

Cosmo-genesis or Transformation of the Human Body into a Cosmic Body in Yanomami Shamanistic Initiation

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The main aim of shamanistic initiation among the Yanomami people of the Upper Orinoco River region in Venezuela is the metamorphosis of the human body into a Cosmic Body, the “corporeal cosmo-genesis.” During the initiation, the neophyte undergoes an experience of death and rebirth, becomes simultaneously an individual living spirit and a “collection” of spirits who move into his body and become his personal allies and sources of power while at the same time imbuing the shaman’s post mortem ego with certain holographic properties. The fusion of body and cosmos is manifested on two levels (1) The micro-cosmic level whereby the shaman’s body becomes a micro-replica of the Yanomami universe, and (2) The macro-cosmic level whereby the candidate’s ego-consciousness expands and becomes unified with the external dimensionality of the macrocosm.

Introduction

In its essence, shamanism can be characterized as a system of different modalities of the transformed ego-consciousness which defines reality and presupposes one of reality. It is arguably a category that describes a variety of interrelated practices, beliefs and traditions that focus especially on trance or ecstasy and the shamans’ specific relationship with their helping spirits. Among the Yanomami *shapori* (shamans) from the Upper Orinoco River region, the established mechanism for initiation and the subsequent *modus operandi* for the alteration of consciousness, the mastery of ecstatic trance, and the contact with spirits, is through the use of psychotropic snuff powder, locally known as *epena* or *yopo*. The snuff is not only a powerful psychoactive substance which aids the shaman to establishing contact with the spirits but it is conceived by the

shapori as a food for the spirits, who enjoy getting intoxicated along with their master. Past analyses of shamanism mainly focused on describing the mechanism of this process of alteration of consciousness through the rupture from its normal mode during the initiation and later practices. While this mechanism is generally known and described, to date there has been a paucity of information regarding a further systematic exploration of the nature of consciousness associated with shamanism. For this reason, I made this the main objective of my ethnographic research. The resulting doctoral dissertation focuses essentially on experiential and phenomenological aspects of Yanomami shamanism, shamans' roles, activities, their socio-cosmic position, and their changing role in the context of cultural change, especially their attitudes and responses towards introduced diseases (and the corresponding new forms of treatment) which have resulted in a terminal imbalance in Yanomami life-world. My specific focus is on shamanistic initiation, the gradual mastery of the trance state, shamans' shape-shifting abilities, and on methods of further expansion of shamans' personal powers through the acquisition of new spirits as well as the nature of shamanistic engagement with the spirits in both ritual and non-ritual contexts and at both the intra-communal and inter-communal levels.

The ethnographic fieldwork for this research project was carried out during 1999–2000 in two Yanomami villages situated in the Upper Orinoco region.¹ During the first six months I was based in the community of Mahekoto-theri situated in Platanal, a Salesian Catholic mission established on the right bank of the Upper Orinoco River, approximately a one and a half hour journey upriver by boat from the Mavaca mission, and three hours from the mission in Ocamo. The second half of my fieldwork was spent in Sheroana-theri, a small community of 29 people linked through kinship ties with the Mahekoto-theri, whose village is situated on the left bank of the Shanishani River, one of Orinoco's numerous smaller tributaries, approximately eight hours on foot from the Orinoco River. While I was living with the Sheroana-theri I

¹ This project was made possible through my affiliation with the School of Anthropology at the Central University of Caracas (UCV), under the external supervision of Dr. Daisy Barreto. Furthermore, I was affiliated with the Amazonian Centre for Investigation and Control of Tropical Diseases: *Centro Amazonico para Investigación y Control de Enfermedades Tropicales* (CAICET), the institution which provided me with the logistical help that enabled the realisation of my project.

have had an opportunity to observe and participate in a shamanistic initiation of a young candidate from this community and monitor his further progress in the ensuing months. During this time, I was adopted by the Ruweweriwë, the Sheroana-theri master shaman, who eventually initiated me as a shaman.

In this paper, I will describe the main components of the process of “corporeal cosmo-genesis” or metamorphosis of the human body into a Cosmic Body in the Yanomami shamanistic initiation (*hekura prai*). During an initiatory ordeal the interiority of the neophyte’s body is fused with the external dimensionality of the Yanomami cosmos through the medium of shaman’s transformed post mortem ego which contains certain properties that can best be described in holographic terms. Thus, the ensuing analysis of the initiation essentially focuses on the relationship between the body and the world or micro and macro dimensions of human existence. More specifically, the relationship between the Yanomami macrocosm (world body as a primal totality) and microcosm (shaman’s body) will be articulated through a dynamics between the whole and the part.

I will begin with the representation of the Yanomami macro-cosmos as a fragmented holographic multi-layered totality consisting of a number of separate but inter-connected celestial and terrestrial cosmic discs which together form one bounded cosmic whole, perceived by the Yanomami as a cosmic boa. Although these cosmic discs exist separately as parts of an overall cosmic whole, at the same time they are a certain kind of wholes in themselves as each disc represents a different condition of the same whole or cosmic boa. This is reflected in names of each respective disc. “When a whole is subdivided, it is split into holographs of itself.” (Wagner 1991: 167) Both celestial and terrestrial realms are mirroring each other and together they constitute the primal totality which I will call the “World Body,” or the “Cosmic Body.” These are alternative terms for the classical idea of the macro-cosmos.

Explicit knowledge of representations of the Yanomami macro-cosmos is generated implicitly through the lived experience of the shamanistic initiation and the “construction” of the shaman’s corporeal micro-cosmos (*imago mundi*), or Cosmic body, which itself is a replica of the Yanomami macro-cosmos. The first complete manifestation of the cosmos *qua* the shaman’s body during initiation occurs after the neophyte experiences death and enters his first trance state which is, in fact, his re-experience of death. Precisely at this moment, his body is speckled

with dots, a pattern which resembles boa's markings. The body, in this sense, becomes a medium for manifestation of a larger structure of the Yanomami cosmos. I will argue that only through mediation of the shaman's body will the earth and sky converge and the cosmos fully manifest itself as the physical features of the Yanomami life-world intersect with the invisible world of *hekura* spirits. Therefore, in continuation, I will summarize the process of initiation and explore the horizon of the Cosmic Body as the experiential realm which opens-up during the shamanistic initiation.

To the extent that the structure of the Yanomami macro-cosmos is holographic in its nature, I will also argue that the structure of shaman's post mortem ego contains certain holographic properties. In other words, the shaman's transformed consciousness brought about through the influx of *hekura* spirits during the initiation, results in the manifestation of the all-encompassing ego which is, in relation to the embodied (transformed) *hekura*, a whole with its parts. More specifically, through the initiation the shaman acquires a number of spirit-helpers who together form the basis of a new egoic consciousness. But, while he is one whole cosmic system he is also a part of that system as he becomes an individual *hekura* spirit. In sum, each *shapori* becomes simultaneously a single *hekura* and a separate cosmic system of personal *hekura* grouped together.

Finally, the enclosed dimensions of existence as revealed through my analysis of shamanistic initiation are not the result of my own interpretation or adherence to certain ontological views. They are treated as empirical realities of human consciousness—like the reality of cosmos. I use holography, not as an intellectual conception, alternative viewpoint or a theoretical construction. Nor is holography something that forms the basis of the Yanomami worldview. It is an analytical tool and a particular “mode of understanding” (Wagner 1991: 170) of the world.

Yanomami Cosmos as a Holographic Totality: The Dynamic Between the “Whole” and its “Part”

The totality of the Yanomami multi-layered cosmos is enclosed within an abdomen of a giant cosmic boa (*hetu misi*). In the Yanomami language, *hetu* means ‘boa constrictor’ and the suffix *misi*, attached to the

name of each separate cosmic disc, signifies ‘abdomen’ (Lizot 1999). The skin of the cosmic snake is a membrane which sets the limits of the Yanomami-known universe. If one applies the notion of hologram² to the totality of the Yanomami cosmos, it can be described as one holographic whole, consisting of three to five separate but inter-related parts or cosmic discs³ positioned on top of each other along the vertical cosmic axis, forming together one cosmic totality. All cosmic discs exist in their own right but they are directly interconnected with each other so that the bottom surface of each disc becomes the top surface of the one below. Although these cosmic discs together form a part of the whole cosmic totality, they are at the same time a certain kind of whole in themselves. Each separate layer is a world in itself with its proper name and with its own horizontal dimensionality limited by the top and bottom surfaces of each layer. Each disc represents different structural part or changing conditions of the cosmic whole as a set of different stages from new to old and from male to female. The uppermost layer is young cosmos in its genesis (*oshe*), while the farthest down is described as an old woman (*hetu misi suwë pata*). In sum, each cosmic disc is part of a fragmented totality which replicates this whole as a state of the cosmos or condition of the cosmic boa’s abdomen. The image of a cosmic snake, as we can see, is an image of a closed universe, a bounded whole which represents the totality of existence

² The term ‘hologram’ derives from the Greek *holos* meaning ‘whole.’ The basic premise of a holographic worldview postulates that the ‘whole’ is contained within each of its constitutive parts, or, in other words, each part is equal to the ‘whole.’ Holography is a special type of three-dimensional, lens less photography, invented by Nobel Prize winner Dennis Gabor in 1971. Gabor used holographic film which contains interference pattern of chaotic light signatures or a hologram. Each illuminated piece of this image-pattern produces the whole three-dimensional, original image. In other words, each part of a hologram has the potential to reproduce the original image. Pribram (1981) identifies the basic principles of holography in his neurological research of the interaction between the brain, visual cortex and memory system. By examining the interaction between vision or perception and previously stored memories, he discovered that they collide with each other and create certain “interference patterns”—holographic in their nature—between visual input of image reception and expectation (Hampden-Turner 1982: 94). He concludes (a) that memory is stored in the brain in a holographic manner, and (b) human brain is a hologram, because in the case of brain damage, brain will continue to store the totality of personal memory.

³ I am indebted to Dr. Jadran Mimica from the University of Sydney for his clarification of this holographic conception of the Yanomami cosmos.

in past, present and future. In fact, through the shamanistic initiation described below, this mythic image of a cosmic boa fully manifests itself through the medium of shaman's body as a micro-cosmic totality bounded by the shaman's skin, which is accordingly dotted in the manner that resembles the pattern on the snake.

Yanomami Shamanistic Initiation: a Brief Summary

Shapori and *hekura* are synonyms for the Yanomami equivalent of shaman: the latter term (*hekura*) also means the 'spirit.' The shaman is correspondingly perceived by non-initiated Yanomami as something other than a human being; he is a living spirit in the flesh. With regards to the first term, in the Yanomami language, the common root *shapo-* as in *shapori* and *shapono*, refers to its character of domesticity (Lizot 1999: 38). In other words, *shapono*, a Yanomami communal house, is a domesticated cultured human space while *shapori* is a collection of domesticated *hekura*. *Hekura*, on the other hand, is the term used when referring to spirit-helpers as parts of the shaman as a whole. I suggest that the distinction drawn between *shapori* and *hekura* is in some way misleading because when a person is initiated and becomes a *shapori* he is also a *hekura*. *Shapori* refers to a person who has been initiated, has lost his human components, and has become immortal *hekura*.

In effect, an adjective *pra-* as in *hekura prai*, which literary means 'to initiate somebody as a shaman,' indicates the idea of transformation, change of the nature, the state or the form. Thus, the Yanomami term for shamanistic initiation *hekura prai* can be translated as the "metamorphosis of a human being into a *hekura* spirit," or human body into a Cosmic Body ("corporeal cosmo-genesis"). Essentially, during the initiation, certain *hekura* spirits, by virtue of being attracted to the sounds of the neophyte's calling and lip vibration, leave their natural habitat—the mountain tops and the forest—and move into the neophyte's body which now becomes their abode. For the duration of this process, the neophyte undergoes an intense experience of death through dismemberment by the spirits, and subsequent re-birth as *hekura* (living spirit). The whole experience of death by the incoming spirits, in fact, consists of a series of quasi-death experiences, before the major death experience, as the neophyte is cut with a machete, torn apart by the jaguar, consumed alive by fire and pierced with an arrow. As the candidate sacrifices his soul

and humanness to the spirits, the latter become his personal allies and sources of power while at the same time imbuing the shaman's post mortem ego with certain holographic properties. More specifically, through experiences of death and rebirth, the shaman overcomes the human condition, becoming simultaneously an individual living *hekura* spirit and a "collection" of other *hekura*.

To the extent that the process of initiation involves the incarnation of numerous spirits, concurrently, the further fusion of body and cosmos is accomplished through an ordered succession of acts of embodiment of the distinctive body-structural components such as the two head-crowns of light (*watoshe*), two toucan wings (*hoko*), the path of spirits (*pei yo*), spirit-house (*shapono*), and Cosmic Mountain (*pei maki*). The shaman's body in this way becomes a micro-replica of the Yanomami universe, with macrocosmic manifestation of the neophyte's ego-consciousness which undergoes radical transformation of self-perception and mode of being as it slips out of its usual body-self boundaries and expands into a cosmic, all-encompassing open mode, thus becoming unified with the external dimensionality of the macrocosm.

The Techniques of Spirit-calling and Mechanism of their Embodiment: Day-by-Day Description of the Process

The initiation unfolds under one specific section of the *shapono's* roof. The complete initiatory ordeal can last up to a month, during which time the neophyte receives large quantities of ready-made psychotropic powder and calls on the *hekura* spirits to come. The initiation develops as a form of dialogue between the master *shapori* (shaman), the embodied *hekura* spirits, and the neophyte. There are about four to five daily rounds, or cycles of embodiment, each one lasting approximately an hour. The first round starts just after sunrise when the morning mist lifts: the last one terminates when the sun is very low in the sky. Upon the completion of each individual round, the neophyte crawls back slowly to his hammock—still facing the same direction—then lies down on his back looking upwards. He rests in this position until the next round and does not talk to anyone.

On the first day of initiation, the neophyte's entire body is covered with circles painted with red ochre. A pair of armbands, made from the skin

of a curassow bird, is placed around his upper-arms; while the bird's white down is distributed all over his freshly-cut hair. He is seated under the roof in a classic initiatory body posture with his legs spread wide on the ground, his back straight, his abdomen contracted, his chest exposed, and with both arms behind him, pressing against the ground. Simultaneously great quantities of psychotropic powder are blown into the neophyte's nostrils: he starts vibrating his lips making a specific sound, a call which attracts the spirits, who soon start coming from all directions, attracted by the calling chants and the characteristic lip-vibrating sound (pl. 4 *a*). The master shaman simultaneously goes to the village central area and starts singing, in this way inviting the spirits to come and enter his body first, before conveying them to the neophyte. Upon capturing and embodying each individual spirit the shaman traverses the path back towards the neophyte and transfers the spirits directly into his body. After that, the master shaman retraces his steps and repeats the process.

On the second day, the master shaman and his helper embody the path of *hekura* (*pei yo*) as the first major structural item of the new embodiment. The embodied path of the spirits is described as a "path of light," dispersing into all the colors of the rainbow along which spirits come dancing towards the neophyte, fluttering and reeling in ecstasy, like a cloud of butterflies. The spirit-path is positioned in the body, with both edges starting from the big toes going along the sides of the legs, and terminating close to the chest on both sides of the ribcage. The path unfolds between the legs and terminates in the chest where the spirit-house will be embodied.

On the third day the neophyte undergoes his first experience of quasi-death by machete. But before that, in the morning, the master first incorporates Oiriwë or fire *hekura*. For this occasion, the master shaman places a basket over his own head and starts waddling towards the neophyte, who in turn starts screaming and panicking. When I asked him later to describe his experience, he replied that the "fire-front" was advancing towards him; the fire engulfing him was extremely hot and he lost consciousness.

At noon, Hetureimawë (spirit of boa constrictor) comes with a machete in his hands, to kill the neophyte by cutting him in half (pl. 4 *b*). As he slowly approaches, the intensity of the neophyte's singing increases, interrupted only by sporadic screams. When the boa-spirit swings his machete inches from neophyte's face, the latter drops down instantly and remains motionless for some time, with arms and legs

outstretched. Later, the neophyte described the experience of cutting as a “kind of explosion of consciousness,” comparable to a lightning strike. He also told me that when he dropped to the ground, although he remained conscious, he was unable to move because his body felt very heavy. He reported experiencing a sensation of sinking and dissolving into the ground. He said that while he was lying motionless, it was as if ants were entering his body through his toes and travelling slowly upward inside his legs. At the same time, he said, the earth became alive, “as if many fingers were touching him from below.”

In the afternoon of the same day, a spirit-house or *shapono*, being another structural body-item, was successfully embodied. The procedure for embodiment of *shapono* was the same as the embodiment of the path the day before, the only difference being that the spirit-path was embodied by the master shaman into the lower part of the neophyte’s body, while the spirit-house was embodied directly into the chest. When the moment of actual embodiment arrives, another man supports the neophyte’s back, holding him from behind in an upright position. The neophyte starts screaming, his upper torso twitching in agony. I asked him afterwards to describe the experience of embodiment and the reason he was screaming. He replied that the newly introduced *shapono* in his chest was very heavy; its presence left him almost breathless. Immediately after the embodiment, the master shaman restored the neophyte’s breath to normal. The latter, however, continues to make gurgling sounds and vomits saliva. He opens his eyes and continues lip-vibrating, calling the spirits and singing to his newly embodied spirit-house (pl. 5 a).

The spirit-embodiment continues in the usual manner and both *shapori* instruct the neophyte to see the spirits’ faces and recognize them. After doing as told, the neophyte bursts out crying, recognizing his father: “*These are my fathers!*” he acknowledges. The master exclaims: “*They are your proper spirits coming to you. They always belonged to you and from now on they are staying with you!*” The *shapori* helper then tells the neophyte how his own *hekura* spirits like him very much. The neophyte replies that he wants his *hekura* to like him very much. “*This comes with time,*” he is told. “*They have to get used to you and your body as their new home. Be patient and respect the rules and they will stay with you for ever.*”

The morning of day four, and the neophyte experiences another death by machete, this time performed by Waikoyariwë, the spirit of anaconda

who brought with him a head-crown of light (*waikoya watoshe*) to put it around the neophyte's head. As the spirit approaches, the neophyte screams and drops to the ground: the spirit swings his machete and dismembers the neophyte's body. The master, however, straight away instructs the unconscious neophyte to heed his voice and not be afraid. The shaman then kneels down in front of the neophyte and starts "opening up" his body with his hands. The *hekura* opens up one leg first, then the other, then the stomach, arms and the neck. The shaman then walks back to the village centre and incorporates the spirit of the inhaling tube whose healing function is to weld the body back together. Holding a tube in his hands, he moves towards the neophyte. The shaman then starts sliding the tube upwards just above the skin, retracing the line of the previous cut. Finally, another *hekura* spirit comes and starts singing into the body along the same lines where the previous operations of cutting and sewing occurred (pl. 5 *b*). After this, the master shaman brings the crown made from palm leaves covered with white down and places it around the neophyte's head (pl. 6 *a*). At the same time the anaconda's spirit crown of light is implanted into the neophyte's structural stratum of his new bodily mode as *hekura* spirit i.e. the initiated *shapori*. Together with the crown, the shaman also embodies a pair of toucan's wings (*hoko*) also made from a palm tree. As an individual (living) *hekura* the shaman will carry a halo of light around his head, the same as those that the *hekura* spirits have around their heads. This light-crown enables him to "see" far away, and inside others' bodies. In addition, the embodied toucan wings will enable the shaman to fly just like the *hekura* fly. These capabilities are non-human qualities. After these key events, the usual *hekura*-embodiment continues until the end of this round and eventually until the end of the day.

On the fifth day the neophyte experiences two further instances of quasi-death. The first was by Wathaperariwë, spirit of "boa tornasol" who arrived adorned with beads and bird feathers dancing and singing with bow and arrow in his hands. He then stood in front of the initiate, placed an arrow in its proper place and pulled the bow-string tight, releasing it immediately with loud noise without letting an arrow go (pl. 6 *b*). The neophyte screamed and dropped on the ground. In the midday round, the neophyte was eaten by Yaoriwë, the *hekura* spirit of an ocelot. For this occasion, the master shaman prepared his own body prior to the act, painting black dots all over it and encircling his entire face with a long piece of white cotton-wool. The shaman takes four

big blows of *epena* powder, starts singing and dancing thus inviting Yaoriwë to come. The feline spirit soon announces his presence, looks towards the seated neophyte and starts walking towards him as the latter continues lip-vibrating and asking the cat to kill him.

As Yaoriwë slowly approaches, wriggling his tongue in the air and with cat-like body movements, (pl. 7 a), the neophyte starts screaming and shouting: “*It’s me! Here I am, I am here.*” The neophyte knows that he will be eaten soon. The master announces that Yaoriwë brought with him many other spirits, who have come with all their possessions, adornments, bows and arrows. These *hekura* are migrating, moving, leaving their *shaponos* in their primordial habitat at the mountain tops (the highest earthly points, and closest to the sky) and moving into the bodily *shapono* of the neophyte, through the path embodied on the second day of the initiation. They take all of their possessions with them in the same way the Yanomami do when they move from one *shapono* to another. The master instructs the neophyte to maintain positive thoughts, or else the spirits will hasten away. Yaoriwë then leaps and attacks the neophyte who drops to the ground: the cat feasts on human flesh while mucus bubbles from the neophyte’s mouth (pl. 7 b). The cat dismembers the body and scatters its parts in all four directions of the cosmos, licking up the remaining blood. Then another spirit arrives and starts putting the new body back together, bones first, followed by the spirit of the inhaling tube sewing the neophyte’s new flesh.

The next morning the neophyte experiences another quasi-death, this time by Irariwë (spirit of Jaguar). This will take place at noon before the ceremonial wooden pole (*pei maki*) is embodied. Jaguar-spirit lives in the forest. In order to bring him to the neophyte, the master has to go outside of the village to find him. After a few moments, Jaguar enters the village: he starts growling and walking towards the neophyte (pl. 8 a). For this occasion, the master *shapori* decorates his body—a cotton ring circles his face, resembling the facial contours of a jaguar. The neophyte quickly realizes that the beast is there to eat him. He panics, screams, and shakes with fear. The jaguar licks his cheeks. The neophyte shouts: “*Bring my bow and arrow to defend myself!*” He simultaneously continues calling with vibrating lips, determined to continue. In the meantime, the people of Sheroana-theri village and especially the neophyte’s family, start crying for him. “*He will finish me off!*” shouts the neophyte, letting out a final agonizing scream; he falls to the ground, swept away by Irariwë’s attack (pl. 8 b). At that moment, the drug, mixed with

saliva, literally bursts out of his mouth and nose. Then comes Jaguar's feast, who starts eating the neophyte's body piece by piece and licks the blood. As he dismembers the neophyte's body, he scatters the latter's arms, legs, head and trunk in all four directions of the cosmos. After the neophyte's new body is re-constituted and he is again seated, Jaguar-spirit places the head-crown around the neophyte's head: the latter continues to sing and look towards the sky (pl. 9 *a*). The head-crown or halo of white light, in this way becomes a constitutive component of the new *hekura's* body. The Jaguar-spirit informs the neophyte that the crown gives him the ability to see into the distance.

Embodiment of the *Pei Maki*: the Moment of Separation from the Master

Finally, the most important day of initiation has arrived: the embodiment of the ceremonial pole which carries within it a spirit-mountain to be embodied into the neophyte's chest. The pole was brought to the neophyte by the master shaman and his assistant. Immediately before the embodiment, the neophyte sings, complaining that the pole/mountain (*pei maki*) is heavy and affects his breathing. His voice starts intensifying. Finally, when the pole is rammed into the earth between his legs, the neophyte screams in agony; the lingering sound gradually dissolves into the air. At the same time his upper torso is supported from the back by a Yanomami helper. After the moment of embodiment, the neophyte looks up towards the top of the pole, starts repeating the text after the master, and vibrating his lips thus calling the spirits to come. Later the neophyte said that at the moment of embodiment his breath came down to his belly: the throat area was very tight and he could hardly breathe. The shaman soon restored his breath to normal by "lifting it back into the chest area." He also said that when he looked up the pole, he saw a (spiritual) mountain that closely resembled the nearby Sheroana Mountain, and was accompanied by many spirits. When the pole was fixed, they started pouring directly into his body (pl. 9 *b*). Entering the pole first, the spirits sank down along its axis then entered the neophyte's body through his big toes. He described the experience of incoming *hekura* as "children lined up behind each other making a long thread." They were, according to him, the size of the tip of the finger.

Contemplation of the Pole (Ethnographer's Personal Experience)

The following is my own personal experience of the contemplation of the pole after it was lodged between my legs. Experientially, there is no separation of space between the ego and the pole. The two merge into one with the newly emerged sense of space. The pole itself appears huge, stretching from one extreme of the cosmos to the other. It is *axis mundi*, which connects all spheres of the universe. In the middle of the pole there is a layer of green parrot feathers, symbolizing this earthly level or the rainforest where Jaguar-spirit lives. After the embodiment, my consciousness became "alive" as the forest opened up and I transformed into a jaguar. The green feathers in the middle of the pole ceased to be simply feathers: they transformed into green forest foliage, moving in flux and producing "a feeling" for the forest and its dangers. The top of the pole represents the top of the cosmic mountain which extends to the sky. Positioned near the top is a crown made of black and white bird feathers, which symbolizes the sky and day and night cycles. This is the place where the celestial *hekura* live. Moving downwards, the pole extends deep into subterranean levels, a cold place of rotten matter and humidity and home to the Amahiri-theri—Yanomami mythological ancestors. Experientially the pole becomes equal to an opening which stretches horizontally. The white down glued to the pole represents the numerous *hekura* who stay in their new house. The pole covered with down thus becomes the equivalent of the mountain full of spirits, which is located inside the neophyte's chest.

Post *Pei Maki* Stage of Initiation

After *pei maki* is embodied, the master ceases to be directly involved in the initiation process, no longer a link between the neophyte and the cosmos. The neophyte enters the second stage of the initiation, calling spirits without the master's direct involvement. From that moment onwards, the spirits come in masses and stay permanently as a part of the neophyte's new body-*hekura* system. As the neophyte looks up towards the top of the *pei maki* pole and starts lip-vibrating and sing-

ing, *hekura* start coming towards the pole. They enter through the top of the pole and at the same time they make contact with his body.

After three days, the wooden pole is removed. It is taken into the forest and left there, affixed to the trunk of a big tree; from then on, the neophyte remains fixed in the horizontal position and continues calling the spirits but without the physical presence of the pole. He no longer looks up: he now looks straight ahead during the chanting. The pole is no longer necessary because the mountain remains in his body: spirits continue coming directly into the body-mountain. This process eventually culminates in the death and total fragmentation of the ego, including temporal loss of identity, followed by the total transformation of the shaman's post mortem, ego-bound consciousness and the constitution of the new mode of *hekura*-being.⁴ The re-birth of the new cosmic selfhood marks the metamorphosis of the human into *hekura*. After the death experience, the neophyte's body is carefully washed with lukewarm water for the first time since the beginning of the initiation. It is then painted with brown dots. (pl. 10 a).

On the eleventh day of the initiation, the *shapori* embodies the final structural features of the new *shapori*'s body—hammocks (*yii*) for the *hekura* to rest in just as the Yanomami do in everyday life. Each spirit-hammock is individually implanted by the master shaman waving his index finger in short, oscillating movements from left to right as he slowly makes his way alongside the neophyte's body. At the end of the round I counted in total 127 hammocks, evenly distributed throughout the whole of neophyte's body. The master shaman later clarified that there are as many individual hammocks as there are embodied *hekura*. Each embodied spirit is assigned his or her own hammock. At the end of this round, the master shaman encircled each of the neophyte's shoulders with his index finger a few times, not unlike tying a rope. The neophyte later explained the meaning of this final act: the *shapori* placed two large hammocks designated for the sky-*hekura* (*hetu misi*: snake's abdomen) on each side of the neophyte's head, starting just behind his ears and extending vertically downwards. Finally, at the very end, he made two circles with the thumbs and index fingers of both of his hands and placed them around the initiate's eyes. He then

⁴ For detailed description and analysis of my own experience of initiatory death and re-birth, see Jokić (2003: 195).

looked straight at him and emitted a very loud, high-pitched sound, saying *perip/mothoka* (sun/moon). Later I was told that the sun and moon are positioned in the same place as the initiate's eyes.

Continual chanting and calling of spirits eventually leads to further expansion and "stretching" of the neophyte's consciousness until it culminates in another rupture. When this occurs, the neophyte effectively enters his first trance state, which is at the same time a re-experience of death. But this time it is less turbulent. When the moment of the first trance/death state arrives, the *shapori* can not sustain a stable differentiation between himself, others around him, the *shapono*, and the rest of the universe. For him, in fact, the inside and outside dimensionality is dominated by a sense of oneness and unity. There is nothing beyond him for he is all there is—the manifestation of whole. At that very moment, the neophyte's body is carefully re-washed with lukewarm water and re-speckled with dots. He also dons armbands made of curassow bird feathers. White down is again spread all over freshly cut hair, as it was at the beginning of the initiation. The body is decorated and dotted with ochre, a pattern which resembles boa's markings: during initiation it becomes the cosmic boa, as the shaman becomes the body of the world. After that, the neophyte stands up and starts singing thus taking his first independent steps of shamanistic practice with the help of the master *shapori* who takes him by the hand for his very first walk (pl. 10 b).

The Bodily Microcosm:

Cosmic Body as a Replica of the Macrocosm

By the end of the first two weeks of initiation, the neophyte's body has completely transformed and become a micro-model of the Yanomami universe (*imago mundi*). The upper parts of the body (head and shoulders) are where the sky *hekura* are suspended on each side of the head, with the sky-hammocks extending from the bottom of each ear down towards the shoulders. Eyes mark the spot where the sun and moon *hekura* are positioned. The middle area (the chest) is where the Cosmic Mountain is planted. The top of the Cosmic Mountain terminates approximately in the base of the neck, which is also the place to which the bottom ends of the sky hammocks are tied, and where the sky *hekura* are suspended. The base of the neck is the place where the top of the

Cosmic Mountain meets the low part of the embodied sky. The lower part of the middle area (the rib-cage) is where the base of the Cosmic Mountain is situated. The *shapono* is positioned next to the base of the Cosmic Mountain. The path of the *hekura* (*pei kë yo*) starts from the big toes which are described as the “gates” for the incoming spirits, stretches along the sides of the legs, and finally terminates in the *shapono*. In front of the entrance into the corporeal *shapono*—a place just under the navel—a *pore* (ghost of a dead Yanomami) is situated. He guards other corporeal *hekura* and alerts them if an intruder is nearby. This spot is also the point in the bodily image of the world where the earth surface and underworld (lower abdomen and legs) meet, as opposed to the base of the neck where the sky and earth meet.

In fact, mirroring each other, the micro-dimension of the *shapori*'s body-cosmos corresponds to the exteriority of the Yanomami natural and social world. The head and shoulders are the replica of the celestial sphere, stretching above the surface of the earth or the body's central area where the bodily *shapono*, spirit-path and inner-mountain are positioned. Together, they replicate the Yanomami lived geographical reality. The Yanomami *shapono* is frequently situated near some mountain peak where *hekura* live. There are numerous paths which lead to and from the *shapono*. Inside the *shapono*, Yanomami sleep in their hammocks; in the same way, *hekura* sleep inside the *shapono* located inside the *shapori*'s chest. The *hekura* are not, however, confined to their bodily *shapono*. They move freely through the body, just like the Yanomami venture into the forest, beyond their communal houses. In the Yanomami lived reality there is often a *pore* (ghost) living in the forest near their *shaponos* just like the corporeal *pore* lives near bodily *shapono*. The main difference is that the disembodied *pore* is considered dangerous because he or she can steal people's souls and make them sick. Once the *pore* is incorporated into the shaman's body he starts serving beneficial purposes.

Symbolism of the Cosmic Body as the Man Becomes a “Centre” of the Universe⁵

Pei maki is the polymorphic symbol which in Yanomami language signifies simultaneously the ceremonial wooden pole, the geographical mountain and Cosmic or Inner Mountain. It is symbolically the place where the sky and earth meet and therefore one example of the universal symbol of *axis mundi*—the World or central axis which connects different cosmic spheres. Eliade writes that *axis mundi* passes through the “Centre of the World”—a place where the rupture of shaman’s consciousness occurs as a form of passage from the earth to the sky (1960: 113). *Pei maki* is the manifestation of the symbol of Cosmic Mountain, also called Central because, in this instance, it attracts *hekura* from other (geographical) mountains towards itself; it serves as a point of convergence of *hekura*. In other words, the Central Mountain is one symbolic manifestation of the absolute “Centre” which draws the universe towards itself. In similar manner, the body is the site of the embodied Central Mountain (*pei maki*); therefore, it becomes Central Body as man becomes “Centre of the Universe.” Thus during the initiatory ordeal, the body becomes the “Centre” towards which *hekura*, as the building blocks of the Yanomami cosmos, will inevitably gravitate.

The symbolism of the “Centre of the Universe” in the Yanomami example can be extended from the human body to the Yanomami dwelling place (*shapono*). Eliade comments that every temple, altar, tent, or in fact “*every human habitation is projected to the ‘Centre’ of the World*” (italics original) (1989: 265; see also Eliade 1958b: 379 and 1965: 76). In other words, the symbolism of *axis mundi* is attested in the very structure of humans’ dwellings. The Yanomami circular communal house reflects an image of their conception of the universe. The open central area is the celestial arch (sky) which meets the earth where the *shapono*’s roof begins (horizon) and human beings—Yanomami—live. It is precisely at this place where the neophyte is positioned during the entire initiation and where the experienced shamans summon their spirits during séances.

In the same manner that an individual *shapori* can be seen as the “Centre of the (Yanomami) universe,” all living shamans across the

⁵ In the following text I use my own interpretative formulations influenced primarily by Dr. Jadran Mimica’s (University of Sydney) concepts.

Yanomami cosmo-geographical region can be seen as “plurality of centres,” coexisting and operating simultaneously within a transpersonal field of macro-cosmic spirit powers. Each individual *shapori* participates through his “centredness” in the sphere of conscious inter-subjective relations with other *shapori*, mediated by their *hekura* and the *epena* psychotropic snuff. They affect each other directly within the field of intra-psychoic shamanistic horizons and overlapping modes of shared self-consciousness, generated by their embodied spirit-helpers and, of course, by the copious hallucinogens used in the shamanistic activities.

One and Many: the Holographic Structure of *Shapori*’s Post Mortem Consciousness

The shaman’s transformed body, as an integrated and dynamic whole, provides a model for the integrated and dynamic totality of the cosmos. Each individual shaman represents an autonomous system, a distinct set of embodied personal *hekura* spirits operating together as a unit. The shaman’s body represents their headquarters. Each time when the shaman engages in his activities, his (Cosmic) body becomes the “Centre,” as he “dies” (*nomarayoma*) anew through trance and ecstasy and directly re-enters the original primordial condition of the ever-present, mythical dimension of *illud tempus*—an *a priori* of human existence. As he becomes the “Centre” of the cosmos and the site of its manifestation, his newly expanded ego-consciousness becomes a field of fluid boundaries and continual multiple transformations and shape-shifting. In other words, in this peculiar state of consciousness, the *shapori* becomes a self-contained but indeterminate cosmic *whole* with the ability to transform into any of its constitutive components, that is, individual *hekura*-spirits who are certain wholes in themselves.

This is determined on the basis of the prevailing evidence of the nature of the shaman’s “post-mortem” consciousness. Briefly, through initiation the neophyte’s self is destroyed by *hekura* and re-constituted as a multiplicity of various *hekura*-selves after his death and rebirth. In other words, after the neophyte experiences himself dying, all of the *hekura* spirits who contributed to the rupture and fragmentation of his ego-consciousness form together the basis of a new totalized and totalizing modality of egoic consciousness.

When a *shapori* dies for the second time, he does not become *no porepi*⁶ like other Yanomami. In other words, unlike all the other souls of the dead Yanomami, the shaman does not journey to the celestial *shapono*. Instead, after the shaman's biological death, his *hekura* disperse in various directions and return to the mountain tops where they lived prior to becoming part of the bodily *hekura* system at the time the shaman was initiated. Each *hekura* retains an imprint of the *shapori*'s persona. Accordingly, when a shaman dies his soul multiplies. Each *hekura* becomes a carrier of his soul image. Some of them will be called upon by future initiates to descend from the mountain tops again and enter a new body. During the initiation in Sheroana-theri, described in this paper, the neophyte repeatedly recognized the multiplicity of his father, who was a great *shapori*, in the faces of various oncoming *hekura*.

A *shapori* is generally referred to as the father of all his personal *hekura*. As they are transferred from father to son, the latter becomes father to his own children (*hekura*). Accordingly, during my fieldwork the Yanomami frequently pointed out to me that the newly embodied *hekura* are very young, just like little children. We shall recall that after the ceremonial pole was embodied during the initiation, the neophyte also described the arriving *hekura* as a queue of children. As the shaman matures and becomes more experienced his personal *hekura* also grow older and become more powerful. The shaman dies but the *hekura* they can not die as they are perceived by the Yanomami to be indestructible and immortal beings (*parimi*). Among the Sanema, Yanomami northern cousins, there is a similar belief that *hekula* (*hekura*) can not die; rather, they mature and grow old together with the shaman whose body they inhabit. After the shaman's death, these *hekura* become temporarily disembodied, having the ability to rejuvenate, become young again and become embodied again as personal *hekura* (Colchester 1982). In this way, the continuity of the cosmic unity of primordial time is preserved and maintained through the initiations of human beings who transform into *hekura* and become the future *no patapi* or living ancestors after receiving the knowledge, in the words of my informant, from the "ones that are gone before" i.e., other immortal *no patapi* ancestors or other past shamans.

⁶ After their death and cremation, the souls of (non-initiated) Yanomami migrate to a large celestial *shapono* where they continue their existence as *no porepi* (dead souls) practicing hunting, gardening and shamanism just like their living counterparts.

Concluding Reflections

In this paper I argued that, after the initiation, the shaman ego-consciousness becomes a self-contained but indeterminate cosmic *whole* consisting of numerous individually embodied *hekura* spirits. Through initiation, the shaman incorporates numerous *hekura* into his body but at the same time he becomes one of the spirits: he is “many within one and one of many.” I stress the word “indeterminate” (*whole*) because throughout their lifetimes the shamans’ arsenal of their personal spirit-helpers will expand as they continue incorporating an additional Yanomami, and sometimes non-Yanomami, spirits into their bodies. The *whole* of the shaman’s Cosmic Body can thus be characterized as an “expanding whole”—a whole that is more than sum of its parts. Correspondingly, other shamans are other sovereign self-enclosed, but constantly expanding cosmic wholes—all parts of the same overall cosmic totality. If all shamans’ personal embodied spirits form distinct cosmic systems, and if, as I attempted to demonstrate in this paper, the cosmos can fully manifest itself only through the shaman’s bodies, what happens than with other spirits who do not form a part of these cosmic systems, i.e. that exist outside of the shaman’s corporeal cosmic closures? If the totality of Yanomami cosmos is viewed as a *whole* outside of which there is nothing, I propose, following Mimica’s analysis of Iqwaye cosmology (Mimica 1988), that these disembodied spirits must also exist *within* because “. . . [i]n the mythic image (of a cosmic boa) all spatiality is ‘within,’ and this ‘within,’ the ‘inside,’ is all that there is. Wherever there is being, it is *within* (emphasis original) the totality of the cosmic being.” (ibid.: 97)

If *hekura* are viewed by the Yanomami as eternal, immortal beings, it may then be said that the Yanomami shamans, through initiation, attain status of immortality. This immortality indicates transformation and continuity of the cosmos which is constantly re-generated and replicated through perpetual cycles of shamanistic initiations. This is reflected in the post mortem multiplication of the dead shaman’s soul image and continual re-incarnation of the disembodied *hekura* spirits who are called upon to invade the bodies of new candidates, make them their abodes, and to contribute to a cosmogonic initiatory act once again.

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4 (a) The classic initiatory position. Photo: Željko Jokić.



4 (b) Spirit of a boa arrives with machete. Photo: Željko Jokić.



5 (a) Embodiment of the spirit-house (*shapono*). Photo: Željko Jokić.



5 (b) Death by the spirit of anaconda. Photo: Željko Jokić.



6 (a) Embodiment of the anaconda's head-crown. Photo: Željko Jokić.



6 (b) Spirit of a boa-tornasol launches an arrow into the neophyte.
Photo: Željko Jokić.



7 (a) Yaoriwe (the ocelot-spirit) is approaching. Photo: Željko Jokić.



7 (b) The ocelot-spirit is “eating” the neophyte. Photo: Željko Jokić.



8 (a) The Jaguar spirit is arriving. Photo: Željko Jokić.



8 (b) Jaguar leaps and kills the neophyte. Photo: Željko Jokić.



9 (a) The neophyte receives Jaguar's head-crown. Photo: Željko Jokić.



9 (b) The spirits enter the pole in masses. Photo: Željko Jokić.



10 (a) Post-mortem body wash and decoration. Photo: Željko Jokić.



10 (b) The master shaman takes the neophyte for his first walk. Photo: Željko Jokić.