Twin Research (2000) 3, 142–147

www.nature.com/tr

The comparative constitution of twinship: strategies and paradoxes

EA Stewart

Department of Sociology, London School of Economics, UK

In both traditional and modern societies, twinship, as an unusual mode of reproduction, involves difficulties for social systems in maintaining consistent classification systems. It is proposed that the most prevalent response to twinship involves various 'strategies of normalisation' to defuse and contain the potential disruption. This proposition is illustrated and analysed in relation to ethnographic maternal drawn mainly (but not exclusively) from African communities in the twentieth century. Following a discussion of twin infanticide as the most extreme of the normalising strategies, the article concludes by identifying a number of paradoxes in the social construction of twinship. Twin Research (2000) 3, 142–147.

Keywords: twinship, social behaviour, cross-cultural comparisons, kinship models, ethnographic materials, societal strategies, infanticide

Introduction

Twin births occur in all societies. In most, the appearance of twins is a matter of surprise, even shock, for the parents and the community. In more industrialised societies, due to the intervention of ultrasound scanners, the social construction of twinship often begins early in the pregnancy, continues through maternal strategies of coping with two foetuses as opposed to one and proceeds within the wider social context once the twins are born. In traditional societies the biological reality of twinship produces immediate and socially determined reactions at the time of birth and more significantly thereafter.

Within both types of societies, twinship is experienced as 'special', but in the latter it presents particular problems of classification. (In contemporary societies, these classification difficulties are complemented or even replaced by identity problems.)[1] As evidenced in the mythologies of ancient and classical cultures, twinship presents societies with the need to comprehend and/or explain unusual or unexpected births. The problematising of the meaning of twinship takes various forms, but all manifest a central emphasis upon kinship and descent. Three forms in particular stand out:

a) concern about the ambiguity of paternity, as in the many variations on the parenting of the Greek twins Castor and Pollux;
b) a focus upon real or imagined disruptions to established social systems (Romulus and Remus together take revenge on the usurper of their maternal grandfather's throne); and
c) the 'restoration' of established systems through ideas of unity in difference (Jacob and Esau in Genesis).

Correspondence: Dr EA Stewart, Department of Sociology, London School of Economics, Houghton St, London WC2A 2AE, UK. E-mail: weinberg@se.ac.uk
Received 4 February 2000; revised 13 March 2000; accepted 27 April 2000

Normalising strategies

How do societies whose social reproduction is threatened by twinship deal with the challenge? The major response involves various 'strategies of normalisation', whose main function is to defuse and contain the disruption by transcribing twinship into symbolic terms. In exploring these strategies, we can draw on accounts of the social conceptualisation of twinship in African communities.

One strategy involves a focus on the symbolic unity of twinship. This is central to Evans-Pritchard's account of the role twinship plays in Nuer culture in the Sudan.[2] Twin birth is there regarded as an intervention of spirit in human affairs and this understanding is expressed in the belief that twins are a single social person (no matter which gender):

> Their single social personality is something over and above their physical duality, a duality which is evident to the senses and is indicated by the plural form used when speaking of twins and by their treatment in all respects in ordinary social life as two quite different individuals, p 314. (emphasis mine).

https://doi.org/10.1375/twin.3.3.142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This symbolic social unity of twins – as against their physical duality – is expressed in key rituals surrounding marriage and death where the unitary social personality of twinship is thought of as undergoing merely a surface change. It expresses a continuity which transcends the limits of social status, even the end of physical existence: if one twin dies, no ceremony is held because 'one of them cannot be cut off from the living without the other'.[2]

Evans-Pritchard's further discussion supports the interpretation of this continuity as a normalising strategy. For the Nuer, twins are birds: 'a twin is not a person (ran), he is a bird (dit)'.[2] This equation is expressed above all in relation to death, emphasising continuity through change: if infant twins die, they are placed in a tree so they can fly away. Twins are not equated with birds because both involve multiple births. After all, many other animals have births. The connection lies rather in the matter of classification: 'Birds are children of God on account of their being in the air, and twins belong to the air on account of their being children of God by the manner of their birth.' (p 136),[2] (emphasis mine). See also Firth.[3]

Additional support for viewing ritual as a normalising strategy is provided by the Nyakyusa of Tanganika. Their family rituals are frequent, elaborate, exciting, and occur at birth, puberty, marriage and death. Birth rituals in particular critically depend on the child's place in the family, being more elaborate for the first child and short and simple for those that follow. Most importantly, such rituals depend on the type of birth. In an 'abnormal birth', which means either twins or breech delivery, the ritual is complex and lengthy because abnormal births produce 'terror' and are seen as danger. In fact, an 'abnormal birth is felt to be even more dangerous and terrifying than death …' (Wilson, p 157).[4] Therefore all relatives of twins need to be purified from contagion of abnormal birth, since such contagion could, in future, affect the whole community as well.

Twin cults

Normalising strategies do not necessarily focus on twins themselves. Thus, the cult of the twin parents is one of a number of cults around which religious life in Lele (former Congo) society is organised. Lele thinking about the universe distinguishes between humans and animals, particularly with regard to fecundity: animals are expected to produce any number of offspring at any one time. However, a relative lack of fertility in humans is always questioned. Against this background, it is easy to understand that the parents of twins are regarded as unconventional, or even special, because they produce children like animals do.

> For a human to be classed with animals in any other connection – because … of unmannerly behavior – is reprehensible. But to vie with animals in fertility is good. … The parents of twins are considered to have been specially honoured by the spirits. … Twin children are spoken of as spirits and their parents as Twin Diviners. (Douglas, p 238)[5]

This material clearly illustrates the implication of twinship in mediation as the central characteristic of myth.[6] Thus among the Lele, parents of twins are thought to be chosen by the spirits for a special role: they mediate between humans, animals and spirits.

The use of cultism as a means of organising a collective response to potential disturbance is further illustrated by the Labwor of Northern Uganda. As birth is regarded as a significant manifestation of juok's (spirit) existence and power, the twin cult focuses upon the general idea of problematic, even dangerous, birth.[7] While all children in the cult bring some anxiety to their parents, twins are thought of as especially 'troublesome and dangerous'. Fear of twins is based upon Labwor recognition of their unity, and hence twins are to be treated equally: the individual who offends against this prescription will be in trouble.

Ambivalent attitudes towards twinship

African ethnography on 'twinship' indicates a significant dichotomy in its positive and negative evaluation. The common element of ambivalence characterises attitudes towards twinship. In East African peoples, Southall[8] identifies the 'sharing and transmission of symbolic elements across major linguistic and cultural boundaries …' (p 103) and notes that little is required to tip the balance of generally ambivalent attitudes. Consequently, contiguous and similar cultures have various responses to twinship. Some actively welcome and desire twins. Some openly fear or dislike them.

Ambivalence offers the clearest explanation of reversals of attitude and practice towards twinship. Perhaps the most striking of these is found among the Yoruba of Nigeria who have gradually reversed their attitudes and patterns of behaviour over the centuries.[9] The earlier practice was infanticide for one or both twins and, in some cases, death or banishment to the mother. A change or process of conversion occurred, however, whereby twins became more acceptable, even auspicious omens.[10]

https://doi.org/10.1375/twin.3.3.142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Now twins are considered a gift from God and must be treated specially.

But in spite of the significant change in the Yoruba's formal evaluation and practical treatment of twinship, an ambivalent attitude remains today. This ambivalence, even negativity, is almost a universal characteristic of cross-cultural views about twins and is manifested in a variety of ways. In many societies twinship poses questions about paternity. Surely, it is said, no one man could produce two children at once, therefore the mother must be immoral, having committed adultery either with another man or with a spirit, usually an evil spirit.[11] The ensuing social confusion for the community could and would have unsettling consequences. Secondly, in societies in which birth order greatly determines social roles, the simultaneous birth of two children causes many problems, the solutions to which vary: twins born more or less at the same time transgress expected or normal age distinctions. Thirdly, twin births are often seen in direct and symbolic relation to animal births.

It is within the context of pervasive ambivalence that we can and must locate the normalising strategies indicated earlier. Thus, for the Yoruba mother, the way back to social normality after the birth of twins is by having another single child. By postulating the single birth child as the 'key-child', Yoruba society is able simultaneously to recognise that the birth of twins poses a threat to the already established category system, while, at the same time, seeking to resolve the conflicts inherent in that situation and work toward restoring the social status quo.[10]

'Explaining' twin birth

As we have seen, in many societies the explanations of twin birth are often specifically directed at the mother. In particular, questions of the paternity of twins are raised and a variety of answers and/or solutions produced. The mother may be accused of having intercourse with a man other than her husband or with an (evil) spirit or demon, or even of sleeping with a god or heavenly force, like thunder. The mother is considered to be unclean and she – as well as her other relations – must be purified. The twins themselves may be seen as punishment for the mother's transgression. In some cases, as with the Assam, the mother of twins 'reaps the rewards' of her relatives' misdeeds.[12]

The social constitution of twinship finds archetypal expression in the drawing of parallels – whether positive or negative – with births in the animal kingdom. Where positive, twins are valued, often special members of the community. But fairly often the comparison is much more negative: while animals experience multiple births naturally, humans do not. Therefore the mother – and other relatives – are, at the very least, considered to be abnormal and, at the very most, harbingers of danger to the group.

The strategy of naming

Where twinship blurs or problematises vital distinctions such as differentiation by age, a variety of social mechanisms may be employed. Among these, probably the most prominent are what we may call 'strategies of naming'. Among the Labwor, twins have specific twin names which indicate gender and delineate birth order.[7] For the Bunyoro, male twins and female twins, respectively, receive special fixed personal names.[13] The Yoruba view the second born twin as the senior, who sends the first born out into the world as a scout![14]

Kinship systems and status groupings

In all of the ethnographic material considered so far, the normalising strategies of belief and practice framing the social context of twinship do not conflict with the twins' normal membership of the general kinship system. This is not, however, a universal pattern. The Ashanti remove twins from their own kinship system and assign them new roles and special statuses, often with sacred attributes. Thus, 'Twins, if both of the same sex, belong, as a right, to the chief, and become, if girls, his potential wives, if boys, elephant-tail switchers at the court…' (Rattray, p 99).[15] In this case, twins join in and symbolise the sacredness and fertility of the chief. The formally constructed status twin in Ashanti culture, however, finds both its counterpart and limit in the actual killing of royal twins themselves. In Kedjom society, one twin goes to the palace whereas the other stays with its parents in the compound: palace children, however, are killed.[16]

The social acceptance of twins may also differ by status grouping. Thus, for the Ashanti and the Kedjom, twins are honoured and fulfil venerable roles with the exception of royal twins. The reverse of this occurs in some Indic societies of Southeast Asia where incest and close marriage are tolerable or even desirable for those of high status: incest is proper for the gods, but comparatively improper for those of low status.[17] On occasion, a universally negative evaluation of twinship across status groups can be tacitly modified in the interests of social reproduction. Thus, in nineteenth century Japanese

https://doi.org/10.1375/twin.3.3.142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

society (and even earlier), multiple births were universally considered disastrous, but social attitudes towards twinship were adjusted according to status: the adverse reaction to twins in general was able to be defused by the higher status feudal lords whose wives were spared the pity felt for other mothers of twins.[18]

Still other societies specify that twins – independent of social standing – must be treated as equals. The Bunyoro say that in all contexts twins must be treated the same.[13] For the Dogon, 'just as the cups (of a double cup, EAS) are equal to one another, so the twins are interchangeable…' and Dogon twins have the 'same value, they are the same thing'. (Griaule, p 199).[19] In the Western Cameroon, the Bangwa consider twins to be the closest of friends and the only true equals: 'born of one womb, one at a time, and sharing the same rank', (Braine, p 215).[20]

Taboos: infanticide as a normalising strategy

In some societies twins are welcome because of their assumed divinity and fertility, whilst in others the cultural response is very different. In the latter, twins are much less favoured because of fear, expense and inconvenience, or various combinations of these. In such situations, the normalising strategy becomes that of infanticide, either actual or potential. Normalisation through infanticide shows a range of variations: both twins may be killed or exposed to the elements to see which is the fittest; or only one twin is killed: perhaps the second born, or the female or the least fit twin. Quite specific rules govern how the 'problem' of twin birth is to be addressed.[8]

Ethnographic evidence on the treatment of twinship in African communities provides a solid basis for comparison with other societies. Analysing twin infanticide cross-culturally, Granzberg has argued that in some societies (18 out of 70), twin infanticide usually occurs where 'insufficient facilities for a mother properly to rear two children at once (while, sic) … fulfilling her other responsibilities' exist, (Granzberg, p 406).[21] Lester, however, queries Granzberg's materialist position, claiming that twin infanticide correlates primarily with the relative inferior status of women.[22]

Such explanations of twin infanticide have been contested by Ball and Hill[23] who question whether twin infanticide is in fact a distinctive cultural custom. They argue that twins fall within several categories in which any infant – whether twin or singleton – would be killed because of their frailty or vulnerability.[24] Thus, they conclude that twins are subject to infanticide because they are seen as infants of 'lowered-viability'.[25]

If twin infanticide represents the severest expression of a taboo against the twin (and any relative), other taboos seem to arise over confusions about the biological conception of one child. The Kwoma of Papua New Guinea believe that conception only occurs after frequent intercourse: after an expectant mother has missed her second menstrual period, the couple abstains. Twins therefore must be 'caused' by continued intercourse, thus violating the abstinence prescription.[26] The Popoluca of Veracruz believe that twins result from the physical position of the parents during intercourse.[27,28] Further myths about the violation of taboos concern what actually goes on in the womb. On several Pacific islands, it is assumed that opposite sex twin foetuses have an incestuous relationship.[17] In Sumatra, this continues post-partum.

Results

Paradoxes of the social constitution of twinship

We can locate and interpret the range of ethnographic material on twinship within a grid. This grid can be constructed around a series of social paradoxes, which relate to the features of traditional societies in which nature and nurture are recognised as being more closely intertwined than in post-traditional societies. Examples of such paradoxes, evidenced in the discussion above, might be:

1) Reproduction is necessary, but can be dangerous For the Bunyoro, although it is good to have twins, twins are extraordinary and therefore represent a threat to the group.[13] Similarly, Nuer twins present the immediate family with danger. This 'danger' of reproducing twins must be expunged; for the Yoruba, such 'purging' takes the form of the birth of a sibling singleton. Twinship thus represents a potential disruption of the predictability of the natural world and of the critical boundaries that delineate natural and social worlds.

2) Twinship is special, hence divine, yet it is also problematic in relation to traditional classifications An example would be where status and power are based on birth order. Among the Ndembu twinship is looked upon both as a blessing and a misfortune and ritual is focused on fertility. The challenges of twinship (where the mother of twins is too fertile) to what is considered natural are not only reproductive but equally social. The dualism of twins problematises critical rules of ascription. The

https://doi.org/10.1375/twin.3.3.142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

resulting complications are succinctly identified in Turner's account of Ndembu twinship.[29] Following Schapera[30] and others, Turner[31] explains that

> ... children born during a single parturition are mystically identical. Yet, under the ascriptive rules associated with kinship systems, there is only one position in the structure of the family or corporate kin-group for them to occupy. There is a classificatory assumption that human beings bear only one child at a time and that there is only one slot for them to occupy in the various groups articulated by kinship which that one child enters by birth ... Yet twinship presents the paradoxes that what is physically double is structurally single and what is mystically one is empirically two. (p 45, my emphasis)

3) What is good in theory becomes not so good in practice As Turner explains, the resolution of this paradox occurs when the entire community takes responsibility for the twins and their family in special twin rituals.

4) The concept of unifying a pair of opposites In this final paradox the Ndembu stress the equal but opposite aspect of duality. They conceptualise twinship not as a pair of similars (eg identical twins) but as a pair of opposites (eg often male/female). Twinship is made 'the ritual occasion for an exhibition of values that relate to the community as a whole, as a homogeneous, unstructured unity that transcends (its) differences and contradictions.' (Turner, p 9).[31] This theme can certainly be seen in other societies' approach to twinship as an event which falls outside 'orthodox' classification.[32]

Discussion

Most of the customs, practices and rituals described above take place in non-industrialised societies where the birth of twins disrupts the structure of the family and the position of individuals within the family, and consequently involves a disturbance of the normal social order. The nature of social cohension, involving fluid and/or non-existent boundaries between the natural and the social world, makes the biological reality of twins a potential threat to social order.

The ethnographic material indicates that attitudes towards twins are mixed: whether positive, negative or ambivalent, attitudes towards twins and twinships were – and are – complex and intense. They encompass feelings of disturbance and anxiety, and intense unease about social as well as individual identity. In general, traditional societies fear twins as being 'unnatural', whereas modern societies may be argued to attempt to socialise the 'un-naturalness' of twinship. However, in doing so, they put twins at the centre of what can, for some, be an insoluble dilemma. This involves a twin's need to internalise (or at least inhabit) individual roles, thereby minimising the social significance of being a twin, while at the same time being chronically confronted with a social identification which emphasises the fact of being a twin, of being part of a supra-individual unit.[1]

What both types of societies share in common is that when a woman says she is 'expecting', it is assumed that she is expecting just one child. Single births are the reference point. To a very large extent, social processing and regulation take place in unitary individual terms. Twins are an anomaly to such processes, creating the very paradoxes discussed in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Professor Peter Loizos and Angus Stewart at the London School of Economics for their help with and suggestions for this article.

References

1 Stewart EA. Exploring Twins: Towards the Social Analysis of Twinship. Macmillan: London, 2000.
2 Evans-Pritchard EE. A problem of Nuer religious thought. In: Middleton J (ed). Myth and Cosmos: Readings in Mythology and Symbolism. The Natural History Press: Garden City, NY, 1967.
3 Firth R. Twins, birds and vegetables: problems of identification in primitive religious thought. Man 1966; 1(1): 1–17.
4 Wilson M. Nyakusa ritual and symbolism. In: Middleton J(ed). Myth and Cosmos: Readings in Mythology and Symbolism. The Natural History Press: Garden City, NY, 1967.
5 Douglas M. Animals in Lele religious thought. In: Middleton J (ed). Myth and Cosmos: Readings in Mythology and Symbolism. The Natural History Press: Garden City, NY, 1967.
6 Lévi-Strauss C. Structural Anthropology. Penguin: Harmondsworth, UK, 1963.
7 Abrahams RG. Spirit, twins, and ashes in Labwor, Northern Uganda. In: LaFontaine JS (ed) The Interpretation of Ritual: Essays in Honour of AI Richards. Tavistock: London, 1972.
8 Southall A. Twinship and symbolic structure. In: LaFontaine JS (ed) The Interpretation of Ritual: Essays in Honour of AI Richards. Tavistock: London, 1972.
9 Nylander PPS. Frequency of multiple births and factors which influence twinning rates. In: MacGillivray I, Nylander PPS, Corney G. Human Multiple Reproduction. W.B. Saunders: London, 1975.

https://doi.org/10.1375/twin.3.3.142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

10 Chappell TJH. The Yorubal cult of twins in historical perspectives. Africa 1974; 44(3): 250–265.
11 Schoeck H. Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior (transl. Glenny M, Ross B). Secker and Warburg: London, 1969.
12 Webster H. Taboo: A Sociological Study. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1942.
13 Beattie JHM. Twin ceremonies in Bunyoro. J Roy Anthropol Inst GB Ireland 1962; 92: 1–12.
14 Oruene TO. Cultic powers of Yoruba twins. Acta Genet Med Gemellol 1983; 32(3/4): 221–228.
15 Rattray RS. Ashanti. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1923.
16 Diduk S. Twins, ancestors and socio-economic change in Kedjom society. Man 1993; 28: 551–572.
17 Errington S. Incestuous twins and the house societies in insular Southeast Asia. Cult Anthropol 1987; 2(4): 403–444.
18 Veith I. Twin birth: a Japanese view. Intl J Soc Psychol 1960; 6: 230–236.
19 Griaule M. Conversations with Ogotemmeli: an Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas. Oxford University Press: London, 1965.
20 Brain R. Friends and twins in Bangwa. In: Douglas M, Kaberry PM (eds). Man in Africa. Tavistock: London, 1969.
21 Granzberg G. Twin infanticide – a cross-cultural test of a materialist explanation. Ethos 1973; 1(4): 405–412.
22 Lester D. The relation of twin infanticide to status of women, societal aggression, and maternal well-being. J Soc Psychol 1986; 126: 57–59.
23 Ball HL, Hill CM. Reevaluating 'twin infanticide'. Curr Anthropol 1996; 37(5): 856–863.
24 Scrimshaw SCM. Infanticide in human populations. In: Haussfater G, Hardy SGB (eds). Infanticide: Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives. Aldine: New York, 1984.
25 Leis PE. The nonfunctional attributes of twin infanticide in the Niger Delta. Anthropol Quart 1965; 38: 97–111.
26 Williamson MH. Sex relations and gender relations: understanding Kwoma conception. Mankind 1983; 14(1): 13–23.
27 Leach M (ed). Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, vols I and II. Funk and Wagnalls: New York, 1950.
28 Lévi-Strauss C. Myth and Meaning: The 1977 Massey Lectures. Routledge and Kegan Paul: London. 1978.
29 Turner V. The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual. Cornell University Press: London, 1967.
30 Schapera I. Customs relating to twins in South Africa. J Afr Soc 1927; 26: 117–137.
31 Turner V. The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure. Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1969.
32 Willis R. World Mythology. Henry Holt and Co: New York, 1993.

https://doi.org/10.1375/twin.3.3.142 Published online by Cambridge University Press