



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

