

A Yoruba Mythology: the Twin Context in a Place Called Igbo Ora

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ABSTRACT

The Twin births among the Yoruba population of the southwest part of Nigeria are usually considered as having one of the highest occurrences of twins in the world, and the trend has become so ingrained in the cultural, spiritual and social life of the people. Twins, who locally have become known as *Ìbejì*, exist in a position that rises above biological considerations and gain interpretative weight in the spiritual and the cosmological realm.

The paper relied on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources would be based on oral interviews and archival materials. Secondary sources on the other hand, were included in literatures such as books and newspapers. The oral interviews would be recorded and transcribed for analysis. The documentary data would be subjected to internal and external criticism for authentication and then to textual and contextual analysis. The paper contributed to knowledge through concepts such as '*Ìbejì*'.

KEYWORDS: *Ibeji*, Twins, Fraternal and Identical.

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INTRODUCTION

Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria see twins (*Ibeji*) as more than biological occurrences. Rather, *Ìbejì* are believed to have special spiritual powers and are thought to hold a great cosmic meaning. In traditional Yoruba society, having twins is thought to be a special gift from the gods (in fact twins are considered gods) and requires ceremonial respect, gift-giving and spiritual rituals (B.Lawal, 2011). Unlike several African cultures like the Efik that connect twins to bad luck, the Yoruba greatly respect twins and view these siblings as representations of good fortune and blessing to the home they came into and a link to their ancestors. As noted by Badmus Lawal "For Yoruba people, twins show a strong link between the physical and spiritual worlds, with twins connecting the two (B.Lawal, 2011). Some kind of connection in thought process between the spiritual world and the physical world. In the womb, the formation of twins in the womb is a fascinating process (Jazeera, 2025). We have two types of Twins namely: Fraternal, and Identical. Fraternal Twins are formed when two separate eggs are fertilized by two different sperm (Jazeera, 2025). These twins are like regular siblings, sharing about fifty percent of their genes while on the other hand, Identical Twins are as a result of when a single fertilized egg (zygote) splits and develops into two separate embryos. These twins share virtually the same genetic makeup (Olarinoye & Alogba, 2022). There are processes of twin formation. For the Fraternal Twins, we have Hyper-ovulation, meaning the mother releases two eggs instead of one during ovulation. Fertilization also means that each egg is fertilized by a different sperm, whilst the term implantation means that both fertilized eggs implant separately in the uterus, developing into two embryos. In the case for the Identical twins, the processes are splitting of the Zygote and the Timing of splitting. In this case the membrane arrangements are also split into two which are Early Split-Twins may have separate placentas; later Split would mean Twins often share a placenta. Some factors influencing Twin pregnancies in Igbo Ora may just be genetics as it concerns the ancestry history which does play a role, especially for dizygotic twins.

Historical and Cultural Context of Twins in Igbo Ora

According to Leroy Fernand, "Among the Igbo Ora people, twins are seen not just as children but as sacred beings, possessing unique powers that can influence both the physical and spiritual worlds." (Leroy Fernand et al, 2002) This diminished kind of reverence interprets rituals at their birth and at the same time determines their social identity and cultural expressions of Yoruba. The Yoruba understanding of twins as a paired soul is carried by the lexical term *Ìbejì*, the product of *ibi* (birth) and *ejì* (two) which describes the permanent cultural investment in duality and balance (Olarinoye & Alogba, 2022). The Yoruba Worldview relies heavily on the use of complementary pairs and hence twins reflect this Worldview (Olarinoye & Alogba, 2022). Segun Olupona points out that, "The birth of twins symbolizes harmony, balance, and cosmic equilibrium, reminding the community of

the delicate interplay between opposing forces that sustain life. (Olupona, 2014)” This is a cosmological reading that is reflected in the complex rituals and worship cultures that accompany twins, and which creates very close links with the twins and Yoruba mythic traditions and gods (Olupona, 2014). Yoruba historical tradition in Yoruba land indicates the existence of a multi-dimensional and contradictory place that the births of twins occupy in the world of Igbo Ora people in the context of culture and religion (Olupona, 2014). Unlike societies which perhaps consider twinning only as a biological novelty, the Igbo Ora people see it symbolically and religiously (Oyinloye et al, 2022). They endow the phenomenon of twins with complex symbolism vacillating between respect and fear. Early beliefs reinforce a fine balance between viewing twins as a divine grace and, on the other hand, as a sign or course of things to come. The twin notion has a central place in the Yoruba collection of mythology (Akinburo, 2008). Conventionally, the older twin is known as Táíwò, this refers to the one who gets to taste the world first whereas the latter referred to as Kéhindé and it is the one who comes after (Akinburo, 2008). Despite the chronological order of birth, the religious direction views Táíwò as the twins at a formative stage of spiritual life he was sent by gods to check up the state of the world in place of Kéhindé. This dualism best provokes the postulation that biological seniority may not always equal prophetic precedence hence emphasizing the complicated factor in Igbo Ora twin doctrine. The position of twins in Igbo Ora cosmology is either fearful or learned as sacred objects; the birth of the same marks a divine or supernatural favour or viewed as the sign of change or measure of spiritual alertness. Such a vague judgment rests on the mythical narrations according to which twins are the harbingers of luck, but they can also be causes of chaos if they are not paid attention to and treated with particular respect (Akinburo, 2008). According to Olajubu, the power to twins is ambivalent: on one hand, it brings wealth and security, on the other hand, brings evil when it is not fed as per spiritual needs (Olajubu, 2003). Such duo-centered belief system emphasizes the necessity of rite care involving the maintenance of Ere Ìbejì (carved twin figures) and other ritual activities designed to maintain harmonious relationships between two twins, their lineage, and the rest of the community. The most important part of Yoruba twin worship is the role played by the god Orisha Ìbejì who is the divine symbol of twins and twin lovers. Obeisance to Ìbejì Orisha is a religious and cultural linkage that preserves the spiritual ties of the living and their twins. Orisha Sabka says “Orisha Ìbejì represents the mystic presence of twins in the physical realm, serving as a guardian spirit and a source of blessing for families (Olupona, 2014).” The god does not only protect people but also “ The ritual system that the Yoruba devote to Ìbejì involves the kind of elaborate rituals performed under the direction of priests and other spiritual experts which involves the use of the Ere Ìbejì: highly carved wooden images of spirits of the babies which became twins (Olarinoye & Alogba, 2022).” These items are not actually considered being pieces of art but are considered to be receptacles of the departed soul of the twins hence retaining the twins in the ancestral chain. The Igbo Ora believed that this is because the mothers treat the Ere Ìbejì as though they were live children, giving them food, clothing and offering ritual prayers- an action that is a testament of the Yoruba belief of the unending of the connection between the living and the dead (Oyinloye & al, 2022). “The wooden twins are animated through ritual care, making the spiritual tangible and ensuring the twin spirits’ ongoing participation in the family’s life (Olarinoye & Alogba, 2022).” The metaphorical understandings of twins, therefore, reflects on a wider view of the world among the Igbo Ora where they view death and life as interrelated, and the spiritual world has a strong influence on the physical realm (B.Lawal, 2011). Twins are considered a threshold between what is visible and what is invisible, and they must be given due attention which will sustain social well-being. It is important that the twins be respected since they are powerful intermediaries between man and God; when not heeded or respected they will bring havoc and misfortune (Olupona, 2014). Therefore, the high position in social hierarchy of twins and their families can be fully explained by the logic of the Yoruba culture where they are even greeted by enduring respect and love. Twins in their turn in Yoruba culture correspond to the principle of their Yoruba culture based on duality that prevails in this culture and tradition and is embodied in the Yoruba philosophy and religion (Oyinloye & al, 2022). Twin births are thought of as balancing lifts that attain harmony between life and death, happiness and sadness and they influence harmony in the cosmic order. This symbolism is vocalized lucidly in the oral traditions and folklores where twins tend to be described as mystical entities with supernatural powers. In fact, one proverb, namely, Ibeji ki pa ara won translated to mean twins do not kill one another underlines the basic unity and the protection of one another. Igbo Ora society has experienced considerable change as regards to modernization and religious evolution but in a sense, adoration of twins and practice of Òrìsà Ibeji still evolve in every way possible. These traditions have been able to bend without losing their most important spiritual values, and are still playing out in family organization, celebrations, and artwork. The continued existence of twin rituals gives credence to their centrality in maintaining identity and the continuity of the Yoruba culture in an ever-changing socio-cultural climate. The historical relationship of the Yoruba populations with twins can be seen as a blend of awe and terror, since it follows an African cosmological outlook dominated by the ethic of balance and the expectation of a threat to the natural order (Jazeera, 2025). The birth of twins, in some instances, was seen as something abnormal, as an event that was supernatural that contradicted normal human conception process, so this resulted into feelings of reverence and suspicion. It is echoed in early Igbo Ora practice, where twins were sometimes interpreted as spiritual beings or beings somehow not rooted in the physical world, and their birth therefore a sign of portent requiring the close management of ritual to avoid disaster. Even though fears about the birth of twins are well-

documented in Igbo Ora societies, they did not bring about a straightforward case of social exclusion but a multifunctional cluster of different practices that were applied in the attempt to honor and appease the spiritual forces that were generally related to the births of this nature. Through generations, twins gained the status of sacred creatures, the personalities between the layers of the human and divine worlds. Indeed, as the ethnographic description of Bascom emphasizes, “The Igbo Ora people regarded twins as possessing protective and beneficent qualities, capable of influencing fortune and misfortune within the family and community (Bascom, 1969).” This is not only seen in the process of ritual but also in the superior social standing given to families whose Yang is in the form of twins. The twin births are most prominent in the town of Igbo-Ora, so called the twin capital of the world, where studies carried out by Oruene has reported one of the highest rates of twins among the entire population of the world (Oruene, 1983). Such demographic trend not only models Yoruba cultural attitudes, but vice versa. The extreme level of twins in this area also highlights their cultural focus and it has led to the development of special twins’ festivals and rituals created to celebrate the twins and their spiritual presence. “The prevalence of twins in Igbo-Ora is not merely a biological curiosity but a defining feature of the community’s identity and religious life. (Oruene, 1983)” Spiritual obligations are not the only community expectations when it comes to twins these are coupled with special social responsibilities: twins, their families, and the mothers of twins are given special attention during communal events and other communal festivals and ceremonies and the mothers of twins will have certain social advantages attached to them due to their position that is closest to the divine in the community (Oruene, 1983). Moreover, twins are supposed to instill the principles of mergence and unity hence representing the Yoruba philosophical ideal of the unity. Idowu notes that “the Yoruba community invests twins with expectations that transcend individual identity, positioning them as exemplars of social cohesion and spiritual balance. (Idowu, 1962)”

Its local twinning rate is higher than that of the world which is 12 in every 1,000 of the live births and some of the results even suggest 158 in every 1,000 (Idowu, 1962). This is despite the varying explanations drawn; however, hereditary factors in the Ibarapa people and environmental-based reasons are commonly mentioned especially the dietary habits. okra leaves and amala, being meals of the traditional meal composed of yam or cassava flour, are routinely consumed by local women as a means of helping them to be fertile and to raise the chances of fraternal twins. Estrogens in the local yams have been proposed as a substance that will induce hyper ovulation, but this has not proved conclusively through empirical research especially in University of Lagos Teaching Hospital (Oruene, 1983). On the whole, such data highlights the uniqueness of Igbo-Ora as a demographic anomaly of international concern. The history of Igbo-Ora is compounded, following trans-Yoruba migration trends with the settlement name changed through the years as successive groups of people crossed forested, moist areas, with the progression of the name-Igbo-Ira (forest of the swamp) to Igbo-Ora. Twinning in the context of lineages of the Old Oyo Empire and the wider Yoruba has been a culturally significant-practice over centuries within the milieu of descendants and the wider Yoruba. As an example, the defendant, the current Olu of Igbo-Ora, habitually refers to twins as godly endowments to be part of the local legend and oral narration. Oba Awoniran Adelani, the Alàsàkó of Asàkó-Igboora, makes it clear that the naming of Igbo-Ora, the land of twins has to be understood in the light of its spiritual and historical roots. During an oral interview, the king experienced, “In any other town twins are not exclusively found but there is Igbo-Ora town (Oyinloye & al, 2022)” which is unique. He noted the prevalent praise-chant among Yoruba to link twins with *Ìsòkún* (as in the oriki, *Ìjirẹ ara Ìsòkún*); people born as twins have been closely linked with that place, chiefly; but that it is Igbo-Ora, he emphasized, that forms the actual spiritual and physical beginning of twins. "Here, high twin birth is not a mere coincidence," the Oba expounded (al, 2002). It is a natural resource that Olodumare has provided to IgboOra-Asako people. And you cannot begin to speak of any origin of Igbo-Ora without starting at Asako because here it is the root. This heritage was supported by the Olu of Igbo-Ora, Oba Olujide Titiloye, on communal and individual levels. This I did not read in a book or hear someone say-I also have had twins. Twins are kids alright but when you order one good thing then you are given two that is the abundance of God. The animated landscape of the town is an indication of symbolic confirmation to the above assertion. Lining up on the front of the palace of the Olu of Igbo-Ora are two giant baobab trees according to the description of Kehinde Dahunsi who is a native of the area. The elders in the community narrate how long these trees have been there since generations and are supposed to have spiritual connections with the high rate of twin births in Igbo Ora Engaging in a further analysis, Oba Awoniran entrenches that the twin association of IgboOra has an historic connection rooted to a period of Ifa divination in the establishment of the settlement (Geertz, 2017). He explains that text of this oracle "*Òwónrhin Mejii*" appeared and foretold that only by making a sacrifice of paired objects and worshiping of "Orisa Ibeji" security against war and abundance will be achieved (Oyinloye & al, 2022). According to these instructions, the founders made the required sacrifice and, as it was to be expected, the population was provided with safety against military confrontation (Akinburo, 2008). This order came to be interpreted as protective and prophetic: besides sparing people the war, Ifa prophesied about generations to come a high rate of incidence of twins being born. The people ended up leaving Asako to their current location and lived as they endured the ensuing hates but the memory of such early divination continues to be part and parcel of who they are as a collective people. Asako is currently an independent town and has managed to maintain a lot of ancestral compounds but it still maintains its history and spiritual capital as the cradle of Igbo-Ora. In the social-cultural context of the

town, such demographic anomaly as twinning is much more significant than the difference in family size: it directs the symbolism of the community and economic identity. This peculiarity is the core of a successful cultural-tourist business. The experience of visitors visiting the town is indeed mind blowing to them.

In the Yoruba anthropology, the twins play a role of sharp prestige that goes way beyond the limit that is attached to them due to being twins and are permeated with various cultural threads of symbolism and spiritual implications and social reinventions. This raising is closely allied with the widespread ideas of fertility, wealth, and spiritual power thus making the twins the main symbols of Yoruba shared identity. Twins are not ordinary children born of a mother, but divine favour and spiritual power, the hopes of a group on its future sustenance and prosperity. This prospect is an ultimate representation of the Yoruba cosmological description of twins as agents of destination: the birth of twins brings felicity to the society and the harmony of the cosmos. The spiritual essence of twins is confirmed with the help of Orisha Ibeji (advisor to twins), which symbolically ties their spiritual strength to germination and success and also serves as an esoteric protector and benefactor. This connection by saying that, Orisha Ibeji brings fertility, protection and prosperity to families and communities as well as a living expression of Yoruba spiritual power. Therefore, the reproduction of twins in a family is not just a biological but indeed spiritual. It is the sign of Godly blessing and spiritual power. Veneration of twins is a cosmic derivation that human reproduction and social expansion are inseparably bound to spiritual favors and social omniscience. Herein, twins and the symbolism that surrounds them are used to unify the fortunes of the family with the state of general health and unity of the bigger community. Rituals related to twins in a community form the central processes of social integration and continuation of a culture in Yoruba community. These rights are not limited to the nuclear family as they rely on broad kinship networks, skilled spiritual operators and respected elders. The most apparent example of this is the Ibeji annual festival which is a remarkable communal event that reinforces their communal values and identity through liturgical performances, choreography and sacrifices. Twin rituals combine not only the roles of a protection gift but also a means of social integration where members share uniform religious experiences and enhance friendships. In such a way, such rites also work on spiritual, social, and cultural levels strengthening the sense of togetherness and preserving the cultural memory. Twin also features heavily in the art and literature of the Igbo Ora and offer powerful ways of articulating identity and continuity. The most recognizable art form on the day of the phenomenon is the Ere Ibeji-wooden sculptures that represent the spirits of dead twins. The repetitive nature of such rituals maintains a constant connection between the prevailing reality and the spiritual world, so that the members of the community do not forget about this source of joint life. The culture of twins is thus staged also by the comprehensive tradition of literature and oral tradition. Twins are songs, proverbs, and folktales explaining the power of unity and protection hence a context of twins and the town of Igbo Ora is hereby studied

The Igbo Ora Context

Igbo-Ora, undoubtedly, is more than a place with a high twin birth rate for Yoruba people; it is a sanctified place tied to traditions, folklores, myths and ceremonies surrounding twin births. African communities have formed many traditions about twins which include spiritual discussions, giving names (orúko àmútòrunwá), making offerings to Èsù and Oriṣà Ibeji and big festivals to celebrate the safety and growth of twins. Despite the strength and the influence of Christianity, Islam, globalization and urbanization has reduced or challenged some of these traditions. Therefore, this work looks into how Igbo-Ora's twin rituals remained strong and adapted to be practiced outside their community in Yoruba land despite the influence of Christianity and Islam. Hence this study mainly scrutinizes how certain Yoruba twin rituals are influenced by the impact of Christianity and Islam. Even though some studies like that of Olarinmoye and Alogba, did analyze aspects of Yoruba customs and beliefs, how twins are cared for and the effects on their identities, beliefs and culture have not been studied as much (Olarinoye & Alogba, 2022). The study looks into what traditional beliefs and ceremonies are common among twins in Igbo Ora people. How do twin rituals support the identity of the Yoruba culture and uniqueness among the Igbo Ora people? What changes have these put into practices made in response to the impact of the new global age, changes in religion and globalization? The questions help us better realize how indigenous groups respond to and adjust to changes over time. The major aim of this researcher are: To study regular twin rite in Igbo Ora and what they indicate about the culture; to find out how these sacraments strengthen Igbo Ora traditions; and to analyze how such traditions have been affected by changes in religion, the modern world and increased global awareness.

The intention of this researcher espoused the meaning of the concept of ritual. For this study, a ritual is considered a specific set of actions within a particular cultural or religious framework that is performed in a particular order with symbolic significance. Some scholars like Clifford Geertz believe that rituals help in strengthening social relationships, conveying dominant socio cultural norms, and ensuring the preservation and continuity of practices across various age groups (Geertz, 2017). He also argues that rituals do not simply reflect but construct real social worlds as they make through a symbol and make worlds and themselves. An example of such rituals is among the Igbo Ora people, where there are twin rituals that aid in the perpetuation of cultural perception and value of twins.

Identity is defined as the personal idea of oneself within society, including but not limited to nationality, ethnicity, religion, and culture. Stuart Hall remarks that uniqueness or identity could evolve over time due to different cultures and history. In the case of

the Igbo Ora people, the cultural folklores of the people were their pride signifying the ramifications that the twin phenomenon has on them and collectively. They claim that twins have always been respected in Igbo Ora believes and culture, as people believe twins have supernatural abilities. It underlines that rituals, offerings and *Ere Ibeji* help to recognize and respect the twins' place in the society (Jazeera, 2025). The Yoruba carving practice of *Ere Ibeji*, which represents twins who passed away, shows the spirit of living individuals and the close bond between life and death (Idowu, 1962). These carvings serve more purpose than to simply remember each twin; they are believed to contain the essence of the twins themselves. However, these figures devoid of any life, yet they call for nurturing with obligation equal to that of a bearing the role of a mother. Unlike other societies, the Yoruba people demonstrate belief unlike many in the existence and effect of heritage spirits on one's life. Twins represent the way life and death, joy and sorrow and other dual parts of life are linked. It is clear in many Yoruba myths and rituals that focus on balance and harmony.

CONCLUSION

The question of what governs the Igbo Ora twin precedence? Spiritual factor or Biological factors: The researcher is convinced that both could be found culpable in Twin processing and the high number of twins in Igbo Ora.

According to one of the Yoruba proverbs, which have remained prominent over time, the Yoruba people hold certain beliefs with regards to twins as evidenced by, *Ibeji ki pa ara won* -twins do not kill each other- about their inseparability, and coexistence together (Geertz, 2017). These oral accounts are part of mnemonic mechanisms through which cultural values, social norms, and historical memory are passed on by one generation to another so that the symbolism of twins has been preserved as a living, well-vitalized part of Yoruba society. Also, the artistic and cultural status of twins is consistent with the philosophical concept of duality and balance of the Yoruba people that crosses over most elements of their world.

The twin ritual and cultural identity in Igbo-Ora and extension to the rest of the Yoruba would highlight an immensely relevant interface of faith, science, culture and social connotation. The anomalous high rates of twin births in Yoruba land and especially Igbo-Ora, then, far from being a demographic exception, turn out to be a determinant building block of cultural identity, communal existence and spiritual awareness. The mythological stories focused on Orisa *ibeji* and practical practices of naming ceremonies, protection as well as yearly festivals, twins are valued as blessed creatures whose existence brings upon blessings, wealth and succession. This is being actualized and embodied materially in symbolic artefacts like *ere Ibeji* and socially reproduced in communal habits and mechanisms which support communal memory and identity. Locating the phenomenon of the twin rituals in the context of the rest of the Yoruba culture, this study contributes to the emerging proliferation of discussions of ritual and identity within the African traditions of culture, illustrating that ritual is not a fixed object in time, but an evolving and dynamic process that is adaptive and responsive to historical and social transformation. It also brings out the symbolism richness inherent in veneration of twins in Yoruba, who hold strong indigenous religious system, and some develop changing cosmological beliefs. The study gives life to the manner in which the traditional knowledge and myth as well as material culture meets the modern, contemporary forces like the church and medicine as well as internationalization with the help of an analysis of the practices worthy of choice in Igbo-Ora. The nature of subsequent cultural assimilation has not eliminated the incidents of twin rituals, but has in fact changed these practices to that of hybridization hence still maintaining the weight of meaning to the older and younger generations. The study presents both policy implication and cultural preservation. It shows that a community-based festival like the "World Twins Festival" must be able to be viewed not only as a tourism attraction but as a living heritage that upholds the native values and energizes local economies. Such rituals ought to be incorporated in curriculum lines especially in courses dealing with African studies as a means to teach appreciation of indigenous ways of knowing. Health policies that interact with different populations, including Igbo-Ora, would also benefit from involving the aspect of culture in reproductive health and the birth of twins. In some ways, future research could extend this work to a comparative study of one or more African peoples assess the means by which Diaspora societies mediate twin identity, or explore the interplay between twin ship and gender, disability, and the exercise of spiritual authority. Taken together, these lines of research improve the understanding of how African cultures are still settling the tension between tradition and change at a speedily changing world.

According to Duyile William Abiodun, the colonial impact on infrastructure must be seen to be exploitative (Duyile, Ediagbonya, Buhari, & Nwachukwu, 2020)) but in most cases the culture of the people remained intact. He further buttressed his views through the prism of migration, politics and culture; (Duyile, William Abiodun, 2021 (Duyile, Economic Integration in West Africa, 1960-1975: An Enquiry into the Past, 2021)) and he took cognizance that Nigeria is a mono-economy state (Duyile & Nwachukwu, 'Japa' Phenomenon and Nigerian Students in the Mix of a Proxy war in Ukraine, 2023).

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