ONGON

a home for a spirit

Whitney Reese & Stuart Boag describe this powerful C15-16th Shamanic-Buddhist Mongolian *ongon* or 'spirit house'

Ongons are amongst the most important shamanist tools in Mongolia and they come in many different forms. They are essentially ritual spirit houses or empowered shrines, to give a home to spirits.

Common materials used to make ongons include wood, leather, felt, rocks, paper, fur, feathers, straw, and metal. Some ongons are highly abstract in form while others are much more realistic. Ordinary people may make an ongon, but it is empowered by a shaman who calls the spirit to occupy it. Ancestor spirits or animal spirits occupy most ongons. However, some contain very powerful nature spirits or house the souls of powerful shamans.

Since most ongon spirits have lived as humans or animals in the past, they are believed to have human-like emotions and memories, and so they are treated with respect. After being empowered by a shaman, an ongon is honoured by being placed in the sacred area of a *ger* (the traditional round felt tent of the nomads - often known as a *yurt* in the West), and fed offerings of liquor, blood, milk, or fat.

When a spirit is no longer useful or desired, the ongon is either burned respectfully or placed out in nature so the spirit can return to the natural world from which it had been called.

The ongon we are focusing on here (see photo on left) is a quintessential and rare Mongolian primitive sculpture, and such pieces are now rarely seen on the open market. This piece left Mongolia some time ago, and is now in a private collection in Western Europe. Its gravitas and presence is evidence that it is enlivened and still powerful.

As a shamanic artifact with potent Buddhist symbols upon it, this ongon represents a key chapter in the history of Mongolia, coming as it does from a time when Tibetan Buddhism was merging with the traditional ancient shamanistic beliefs of the country.

BUDDHIST INFLUENCES

Historically, the nomads of Mongolia had a worldview characterised by shamanism, the shaman acting as a vehicle between the human world and the realms of the spirits.

But despite its shamanic heritage, Mongolia has had a long history of exposure to, and assimilation of, Buddhism. The earliest Mongolian contacts with Buddhism date to the fourth century CE - when the activities of Chinese monks in Mongolia are reported in contemporary Chinese sources. Many historical reports also cite the merits of Tantric Buddhism, and there was contact with Tibetan influences during the reign of the great Mongolian leader Kublai Khan (1215-1294 CE).

At that time, conversion to Buddhism seems to have been limited to the Mongolian nobility and the ruling families, and it is rather doubtful if Buddhism spread among the general population on a large scale.

After Mongol rule over China ended in 1368CE, the practice of Buddhism diminished among the Mongols, deteriorating into mere superstition or giving way once again to the indigenous animism and shamanism of the people. It was not until the sixteenth century that a second wave of Buddhist conversion began, brought about by the military expeditions of Allan Khan (1507-1583CE) into the eastern border districts of Tibet, which resulted in contacts with Buddhist clerics.

It was Allan Khan who first gave the title 'Dalai Lama' to a high ranking Tibetan Buddhist lama, called Sonam Gyatso, and so established the office which continues until today. 'Dalai' means 'Ocean' in Mongolian. During this period - when Tibetan Buddhism (often called Lamaism to denote it's difference to other forms of Buddhism found in Asia) was

SPIRIT HOUSES

There are many kinds of ongons or spirit houses made by the peoples of Siberia. They may contain an ancestor spirit, the spirit of a place, or a shaman's spirit helper

Top left: ancestor ongons. Teluit people, South-western Siberia. C19th

Top right: Protector of the Hunt. Yakut people, Northern Siberia. C19th.

Right: ancestor ongons. Nanai people, South-eastern Siberia. C19th.

Right: Blacksmith-shaman's ongon of the 'Spirit of the Bellows'. Buryat people, Southern Siberia, C20th

Below: Protector spirit. Aleut People, Aleutian Islands, Northen Siberia. C19th.

Right: ongon of the 'Spirit-master of Kolinsky Marten'. Buryat people, Southern Siberia, C19th

Right: ongon of the spirit of fire. Buryat people, Southern Siberia, C20th.

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again introduced into Mongolia, the monks sought to convince the nomads to abandon their shamanist beliefs in favour of Buddhist doctrine, and more often than not there was a fertile confluence of beliefs and rituals where ancient shamanic practises intermingled with those of Tantric Buddhism.

Although shamans and Buddhist monks dress differently - the shamans' dress often displaying all kinds of regional and even individual differences, whereas the monks' garb is more or less a uniform; nevertheless, there are striking parallels between shamanistic and Lamaist rituals.

Some of the same spiritual functions can be performed by either a shaman or a lama, as both play a role in divination, healing and exorcism. Moreover the tantric Buddhist pantheon of buddhas, gods and demons was brought into ritual use through enlivened or empowered statues, in a similar way to the empowered ongon spirit houses which were intrinsic to the ancient magical workings of the shaman.

Stuart Boag is a poet, musician and storyteller. His work is strongly inspired by the natural world and he has released two CDs of Himalayan and Mongolian singing bowl music (see the review in Sacred Hoop Issue 58). He has journeyed in Mongolia and lives in Canberra, Australia.

Whitney Reese has lived and worked off and on in Mongolia since 1993. He is an avid collector of Buddhist antiques and owns and operates his website www.mongolian collectables.com in his continuing quest to understand life.

Tibetan bells and dorje

ONGON'S TANTRIC SYMBOLS

This particular ongon takes the form of a most powerful tantric Buddhist practitioner who was presumably revered by a shamanic lineage. The key elements of the symbolism of this ongon are: a vajra and bell, a necklace of human skulls, and the fact that the ongon is made from elemental copper.

The *dorje* or *vajra* and the *ghanta* (bell) are the most well-known and important ritual implements of tantric Buddhism, hence its offical name 'Vajrayana (diamond path) Buddhism'. This form of Buddhism flourished in Tibet, across the Himalayas and then came to Mongolia.

Symbolically, it is seen as having the nature of a diamond, and can cut through any substance, and also the irresistible force of the thunderbolt. It is a symbolic weapon representing the energy to destroy any enemies of Buddhist law *(dharma).* It can also symbolise the power of knowledge over ignorance, and of the spirit over the earthly passions.

Used in ritual, the *vajra* is paired with the bell. In Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism they often appear together representing the female and male aspects of the universe respectively. In rituals, the lama, or practitioner, holds a *vajra* in his right hand and a bell in his left.

In many tantric practises the *vajra* symbolises the male sexual organ, the male cosmic force, and the quality of compassion. The bell symbolises the female sexual organ, the female cosmic principle, and the virtue of wisdom. United they represent enlightenment.

In this ongon, the *vajra* is held in the right hand and the bell is held in the left, with the hands held separate from each other (rather than crossed over, which is often the case when making offerings in Buddhist rituals). Given the relative crudity of this sculpture, the *vajra* and bell are remarkably finely crafted.

The ongon is draped in a delicately-formed long necklace or 'garland' of human skulls. In Vajrayana this symbolises the purification of mental factors or thought processes - purification of mind being a fundamental goal of tantric Buddhism.

The depiction and use of human bones and skulls in tantric symbolism and ritual, is a reminder of the presence of death and the impermanence of all things. Skull necklaces are also worn by wrathful Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist beings such as Mahakala, Vajrapani, Hyagriva and dakinis (female sky and elemental spirits).

The ongon is made of copper or an alloy very high in copper. Copper may well be the oldest metal in human use, as copper artifacts dating to 8700 BCE have been found. Copper is commonly used to form the many metal accessories used by shamans, such as small bells and miniature weapons, small discs etc.

Elemental copper is seen by many practitioners as healing for the mind, body and spirit. It is an excellent conductor of energy, as well as a balancing metal that works with the flow of projective and receptive energies. To shamans and healers it is a metal that can assist in the energetic alignment of the body, removing blockages which are responsible for illness or imbalance. Copper objects are thus used to amplify and transmit thought and healing energy.

In its elemental form it is claimed by some to provide a harmonic connection between the physical and spiritual dimensions. It seems the ideal material for the construction of an enlivened spirit dwelling such as the ongon described here.

Altogether this is a remarkable and unique example of Mongolian ritual art, and we believe that the elements of its design symbolise the ongon's conquest of a material being - human flesh is all stripped away, the necklace of skulls symbolises the all-conquering tantric meditation practises, and now eaten away to the core, the practitioner dwells within the conjunction of bell and vajra - wisdom and compassion, sitting mouth agape - the winds of the universe blowing right through.

Whether a devotional object of tantric Buddhism, or a ritual object from a shamanic lineage, this is a remarkable Mongolian sculpture that evokes the transcendence of the everyday world, and offers a glimpse of the void.