

SOCIETY OF YOUNG NIGERIAN WRITERS

**ARTICLES, ESSAYS AND E-BOOKS ON DANIEL
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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 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).

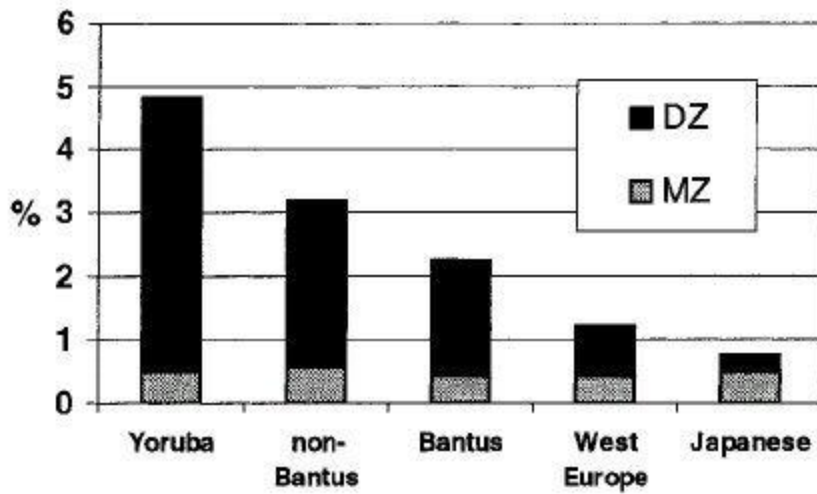


Figure 3

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

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).