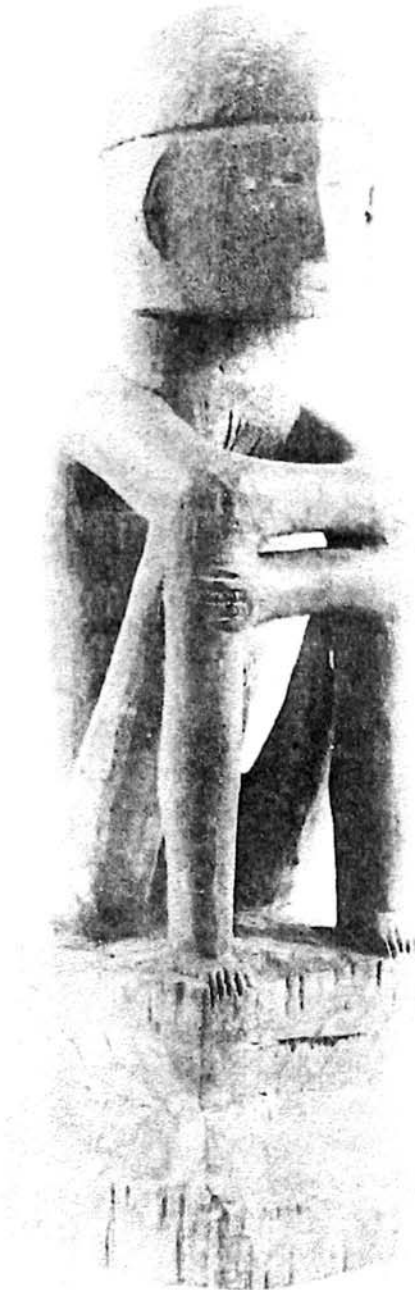


The Ifugao Wooden Idol

by Marilou M. Dancel



A bulul figure.

Man is a worshipping being. He worships as easily as he purges himself. When the gods of his ancestors are taken away from him, he looks for others elsewhere.

Believing in a supreme God and a pantheon of at least 1,500 deities (Roll 1974:21), the Ifugao of the Cordillera mountain range of Northern Luzon, Philippines, have defined their hero ancestors, agriculture, nature, technology, fears and hopes through their deities. But despite the large pantheon, only the rice gods were among those carved, showing the importance of rice in their lives.

A **bulul** is a carved consecrated figure. It is either made from narra (*Ficus Moracea*), ipil (*Pterocarpus Indicus Wied*), or molave (*Curculigo Recervata Dry*). An effigy of a deceased Ifugao ancestor, a bulul is usually created in pairs.

It is sometimes impossible to tell a male from a female **bulul** figure. The genital parts of the figures are not clearly carved. Nipples are usually present on both the male and female figures but breasts are rarely

indicated. Some of the figures have holes on the ear lobes and human hair is planted on the head.

On special occasions, such as harvest time, **bulul** figures are dressed in Ifugao costumes. While the male image is dressed in loincloth, the female figure is dressed with a skirt. They are also adorned with real jewelry or colourful beads.

The Ifugao people are a distinct ethnic group. Their language, architecture, agriculture and religion show a developed culture. Roginsky and Barton (1914), using a fourfold division of racial stocks say the Ifugaos are the purest representatives of the Indonesian race.

Traditional Ifugao men wear G-strings while the women wear wraparound skirts and short sleeveless jackets. They adorn themselves with brass or shell earrings, coiled bracelets,

The author is a museum research assistant in the Anthropology Division of the Philippine National Museum.



Created by the Ifugao, the rice terraces of the Cordillera Mountains have become one of the world's greatest wonders.

boar tusk armllets and beaded head-dresses.

The Ifugao subsist mainly on rice, planted in their multipurpose mountain terraces. This is augmented by their fishing, hunting, trapping and snaring.

An Ifugao village consists of several terraces upon which houses are built. An Ifugao's house is made of four posts planted to the ground. It has limited space. An important accessory of the house is the granary: a flooring resting on the beam supporting the roof. It is like an attic with an opening near the front door

for access.

Bulul images are stored in the granary. Once kept in the granary, they are adorned with rings and necklaces made from rice stalks, sugar cane leaves, or dongla (*Cordyline Terminalis*).

All **bulul** figures sit or stand on a base. This base is visibly divided into two horizontal sections made by artistic incisions. In the standing position, arms are hung loosely on the sides. Hands either touch the kneecap or are raised sideways. A sitting figure, on the other hand, have arms folded across drawn up legs.

The hands are placed on the kneecap.

The position of a **bulul** indicates its origin. A standing **bulul** with hands touching or covering the knees usually comes from Western Ifugao (*Hapao-Hunduan*). The seated and finely carved **bulul**, sometimes with cowry eyes and mouth, comes from Northern Ifugao (*Kambulu-Batad*).

A **bulul** with a mixed expression, European facial features, and which may be sitting or standing comes from Central Ifugao (*Kababuyan, Banaue, Hingyon, Mumpolya*). A standing **bulul** with stretched hands parallel to the legs come from Southern Ifugao

(*Kiangan*). They are carved in a crude manner (*Bayer*).

Various myths relate to the origin of the carved wooden idols. One myth, according to Bayer, goes as follows:

A long, long time ago there lived a giant or overgrown narra tree known as **Bongbong**. It is a boundary marker located in the village of a famous Ifugao named **Humidhid**. This village is in the upstream region known as **Daiya**.

Bongbong was either haunted or given supernatural powers by the skyworld. At any rate, it started giving off a loud winging sound. This scared the villagers. But it made **Humidhid**, the village headman, feel disturbed and angry. He was unable to sleep because of the sound.

One day, **Humidhid** prepared a small, black rice wine jar. He took this along with his adze to the giant tree. While underneath **Bongbong**, **Humidhid** shouted, "Shall I cut the tree and make it into a house?"

The giant tree continued his strange sound. Again, after a while, **Humidhid** shouted, "Shall I make thee into a bench?" Still the tree kept on. After some time, **Humidhid** looked up to the tree and shouted, "Shall I make thee into a ceremonial box?"

Bongbong was not intimidated. He went on with his strange sound. Irritated but still keeping his patience, **Humidhid** shouted his threats at intervals. He mentioned different objects to construct but none of his threats ended the noise.

Afternoon came, and for the last time, **Humidhid** shouted, "Shall I cut you down and make you into an ancestral image to guard our crops and make our rice harvest plentiful?" The large narra tree suddenly hushed.

Humidhid took a cup of wine and drank slowly. Then he picked up his adze and started cutting the tree. When dusk came, **Humidhid** remembered it was taboo to fell trees at night. He promptly returned home.

The following morning **Humidhid** took breakfast early, fetched his adze and wine jar, and proceeded to the giant narra tree. He continued cutting the tree. Then at mid-morning, **Humidhid**, was about to fell the tree. Finally he made a big swing and struck the tree with his adze.



An Ifugao wearing his traditional costume.

The giant narra tree fell and emitted a tremendous sound before it reached the ground. The sound was heard by all the people in the region and as the tree hit the ground, the earth trembled. This was felt by the underworld gods.

Humidhid thereafter carved

eight pairs of **bulul** out of the giant tree's main trunk. After they were shaped, he gave them names and brought them home for finishing. He gave a feast, sacrificing five pigs, in honour of the **bulul** figures.

That night there was dancing and rejoicing. A fat hen was sacrificed and its blood was daubed by hand on the bodies of the images. At the same time, they were consecrated. A priest recited the myth prayer--that the god **Nabulul** and his wife **Bugan** possess or live in the images. May they forever guard the rice and make harvest plentiful, he prayed.

Almost all well-to-do Ifugao families owning rice granaries keep the carved idols. They believe that keeping **bulul** images in their granary protects their rice from pests and thieves. Rice is also protected from being consumed too quickly.

Nevertheless, not all Ifugao own **bulul** images. Only descendants of families owning properly installed **bulul** figures can usually have a newly carved **bulul**.

Installation of **bulul** images involves an elaborate and expensive ritual. First, the right type of wood must be collected from the forest, where the preliminary carving begins. As soon as this is done, the owner brings the wood carvings to his house where he is welcomed with festivities.

The beginning of the final carving is also marked by another festivity. Carving is done during the day while the nights are spent on dancing and more feasting.

Another ritual marks the completion of the sculptures. During this ritual, the myth on the origin of the **bulul** is recited by a priest (*mumbaki*). This is done so that the powers and benefits bestowed on the

bulul in the myth are transferred to the newly carved **bulul** images.

Then the **bulul** images are bathed with blood from a sacrificed pig. Thereafter, the images are positioned in the granary until the rice harvest season. After a month or so, another rite is held, marking the end of the presiding priest's fasting. The presiding priest, during the ceremonies, is not allowed to eat certain foodstuffs and is prohibited from sexual activity.

Although the Ifugao raise two crops a year, rituals are performed only on the first crop. To mark the start of the rice year and the ritual cycle, rice fields are weeded; the rice terraces are cleaned.

Rice is important in the lives of the Ifugao. It therefore requires very elaborate rites. **Lukat**, the first rite performed, is usually carried out in the month of October.

In this rite, a chicken is offered to the ancestors and deities. Priests implore the gods to strengthen the dikes and fill the fields with water so that the crops may come in abundance.

Subsequently, every stage of rice planting until harvest time commences with a ritual. Just when the rice is ready for stacking in the granary, another ritual is held.

In this ritual everyone rests. Idleness is strictly observed for three days and everyone is prohibited from leaving the village. Then on the last day of the idleness period, the rice is finally stacked in the granary.

The **tagdog** ritual marks the end of harvest. It is performed communally at the house of the **montonok** or the first rice planter. Several **atag** mats are spread in a shady place. The

bulul or granary idols from all the granaries of the village are collected and placed on the mats where the presiding priest sits.

At the center of the spread mats is a ritual chest. On top of the chest is a pile of clustered **areca** nuts and **buga**, or hard stones. Near the priest are coconut cups, a wine bowl, and a rice wine jar.

The priest starts the rite by calling upon their ancestors, and then their deities. After the upstream **bulul** deities are invoked, two bundles of newly harvested rice are placed on the two west side corners of the ritual chest.

The downstream **bulul** deities are next called upon and another two bundles of newly harvested rice are placed on the two east side corners of the chest. The four bundles of harvested rice are called **li-ub**.

As the invoked deities possess the priest and the wooden **bulul** images, one whole grain of rice is taken from each bundle of **li-ub**. They are attached as earrings to the pair of **bulul** images. Wine is thereafter offered to the deities in the person of the possessed priest.

The ritual ends when the priest sips the wine from the cup and pours the remaining wine on the heads of the **bulul** images. Then the images are bathed with blood from sacrificial animals, such as pig or chicken. In some localities, the **bulul** images are smeared with rice cakes. And then they are kept in the granaries, once again.

The **bulul** is adored, invoked, and appeased. Man is absurd; he cannot make a flea, and yet he makes gods by the dozens. ■

REFERENCES

- Barton, Roy Franklin
1946 "The Religion of the Ifugao", *American Anthropologists*.
New Series 48 (4) Part 2 Memoir Series No. 65. Monasha,
Wisconsin.
- Beyer, Henry Otley
1913 "Origin Myths Among Mountain Peoples of the
Philippines". *The Philippine Journal of Science*, Vol.
VIII, (April) No. 2.
- Casal, Gabriel, et al
1980 *The People and Art of the Philippines*. Museum of Cultural
History, University of California, Los Angeles: 183-263.
- Gomez, Garcia Pinky
1983 "Northern Philippine Primitive Wooden Art." *Arts of Asia*,
July-August: 84-93.