

# POWER IN THE HAND

An Introduction to the Rattle by Jonathan Horwitz

My first teacher of shamanism in the physical world taught me how to journey on the sound of the drum.

My second shamanic teacher told me "the first time I went to the 'World of the Spirits' I was standing with three other people in a small circle. We were all rattling. Suddenly the Earth opened up in front of me and I fell into the Lower World."

When I heard this I thought, "I'd better get me a rattle."



The rattle I got then has been with me since, and over the years I have been given, have made, and have given away more rattles than I can count. Rattles are something special.

The rattle is one of the things I ask people to bring with them on the courses I teach, and one of the first things I teach is how to use it: it is one of the most important helpers in the shaman's kit.

Most of us had rattles as young children, and a nicely surprising number of people have them as adults. Sometimes people tell me, "I've had this rattle for years. I don't know why I bought it. It just seemed to speak to me. Now I know why!"

The shaman's work is to go to, or call to, the world of the Spirits to ask for help, be it as power, healing, knowledge, or wisdom. I use the rattle to send my voice to the Spirits. The rattle is one of the easiest, quickest, and most powerful helpers we have for doing this.

#### CALLING THE SPIRITS

The shaman works by asking for help from the Spirits: 'no Spirits - no shaman'. Calling the Spirits is the most basic of the shaman's work. I have what I call 'a basic rattling ritual' for calling to the Spirits which I teach on the introductory workshop. Quite simply, it involves facing in one of the four (cardinal) directions and shaking the rattle four times, calling to the Spirits of that direction, asking them to come and help me.

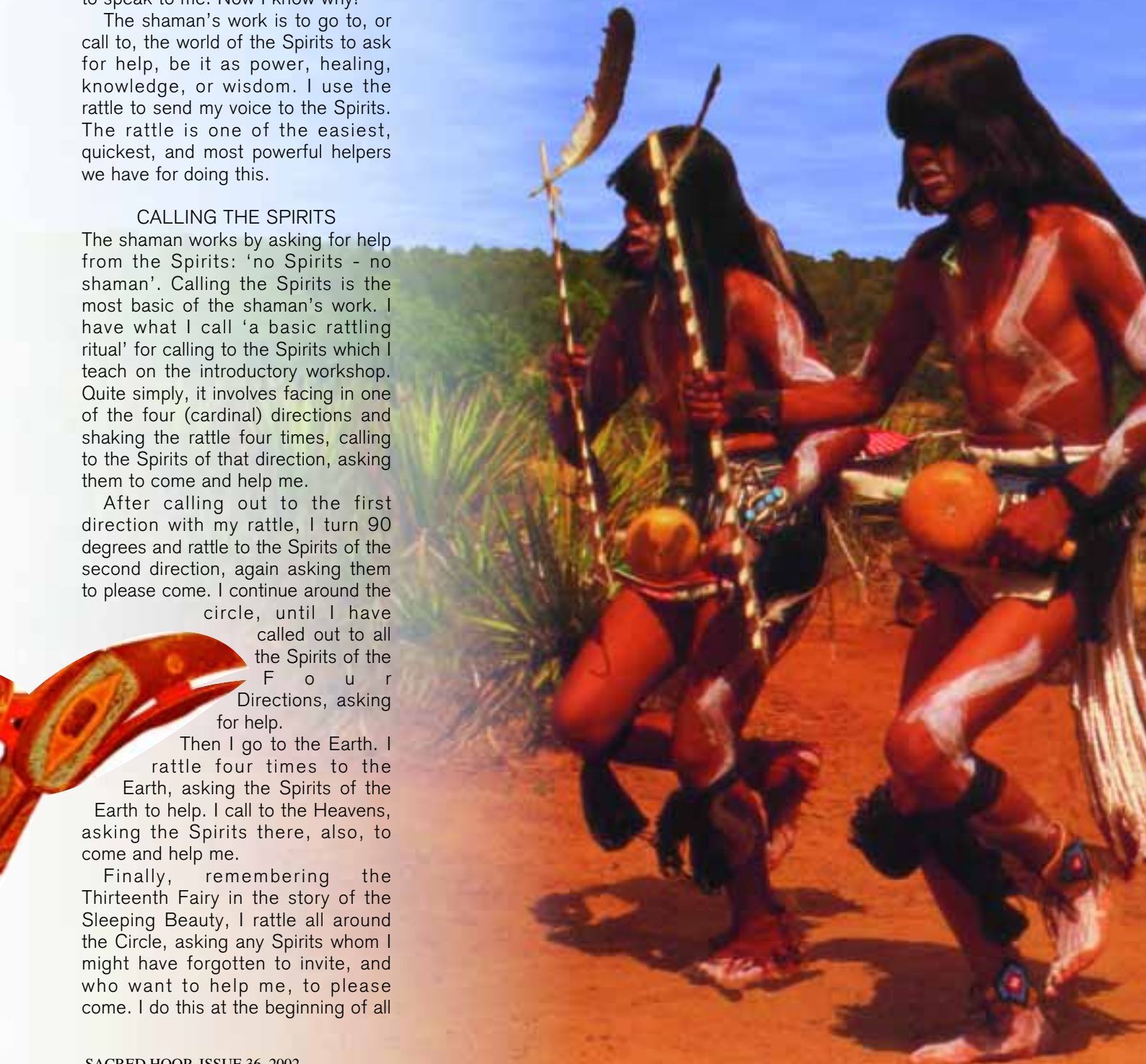
After calling out to the first direction with my rattle, I turn 90 degrees and rattle to the Spirits of the second direction, again asking them to please come. I continue around the circle, until I have called out to all the Spirits of the **F o u r** Directions, asking for help.

Then I go to the Earth. I rattle four times to the Earth, asking the Spirits of the Earth to help. I call to the Heavens, asking the Spirits there, also, to come and help me.

Finally, remembering the Thirteenth Fairy in the story of the Sleeping Beauty, I rattle all around the Circle, asking any Spirits whom I might have forgotten to invite, and who want to help me, to please come. I do this at the beginning of all



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my shamanic work.

This is the basic rattling recipe I started with to call to the Spirits to ask for help. My rattling ritual has changed now, but if you listen carefully you can hear this recipe in its roots.

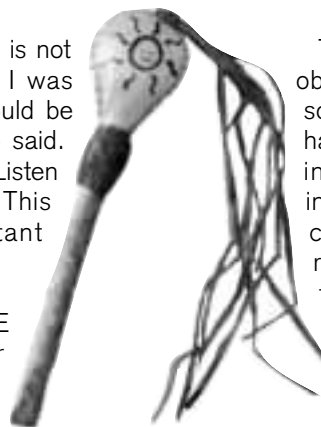
Over the years, what has happened for me, and for many of the people I've re-introduced the rattle to, is that as I was rattling the different directions the Spirits came and taught me how to call them. When I call to my Teachers from the upper and lower worlds I use my voice, as well as the rattle.

When I call to the spirits of the between-directions I whistle. Some

why. The Spirit then said, "That is not your way. Go with the Sun." I was concerned that my teacher would be angry. "But this is perfect," he said. "The Spirits are teaching you. Listen to them. Do what they say." This was one of the most important teachings I ever got from him.

#### THE POWER OF THE RATTLE

I often call the rattle a *power antenna*. Sometimes when I'm standing and calling the Spirits, I feel like a man holding onto a lightning rod as I feel the power flowing through me. Many



The Spirits had obviously responded, so much so that she had lost track of her intention. Her new intention became to control the rattle, rather than receive the power (help) the rattle was trying to give her. It turned into a wrestling

match, and the Spirits 'won'! I got a note from her a month later, "I've made four rattles since the course, and they all work!"

There was a second important teaching for her in that experience: All that exists is alive. The true power of the rattle is in its Spirit. Learning to work with the rattle is learning to listen to its Spirit. For me, the rattle is not a tool – it is an ally.

#### LISTENING TO THE SPIRIT OF THE RATTLE

In the beginning, working with the rattle can be an exercise in exceeding your boundaries, or as don Juan<sup>1</sup> used to say, in losing self importance.

The first time you stand alone in your home or in the forest with a rattle and think "Now I'm supposed to call the Spirits?!?" it can be that you feel a little foolish, embarrassed maybe. This feeling generally disappears after the second or third shake of the rattle.

For most of us it doesn't take long before we find it's not only empowering, but also exhilarating. But the work of the shaman is not just to experience the ecstasy of contacting the Spirits. The work of the shaman is to step through the door of that ecstasy into the world of the Spirits to find the wisdom, the power, the help she needs to do her job in the physical world.

This means that one must learn to listen to the voice of the rattle. The rattle, like everything else, is alive, and it is trying to tell you something. Listen! But don't only listen with your ears. Listen with your entire being.

In our attempts to understand, we, in the western world, have broken everything down into classification systems. We label everything. Admittedly, this can be very helpful, but the side effect is that what is too



of the Spirits like to dance, and so I dance. And all the time, the rattle brings me closer to the Spirits, and brings the Spirits closer to me.

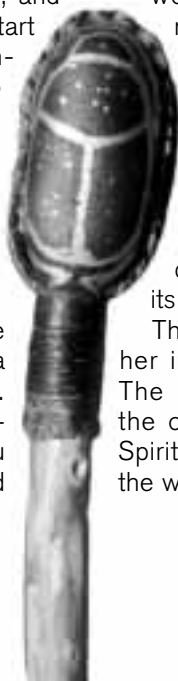
The directions one uses are different from culture to culture, and from one person to another. I start in the East, and then go Sun-wise around the circle, first to the South, then West, North and back to East, closing the circle.

My first teacher of shamanism also started in the East, but then he went to the North and around that way. He had learned from the Native Americans of the Northwest Coast. Trying to be a good student, I followed his lead. But one day, one of my Spirit-helpers asked me, "Why do you go around in that direction?" I told

people have this experience.

On one group I was teaching there was a woman who hadn't brought a rattle with her. "I felt foolish going to buy a rattle," she said. So I loaned her a rattle I had made. I noticed as we were all standing in a circle, rattling and singing, that she was very active, in fact her rattle-arm was flying all around her head and body, down to her feet and up again. Afterwards she said. "I have a complaint. The rattle wouldn't do what I wanted it to do! It was like it had a mind of its own!"

There was a good teaching for her in that experience: intention. The reason we were standing in the circle singing was to call our Spirit-helpers to ask for help with the weekend.



sensitive to be measured and classified is reduced in importance until it seems to disappear.

The soul has been reduced to five (or six) separate senses. Hearing is just one of them. But when  
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listen to the rattle you must recombine all of your senses. Ask your rattle to help you, and then open your self to the help that comes. Opening yourself to that help is perhaps the most difficult task of all.

Most of us want to control our lives. We think that as long as we are in control everything will be all right. We have invented the myth of security to make ourselves feel better, as if feeling better is an end unto itself. However, the way the shaman works is to surrender to the Spirits. When you surrender to the Spirits, you fill yourself with their power. You may or may not be able to control the situation, but you will be able to face it in a power-filled way.

#### THE RATTLE AS HEALER

After becoming friends with your rattle, you will find that it has many aspects. The healing power of the rattle is one of them. This was shown to me in an experience many years ago.

A woman contacted me because she was 'blocked'. Could I help her to open these blockages? Blockages was not a term in my shamanic diagnostic vocabulary at the time. I had no idea what she was talking about, but I trusted that my Spirits would know what was going on. So I replied that I didn't know if I could help her, but why not come over and we'd see what we could do.

When I asked my Spirits,

they said "Use your rattle." So after calling to the Spirits I began to rattle over her body. She began to shake, more and more violently, and then to convulse. The part of me that was in ordinary reality began to be quite alarmed. I asked my Spirits what was going on, and was told to shut up, pay attention, and keep rattling. Finally with a roaring-barking sound, she heaved one final huge convulsion and something left her

body, flying out of her mouth, and out the opened window.

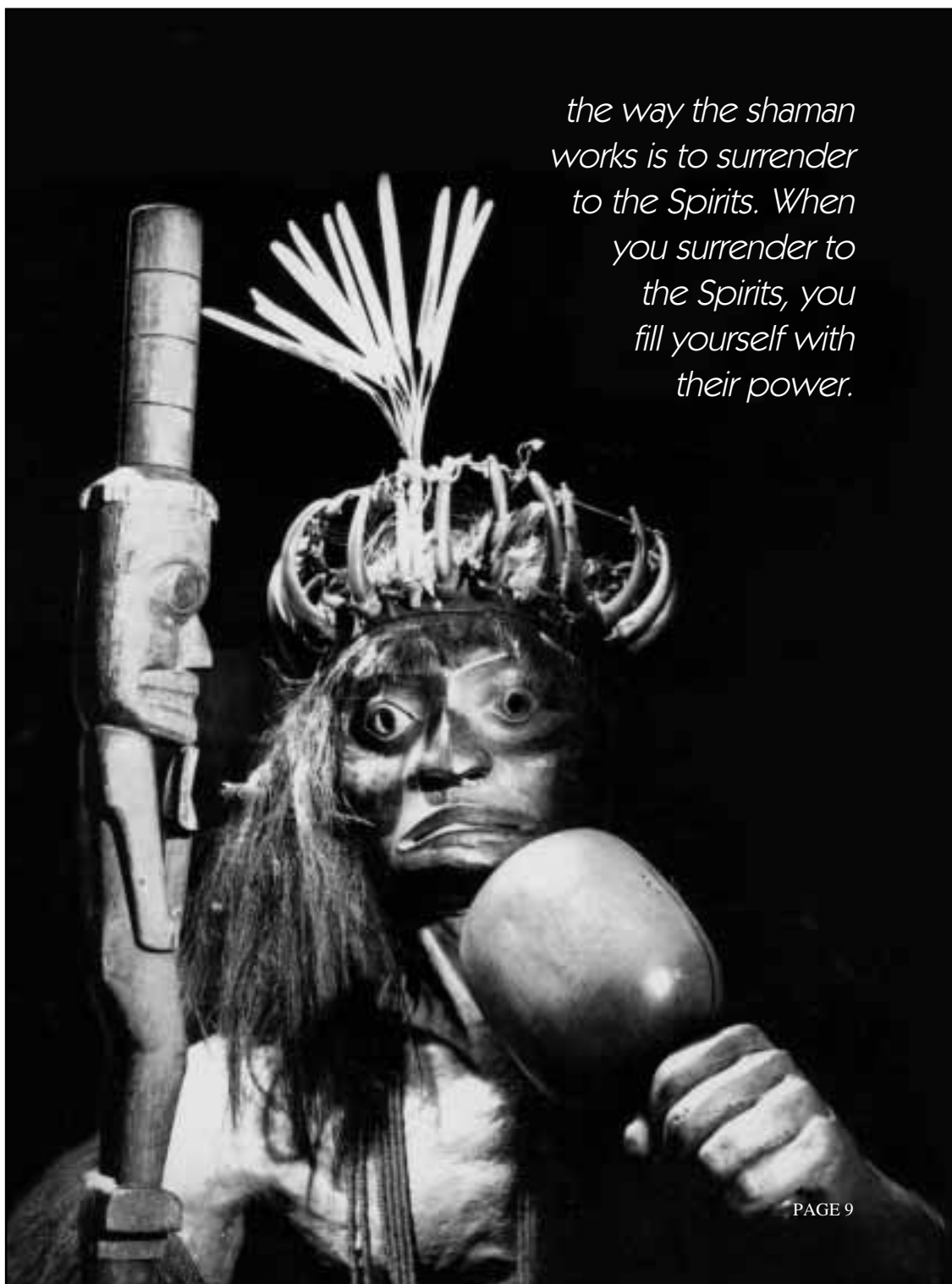
She sighed a sigh of relief and asked me what I'd done. I quite honestly replied that I just shook the rattle and it took care of the rest.

As the years have gone by, I have relied more and more heavily on the rattle. I have learned from the rattle that it is excellent for doing diagnostic work, for opening up areas where energy is blocked, for re-establishing energy flow, and for helping to remove inappropriate energy.

#### SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

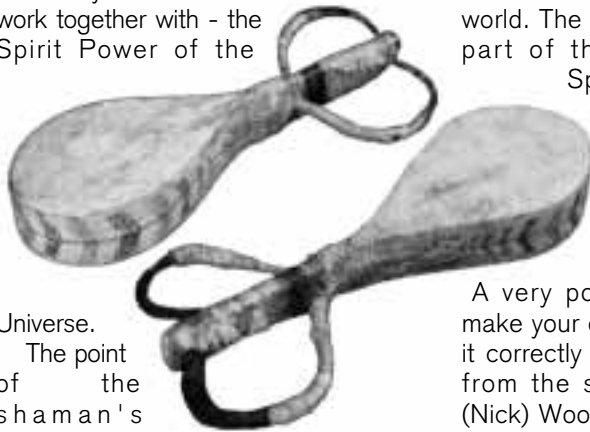
One idea I often hear from people goes like this: 'A big drum (rattle, crystal, etc.) is a powerful one, and

*the way the shaman works is to surrender to the Spirits. When you surrender to the Spirits, you fill yourself with their power.*



more powerful than a little one.' I have also seen people become dependant on their power objects, for example, 'I can't do a soul-retrieval without my eagle-feather.'

To my understanding, shamanism is a spiritual practice which enables one to directly contact - and work together with - the Spirit Power of the



Universe.

The point of the shaman's work is to bring the power of the Spirit World to the material world, and to let that power flow through him. The more the power of the Spirits flows through the shaman, the more powerful she becomes, as long as the power is handled in a proper way.

The Spirit



Power of a rattle, drum, or any other power object, has nothing to do with it's physical size, it has to do with the power of its Spirit. The real power objects in shamanic practice do not exist in the physical world. The most important part of the rattle is its Spirit. You can call it to you, even if you've left the rattle at home.

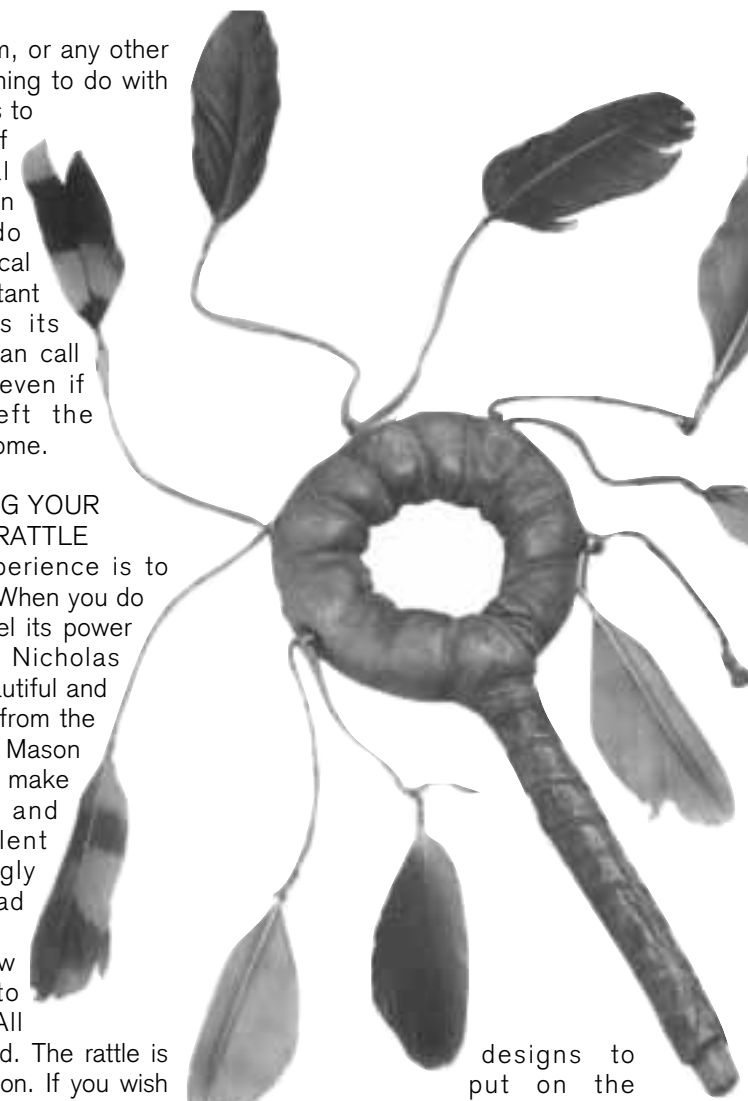
#### MAKING YOUR OWN RATTLE

A very powerful experience is to make your own rattle. When you do it correctly you can feel its power from the start. Both Nicholas (Nick) Wood in his beautiful and inspiring book 'Voices from the Earth', and Bernard S. Mason in his classic 'How to make Drums, Tom-Toms, and Rattles', give excellent instructions. I strongly suggest that you read these before you start.

But there are a few points I would like to emphasise here. All

Creation is sacred. The rattle is no exception. If you wish to make a rattle, it could be a very good idea to ask your Spirit-helpers for help. Tell them that you want to make a rattle to help you to, for example, honour them, or to do healing work, or to communicate with the Spirits of Nature, or to mark a special passage in your life, or as a gift for someone else.

Listen to what they say. Perhaps they will tell you what materials to use, what stones or objects to put inside,

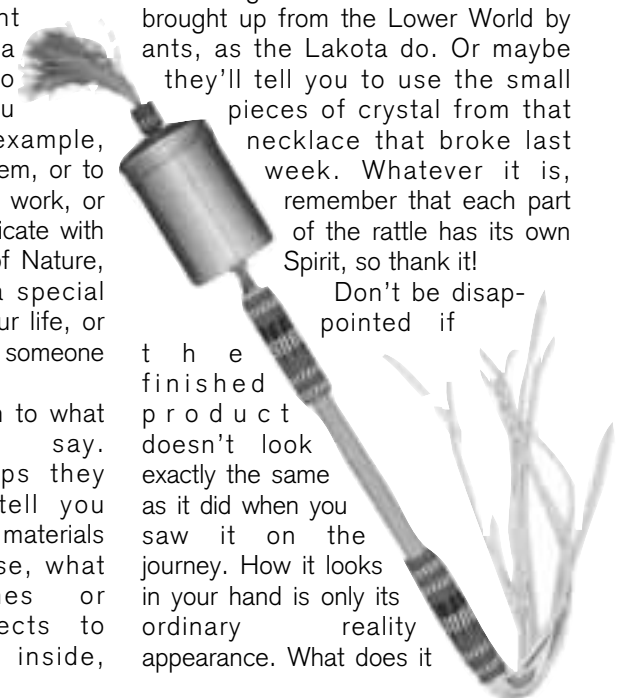


designs to put on the outside, what wood or other material to use for the handle. The possibilities are endless.

Let the Spirits decide and do what they say. Maybe they'll want you to go out and get the small white stones brought up from the Lower World by ants, as the Lakota do. Or maybe they'll tell you to use the small pieces of crystal from that necklace that broke last week. Whatever it is, remember that each part of the rattle has its own Spirit, so thank it!

Don't be disappointed if

the finished product doesn't look exactly the same as it did when you saw it on the journey. How it looks in your hand is only its ordinary reality appearance. What does it



look like when you take it on a journey to your Spirits to present it to them? How do they receive it? How does it 'work'?

These are the things which are important. If it is a gift to someone else, your Spirits may even tell you what words to say as you present it.

By making your own rattle you will find that you quickly come into contact with its Spirit, and you will be able to start learning from it right away. The 'initiation' (i.e., starting) of the rattle happens when you first use it to call to the Spirits and then journey with it to your Spirit helpers and teachers to show it to them. Then you yourself will become initiated to its being and use. In all probability, at this time you will meet the Spirit of the Rattle you are holding in your hand.

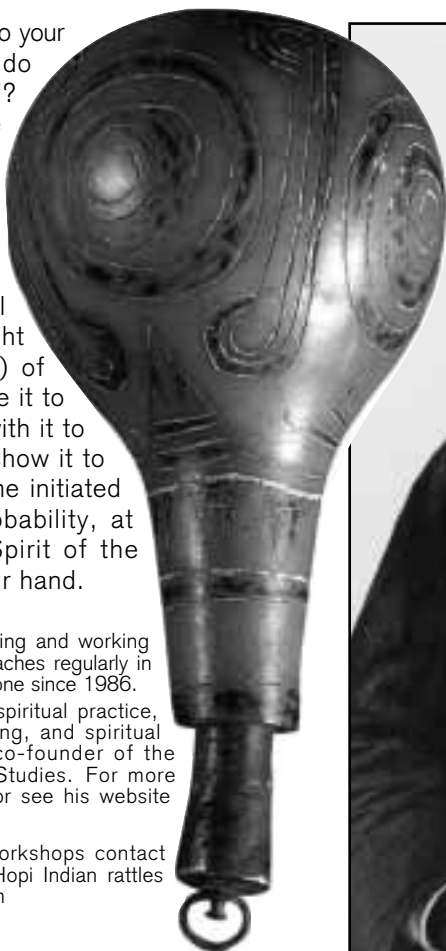
Jonathan Horwitz has been studying and working with shamanism since 1972. He teaches regularly in England (see the advert in this issue) and had done since 1986.

His main interests are shamanism as a spiritual practice, shamanic healing, shamanic counselling, and spiritual ecology. With Annette Høst he is co-founder of the Scandinavian Center for Shamanic Studies. For more information ring (020) 8459 3028 or see his website [www.shamanism.dk](http://www.shamanism.dk)

For information on rattle-making workshops contact Kathy Fried (020) 8459 3028. For Hopi Indian rattles direct from the Hopi see: [www.hopimarket.com](http://www.hopimarket.com)

REFERENCES:

Nicholas Wood, 'Voices of the Earth - A Handbook for the Modern Shaman'. Godsfield Press. ISBN 1 84181 015 0. Signed copies available directly from Sacred Hoop - see the back cover for details.  
Bernard S. Mason, 'How to Make Drums, Tom-Toms, and Rattles'. Dover Press. ISBN 0 486 21889 9

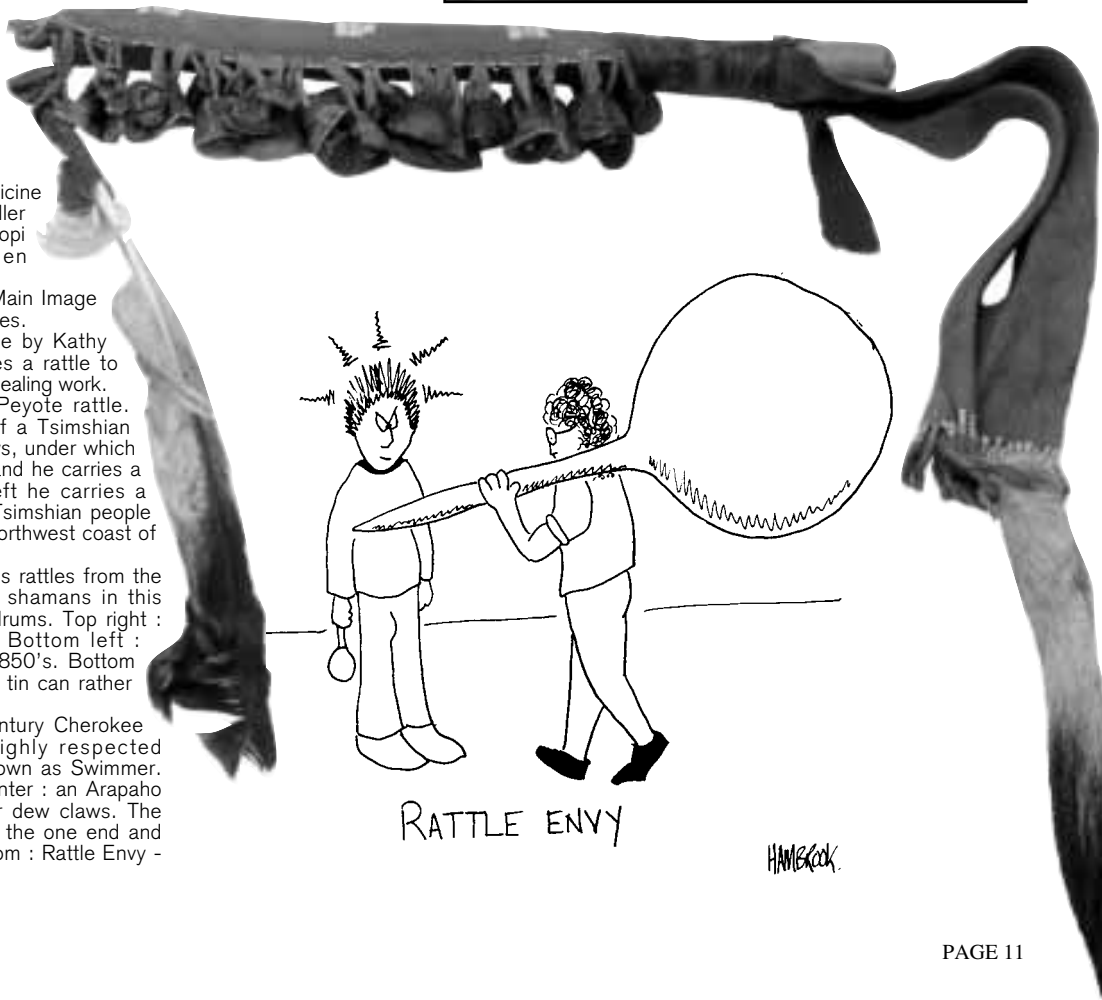


NOTES:

1 : don Juan is the legendary shamanic teacher of Carlos Castaneda in the many books by the author.

IMAGES:

Page 6 - Main image : Rawhide medicine rattle made by Nicholas Wood. Smaller Images from top to bottom : Two Hopi Gourd Rattles and carved wooden Haida Raven Rattle.  
Page 7 - Top : Jonathan Horwitz. Main Image : Hopi Dancers dance with their rattles.  
Page 8 - top: Rawhide rattle made by Kathy Fried. Main Image : Jonathan uses a rattle to diagnose a client who has asked for healing work.  
Page 9 - top: Comanche Gourd Peyote rattle. Bottom : The healing equipment of a Tsimshian Shaman. Crown of grizzly bear claws, under which is worn a ritual mask. In his right hand he carries a carved wooden staff and in his left he carries a carved wooden healing rattle. The Tsimshian people live next door to the Haida on the Northwest coast of the USA.  
Page 10 - top left : Pair of women's rattles from the Siberian Orochen people. Women shamans in this tribe often used rattles instead of drums. Top right : Lakota rawhide doughnut rattle. Bottom left : Rawhide Arapaho rattle from the 1850's. Bottom right : Modern Peyote rattle with a tin can rather than the more traditional gourd.  
This page top left : Early 19th Century Cherokee Gourd rattle. Top right : The highly respected Cherokee holyman Ayyuini, also known as Swimmer. He holds a gourd healing rattle. Center : an Arapaho Dog Society rattle made from deer dew claws. The rattle has an ermine tail hanging at the one end and an eagle feather at the other. Bottom : Rattle Envy - a cartoon by John Hanbrooke.



RATTLE ENVY

HAMBROCK