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# Overseas youth expeditions with Raleigh International: A rite of passage?

Simon Beames

## Abstract

This paper examines to what degree a 10-week expedition to Ghana, West Africa may be considered a rite of passage for its British participants. A case study method was adopted to interview 14 British youths two months before leaving on expedition, three times on expedition, and six months post expedition. Thematic analysis was employed to identify positive and negative indicators of van Gennep's (1960) three stage model of rites of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. The findings indicated that while the structure of the expedition mimics rites of passage on a superficial level, there are some aspects central to rites of passage that are missing from the overseas expedition experience. Expedition providers may consider adopting van Gennep's model as a way to 're-introduce' young people back into their communities with added responsibilities.

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## Introduction

Each year, more than 10,000 British young people go overseas on structured experiences (gapyear.com, 2001), but little is known about the hows and whys of this cultural phenomenon. These experiences vary from teaching placements in rural schools, to environmental conservation projects, to expeditions that involve a self-reliant journey using temporary shelters. Almost all of these programmes take place in developing nations.

My interest lies in gaining a deeper understanding of how young people are influenced by an overseas expedition and in identifying the essential ingredients of this experience. Though a number of people have written on the value of youth expeditions (Gair, 1988; Grey, 1998; Hebborn, 1993; Maddern, 1990; Potter, 1998; Schusser, 1998; Surtees, 2000), only three investigations have focused specifically on learning more about the overseas expedition experience from the perspective of a young person from the United Kingdom (Allison, 2002; Grey, 1984; Kennedy, 1992). This study focuses on the British youth development charity, Raleigh International ('Raleigh' from now on). Raleigh's goal is to inspire people to "discover their full potential" through ten week expeditions to developing nations where they take part in three different projects: environmental conservation, community service, and adventure (Raleigh, 2003).

As someone who has led expeditions over the years, I have often overheard people claim that expeditions are a rite of passage for young people. In fact, I had heard this statement so often that it prompted me to seek out the origins of this phrase so I might contribute to future conversations on this topic with some degree of confidence. Thus, the aim of my research was born: how is an overseas youth expedition like a rite of passage? The review of literature blends

the anthropological theory on rites of passage with insights from modern educators and psychologists on the role of rites of initiation for young people today.

## Background

The phrase 'rites of passage' was coined by the Belgian anthropologist van Gennep in 1909. First translated into English in 1960, the book *The Rites of Passage* (van Gennep, 1960) outlined how life was a series of passages from one stage to another, each passage comprising three rites: separation from one's original social pattern, passing through a state of transition unlike the past or coming state, and incorporation back into one's original social structure (van Gennep, 1960). Initiation into adulthood is just one of several rites of passage that also include birth, childhood, marriage, and funeral.

Van Gennep labelled the second stage of rites of passage *liminality*. This idea was expanded upon by the British anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), who claimed that liminality was characterised by experiencing *communitas*: a coming together of people. This can be likened to the common outdoor education cliché, 'group bonding'.

A literature review on different cultures' approaches to initiating young people into adulthood suggests similarities between the Australian Aboriginal walkabout and the Native North American vision quest. Though the vision quest was considered a ritual for those searching for solutions to a problem, it was often used specifically to help bridge the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This episode involved the individual venturing off alone into the woods in search of a vision or sign. After being without food or water for several days the person would enter a state of altered consciousness, which, coupled with the anticipation of a sign, elicited insight into one's struggles. A shaman would often help the

person interpret her/his experience upon return (Suler, 1990). The vision quest is not dissimilar to the walkabout, in which the young person "faces a severe but extremely appropriate trial, one in which he [sic] must demonstrate the knowledge and skills necessary to make him [sic] a contributor to the tribe rather than a drain on its meagre resources" (Gibbons, 1974, p. 597).

Countless tribes in Africa each have their own rituals; rites of passage being just one example of the many rituals that are such an integral part of life (Somé, 1996). In many cases initiation involves being removed, sometimes quite suddenly, from one's family and taken to a sacred site. It is here that community elders teach initiates the oral traditions of their people, often with particular attention paid to past struggles (Houston, 1996; van Wyk, 2002). Spending time alone is another common feature of the transition phase. Part of this solitary reflection time is to encourage the youth to question who they are and how they intend to take on an adult role in the community (Gibbons, 1974; Maddern, 1990; Suler, 1990).

Building on common cross-cultural features of initiation, a deeper question begged answering: what can these ancient rites and rituals teach us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? I asked myself how western young people mark their transition from adolescence into adulthood in the year 2003. For many it is through getting drunk, graduating from secondary school, having sex, experimenting with drugs, or getting a driver's license.

A growing body of literature suggests that young people need challenging but structured rituals through which they can mark their coming of age (Kornfield, 1996; Meade, 1996b; Oldfield, 1996; Somé, 1996). Kornfield (1996) states that "if nothing is offered in the way of initiation to prove one's entry into the world of men and women, it will be done unguided in the road or the street, with cars at high speed, with drugs, with weapons" (p. 42). Though rites of initiation exist in the military, in college fraternities and sororities, street gangs, and sports teams, these are not regarded as positive 'growth' experiences, as they are missing a crucial, spiritual dimension (Meade, 1996a; Somé, 1996). Still, the irony is that these underground rituals are often much more physically demanding, 'status-elevating', challenging, and 'pride-eliciting' than a publicly sanctioned ritual such as taking a driver's education course.

Where aboriginal youth travelled to unfamiliar places to face unknown challenges that would draw on all their knowledge and skills, western youth are required to prove content mastery over subjects in a familiar and protected environment such as a high school exam sat in a gymnasium. How can we provide young

people with a more formal, public initiation that involves tests requiring them to draw on inner reserves of strength and make decisions with real consequences, while using their creativity, self-reliance and initiative?

In response to this absence of formal challenging rites of passage into adulthood, educators have considered how traditional approaches can be woven into modern society (Grof, 1996; Maddern, 1990; Meade, 1996b; Somé, 1996). Almost 30 years ago Gibbons (1974) wrote about how North American youth could benefit from adopting principles of the Aboriginal Australian. His vision spurred the creation of an alternative education programme called the Walkabout programme in over 150 North American secondary schools (Knapp, 1989). Gibbons (1974) suggested that the modern walkabout comprises several challenges, two of which were embarking on an adventure demanding daring, endurance and skill in an unfamiliar environment and identifying a human need for help without expecting reward. This Walkabout programme met with success, in part due to its subjective, flexible nature which encouraged young people to design their own challenges.

Among the calls for modern initiations to adulthood based on traditional models, there has been a strong voice that opposes non-natives adopting traditional ceremonies (Horwood, 1994). Horwood's (1994) paper was written to highlight how the "misappropriation and trivialization of Native American ceremonies within...the practice of outdoor education has drawn emphatic and articulate objections from both natives and non-natives" (p. 12). Still, even though Horwood (1994) feels that native spiritual ceremonies have no part in the "educational, often recreational, secular purposes of non-natives" (p. 12), he encourages non-indigenous people to seek out their own connections with the land and create ceremonies more suited to their cultures.

Internet searches yielded innumerable organisations offering rites of passage programmes. Some of the advertised courses included: three days of varied activities at a residential outdoor centre, a 12-day backpacking trip, and an interdisciplinary middle school programme. All claimed that their programmes would facilitate a young person's transition to adulthood. For all the rites of passage programmes offered to the public, only a few theorists have related van Gennep's (1960) three stage model to outdoor education in general (Bell, 2003; May, 1996).

The idea of using rites of passage theory in conjunction with expeditions in particular is not new (Andrews, 1999; Bacon, 1983; Maddern, 1990; Venable, 1997). One example of an expedition-based programme that clearly

structured its activities around the rites of passage model is an American coming-of-age programme that centres on teenagers undertaking a backpacking trip (Venable, 1997). Having identified a void in a young person's passage from childhood to adulthood, Venable devised a rites of passage experience encompassing a week-long hill-walking expedition. The idea is one leaves home (separation), adapts to and exists in an unfamiliar environment (transition), and then returns to one's home environment as a responsible adult, with new social status (incorporation). The trip culminated with a church service where the individuals were recognised as adults by their family and community. The effect of this experience was measured pre and post expedition (4 and 12 weeks after) with three different scales of spiritual, religious, and existential well-being. Despite the small sample size and statistically insignificant increases of the three types of well-being, the nature of the exploratory project was encouraging.

Another North American practitioner has further deconstructed the rites of passage concept as it relates to a young person's growth through a wilderness expedition (Andrews, 1999). By building on Turner's (1969) discussion of *communitas*, Andrews (1999) proposes three dimensions of the liminal or transition phase: sense of community, sense of self, and sense of place. It was argued that wilderness expeditions involve a release from normal social order and status in a way that elicits stronger connections - a sense of community - between participants (Andrews, 1999). One's sense of self is heightened by being in an environment without the usual pressures of social conformity. On a wilderness expedition, young people can concentrate on who they are and want to become because they are not bound by previous identities, roles, and responsibilities (Andrews, 1999). The third dimension of liminality within a wilderness expedition is an increased sense of place stemming from one's disconnection from normal surroundings and feelings of connectedness to the natural environment (Andrews, 1999).

More recently, Bell's (2003) work has outlined how outdoor programmes using a classical rites of passage model to frame their experiences are generally ineffective at facilitating the third phase of van Gennep's (1960) model, incorporation. Bell (2003) suggests that programmes using a rites of passage model may be better off accepting this weakness and should consider following a 'contemporary adventure model' which leaves "participants to choose their own roles after a liminal experience" (p. 49), at the same time not over-exaggerating claims of participant transformation.

The above research notwithstanding, the overseas expedition as rite of passage for British young people remains a romantic idea, one that I aim to further examine through empirical inquiry.

## **Method**

The method I chose to serve the aims of this inquiry is grounded in the constructivist paradigm. Silverman (2000) suggests to begin all research by establishing one's model of how one sees the world, namely ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (the nature of knowledge). Constructivist beliefs form the bedrock of my research, as I subscribe to the relativist view that reality is constructed differently by different people and to the subjectivist view that knowledge is created through personal experience and dialogue (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Stake, 1995).

My aim was to examine how a 10-week overseas expedition with Raleigh International might be considered a rite of passage, based on van Gennep's (1960) three-stage anthropological framework. To this end I chose a case study approach, as it offered me the use of multiple methods of data collection and allowed me to examine issues that I brought to the study, as well as those unpredicted themes that were generated by the conversations I had with participants (Stake, 1995).

My principal method of data collection was five rounds of interviews with a group of 14 young people from diverse backgrounds. Tape-recorded interviews with individuals were conducted eight weeks before expedition, once during each phase of the ten-week expedition, and finally, six months post-expedition. The study participants were between the ages of 17 and 25, six male/eight female, seven self-funders/seven youth development program (YDP), from all over the UK. Like all young people participating in Raleigh programmes, they are known as venturers. Venturers from the YDP programme have typically experienced some form of social exclusion and have been referred to Raleigh by a regional youth charity. Their expeditions are largely funded from external sources such as the European Social Fund. Unlike the self-funders, YDP venturers have a mandatory Development Week of preparation before the expedition and an optional Follow-up Week after the expedition, in order to help process their experience and make plans for the future.

The study participants were a rich mix of personalities from a wide variety of upbringings that included a highly privileged 18-year-old youth who had just graduated from an exclusive boarding school, a 24-year-old who had been working fulltime for the last eight years, a 23-year-old former heroin addict, a 20-year-old

who had been unemployed for most of the time since leaving school at age 15, and a 23-year-old manager in the public service.

All 14 study participants were chosen specifically, rather than randomly. This method of purposive sampling allowed me to choose people who would reflect a full range of experiences on the expedition (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). In this sense, the way I chose participants was "deliberately and unashamedly selective and biased" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 104). Ideally, I was looking for 16 participants from all over the UK with an even split between self-funders and YDP, male and female, over 20 years old and those between 17-20. In the end, only six of the 14 participants were male, as I could not find an older, male self-funded venturer before the study began and, after the first interview, one male YDP venturer decided (along with his social worker) that he was not ready to come on expedition.

This inquiry focuses exclusively on predetermined themes, and to that end, my analysis of the interviews centred on looking for positive and negative indicators of van Gennepe's three stages of rites of passage: separation from one's normal social pattern, transition through an ambiguous and "statusless" place unlike anything one has ever experienced, and incorporation back into one's original social pattern with new roles and responsibilities (van Gennepe, 1960).

The data interpretation borrowed some basic techniques from phenomenology, namely highlighting meaningful phrases and clustering them together into categories (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). I added more structure to the process by developing a simple system of thematic analysis where the labels of separation, transition, and incorporation were attached to phrases which matched criteria for each of the three themes (Boyatzis, 1998). This system helped me to contemplate more specifically not *if* this expedition was a rite of passage, but to what degree it may or may not be considered a rite of passage.

I used member checks and investigator triangulation in an effort to increase the trustworthiness of my work (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). Member checks involve the researcher discussing his/her interpretation of the interviews with each participant. Participants have the opportunity to comment on and amend the interpretation of the conversations. The second method employed to increase the credibility of my findings was investigator triangulation which involved colleagues (both volunteer and full-time Raleigh staff) interpreting a transcribed interview and then comparing notes. Investigator triangulation proved very worthwhile, as it

provided me with a 'sounding board' between each round of interviews and ensured that I did not bring too much personal bias to the investigation. These meetings served to support hunches that I had or to suggest alternative angles to the investigation that I may have missed. Based on the proper application of member checks and investigator triangulation, I believe my findings are trustworthy.

## Findings

### Separation

The initial stage of separation appeared to last from the time the venturers knew they would be leaving the UK up until the first ten days of the expedition. The prospect of leaving their social pattern for ten weeks did not appear to worry the venturers. On the contrary, there was a great sense of anticipation and romanticism surrounding the participants' imminent departure. This is supported in the following quotes from the Round 1 interviews. Please note that I have used pseudonyms; the number after the name refers to the participant's age.

I could leave for a year. Rufus, 23

I'm not bothered about leaving – I'm quite happy to go. Nonnie, 18

I wish I was going away tomorrow. Lily, 18

That is not to say there were no voices expressing concern at being away from their 'world' for 10 weeks:

I'm a bit apprehensive about leaving my family behind. Tracy, 22

To me it was clear that even though some participants recognised they would probably be homesick, they were not particularly troubled by that prospect. People were looking forward to heading out on their adventure, some of them having planned it for many months. It was also evident that some YDP venturers were particularly keen to leave their current social pattern. The three Raleigh staff who participated in the investigator triangulation process felt it highly likely that the YDP venturers who were ready 'to go today' were longing to escape a negative or dysfunctional social pattern of some kind.

The most substantive feelings of separation that I witnessed were those during the first week of the expedition, known as induction. This week involves getting to know the venturers and staff team, learning about the different projects, and becoming accustomed to camp-life in rural Africa. During induction there was an overwhelming feeling of separation from participants' social patterns in the UK. One aspect of this separation was characterised by feelings of disequilibrium (Nadler & Luckner,

1992), which participants spoke about in Round 2 interviews:

One minute I was incredibly happy, the next I was desperate to leave. Just flipping up and down. It was pretty tough actually. Sylvio, 18

The first two days I wanted to go home. I missed everybody...my friends and family. Lily, 18

I woke and flooded my tent with tears 'cause I was away from home, my family, my friends. It was like, "what am I doing here? I don't want to be here". Friio, 20

These rollercoaster-like emotions seemed to manifest themselves a few days after arrival in Ghana, perhaps once the 'buzz' of being in a far-away place with unfamiliar people had worn off a little. By the time it came to the Round 3 interviews (in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> week of expedition), these dominant feelings of missing home had reduced considerably, though most people naturally missed home to a degree.

The findings of the first two rounds of interviews revealed that participants were very much looking forward to embarking on an adventure and leaving the UK. It also was evident that a large number of participants were very homesick from being separated from their community, friends and family. Both of these elements are consistent with the first stage of van Gennep's (1960) rite of passage of being separated from one's original social pattern.

### **Transition**

Positive indicators for the second stage of a rite of passage, transition, were also evident in the Round 2 interviews. Van Gennep's (1960) second stage was characterised by being in a place where individuals have no status and the environment is unlike anything that they have ever experienced. The following quotes from the Round 2 interviews indicated that this expedition possessed characteristics of van Gennep's middle stage of transition.

The whole environment's totally different...it feels so far out from what I'd normally be doing... Ronie, 25

Everything's so different. It's completely the opposite. Sophie, 20

This is so unique – different people, different backgrounds thrown together on a project that I wouldn't even imagine. Tracy, 22

This is a once in a lifetime experience. Never done before, won't do it again, won't be like this... Rufus, 23

The Round 3 interviews (five to six weeks through the expedition) did not yield many indicators of rites of passage, whether positive or negative. Rather, participants steered the conversation towards issues they were more interested in – what Stake (1995) refers to as 'emic' issues. (The participants' issues that emerged throughout this study were plentiful and are the focus of a forthcoming paper.) However, one area of interest that did emerge in relation to rites of passage was, again, separation. These instances differed from van Gennep's meaning of being separated from one's original social pattern, in that this time participants were grieving the loss of their first phase group (the group they were with for the first four weeks). My explanation of this is that the first phase group came to take the place of their friends and family back home; it became their most recent 'original social pattern'. It must be noted that the first phase group was also together for the induction week – the first few days any of them had spent together in Africa, and a time full of emotional ups and downs, as the Round 1 interviews indicated. Some feelings of being separated from the first phase group are articulated below:

It was really unsettling I found, 'cause we had all bonded as a group. Nonnie, 18

I absolutely loved my first group and I still miss them...I'm still trying to get used to it. Lily, 18

That was a shock. I didn't expect to miss them so much...It's kind of weird 'cause now you're getting more letters from your first phase group than from home. It's really bizarre. Ronie, 25

It just threw me completely. I was really upset to leave the people I'd been with for four weeks. It was really difficult. Tracy, 22

It was quite emotional, changing over. I don't think anyone in our group wanted to change groups. Rufus, 23

As the above testimonials show, the theme of separation from the social pattern the participants had become accustomed to was strong. I would suggest that it was as powerful as the Round 2 discussion of being separated from one's UK social pattern. Along with this dominant aspect of separation from the first phase group, the Round 2 and Round 3 interviews (both on expedition) showed that the uniqueness of being in rural West Africa with a rich mix of young people from all over the world fits with van Gennep's middle phase of

transition, as the young people were in a place which was unlike any they had been to before and might go to again. Interviews aside, there were also several straight-forward observations of the expedition that indicated it was not a rite of passage. First, the young people were not educated about their own cultural heritage, with particular reference to the victories and struggles of their people – an important antecedent to becoming an adult in the community (Houston, 1996; van Wyk, 2002). Second, the adults (staff) did not discuss with them their imminent elevated status within society – their new rights and responsibilities. And third, there was no solitary time where the young people might reflect on their past and consider the adult they would become. These last two indicators of rites of passage have been outlined as features of indigenous coming of age processes that could be adopted by modern educational programmes (Gibbons, 1974; Maddern, 1990; Suler, 1990).

### **Incorporation**

Turner (1969) expanded on van Gennep's ideas of incorporation, stating that the passage was consummated in the third phase, when the "passenger" returns to a stable state and assumes certain rights and obligations regarding behaviour towards others. One of my questions during the Round 4 interviews (approximately two weeks before the venturers flew home) was "What's it going to be like to go home?"

It's going to be weird...I don't know.  
Sophie, 20

Really, really hard. Really difficult because you've got used to Raleigh life...It'll definitely be scary, but I think it'll take me at least a few weeks to actually feel comfortable when I go home. Lily, 18

I'm getting a little worried about how I'm going to react when I get home.  
Stuart, 25

I can't help but feel that everything's going to be a bit unsatisfying and dry...it will be a massive anti-climax for reasons we can't see yet. Sylvio, 18

I think it's going to be quite difficult at first, to fit back into normal life.  
Tracy, 22

The anxiety surrounding not knowing what to expect when they got back to the UK and whether their friends, family and peers would regard them differently was articulated in every single interview. The Round 4 interviews (towards the end of the expedition) showed an overwhelming feeling of anxiety surrounding

the venturers' return home. These concerns were similar to those highlighted by Allison (2000, 2002) on his research on what he called "post-expedition adjustment" with the British Schools Exploring Society. Perhaps a more formal 'preparing for the return home' session would be useful to address these concerns before the venturers returned to the UK.

The Round 5 interviews took place six months post-expedition and helped shed more light on whether rites of incorporation were part of the Raleigh experience or not. These interviews highlighted three indicators of how a Raleigh expedition is not a rite of passage. First, a number of participants did not return to their original social pattern. Second, most participants had no formal meetings about how their status, roles, and responsibilities might change once back in the UK. And finally, there was no event where the young people were presented to their community as adults.

In the Round 4 interviews, it became apparent that a number of the young people would not be going back to wherever they were when they came on expedition. In most cases, those who did not return home went travelling or moved so they could start university or a new job. By not returning to their original social structure to assume new rights and obligations, venturers were not experiencing van Gennep's (1960) third stage of incorporation. In a sense, the young people were starting a new rite of passage without finishing the first one!

Though Raleigh provided a post-expedition, follow-up residential to all the YDP venturers – with the aim of processing the whole experience – only one of them elected to go. Apart from the follow-up residential, there was no formal event where the young people were presented before the adults of the community. This final ritual would serve to celebrate the achievements and safe return of the young people, to have them declare in front of their communities that they are ready to contribute to the community rather than be dependent on it, and for the older people to accept these young people as adults (Gibbons, 1974; Kessler, 1996; Venable, 1997). The lack of rites of incorporation with Raleigh expeditions is consistent with Bell's (2003) claim that most outdoor programmes are ineffective at facilitating this third and critical stage of van Gennep's (1960) model.

### **Conclusion**

Van Gennep's (1960) theme of separation featured strongly in this Raleigh expedition, most commonly manifesting itself through homesickness (missing friends and family) and a strange 'rollercoaster' of emotions due to the excitement and anxiety of being with new people in a novel setting. Feelings of separation were evident not only in leaving home, but also

in leaving the 'new original social pattern' of the first phase group.

The interviews indicated that van Gennepe's transition stage is analogous to the main part of the expedition, as the physical environment and social order is unlike anything the participants have ever come across – "a once in a lifetime experience". Unlike transition stages of many other traditional cultures (see van Gennepe, 1960 and Turner, 1967) there were no instances of the young people being told about their cultural heritage, informed about the rights and responsibilities that came with their new status in society, and no time of seclusion for them to reflect on their transformation.

It is in the incorporation stage where the expedition as rite of passage loses more plausibility. Although some venturers returned to their original social structure, many did not, or they returned only for a few days before leaving again. And, although there was a follow-up residential programme organised by Raleigh, 13 of my 14 study participants were either excluded because they were not YDP venturers or elected not to go. Though on expedition there may have been some focus on what people were gaining from their experience, there appeared to be little attention paid to discussing how a young person could return to be a contributor to their community rather than being a drain on its resources.

Is an overseas expedition with Raleigh International a rite of passage into adulthood? Interpreting 70 interviews conducted over a ten-month period suggests that while leaving home to go on a challenging adventure and then returning may fit the three-stage structure of van Gennepe's (1960) rites of passage, at closer inspection what takes place during the three stages is only partly congruent with rites of passage.

In fairness to Raleigh, I examined their programme through a lens of my choosing, rather than one directly related to their programme. Just because I have concluded that a Raleigh expedition is not entirely a rite of passage, this does not disqualify it from being a powerful, positive and worthwhile event in a young person's life. Furthermore, it is important to be reminded that van Gennepe's work was published almost one hundred years ago and may not be an appropriate model for 21<sup>st</sup> century expedition providers to follow. I believe the rites of passage model has its uses but has elements that may not apply to us (e.g., not returning to - and remaining in - our original social pattern) or has elements we may not wish to apply (e.g., bodily mutilation).

My hope is that this investigation will build upon the dearth of work written on rites of passage as a tool for coming-of-age programmes

in the field of outdoor education. Organisations offering expedition programmes might better serve their participants and their communities if they adopted a rites of passage model that worked with young people as they travelled through each phase of separation, transition, and incorporation. In particular, expedition providers may benefit from considering Venable's (1997) example, as he employed formal rituals that included the home community before the expedition (or 'trial') and afterwards. This way everyone in the community would be aware of the young people embarking on an arduous journey of initiation, and then welcome them back into their new roles as both adults and contributors to the community.

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### About the Author

Originally from Canada, Simon has worked in outdoor programmes all over the world since 1992. He is completing a PhD on the overseas expedition experience at University College Chichester, England. Simon can be reached at [s.beames@ucc.ac.uk](mailto:s.beames@ucc.ac.uk)