Ibeji

Ibeji (Yoruba: Ṣebi) is a term in the Yoruba language meaning "twins."

Overview

The Yoruba are a major African ethnic group; in their culture twins are traditionally very important beings. In the Yoruba language "ibeji" literally means "twins". Carved wooden figures made to house the soul of a dead twin are also called ibeji. These wooden figures, six to ten inches high and carved with the family mask, are often well tended. The Yoruba people believe that this care and tending helps ensure the survival of the other twin. In the Yoruba traditional religion, there is a deity that represents twins called Orisha Ibeji or Orisa Ibeji.

Origins

While the birth rate of monozygotic twins is relatively constant worldwide, about 4 per 1000 births, that rate for dizygotic twins varies widely. The incidence of dizygotic twin births in much of Africa is significantly greater than in the United States, with the highest incidence among the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, with a frequency of 45 per 1000 births. In fact, the Yoruba town of Igboora boasts of an average of 150 twins for 1 000 births and is therefore considered Nigeria's, and the world's, capital of twins.

Practice

Traditionally, when twins were born, the parents would visit a Babalawo, meaning, "father of mysteries", to find out their wishes. The first of the twins to be born is traditionally named Taiyewo or Tayewo, (which means 'the first to taste the world'); this is often shortened to Taiwo, Taiye, or Teye. Kehinde, "the last to come", is the name of the last-born twin. These are what could be called "celestial" Yoruba names; names due to birth circumstances. The child after the twins is called "Idowu" regardless of the sex, a boy or a girl. "Alaba" is the one after Idowu, either a boy or a girl, which is usually followed by Oni and Ola or "Idogbe", etc. It is said that Kehinde sends Taiyewo to check out what life is like on earth and to tell him (or her) whether it is good. Therefore, Taiyewo goes as sent by Kehinde, and becomes the first child to be born. He then communicates to Kehinde spiritually (believed to be from the way he cries) whether life is going to be good or not. The reply determines if Kehinde will be born alive or stillborn. Both return to where they came from if the reply from Taiyewo is not good enough for both of them.

The Yoruba traditionally say that Kehinde is the true elder of the twins despite being the last to be born, because he sent Taiyewo on an errand, a prerogative of one's elders in Yorubaland. Kehinde is therefore referred to as Omokehindegbegbon (which means, 'the child that came last becomes the elder'). However, the first-born twin is also sometimes referred to as Taiyelolu or Tayelolu, which is short for Omotaityelolu and means, 'the child that came to taste life excels'.

Pair of ibeji, authenticated by the Department of Antiquities of Nigeria
Since in Yoruba tradition, each person is one soul in the long line of ancestral souls, twins are complex, sharing the same soul - but one of the two is thought to have the spiritual half of the soul while the other has the mortal half. Since there is no way to determine which has the mortal soul and which the spiritual soul, if one twin should die, a carving is commissioned to represent the deceased child. Only the sex and the lineal facial scarifications (if the child had any) are specified and are faithfully recreated in the carved figure. Taiyewo is believed to be mostly the quiet, calmer, and introverted of the twins, while Kehinde is mostly believed to be the extroverted one.

**Ere ibeji**

As stated above, the Yoruba believe that both twins share one soul, so if one twin dies at a young age, the balance of the soul is thrown off or disturbed. The death rate of children is very high in Africa, and on account of this, a ritual is carried out to put the twins’ soul back into balance. The Ifá priest chooses a well-established carver to create a small figure that symbolizes the dead child. The carver is free to create a figure of the twin in his own image of what he felt about the twin. If both twins die, then two figures are made. The soul is then spiritually transported into the figures. These figures are called ere ibeji. Ibi means born, eji means two, and ere means sacred image. The figure remains as respected and as powerful as the person it represents. The children’s parents must treat the statue as if it were real, so it is bathed, fed, and clothed just as it would be in life. The figure is particularly special to the mother, who keeps the figure close to her bed. She rubs the figure with red wood powder to maintain the look of slickness, and she caresses the figure in a loving manner. Rituals and prayers are performed for the child's birthday and other celebrations or festivals.

The head of the figure is associated with the child’s destiny, which measures the success or failure of the child. The size of the head is one-third the size of the body because the head is where the spirit resides. The head must be big in proportion to the rest of the body. The figure is very detailed, but it is only a symbol of the child and is not intended to be a realistic likeness but rather a resemblance of a human. The child is shown as an adult, which is common in African sculpture. The features of the child are more mature, including scarifications on the face, and full-sized breasts on female figures. The surface of the figure is very smooth. The figure is motionless to represent discipline, serenity, and confidence. The figure is sometimes made to hold symbolic items. Shells or beads may invoke certain gods or indicate wealth.

References


Article Sources and Contributors

Ibeji  
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