

Dolls and Ritual

The Use of Human Effigies in Shamanism and Sorcery Nicholas Breeze Wood

Above:
carved wooden
shaman's ongons
out on the
Siberian steppes

Many shamanic, and other magical traditions across the world use dolls of one kind or another in their practices. Their use is ancient, with evidence for their use going back at least 3,000 years to ancient Greece, China and India. Examples are found in most other cultures too, such as the ancient Egyptian ushabti - magical doll-like figures buried in tombs alongside the dead, who come alive in order to act as servants in the afterlife.

Magical dolls are well known in western culture too, and have a long history in many places in Europe, but more recently Caribbean voodoo dolls have become the stuff of popular fiction and horror stories, and so many people now think of

magical dolls as being a primarily Afro-Caribbean tradition.

In Britain such dolls are called poppets, which comes from a medieval word for small child, and the word has a double meaning - as it not only refers to the magical doll, but is also a term of endearment for a young child, mostly a young girl.

A doll may represent a person or a deity or spirit. When it represents a person, it may be made to help protect them, help in their healing, or help in their cursing. In short, a doll, in this form, is a surrogate, representing the person for whom the magic is intended, in lieu of the person themselves.

When it represents a spirit or a

deity it is an idol or fetish figure.

Idolatry - the worship of idols - has a bad name because of strong prohibitions found within the three dominant Abrahamic religions - Christianity, Islam and Judaism - but I would argue that idolatry is important and natural, part of the animistic mindset, which I think human beings are hardwired with.

DOLLS AS ACTUAL PEOPLE

Probably the most important form of doll found in shamanistic and animistic practices around the world, are dolls which represent ancestors. These are very common, and they can take the form of small amulets, right up to large statues.

The modern West tends to see large figures as sculptures, pieces of art, which are dead, we have a 'dead-matter-thinking' culture and so it's natural for us to think a statue representing a dead person is just a lifeless image - a 'keep sake' of some sort, or a figure to remember and honour them.

For most indigenous cultures however that is not the case, as, of course, a carving is 'alive' and 'awake'; it 'is' the person, or at least acts as a focus for that person, being given offerings and taken care of, as it guards and advises or watches over its descendents.

In Mongolian shamanism, such a figure is called an ongon. These are figures - often, but not always, in human form - which represent important shamanic spirits, most often ancestral shamans within the shamanic lineage.

The shaman will be taken over by these spirits during a shamanic trance, and the spirit - also called an ongon [plural: ongond] will come into the shaman's body and advise members of their community who ask for information, or give healings using the shaman's body as their own.

A physical ongon is a house for the ongon spirit to live inside of, and once made they are ritually brought alive and the spirit invited to live within them. Then the ongond is given offerings and cared for in culturally prescribed ritualistic ways. These ongon figures - and the whole concept of ongonds - is a vitally important aspect of Mongolian and Siberian shamanism.

The ritual clothing of a shaman can be thought of as being an

ongon - or a collection of ongons - itself, as each part is alive and contains a spirit helper, as are all their other ritual objects, such as their drum and drum beater.

The same thing can be found in Tibetan Buddhism in a slightly more formalised manner. The statues of the Buddha or any of the beings of the Buddhist cosmology - such as protector beings - are also seen as being alive and hiding the quality - the spirit or essence - of the being they represent.

When a statue is put on an altar, it is not a statue in the Western sense, it is always empowered and 'brought alive' in a ritual way, by the recitation of mantras and specific spell-like prayers, and by the offerings made to the being - which is now sitting on the altar.

DOLLS AND MAGICAL WORK

There are many ways in which dolls are used for magical work - both helpful and harmful - across the world. Knowledge of healing is also knowledge of harming, the two are the different faces of the same coin and if the one is done, the other can be done equally easily. Anyone who knows how to heal could - if they so wished - instead seek to

harm someone, the important thing is the intent of the practice.

There are two main ways of working with dolls, one is to bring something to the person they represent, and the other is to take away something from it.

In the next article in this issue of Sacred Hoop, the Korean shaman Jennifer Kim describes a doll tradition from her culture, where a person's illness is taken up in a doll, which is then ritualistically removed from the sick person, so the illness leaves the person and goes into the doll.

I recently took part in a similar ceremony performed by a Nepalese shaman friend. During this ceremony we each made small clay dolls which represented us. Once the doll was made, we filled it with our hair and some toe nail clippings, and then our illness, attachments, defilements, pollutions etc, were ceremonially put into these clay dolls. Once this had been done, the dolls were put out in the wilds - so the harmful spirits would attach themselves to the dolls and eat them - not us.

After the ceremony was performed, and while the dolls were

being taken outside into the wilds, we all had to change our clothes, so we became 'a different clean person'. This was done to confuse the harmful spirits, and it is the reason why people wear black at funerals - an old tradition, the black clothes confuse the spirits and stop them following the living back to their homes.

These kind of ceremonies are often called 'ransom ceremonies' and they occurs in lots of animistic and shamanic traditions. In many ceremonies the person not only changes their clothes after the defilements have been taken, they also have to change their name, so the harmful spirits can not find them and continue to do harm. In effect they become 'new people' - and the 'old person' is left out in the wilds to be eaten by the spirits which are allowed to feed upon it.

Here, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, a Tibetan Bon lama, recalls a ransom ceremony (Tib: *glud*) he witnessed, performed for his mother:

'I remember when my mother had been ill for a long time we tried to heal her by means of different medical treatments, but nothing helped. We then performed several minor rites, but these did not work either.

So finally we invited some shaman monks, who performed a big ransom rite, in which they prepared a large



Above left: shaman's copper ongon. Selkip people, Siberia

Above: ancient Egyptian ushabti

Below left: ancestor figures and graves, Ke'te Kesu, Indonesia

Below: Siberian shaman's elaborate ongon



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effigy of her (in fact, people often make life-size effigies), and we dressed it in her clothes, so it was very lifelike and resembled her closely.

Then we performed the ritual, offering the effigy in her place to repay her karmic debt to the spirits.

She was given a new name, Yehe Lhamo, in place of her old name, Drolma, as a kind of new birth into the world, and she recovered from her illness.'

The Korean, Nepalese and Tibetan practices above, are all examples of taking away something from the person.

Ways of bringing something to the person would include the archetypal sticking of pins into a wax figure to do harm, or other ways of bringing healing or protection. Remember you need permission from the person you are working for - or in the case of a child their parents - before you do this or any other form of healing work. You don't just 'do it' on people - that's unethical.

I use dolls quite often in my own shamanic practice, and the way I do it is simple. It can easily be adapted by anyone reading this.

To represent a person, I generally use a small figure, either a small cut-out made of leather, or a small bronze figure. The bronze figures I use, of which I have several I keep specifically for this task - are shaman's ongon figures from Inner Mongolia. These are small figures, often with

suspension loops so they can be worn as amulets, and they are traditionally made to represent ancestral figures and spirits.

However I often use them to represent the person

I'm working for, and as they come in both male and female forms, I can select one that 'fit's the

person the work is

for. I also have one or two wooden dolls I use when it seems right.

Sometimes I am instructed by my spirits to ask the person I am doing the work for to send me some clothing, I generally ask for an old T-shirt or scraps they have cut from some other piece of old clothing, something they have worn quite a lot, and are associated with.

In these cases, I generally make a specific doll just for them, normally out of sticks, or scraps of wood. At the end of these healings, after the spirit has been removed from the doll, I normally leave these dolls to decompose in nature.

Most often I work with a single doll for a single person, but occasionally the work I do will be for a couple, or a whole family, and when this is the case, I will use - or more likely make - a set of simple dolls, one to represent each person the work is for. These may only be a simple wooden stick, onto which I always paint a face to help bring them alive.

The way I perform this ritual is to start by calling my spirits to me in my normal way, and then, when I have done that, I call the spirit of the sick person and into the figure I am

Above: Mou nemy - 'the giver of life' - shaman's ongon doll. Nganasan people. Siberia, mid C20th

Top left: some of the small dolls used by the author

Centre left: a doll-person placed upon a bronze shaman's mirror surrounded by a prayer bead mala to make a boundary of protection and blessing, with a further layer of phurbas with blades facing outwards defending the doll-person

Left: a red pot containing a family of doll-people. The pot is hung with iron weapons, and surrounded by a mala for protection

using to represent them. If you don't know how to do this, you are probably not really capable of doing this work yet.

Then, because I work with mirrors a lot, I then place the doll-person onto a bronze shaman's mirror.

Bronze mirrors (toli) are important ritual objects in many forms of traditional Siberian shamanism and they have a lot of uses. One of these is as a connection to the sacred centre of everything - so by putting a doll-person on top of a mirror, I am symbolically putting them in the very centre of creation - a place of perfect balance and great power. They are truly centred.

Placing them on a mirror is also very protective, but - like all these ways - putting them on a mirror could also be done to harm them deliberately.

Not everyone works with shaman's mirrors I know - so here you may well have to ask and listen to your own spirits about what you should use instead.

When I don't use a mirror, I have a bag of dried flower petals from an Andean despacho ceremony and I sometimes use those as a bed for the doll-person to rest on. I also have a square of white rabbit fur I put the doll-person on sometimes. You have to find what is right for you. Ask your spirits.

It is important to place the doll-person on something however, the act of placing them down in a special place - whether it's a mirror or a piece of special cloth - is a way of magically separating them from the everyday world. You are taking them from the ordinary and placing them into a special, sacred, environment.

The person is now ready to be worked with, and we need to determine the nature of the way they need to be worked with.

A lot of the times I do this, it is for protection. The person might be in a difficult place in their life - maybe personally, or perhaps they are travelling, and wish to be kept safe, or maybe they are undergoing a medical procedure.

Because of this, I quite often wind red woollen thread, or red ribbons around the doll-person too. Red is a protective colour - the colour of blood, and therefore life -

and so, by winding red around them, you are winding protection around them.

I sometimes take a photo of this doll-person on my altar and send it to the person, I find on a human, psychological level, it often gives great comfort to them.

For additional protection work, I often put a Buddhist mala (string of prayer beads) around them too. I do this because as well as practicing shamanism I am a Tibetan Buddhist, and so, for me, they are an ideal powerful thing to use to make an encircling band of protection and healing around a person. I have heard of people who place a circle of salt or tobacco around a doll-person in this way too, and one Siberian shamanic tradition I know of - and one I often do myself - is to simply circle the doll with a burning match three times clockwise, circling the doll-person with protective fire.

Of course, it goes without saying, one should smudge the doll-person, and in so doing of course you are smudging the person too.

If the person needs specific protection, I often put a protective 'fence' of phurbas (ritual demon destroying daggers) around them - facing outwards.

Again this is drawing on my Tibetan Buddhist practices - I work a lot with phurbas, and so I often do quite specific phurba practice for people too - the aim of which is to kill - or at least immobles by pinning them down - any spirits which are provoking the person. In Tibetan traditions a provoking spirit can cause fear, illness and other maladies.

Instead of phurbas, you can again ask your spirits about other things you could do here; the circle of salt I already mentioned is an excellent barrier for example. When I am working with physical people in the room, rather than doll-people, I have often used a circle of eagle feathers, or a circle of sage (smudge), or sometimes a circle of tobacco, or blue corn meal - any of these could be used with a doll-person too.

And so, the doll-person is there with you - on your altar- even if

physically the person they represent is thousands of miles away. Now you can work with them - using the doll-person as their surrogate.

I often have people on my altar like this for several weeks if it's a long healing process, or if they are in great need. A few doll-people have been on my altar permanently, until they died - for years sometimes, and sometimes I use containers for people, small pots, into which I put doll-people.

When I do this I normally use red containers because of the traditional protective nature of the colour. I will also sometimes tie additional protective things on the jar too - iron objects especially, as iron is seen universally as protective. These objects may include small shaman's weapons such as a bow and arrow or a sword.

When the time comes to finish the healing process, I thank the spirits, and I dismantle the doll, and it's bed. The spirit of the person is still in the doll - so it has to be sent back. Again, if you don't know how to do this you probably should not be working in this way yet.

When the doll is empty it is ready to be used for the next healing.

*Left and below:
shaman's iron
miniature
weapons*



THE KILLING OF DOLLS

We normally associate harmful acts done to a ritual doll as dark magic, but this practice can also have a healing side to it, but in these cases, the doll does not represent a

*Below: simple
wooden dolls
representing a
whole family*





Above: Nude female ritual doll in a kneeling position. It is bound and pierced with thirteen pins. Found in a terracotta vase with a lead tablet bearing a binding spell. Ancient Greek

person, but instead is a house for the spirit of a disease or a malady.

Personally I take a Buddhist view of such things, a troublesome spirit is a suffering being in its own right, and is trapped in its suffering state by its karma. Because it is suffering, it does harm, but this does not make it evil. Buddhists don't really accept the concepts of good and evil, instead they see enlightenment and ignorance. A being - such as a spirit of illness - is ignorant - and therefore suffering - and its suffering causes it to harm others by its ignorant actions.

The Tibetan Buddhist view is to 'liberate' (Tib: *bsgral-ba*) the spirit from its suffering, and one of the ways of doing this is to compassionately kill it, so it can then have a more fortuitous rebirth, being released from some of its negative karma.

This 'liberation' of a spirit is an important part of many Tibetan exorcism ceremonies, and plays a part in traditional new year ceremonial dances, called cham,



which have their roots in the ancient pre-Buddhist shamanic traditions of Tibet. In these dances - enacted by masked dancers who represent beings of the Buddhist cosmos - a special human figure, called a *linga* is used.

In the new year ceremony the *linga* is employed to gather up all the old energy and spirits connected to the old year - which need to move on - and 'liberate' them. If the ceremony was done as an exorcism at another time in the year, the *linga* would hold the ghost or harmful spirit, which needed to be dispatched to its next life.

In the ceremony, the spirit is summoned and bound within the *linga* - which is usually made of dough, but can be as simple as a person shaped drawing on a piece of paper.

This figure is then placed inside a triangular box, generally made of iron. Iron is considered wrathful and a powerful binding metal because of its protective qualities - it can keep things out, and also keep things in. The triangle shape



Right: Tibetan *linga* effigies during a ceremony



is also considered wrathful and is connected with the element of fire. This is also why some Mongolian shamans play triangular shaped drums sometimes.

This triangular box is a spirit trap, the spirit to be 'liberated' is trapped both within the dough body of the linga, and then bound once more in the prison of the inescapable iron box.

The linga is then ritually killed, in a magical way, by using a mixture of magical texts and magical weapons - it might be stabbed with phurba daggers, hacked to pieces with ritual swords, or shot by ritual bows and arrows.

Once the spirit inside the linga is dead, and the physical linga mutilated, the corpse of the linga is burned. On one level this is a form of psychological drama, acted out for all to see, and on another level it is deep and powerful sorcery.

There are six designated and identified parts to this ritual:

- 1) Creating the linga (Tib: 'br)
- 2) Summoning the target spirit to go inside the linga (Tib: 'gugs)
- 3) Causing the target's spirit to be bound into the linga (Tib: bstims)
- 4) Separating the target from any protecting spirits looking after it (Tib: dbyc)

5) Cutting off the target's life-force (Tib: srog-chod)

6) Liberating (killing) the spirit of the target (Tib: bsgral-ba)

Of course - such practices can be employed to do harm just as easily as they can be used to do good, and Tibetan culture is full of dark magic.

HOUSES FOR THE SPIRITS

The other main use of effigies in shamanism is as fetishes of some kind or another.

As previously mentioned, in Mongolian and Siberian shamanism an ongon is generally the ancestral spirit of a shaman who has been bound to the earth so they can come back and be available to other shamans.

When a powerful shaman dies there is a period of three years, during which the mourning happens and things are



prepared. At this time the shaman's soul is said to go to be with the naga spirits - the lu as they are called in Mongolia.

Then, at the end of this period, a series of ceremonies, called 'the taking back' are performed, and these take back the shaman's soul from the naga, and bind it to the earth in order to stop it leaving and having a rebirth, or passing to the heavens.

A special shrine called an asar is made, and the shaman's old ritual objects and armour (costume) are placed within it. This is now the main ongod (spirit house), of the ongod (spirit of the shaman).

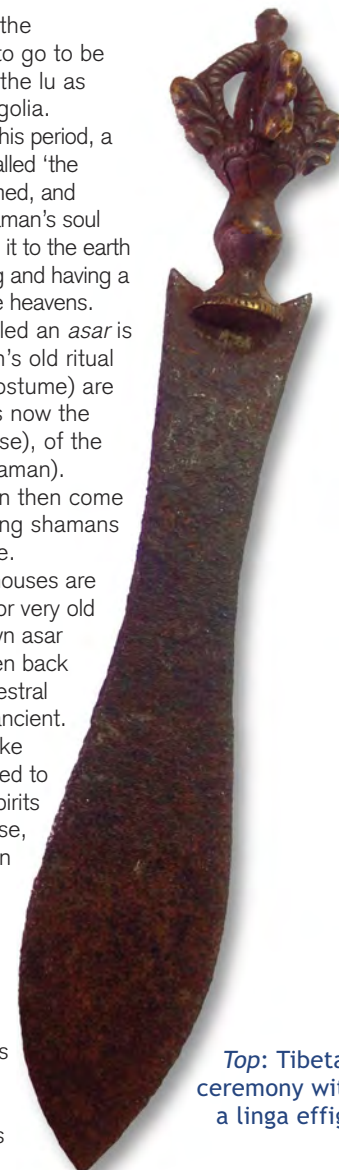
The ongon spirit can then come back and take over living shamans while they are in trance.

But smaller ongon houses are also made, especially for very old ongon spirits whose own asar has long ago been taken back into nature - some ancestral ongon spirits are truly ancient.

These ongod can take many forms, and be used to house many types of spirits - ancestral and otherwise, but most physical ongon spirit houses are in human form in some way or another.

The way a spirit is called into an ongon varies according to tradition. When I have

done it for ancestral spirits and helper spirits whom I have met in my own shamanic work - and who have specifically asked me to make an ongon house for them - I make the physical ongon house, and then call to the ongon spirit and invite it into the effigy.



Top: Tibetan ceremony with a linga effigy

Above: small Tibetan ritual iron sword

Left: a ritual Tibetan triangular iron spirit trap box

When a powerful shaman dies, their soul is bound to the earth to stop it leaving. A special shrine called an asar is made, and the shaman's old ritual objects are placed within it. This is now the main ongod (spirit house) of the ongon (spirit of the shaman). The ongon spirit can then come back and take over living shamans while they are in trance

Right: an asar shrine in Tuva

I do this by preparing offerings to the ongon spirit, which are placed in front of the effigy, and then generally I play a khuur (a shaman's jaw harp) to draw down the spirit. The spirit is then transferred to the ongon figure by wrapping the effigy in the streamers and cloth snakes - manjig - representing nagas, attached to the khuur.

Below: shaman's small ongon dolls. Mongolia

A drum could be used in a similar way, the effigy being placed into the body of the drum, wrapped up in cloth streamers attached to



the drum, and so transferring the ongon spirit into the ongon effigy. There are many ways to do this, some very elaborate and some quite simple.

This technique can also be employed for soul and power retrievals. The returned soul part,

or gift of power, is brought back inside a drum, and once back, a physical stone - or some other object - is put into the drum and wrapped in the drum's cloth dressings. Once it is empowered in this way, it can be given to the person it belongs to. I have done this many times, especially for people I am working for who are physically a long way away. I often use small shaman's mirrors, putting the soul part or gift of power into them, and these I then send to the person I am working for with the instruction they have to wear them around their neck for a period of time. The act of physically wearing the mirror or an amulet helps with the integration.

THE SELF OFFERING STICK

Human effigies and dolls are very much part of Native American traditions too, and they come in a variety of forms, from simple cut-out rawhide human shapes, to elaborately crafted or carved figures.

One sacred doll tradition was taught by the Lakota holyman Frank Fools Crow, who was said to have been the most powerful Native American holyman born in the C20th. This doll is what he called the 'sacred self-offering stick.' Here is a part of a description of the stick, written by Thomas E Mails.

'... The first time he presented it to me, he held it with the greatest



care, and I could see in his misting eyes and soft smile how much he cherished and respected it. He handed me the stick and as I inspected it I could smell the smoked sweet-tobacco and sweetgrass that impregnated it.

"I made this many years ago," he said, "in 1928, just after our two sons died... I wanted Wakan Tanka and the Helpers to know that I did not blame them for the deaths, and that I would continue to serve Them.

"It is made up of things that represent me and my thoughts, along with my love and devotion to the Higher Powers. It also expresses my continuing gratitude for what the Higher Powers have done in and through me for others.

"I call it my 'sacred self-offering stick,' and Stirrup [another Lakota medicine man, one of Fools Crow's teachers], who had one of his own, taught me how to make and use it. He told me that in former times every medicine person had one.

"I was only a boy when he taught me, but he said I would know when the right time had come to make it."

In appearance alone the stick was a fabulous creation... It was a ten inches long and one inch in diameter cottonwood stick. It was hand-carved and painted red. At its top end, which was rounded off slightly, were painted three black dots, to represent his own face. On the back, extending from top to bottom, was a narrow, undulating black line. The stick was wrapped in a piece of cloth in such a way that the face was left exposed.

On the outside of the stick, about where belt level would be on a person, he had wrapped and tied four strings of thick yarn in the four directional colours - white, black, red and yellow. To this were tied two pouches, one containing tobacco and herbs, and the other

sage and sweetgrass.

Hung from the belt on string loops were two beautiful sea shells, some beads of different colours, and a white fluffy breath feather. Above the belt, a string of seven tobacco packets was wound around the stick. Tied upright to the stick were two long feathers.

There was a small fragment of cloth from the clothing of each of his deceased children, a scrap from the clothing of his surviving daughter, and a fragment from the clothing of each of his two wives.

Fools Crow told me that he refurbished the stick from time to time to keep it up to date and beautiful - so that it would please the Higher Powers. He added items that represented significant moments in his life, and he regularly replaced the tobacco offerings.

The stick was a very personal item, and I was not certain that he wanted to tell me anything more about it, but he did.

"I am fully wrapped up in this stick," he said as he caressed it lovingly. "It is my way of continually telling Wakan Tanka, the Helpers, and Grandmother Earth, how much I appreciate the opportunity to serve them. When I am busy with daily tasks, or when I need to go someplace, this stick continues to tell Them how I feel.

"Wherever I am, I know the stick is doing this for me, and that my thanksgiving is not being neglected. Wherever I am, it is always in the back of my mind.

"You must tell people to make their own sacred self-offering sticks and to put them out as I do. It will give them a feeling of closeness to Wakan Tanka and the Helpers that nothing else can equal."

"I made this many years ago, just after our two sons died... I wanted Wakan Tanka and the Helpers to know that I did not blame them

Impressed as I was, I had one more question: "What is the purpose of the undulating black line on the back of the stick?"

"My prayers fly up it, on their way to the Higher Powers, and then their responses come flying back down it to me."

Then he lifted up the cloth wrapping where it covered the bottom of the line and added,

"See, there is a little painted cup there to catch the blessings I know the Higher Powers will send me."

The aim of this article was to give some possibilities, to perhaps open up some possible ways you might work with ritual effigies in some way or another yourself, whether making a self-offering stick, or performing healing or protection ceremonies for people, performing exorcisms, or creating homes for some of your spirits.

Working with spirit dolls is part of our birthright as humans, and although we may not do it in the same way as our ancestors did, or in the same way as a Mongolian shaman or native American medicine person might to do it, an awareness of such things allows us to put a key in the lock within the doorway to new possibilities, and open that door and see what's inside.

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Left: a reproduction of a Sundance effigy doll. Crow people



Above: a self offering stick