Twins in African and Diaspora Cultures: Double Trouble, Twice Blessed
Edited by Philip M. Peek
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reviewed by Enid Schildkrout

This book’s subtitle could well be—not intended, strictly speaking, as an homage to Claude Levi-Strauss—“twins are good to think.” The book’s sixteen excellent essays are not so much about the lives of actual human twins, a subject that is only briefly discussed in a few chapters, but rather about African ideas concerning twins as they relate to broader conceptions of the cosmos, the social order, and humans’ place within it.

In the introduction, editor Philip Peek reviews some prior literature on African twins, focusing mainly on twentieth century anthropological literature and more recent work. He (and later in the volume, Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers) discusses E.E. Evans Pritchard’s writings on the Nuer, where twins are the symbolic equivalents to birds. Like snakes, mentioned in many of the essays, birds and twins straddle two worlds—earth and sky, human and spirit. Peek also notes the contribution of Victor Turner who, like many other social anthropologists, discussed the dilemma of two people occupying one social position. Peek stresses that nineteenth and early twentieth century accounts of twins in Africa often described such births as biological aberrations that posed structural conundrums and provoked negative responses, including infanticide. Whether such responses were exaggerated by earlier writers or have changed since these accounts were written is an open question, but the purpose of the essays in this book is to demonstrate that twins present “solutions” to the dilemmas they pose. The solutions are found in ritual practices and visual expressions that protect twins, their relatives, and society in general from the ambiguities twins present.

Twins, Peek writes, are “dialogic” and invoke interactions with the spirit world, between male and female elements, sky and earth, spirit doubles, and even death, as when a living twin is at risk should the sibling die.

It is safe to say that ideas about twins in the West are very different from ideas about twins found in Africa, perhaps because of better survival rates in the West and because of the medicalization of the human body that has developed since the Enlightenment. Pascal James Imperato and Gavin H. Imperato discuss some of the biological aspects of twinning in the opening essay and contrast the Western understanding of twin births with beliefs held by the Bamana and Maninka. In the West, there is a preoccupation with individuality and with the question of whether twins are genetically identical. This preoccupation supersedes interest in gender or birth order. Hence, on a personal note, I have been asked on numerous occasions if my twins, a boy and a girl, are identical. This preoccupation with genetics seems to be absent in African cultures, where the focus is rather on the idea of the double, in both physical and spiritual manifestations.

In Africa and its diasporas the focus is on how two beings can occupy the same social space and on how twins relate to spiritual forces that explain their existence. The twin Catholic Saints Damian and Cosmas (or Cos-mos) have been integrated with Yoruba ibeji in Cuba and with Haitian lwa (spirits), while elsewhere in Africa the idea of the double is elaborated to describe the relationship between humans and spirits, past and present, life and death, earth and cosmos. How these ideas are expressed in sculpture or photography is explored in many of the essays, but especially by Babatunde Lawal on Yoruba, Susan Cooksey on Win, Mary Nooter Roberts on Luba, and C. Angelo Micheli on photography. In his essay on Himba, Steven Van Wolputte takes this idea further and shows how the idea of doubling pervades Himba thinking; rituals and beliefs about twins, who are “both one and two,” reflect and enact Himba preoccupations about the ambiguities and uncertainties of their world.

Ideas about twinship turn out to be strikingly similar in many of the societies discussed in this book, perhaps because many of them have common historical roots. These ideas are manifested in specific ritual practices and visual expressions that differ from place to place and change over time. But the basic idea that twins and other multiple births, breech births, albinos, hermaphrodites, and individuals born with special characteristics—extra digits, for example—require protection and precautions for themselves and for others around them (particularly their mothers and subsequent siblings) is very widespread.

Because they straddle the earthly and spiritual worlds, twins occupy an ambiguous social space. Twins, Van Beek writes, are “forever liminal, forever in-between, powerful but fragile, a dangerous blessing, people from on high and not from this middle earth” (p. 180). Variations of this theme appear in essay after essay, where twins straddle gender identity (Frederick Lamp on Baga), mediate between spirit and human realms, between sky and earth, even between the living and the dead. Twins, as doubles, can also represent completeness, as among Dogon, where boy-and-girl twins (or hermaphrodites) are the first couple. But because of their liminality and closeness to the spirit world, special precautions are needed in death as in life. Several of the essays, especially those of Allen F. Roberts, Walter E.A. Van Beek, and Paulo Granjo, describe the interdictions attending the burial of twins.

The sixteen essays in this book range geographically through all regions of sub-Saharan Africa and its Atlantic diaspora (Stefania Capone on Brazil, Ysamur Flores-Pena on Lucumi-Cuba, Marilyn Houlberg on Haiti). They describe many kinds of associations that surround the idea of twins, most of these based on cosmic and gender dualities, symmetries, and ambiguous identities. Are twins one being or two? If two, how do societies assign birth order (a problem addressed by the Yoruba through naming practices)? If one, are their genders fixed or fluid? (Lamp argues the case for the equivalence of twins and homosexuals in Baga society). Are they in some ways like other beings that link two realms—chameleons, snakes, or birds—a topic explored by Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers on Ubangian ideas about twins and touched on in several other essays. Being of two realms can have political ramifications as well, as among Luba (Nooter Roberts) and Tabwa (Allen F. Roberts) where twins are linked to the origins of kingship and the linking of the earthly and divine.

Some of the essays describe contemporary manifestations of twin beliefs. Micheli writes about photography and describes how friends dress in identical outfits—assumed to represent twins—for studio photographs, or how individuals have their own portraits printed and dressed in identical outfits—assumed to represent their absent twin, or perhaps their spiritual double. Elisha Renne masterfully discusses contemporary African literature and Nigerian videos where the idea of
In her opening paragraphs, Sara Byala leads A Place That Matters Yet: John Gubbins’s MuseumAfrica in the Postcolonial World to demonstrate the importance of this place, despite its seeming obsolescence. A Place That Matters Yet: John Gubbins’s MuseumAfrica in the Postcolonial World contributes to a significant body of scholarship on museums in South Africa (Murray and Witz 2014, Dubin 2006, Coombes 2003, Rassool and Prosalendis 2001, Rankin and Hamilton 1999). Furthermore, the book contains insights for all historians of museums, as it traces the many different functions of MuseumAfrica since it was founded as the Africana Museum in 1935. In particular, Byala offers an example of how to study other museums often dismissed as outdated or irrelevant. These analyses can stimulate dialogues about what African citizens want from their museums, rather than reinforcing what African museums once demanded of their citizens.

The book consists of two biographies: one of British immigrant John Gaspard Gubbins and another of the museum that he founded. In the first chapter, “Two Worlds Collide: John Gaspard Gubbins in South Africa, 1902–1924,” Byala suggests that her portraits of Gubbins and his museum also comprise a portrait of South Africa. Byala plumbs the limitations of Gubbins’s philosophical treatise on Three-Dimensional Thinking by documenting the ways that he adhered to European racist paradigms, despite shedding prejudices about his Afrikaaner neighbors and finding inspiration in indigenous African cultures (Gubbins 1924).

The second chapter, “The Founding Vision: John Gaspard Gubbins and the Dream of a City’s Treasure, 1924–1935,” describes the last years of Gubbins’s life, which he spent developing what he named the Africana Museum. It also includes a portrait of Johannesburg, where Gubbins chose to donate his library and to create his museum. Byala situates Gubbins’s evolving goals within broader discourses on liberal and South Africanism, which at the time promoted a shared South African white identity. Gubbins rightly saw the opening of his museum as the mere beginning, although he died shortly after its opening.

In Chapter 3, “Becoming ‘Treasures and Trash’: The Africana Museum in the Johannesburg Public Library, 1935–1977,” the book shifts its focus to the museum after Gubbins’s passing. With institutionalization came a turn toward precisely the kinds of binary logic Gubbins had abhorred. Byala argues that this theoretical transformation of the Africana Museum happened under the guise of an “ironic liberalism,” which claimed to support equality and freedom while supporting the “logic of racism and apartheid” (p. 110). Using supposedly objective methods, the Africana Museum, despite sincere liberal beliefs in equality and freedom, became a tool of the violent and oppressive apartheid state.

In the next chapter, “Determined To Be Relevant: The Museum Reimagined, 1977–1994,” Byala most directly treats the Africana Museum as representative of a broader history of South Africa. The museum may be more precisely understood as representative of white liberalism during this period, for we hear little from either apartheid state actors or black South Africans. Although the museum engaged these populations, its conflicting projects at the Africana Museum and its new satellite location, which was called the Africana Museum in Progress, reflected two opposing white liberal viewpoints, rather than more diverse South African perspectives. In the late 1980s, the historic museum and the provisional AMIP each operated as if they were permanent, despite the growing signs that both would be dismantled. Byala describes the self-education of AMIP curators and their resulting adventurous experiments. Participants hoped that the transformed museum that opened in 1994, the MuseumAfrica, could contribute to a more just, post-apartheid South Africa.

In the fifth chapter, “On Display and in Storage: Museums and Archives in Postapartheid South Africa,” Byala continues to portray the museum as national metonym, but better emphasizes its distinct path. Seen as a relic of colonial and apartheid thought, MuseumAfrica quickly saw itself eclipsed by new commemorative museums that offered visitors clear narratives about South Africa’s history and its defeat of apartheid. MuseumAfrica, having finally refused binaries, did not replace them with a cohesive message. In combination with ongoing white leadership, decreased funding, and urban changes, this resulted in a steady decline in visitors and reputation at the close of the 1990s. However, Byala optimistically concludes by describing a museum again rebounding in the twenty-first century.

The museum’s circuitous path demonstrates the changing functions performed by museums in the last century. First, we see how some collections become lasting museums, while others are subsumed or dispersed. Although the lack of a narrative endangered MuseumAfrica in the late twentieth century, it had been Gubbins’s ability to craft a story for his collection that launched the Africana Museum. Providing a material anchor, the collection itself has sustained the institution. The museum also has persevered because of its staff’s participation in global museum discourses and practices. While the MuseumAfrica’s case may have been especially drastic at the turn of the twenty-first century, it was hardly alone in seeing its purposes change. This portrait of what museums have done over time is among the greatest contributions of A Place That Matters Yet. The history of MuseumAfrica shows that it has mattered.

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book review

A Place That Matters Yet: John Gubbins’s MuseumAfrica in the Postcolonial World by Sara G. Byala Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. 344 pp., 8 b/w illustrations. $35.00, paper

reviewed by Amanda Gilvin

In her opening paragraphs, Sara Byala leads the reader on a tour of a museum that few people would bother to fit into their itineraries today. Dusty, outdated, confusing: this, we learn, is Johannesburg’s MuseumAfrica. Then, she quickly asserts that the book’s primary goal is to demonstrate the importance of this place, despite its seeming obsolescence.