



■ The Mafa believe that twins are only half human. Looking on from the mist and trees, they choose a woman to be their mother, and then enter her belly.

THEY LOOK WITH TWO EYES

TWINS IN MAFa SOCIETY

José C.M. van Santen

The mist started on Wednesday. Large clouds of dust rolled down the Mandra Mountains, blocking out the sunshine and obscuring the horizon. Unusual for this time of year, the mist was a great concern. As it lingered, the Mafa labored to find a cause. Finally, after a few days, the mist's cause became clear. The word spread:

A man had died. His wife had given birth to four sets of twins but he had foolishly failed to organize any of the appropriate rituals or sacrifices. Little wonder, then, that some of his children had died. His death was their revenge.

On Saturday, the distressed family gathered to perform the necessary rituals. On Sunday, the mist slowly disappeared.

In many African societies, like the Mafa in north Cameroon, twins have a special position. On the one hand, the birth of *tsakalay* (twins) is considered a great blessing. Twins "run in the family" and some people are certain to have them,

which is a source of pride. Twins are believed to be endowed with special gifts from the gods and are considered to be clairvoyant: "They look with two eyes" as the Mafa say. On the other hand, twins are also believed to possess dangerous powers: They can bring blindness, madness, or, as in the case above, premature death to their parents.

Parents of twins have to make many concessions to their offsprings' desires. They must always give each one the same object: If they give one twin a new piece of cloth, they have to give the other one the exact same thing.

The father of twins always wears a small calabash attached to his left wrist with a piece of rope. Both parents wear bracelets: the mother on the left wrist and the father on the right. Thus the parents

THEY LOOK WITH TWO EYES

of twins are always identifiable. More importantly, this custom protects them against the twins' supernatural powers.

The Mafa believe that twins are only half human. Twins come from the wild grasses, the trees, and the mist. Their existence precedes humanity, dating back to the primordial past.

Twins, who are not engendered by their father, must choose their own mother. As Mafa legend has it:

An unsuspecting woman might be walking alongside a road as twins carefully watch her passing by. If they want to be born by her, they might say: "She looks all right for a mother!" Then they will enter her belly.

When the twins are born, their parents will not make the news public. In-

stead, immediately after their birth, their father must fetch an egg (symbolizing fertility), *guro-tsakalay* (a grassy herb that grows along the riverbank), and a branch from the *gangar* tree. In the meantime, the parents pretend that the twins have not been born and do not touch them. According to Mafa folklore:

If the parents touch them, the twins will leave. They pretend not to be alive; they do not breath and the umbilical cord is not cut. The twins observe the parents carefully to see if they are acting properly. The twins know exactly what they want between themselves.

If the river is far away, it may be some time before the father returns. Since this waiting does not enhance the viability of the twins, their risk of dying is far greater than that of single children.

When the father returns he will carefully beat the twins with the *ganger* branch "to teach them to listen, as twins are very stubborn in life," say the Mafa. Then they can be touched.

The two souls of a human being

Each Mafa has his or her own special jar, made immediately after birth. The jar represents the *guid pat*, or the being who is always next to a person. (*Guid pat* literally means "foot side of the bed," and that is where the jar is kept. The *guid*, or bed, is a wooden board.)

The Mafa believe that a human being has two souls—one resides in his body, the other in his *guid pat*. This second soul protects him against evil spirits, called *mide*. Without this invisible being, a Mafa is not considered to be a whole per-

The Mafa

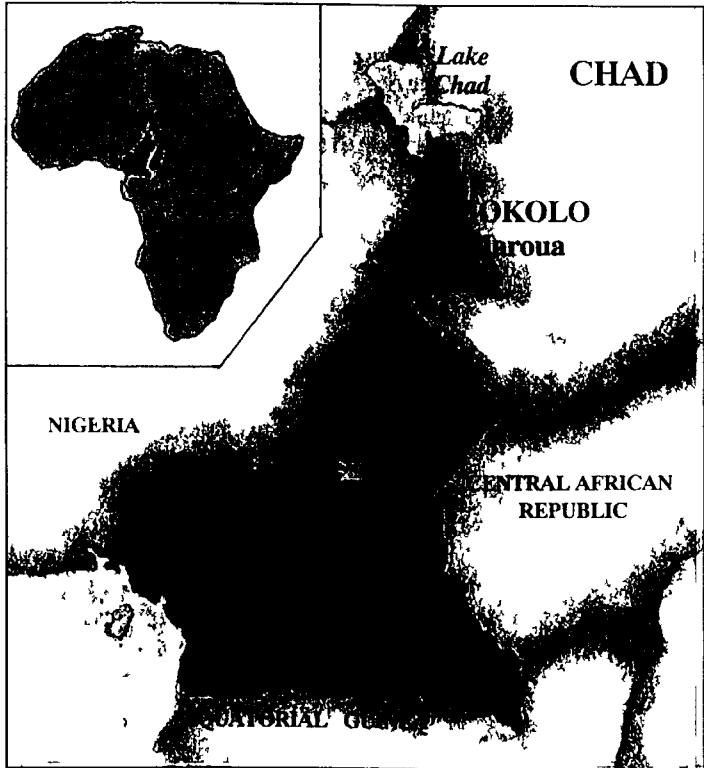
The Mafa are one of a number of ethnic groups in the Mandara Mountains, which are near the Nigerian border of north Cameroon and three hundred kilometers south of Lake Chad. The Mafa are horticulturalists. The mountainsides surrounding each compound are strewn with terraces, where millet, their main crop, is cultivated. They are a decentralized group, divided into family compounds scattered throughout the area. Their highest authority is the father of the house, who shares the compound with his wives and children. Each household is strictly independent, and traditional Mafa households are not gathered into villages or any larger social or political unit.

—J.S.

son Behind every walking, talking, working, drinking, and laughing person there is a second, invisible entity to support the visible one Everyone is in fact a twin, with the *guid pat* housing the invisible member The Mafa compare the *guid pat* to a shadow

If a human being dies, he starts rotting, but it is his or her shadow that descends into the earth and continues to live on One time a white person opened up a grave and saw people dancing within, but they could not come out of the earth anymore A Mafa had to tell the white man that he should never again open a grave as people might start thinking that being dead was a much better state than being alive They were the shadows of the ones who had previously lived on earth

■ Each Mafa is believed to possess two souls, one visible and the other—called a *guid pat*—like a shadow. It is said that a white man once opened a grave and saw the shadows of the deceased dancing within.



THEY LOOK WITH TWO EYES

that the white man saw, the shadows that are always next to people. If a person marries, his shadow marries; if he has a child, his shadow has a child; and, when he dies, his shadow passes from this realm to the next.

This duality of existence is very important. For the Mafa, doubleness lies at the source of being. Within human existence, in society, in everything, there are always two. Two souls inhere to every human being, the visible, substantial person and the invisible shadow. But twins, the manifestation of the divine principle of two, have crossed this borderline. The shadow, the guid pat, has become visible. The only way for this to be possible is for each twin to be, in fact, only half-human.

Nevertheless, the twins receive a guid pat, but only one jar for the two of them. After they are born, their father goes to the potter—both the male blacksmith and the female potter belong to the blacksmith caste—and asks her to make a special jar for the twins. It is not the same jar as ordinary people get; it has two heads and one belly. This jar has to remain inside the house at all times. The jar cannot bear sunshine without harm falling upon the twins. The potter also makes two small plaques for the twins that single children do not receive, called *dédé tsakalay*, which means: "One who is watching over the children."

The ritual for twins

The father of twins must organize a special ritual sacrifice for them every year for the rest of his life, even after one or both have died. If the sacrifices are not performed, the twins can exercise their malevolent powers: People

will become "lost"; lost in the wilderness, lost in the mist, lost in blindness, or lost in madness. These plights replicate the chaos of the primordial, which is the origin of twins.

The ritual is performed for the first time about a year after the twins' birth. The potter holds the special jar and plaques in readiness. Her husband—the blacksmith—makes special bracelets for the parents of the twins, which the father will wear on his left wrist and the mother on her right wrist. The maternal and paternal clans are sent messages announcing the ritual and preparations, specifically the fermentation of millet beer, begin.

Millet beer is a key element in the ritual for the twins. As the staple cash crop of the Mafa, millet has a great deal of symbolic and religious significance. Offerings for male ancestors are made with millet beer, and millet porridge is prepared for female ancestors.

The cultivation of millet requires the family compound to maintain a diligent sense of order: Twins possess the ability to create disorder. Consequently, because twins come from the forest, the Mafa know that they cannot plant millet where there are trees or wild grass. Millet can grow only where people cultivate terraces, maintain them in good repair, and harvest regularly.

From the day preparations begin, the parents are not allowed to cross the river where the twins' father obtained the *gurotsakalay* after the birth of the twins. Otherwise, harm would fall upon them, because twins have a special relationship with the water spirits, who helped them come into this world.

As preparations continue, the mother's head is shaved and her hair is given to the potter. (It is vital that this hair be kept safe.) The night before the ritual, the



■ Every Mafa has a special jar for his guid pat to live in. But twins are given only one jar for both of them. This is presented to the parents at the first ritual celebration for the twins.

parents may not have intercourse, nor may any of the guests. If they do, they risk becoming sterile.

On the day of the ritual the mother dresses in a goatskin. The potter arrives before the other guests, sneaking the twins' jar and plaques into the compound, covered with a piece of cloth. The guests from neighboring households arrive; Parents of other twins, elders, and the smith come to assist, as they are familiar with the ritual. All guests bring millet as a present, which is emptied into a special basket.

The potter announces to the parents: "I have something for sale!" They then give her a jar of beer, and in return, she gives them the jar she has made for the twins' guid pat. Then beer must be given

to her again, whereupon, she returns the mother's hair clippings. Then the hair is buried beneath the family's granary, where it will remain until the parents die.

Someone brings guro-tsakalay picked from the river banks, which is used to make a cord. The parents of the twins and those who assist them—and the twins themselves if they are big enough—kneel down. First the cord is put on their heads, then around their necks.

The beer is poured—first into the twins' jars, then into a calabash—and drunk by those wearing the cord while they are kneeling. The calabash is filled three times if the father's firstborn is a boy, twice if it is a girl. The twins' jar is refilled again and kept full.

Afterwards two jars of beer are car-

THEY LOOK WITH TWO EYES



■ Even those who convert to other beliefs fear the power of a twin. In one story, a Muslim twin was cursed by her younger sister (also a twin) with infertility. Though the older sister begged and pleaded, her sister refused to remove the curse, and she remained barren.

ried out to the visitors, who must remain outside the compound. The most important nonrelatives attending the ritual, like the next-door neighbor, the mountain chief, and the mother and father's best friends, are the first ones to drink the beer. One jar is for elderly men, the other is for the rest of the guests.

The ceremony lasts all day. Although all the actions and gestures have significance, most of the participants do not know all the exact details and their sequence. Therefore, two or three different masters of ceremonies lead the day's events. Even so, they usually seek the advice of elders or other parents of twins, who have done the ritual before.

The most important activities of the day are the slaughtering and sacrifice of animals. A chicken, sacrificed at the entrance, is prepared and eaten by the moun-

tain chief and his friends. A sheep is sacrificed and the contents of its stomach are smeared on every door of the house as well as on the granary and the tree beside the house. When the sacrificed sheep is eaten, the central figures of the ceremony must take care to chew an even number of bites—two, four, or six.

After the people inside have eaten, they line up two by two while the master of ceremonies holds up a bowl with millet flour. With two fingers, he puts some flour on the jar of the twins, and then he puts flour on their foreheads.

In between the various events much millet beer is drunk and sacrificed: It is poured out on the floor while a prayer is said aloud for Jigilé (God), who must receive his share.

The importance of the number two appears throughout this and other Mafa ritu-

als. In fact, a feminine principle thoroughly imbues Mafa rituals. Women are associated with the number two, evenness, and men with the number three, unevenness. Men have earthly powers: they control the household and the entrance of the compound. Men fill the important religious positions in society, like the position of mountain chief, cricket chief, and rainmaker. They also perform the sacrifices to the gods—though these can never be made without the presence of the women of the household. But the presence of doubleness, the even female principle in the rituals, seems to underline the fact that nothing can be done in Mafa society, which on the surface is ruled by men, without the feminine presence.

Twins and conversion

As the Mafa face influences foreign to their culture, twins may leave a home, or possibly convert to Islam or Christianity. The ritual is still performed for a twin who moves away. If a twin converts to Islam and chooses to live in a town such as Mokolo, a Muslim community situated in the midst of Mafa territory, he will attend the ceremonies but not drink or eat (Muslims cannot drink millet beer or eat meat that is slaughtered by non-Muslims). By the second generation, no sacrifices will be offered for converted twins.

Should the mother convert (usually late in life) to either Islam or Christianity, the rituals will be followed as usual. Should the father convert, many problems arise. As a Christian, he may continue to perform rituals but not sacrifices, which turns the traditional practice into a sort of festivity. If the father becomes a Muslim, he will no longer be permitted to

perform either rituals or sacrifices. Generally, however, men seldom convert to Islam after becoming the father of a household.

Converted Mafa still believe in the power that twins can exercise. There is a story:

A man had a child, and then twins: one female and one male. He had another child and then twins again, both female. The male child of the first pair of twins died, and his sister converted to Islam when she had grown up. The father and the mother became Christians but one girl of the second pair of twins kept true to Mafa beliefs. Angry at her older sister's conversion, the faithful girl cursed her: "You will never be able to have children." The older sister begged her to take back the curse, and she gave her gifts and promised more gifts, even up to twenty bulls, but her sister refused to take it back. Since then, till this day, the older sister has been barren.■

Additional Reading:

P.B. Clarke, *West Africa and Islam: A Study of Religious Development from the Eighth to the Twentieth Century*, Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd., London, 1982.

S.J. Hogben and A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *The Emirates of Northern Nigeria: A Preliminary Survey of Their Historical Traditions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966.

J.Y. Martin, *Les Matakam du Cameroun*, Mém. Orstom, Sc.Hum., 41, Paris, 1970.

A. Southall, "Twinship and Symbolic Structure," *The Interpretation of Ritual: Essays in Honour of A.I. Richards*, edited by J.S. La Fontaine, Tavistock Publishers, London, 1972.

Victor Turner, "Symbols in African Ritual," *Symbolic Anthropology*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1977.

Monica Wilson, *Rituals of Kinship among the Nyakyusa*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1957.

José C.M. van Santen specializes in feminist anthropology and the position of women within Islam. She teaches in the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Leiden University in Holland.