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Introduction

Magical Death is one of the more than twenty films about the Yanomamo Indians that are now distributed by D.E.R. The Yanomamo, who live in the tropical rain forest in southern Venezuela and northern Brazil, practice a mixed subsistence economy. Up to eighty percent of their food comes from gardening, while food from hunting and foraging rounds out their diet. There are currently about 1-5,000 Yanomamo living in some 150 scattered villages. The film was made in March 1970 and March 1971 in the village of Mishimishimabowei-teri, a large village of some 250 people, which is located at the headwaters of the Mavaca River in the southernmost part of Venezuela. Mishimishimabowei-teri was first contacted by a westerner in 1970 when the village was visited by Dr. Napoleon Chagnon, an anthropologist who had spent 3 years living among the Yanomamo. When Chagnon returned to the village in 1971 he brought with him Timothy Asch, an ethnographic filmmaker, and Craig Johnson, a sound person. The team lived in the village from February 26-March 27, and during that time they shot over forty hours of synchronous sound film.

Synopsis

Magical Death is a film about Dedeheiwa, a great Yanomamo shaman and headman. The first part of the film shows how Dedeheiwa uses hallucinogenic drugs and calls the hekura spirits to help him cure the sick of his village. In the second part of the film, former enemies arrive in Dedeheiwa's village to form a new alliance; and the viewer sees how the Yanomamo manipulate their spiritual world to political ends when Dedeheiwa offers to magically attack a village of the visitor's choosing in order to demonstrate his village's good intentions. For the next two days, Dedeheiwa and the other shamans of his village mount the attack. The

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viewer sees how the drugs are prepared, how the hekura are called, and how the attack is dramatically carried out to a successful conclusion.

Transcript

The following is the complete narration and description of the action in the film. The numbers indicated in the form x:y are footage counts; they refer to the number of feet and frames elapsed from the "2" on the academy leader of the film. The film lasts approximately 29 minutes.

56:10 Opening shot of Dedeheiwa receiving a hit of drugs. Moawa, his son-in-law, looks on from his hammock.

67:00 "This is a film about a great shaman, Dedeheiwa, and how he manipulates the hekura spirits for both good and evil. He is

both a shaman and one of the several headmen of his village Mishi-



mishimabowei-teri. He takes hallucinogenic snuff powder to become intoxicated before he calls to his hekura spirits. The hekura spirits come to him down their invisible trails in the sky, reeling and dancing. The male hekura wear fiery halos and the females have brilliant wands protruding from their vagi-

nas."

104:19 Dedeheiwa begins curing his grandson -- Moawa's son.

137:00 "Dedeheiwa told me that the flight of the hekura from their mountain homes is like myriad glowing butterflies dancing in the

sky."

"The hekura spirits come to him down their invisible trails in the sky, reeling and dancing."

137:30 Dedeheiwa pacing and chanting to the hekura spirits, so that they will come to him.

148:30 "For Dedeheiwa, life is

a never-ending drama involving the hekura spirits. When there is sickness in his village Dedeheiwa is called upon at any hour of the day or night to drive away the evil hekura

and restore his people to health. He cures people by a combination of sucking, massaging, chanting magical songs, and striking the evil spirits with violent magical blows from various weapons. When he chants his magical songs, the fragrant hekura come first and scent his body with attractive odors. Other hekura then follow, each prancing wildly and rhythmically down his own trail until he reaches Dedeheiwa's feet. The hekura enter his body here, ascend his legs..."

186:10 Shot of Dedeheiwa sucking an evil hekura out of a sick woman "...and traverse the inner jungles, mountains, and trails of his body until they come to rest in the great house he has in his chest. There they prepare and drink their intoxicating magical beverage and are subject to his call to cure or

to kill."

193:10 Dedeheiwa holding a sick child in his lap and chanting a magical song.

201:30 "During times of sickness, Dedeheiwa is haggard and weary for he often chants

and prances wildly about for many hours each day and worries about his people and about his power to cure them."



204:05 Dedeheiwa draws the evil hekura

out of the child, holds it in his hand and violently hurls it to the ground.

217:15 Shot of a group of mothers and children about to be cured by Dedeheiwa. Most of them are his children and grandchildren.

239:30 "Dedeheiwa has sixteen children. Much of his time is spent curing them or members of their families."

250:00 Dedeheiwa begins drawing an evil hekura spirit out of a woman's body. He takes the spirit, hurls it to the ground, and then uses a log and machete to help destroy it.

287:00 When Dedeheiwa, is not curing he concentrates on sending his own hekura to cause sickness and magical death among his enemies. Dedeheiwa knows the hekura well,

for he has chanted for many years and as a young man watched and listened to older shamans. He has acquired the many secrets of the hekura that only time and experience can bring. Some of the hekura have gotten to know Dedeheiwa well also and they live permanently in his chest. So accomplished

is Dedeheiwa that he is one of a few Yanomamo shamen whose name and reputation is known in distant villages."

327:00 "In 1970 important visitors from Bisaasi-teri who live two weeks by trail to the north arrived at Dedeheiwa's village."

341:20 Close-up of Kaobawa, headman of Bisaasi-teri

"This was the first peaceful meeting of the two groups in twenty years. Their war began when the Bisaasi-teri killed a visitor from Dedeheiwa's village. Mutual treachery

"Some of the hekura have gotten to know Dedeheiwa well also and they live permanently in his chest..." and incessant raiding followed. Many people died. Kaobawa, headman of the Bisaasiteri, his face painted dramatically, discusses these past grievances with the

more important men in Dedeheiwa's group.

363:20 Close-up of Moawa.

"He invites them to a feast in his village and they accept. Then Kaobawa and the visitors left. One of them, Rerebawa, remained with me in Dedeheiwa's village for several weeks. "There is a symbiosis

between man and spirit.

For man cannot destroy

the souls of his enemies

hekura. But the hekura

cannot devour the souls

without the direction of

without the aid of the

Dedeheiwa offered to kill by sorcery any enemy that Rerebawa chose to specify. Rerebawa asked him to send hekura to destroy the souls of children in the distant village of Mahikototeri, for raiders from this group recently killed one of his kinsmen. For two days an intricate drama unfolded as Dedeheiwa and his co-villagers executed this request."

389:30 Shot of several men gathering and preparing drugs.

395:00 "Some of the men prepared hallucinogenic snuff powder from the seeds of

a wild tree, while others used the leaves of a special plant they cultivate in their gardens. These drugs are essential in Yanomano shamanism, for they alone permit the shaman to see and manipulate the hekura spirits."

400:20 Man rubbing ebene mixed with saliva between his hands.

403:00 Close-up of the same

411:30 A woman takes a wad of tobacco out of the lower lip of the man preparing drugs.

men."

413:24 Shot of a woman decorating a shaman.

419:00 "The hekura, being beautiful, are likewise attracted to beauty. Many shamen paint their bodies elaborately, especially their

faces, chests and abdominal regions. Properly decorated and under the influence of drugs the shaman can see their hekura and lure them to their bodies with magical songs. There is a symbiosis between man and spirit. For man cannot destroy the souls of his enemies without the aid of the hekura. But the hekura cannot devour the souls without the direction of men."

428:00 Close-up of man chewing tobacco and being decorated.

4486-25 Man using a feather to scrape to-

gether the hallucinogenic powder.

454:00 "When the drug was prepared they scraped the drug up with a feather and stored it in a leaf until they were ready to attack the souls."

462:15 Man putting the drug into the end of the bamboo blow-tube

used to administer the drug.

467:00 The man now administers the drug to Dedeheiwa, who is wearing red feathers on his upper arms.

488:00 "Dedeheiwa assembled all of the shamen in the back of one of the houses in the ashes of a cold hearth. They took numerous blasts of ebene powder, sang to their hekura, and gradually transformed from mortal men into spirits. The faces, gestures, and sounds were the expressions of the heku-

ra, not of men."

511:30 "As Dedeheiwa became intoxicated his vision and spiritual perception became clear. He could see the souls of the children in the ashes and the hekura dancing down their trails from the mountains to the village. He called Haduishimiwa, a hot and meathungry hekura, to help him destroy the souls of the babies with fire."

526:27 The shamen form a circle.

537:00
"He made several of the men enter the circle as makebelieve Mahikoto-teri

victims. As they squatted in the ashes surrounded by the others they became the Mahikoto-teri children. Thus they were alternately themselves, their hekura, and their victims."

554:00 Shot of Kaobawa sitting alone.

555:30 "Kaobawa, squatting by the house, mounted his attack by himself, sending hekura to Mahikoto-teri."

561:25 Dedeheiwa and the others squatting over the ashes.

563:30 "Dedeheiwa then instructed his comrades to bend over the ashes and devour the

souls. They were no longer men but hekura, and they had traveled through the sky to the village of Mahikoto-teri."

581:23 Dedeheiwa and Yoinakuwa lying on their backs in the ashes.

581:25 "Dedeheiwa and Yoinakuwa assumed the forms of dying children and writhe in agony in the ashes, visible proof to Rerebawa

that his enemies are mortally stricken."

591:00 "Dedeheiwa and Yoinakuwa change back to their hekura forms and imitate Ferifeririwa, a hot spirit who lives in Yoinakuwa's chest. They see the trail that the hekura have taken as they carry off Moamo

souls. They are barely able to contain the terrible power of death that fills their bodies, and they convulsively make gestures peculiar to the hekura. They face each other and solemnly continue to devour the souls. "

641:15 Dede-

heiwa squatting in front of the house.

643:20 "Another proof that he has killed enemy children comes when Dedeheiwa dramatically removes one of the several pieces of cotton string from his throat. The string represents the body-fat of the dead children, and Dedeheiwa displays it to show that he was physically in the distant village and has brought home evidence. He had difficulty coughing up the other strings and abandons his attempt. In his excitement he apparently swallowed them."

666:30 The shamen excitedly gather around Dedeheiwa, holding him up, protecting him from harm.

669:20 "The drama is unexpectedly interrupted with a tragedy. A shaman in an enemy village sent one of his hekura against Dedeheiwa. The hekura hid behind a post, and when Dedeheiwa walked by the hekura imbedded a magical hook deep into his leg. Dedeheiwa screamed that his house was falling down, meaning that he was dying."

711:00 "As he falls unconscious, his sonin-law Moawa cries out that he will avenge him. Then Moawa diagnoses the attack as a magical hook and with the help of others sets about to remove it from Dedeheiwa's leg. They are successful and overjoyed and prance happily around Dedeheiwa to reassure themselves that he is recovering."

740:35 "The drama then slows down, for most of the shaman are tired. Moawa, inspired by his success, continues to chant. Dedeheiwa retires for the day. He is physically and emotionally exhausted. He ties a piece of bark around his head to relieve the throbbing caused by the drug and his constant chanting."

768:10 The next day they take drugs again and resume their attack on the children of Mahikoto-teri. They are somewhat disor-

ganized at first until Dedeheiwa tells them that the souls are to be found immediately in front of the house. Today they will finish devouring the souls of children and then attempt to attack older men in Mahikototeri. Dedeheiwa commands one of his most powerful hekura, Hedushisiwiwa, to go into Moawa's chest and serve him. Moawa can hardly contain this spirit and thrashes wildly on the ground, beating his chest. Dedeheiwa brings the shaman together and commands them to devour the souls. They pick them up with their fingers and suck them into their mouth. The body-fat of the victim is considered to be filthy and supernaturally dangerous, so they are careful to lick it all off their fingers lest they contaminate themselves and later become sick."

842:00 "They carry the remaining souls away to devour them elsewhere and Dedeheiwa carefully inspects the spot to make sure that none have escaped."

854:00 "Dedeheiwa then organizes the shaman for the attack on an unnamed youth in Mahikoto-teri."

874:10 "He pretends to be his victim and dodges the hekura who have begun to attack him. He walks around the periphery of the village and talks with the women of Mahikoto-teri. He is angry that they use his name in public and criticize him for believing that the hekura tell the truth. He tells his mother that he is leaving the village and will not come home until dark. He sits on the ground, unaware that the waiting men, who are hekura, are about to attack him and kill him with their magical weapons. As his victim's soul, he approaches the waiting hekura who wave their weapens menacingly at him. They attack him mercilessly and vio-

lently, screaming loudly as they try to pierce the soul."

950:00 "Despite their attempts they are unsuccessful. Dedeheiwa tells them that the soul has escaped to the other side of the village and he leads them in formation to that spot. This time they are successful in destroying the soul. Dedeheiwa leads them back to tell Rerebawa that one of his enemies is now dead."

990:20 Shot of warriors who have arrived in full dress for a feast.

992:10 "Three weeks after this incident some of the men from Dedeheiwa's group arrived at Bisaasi-teri to feast with Kaobawa's people. They discussed old grievances and decided to become friends again. While they were there, many of the visiting men agreed to help Kaobawa raid an en-

emy village to the east. Their participation in the raid strengthened the new friendship."

1000:20 Hosts escort individual guests to their hammocks.

1004:10 Freeze frame of Dedeheiwa. "Dedeheiwa did not go on the raid for he is too old to be effective with mortal weapons. Now, when the younger men go on raids, he remains at home and kills his enemies with

his hekura and prevents them from killing members of his village. His task is constant, day and night, week after week, and thus his responsibilities are great."

Discussion

Mishimishimabowei-teri has almost 250 people. There are four headmen: two of the most prominent are Moawa, a fierce political leader, and Dedeheiwa, a renowned shaman, old but respected for his spiritual powers,

who has cured many patients in nearby villages as well as his own. In the past, when the village has fissioned, these two have always stayed together, retaining a large following. It may be because of their influence that Mishimishimaboweiteri was one of the largest villages studied.

Moawa is young for a leader; in fact, he is the son-in-law of Dedeheiwa. The

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two have very different personalities. Moawa is forceful and aggressive, even dictatorial, in his ways and has a reputation as a great warrior. It is in his aggressiveness that lies his strength and ability to stabilize the village. Dedeheiwa, on the other hand, has perhaps mellowed with age, but he is known for being magnanimous, wise, and munificent. He is the humanist, and relies on his skill as a shaman to show his leadership. This demonstrates how there are various ways in which



one may rise to the position of headman: by being a fierce warrior, a great hunter or, as in Dedeheiwa's case, a successful shaman. Particularly valued is one's skill in arbitration and one's ability to keep a cool head in moments of social crisis.

"In order to cure

All males in Yanomamo villages are eligible to become shamen. Candidates experience a short period of fasting, during which they take drugs, are obliged to remain chaste, and

members of their village or defend members of their group from the spiritual attacks of others, they must form a symbiotic relationship with the hekura. The only way they can do this is by taking the drug."

stay in a stupor most of the time; at the end of this they are free to practice their skill whenever they want. Not everyone becomes a shaman although most eventually do. As it is necessary to provide meat for the family, it is equally important to be able to cure the members when they are sick. A man is being socially responsible by being a shaman.

In Yanomamo spiritual beliefs, there is no such thing as "natural" death. Death of this type can only be due to the malevolence and vengeance of their enemies, who have sent "hekura" spirits, tiny demons that can be commanded by shamans to kill people. The

hekura are humanoid spirits that dwell on rocks and mountains. The explanation for the existence of the hekura is found in Yanomamo cosmology and mythology. When the cosmos originated it was inhabited by the first beings whose activities were the origin

of the Yanomamo, the hekura, and the world they live in. When these first beings died, they became spirits. When a shaman takes drugs and chants, he often chants parts of myths that recount the adventures of the first beings.

The duties of the shamen, therefore, are to cure the sick in the village (those attacked by hekura), to ask their personal hekura to prevent any future harm to villagers, and to work magic in return against their enemies. The Yanomamo do not

use medicine made from plants and animals to treat illness. As illness is magical, it is up to the shamen to work supernatural cures.



A shaman

has no power except through his hekura, and he can call them and see them only when he is under the influence of one of the hallucinogenic drugs the Yanomamo make use of. The amount of the drug taken depends on the individual shaman. Some achieve their high on only a pinch inhaled through the fingers; most have it blown up their nostrils by means of a 3-foot bamboo tube. Sometimes double doses are taken, one tube in each nostril. The "high" lasts about one hour and can be regenerated.

"Ebene" is the Yanomamo term for their prepared snuffs. The drug has many sources in a wide variety of wild and domestic plants. Ebene varies in composition; bark, seeds, leaves and resin may go into the mixture, and even other previously-prepared ebene powders may be used. Whatever is at hand may be used -- there may be four or five different hallucinogens in the ebene. The bark of the "yakoana" tree is a major source, as well as the bark ash of the "ama" tree. The seeds of the "hisioma," which is often domesticated, provide the strongest ebene. In preparation, the ebene is mixed with ashes and saliva by rubbing between the hands, then dried, and ground to form a brownish-green powder. The normal reaction upon inhalation of the drug is vomiting, nose running with greenish mucus, and a general intoxicated appearance lasting about ten minutes. Ebene does not seem to be habit-forming. Shamen commonly abstain for weeks without problem. It should be clear that the Yanomamo take drugs for purely social purposes. In order to cure members of their village or defend members of their group from the spiritual attacks of others, they must form a symbiotic relationship with the hekura. The only way they can do this is by taking the drug.

The paint that the shamen use is made with a base of bixa orellana, which comes from the fruit of a small tree. It might be noted that it is normal for an especially powerful shaman, such as Dedeheiwa, to direct the hekura of others. If there is need, shamen will at times chant and cure all through the

night.

Magical Death is an example of the first incipient stage of alliance-formation between two villages. The relationship between any two villages is usually hostile unless they are closely related or have made some mutual effort to establish an alliance. Alliance formation begins with visiting and trading between individual members of the two villages. If the alliance progresses, one village will invite the other to a feast. At a feast, trading continues on a larger scale, and there is an obligation on the part of the visitors to reciprocate by inviting the hosts to a feast at their village. After a while, if the alliance is successful, the two villages may even exchange women. This exchange creates the deepest form of mutual obligation. At this point one village may even move to the other village in times of trouble and expect their hosts to feed them. In the film, the two villages are at the initial stage of alliance formation; they are entering into exchanges which will be reciprocated and thereby create a political bond. Only in this case, the members of the two villages are not exchanging goods but magical services.

Making of the Film

Magical Death is a significant film not only because it captures and articulates an 'anthropological event', but also because of the manner in which it was made. The film was made in February 1970 and February 1971 by Dr. Napoleon Chagnon. Chagnon first lived with the Yanomamo in 1964. During that time he "realized the importance of taking film on selected aspects of Yanomamo culture," and to do so he borrowed a movie camera. However, his first efforts at

filmmaking were, in his words, "crude and undisciplined" and he realized that to effectively film the Yanomamo he would have to collaborate with an ethnographic filmmaker. In 1968 he teamed up with Timothy Asch and together they made the films The Feast and Yanomamo: A Multidisciplinary Study. This collaboration proved successful and they decided to return to the Yanomamo in 1971 to do a more in-depth film study. In the interim Chagnon continued to bring a camera with him on his yearly field trips to the Yanomamo and, in 1970, filmed the two-day shamanistic drama which constitutes the second half of this film. (The introduction was filmed by Chagnon in 1971). Chagnon's method of filming uniquely combined filmmaking and field research. He not only filmed the shamen with his movie camera, but he also photographed them with both a Polaroid camera and a 35mm still camera. In addition, he placed his tape recorder on the ground near the shamen. In the evening, Chagnon would go over the tape and the Polaroid photos with the shamen and they would explain to him what they had been doing during the event. Chagnon then used this information as a guide for further filming and editing. This approach of course requires an intimate knowledge of another culture and, for that reason, Magical Death stands as an example of the type of film that could be made by other anthropologists with minimal training in filmmaking.

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Film Credits

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Edited by Craig Johnson

Production Manager: Timothy Asch

Assisted by: Frank Galvin, Documentary Educational Resources, and Chas Bicking, Stuart Cody, Eliot Tarlin, Ben Cantesano, Chat Gunter, Jim Townsend, Cinelab, John Marshall, and Marilyn Wood. This film was produced on a grant from the National Science Foundation on the Department of Human Genetics of the University of Michigan as part of the Anthropological component in a multi-disciplinary study, directed by James V. Neel, constitutes one of the contributions of the United States to the International Biological Program. The collaboration of the Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Investigation (I.V.I.C.) is gratefully acknowledged.

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