

Status of Twins in Yorùbá and Haitian Society and Religion

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The existence of twins has provoked curiosity and interest across numerous societies and cultures. From the twin Greek gods Artemis and Apollo, to the Old Testament twin brothers Jacob and Esau, it often falls to religion to explain the twins relationship to each other and the rest of society. Among African religions, this explanation has varied throughout different periods, and continues to be a focus in rituals today. Haitian Vodou is a cultural descendant of many traditional African societies, including the Dahomian and Yorùbá peoples. This paper will examine beliefs about twins in Yorùbá and Haitian society and religion. I have juxtaposed these societies to demonstrate how traditional African beliefs have evolved both within Africa and upon transport to the New World. Acknowledgement of the continued influence of African culture on the Caribbean culture is important for placing Caribbean traditions in their appropriate context. The status of twins is a good demonstration of this enduring connection, as Haitian, Yorùbá, and Fon societies share a similar appreciation for twins. Academics have characterized Yorùbá enthusiasm for twins as a “cult of twins,” and Vodouists consider twins a sacred gift. Comparison of the ritual and mythology surrounding twins in both societies reveals the role of Yorùbá traditions in modern Haitian Vodou.

The Yorùbá are one of the largest ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria, with a population of about 20 million people residing in the Southwest (Yoruba, 2012). During the forced removal of African slaves and their subsequent dispersion, the culture and religion of the Yorùbá people spread to regions of South America and the Caribbean. This influence, while strong in Cuban Santeria, is also visible in Haitian Vodou (Fandrich 2007: 775-776). Nago is an identification used by slave traders to denote slaves from the Yorùbá region of Africa and the Nago family of spirits derives from the Yorùbá (Hebblethwaite 2012: 269).

The perception of twins in Yorùbá society has vacillated across time from hatred and prohibition to adulation. While most information about this shift comes from oral histories, the general account begins with an ancient prohibition in the Yorùbá region of Oyo against twins that resulted in the common practice of infanticide, most frequently by exposure to the elements (Renne 2001: 64). In the neighboring kingdom on Dahomey, a once rising economic and political power, the community gave gifts to the parents of twins, which eventually made them very rich. Yorùbá immigrants to Dahomey gained exposure to this belief in the luck of twins and subsequent economic benefits for the parents (Chappel 1974: 252-253). Gradually, the Dahomian twin traditions spread, the prohibition against the birth of twins ended, and the “cult of twins” developed. This shift likely occurred between 1650 and 1800, a peak time for the Atlantic Slave trade, when Yorùbá people brought their beliefs and traditions to Haiti and Cuba (Chappel 1974: 256).

Many academic fields study Yorùbá beliefs about twins because the Yorùbá people possess the highest birthrate of fraternal twins in the world (Leroy 2002: 132). According to Yorùbá mythology, twins share a soul and the death of one twin greatly endangers the other; as a result, the care of twins requires a great deal of attention (Leroy 2002: 134). It is widely believed that having twins will bring a family happiness and good fortune; however, the mercurial nature of twins can cause a family great strife. This powerful dichotomy results in leniency with twins and the displays of great reverence and respect for twins.

There are a complex set of rituals observed upon the birth of twins and throughout their lifecycle. These ceremonies include the naming ceremony, which occurs seven days after birth.

During the naming ceremony, twins are dressed in matching clothes, and all of the twins in the community and their families are invited (Renne 2001: 68-69). Twin ceremonies, like Vodou ceremonies, require certain foods and clothes. The twins will also be dedicated to the god, Orisha, who will provide special protection. (Leroy 2002: 134) Twins marry on the same day, and at the ceremony they wear the same clothes and eat the same foods. All of these rituals serve the purpose of emphasizing the shared soul of twins (Renne 2001: 68-69).

Similarly, in Haitian Vodou twins possess a special relationship with the divine. The Marasa, or Divine Twins, are *lwa* connected with human twins and more broadly children (Brown 1991: 405). In Vodou ceremonies, practitioners summon Papa Legba, followed by the Marasa, Loko, and Ayizan (Clark 2009: 12). The Marasa are volatile and demanding *lwa* to serve, as twin children are difficult to parent. However, Vodouists feel that twin children, while difficult to care for, will bring luck and good fortune, in the same way that serving the temperamental Marasa can confer great benefit.

The *vèvè*, or mystical diagram, that represents the Marasa has three distinct parts. Worship and rituals for the Marasa often involve groupings of three, despite them being divine twins. The ritual importance of groups of three may relate to the special status given to a child born after a set of twins. This child, called a *dossu*, if male, or a *dossa*, if female, completes the trio of the Marasa (Clark 2009: 12). An example of a Marasa ritual is the *plat Marasa*, in which the parents of twins offer food to the Marasa in a wooden bowl separated into three parts (Hebblethwaite 2012: 279).

The similar status enjoyed by twins in traditional Yorùbá religion and Haitian Vodou is an indicator of their shared heritage. Upon their transport to Haiti, Yorùbá slaves integrated their religious practices with those of slaves from other areas in Africa. The resulting religion, Vodou, possesses a vast pantheon of spirits that is representative of its complex heritage. Yorùbá influence is apparent in some of the names of the *lwa* in Haitian Vodou and in their admiration for twins. The “cult of twins” that is so well documented amongst the Yorùbá people clearly links with the veneration of twins in Haiti. Tracing the roots of Haitian Vodou to their origins in Africa illuminates the influence of a continent often neglected.

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