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SYMBOLISM AND SPRITUALITY OF ERE IBEJI (TWIN FIGURINES) IN ILE IFE

NSIMA SUNDAY ANAM
National Museum, Port Harcourt
Rivers State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Ere Ibeji, wooden sculptures representing deceased twins, hold profound spiritual and cultural significance in Yoruba tradition, particularly in Ile Ife. This study explores the symbolism and spirituality of Ere Ibeji, examining their role in Yoruba cosmology, mythology and ritual practices. The study reveals that Ere Ibeji embody the spiritual essence of the departed twins, serving as substitutes that receive care, attention and worship. The sculptures symbolize the twin's spiritual power, fertility and prosperity, while reinforcing the community's connection of their ancestors and cultural heritage. Through a qualitative analysis of Yoruba oral Traditions, myths and rituals, the study highlights the enduring significance of Ere Ibeji in contemporary Yoruba society, demonstrating their continued relevance in modern times.

Keywords: Symbolism, Sprituality, Ere Ibeji (Twin Figurines), Ile Ife.

Introduction

Ife is an ancient sacred city and spiritual homeland of the Yoruba people in south-western Nigeria founded sometime between the year 1000BC and 500BC. By 900AD, the city had become important West African emporium producing sophisticated art forms. The city is located in present-day Osun State. Ife is about 218 kilometers north-east of Lagos with population of over 500,000 people, which is the highest in Osun State according to population census of 2006. The main occupation of the people of Ife is agriculture, with major crops including yams, cassava and corn. Historically and currently, they have a strong tradition of arts, crafts and trading of arts, crafts and trading, with occupations like metal-working, pottery, weaving, carving and trade playing a significant role. The city, whose name means "the land of expansions" was also a major industrial center for glass production from the 12th to 14th centuries.

According to the traditions of the Yoruba religion Ile Ife was founded by the order of the supreme God Olodumare of Obatala. It then fell into the hands of his brother Oduduwa, which created enmity between them. Oduduwa created a dynasty there, in which the sons and daughters of his dynasty became the rulers of many other kingdoms in Yoruba land. The first Ooni of Ife is a descendant of Oduduwa. The Ife people of Osun state have a rich cultural heritage, with a deep-seated reverence for tradition and spirituality. At the heart of this heritage lies the concept of Ere Ibeji, wooden sculptures carved to represent deceased twins. In Yoruba cosmology, twins are considered a blessing, embodying spiritual power and fertility. When a twin dies, the community respond with a unique ritual, crafting an Ere Ibeji to house the spirit of the departed. This sculpture

becomes a vocal point of worship, care, and attention, symbolizing the enduring bond between the living and the dead.

The aim and objectives of this article is to take you on a journey deep into the heart of Ife culture, exploring the fascinating history, artistic traditions, customary beliefs surrounding the sacred twin sculptures known as ERE IBEJI in this sacred city and cultural epicenter of the Yoruba people.

Fascinating History of Ere Ibeji

The Yoruba people in general have one of the highest rates of twinning in the world. It is estimated that out of every 1,000 births, 45 – 50, result in twins. They believe that there is something quite supernatural about the existence of twins. In the earlier centuries, while most tribes in Nigeria massacred millions of twins; taking them to be demonic or evil, the Yorubas on the other hand, revered twins.

It all began centuries ago when 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. These actions attracted a cloud of inexplicable sadness hovering over their communities. In this dire atmosphere, they turned to Ifa Oracle for guidance. The oracle verdict was clear; twins were to be revered, respected, and honoured. This divine proclamation put an end to the practice of killing twins and ushered in an era of happiness and celebration, hence a profound shift in their perception of twins. Right from that time twins, in Yoruba culture are now believed to be the magical and earthly representations of an Orisa (spirits) sent by the Supreme Being to assist humanity. This Orisa, named Ibeji, is believed to have the powers of fertility and prosperity and is specifically protected by the god of thunder, Sango. Just like twins, the Ibeji is also two individuals who according to Yoruba spirituality share a single soul. Due to this belief, the Yorubas also call twins – 'Ejire' meaning 'two persons that are the same.

Ibeji refers to twins who are considered divine beings who bring happiness, health, and prosperity to their families. The term 'Ibeji' comes from the Yoruba words 'ibi' (birth) and 'eji' (two) which when interpreted means 'born twice' or 'double birth'. Each twin receives a name based on their birth order, with Taiwo (Taiye) being the first born meaning, (first to taste the world) and Kehinde the second meaning, (arrive after the other). The birth of twins holds special significance. It was the cause for grand celebrations. New mothers were treated to the finest delicacies, clothing and accessories, while the community and neighbouring villages joined in congratulating them. An exclusive dance ritual, symbolizing prosperity, happiness, and protection against malevolent forces, was performed by other mothers of twins.

The Origin of Ere Ibeji

In Ife, as with other Yoruba communities, "Ere" can have different meaning depending on the context. "Ere" can mean play, amusement or recreation. "Ere" in this context means "sacred image", "figurine", or "representation". While "Ibeji" on the other hand means twins or twin figurines. The practice of Ere Ibeji in Ife culture is rooted in their deep spiritual beliefs and connection to ancestors and the afterlife. Historically, in some Yoruba communities, it was observed that when one twin died, the second twin would follow shortly, as if 'called' by the deceased sibling. It is believed that twins share a single soul and when one twin dies, the balance of the soul is disrupted.

There are many tales to the origin of Ibeji myth; however, one forever holds center stage. In the myth, Yemoja, a beautiful goddess gave birth to a set of twins, the children she loved with all her heart. One of them died quite tragically and Yemoja was inconsolable. Full of profound love and longing, she crafted with her bare hands a wooden statue of the departed child and by magic and divine intervention, the wooden replica came to life in her hands; her child returned to her and was united once again, with its twin. It was from this story that the Ibeji myth came to be. Till this day, if a twin should die in a traditional Yoruba household, leaving his or her soul sibling behind, a replica of the twin is created in the form of brass or wood. This replica is called "ERE IBEJI".

Mystical Demands and Spiritual Significance of Ere Ibeji

Within certain Yoruba traditional belief systems, the birth of twins is associated with spiritual responsibilities and ritual obligations that may extend beyond ordinary parental care. In some traditional accounts, twins are believed to possess distinctive spiritual identities and particular and particular demands that their mothers or families are expected to fulfil. These demands may include selling items such as salt, beans, or palm oil, begging for alms, and dancing in public. Such activities are understood within these belief systems as expressions of obedience to spiritual instructions and as means of maintaining the well-being of the twins and their family. Some account also associate non-compliance with these perceived demands with misfortune or unusual experiences affecting the mother or the household. Although the nature and interpretation of these beliefs may vary across communities, they real an important dimension of the cultural and spiritual meanings attached to twin ship in Yoruba society. Ere Ibeji in this context, is not merely an artistic representation of a deceased or living twin; it may also be understood as part of a broader system of beliefs, ritual practices, and relationships between the human and spiritual worlds.

In Ife culture, twins are considered special and sacred, embodying spiritual powers and blessings. When a twin dies, it is believed that their spirit needs to be honoured and appeased to maintain balance and harmony in the family and community. While the birth of twins is a source of joy, the risk of one or both dying, especially in infancy, is a source of grief.

The consecration of newborn twins to the deity of twin – Orisa Ibeji, is a crucial ceremony carried out by the Babalawo, the Chief Priest, shortly after birth. This ritual is believed to bind the twins' souls together, making the survival of one twin dependent on the other. In order to avert misfortune should one twin pass away, the Babalawo is consulted to create sacred sculptures, ERE IBEJI. These sculptures serve as a vessel for the departed twin soul and a means of appeasing the surviving twin soul. Due to low birth weight of twins and high infant mortality rates in the past, many twin babies do not live long. If a baby dies during childbirth, mostly within the period of naming ceremony, the parents will seek consultation with an Ifa diviner, a Babalawo. If the Babalawo ascertains a spiritual cause, he will help the parents find a carver to create an Ere Ibeji figurine, a wooden carving of a male or female figure used to represent a dead twins where the spirit of the dead twin will be invoked into.

The figure is a focal point for the spiritual energy of the deceased twin who, according to Yoruba traditional thought, resides in the supernatural realm where he/she is cared for by a spiritual mother. Families, especially grieving mothers, take comfort in the belief that a spiritual

mother is caring for and guarding their departed child. The mother plays an active role in caring for the Ere Ibeji (sacred sculpture) of the deceased twin, treating it with the same love and care as the living twin. The Ere Ibeji is ritually washed, fed, clothed, and wrapped on the back with a cloth as a real baby would be carried. Conversations with the sculptures and placement near her bed and place of worship help maintain a spiritual connection. Even when breastfeeding the living twin, the same gesture is extended to the sacred sculpture of the departed twin. The Ere Ibeji might also be decorated with camwood powder, blue paint, beads, shell and precious textiles. Despite the fact that this carving can serve as a receptacle for the spirit of the dead child, Ere Ibeji figures do not look like children. It is neither a child nor an old person. Beyond the figurines, other riyuals are performed to protect the surviving child from the deceased sibling. For instance, in some traditions, the surviving twin might be laid in the grave and brought out before the burial of the dead sibling to ritually separate their spirits and prevent the dead child from haunting the living child.

Ere Ibeji





Ere Ibeta





It is worth mentioning that, Ere Ibeji figurines are specifically for twins, but the tradition extends to other multiple births, such as triplets and quadruplets. In Yoruba (Ife) culture, the tradition of carving of a wooden figurine for a deceased twin, known as an Ere Ibeji, is adapted for triplets, with the carved figures being called ERE IBETA. The same core beliefs about preserving the spiritual wholeness of the siblings apply. It is believed that twins and triplets share an inseparable soul. If one multiple-birth siblings die, the lives of the remaining siblings are considered to be in peril. The Ere Ibeta figure serves to placate the spirit of the deceased child, reassuring it that it has

not been forgotten and preventing it from drawing the other children into the spiritual world. If one triplet dies, a single Ere Ibeta figure is carved to represent the deceased child. If two triplets die, the family would commission two separates Ere Ibeta figures, one representing each deceased child. Much like with Ere Ibeji for twins, the family must care for the carved figures as if they were the living children.

The Symbolism of Ere Ibeji

Ere Ibeji, or twin figurines, hold significant symbolism in Ife culture. These figures are more than artistic objects; they embody beliefs about twinship, spiritual relationships, family continuity, protection, and the enduring connection between the living and the dead. They represent the duality and balance that are essential to life. These wooden sculptures are created to honour deceased twins, ensuring their spirits are appeased and maintained within the family.

Major Symbolic Meaning of Ere Ibeji

1. Duality and Balance: The most fundamental symbolism of Ere Ibeji is the special relationship between twins. The figures represent the dual nature of twinship and the bond between two individuals believed to share an extraordinary connection. Their paired existence expresses unity, companionship, and the relationship between two distinct yet interconnected beings. Ibeji embody the harmony of opposites, like male and female, light and darkness, and life and death, which are fundamental principles in Yoruba (Ife) thought.
2. Spiritual Connection: The figurines serve as a bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds, allowing families to communicate with the deceased twins' spirits.
3. Protection and Guidance: The twins are considered guardians of the family unit, offering guidance and safeguarding the home.
4. Good Fortune and Blessings: Ibeji are believed to bring prosperity, fertility, and protection to families who honour them.
5. Reverence for Ancestors: Ere Ibeji demonstrate the Ife people's deep respect for their ancestors and the spiritual realm.
6. Cultural Identity: These sculptures reflect the rich cultural heritage and traditions of the Ife people, showcasing their unique artistic and philosophical perspectives.

Features of Ere Ibeji

Ere Ibeji figures typically have distinctive physical features, including;

*Conical Head
*Elaborate Hairstyles
*Almond-Shaped Eyes
*Thin Smiling Lips
*Delicate Noses
*Facial Scarification
*Mature Adult Features
*Proportional Body Parts
*Ornaments and Adornments.

Conclusion

The Ife sacred twins' sculpture, Ere Ibeji, are more than just artistic masterpieces; they are living symbols of a culture deeply rooted in tradition, spirituality, and reverence for the miracle of twinning. In the last fifty years, the practice of commissioning a carver to create an Ere Ibeji figures has waned. However, the practice of using Ere Ibeji has not stopped, though since the 70s some parents have chosen to use manufactured, imported dolls or photographs instead of carved figures as receptacles for the spiritual energy of the deceased. These materials are generally less expensive, worldly, and modern. While Ere Ibeji carving have a distinct style, the fact that another medium can successfully serve the same purpose suggests that for the Yorubas, art is dynamic and flexible.

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