

# ATTITUDES TOWARDS TWINNING IN PRIMITIVE SOCIETIES

F. LEROY

Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, St. Pierre Hospital, Free University of Brussels, Belgium

---

*In primitive societies twinning raises emotions varying from extreme terror to hope and joy. The first impulse prevailing among the less civilized people seems to be to regard twins as unnatural and monstrous and therefore as portending evil. Accordingly, they must be put to death and the offence repudiated. This negative attitude stems from a series of explanations which can generally be connected with the widespread belief in superfetation and double paternity. In a few cases only, would the custom of sacrificing twins arise from economic necessities. However, in many agricultural primitive tribes, twinning is regarded as a happy event. In this case, the worship of twins entrusts them namely with power over water allowing to confer fertility to the soil and also to women and animals. In the past, the mother of twins was often executed with her offspring or simply banished. In many tribes, she is still compelled to go through elaborate purification in order to forestall the evil omen. If twins are welcomed, their parents are similarly respected as they symbolize the fertility power of the clan. Superstitions and myths pertaining to twinning are universal and often present converging features among cultures without mutual contact. This would point to the twin cult as one of the earliest religious beliefs of mankind.*

---

Being unusual, a double birth is considered in most primitive societies as arising from preternatural powers. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that twinning should raise emotions varying from extreme terror through the whole gamut of fear, repugnance, suspicion, perplexity, hope and joy, and that it has generated many peculiar customs and myths.

As a general rule, hostility against twins is mainly found among the most deprived and less civilised wandering tribes. One opinion is that this negative attitude would have arisen from economic pressure. As Scheinfeld (1968) puts it, « The practice of killing one or both twins was wide-spread among primitive people as diverse as the Eskimos, the Ainu of Japan, Australian aborigines, numerous Africans and various North and South American Indians. Usually this practice stemmed from the excessive difficulty of sustaining and rearing two infants at the same time, a particular burden for people engaged in a constant struggle for existence ». This hypothesis seems indeed plausible in some cases such as, e.g., the Lengua tribe of Paraguay, where the mother has to perform the heavy work and carries all family belongings when on the move (Hawtrey 1939), or as the Eskimos, whose way of life used to be extremely hard.

In the majority of cases, however, close scrutiny indicates that such an explanation is largely inadequate. Most of the time, the primitive mind will not content itself with merely objective motives such as economic difficulties.

In numerous African tribes, twinning used to be regarded as something monstrous portending evil and disaster. Therefore, twins had to be put to death or abandoned. South to the Zambezi river, the sentence was executed by the father or the midwife, by leaving one or both infants to be devoured by wild animals or by burying them alive. In other cases, they would be strangled or suffocated by stuffing their mouth with earth or by pouring boiling water into their throat. Similar customs were followed by some populations of the Nile valley and the Niger delta by whom the twins were simply burned or drowned. In some parts of East Africa, to say to a woman, « May you become the mother of twins », used to be considered as a frightful curse which did not even have to be uttered in words: to hold up two fingers was just enough to be understood (Hartland 1922). It is also significant that, in Southern Rhodesia, a special orphanage for abandoned twin children had to be maintained until at least 1946 (Gaddis and Gaddis 1972).

On several Pacific Islands and also in Southern India, hostility was mainly concerned with twins of opposite sex, since they were supposed to have violated the taboo against incest while still in their mother's womb. Such twins were consequently sacrificed or left in the jungle after having been symbolically married. No longer than forty years ago, at Bali, the simultaneous birth of a girl and a boy from the same mother was still considered as a bad omen and would require elaborate purification (Belo 1935). Even the gods were supposed to be soiled and their idols had to be given a ritual bath in the sea.

Still another theme of the repugnance raised by twins is the notion that their mothers are comparable to inferior animals with multiple offspring. Such was, e.g., the opinion of some Pueblo and Navaho Indians. When, on his visit to Luzon, Theodore Roosevelt asked the Igorot women why, in their tribe, twins were systematically killed, he was flatly answered that they didn't wish to be like dogs and have litters (Gaddis and Gaddis 1972). A similar attitude used to prevail in ancient Japan. The abdomen of women carrying a multiple pregnancy was called *chikusho bara*, which means animal belly, and was otherwise considered as a most obscene insult (Veith 1960).

Despite the apparent diversity of interpretations for multiple pregnancy given in primitive societies, most of the time, social attitude towards twinning is connected with the widespread belief in superfetation and double paternity. In many tribes, it is admitted that one of the infants is the child of the legitimate husband, whereas the other, usually the second born, is believed to have been fathered by a demon, an evil spirit, a wizard, an animal or a god, or more simply through adultery of the already pregnant woman. According to the Dayaks from South Borneo, one of the twins was engendered by the penetration into the womb of the spirit of a snake, or an ape. Therefore, when the excessive volume of a woman's belly made her suspect of bearing twins, an abortion was immediately performed (Grabowsky 1897). Also the Jivaro Indians would kill the second twin as being the son of a demon. That twinning is the result of common adultery is a fiction believed by the Kaffirs, the Jukuns of Sudan, and several American Indian tribes.

Even when not openly expressed, it can often be sensed that superfetation is the subconscious and therefore the true reason for distasting twins. It is striking, e.g., that the ancient Japanese would only consider the first born twin as legitimate heir, the other being repudiated and left nameless. Equally significant is the fact that purification rituals, which are followed at a twin birth in numerous tribes, are mainly or exclusively concerned with the mother. Also revealing is the observation that it is precisely among populations by whom twins are ritually sacrificed that would also prevail the taboo against intercourse during pregnancy (Devereux 1955).

The American ethnologist G. Devereux (1955) has given a convincing psychoanalytical interpretation of this primitive fear of superfetation. According to him, the primitive hostility towards twins would convey, through the more or less conscious idea that the father of one is socially improper, the fact that the intrusive begetter symbolizes the rejected part of the paternal *imago*. According to the psychoanalytical theory, in any human being there is, at some stage of psychological maturation, an ambivalent representation of the father, at the same time loved and hated, of which the negative part would often be projected through the phantasm of demons.

Conversely, there are also quite a number of primitive societies where twins are happily welcomed or at least respected. One well-documented example are the Mohave Indians (Devereux 1941). According to their beliefs, twins would be immortal beings living in heaven, who choose from time to time to be incarnated as humans. Their coming on earth is supposed to be associated with lightning, thunder and storm. Accordingly, twins are honored and believed to detain special shamanistic powers. A similar enthusiastic attitude towards multiple birth is shared by the Yorubas of Nigeria who also happen to have the highest twinning rate in the world (Bulmer 1970). An interesting custom of this tribe is to carve wooden figures representing twins and which are called *ibejis*. If one of a twin pair dies, his figurine will be looked after by the survivor, who will symbolically, during all his life, feed, wash and dress the effigy of his late cotwin. This custom points to the everpresent belief that twins are linked through indestructible bonds and share the same soul. In some parts of Southern Africa,

one would say of a deceased twin that he has been torn away from his fellow as a branch from its stock (Shapera 1927).

In many tribes where twins were valued, they were also credited with the power of influencing the weather (Frazer 1930). This was the case, among others, of the Indian tribes of British Columbia, who believed that twins could induce rain, wind, or sunshine, simply by shaking a rattle, or by painting their face in black and washing it. The same Indians would identify twins with salmon, which was their main food supply. Therefore, twins were called by a special name meaning "donors of plenty". A double birth was also considered to foretell a period of successful fishing and abundance. Similar beliefs in the powers of twins over weather were held by several African populations. Among the Zulus those who wanted rain would go and ask a twin about his health. If he answered that he didn't feel well, they knew it would rain. Also the Barongas of the Limpopo valley would call the mother of twins *Tilo*, or the sky, the twins themselves being known as the "Children of Heaven". When drought was threatening, the women of this tribe used to pour water on a twin's grave. If the rain still held up, someone might remember of a twin buried in a dry spot, whose bones had to be dug up to be replanted in a moist place. According to an old custom of central India a twin was capable of preventing rain or hail from ruining the crops by standing naked with painted buttocks in the blowing wind.

There are many more examples showing this belief of twins controlling rainfall. As a consequence, in numerous tribes they were associated with fertility rituals. The Busogas of central Africa, would start sowings only in the presence of newborn twins and their mother would spread seeds on a field which henceforth became the property of her children. The fertility induced by twins also extends to domestic animals. In some parts of Rhodesia, the foundations of a new pigeon house used to be laid by a twin mother in order to obtain prolific reproduction of the birds (Paulme 1949).

It thus appears that in quite a number of primitive societies, twins are attributed a heavenly origin. The simple fact of being two instead of one makes them an ideal symbol of fertility. As children of the sky, in the mind of primitive agricultural tribes they become quite logically the masters of falling water which provides plenteousness. We may surmise that, in this case, twins are the emissaries of the psychological archetype of the almighty heavenly father, who is capable, through his inexhaustible virility, of doubly fertilizing not only the women but also the soil and the animals.

That in certain tribes twins should first be killed or ostracised and then become an object of worship is only paradoxical at first sight. Representing hostile or benevolent superhuman powers, twinning gives rise to the contradictory attitudes of fearful aggressiveness and idolatrous respect. In preternatural matters, primitive mentality will then often confuse the notions of baleful impurity and propitious holiness.

As a general rule, the primitive social reaction to the parents of twins will be similar to that aimed at their children. Where twinning is rejected the mother will often be accused of witchcraft, of intercourse with devils, or be at least considered as a blemish. In some cases, she will be imposed the same unfortunate fate as adulterous women. In the past, the mother of twins was therefore often executed with her offspring as it used to be done in several South African tribes (Shapera 1927) and in some parts of the Benin kingdom (Roth 1903).

In many tribes, the parents of twins would have to undergo a cleansing ceremony. One spectacular example is that of the Ovambos of South Africa. The mother was shaved all over her body in such a way as to gash the skin and let the "bad" blood flow freely. She was then thoroughly washed with some medicated water. The father was given the same treatment to which were added several cuts on his limbs and even on his tongue, lest he may have uttered some remarks on the unhappy event (Dornan 1932).

A constant theme of these purification rituals is the prolonged ostracism to which the parents and especially the mother of twins were compelled. In Eastern Transvaal, the mother used be secluded into a special hut and completely deprived of social contact during three months. In some East African districts, she would have to warn off other villagers by shaking a sort of twin rattle. In some other tribes, her seclusion period would last as long as six years or could even be definite. Similar customs

were followed by several North and South American Indians. Also at Bali the parents of twins were exiled during forty-two days, all their belongings including clothes and house having been thoroughly burned (Belo 1935).

Among population groups who greet them as a happy event, the worship of twins will flash back on their mother and father. In several tribes the parents of twins will be entrusted with special privileges. In the South African Herero tribe, after the birth ceremonies, the father will go on a trip through the neighbouring villages. He will come back quite wealthy, having received many cattle heads and other presents. Among the Bagandas from Uganda, the parents of twins would perform fertility dances and the father, dressed with sacred ornaments, is allowed to take in any garden everything he wants.

Twinning sometimes becomes a way of woman's emancipation. The Balubas of Kasai consider the mother of twins as incarnating the fertility of their clan. After the delivery, her wishes will be taken as orders. Physically, she is plainly recognizable, having her face half painted, her hair half shaved and her legs in red on one side and in white on the other. She is now allowed to participate to men conversations. No joke coming from her will be considered uncalled and she can no longer be repudiated even on the charge of adultery (Tshibangu 1974).

The customs concerning twin parents clearly illustrate some essential functions of rites among primitive societies. The often severe purificatory part of these ceremonies typically represents a *rite de passage* aimed at helping an individual to go through a period of crisis. In this case, the difficulty arises from the contact with the impurity of twinning. But even if the supernatural is impure and dangerous, one will nevertheless be tempted to take advantage of its power. This is clearly the aim of magical fertility rites involving the twins and their parents. Therefore, the various rituals associated with twinning oscillate between a negative and a positive pole, of which one or the other, or both together, will be represented in a particular cultural context.

In this presentation we have tried to show that superstitions and customs pertaining to twinning are universal and that they often present converging features among cultures without any mutual contact. This observation would point to the twin cult as one of the earliest religious beliefs of mankind,

## REFERENCES

- Belo J. 1935. A study of customs pertaining to twins in Bali. *Tijdschr. Indische Taal-, Land- Volkenkunde*, 75: 483-549.
- Bulmer M. G. 1970. *The Biology of Twinning in Man*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Devereux G. 1941. Mohave beliefs concerning twins. *Am. Anthropologist*, 43: 573-592.
- Devereux G. 1955. *A Study of Abortion in Primitive Societies*. New York: Julian Press.
- Dornan S. S. 1932. Some beliefs and ceremonies connected with the birth and death of twins among the South African natives. *South Afr. J. Sc.*, 29: 690-700.
- Frazer J. G. 1930. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. New York: Mac Millan.
- Gaddis V., Gaddis M. 1972. *The Curious World of Twins*. New-York: Hawthorn Books Inc.
- Grabowsky F. 1897. Gebräuche der Dajaken Südost-Borneos bei der Geburt. *Globus*, 72: 269-273.
- Hartland E. S. 1922. Twins. In J. Hastings (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* [Vol. 12, pp. 491-500]. New York: Ch. Scribner & Sons.
- Hawtreay G. 1939. The Lengua Indians of the Paraguayan Chaco. *J. of the Anthropol. Inst. of G. Brit.*, 31: 295-322.
- Paulme D. 1949. Les jumeaux dans la mythologie et dans les religions primitives. In M. Lamy (ed.): *Les Jumeaux* [pp. 11-36]. Paris: Correa.
- Roth H. L. 1903. *Great Benin its Customs, Arts and Horrors*. Halifax: Bedell Press
- Schapera I. 1927. Customs relating to twins in South Africa. *J. Afr. Soc.*, 26: 117-137.
- Scheinfeld A. 1968. *Twins and Supertwins*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Tshibangu K. 1974. Personal communication.
- Veith I. 1960. Twin birth: blessing or disaster. A Japanese view. *Int. J. Soc. Psychiatry*, 6: 230-236.

Dr. F. Leroy, Laboratory of Experimental Gynecology, St. Pierre Hospital, 322, rue Haute, 1000 Brussels, Belgium.