

Vision Quest: Ritual of Identity Transition

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Introduction

While the vision quest ritual in traditional society can occur at multiple points in an individual's life, it features most prominently in later adolescence as initiation into adulthood. In this context, the vision quest ritual is a socially instituted rite of passage often framed by preparatory and follow-on ritual events.

The Quest

The quest itself involves the individual, who is alone, moving to a quiet, remote location often overlooking a significant scene or vista in the band/tribe's traditional territory. It is what happens in that isolated setting that is most significant.

Most often the individual sits and adopts a relaxed, contemplative, meditative mode inviting an experience of personal revelation that addresses the "Who Am I" question. This revelation may take time, even days, and it typically comes in the form of a vision of a creature or event from nature with which the individual is likely to be keenly aware as a result of experiencing in detail his band's territory while growing up.

The Social Response

Upon the initiate's return to his band, his vision gets assessed by elders and becomes the basis for identifying the individual's totem. This totem then suggests a new or embellished name for the individual as an adult. With the individual's vision quest itself completed, typically the individual's new identity is celebrated by the family/band/tribe in a communal event of dancing and feasting. In this celebration, the typical 4-4 drum beat of traditional dance [first beat emphasized] mirrors the human heart beat. Repeated over and over this rhythm invites a shift to an altered state of mind for the participants – promoting social solidarity. The initiate now enters this collective group as an adult!

The final result: the vision quest initiate has completed the transition to adulthood, with a new identity gleaned from the ecology of the band/tribe's own territory, an identity that is accepted and celebrated by his adult "community," which now includes him.

Interpretation

In the initiation version of the vision quest ritual, utilization of the intuitive mental mode in the meditative state provides the initiate with access to a totally

interconnected reality where the individual experiences an extension of himself in a natural phenomena. This explicit resort to the intuitive is essential in achieving the desired results: First, the individual discovers an alternative identity in nature that provides the basis for a successful transition to adulthood. Second, in the form of the acquired totem, the individual unites with his home territory as an adult, literally taking his newly named identity from it. Third, the individual's new identity as an adult is confirmed in the band/tribe's follow-on ritual of acceptance and celebration. Effective use of the intuitive mental function to explore the individual's shared identity in nature allows the individual to identify his alternative adult self in his band's own territory.

I contend that the human intuitive mental function is central in all socially informed, traditional ritual, but in the vision quest it is explicit.