



DOLLS:

Protection, Healing, Power, and Play

by Geri Olson, Ph.D.

Once upon a time, a young Asante girl named Akua found herself unable to conceive a baby. When she consulted a priest, he told her to commission a woodcarving of a child and to treat it as a real infant. She did so, and then carried this doll on her back, fed it, and gave it gifts. The villagers ridiculed her, but soon she gave birth to a little girl. From then on other young women had these wooden dolls made, which became known as akua 'ba in her honor.

This African tale about a young girl and her doll, and the power of a ritual to bring her good fortune, is only one of many such stories in numerous cultures that describe dolls and their role in protection, healing, power, and play. In rituals of protection and power, dolls act as intermediaries between this world and another and involve ceremonies that ensure that harm does not visit or that the future is controlled. Healing ceremonies use dolls as instruments that remove illness, ensure fertility, and postpone death. In our culture, we are most familiar with playing with dolls, a relatively new role in the 25,000-year history of the doll. This article will explore the powerful role of dolls in other cul-

tures, particularly Native American and African communities, and then suggest the healing potential of doll work today.

First, what is a doll? The English use of the word *doll* became common about 1450 and means "a small model of the human figure, especially a child's toy" (*Oxford American Dictionary*). But we know from many sources that the doll has a longer history and an etymology that has links to a religious or spiritual context (Cameron, p. 12). According to Dr. Cameron, the word *doll* comes from the name Dorothea, which in Greek comes from *δωρον* (a gift expressing honor) or *διδοναι* (to enter a temple to offer a sacrifice). Antonia Fraser also suggests that *doll* may come from the Greek word *eidolon*, from which the word *idol* is also derived (Lenz, p. 9). She notes that in Chinese and Korean, *doll*, *idol* and *fetish* all come from the same root. In the *Art and Architecture Thesaurus* (Petersen, 1990), the definition has been expanded to include "human and humanoid figurines, especially those used for play, and certain ones used for ceremonial, religious, or decorative purposes."

In both ritual and play, dolls have

taken many forms and are made from such different materials as walrus tusk, clay, cloth, stone, wood, beeswax, and corn husk. Dolls have been placed by the bedsides of sick children, left in caves to quiet the spirits, and worn by shamans on their collars and belts. Their role in the imaginal life of many cultures and the richness of their diversity will shed light on the human process of constructing meaning by combining art and ritual in daily life.

Art-Making and Ritual

The earliest dolls were works of art used in ritual and ceremony. In both art and ritual, the unseen world, a world other than the everyday world, is made visible and is acknowledged. This alternate reality is entered and embodied through artistic expression, and this acknowledgment, which often makes use of all of the senses through movement, sound, and emotion, helps people memorize what has been called the "tribal encyclopedia" (Dissanayake, 1995). Dissanayake calls the behavior of art, the process of shaping and giving artistic expression to an idea or embellishing an object, "making special." This behavior of art celebrated

the significance of mysterious events such as birth and death, and helped control this unpredictable world. Dissanayake proposes that this "making special" is a distinguishing characteristic of humankind and is an inherited predisposition. "We could postulate that societies whose members tended to make things special or recognize specialness survived better than those who did not" (Dissanayake, 1995, p 103). In this Darwinian view, any society with ceremony and ritual that unites the members in a common belief system could be more cohesive and more equipped for survival (p. 151). Thus, the making of dolls and the rituals surrounding them embodies a deep ancestral push to make the invisible life visible, to honor significant life events and make them special through art. Art-making could also be fitness enhancing and help ensure survival through shared ceremony and a strong community.

The Shaman's Doll

Through the ages, dolls have been instruments in the search for protection and power for hunters, gatherers, farmers, and herders. Dolls were created to ask for good crops, to protect the lives of humans and livestock, to request a fertile womb, and to influence the actions of others in love and war. The belief that spirits inhabit and influence all humans, animals, and natural phenomena was a common religious theme. Dolls became communicators with these spirits, representations of prayers, or pleas with those who influenced the life-and-death outcomes of every event. Every aspect of the bodily life—health, fertility, strength in battle, even the loss of soul—required dialogue, plea-bargaining, and strategies for maintaining a good relationship with the spirits.

An important player in designing the structure and rules for relating to the spirit world is the shaman. At one time the word *shaman* referred only to the religious specialists among the Tungus of Siberia, but it has generalized to include all of those gifted as intermediaries with the other world. Examples include the Huichol *mara'akame*, the Eskimo *angakok*, and the Northwest Coast Tlingit *yek* (Lenz,

1986). Shamans practice religion and medicine, and often determine the course of action one would take to live in harmony with oneself, one's community, and the natural world. As part of his or her medicine bundle, a shaman would carry doll figures along with other healing instruments such as rattles and hollow bones. A fine Siberian costume for a shaman has thirty to fifty pounds of ornaments attached; one Altaic robe had seven dolls sewn to the collar representing seven celestial virgins (Eliade, 1964). Numerous copper and iron dolls hang from the Tungus shaman's robes and represent helping spirits, allies that assist the shaman in his medicinal and spiritual tasks (Lommel, 1967; Halifax, 1982).

Among the Eskimo, shamans also used dolls to represent spirit helpers. These dolls were carved from bone, wood, and ivory and, like their keepers, could journey to the other world and return to reveal messages from beyond. In North America, shaman dolls were found



among the Carrier, the Eyak, the Coeur d'Alene, and the Tlingit. These dolls were used to extract evil spirits from sick persons. It was reported that the doll was thrown into the patient, where it absorbed the illness. The Cuna shamans of Panama would instruct a doll to go in search of the lost soul of a sick person. Dolls

might also be placed around the body of a sick person, acting as assistants, even when the shaman was not present (Lenz, p 57). Neighbors to the Cuna shamans, the Choco peoples, would feed their dolls before requesting their services. In one ritual, a doll was placed near an infant and represented the guardian spirit given to the child. At the end of the ceremony, the doll became an ordinary toy, as it was no longer needed after it had served as a temporary home for the spirit. One Menomini medicine doll from the Great Lakes was offered tobacco and songs with hopes that successful hunting and good fortune would be given in exchange.

Birth and Death

One of the most powerful events in tribal life was giving birth, so it is no surprise that fertility dolls and rituals are documented in every part of the world. The best known example is the Asante tale of the *akua'ba* or "child of Akua" described at the beginning of this paper. When a doll was carved for a childless woman, it was given to the priest to place near the gods for a while and then returned to the woman. She carried and fed this doll and gave it gifts until her baby was born. Along the western coast of Africa, dolls are made by little girls from the femurs of sheep, cows, and pigs. A father drills a hole in the bone where heads are attached. The doll is worn to encourage conception, and again, this bone child is treated as a real child until a human baby is born. In Kenya, a woman without a child is ranked just above children and is unable to participate in adult female rituals. A wooden doll carved by the girl's father is believed to help her bear a child successfully.

Dolls play a central role in the initiation ceremonies of young African women. Among the Zaramo of Tanzania, a girl is secluded at puberty from everyone except attendants and a doll that represents both genders. The doll is bathed and fed each day and the initiate adds her own hair to the doll. When she emerges with her doll, the doll is given gifts from the waiting family. Unlike other dolls, this doll is always covered and is not viewed publicly.

Lenz describes fertility doll practices among Native Americans. An Eskimo woman who wanted a baby would sleep with a small doll made of ivory under the pillow. Small dolls in cradle boards were used by medicine men to assist barren women. In the Southwest, dancers in the Bean Dance carry dolls, and women who want children throw cornmeal on them as they pass. In Oaxaca, Mexico, women make a pilgrimage to a sacred place, make a small doll and cradle, and ask for a child as the doll is rocked. Hopi brides and those who have miscarried receive a flat doll called a *putsqatihu* that represents "the mother of the kachinas" (Lenz, 1986).

Dolls also play a role in the rituals surrounding death and in communicating with ancestral spirits. The Yoruba of Nigeria have the highest birth rate of twins in the world and special powers are associated with them. With their playful, fearless personalities they are able to move back and forth from the real to the spirit worlds. Often one of the twins dies and "calls" to the other twin from the spirit world. Then a wooden twin, the *ere ibeji*, is carved as a substitute for the twin. This doll will house the spirit of the deceased twin and when the mother feeds and dresses the surviving twin, she will also care for wooden doll. The living twin takes over this care when

he or she is able.

There are also examples among the Naïve Americans of mourning rituals associated with dolls. Field notes collected by M. R. Harrington in 1909 tell of a practice where dolls were placed at the table in place of the deceased and honored to acknowledge that the deceased still had an important role in the family. Ojibwa mothers would carry a bundle of toys and clothes along with a doll representing a lost child, and care for these "children" until they were able to care for themselves in the other world. Among the Sioux, families would tend to a "ghost pole" that was dressed to resemble a dead child. The family would limit activities and observe strict rules of mourning to lessen the grief and keep the child's presence close (Lenz, p. 53).

These examples begin to present the variety of ceremonial contexts in which dolls were used. We see that dolls could help people understand and control the mysterious forces of the unknown world, such as birth, death, illness, and fertility. Used in rituals, dolls also served as vehicles to help bring about a sense of power, to quiet grief, and reduce fear. Some dolls were created for one event, and then destroyed or given to children to use in play. Other dolls were sacred and became heirlooms to the next generation of healers. There are hundreds of examples of dolls used for education (such as the Hopi kachina dolls), for magic and voo-doo, and for love medicines, that cannot be included in this article. This expansive presence of dolls throughout the ages, however, sets the stage for looking at how dolls are being used today in hospital settings, play therapy, and doll workshops.

Child Life Programs

It has now been well established that when children are placed in a health care setting, they have emotional needs as well as physical ones that require attention. In 1986 the Academy of Pediatrics made the recommendation that institutions with more than 10 beds for children should develop programs that meet these emotional needs. The profession of the child life specialist has developed to provide these psychosocial services. Through art and play experiences, child life programs strive to reduce



