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 Yoruba people led to the current patterns in which twins are revered and celebrated both in life and in death (Leroy 1995).

The Yoruba 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 Yoruba 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 Yoruba people, just like most of the African ethnic groups, used to reject and even sacrifice newborn twins. This is now all but forgotten and expected to dance with these ibeji statues. This responsibility is then passed on to the surviving twin when he/she is older.

The manufacture of the ibeji statues among the Yoruba 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 ibeji 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.

Yoruba’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 Yoruba twin belief system into African Diaspora religions Candoble and Macumba (Salvador de Bahia region) and Umbanda (Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo regions) in Brazil is not surprising (Leroy et al. 2002).

References

Marasa in Haiti refers to mortal twins as well as the sacred twins who represent the spirit of children. Traditionally, the term marasa also refers to “uncanny children” with mystic qualities, those born with a caul, with teeth, with hair, or those of breech birth (McGee 2022). Though in recent decades, the carved tradition of wooden statues has not been maintained in Haiti as in West Africa, twins are honored with plat marasa, ceramic vessels that hold offerings for a family's mortal twins and the sacred spirit duo. Plat marasa comes either as a tripartite ceramic set with three removable pots in three conjoined bowls or as two conjoined bowls with pots and one ancillary bowl and pot that can be added or removed. It may appear peculiar that mystic pots honoring the sacred twins include three mystic pots, but this embodies the principle of marasa twa (literally, “twins of three”). Marasa twa honor either triplets or the child who follows twins—dosi if a boy, dosa if a girl. It also recalls the Vodou adage that 1+1=3, a philosophy that highlights the mystic power of exponentiality, in which twins manifest a divine energy more powerful than the sum of their combined parts. More studies should be conducted on the intriguing parallels between the practice of twins veneration among African societies and that of noble children, particularly with physical malformations, leading to their sacrifice among the Indigenous communities of pre-Hispanic Peru, such as Chimú, Moche, and Inca (capac hucha) groups.

As divine mortal beings, twins’ mortuary rites often blend worship traditions for revered ancestors and spirits. Following a twin’s end of life (or the tragic death of both twins) in Yorùbá communities, the ere ibeji play an essential role as an embodied manifestation of the lost twin, ensuring that parents and relatives can continue to care for the deceased twin's spirit. These ere ibeji may be adorned with beaded necklaces and intricate regalia, including cloaks of cowrie shells or colorful seed beads in more affluent families to signal a family’s devotion in honoring the legacy of their departed twin(s). In Haiti when a family experiences great strife, especially with (twin) children who persistently fall ill, people may identify this misfortune as a result of displeasure of the Marasa, referring either to the spirit twins or a deceased pair of twins in the family lineage. To appease the divine duo, Vodouizan will host a ceremony called manje marasa, a sacred feeding of the twins. As mortal manifestations of the Iwa Marasa, neighborhood children are invited to partake in a spiritual feast, and offered mayi moulin (cornmeal porridge) on traditional “plates” of banana leaves, along with sweet treats and kola kouronne (Haitian cola). In this way, the Iwa Marasa (twin spirits) as well as the family’s zansèt marasa (deceased twin ancestors) may be satiated, and can restore harmony and wellness to the living family.

Disruptive Death: COVID-19 and the Haitian Earthquakes

Cosmologically speaking, Vodouizan do not pray for immortality, as only the lwa—the divine energies who orchestrate order in the universe—live forever. But like so many religious devotees around the world, a common Haitian prayer for elders and juniors alike is the blessing of a long and productive life. The most devastating deaths are those that occur traumatically and unexpectedly: the deaths of children, road accidents, deadly illnesses with no treatment, natural disasters, and pandemics. Haiti has experienced its own share of catastrophic deaths en masse, including two seizable earthquakes in the past 12 years: the 7.2 magnitude earthquake of Port-au-Prince on January 12, 2010, and the recent 7.0 magnitude earthquake of Les Cayes on August 14, 2021. The 2010 earthquake killed approximately 250,000 people, injured 300,000, and left millions of people displaced (Germain 2011); the 2021 earthquake killed approximately 2250 people, injured 12,765, and left at least 330 missing (International Medical Corps 2021). These earthquakes are the result of Haiti being situated between two geographic fault lines: the Septentrional Fault and the Enriquillo-Plantain Garden Fault. Such scientific explanations must be underscored as missionaries and televangelists such as Pat Robertson asserted that Haitians were killed during the 2010 earthquake and other historical atrocities due to a supposed “pact with the devil” made in 1791 to defeat the French colonizers (Stewart [Diakité] 2010). The truth is that Haitian maroon soldiers and enslaved citizens held a revolutionary congress at a northern site called Bwa Kayiman, and in a Vodou ceremony honoring the spirits on August 14, 1791, they pledged their allegiance to the lwa to build a free Black republic and the world’s first anti-imperial nation-state.

While the nation’s physical damage proved calamitous in both Haitian earthquakes of 2010 and 2021, the most harrowing reality involved the tragic loss of so many lives, and people's inability to bury their loved ones. Aid workers and healthcare providers worked to dig mass graves for the dead and the dismembered, but hundreds of thousands of missing-person reports seemed to flow in an endless stream of grief. In Vodou as in Christianity, being unable to find loved ones and inter the dead can have disastrous spiritual
consequences for the soul, which caused tremendous upheaval in a nation beset by mass mourning. More recently, Haiti has been reeling from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. And while COVID-19 has had far more devastating consequences in North America than in Haiti, concerns surrounding such a dangerous virus in a nation already struggling with public health infrastructure problems have alarmed healthcare workers about the possibilities of a full-blown outbreak.

Haitian artists, similarly to other artists all around the world (see Wali on responses to the pandemic in this volume), have responded to these recent natural disasters and the pandemic with portraits of earthquake victims and survivors; divinely inspired artists have also portrayed the spirits’ interventions in human affairs to save their devotees from COVID-19. Remarkable drapo depictions of the 2010 earthquake have been produced in exquisite beaded detail by Myrlande Constant (Ulysse 2022), Evelyn Alcide (Daniels 2021), Roudy Azor, and most recently, ritual flag and mixed media artist Ronald Edmond. Edmond founded the artisanal Port-au-Prince workshop Atelye Deliverans (Artistic Workshop of Deliverance), and as a skilled ritual flag designer and maker, he and his team of artisans typically complete flags within several weeks or months depending on their size and intricacy. However, as a survivor of the earthquake himself, Edmond reflects that it took him over a decade to actualize a ritual flag portrayal of the 2010 earthquake as he experienced and envisioned it. Haiti’s most recent major earthquake of 2021 encouraged him to return to this earlier work with intentions to manifest the flag fully.

Completed in 2022, Ronald Edmond’s Le Sèisme du 12 Janvier 2010/The Earthquake of January 12, 2010 (Figure 3.1) depicts a harrowing scene of chaos and destruction in the capital city, despite the fact that the earthquake’s epicenter was in Léogâne, roughly 16 miles from Port-au-Prince. Concrete buildings are cracked and splayed, foundations unearthed, houses toppled over. Victims have been crushed beneath edifices, and severed limbs haunt the lower corner of the tapestry. While certain figures appear faceless, standing in for all unnamed victims of the earthquake, several other peoples’ eyes capture our attention, either calling for help in the wreckage or assertively fixed on the mission to save any possible survivors. A telephone pole has fallen over next to a stalled yellow car. A cinder block, disengaged tire, and red tool box all litter the ground in various corners, and a pool of blood seeps from victims’ bodies onto toppled concrete walls.

And while foreign aid intervention is visible from the United Nations helicopter overhead (noticeably absent from both Alcide and Azor’s earthquake depictions), on the ground, Edmond renders the real front-line workers of 2010: Haitian civilians and local aid workers, including a pair of civilians who transport an injured woman to safety (see also Mutcherson in this volume, on other front-line workers disproportionately affected by the pandemic in the US). The flag also renders a sophisticated trompe l’œil effect, with a skewed perspectival landscape of the Earth. Along with overturned houses and shattered concrete buildings, the Earth is unevenly rendered, and appears menacing as it threatens to swallow the city and its inhabitants whole.

Before our eyes, the metropolis of Port-au-Prince has become a necropolis, but the Vodou spirits have not forgotten their children. In the upper left corner, the mother warrior spirit Ezili Dantò wears her signature crown and a pair of orange wings to rescue a woman from her home; the woman wears dark blue, Dantò’s signature color, perhaps signaling her devotion to the Black Madonna. Above in the top right, the mermaid queen of the seas LaSirènn swims through the sky with a tail of multi-colored scales and pulls another survivor from the ruins. Poised with the ritual rattle (ason) in her right hand that marks her priesthood, she may be preparing a ritual Healing ceremony for the injured mortal. Alternatively, this same spirit could also be interpreted as the rainbow serpent spirit Ayida Wèdo with her brightly colored serpent tail. Finally, the Iwa Brav Gede (at times also known as Gede Nibo) appears in the top right corner with a dark-colored suit and top hat. Golden speckled angel wings may allow him to rise more swiftly from his subterranean domain of the afterworld Afrik-Ginen. In his left hand (the spiritual side), he carries a calabash bowl of food offerings to nourish the human child he has rescued from below. LaSirènn and Brav Gede hover over a partially crushed long white building. Two of the building’s doors are open, one orange and the other red, and they resemble the intricate iron doors of urban Vodou temples. This may signal that while largely accosted by Pentecostals who accused Vodou devotees of having caused the earthquake (Payton 2019), Vodouisants kept their temple doors open, and often held mass funerals to pray for the unburied dead, regardless of their religious orientation. A large mystic eye likely inspired from Freemason iconography (Kali 2019) emerges next to cumulus clouds, perhaps a signal that Bondyè (the creator God) bears witness to all devastation.
Between the third and tenth centuries CE, in one of the driest deserts of the Western Hemisphere, the Moche society thrived. Considered by many as one of the first state-level entities from the pre-Hispanic Andes (cf. Quilter and Koons 2012), the Moche were organized into diverse political confederations governed by elite family clans, who controlled large portions of the valleys of the north coast of Peru (Quilter and Castillo 2010).

The Moche are particularly recognized, among many aspects, by the level of complexity of their elite burials. Discovered within large adobe pyramids or huacas (e.g., Sipán, Úcupe, El Brujo, and Huaca de la Luna), the Moche elite burials are composed of underground quadrangular-shaped adobe chambers often decorated with niches, platforms, and mural painting. The chambers contain the remains of high-status Moche lords and ladies accompanied by dozens of luxury items, including silvered and gilded copper crowns, nose ornaments, and headdresses, as well as warfare and ritual paraphernalia of various materials decorated with the most intricate designs and motifs.

Something particularly intriguing about these contexts is the striking similarity between the funerary ornaments that accompany the individuals and those with which mythological beings are depicted in Moche narrative art while performing cerimonial activities. For many, this is an indicator not only of the religious nature of the funerary items, but also their powerful transformative agency (Kaulicke 2000), suggesting that high-status individuals were interred as personifying gods and goddesses from the Moche pantheon. Whereas discussions about whether these divine identities were gained (and performed) in life or ascribed during funerary rituals have remained unresolved, it is undeniable that, in Moche society, immense power, prestige, and wealth was held in the hands of a few families in the region, who were likely related one to each other by kinship and hereditary rights.

But, as many have claimed, the Moche cannot be reduced to the sophistication and material richness of their grave goods, despite their exuberance. Death in the Moche world was particularly conceived in relationship to a specific understanding of environment, landscape, ancestors, and life regeneration. The Moche are considered both a cause and consequence of a long process of adaptation and life regeneration. The ancestors were thus mediators for the reestablishment of the much-desired order.

Although perhaps disturbing for modern eyes, graphic and vivid representations of sexual acts, possibly mimicking the deeds of the Moche mythological hero, are ubiquitous in Moche art. Humans, nonhuman, and hybrid beings are represented as actively engaged in sexual practices that involve masturbation, fellatio, and coitus. But not all entities had the same privilege to be represented, and Moche sex cannot be equated with eroticism or pornography. Elite individuals seem to be preferred in these type of depictions and it is very likely that sexual acts were ritually performed, too, as part of larger performances of death in Moche religious centers (Muro Ynoñán 2019). The prominence of the sex organs (both male and female) in the artistic representations emphasizes the relevance of the *stimulus*, as well as the acceptable limits of the interaction between bodies.

So, it is not the sexual act in itself that is central in these representations. Instead, it is the capacity of given individuals to serve as a receptacle and means for the transmission of the *vital fluids*: those that guarantee the continuity of life and the maintenance of the social and natural order.