

3B The Inca *Capac Hucha*

Patrick Ryan Williams

Field Museum

The Inca rite of *capac hucha*, the “royal obligation,” brings into question the fundamental aspects of death in society. It involves the offering of young children as sacrifices to important sacred entities in the Inca world. It is, in many ways, the sacrifice of the future potential of humanity. The *capac hucha* is not a moment in time, however, as it involves an extensive process of transformation. Those chosen for the ritual of *capac hucha* may have been removed from their home months or a year or more before their biological deaths in many cases. And they were conceived of as intermediaries to the ancestral deities. The Inca empire prepared for these cases well in advance. Some of the young women may have been taken into service as *aqllakuna* (chosen women) and destined for this rite. Other girls and boys were chosen from communities throughout the empire. While often the sacred entities to whom they were sacrificed were lofty mountain peaks, in at least one case it was a sacred island in the Pacific Ocean.

In 1892, George Dorsey, future curator at the Field Museum, conducted excavations on the Isla de la Plata off the coast of Ecuador for the World Columbian Exposition. On a triangular point of land between two ravines, at 16 feet below the surface, the excavations revealed the remains of two poorly preserved skeletons and numerous grave offerings (Dorsey 1901). Based on the grave offerings, we presume these were the remains of two young women, although their bodies were not collected nor identified on site. The excavations revealed many ceramics and stone sculptures of the local Chorrera culture and the remains of a sacred Inca child sacrifice, the *capac hucha* (McEwan and Silva 2000).

The grave offerings accompanying the two individuals included five female figurines (three of gold, one of silver, and one of bronze), six *tupu* pins (used to fasten a women's shawl), and several Inca ceramic vessels which were made in the Inca capital of Cusco, over 1000 miles to the south (Bray et al. 2005) (Figure 3.10). This assemblage of grave offerings is characteristic of the *capac hucha*, a rite of sacrifice that took place on important occasions in the Inca empire. Such occasions may have been on the coronation or death of the emperor, the birth of a royal heir, a great victory in battle, or in response to a natural disaster. The ceremony did not always involve human sacrifice, which was reserved for the most powerful sacred places, often the peaks of great mountains, or *apu*.

According to early Spanish accounts, a *capac hucha* ceremony was preceded by a call to all the provinces of the empire to send as tribute boys and girls between the ages of four and ten years old. Some were required to be children of local lords, and all were to be examples of physical perfection. In some cases, the children were paired as male/female couples and buried as a pair. The children and

visiting dignitaries that accompanied them participated in ceremonial feasts, performances, and ritual events for days or weeks in Cusco. At the designated time, the children and their attendants would begin the journey to the sacred places of sacrifice, sometimes hundreds of miles away, dressed in fine clothes and with the various precious offerings to the *huaca* (sacred entity). Their physical cause of death may have been exposure in the cold mountain air, a blow to the head as they sat in their tomb, strangulation, or intoxication to the point of death. In all cases, the integrity of the body was critical to the ritual.

The examples of *capac hucha* told in early historical accounts illustrate diverse origins and interment locales for these children. A young girl named Tanta Carhua was buried alive at a *huaca* in her homeland in the central highlands of Peru after returning from the ceremonies held in Cusco. Another, named Cauri Pacsa, from the northern highlands of Peru, was sacrificed in Chile (Hernández Príncipe in Bray et al. 2005). Archaeological research on the bodies of children from the Llullaillaco *capac hucha* burial in Argentina show they consumed coca and large amounts of alcohol in the month before their interment; intoxication may have opened paths to the spiritual realm in Inca beliefs (Wilson et al. 2013).

The *capac hucha* demonstrates that death is not a single moment in Inca conception. The moment the children are chosen for the *capac hucha*, they begin a process of transformation. The Jesuit priest Bernabe Cobo indicates that parents obliged to give up their children were not allowed to express any sadness, but rather gestures of happiness that the honor was a great reward were required (Wilson et al. 2013). The moment of transfer from their previous social existence to an Inca offering represented a fundamental transformation in their being. As they left their village, never to return again, they left their social world forever. Their social death preceded by months their physical interment on a mountain summit or in an island tomb.

The days or weeks of ceremonies in Cusco represented the transformation of the children from earthly beings to offerings to the sacred. The moment of biological death, be it through physical violence at the site of their interment, or intoxication and hypothermia that led to the ceasing of their heart and brain to function, was not a clear break either. In fact, the physical preservation of their bodies, surrounded by the precious offerings that made them sacred, was likely intended for them to serve as conduits to the *apu* and the sacred realm. In a spiritual sense, it is unclear if they may continue to exist in a spiritual cognizance with the *huaca* in which they were interred.

We cannot know how these children felt about their sacrifice on the mountain summits and in the island grave.

Figure 3.10. Inca *capac hucha* assemblage from Isla de la Plata, Ecuador: miniature ceramic jar (FM 4459); ceramic pedestal-base pot (FM 4460); miniature ceramic plate (FM 4367); gold figurine (FM 4450); and silver figurine (FM 4354).

That they went in altered states under the coercion of powerful political leaders at such a young age belies any choice they had in the matter. But it does call us to examine the questions: what is death and when does it occur? Death is not purely a biological process, but a transformation from one state to another, and one that depends on social roles, physical processes, and spiritual presence in defining how that process occurs.

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In the African Diaspora, sacred vessels house various aspects of the soul, and can liberate these souls upon an initiate's death. Haitians refer to the physical body as the *kò kadav*, and within the body, seven "soul-selves" reside: the *gwo bon anj* (personality soul), the *ti bon anj* (morality soul), the *zetwal* (astral soul), the *lwa rasin/lwa eritaj* (root or inherited soul spirits), *lwa mèt tèt* (master of the head soul spirit), *wonsiyon* (collective of soul spirits that accompany the *mèt tèt*), and *nanm* (the full self in totality) (Beauvoir 2006). In Vodou cosmology, mystic clay pots serve an essential role during major life changes, as these various vessels each claim responsibility for distinct souls. Haiti boasts several mystic pots: *plat marasa* (ceramic pots sacred to Marasa, the divine twins akin to the Yorùbá *ibéjì*), *kriich* (clay drinking vessels), *pòt tèt* (ceramic initiation soul chambers), *zen* (clay or iron ceremonial pots for initiation and mortuary rites), *govi* (spirit residences, divination implements, and funerary vessels), and *kanari* (large clay mortuary vessels). Several of these Haitian mystic clay pots associated with the souls are featured in this exhibition, including two *govi* and one *kanari* (see for example Figure 3.4).

When a Vodou initiate dies, a primary mortuary rite known as *desounen* takes place, during which the deceased's body is prepared for burial, various pots are nourished and destroyed, and several souls (the *gwo bon anj*, *ti bon anj*, and *lwa mèt tèt*) are removed from a person. *Desounen* literally translates as "an uprooting of sound" or removal of life from a person's body. In essence, the ritual of *desounen* "desacralizes the body, extricating it from all divine manifestations, and at the same time freeing the *gwo bon anj* and the *mèt tèt* to be initiated among the community of the dead" (Desmangles 1992, 69). To ensure a person's many souls make safe passage to the spirit realm, biological and spiritual family members gather together to perform *bohoun*, special funerary

songs and drumming. The devotee's physical body (*kò kadav*) is publicly released from its mortal duties and sent to a subterranean spiritual realm to be refired for the entrance of a new soul (Daniels 2023). Enormous mystic pots known as *kanari* (Figure 3.4) play a central role here, even in their humble state as unadorned clay vessels. They are ceremonially broken during *desounen* in a rite called *kase kanari*, which liberates the deceased person's souls and head-spirit so that they may join their unique spirit realms.

If *desounen* "uproots sound" to release the body's souls, *kase kanari* shatters a small portion of the universe to embody the deceased's final act as a physical person. At this time, three of the devotee's souls—the *gwo bon anj*, the *ti bon anj*, and *lwa mèt tèt*—are all liberated to pursue their respective paths: the *ti bon anj* journeys to heaven, the *gwo bon anj* goes underwater to the ancestral realm of Afrik-Ginen, and the *lwa mèt tèt* is released into the ether to rejoin the other cosmic spirits. *Kase kanari* is conducted by both the biological and spiritual family, signifying the rupture of the initiate's passing and also embodying the liberation of multiple souls and spirits who have animated the initiate. Inducted into ceremony by the community, the purchase and subsequent shattering of the mystic pot *kanari* embodies a family's commitment to honor the deceased's many souls and continue the family legacy of spirit worship in the next generation.

The smaller Haitian clay pots known as *govi* (Figure 3.4) serve three principal roles in Vodou divination rites: as residences for the spirits, as divination implements, and as mortuary vessels for the ancestors. During rites of initiation in southern variants of Haitian Vodou, each devotee receives seven *govi* in honor of seven principal *lwa* or spirits of the temple. These Haitian *govi*—a Fongbe word from ancient Dahomey/Benin, *vi* meaning small

or child and *go* meaning gourd or bottle (Blier 1995)—are blessed, fed, and become dwellings for an initiate's spirits on her personal altar. The mystic pots are dressed in colored satin or silk robes that honor the spirits whom they embody: white for the elder serpent spirits Danbala and Ayida Wèdo, red for the warrior spirit Ogou, and blue for the mother warrior spirit Èzili Dantò. In their second role, *govi* are also used as traditional divination implements, as priests and priestesses (*houngan* and *manbo*) invoke the *lwa* using the clay pot as a channel to directly contact the spirit realm.

In secondary mortuary rites of Haiti, the same earthenware *govi* appear again in their third role as mortuary vessels. As previously mentioned, *desounen* is performed when a devotee transitions to release several of her souls. At this juncture, her *gwo bon anj* or personality soul travels under the water (*anba dlo*) to the divine realm of Afrik-Ginen, where the spirits and ancestors all reside. One year and one day after a person has been buried, another ceremony occurs known as *wete mò nan dlo* (or *retire mò nan dlo*)—literally, to call or pull the dead from the water. In this secondary mortuary rite, the buried person remains undisturbed in her tomb, but the deceased's soul undergoes a transition of residence. Devotees invoke the names of the dead in ritual song to call forth the *gwo bon anj* of various loved ones who have been stationed in Afrik-Ginen (Deren 1953; Métraux 1959). Each deceased ancestor's *gwo bon anj* soul is ritually prepared for a return to the mortal world, this time not in a human vessel but in a mystic clay pot. At the right moment in the ceremony, the *gwo bon anj* souls of the dead being called forth are ritually “captured” in their respective *govi*, and the ancestors regain their ability to speak through the clay vessel. The *govi* thus become funerary pots as well as “homing” receptacles for the ancestors. From then onward, the ancestral *govi* will be precious kept on a family altar or in the community temple, and can be accessed through divination rites for counsel and advice regarding illness, misfortune, or family difficulties. The mystic pots featured here in this exhibition—*kanari* and *govi*—ultimately represent the distinct journeys of a Haitian Vodouizan's souls after death. While certain souls are released into cosmic realms, others will be recalled in a new manifestation of ancestral presence on the earthly altars of their devotee descendants.

Twin Souls and Double Deaths

Twins present a fascinating case of plural soul-selves in Africana cosmologies, which explains their complex relationship to death and the invisible realm. While the rates of identical twins appear roughly the same across the world, BaKongo societies of Central Africa (Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, and Congo-Kinshasa) and Yorùbá societies of West Africa (southwestern Nigeria and southern Benin) produce some of the highest rates of

fraternal and sororal twins in the world (Bandama in this volume; MacGaffey 1986). Twins are regarded in both regions as possessing divine qualities, and must be propitiated while living on earth and afterwards in death. Mapasa, as they are known in Kongo regions, historically followed certain ritual taboos, such as refraining from eating leopards and certain big cats, sacred animals whose spotted or striated coats signal their ability to communicate with the spirit realm (MacGaffey 1986; Fu-Kiau Kia Bunseki-Lumanisa 2001). Traditionally regarded as mediators between worlds, as were Inca noble children (see Williams on the Inca *capac hucha* ritual in this volume), Kongo twins were instructed neither to kill nor consume the flesh of these revered forest creatures who lived between realms, for to do so would be akin to taking one's own life.

In Yorùbáland, Nigeria, *ibeji* or twins similarly express otherworldly qualities as part human and part spirit. Sacred wooden statues of Yorùbá twins called *ere ibeji* may be carved at different points in the twins' lives. In this volume, Foreman Bandama helpfully explains how “twins have the same combined soul, whose stability needs to be maintained if one dies.” Indeed, in the Yorùbá universe, each person possesses a divine double (*enikeji*) in the spirit realm who walks alongside one during the entirety of one's life. When twins are born, it is said that the *enikeji* has come along with the mortal person as a newly incarnated spirit (Olúpòṇà 2022). Because no distinction can be made between the mortal-twin and spirit-twin, *ibeji* must be treated exactly the same. In Yorùbá and Kongo communities alike, twins are showered with loving care and attention, for any angered twin can bring strife to the family, and orchestrate great chaos in the community.

Vibrant twin traditions persist in the African Diaspora, with elaborate ceremonies to honor twins known as *gemelos* in Cuban Spanish and *jimo* in Haitian Kreyòl (from the French *jumeaux*). Tellingly, while twins possess these secular titles in both Caribbean nations, they are revered as both mortal and divine, and thus also carry mystic monikers: *ibeji* in the Cuban Lucumí/Regla de Ocha/Santería religion and in Haiti, the more commonly used term is *marasa* (a clear derivation of the KiKongo *mapasa*), especially among the Vodou communities. Such twin devotion appears on altars, as with the *ibeji* statues of Cuban Lucumí/Regla de Ocha/Santería traditions. Here the wooden-carved twins likely imported from Nigeria are paired with two porcelain ceramic vessels with different colored beads. The male twin (left) stands behind a pot with a red-and-white necklace for the *orichá* (spirit) of thunder and lightning Changó, while the female twin (right) faces a pot with mostly clear and blue beads for Yemayá, *orichá* of the sea and mother of fish and all humankind. These vessels are periodically fed as divine nourishment for the doubled spirits of *ibeji*.



Figure 3.11. Yorùbá *ere ibeji*: twin figures in wood (FM 303438, 9-A114395d).

3C The Yorùbá Ere Ibeji: Reincarnation of Twins

Foreman Bandama

Field Museum

Life and death are powerful forces whose balance, or lack thereof, cannot be left to chance or nature. But what happens when they are doubled, literally, through the birth or death of twins? Traditionally, the birth and/or death of twins always swings the pendulum of these forces rather violently amongst many African communities (Mobolade 1997). For much of Africa, twins are feared and considered a bad sign of impending danger that can be averted by the elimination of one or both of the newborn children. However, historical shifts amongst the Yorùbá people led to the current patterns in which twins are revered and celebrated both in life and in death (Leroy 1995).

The Yorùbá people are concentrated in southwestern Nigeria, but they are also found in neighboring Togo and Ghana. They are one of Africa's largest ethnic groups, with over 25 million members (Leroy et al. 2002). One of their most peculiar features is a genetic disposition that has given the Yorùbá people the highest recorded rate of twin births in the world. Their dizygotic twinning rate is 4.4 percent of all maternities, or about 45 sets of twins in every 1000 births. This, coupled with other historical challenges, often led to high infant deaths. In ancient times, the Yorùbá people, just like most of the African ethnic groups, used to reject and even sacrifice newborn twins. This is now all but forgotten and twins are welcomed and celebrated in grand style, both at their birth and after death. Anthropologists posit that the shift into the *ere ibeji* system was a copying mechanism for an ethnic group that witnesses more twin birth/death than others.

In the Yorùbá language, twins are called "*ibeji*," which is a compound name; "*ibi*" (which means born) and "*oji*" (which means two/twice) (Mobolade 1997, 14). The first-born twin is usually named "Taiyewo" or "Taiwo," meaning to have the first taste of the world, and the second is named "Kehinde," which means arriving after the other (Figure 3.11). *Ere* then refers to a sacred statue/carving commissioned and created to symbolically perpetuate the life of the departed, when one or both twins die (Leroy et al. 2002).

To the Yorùbá people, twins have the same combined soul, whose stability needs to be maintained if one dies. Accordingly, most twins' activities and appearances are also matched. For instance, they wear the same clothing, eat the same food, and even share in all services (Idowu 1962). The celebration of the twins begins immediately after birth with elaborate feasts that may even involve neighboring villages, depending on the status of the parents. Soon after birth, a divining priest is consulted to find out about the future of the twins and to obtain specific instructions on how to care for the newborns. A major component of this consultation includes finding out whether carved figures (*ibeji*) should be commissioned immediately or not. In the latter case (*ibeji* not decreed at birth), the carved figure(s) will be required when one or both die. When one twin dies, an *ibeji* image is fashioned and kept to house the soul of the departed, thereby maintaining balance in the soul of the surviving twin. The death of both twins is followed by

the commissioning of two *ibeji* statues that are treated with reverence as if the twins were still alive. The pampering of the *ibeji* includes occasional feeding (food touching the mouths), facial markings, bathing, singing, clothing, elaborated ornamentation such as beads and painting, as well as soaking in magic potions (Johnson 1921). It is the primary responsibility of the parents to treat these statues as if they were the living children because failing to do so is believed to lead to negative consequences such as poverty and illness (Mobolade 1997). This responsibility is then passed on to the surviving twin when he/she is older.

The manufacture of the *ibeji* statues among the Yorùbá people was done by skilled carvers because they are made from wood. The wooden figures are always carved in an erect adult posture with hands on the hips and are fixed to a round or rectangular baseplate. Often, the associated adornment included non-wooden materials such as bracelets, waistbands, and necklaces made from terracotta clay, cowrie shells, or valuable metals like copper, bronze, or silver. The statues are generally small and never life-size (about ten inches tall), but carved in unmistakable human likenesses. These sizes have to do with how they are used at special occasions, because the mothers of the deceased twins are expected to dance with these *ibejis* tightly held in their palms or tucked in the wrappers on their waist at annual occasions (Leroy et al. 2002). The general workmanship of the *ibeji* statues speaks to the long artistic traditions expressed in ancient kingdoms such as Benin and Ife. Marked stylistic differences do occur according to the region and artists, and these differences can be noticed in facial expressions, hairdos, tribal scarring heads, and head covers.

Yorùbá's *ere ibeji* tradition has since spread to several parts of the world, mainly to the West Indies and the eastern coast of South America (the "slave coast") because of the transatlantic slave trade. Accordingly, the transposing of the Yorùbá twin belief system into African Diaspora religions Candomblé and Macumba (Salvador de Bahia region) and Umbanda (Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo regions) in Brazil is not surprising (Leroy et al. 2002).

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