Finch & Co

IBEJI

TWINS AND THE YORUBA

YORUBA PEOPLE ARE SAID TO HAVE A RATE OF TWIN BIRTHS SOME FOUR TIMES THAT OF ANYWHERE ELSE; AND THE IMAGES THAT REPLACED THE TWINS WHO DIED IN INFANCY ARE AMONG THE BEST KNOWN AND MOST LOVED OF SCULPTURAL FORMS AMONG THE COLLECTORS OF AFRICAN ART IN EUROPE AND AMERICA. THIS BRIEF ESSAY IS AN ATTEMPT TO EXPLORE SOME OF THE REASONS WHY THIS IS SO.

TWINS WERE A PROBLEM CATEGORY FOR YORUBA PEOPLE FOR SEVERAL REASONS. THEY VIOLATED THE NORMAL PATTERN OF THINGS, WOMEN NORMALLY GIVING BIRTH TO ONE CHILD AT A TIME, AND THEY WERE SUBJECT TO A HIGHER RATE OF INFANT MORTALITY. TWINS WERE EXPENSIVE: THERE WERE TWO MOUTHS TO FEED AND, TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, THE SPECIAL FOOD GIVEN TO TWINS, WHETHER ALIVE OR DEAD, WERE RELATIVELY COSTLY AND LUXURIOUS. TWINS ALSO HAD THE CAPACITY, AGAIN ALIVE OR DEAD, TO DELIVER UNEXPECTED GOOD OR ILL FORTUNE TO THEIR PARENTS. IT WAS FOR THIS REASON THAT ONE COULD OFTEN SEE THE MOTHERS OF TWINS SINGING AND DANCING IN THE MARKET PLACE, AND BEGGING FOR MONEY; AND AS ONE'S TWINS GREW UP THE PARENTS WOULD DENY THEM NOTHING IN FEAR OF UNEXPECTED ILL FORTUNE. PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT REASON FOR FOLLOWING THE ESTABLISHED PROCEDURES IN THE CARE OF TWINS WAS THE HOPE OF ENSURING THE CONTINUED FERTILITY OF THE MOTHER AND THE BIRTH OF FURTHER CHILDREN, PROCEDURES MIGHT INCLUDE COMMISSIONING SCULPTED IMAGES.

THE YORUBA PEOPLE INHABIT THE SOUTH-WESTERN REGION OF NIGERIA, AND ADJACENT PARTS OF THE BENIN REPUBLIC; AND BECAUSE OF THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE THERE ARE YORUBA PEOPLE IN SIERRA LEONE, CUBA AND BRAZIL. THIS IS DUE TO THE FACT THAT THE LAST PHASE OF THIS TRADE WAS CENTRED ON THE COASTAL CITY OF PORTO NOVO, THE ATLANTIC OUTLET FOR THE EMPIRE OF OYO, AND MOST OF THE CAPTIVES WERE TAKEN FROM ITS YORUBA-SPEAKING HINTERLAND. THE YORUBA PRESENCE IN FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE, IS BECAUSE SOME OF THE SLAVING SHIPS BOUND FOR CUBA AND BRAZIL IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY WERE INTERCEPTED BY THE BRITISH NAVY AND THE CAPTIVES LIBERATED. I HAVE USED THE TERM 'YORUBA' AS A SHORTHAND REFERENCE TO A COMPLEX HISTORY, FOR UNTIL THE MID 19TH CENTURY IT WOULD BE FAIR TO SAY THAT THE YORUBA DID NOT YET EXIST. THE NAMES IN USE FOR THE PEOPLES OF WHAT IS NOW THE YORUBA-SPEAKING REGION OR YORUBALAND, WERE, VARIOUSLY, THE NAMES OF EMPIRES, CITY STATES, VILLAGE-GROUP STATES, AND/OR CULTURALLY-DISTINCT REGIONS. THE CULT ASSOCIATIONS PROVIDED A MEASURE OF UNITY ACROSS THE REGION, EACH WITH ITS DISTINCTIVE CENTRE RELATED TO THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE PARTICULAR DEITY, AS DID THE MYTHS OF KINGSHIP, MOST OF WHICH DEFINED THE LEGITIMACY OF THE KINGS OF EACH STATE IN TERMS OF DESCENT FROM THE DEITY WHO CLIMBED DOWN FROM THE SKY AT IFE TO CREATE THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT. THE RESEARCH INTO LANGUAGE AND HISTORY THAT BROUGHT ABOUT THE MODERN SENSE OF AN IDENTITY AS YORUBA WAS INITIATED BY TWO AFRICAN INTELLECTUALS, BOTH MINISTERS OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, WHO WERE PART OF THE COMMUNITY OF FREED SLAVES REPATRIATED FROM SIERRA LEONE IN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY COLONIALISM.

THE EMPIRE OF OYO, THE DOMINANT POLITICAL FORCE IN THE REGION SINCE THE 17TH CENTURY, HAD COLLAPSED IN THE 1830S UNDER THE ONSLAUGHT OF A REFORMING MUSLIM JIHAD, AND THIS SET IN TRAIN A SERIES OF WARS BETWEEN KINGDOMS AND REGIONS, A MASSIVE DISPLACEMENT OF PEOPLES, AND THE INCEPTION OF THE MODERN CITIES OF ABEOKUTA AND IBADAN. NEW FORMS OF VISUAL IMAGERY BEGAN TO APPEAR, MOST ESPECIALLY PHOTOGRAPHY, WHILE THE INHERITANCE OF PRACTICES FROM THE PAST IN SCULPTURE, MASQUERADE, TEXTILES, AND

CHIEFLY CEREMONIES, CONTINUED TO THRIVE; AND, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE SCULPTURES IN WOOD FOR THE TEMPLES OF DEITIES AND THE PALACES OF KINGS AND OTHER TITLED MEN, THIS IS STILL THE CASE. MOST OF THE EVIDENCE FOR THE PRE-MID-19TH-CENTURY SCULPTURAL TRADITIONS WAS DESTROYED IN THE VARIOUS WARS, FEUDS AND DISPLACEMENTS, BUT AS THINGS SETTLED DOWN TOWARDS THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY THOSE TRADITIONS WERE REVIVED. UNFORTUNATELY, BY THE MID 20TH CENTURY THIS SCULPTURAL INHERITANCE WAS IN DECLINE, DUE TO A NUMBER OF FACTORS, INCLUDING ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY ACTIVITY, NEW FORMS OF ARCHITECTURE, AND THE SCHOOL/UNIVERSITY EDUCATION SYSTEM, ALTHOUGH IT WAS GIVEN A KIND OF AFTERLIFE IN THE FORM OF THE NEO-TRADITIONAL MOVEMENT INITIATED BY A CATHOLIC PRIEST WHO WAS TRYING TO NIGERIANISE THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY.

TWO THINGS FOLLOW FROM ALL THIS. THE FIRST IS THAT ALMOST ALL OF THE EXTANT TWIN IMAGES NECESSARILY DATE FROM THE PERIOD SINCE 1850. THE BEST EVIDENCE FOR THE SCULPTURAL TRADITIONS AS THEY MIGHT HAVE BEEN BEFORE THE UPHEAVAL ALREADY REFERRED TO IS PROVIDED BY THE REVIVAL FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE CENTURY ONWARDS. BY THE MID 20TH CENTURY, HOWEVER, THOSE SCULPTURAL TRADITIONS WERE OBSOLETE IN SOME AREAS AND AT BEST OBSOLESCENT IN OTHERS; AND WHILE SOME SCULPTORS WERE STILL ACTIVE THROUGH THE LATE 20TH CENTURY UNTIL THE PRESENT, THE DEMANDS OF A LOCAL PATRONAGE WERE NOT SUFFICIENT TO SECURE THE QUALITY CONTROL SEEN IN THE EARLIER WORK. THE SECOND CONSEQUENCE IS THAT TO USE THE WORD 'YORUBA' OF THIS COLLECTION OF TWIN IMAGES, OR INDEED ANY COLLECTION OF YORUBA SCULPTURE, ENTAILS A PROCESS OF CULTURAL RETROSPECTION. ONCE MADE, THIS POINT NEED DETAIN US NO LONGER; WHILE THE FORMER POINT WOULD ENABLE US TO DETERMINE, IF FURTHER RESEARCH WERE FEASIBLE, THE POINT BEYOND WHICH A GIVEN SCULPTURE COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MADE. THIS, IN TURN, TAKES US TO ANOTHER KEY POINT ABOUT YORUBA IMAGES OF DECEASED TWINS. THE RITUAL PRACTICES THAT NECESSITATED THE CARVING OF THE IMAGES WERE NOT UNIVERSAL ACROSS THE WHOLE OF WHAT WE NOW CALL THE YORUBA-SPEAKING REGION. IT WAS NOT FOUND IN IFE, NOR IN THE EASTERN, NORTH-EASTERN AND SOUTHERN MARCHES OF THE REGION. IT IS STRONGEST IN THOSE PARTS THAT WERE, WHETHER DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY, WITHIN THE POLITICAL AND CULTURAL HEGEMONY OF THE EMPIRE OF OYO, I.E. IN THE CENTRAL AND WESTERN DISTRICTS. MOREOVER, BECAUSE SCULPTURAL FORM VARIES FROM PLACE TO PLACE ACROSS THE YORUBA REGION, IT IS OFTEN POSSIBLE, EVEN IN THE ABSENCE OF FIELD-COLLECTION DATA, TO DETERMINE WHERE A PARTICULAR EXAMPLE IS FROM. THE IMAGES OF TWINS HAVE THE ADDED INTEREST OF GIVING US A STANDARD BASIC FORM, THE HUMAN FIGURE BETWEEN EIGHT AND TWELVE INCHES IN HEIGHT, CLEARLY EITHER MALE OR FEMALE, CONFORMING TO THE HABITUAL CANON OF YORUBA SCULPTURAL ART, IN WHICH THE HEAD IS ABOUT ONE THIRD THE TOTAL HEIGHT. THE PROPORTIONS OF THE FIGURE MIGHT SEEM INFANTILE, YET THE SEXUAL CHARACTERISTICS ARE ALWAYS FULLY DEVELOPED. MORE OFTEN THAT NOT, THE FIGURE IS UNCLOTHED AND THE HANDS REST ON THE HIPS. WHERE THIS IS NOT THE CASE, IT ALWAYS INDICATES AN ORIGIN IN A PARTICULAR PLACE. FOR THE STUDENT OF AFRICAN SCULPTURE, THE FORMAL VARIATIONS WITHIN THESE LIMITS EFFECTIVELY TURNS THE CORPUS OF FIGURE SCULPTURES OF DECEASED TWINS INTO AN INDEX OF YORUBA FORM AND STYLE. WELL-KNOWN CITIES SUCH AS ABEOKUTA (NO 36), OYO (NO 45), EDE (NOS 43, 27) AND OSHOGBO (NO 9), ARE EACH WELL DOCUMENTED AS TO THE FORMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE SCULPTORS OF THOSE PLACES, AND CONFUSION BETWEEN THEM IS NOT POSSIBLE.

THE YORUBA WORD FOR TWIN IS IBEJI, LITERALLY 'BORN TWO', OR IN EASTERN YORUBA OMO MEJI, 'TWO CHILDREN', AND THE WORD FOR A CARVED IMAGE IS ERE, GIVING US ERE IBEJI AS THE STANDARD YORUBA NAME FOR THIS CLASS OF SCULPTURE. WHEN TWINS ARE BORN THEY ARE HABITUALLY CALLED TAIWO (OR TAYE) AND KEHINDE. THE FIRST TO EMERGE FROM THE MOTHER'S WOMB IS TAIWO, A NAME THAT REFERS TO THE CHILD'S ROLE AS THE JUNIOR OF THE PAIR, SENT OUT BY HIS ELDER BROTHER TO 'TASTE THE WORLD', THE LITERAL MEANING OF THE NAME. THE SECOND TO BE BORN IS CALLED KEHINDE, WHICH REFERS TO THE CHILD'S LATER ARRIVAL, ONCE THE JUNIOR HAS 'TASTED THE WORLD' AND SHOUTED BACK TO SAY IT IS SAFE TO COME OUT. THEIR MOTHER'S NEXT CHILD IS ALWAYS CALLED IDOWU, WHO IS EXPECTED TO BE A PARTICULARLY TROUBLESOME CHILD WHOSE ROLE IS TO CLEAR THE WAY FOR NORMALITY TO RETURN. IDOWU IS HABITUALLY DESCRIBED AS ESU LEHIN IBEJI, THE 'ESHU AT THE BACK OF [I.E. FOLLOWING AFTER] TWINS'. ESHU IS THE TRICKSTER DEITY OF THE YORUBA PANTHEON OF GODS (KNOWN COLLECTIVELY IN CENTRAL AND WESTERN YORUBA AS THE ORISHA), A DEITY ASSOCIATED WITH THE CROSSROADS, THE PLACE WHERE, IN THE ABSENCE OF ESHU'S GUIDANCE, IT IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE TO TAKE A WRONG TURN, AND WHERE, WITH HIS GUIDANCE, THE CORRECT PATH CAN BE FOLLOWED. IN THE CASE OF TWINS, THE BIRTH OF THEIR IDOWU SIGNIFIES THE RETURN OF NORMALITY.

WITHIN YORUBA CULTURE, THERE IS NO SINGLE EXPLANATION FOR TWIN BIRTHS, NEITHER IN TERMS OF A HISTORY OF THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CULT, NOR IN TERMS OF BIOLOGY NOR THE METAPHYSICS OF SOULS AND

SELVES. THE VARIOUS EXPLANATIONS AND THE MYTHS ASSOCIATED WITH THEM ARE FULLY COVERED BY JOHN PEMBERTON, WITH A FURTHER NOTE FROM ME (IN CHEMECHE 2003). WHAT IS CLEAR IS THAT IN THE ABSENCE OF MODERN STANDARDS OF HEALTH CARE, TWINS WERE LIKELY TO BE BOTH PREMATURE AND UNDERWEIGHT, AND THEREBY SUBJECT TO A HIGHER INFANT MORTALITY RATE THAT SINGLE-BORN CHILDREN; AND FOR PARENTS WHO ARE NOT DEVOUT MUSLIMS OR CHRISTIANS, THEIR BIRTH AND/OR DEATH NECESSITATED A CONSULTATION WITH A DIVINER. HE WOULD PRESCRIBE THE APPROPRIATE SACRIFICES, USUALLY PALM OIL AND BEANS, THE PROTEIN-RICH FOODS HABITUALLY GIVEN TO TWINS ONCE THEY ARE NO LONGER BREAST FEEDING; AND HE WILL ALSO PRESCRIBE WHETHER OR NOT IMAGES SHOULD BE MADE, AND WHO SHOULD BE COMMISSIONED TO MAKE THEM. IF IT WERE TO BE THE LOCAL MASTER, FINE IMAGES WOULD RESULT (NO 36 IS A SUPERB EXAMPLE OF THE WORK OF AKINYODE, 1875-1936, OF ABEOKUTA; OR NO 29, THE WORK OF JIMO EJONGBARO OF IKIRE, WHO WAS STILL ACTIVE IN THE EARLY 1960S; OR NO 26, BY AN EARLY BUT AS YET UNIDENTIFIED MASTER FROM SOMEWHERE WITHIN THE OYO EMPIRE); BUT IF THE SCULPTOR HAD TO BE THE CHILD'S FATHER, A MAN HITHERTO WITH NO EXPERIENCE OF THIS ART, A RATHER MORE SCHEMATIC FORM WOULD EMERGE (NO 14 IS PERHAPS A CASE IN POINT). THE USUAL PRACTICE WAS FOR AN IMAGE TO REPLACE THE TWIN THAT HAD DIED IN INFANCY, AND IF BOTH HAD DIED A PAIR WAS CARVED. OF COURSE, THE DEATH OF ANY CHILD IS A TRAGEDY FOR ITS PARENTS AND WE SHOULD THEREFORE REMEMBER THAT THE IMAGES OF TWINS EXIST AS EVIDENCE OF TRAGIC EPISODES IN THE LIVES OF THEIR FAMILIES. SOMETIMES, THE DIVINER WOULD ALSO SPECIFY THAT AN IMAGE SHOULD BE MADE TO REPRESENT THE SURVIVING TWIN, AND I ALSO KNOW OF AT LEAST ONE EXAMPLE OF AN IMAGE MADE OF THE IDOWU, EVEN THOUGH THE CHILD WAS ALIVE AND WELL.

IF THE TWINS SURVIVED INFANCY THEY COULD EXPECT A RICH DIET OF PALM OIL AND BEANS, AND EVEN IF DEAD PALM OIL AND BEANS WERE NEVERTHELESS Â€ŒEFEDÂ€ TO THE IMAGES EITHER BY PLACING BITS OF THE PALM OIL/BEAN MIXTURE ON THEIR LIPS OR PLACING A SMALL BOWL THEREOF IN FRONT OF THEM. THE IMAGES WERE KEPT IN THE LIVING AREA OF THE HOUSE AND THEY WERE WASHED AND DRESSED REGULARLY. THE BASIC 'DRESSING' WAS BY RUBBING THEIR BODIES ALL OVER WITH CAMWOOD PASTE, A RED COSMETIC MADE FROM THE WOOD OF THE CAMWOOD TREE THAT WAS SAID TO HAVE HEALING AND OTHER MAGICAL CONNOTATIONS. THEY WERE ALSO GENERALLY CARVED WITH A COMPLEX HAIRSTYLE, AND THIS WAS PAINTED WITH INDIGO DYE AND WASHING BLUE (ALSO KNOWN AS RECKITTS BLUE: IT IS WHAT OUR GRANDMOTHERS ONCE USED TO ENSURE THAT WHITE CLOTHES STAYED WHITE). SOMETIMES LITTLE CLOTHES WERE MADE FOR THE IMAGES, AND ALMOST ALWAYS THEY WERE DRESSED IN BEADS AND OTHER ORNAMENTS. SOME OF THESE BEADS ARE THE WAIST BEADS CARVED FROM COCONUT SHELL WORN BY ALL YORUBA WOMEN, FROM INFANCY ONWARDS. OTHERS ARE CARNELIAN FROM THE SAHEL REGION FAR TO THE NORTH, OR THE BLUE GLASS BEADS THAT WERE MADE IN ANTIQUITY OR WHICH ARE THE REPLICAS THEREOF, OR THE MULTI-COLOURED GLASS BEADS THAT ORIGINATE IN VENICE, THOUGH NOW MOSTLY MADE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC. THESE MEAN NOTHING IN PARTICULAR BEYOND THE FACT THAT PEOPLE WEAR BEADS. THEN THERE WERE GLASS BEADS OF THE COLOURS THAT DENOTE AN AFFILIATION TO THE CULT OF A PARTICULAR DEITY, E.G. ALTERNATING RED AND WHITE FOR SHANGO, THE DEITY OF THUNDER; YELLOW AND GREEN FOR IFA, THE DEITY OF THE ORACLE; WHITE FOR OBATALA, THE DEITY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FORMATION OF THE HUMAN BODY IN A MOTHER'S WOMB; YELLOW AND BLACK FOR ESHU, THE TRICKSTER; OR THE BRASS BRACELETS AND ANKLETS THAT DENOTE AN AFFILIATION TO OSHUN THE DEITY OF THE RIVER RUNNING THROUGH OSHOGBO; ALUMINIUM ANKLETS AND BRACELETS ALSO FOR OBATALA; COWRY SHELLS FOR ORISHA OKO, A HEALING DEITY WHOSE CULT BEGAN WITH THE DISCOVERY OF MAGICAL THINGS ON A FARM. WHEN PLACED ON AN ERE IBEJI, THEY SUGGEST A LITTLE MORE FAMILY HISTORY, FOR THEY DENOTE THE BIRTH OF THE CHILD UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF THE DEITY SIGNIFIED: PERHAPS AFTER A PERIOD OF HIS WIFE'S BARRENNESS THE HUSBAND CONSULTED A DIVINER WHO PRESCRIBED A SACRIFICE TO THE DEITY SO IDENTIFIED.

BY THE MID 20TH CENTURY, WHERE THE CULT OF TWINS SURVIVED IT OFTEN DID SO IN A VISUALLY DISTURBED FORM, SUCH AS IN THE CITY OF ILA-ORANGUN WHERE A PHOTOGRAPHER WOULD PHOTOGRAPH THE SURVIVING TWIN, BUT PRINT IT IN DUPLICATE, THE IMAGE SERVING AS THE FOCUS OF CULT AND SACRIFICE; AND ELSEWHERE, UNADORNED PIECES OF WOOD OR IRON WOULD SUFFICE. FOR SOME MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN CONVERTS, THE TRADITIONS ASSOCIATED WITH TWINS ARE IGNORED ALTOGETHER; FOR OTHERS THEY WILL BE REVERTED TO ONLY IN THE EVENT OF A FAMILY CRISIS. MEANWHILE THE SCULPTED IMAGES OF THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES REMAIN, EVIDENCE OF A ONCE FLOURISHING TRADITION, A RESPONSE TO THE TRAGIC EXPERIENCE OF INFANT MORTALITY THAT YET EMBODIED A HISTORY OF ART.

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