

Benin's Living Dead

The Voodoo Twins Tradition





40% of the world's twins are born in Africa. Benin's Fon people have one of the highest occurrences at 1 in 20 births. The high rate of infant mortality and voodoo religion. But the high mortality rate has contributed to a special twin belief system according to this culture's voodoo traditions.



Once a twin dies, a wooden statue called the “hohovi” is carved, within which the spirit of the dead child is placed. These figurines are deified and treated almost exactly like the living children. For the Fon, twins are immortal. They continue to live even after their death, bringing blessings or misfortune depending on if there are either pampered or abused.



Hounyoga lives in Bopa. The hohovis are placed so that they peer out of the front garment of the mother, for everyone to see. The parents have a spiritual obligation to ask for alms in a market or in the street. *“The twins are asking you for something”* the mother says during the collection. Everyone must give something, be it money or food.



Hounyoga introduces me to Zinsou (the boy) and Zinhoue (the girl), her two dead twins. She had 9 children including a set of twins who died at 2 years old. She speaks about them in the present tense, as if they were still alive. She puts them on two miniature iron chairs around the table where we sit.



It's 1PM and Hounyoga must serve lunch to the hohovis. Seeing my skepticism, she explains, "*They must be fed daily.*" Hounyoga presents the twins a large plate of beans soaked in red palm oil. Long ago, voodoo practitioners discovered this particularity and since then it has become the sole dish fed to dead twins.



Hounyoga put the twins in the small temple for the deity Dan, a snake that embodies prosperity. A voodoo practitioner gets nothing in life without Dan. The mother offers the rest of the meal to Dan, pouring the red oil from the beans and some orange drink. This oil is an essential element in voodoo because it facilitates the process of the ceremonies and the Gods like it.



Hounyoga prays and invokes the hohovis spirits. She cuts a cola nut in half with her teeth, seasons it in very strong pepper and offers it to the twins. She tells me that they accept the offering and are satisfied.



Today, the twins have their weekly bath with Hounyoga in the lake. It's not for the purposes of staying cleanly but rather to rid them of evil spirits.



Hounyoga wipes them with a vegetable sponge and soap, then cover them with talc powder, dry them gently, dress them, and spray perfume on them...



The bathing ends. Hounyoga throws the sponge as far as possible in the lake. It is contaminated. If she brings it home, she will bring the evil spirits with her. Everything must be done according to rites. *“If we take bad care of a twin, he will get angry. We will wake up in the morning and he will no longer be in the house. So a great tragedy will soon come. If we take good care of the twin, when someone is me wanting to cause me harm, I tell the twin and he protects me.”*



Come the night, it's time to put the hohovis to sleep like children in a bed made of mat and an immaculate white blanket or even a miniature bed. Hounyoga undresses them, and lays them on their back, side by side, in the bed. *"We will wait until they are asleep before I put them on their stomachs."* A few minutes later, she gently flips them over and turns off the lights.



Dah Tofa, Hounyoga's husband always takes them when he drives his car to Cotonou, Benin's capital. *"I put my twins in my belts because I know they protect me. Nothing bad will happen to me with them. I won't get robbed, won't get in a car accident, nothing!"*



Hounyoga dreamt that her twins studied hard in school and went to work in Europe. Once I ask about how they died, their father, in a very low voice says to my ear. *“Someone put a very strong curse on them.”*



Everyone cares for dead twins, even more than if they were living. The brothers and sisters of the dead twins do their share as well. They walk with them, keeping them snug in their belts. Under no circumstances do they ever play with them like toys, despite their likeness with dolls.



If the mother doesn't have time to take care of the statues, then the father does it. If both parents are busy, then the twins are kept at a nursery. It is a sacred place. There are tens of statues, all dressed in colorful clothes.



The sheer amount of statues reflects the high mortality rate for children in the village. Mister Attobern, the guardian of the nursery shows me his nephews.



Some hohovis are cleaned so much that the facial features totally disappear, the wood eroding under the constant scrubbing. This makes them collectors items. Upon learning that in the west, the twins are considered pieces of art, sought after to sell for thousands of dollars, the parents can't believe it. *"How can someone sell their children?!"* they wonder, speaking of the statues.



Mrs. Kpsouayo on Dedoukodji Beach. She is a fisherman wife. She had two twins. The boy was named Tohossi, « god of the sea » and the girl Houedossi, « the rainbow ». She washes them once a month in the sea to purify them by the goddess of the water.



Each year, twins statues are blessed and are spoiled with candies. They love sweets says Kpsouayo. a big celebration takes place every october 25 in the country to bless the twins, dead or alive, who come from Benin, Nigeria and Togo.



Eric is an English teacher in Ouidah. He lives in a modern house with his wife Tatiana. Despite their social stature, they still practice in the cult of the twins: Paterna died when she was a baby. Her brother Paterne still lives. The statue is sitting on a plastic chair.



When the parents go to make clothing for the family, Paterna also get clothing from the same cloth like her old bro Edouard on the picture. Like that, everyone looks like part of the same team. When Paterne will be in age, she'll go with him to school.



Eric has asked a carpenter to build a miniature version of the Paterne bed for her twin sister hohovi Paterna. In order to avoid jealousy between the wins and keep a perfect balance between the both.



Paterne and his sister twin, Paterna. He is 2 and is educated with the voodoo tradition that learns him the statue is part of the family. Everything is shared with Paterna. When the family goes to a restaurant, she joins. When they see a movie at home, she watches. She is always by their side. *"We never leave her alone"*.



The mother, Tatiana, confesses me: *"It hurts me that Paterna has gone to the forest"*. She should not complain about the death of her twin, nor should she show any sadness in public. The family will not go mourn at the grave. Twins are most of the time buried in secret. They had new twins, who are still alive.



Mrs. Ablossi, had a dreadful fate.

“When I gave birth, I did not know that I was pregnant with multiple children. The doctor took out one, then a second, and then a third! The next time round I had a twins. My third pregnancy, I had yet another set of twins. I was dead broke. I spoke to the triplets and the twins, telling them that there were too many mouths to feed and I had no money. At that very instant, someone knocked at the door and offered me a sack of corn.”





“Twins love Fanta and Coca Cola” says Ablossi. In the voodoo rituals, if someone wishes for a more peaceful life, sugar is equated with this peace. In giving sugar to the statues, you increase the chances of getting a better life because the twins have supernatural powers and the ability to affect your destiny.



Ablossi uses cowrie shells to communicate or consult with her twins. She holds the question she wishes to ask them in her mind, focuses hard, and throws the cowrie at their feet. Two shells facing up and two shells facing down are interpreted as a very good sign.

When I ask her how they passed away she responds, *“The first twins couldn’t stand my incessant quarrels with my husband. They preferred to go to the forest to look for wood.”* This is a figure of speech explaining that a twin has died since, in voodoo, they are technically immortal.

Since she had three pregnancies in a row with more than one child (a feat she is very proud of), she has an especially high ranking in society. She is even exempt from bowing before the king.





I come across a bare-chested woman with many necklaces. On her belt is a doll, fully adorned. The woman refuses to let me take her picture: she has just come out of a voodoo ceremony and is still in trance. She refuses to tell me when the twin died and at what age because it could curse the living twin.



It seems that malaria encephalitis is the true cause of so many deaths. Many Fon people live near lakes or waters without sanitation and the mosquitos swarm. At 4000 CFA (7 euros) for an anti-malarial treatment, the costs are prohibitive. The sculptor of the hohovis is at no risk of unemployment. .

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