

## **ANTH 3324. Experiencing Rites of Passage: Anthropological and Experiential Perspectives**



**Location: SMU-in-Taos & Carson National Forest**  
**Professor: Neely Myers, PHD**  
**Guest Instructors: Nancy Wiens, PHD; Albert Mitugo, MSc**  
**3 credits**

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Students in this course will have the opportunity to use anthropological theory and methods to better understand the importance of Rites of Passage for diverse human cultures around the world, including—potentially—their own. This course offers students both an academic (theory, lab methods) and experiential exploration of ancient and modern rites of passage and their importance across cultures for human adaptation, healing, and flourishing. Drawing on anthropological works, as well as works from religion and psychology, we will explore the theory and methods that inform classic, visual, and modern studies of rites of passage. Students will also use one of the core anthropological methods, ethnographic fieldwork, to engage in participant-observation and write fieldnotes during their own rite of passage in the Rites of Passage Lab, which will take place off campus in a wilderness area of Carson National Forest. Their lab experience and course readings will be synthesized in a final presentation on rites of passage around the world that incorporates their new anthropological perspectives from coursework and fieldwork.

This course, including the Rites of Passage Lab, will be guided by the main instructor (Dr. Neely

Myers), a wilderness rites of passage guide with 25 years of experience (Dr. Nancy Wiens), our SMU Outdoors safety specialist (Albert Mitugo, MEd).<sup>1</sup>

This travel course has 2 components: Academic Course Work and the Rites of Passage Lab. We will spend six days engaged in academic course work learning about rites of passage around the world, anthropological theory about rites of passage, and anthropological methods at the SMU-in-Taos campus. Students will learn more about the diverse range of Rites of Passages used to mark life transitions (birth, death, puberty) across cultures, including in the American Southwest. They will also think through how they will personalize their own rite of passage during the Rites of Passage Lab.

Next, we will begin the Rites of Passage Lab, which will give students the opportunity to experience firsthand the four stages of the Rites of Passage about which they have read (severance, threshold, reincorporation, reintegration). By engaging in ethnographic fieldwork on their own Rites of Passage experience (known as autoethnography) through participant-observation and the keeping of daily fieldnotes, students will learn how to apply the methods of anthropology to a real-world experience so as to learn more about the rites of passage experience from a first-person perspective. All students will travel as a group to a wilderness area in Carson National Forest, about an hour from the Taos campus. They will have been prepared to choose whether or not they will participate in three traditional “challenges by choice:” no food, no shelter, and no companionship. Each of these elements of the Rite of Passage can be amended to meet particular student needs, e.g. food in order to take medications or other health needs, a tent to adjust for conditions in nature, and interaction with the three instructors, who will be in the field with students to provide needed support of any kind. No camping or backpacking experience is needed, and all participants will receive training in wilderness safety as part of the course. After four nights in Carson National Forest, we will return to campus for the Reincorporation and Reintegration Stages of the Lab.

Centrally, the course will seek to facilitate students’ discernment of their life purpose at this important juncture between college and young adulthood. We will encourage students to reflect on this experience from numerous perspectives: personal and communal, interior and exterior, social, ecological, and spiritual. The course aims to give them a chance to reflect intentionally on their experiences at SMU and to help empower them to become the worldchangers they came here to be. The four stages of their rite of passage will be carried out in group projects with their peers to build a sense of *communitas* and reintegration that anthropologists have found to be so central to rites of passage around the world.

On the final day of the course, students will analyze the fieldnotes they collected during their Rites of Passage Lab from an anthropological perspective using course materials to integrate their field experience with the experiences of the four stages of Rites of Passage for people across cultures. They will use anthropological theory about the four stages (e.g., liminality) to make sense of their experiences and the experiences of others. These will be synthesized into a 15-minute oral Powerpoint presentation.

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<sup>1</sup> Importantly, neither the academic nor the practical elements of this course are ‘playing Indian.’ Rather, the responsible, interdisciplinary use of anthropological and ritual studies scholarship on wilderness rites of passage accents the racial, ethnic, and religious contextualization of the practical rite in the wilderness. This class will avoid cultural appropriation and instead uphold a comparative, experiential approach that encourages students to create a rite of passage that is meaningful for them, drawing on their own traditions.

**Note for Students Regarding Application Process**

This course is available by instructor approval only. Please email Professor Neely Myers ([namyers@smu.edu](mailto:namyers@smu.edu)) a reflective statement (one single-spaced pages, 11 point font, Arial) about your intention in taking this course and participating in an experiential wilderness rite of passage prior to the deadlines for enrollment in this class. Please focus on these questions: Is there anything specific that you intend to ask yourself or try to mark in your life during this course? Are there any life transitions you are undergoing or celebrating or preparing to undergo and how might this course help you with those transitions?

**UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES****1) For Proficiency, Human Diversity. 1a.**

1a. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the historical, cultural, social, or political conditions of identity formation and function in human society, including the ways in which these conditions influence individual or group status, treatment, or accomplishments.

→ This requirement will be assessed by your grade for the **Reading Responses** to the Rites of Passage readings, which will speak to the ways rites of passage shape identity formation, including the historical, social and political elements of rites of passage across human cultures.

**2) For Proficiency, Oral Competency. 1 and 2**

1. Students will be able to select, organize and use appropriate evidence or information to suit a specific or targeted audience.
2. Students will be able to use appropriate vocal and visual cues to deliver a presentation to a specific or targeted audience.

→ This proficiency will be assessed through the grade on the **Rites of Passage Presentation**. On the final day of the course, students will share the story of their own rite of passage with the class in a 30-minute presentation of their experience. They will choose appropriate audiovisual materials to guide listeners through their story.

**BASIS OF FINAL GRADE**

1. **Attendance and Participation. 20%**
2. **Rites of Passage Lab (group project grades, 5% each). 20%**
3. **Reading Responses. 20%**
4. **Safety Quizzes. 5%**
5. **Ethnographic Fieldnotes. 5%**
6. **Rites of Passage Presentation. 30%**

**1. Attendance and Participation. 20%.**

Please attend class and participate regularly. I expect excellent attendance. Students who wish to be excused from class due to a religious holiday must inform the Professor by 9 AM on the first day of class. No exceptions. Participation means engaging in course discussions and projects to the best of your ability.

**2. Rites of Passage Lab. 20%**

The Rites of Passage Lab lasts for ten days. During this Lab, students will engage in

ethnographic participant-observation of their own rites of passage experience. During these ten days, four group projects will be assigned for each of the four stages of the rite of passage ( that helps students incorporate what they have learned academically and in their own lab work about each of the four stages of rites of passage across cultures (severance, threshold/liminal, reincorporation, and integration) and in their own experience. There will be one project for each stage that reflect on and incorporates cultural traditions we have read about to help students understand and explore ethnographically their own experience of that stage. Fieldnotes will be taken every day, as in all anthropological fieldwork, to document and reflect on the experiences of the day in terms of course materials and lab work.

### **3. Reading Responses. 20%.**

Students will write FIVE 2-page, double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font, reading response that connects course readings to class themes and their own life experiences and expectations for their own upcoming rite of passage. Reading responses that need to be re-written can be turned in on the indicated day.

### **4. Safety Quizzes. 5%.**

To minimize risk, students will be quizzed on safety trainings offered during the course. Students will be assessed on a Pass/Fail basis. Students will not be able to leave for the wilderness site that have not passed their safety quizzes.

### **5. Ethnographic Fieldnotes. 5%.**

Fieldnotes are a key method of all anthropology research. During your fieldwork time of the Rites of Passage Lab, students will keep fieldnotes on what they observe (hear, taste, feel, smell, see) and feel (in their bodies, in their hearts and minds). In order to protect the confidentiality of other students, students' fieldnotes will focus on their own individual experiences in the Rite of Passage (autoethnography) and will not record the experiences of others. No one but the ethnographer (student) will read these journals, but Dr. Myers will check to be sure they are complete on the last day of class to offer a grade. Fieldnotes will be used to help students put together their Rites of Passage Presentation.

### **6. Rites of Passage Presentation (30%)**

On the final day of the course, using their course notes and fieldnotes, students will bring together their academic coursework (examples from readings, films and lectures) and lab work (fieldnotes) in a 15-minute presentation about the four stages of their own rite of passage. Students will use anthropological methods during their Rites of Passage Lab, and then synthesize their lab experiences with what they have learned about the experiences of diverse humans in other societies in this final presentation. They will choose appropriate audiovisual materials to link their experiences to other cultural traditions.

## **UNIVERSITY POLICIES**

**Disability Accommodations:** Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first register with Disability Accommodations & Success Strategies (DASS). Students can call 214-768-1470 or visit <http://www.smu.edu/Provost/ALEC/DASS> to begin the process. Once registered, students should then schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible, present a DASS Accommodation Letter, and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement.

**Religious Observance:** Religiously observant students wishing to be absent on holidays

that require missing class should notify their professors in writing at the beginning of the semester, and should discuss with them, in advance, acceptable ways of making up any work missed because of the absence. (See University Policy No. 1.9.)

**Excused Absences for University Extracurricular Activities:** Students participating in an officially sanctioned, scheduled University extracurricular activity should be given the opportunity to make up class assignments or other graded assignments missed as a result of their participation. It is the responsibility of the student to make arrangements with the instructor prior to any missed scheduled examination or other missed assignment for making up the work. (University Undergraduate Catalogue)

**Academic Dishonesty:** Students are expected to adhere to the University Honor Code. Students who do not will receive a 0 on the assignment in question. If a student is caught engaging in academic dishonesty on more than one occasion, further disciplinary actions will be sought. The definition, set by SMU students, appears below:

*We, the students of Southern Methodist University, with the approval of the Provost and the Dean of Student Life, establish the Honor Council to uphold the standards of academic integrity set forth in the Honor Code. Acts punishable under the code include, but are not limited to the following:*

**ACADEMIC SABOTAGE** *Intentionally taking any action which negatively affects the academic work of another student.*

**CHEATING** *Intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, or study aids in any academic exercise.*

**FABRICATION** *Intentional and unauthorized falsification or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise.*

**FACILITATING ACADEMIC DISHONESTY** *Intentionally or knowingly helping or attempting to help another to violate any provision of the Honor Code.*

**PLAGIARISM** *Intentionally or knowingly representing the words or ideas of another as one's own in any academic exercise.*

## BOOKS FOR PURCHASE

Teresa Pijoan, Pueblo Indian Wisdom: Native American Legends and Mythology. Santa Fe, NM: Sunstone Press, 2000.

Foster, Steven and Meredith Little. The Trail to the Sacred Mountain: A Vision Fast Handbook for Adults. Big Pine, CA: Rites of Passage Press, 1984.

(Provides an overview of global traditions related to Wilderness Rites of Passage, as well as useful information like Packing Lists, safety information, and other practical advice).

All other readings will be available on the course website.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### **Pre-Course Recommended Activities**

**April 1:** Begin Rite of Passage Journal: Keep a journal that focuses on your excitement, fears, concerns, things you anticipate, and question related to your upcoming Rite of Passage. Begin 1 April and write once per week, even a few words about what is arising in you. I will not read these journals.

### **On-Site Assignments**

## Tuesday, June 4: Student arrival on campus—welcome to SMU-in-Taos!

### Part I. Academic Coursework

#### Wednesday, June 5: Introduction to Rites of Passage (63 pages) and Ethnographic Methods

- *Morning (8-12)*
  - Turner, Victor. 1967. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," Forest of Symbols, pgs. 3-19
  - Stevens, Jr., Phillip, 1991/2011. Play and Liminality in Rites of Passage: From Elder to Ancestor in West Africa. Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 237-257. 2011 (ed.) *Anthropology of Religion: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies*. 4 volumes. London: Routledge.
  - Morinis, Alan. "The Ritual Experience: Pain and the Transformation of Consciousness in Ordeals of Initiation," *Ethos* 13 (1985), 150-174. [Ethos is the flagship journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology.]
  - Tedlock, Barbara. From participant observation to the observation of participation: The merging of narrative and ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 47(1), 69-94
  - **READING RESPONSE 1 IS DUE IN CLASS**

#### Thursday, June 6: Cross-Cultural Rites for Adolescents: Anthropological Classics and Ethnographic Methods (~90 pages)

- *Morning (8-12)*
  - Ortiz, Alfonso. 1972. The Tewa World: Space, Time and Becoming in a Pueblo Society, University of Chicago Press. Selected passages TBA. (~30 pages)
  - Richards, Audrey. 1956. Chisungu: a girls' initiation ceremony among the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia. London, England: Faber and Faber. Selected passages TBA. (~30 pages)
  - Herdt, Gil. 1981. Guardians of the Flutes. Volume 1. Idioms of Masculinity. University of Chicago Press. Selected passages TBA. (~30 pages)
  - Critical conversation about ethnographic methods and ethics.
  - **READING RESPONSE 2 IS DUE IN CLASS**

#### Friday, June 7: Rites of Passage Today (~62 pages)

- *Morning (8-12)*
  - Whitehouse, H., Lanman, J. A. (2014). The ties that bind us: Ritual, fusion, and identification. *Current Anthropology*, 55(6), pp. 674-695. (21 pages)
  - Eberhardt, Nancy. 2009. "Rite of Passage or Ethnic Festival? Shan Buddhist Novice Ordinations in Northern Thailand." *Contemporary Buddhism* 10 (1): 51–63. doi:10.1080/14639940902968913 (12 pages)
  - Turner E. (2012) Rites of Passage: Communitas in Times of Change. In: Communitas. Contemporary Anthropology of Religion. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. Pp. 167-196. (29 pages)
  - Visual Methods in Anthropology
  - In-class Film: *Inside an Apache Rite of Passage to Womanhood* (20 minutes)
  - **READING RESPONSE 3 DUE IN CLASS**

#### Monday, June 10: Anthropological Perspectives: Severance Stage (~40 pages)

- *Morning (8-12)*
  - Reading: Teresa Pijoan, Pueblo Indian Wisdom: Native American Legends and Mythology, select two stories to write about for reading response (~40 pages)
  - Severance Stage Group Project
  - Severance Stage Group Discussion and Project
  - **READING RESPONSE 4 DUE IN CLASS**
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**Tuesday, June 11: Anthropological Perspectives: Threshold Stage (~40 pages)**

- *Morning (8-12)*
  - Foster, Steven and Meredith Little. The Trail to the Sacred Mountain: A Vision Fast Handbook for Adults. Big Pine, CA: Rites of Passage Press, 1984. (~40 pages) [This reading offers background on a long tradition of Wilderness Rites of Passage around the world and ideas for personalizing one's own rite of passage.]
  - **READING RESPONSE 5 DUE IN CLASS**

**Wednesday, June 12: Preparing for a Wilderness Rite of Passage: New Mexico Ecology, Environmental Sustainability, and Staying Safe**

- *Morning (8-12), Guest Lecturer: Albert Mitugo*
  - Flora and Fauna in New Mexico, Guest Lecturer: Albert Mitugo
  - Wilderness Safety Workshop, Guest Lecturer: Albert Mitugo
  - Ecology and Environmental Sustainability in the Southwest, Albert Mitugo
  - Safety Quiz 1<sup>2</sup>
  - **ALL READING RESPONSE RE-WRITES ARE DUE BY 5 PM.**

**Part II. Rites of Passage Lab (4 Stages: Severance, Threshold, Reincorporation, Reintegration)**

**Thursday, June 13: Severance Stage Lab**

- Travel to Carson National Forest (~1 hour), set up base camp and map solo sites, review safety protocols
- Severance Stage Group Project and Ethnographic Fieldwork
- Severance Stage Fieldnotes
- Safety Quiz 2 (on-site)

**Friday, June 14 through Sunday, June 16: Threshold Stage Lab**

- Threshold Stage Group Project and Ethnographic Fieldwork
- Threshold Stage Fieldnotes Daily

**Monday, June 17: Reincorporation Stage Lab**

- Reincorporation Stage Group Project and Ethnographic Fieldwork (AM)
- Return to on-campus campsite (PM)
- Reincorporation Stage Fieldnotes

**Tuesday, June 18-Wednesday, June 19: Reintegration Stage Lab**

- Reintegration Stage Group Project and Ethnographic Fieldwork
- Reintegration Stage Fieldnotes
- Return to main campus to prepare for departure

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<sup>2</sup> To document that students understand safety procedures, and by request of SMU Risk Management, we added Safety Quizzes to the course.

**Part III. Putting It All Together**

**Thursday, June 20 (4 contact hours)**

- Rites of Passage Presentation Day and Celebration

**Friday, June 21**

- Student travel day

## **APPENDIX I. About the Instructors**

### **Overview of Course Faculty**

The various components of the course requires one full-time faculty member and two guest instructors. The full-time faculty, Dr. Myers, is responsible for academic coursework, insuring that Student Learning Outcomes are met, enforcing University Policies, and all student assessment. Dr. Wiens, an experienced wilderness rite of passage guide, will lead the experiential component of the course, the Wilderness Rite of Passage. The third, Albert Mitugo, will train students in wilderness safety procedures and then support student safety during our time in the backcountry. All three instructors will be present for the wilderness part of the trip

### **Course Faculty Bios**

**Neely Myers, Ph.D.** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at SMU where she is in her fifth year of teaching for the Anthropology majors and Biomedical Minors, as well as the Health and Society majors. Her research expertise lies at the intersections of psychological and medical anthropology, and focuses on cross-cultural experiences of mental health, mental illness, and well-being. She has extensive experience engaging in ethnographic research projects with diverse communities in the United States and northern Tanzania. Her publications include a scholarly monograph and over 20 articles and book chapters related to anthropological studies of mental health and mental health care. In the summer of 2017, Dr. Myers joined Dr. Nancy Wiens for her course on Wilderness Rites of Passage at Wake Forest University. Dr. Myers is now apprenticing with Dr. Wiens to become a Wilderness Rites of Passage guide. Until she has completed her apprenticeship, Dr. Myers will rely on Dr. Wiens to lead the students for the experiential component of the course. Dr. Myers will be responsible for the academic components of the course as well as being the leader of the group.

**Nancy Wiens, PhD, M.Div.** has been an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) since 1991 and a Spiritual Director since 1997. From 1993-1995, she trained with Steven Foster and Meredith Little (whose works we read in this course) who are also known as the grandparents of the Modern Rite of Passage, at the School of Lost Borders. For the past 25 years, Dr. Wiens has led dozens of wilderness rites of passage across the United States, from Kauai to North Carolina (including with college students at Wake Forest University in 2017 and at the University of the Redlands), to initiate and mark transitions with people from 17 years old into their 70s, Nancy also mentors apprentices to become Wilderness Guides and has been a member of the international Wilderness Guides Council since 1995 (see: <https://www.wildernessguidescouncil.org/>). Her Ph.D., received in 2007, focused an interdisciplinary lens on Christian theology, spiritual studies and natural science. Dr. Wiens is also certified in Wilderness First Aid. Dr. Wiens will assist with the safety needs of the students, and will be responsible for leading the experiential component of the course.

**Albert Mitugo, M.Ed.** earned a Master's in Educational Leadership from SMU in 2011 and has over 20 years of experience in outdoor experiential education. He has been running the SMU Outdoor Adventure Program for the last 10 years. Albert views the outdoor environment as a change agent for many students on and off campus. Albert has racked up over 180 weeks in the back country (wilderness) during his outdoor career, often in very remote places. He is very familiar with the wilderness areas around Taos (including the Carson National Forest where we plan to go) because he has used the area many times as the outdoor classroom for students he trains in leadership. He is a certified level one group facilitator, a current Wilderness First Responder (80 hour certification in wilderness emergency medical response) and a current

American Red Cross Instructor. Albert will be in charge of training students to be safe, as well as the student safety expert for the team while we are in the backcountry.

We will travel to a site that is within 60 miles of the SMU-in-Taos campus and the city of Taos. Albert Mitugo, a certified Wilderness First Responder and Nancy Wiens, certified in Wilderness First Aid, and Neely Myers (SMU Faculty Member) will both be on-site around-the-clock during our time off-campus. Safety training prior to departure for students, on-site safety support at base camp during our time in the wilderness, having a satellite phone on-site for emergencies, having a van on-site, back-up equipment and supplies (including food and water), detailed maps of the camping area and solo sites, and a buddy system during solo time, are all details of the plan we are developing.