. 1982.1513-14. (Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago).

place in the 'framework of ritual practice'.<sup>32</sup> The role of this ritual practice is to translate the connotations of aggressive rivalry that the twins evoke into an alternative sphere of meaning, the order of the sacred. There, anomalies that symbolise the erasure of difference and destructive rivalry can be transposed and explained in religious terms.

A key component of this transposition is the role of sacrifice. Sacrifice is an important part of Yoruba ritual. Here the word sacrifice is not meant in its most violent sense, but as a way of describing the offerings and ritual acts that accompany worship. It has a number of purposes, one of which is to defray violence. Sacrifice is explicitly connected with death; indeed it can be a way of averting it. From the *ifa* poetry we have this: 'Ifa says that Death is now ready to kill the person; but if he can make plenty of sacrifice, he will wriggle out of danger.'<sup>33</sup> The family of living and dead Yoruba twins are required to perform various acts. These acts are a response to an initial symbolic violence that seeks to deflect that violence and prevent its spread. This deflection is performed through ritual acts that involve the sacrifice of personal status (begging in the marketplace for food), of food (to the twin figures), even of animals.<sup>34</sup> These sacrifices, or losses, on the part of the parents seek to counteract the threat of disruption to the society at large that the twins evoke.

The analysis in this essay so far has delved into the beliefs underlying the rituals associated with *ibejì*. The need for these rituals is connected to the disruption that the appearance of twins signifies to the Yoruba. The alarming erasure of normal social and biological distinctions that the double birth conjures up is worked upon by sacrifice and ritual to deflect, through representation, the threatening aspects of the anomaly. What remains is to examine the *ère ibejì* more closely as objects to try and understand how their physical form is informed by these and related issues.

### III.

Regardless of at what age the twin has died, the figure is presented as a fully mature adult. The female twins are provided with breasts, the men possess developed pectoral muscles. These elements suggest that the figures are not strictly portraits in the sense of a physical likeness at the moment of death; rather, they are ideal representations, showing the person in the prime of life. This ephebic representation indicates that it is the nature of the *ibejì* as a potent force as well as their specific, temporal manifestation that is depicted by the figure. This lack of individuality may help to explain why a double photograph of one twin can be considered an adequate representation of both twins after one has died. What matters is the *ibejì* as phenomenon, as an actor in Yoruba spiritual life, as much as the twin in their temporal, specific existence.

The heads are large in proportion to the body. This is a rule that extends to most Yoruba carving. This disproportion can be explained by the importance of the head in the Yoruba concept of personhood. In the Yoruba theory of human creation, the

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32. Girard, 1977, p. 58.

33. Pemberton, 1977, p. 24. Moreover, an expression recorded in the Yoruba dictionary is: 'Though the offering is difficult, it is not worse than death.' See Abraham, 1962, p. 172.

34. Houlberg, 1973, fig. 5: 'Feather on the forehead of this twin image indicates that it has recently received a chicken sacrifice.'

physical body is created first, after which its spirit (*emi*) is breathed into it, through the head. The person then chooses an *ori* or inner head which will determine the being's fate in life. The *ori* is a broad concept, with metaphysical connotations. It is a kind of personal deity who is worshipped and constitutes the personality and the soul. As a Yoruba saying has it, 'a person's head is his source of origin.'<sup>35</sup> According to Lawal, there are three basic forms of representing the head by Yoruba artists.<sup>36</sup> The first is the 'naturalistic' mode, where the form of the facial features corresponds to those found in living people. This type is used for effigies in funeral ceremonies, where the emphasis is on capturing the likeness of the deceased. The second is the "stylised" mode, which is encountered in the *ibejì* sculptures. While the naturalistic mode refers to the earthly existence of the individual, the stylized mode is used for the spiritual realm. Aspects of stylization are the disproportionately large eyes, heavily projecting lids, and schematic lips. The third form of Yoruba head sculpture is the abstract, conical *ibori* which represents the 'altar of the head' of the individual. These are kept in leather casings and adorned with cowries and are worshipped like a deity. The *ibejì* and the other deities and figures represented in the stylized mode represent a mid-point between the extremes of physical and purely abstract conceptions of the head. They are not an entirely metaphysical entity; nor are they merely manifestations of the earthly presence of the being. Thus, the stylized *ibejì* are images of both physical and spiritual presence.<sup>37</sup>

Another reason the head is emphasized in Yoruba sculpture more generally is that the head is believed to be the entry point for divine possession. The head, which receives special attention in possession rituals, is considered to be the gate through which the spirit enters. Women priests who are to receive the spirit of *odu* have their heads shaved, bathed and painted. As Margaret Drewal has explained, mixtures of vegetable and minerals are rubbed into incisions made in the scalp to 'fix the power of the deity in the head', and after the possession is over, attendants clear the medium's head by pouring gin over it, blowing on it, and massaging the base of the neck.<sup>38</sup> It is the head that has access to the spiritual realm; it is the receptacle for spirit beings. The *ère ibejì*, which are strongly connected to the spirit world but which also exist on the material plane, live out a duality of physical and metaphysical which can be compared to that of the possessed priest. This explains the disproportionate emphasis on the head.

The elaborate hairdos of the twin figures are similar to those seen on certain Yoruba people, particularly priests, while involved in ritual. As Lawal has observed, 'Statuettes dedicated to deceased twins (*ère ibejì*)... display priestly hairstyles, partly to honor the departed soul and partly to reflect the popular belief that the souls of twins run errands for the *òrìsà*, particularly for Sàngó, the thunder deity.'<sup>39</sup> Initiates to the priesthood of mediums for the deities, who are normally women, are given special hairdos that emphasize the forehead, giving the impression of physical swelling, a

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35. Hallgren, 1988, pp. 60-61; Lawal, 1985, pp. 91-3.

36. Lawal, 1985, pp. 94-8.

37. An important qualification to this is the incidence of abstract *ibejì* figures observed by Houlberg in Oyo, 1967 - 1970. She suggests the simplification of form can be attributed to Christian or Muslim beliefs. See Houlberg, 1973, pp. 26 - 27.

38. Drewal, 1992, p. 182, 184.

39. Lawal, 2001 - 2002, n.p.



state said to occur during possession.<sup>40</sup> When Yoruba men become possession priests they are dressed in female hairstyles and clothes.<sup>41</sup> This cross-dressing can be explained by the fact that by giving birth to children, Yoruba mothers are thought to enact a form of duality by serving as a point of contact between heaven and earth, allowing the spirit being to take on worldly form.<sup>42</sup> In a photograph taken in 1970 in Ede, in which male priests are dressed like women, two men are shown to have headdresses very similar to those found on some *ibejì* figures.<sup>43</sup> If such priests, whether male or female, become the deity during possession, the twin lives every day as a god at the same time as he or she represents it. The *ère ibejì*, with their elaborate hairstyles, are therefore a powerful image of the oneness of heaven and earth. This may explain their ubiquity, and the persistence of the *ère ibejì* in the face of Muslim, Christian, and general modern-day encroachments on Yoruba belief.

Yoruba twins embody the material and physical, human and godly worlds simultaneously. By being elevated to living gods, they embody a supreme incidence of boundary crossing and distinction blurring. From the status and importance granted to Yoruba possession priests or mediums, who also engage in traffic between earth and spirit, it is possible to see how the trouble of twins, their potential threat to the very order of society as the Yoruba see it, also has its positive side, in the extraordinary merging of the physical and the metaphysical.

#### IV.

This study of the *ère ibejì* has explored their dual nature; as a source of fear and of celebration. The apparent strangeness of the Simple Photo studio twin photograph from Ila-Orangun to a non-initiated viewer is not simply related to cultural ignorance but can be connected to the “trouble” of twins in Yoruba society. The birth and death of twins are a source of great concern for Yoruba. The problem they pose to certain communities is their liminal quality, their transgression of conventional boundaries. The twins are connected to each spiritually in a much stronger sense than normal beings; they are both human and animal; they are both alive and yet likely to die. Their presence can suggest sexual impropriety on the part of the mother, which disrupts legitimate paternity. Most of all, they confound the most fundamental categories of personhood and classification by suggesting the sameness of difference. This erasure of personal distinction has the potential to signify an outbreak of violent rivalry that threatens the very basis of social order.

As a corollary of these disturbing connotations of twins, the Yoruba assign them a sacred status, which registers the special nature of twins in a sphere of ritual belief and action. The anomalous nature of twin birth possesses the power to disrupt the equilibrium of everyday life in a way that suggests the transcendent nature of the sacred realm. This power is relatively indifferent to the limits of the human, social world; it can invoke calamity as easily as great fortune. The Yoruba family incorporates the eruption of this unpredictable and transcendent realm in the midst of their household by performing sacrifices to the twins, whether to their living persons,

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40. Drewal, 1992, p. 182.

41. Drewal, 1992, p. 183.

42. Drewal, 1992, pp. 177 - 185; Drewal, 1977, p. 549 and Drewal, 1974, p. 10.

43. Drewal, 1986, p. 62, fig. 6.

or to their earthly representatives when dead, the *ère ibejì*. The sacrifice, by exiting the circuit of worldly exchange and appealing to an interchange with spiritual beings, attempts to transpose and signify the power of twins in a way that reconciles and incorporates that power into the realm of human ritual practice. By opening commerce between the sacred and profane realms on behalf of the twins, the sacrifice restores a sense of meaningful equilibrium to the community confronted with the twins and their disruptive potential.



Fig. 7. Unknown Yoruba artist (Nigeria), *Ìbejì Figures*, date unknown. Mixed media, dimensions unknown, Otago, Joel A. and Patricia H. Vandenburg collection. (Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin, New Zealand/ JA and PH Vandenburg).

Such sacrifices are prophylactic measures designed to ward off misfortune. Nevertheless, it is clear from the songs, ritual, and especially the *ère ibejì* themselves that the twins are not thought of simply as malicious beings with the potential to bring harm. The ephobic beauty, prominent heads and sacred headdresses of the figures indicate that twins are thought of as wonderful figures who personify the highest achievement of Yoruba personhood. Therefore, while it is true that the production and use of the twin figure is a way of dealing with the anxiety associated with the power *Ìbejì* are thought to possess, it is important to stress that this power is also a greatly valued thing. Yoruba ritual practice is intended not to extinguish or evade this power, but to incorporate it meaningfully into the wider realm of human social life. In the light of these observations, the double photograph by Simple Photo, which shows the same child representing two children, serves as an appropriate image of the twins as it is the very similarity of the children that originally called out for representation. This image is offered food sacrifices just as the carved figures are; in this sense, it is not a memorial portrait of two individuals but the symbol of a phenomenon that can

become the focus of ritual.<sup>44</sup> Although the photograph has the potential to disturb because of the way in which it threatens the category of individual personhood with a de-centring repetition, it can also be appreciated for the way in which it embodies the seemingly magical quality associated with all transgressions of the conventional limits of subjectivity.

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44. Houlberg, 1976, p. 18.

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