



Male twin-memorial figure (ere ibeji)

Eshubiyi

On display

Title/Description: Male twin-memorial figure (ere ibeji)

Artist/Maker: Eshubiyi

Born: 1850 - 1899

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Pigment, Wood

Measurements: h. 254 x w. 97 x d. 90 mm

Accession Number: 229

Historic Period: 19th century - Mid/Late

Production Place: Abeokuta, Africa, Nigeria

Cultural Group: Yorùbá

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This small figurine illustrates the enduring importance of twinhood to Yorùbá culture. Across Yorubaland - an area covering southwest Nigeria, Togo and the Republic of Benin - an unusually high proportion of new-borns are twins. Over the centuries, this has led Yorùbá communities to consider twins to be closely linked to the spiritual realm. However, a twin's spiritual influence remains mysterious [1]. Consequently, as cultural and religious ideas have changed over time, twin-births have been seen as both heralding prosperity and foreshadowing misfortune.

Known as *ere ibeji* ('*ere*' meaning sacred image, '*ibi*' born and '*aji*' two), figurines such as this were created by specialist carvers following the death of one or both twins. Since, in the past, infant mortality was high among new-born twins throughout Yorubaland, *ibeji* were produced in huge numbers - both as single figures and in pairs. Upon the death of one or both twins, families of the deceased would visit a local diviner (*Babalawo*) to decide whether a memorial figurine should be made - a judgement based on the departed twin's likely effect on the fortunes of those still living. If a *Babalawo* considered an *ibeji* necessary, the mother of the deceased was expected to treat the new carving as a surrogate for their deceased child's spirit - nursing it with the same level of care by bathing, clothing and ritually feeding it. In doing so, their late child's spirit could be appeased and the family's fortunes preserved until another healthy child was born. Today, *ibeji* are less commonly produced [2], though memorialisation continues via alternative technologies such as double-exposure photography.

This single, male *ibeji* bears the marks of this nurturing in its surface, smoothed by frequent handling, and in the application of indigo dye, a colour closely associated with Shango, the Yorùbá god of thunder and protector of twins. The particular community to which the memorialised child belonged is made clear in its facial scars. Additionally, its legs and hands are carved in a way that allows cowrie shells, precious beads and other adornments to be hung around them. While more apparent in female examples, *ere ibeji* typically depict their infant subjects with prominent breasts, arm muscles or elaborate hairstyles as a way of portraying the child in its adult prime.

Certain features of this *ibeji* carving suggest it is the work of Eshubiyi (1840-1910), a master woodcarver and the founder of one of Yorubaland's leading artists workshops [3]. Also known by his praise name 'Amutu', Eshubiyi was not only a skilled carver but also a priest at the community shrine and a member of the local *Gelede* masquerading group in the town of Abeokuta (an important political and artistic centre north of Lagos). Having founded his workshop in the Itoko quarter of Abeokuta in 1862, Eshubiyi faced competition from rival artisans, especially from the nearby Ojerinde (or 'Adugbologe') workshop. Despite this, he went on to establish a celebrated dynasty of carvers that continued well into the twentieth century under the direction of his son, Akinyode, and grandson, Shookan.

Theo Weiss, March 2021

[1] Elisha Renne, 'The Ambiguous Ordinarity of Yoruba Twins,' in *Twins in African and Diaspora Cultures: Double Trouble, Twice Blessed*, ed. Philip Peek (Indiana University Press, 2011), 306-326.

[2] Marilyn Houlberg, 'Ibeji Images of the Yoruba.' *African Arts* 7 (1), (1973): 27

[3] Tim Chappel, 'A twin image from Abeokuta, Nigeria,' *African Arts* 51 (3), (Autumn, 2018), 74-77.

Further Reading

Tim Chappel, 'The Yoruba Cult of Twins in Historical Perspective,' *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 44 (3), (1974), 250-65.

George Chemeche, [ed.], *Ibeji: the cult of Yoruba twins*, Five Continents Editions (2003).

Alisa LaGamma, 'Beyond Master Hands: The Lives of the Artists', *African Arts*, 31.4 (1998), 24-90

Babatunde Lawal, 'Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yoruba Art and Culture,' *African Arts* 41.1 (2008), 24-39.

Timothy Mobolade, 'Ibeji Custom in Yorubaland', *African Arts*, 4.3 (1971), 14-15

Provenance

Tentatively attributed to Eshubiyi (1840-1910), also known as 'Amutu', or one of his contemporaries working in the Itoko artist quarter in Abeokuta, southwest Nigeria.

Entered the European art market in the early 1950s where it passed through several hands.

Previously in the collection of S. R. Burnstein before being sold, around 1953, to Kenneth Webster.

Purchased by K. J. Hewett, London, from Kenneth Webster before 1963.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1963.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
