

Surrendering to the need for a walking stick is not without its complications. A century or so ago, most well dressed men and women carried a stick or cane; however, in our twenty-first century culture, the use of a stick or staff usually signifies that the bearer either has some sort of physical disability or that they are off for a hike in the north woods.

Having once been placed by a diagnosis into the first category, I claimed the acquired 'appendage' as one of my power objects. After all, for shamanic practitioners, the staff or cane has a rich and varied history.

Over the centuries, a shaman's regalia has often included a magical staff. Different forms of this power object are seen in cultures across the globe. From the deep jungles of the Amazon basin, to the steppes of Asia, the deserts of Australia and even to the high reaches of the Arctic, shamans use staffs as power objects.

When the shaman's helping spirits work through these objects, it is possible to amplify the spiritual power that is available to the shaman for his or her work.

As the shaman continues to use their staff in this manner, the object itself becomes inspirited. Since the objects are then considered to be alive, they function as assistants, partners and guides to the shaman in their work and, as such, must be cared for as living beings.

For many peoples, the shaman's staff is a representation of the connection between the realms of Upper, Middle and Lower Worlds, functioning thus as a model of the World Tree.

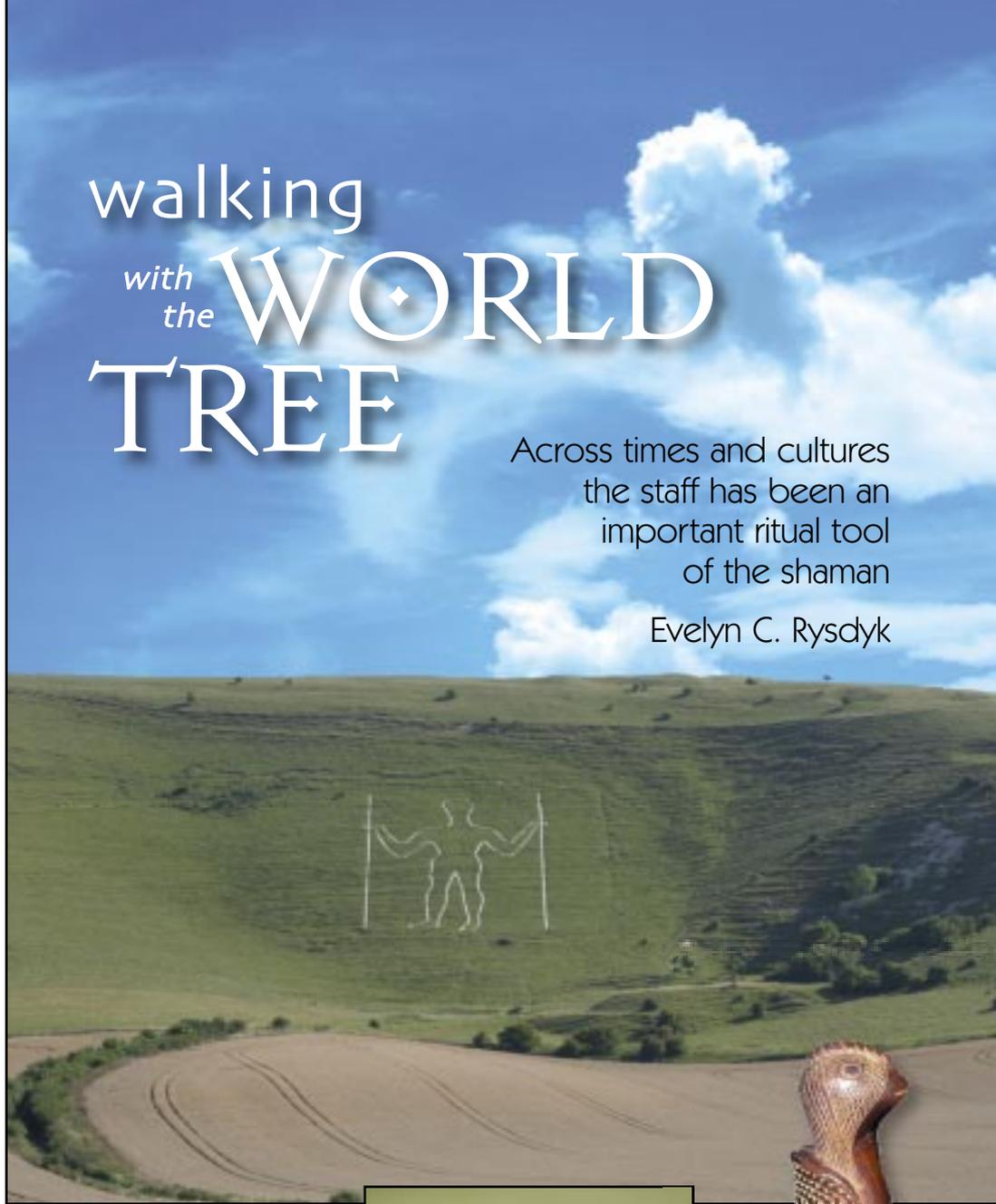
As is the case with all true power objects, the staff is imbued with spiritual purpose and becomes a living presence. It becomes a catalyst for change and transformation - even capable of working on its own on behalf of the shaman.

In the Amazon, the shaman's staff or *baculo* is made from a two-metre length of wood which is ceremonially cut from a pona tree (*Iriarte deltoidea*, also known in Spanish as *chonta-kilo*) which many peoples in the region see as especially sacred. The staff is also decorated with special symbols, talismans and carvings which are connected to the shaman's own power. For these people, the staff

# walking with the WORLD TREE

Across times and cultures  
the staff has been an  
important ritual tool  
of the shaman

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represents a connection to the Pleiades - a star constellation that many Lower Amazonian people believe is their spiritual home.

The staff functions as an energy conduit between the 'up-above' and 'down-below' worlds. As a symbol for the *Axis Mundi* or World Tree - the very center of the cosmos - it holds the spiritual center in ceremony.

Shamans from the First Nations of the Pacific Northwest of North America, such as the Tlingit and Haida, use staffs that are carved with representations of the shamans' spiritual connections along their length. These staffs allow the shamans to access their ancestral spirits for help and guidance while performing shamanic healings. These staffs may be made of



Top: 'Long Man of Wilmington' chalk figure, England

Above: head of a Nepalese shaman's staff in the shape of a bird. Early C20th

Inset left: top of a healer's staff, Kuna or Embera people, Panama. Early C20th





Sacred staffs still remain in Western culture  
(Above) Head of C17th Bishop's crosier

Below (left to right): The author's antler-tipped ritual staff

Head of a healer's carved wooden staff from Tanzania. Early C20th

Siberian shaman's iron 'horse' staff. Buryat, late C19th



carved wood, whalebone or marine ivory, and are carried by the shaman during ceremonies.

Ranging from about 40cm to over a metre, they are used to heal, combat the spirits of disease, and to detect the presence of 'witchcraft' or negative magic.

Because of their role in magical combat, some of these objects are carved to resemble weapons such as clubs and long knives. Others are simple, long and graceful arcs of bone or ivory completely covered in the carved images of the shaman's helping spirits and clan affiliation symbols.

Among the Selkups, Enets and Nenets of Siberia, the shaman's staff is the 'tree of life' and helps the shaman negotiate the perils of the spirit journey to the world of the ancestors. In the shamanic traditions of these people, the land between the realms is harsh, with many sharp mountains and ravines separating the place of the dead from our world.

Since the shamans in this region sing and dance their journeys, the staff also functions as a rhythm stick. To enhance this role, the staff is forged of iron and covered in iron rings which clang together and against the staff. Thus it takes the place of the shaman's drum for the journey. These staffs are one-and-a-half metres tall, and some have the form of a reindeer hoof at their base.

As reindeer herders, this hoof represents a connection to the spirit of the animal on which the tribe relies.

Among my teacher Grandfather Misha's people, the Ulchi of southeastern Siberia,

sacred objects are most often made from the wood of the most sacred tree in the *taiga* (sub-Arctic forest) - the larch.

While their costumes are made of intricately sewn and embroidered cloth or fish skins, most of the shaman's other regalia - the drum hoop, the rattles and extraction brooms (used to remove negative energies), the many *saiven* carvings (spirit fetishes) and drum paddles - are all carved from larch wood. The shaman's staff is no exception.

Among the Ulchi the staff functions as a connector of the realms and also as a healing implement. Since such objects are imbued with spiritual energy, they can heal - working as partners with the shaman. In his healings, Grandfather Misha would use them to touch and brush a patient as a part of their healing.

The shamans of the Peruvian North Coast use staffs on their healing 'mesa'. These staffs are arranged in an upright row at the head of this ceremonial altar - or *mesa* from the Spanish word for table - along with swords or long knives.

Holding the energy of each of the shaman's many 'compadres', or helpful and healing spirits, these staffs range from about 60cm to 120cm long, and are used as a part of the all-night San Pedro ceremony.

The shaman's *mesa* is arranged in such a way as to have left, center and right fields of energy. The left side holds images and power objects that invoke darker spirits. The right holds the spirits of light and the center is the point of balance behind which the shaman sits as mediator.

During the ceremony, the various staffs - each one living and filled with spirit - are used to cleanse the patient of negative energy, the spirits of sickness and of bad luck. Many of these staffs are made of a very dense and dark, Amazonian wood taken from a palm tree called *Geonoma weberbaueri* (known in

Spanish as *chonta-duro*), and are carved at the top with figures of the particular spirits and saints that the staffs embody.

Not only are the images sacred, but the wood itself comes from a highly sacred tree of the region. This species of palm grows at higher elevations in the Upper Amazon than any other palm, and native people such as the Shuar of Ecuador, see this as their 'Tree of Life.' This impression may also come from the fact that objects made of this wood seem to be everlasting, as the wood doesn't rot, even though it is subjected to constant, tropical dampness.

The ancient Icelandic sagas tell us about the use of staffs in the shamanic rituals of the ancient Norse and Germanic peoples of Europe.

Among these, the ceremonial staff was the tool of the the *völva* or seeress who used it during *sedir* ceremonies.

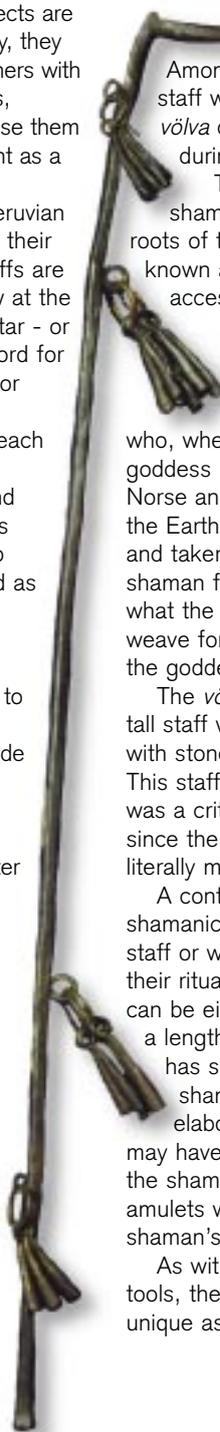
The *völva*, whilst in a shamanic trance, enters the roots of the great, world tree known as Yggdrasil, to gain access to ancestral wisdom.

This oracular ceremony was usually performed by specially gifted women, and sometimes by men, who, when in trance, acted as the goddess Freyja. Freyja is the Norse and Germanic goddess of the Earth, who is both the giver and taker of life and an original shaman figure. Since she knows what the three *norms* (fates) will weave for individuals, she is also the goddess of prophesy.

The *völva's* costume includes a tall staff which was typically set with stones and bound in brass. This staff was known as a *völ* and was a critical part of the ritual since the ceremonial title *völva*, literally means 'staff bearer.'

A contemporary, Western shamanic practitioner may use a staff or walking stick as a part of their ritual paraphernalia. These can be either quite simply, made of a length of wood from a tree that has significance to the shaman, or may be elaborately decorated. They may have jingles that keep time to the shaman's dance, or carry amulets which amplify the shaman's power.

As with all other shamanic tools, they are as individually unique as the people that carry



them. One of my staffs is made from a maple sapling that was entwined by a bittersweet vine. This is significant to me as it reminds me of several themes.

Bittersweet, (*Celastrus orbiculatus*), is a showy, ornamental vine that was imported to the USA from Asia in 1860. Today, it is a prolific plant 'pest' that slowly strangles native trees.

For me, the vine wrapped sapling reflects both the vulnerability we all have to the slow progress of age and disease as well as the ability that gentle forces have to overcome something large or seemingly impossible. It also reminds me that we are affected by those beings that accompany us on our life walk - that is, our environment shapes us as much as our genetics.

It also reminds me that the bittersweet elements of our lives walk side-by-side with the many joys life has to offer.

On the top of my staff is a branch of reindeer antler. This is to honor my Arctic European roots as well as to provide a symbolic representation of the branches of the World Tree. The only other

decoration is bunch of silver bells that are attached to the staff with a loop of reindeer leather. These make a joyful sound whenever the staff is moved and so accompany my healing songs very nicely!

When I am out walking in nature, however, I remove the bells so that I won't frighten animals and birds.

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## MAKING YOUR OWN STAFF

Whether you require the use of a staff to steady your steps or the World Tree is calling your heart into relationship, it may be used to augment and enrich your spiritual life. Since it is capable of carrying power, it is important to choose your staff thoughtfully.

If possible, I recommend that you create the staff yourself. There is tremendous power in creating your own power objects. Sacred items you personally craft will hold an even deeper significance for you.

If your staff is meant to be of wood, first connect to the tree spirits. Each species of tree has a different energy, so it's a great idea to find out the sort of tree to which have been drawn.

When a specific tree has been chosen, ask that living being for permission to cut it's flesh. Pray your thanks to the tree as you cut thoughtfully and with great care. When you are through, leave a heartfelt offering of gratitude, such as a small bit of food or drink behind to thank the tree for its sacrifice. (I find that carrying a pocketful of birdseed is handy for such occasions!)

If your staff is meant to be of another substance such as metal, use prayer or meditation to connect with the right one for you.

One of my students made a remarkable staff from copper pipe. At the top, she used a copper fitting as a seat for a large crystal and at the bottom she placed a copper cap. Before all the soldering was completed, she filled the pipe with sacred stones and amulets. As it is moved over a patient, the objects in the staff shift and make a soft rainstick sound.

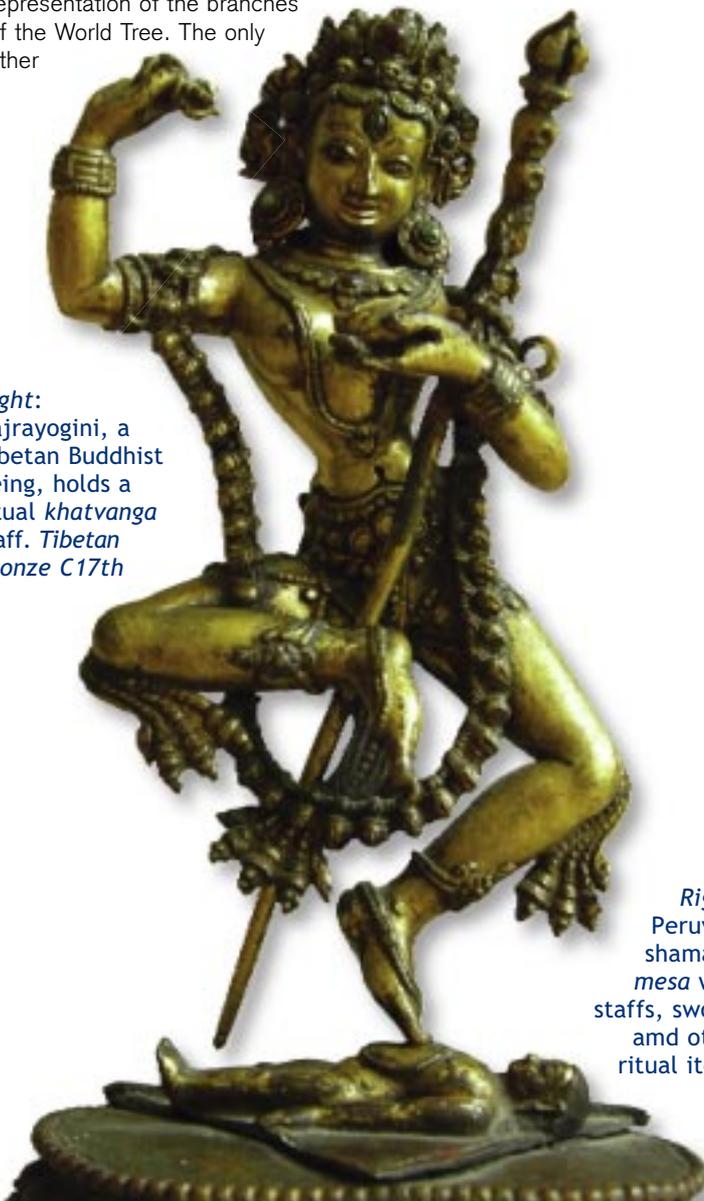
Once you have secured your staff, ask it how it might wish to be decorated. This can be done by meditating or praying in quiet, or drumming yourself into a journey state - do what works best.

As you connect with the staff, you may find that you are asked to paint, carve, wrap in beadwork, wood burn symbols on it, tie on bells or hang objects such as feathers from the top. Follow your guidance and it will be just right for you.

After the staff feels completed, spend some quiet time alone with this new part of your life. When holding it vertically, you may feel the energies of the Upper, Middle and Lower Worlds connecting through the centre of your staff. Try to feel the flow of these energies and notice what happens inside your body.

Be patient and over time you may indeed sense the strength of the great World Tree in your hand. Allow this new part of your life to become a reminder of your personal connections to All That Is.

**Right:**  
Vajrayogini, a Tibetan Buddhist being, holds a ritual *khatvanga* staff. Tibetan Bronze C17th



**Right:**  
Peruvian shaman's mesa with staffs, swords and other ritual items

