Liminal Spaces and Youth Transition: Church-Based Post-School Programs as Contemporary Rites of Passage in an African Context

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Abstract

Late adolescence and young adulthood are critical life stages that coincide with several transitions: leaving school and entering college or the workforce, attaining physical maturity, and negotiating complex psychosocial adjustment away from home. In Africa, urbanization, globalization, and broader cultural change have eroded the traditional rites of passage that once prepared young people for adult roles, leaving a transitional vacuum in which youth are often unprepared for the responsibilities and challenges of adulthood. This paper examines how church-based post-school programs provide community-based, structured spaces for mentorship and growth that address this gap. The study was guided by one main question: how church-based programs function as contemporary rites of passage for youth transition and three sub-questions concerning how young adults experience the transition, how the programs facilitate it, and how they can be improved. Drawing on qualitative data from three programs in Nairobi and on Van Gennep's and Turner's theories of rites of passage and liminality, the paper argues that youth can still be prepared, within an organized system, with the knowledge, skills, and values that empower them to make sound decisions and live responsible lives beyond school, following Jesus Christ. The findings indicate that leaving school produces a liminal phase of separation marked by freedom, idleness, anxiety, and vulnerability to negative influences; that the programs operate as liminal spaces that foster peer communitas, relational mentorship, spiritual formation, and identity; and that re-incorporation occurs through graduation, service, and pre-campus preparation. The paper recommends relational and holistic programming, capacity building for mentors and facilitators, intentional peer-community formation, and partnerships among churches, families, and other institutions to extend such support to more youth in Kenya and beyond.

Keywords*:* Youth Transition; Rites of Passage; Liminality; Church-Based Programs; Emerging Adulthood

Introduction

The school system in Kenya offers considerable stability for young people, as the school routine shapes nearly every aspect of daily life. In boarding schools, especially, meals, accommodation, academic and non-academic responsibilities, dress code, communal living, accountability, and rewards for accomplishment are predetermined by school rules. This external structure often ends abruptly upon completion of secondary school. Yet contemporary schooling has been widely critiqued for privileging cognitive achievement and examination performance over the holistic, moral, and social formation that prepares young people for life (Moran 2019, 5; Karei 2019, 5). As a result, many youths leave school ill-equipped to cope with the demands of post-school life. The first weeks and months before joining the next institution of learning or the workforce are particularly challenging, marked by sudden freedom, boredom, and a lack of guidance (Finkielsztein 2024). In the absence of meaningful engagement and transitional support, some youth become vulnerable to unhealthy coping mechanisms and unstructured life patterns, including alcohol and substance use, which research has documented among first-year students in Nairobi (Musyoka et al. 2020, 11).

On the one hand, then, leaving school removes the scaffolding that has organized young people's lives. On the other hand, African youth simultaneously encounter socioeconomic, vocational, and identity challenges as they navigate a post-school season that can be considerably prolonged (Honwana 2014, 28; Oosterom and Sumberg 2021, 5). The result is a double disruption: the familiar structure disappears at the very moment that demanding new choices about study, work, relationships, and faith must be made. Several church agencies have responded to this gap by developing programs that occupy the period between school and the next stage of life (Karei 2019, 6; Mwangi 2018, 342). This paper focuses specifically on such faith-based post-school transition programs and asks how they function as contemporary rites of passage. Moreover, although male initiation still occurs in many Kenyan communities, it typically coincides with the post-primary, pre-secondary period and early teenage years rather than early adulthood, and so does not address the school-to-college threshold that is the concern here (Oino et al. 2023, 171; Machoni et al. 2024, 47).

There are limited studies on faith-based post-school programs as structured transitional or liminal spaces. The few available studies tend to examine generic college-transition or bridge programs, secular youth development, or the spiritual formation of adolescents within church

youth groups, rather than the in-between, liminal phase that follows secondary school in an African Christian context (Bulger 2024; Sorenson 2018, 184; Powell, Bradbury, and Griffin 2023). This liminal phase, the betwixt-and-between period when the young person has shed the status of school pupil but has not yet assumed that of college student or worker, is precisely where this study locates the church-based program.

This article therefore examines church-based programs as contemporary rites of passage that facilitate youth's transition into adulthood. The main research question is: How do church-based programs function as contemporary rites of passage for youth transition? To address it, the study interrogated three sub-questions: (1) How do young adults experience the transition from school to post-school life? (2) To what extent do church-based programs facilitate a successful changeover into post-school life? (3) How can these transition programs be improved? The study, therefore, sought to examine youths' perceptions of the transition, assess the role of the programs, and identify ways to strengthen them.

Literature Review

Youth Transition to Adulthood in Africa

Traditional African societies had clearly defined transitions into adulthood, with puberty or initiation rites being among the most prominent. These maturity rites, chiefly male circumcision and, in some communities, forms of female initiation, marked a change in status through a communal ceremony signifying entry into adulthood (Alcorta and Sosis 2020, 3; Lebese et al. 2022, 54). The process was not a single event but a sequence. Candidates were first separated from the community, then secluded in the "wilderness" for instruction in norms, values, and adult responsibilities, subjected to ordeals that tested endurance, and only then reincorporated. Rejoining the family and community symbolized a "rebirth" with a new personality, a changed status, and permission to access adult knowledge and societal secrets (Lebese et al. 2022, 54; Sebbeh 2020, 45).

These rites, however, were not without harm. Both during seclusion and after reintegration, participants could experience negative physical, psychological, emotional, and social effects, including the risk of injury and death, the entrenchment of gender inequality, and the violation of girls' and women's rights (Schroeder et al. 2022, 187–88). The most widely contested of the female rites is female genital mutilation (FGM); despite sustained opposition from governments and the media, it remains prevalent in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly among rural, less educated,

and unemployed women (Luoga et al. 2025, 15). It should be clarified that this study does not focus on FGM or male circumcision as such; rather, it treats the institution of rites of passage, including its decline and its documented harms, as the conceptual backdrop against which contemporary, church-based alternatives are examined.

Youth transition to adulthood in Africa is becoming increasingly complex for several interrelated reasons. Among these, colonization, Western cultural influence, formal schooling, urbanization, and economic precarity have together reshaped African rites of passage, particularly by delaying transitions and promoting individualized rather than communal maturity (Mawere 2024, 22–23; Karanu and Nzengya 2025, 20). The initiation rite is no longer the sole determinant of maturity, and completing school no longer guarantees the conventional markers of adulthood: employment, marriage, and settling down. Instead, many young people remain unemployed and unsettled long after college, a condition Honwana terms "waithood," a prolonged and ambiguous period of suspension between childhood and full adult status (Honwana 2014, 28; Oosterom 2021, 142). Recent studies on markers of adulthood in the African context Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya recognize the complex influence of sociocultural dynamics that distinguishes youth transition there from Western patterns; young people report an incomplete attainment of adulthood because they miss markers such as financial independence and the assumption of family responsibilities, owing to delayed employment and marriage (Muchiri-Muchai et al. 2024, 13; Heckert et al. 2021, 628).

Efforts have been made to preserve the maturity rites in modern times. Among the Bantu-speaking peoples of Southern Africa, initiation schools for boys and girls integrated identity, social values, and norms with the expectation of positive moral lifestyles. However, the practice has experienced both decline and resurgence in contemporary society (Hammond-Tooke 2024). Naming, for instance, was an integral part of initiation among the Basotho, signifying holistic development and maturity (Hala-hala 2021, 64). Initiation thus carried symbolism beyond the physical cut, shaping identity and elevating initiates' status, with moral values transmitted during intense seclusion. In Kenya, the Kisii community has historically maintained circumcision and marriage as rites that confer social status and acceptance for both genders (Oino et al. 2023, 171). Kisii boys, circumcised between the ages of twelve and fifteen, consented to the rite, though the elders had the final say over its timing and conduct. Christianity and Western culture have steadily eroded these practices through urbanization and modernization (Machoni et al. 2024, 47). This erosion has occurred as schooling competes with the seclusion calendar, as church teaching

reframes or rejects the rite's spiritual elements, and as migration to towns removes youth from the elders who once superintended the process. Modern rural transitions, moreover, tend to favor young men, who are more likely than women to be employed and economically engaged, partly because of women's domestic roles (Heckert et al. 2021, 628). From the Bukusu context, Wanyama argues for a notion of masculinity that extends beyond the initiation rite while still emphasizing its symbolic function in shaping men's behavior and personality (Wanyama 2025, 10–11). Across these communities, maturity rites have taken physical forms such as circumcision, scarification, or tooth removal, and have been characterized by seclusion, social and spiritual instruction, and, in some cases, early sexual debut for boys (Karanu and Nzengya 2025, 20; Plummer 2021).

In response to both the decline and the documented harms of traditional rites, several communities, non-governmental organizations, and churches in Kenya have developed Alternative Rites of Passage (ARP). These programs retain the instructional and celebratory dimensions of the traditional Rite of Passage (ROP) while removing the physical cut and the element of coercion; they safeguard initiates' rights by securing informed consent, replacing harmful ordeals with mentorship and life-skills education, and involving parents and trained facilitators rather than relying solely on the elders (Karanu and Nzengya 2025, 21). Such modified rites seek to address the undesirable outcomes of traditional ROPs and to fill gaps left by weakened passages, though they rarely address the post-secondary transition specifically. The church's own response to traditional initiation has ranged from outright rejection to careful adaptation into a Christian schema, since the practice was traditionally regarded as spiritual and performed in honor of the ancestors (Weyel et al. 2022a, 382).

A small but growing body of work surveys church-based and para-church youth programs in Kenya and the wider region. Discipleship and mentorship initiatives such as small-group formation among undergraduates in Nairobi (Mwangi 2018, 342), transformative discipleship of young adults within established Kenyan churches (Karei 2019), and Scripture Union's school-based disciple-making in Ghana (Awuah-Gyawu and White 2025, 105) illustrate the church's increasing investment in this age group. The fading or modification of traditional rites, combined with prolonged post-school dependency, creates a liminal stage that is rarely addressed by existing family, educational, or communal structures, and it is into this gap that a few Kenyan church-based institutions have stepped. In sum, this subsection has shown that African youth transition is

becoming protracted and individualized; that traditional rites have weakened and, where harmful, have rightly been contested; and that church-based programs are emerging as one structured response to the resulting transitional vacuum.

African Rites of Passage

African rites of passage were significant for marking life transitions such as birth, maturity, marriage, and death, each conferring a new status and shaping identity (Insoll 2011; Alcorta and Sosis 2020, 3). In particular, the rites of initiation were significant for "human wellbeing, communal identity, spiritual security, and wholeness" (Weyel et al. 2022b, 380). The seclusion period functioned as a classroom for communal instruction, during which the youth acquired the norms, values, customs, and taboos that inducted them into their rights, roles, and responsibilities as adults (Sebbeh 2020, 45; Lebese et al. 2022, 54). These processes integrated moral formation and ethics, thereby transmitting the community's ideals to the next generation. The setting for seclusion was typically the wilderness, where challenging experiences tested manhood and instilled resilience and endurance (Ali 2021, 4). Significantly, the rite was mandatory and intergenerational; those who declined risked being viewed as self-seeking misfits, undeserving of the recognition, respect, and trust accorded to full adults (Sebbeh 2020, 42). This subsection underscores that the traditional rite was at once educational, moral, communal, and spiritual, a combination that contemporary programs implicitly seek to recover.

Liminality and Rites of Passage Theory

Classical theories on rites of passage are attributed to Van Gennep and Victor Turner. In 1909, Van Gennep introduced the concept of rites of passage across various life stages, including initiation. He observed three phases of separation (pre-liminal), liminality, and reintegration (post-liminal), with the liminal phase being transformational (Gennep 2022, 11). His threefold process views the in-between stage as transformative, with participation in rites and rituals leading to a change of status upon re-incorporation. The theory has been applied across psychology, sociology, and religion since its inception. However, while scholars acknowledge the foundation Van Gennep laid, they also note that he did not elaborate on the details, especially of the middle stage of liminality, paving the way for more elaborate theories, including Turner's liminoid, Thomassen's critical reappraisal, and McKenzie's liminautic in view of digitalization (Skrzyńska 2025, 145).

Turner developed Van Gennep's theory by focusing on the liminal phase in The Ritual Process (1969). The term liminality derives from the Latin word limen, meaning threshold, and

refers to the transition phase in a ritual context, where "identity could be deconstructed, disoriented, and reformed," resulting in a change of status, place, and time (Le Hunte 2022, 836). As the second stage in the rite of passage, liminality entails the separation of individuals or a cultural group from a previous social identity into a state of ambiguity, an in-between state of openness to change (Banfield 2022, 611). In his study of the Ndembu of Zambia (1950–54), Turner identified three features: symbols and rites, liminality, and community as critical transitional markers in a society (Wabujala 2024, 251). Building on this work, in From Ritual to Theatre (1982), he used the term "liminoid" to explain how creativity and uncertainty unfold visibly in voluntary activities such as art and leisure in post-industrial societies (Wabujala 2024, 258). He identified three markers of liminality in ritual presentation: contact with the sacred, ludic deconstruction, and the simplification of social relationships (Lipska and Zagórska 2019, 5). Recognizing the ambiguity of communitas, Haggar identifies four features "physiological and psychological experience, the anti-structural setting, the emotional effect, and ephemerality" that inform her study (Haggar 2025, 323). Thomassen, for his part, dissected Van Gennep's and Turner's theories and proposed a holistic, multidisciplinary approach, recognizing that liminality can be brief or extended, individual or collective, and may remain unresolved at the systemic level (Gold and Kapferer 2024, 44). Applied to modern realities, cultural shifts, and the decline of organized religion, these developments have negatively affected traditional ROPs, leaving individuals to navigate turning points such as adolescence and midlife largely unaided (Starr 2024, 3–4).

These theoretical resources frame the present study in three ways. First, Van Gennep's tripartite scheme structures the analysis of the youths' experience: separation from school, the liminal in-between of the gap period and the program, and re-incorporation into college or work. Second, Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas illuminate how the programs dissolve prior status distinctions and forge intense peer bonds. Third, Thomassen's reappraisal that liminality may be brief or extended, individual or collective, and sometimes unresolved accounts for the prolonged, waithood-like character of the African post-school season. Together, they provide the interpretive lens for the findings below. In short, traditional rites of passage served as contexts for acquiring the skills, values, and attitudes that enabled initiates to function as adults. At the same time, their exact details cannot be replicated; their principles can be infused into programs that prepare contemporary youth for adulthood.

Faith-Based Youth Development

Faith-based youth development is a growing phenomenon that provides space for mentorship, spiritual formation, holistic development, and a sense of belonging (Lederleitner, MacDonald, and Richardson 2022; Powell, Bradbury, and Griffin 2023). Studies show a correlation between increased religiosity among adolescents and a decreased prevalence of behaviors such as early sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, and juvenile delinquency, as well as better coping with anxiety, depression, and suicidality, even though other factors also contribute (Goodman and Dyer 2023, 2). Youth-development research consistently recognizes the central role of the relationship between youth workers and young people, especially where the latter "feel valued, listened to, and share a sense of autonomy with the youth worker" (Yadi and Mastofa 2025, 454; Brailey and Parker 2020, 112). At the same time, the African church faces significant attrition of young people after high school, with many abandoning active faith on entering college (Karei 2019, 5; Kinnaman 2019). Well-designed programs embed processes that help youth internalize their rights and responsibilities as young adults and that enhance a successful transition to adulthood (Ewontomah 2025, 633; Tsekpoe 2021, 24). However, few studies conceptualize such programs as rites of passage, a gap this study seeks to address. In summary, the literature affirms the developmental value of faith-based programs while leaving their liminal, rite-of-passage character largely unexamined.

Methodology

Three objectives guided the study: to examine youths' perceptions of their transition from school to post-high-school life; to assess the contribution of Christian-based post-school transition programs to a successful transition; and to establish how these programs can be improved. The corresponding research questions are stated in the introduction. Restating them here ensures that the analysis that follows remains aligned with the study's purpose from the abstract through to the conclusion.

The findings presented here are drawn from a larger doctoral study that employed a qualitative approach, situated within the interpretivist–constructivist paradigm, to examine the role of church-based programs in fostering the transition from school to post-school life (Pretorius 2024, 2699; William 2024, 3). A phenomenological design was adopted because the lived experiences of program participants served as the primary basis for the data (Islam and Aldaihani 2022, 3; Mohajan 2018, 24).

Three programs in Nairobi were purposively selected to represent the principal categories of faith-based post-school programs: a Christian university, a church, and a para-church organization: the Youth Development Program (YDP) of Pan Africa Christian University, the VUMA program of Nairobi Chapel, and the Bridge program of Life Ministry. The selection criteria were that each program had operated for at least 5 years, adopted a holistic approach, and emphasized mentorship and discipleship rather than academics; both residential and day programs were included to provide richer data. The study population comprised program alumni from the previous decade, together with program directors and counselors. Because alumni had dispersed across the country for study and work, non-probability snowball sampling was used: program directors provided initial contacts, who then referred others (Gierczyk et al. 2024, 39; Ting et al. 2025, 2). In total, 36 participants were interviewed: 15 from VUMA, 13 from YDP, and 8 from Bridge, along with each program's director and at least 2 counselors for triangulation. Sampling continued until saturation, the point at which no new themes, categories, or explanations emerged from the data (Mthuli, Ruffin, and Singh 2022, 810–11).

The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol, with separate versions for participants, directors, and counselors, aligned to the research questions and refined through piloting with four youth from a comparable program (Rabionet 2022, 564; Shoozan and Mohamad 2024, 2). Interviews were conducted between 2019 and 2024 face-to-face, by telephone, and via online platforms such as Google Meet, according to participants' accessibility and preference. Limited secondary data, including program brochures and website materials, supplemented the interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded, transferred to a computer, transcribed verbatim, and cleaned of repetition typical of spoken language. The data were then coded and analyzed thematically using QDA Miner Lite, which supported the generation of codes, nodes, and sub-nodes and the identification of recurring patterns and emerging themes for each research question (Elfarem et al. 2025, 20). Themes were reviewed and organized to provide the framework for the findings and discussion.

To safeguard the respondents' rights, ethical clearance was first obtained from the university's research ethics committee, followed by a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation and authorization from the Ministry of Education. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, with the right to withdraw at any time. Data were reported truthfully and triangulated with mentors' perspectives. Anonymity

was preserved through coding rather than by using names: "R" denotes VUMA participants, "D" denotes YDP participants, and "G" denotes Bridge participants, with "RM," "DM," and "GM" denoting the corresponding mentors (Nassaji 2020, 428).

Findings and Discussion

The findings are organized according to Van Gennep's three phases and aligned with the research questions. The experience of separation addresses the first sub-question; the programs as liminal spaces and the processes within them address the second; and re-incorporation into adult roles completes the analysis of how the programs facilitate transition. Throughout, the youths' accounts are read through the lenses of liminality, communitas, and waithood developed above.

Separation from Prior Roles

From the findings, leaving school creates a temporary withdrawal from school identity, prior routines, and dependence structures. Through Van Gennep's concept of separation, the first phase in a rite of passage, which occurs when a frontier is crossed (Enríquez and Fernandez-García 2025, 2), the youth, having crossed the school frontier, awaited the release of results and the process of joining various tertiary programs. Most participants reported that this decisive moment was characterized by freedom, boredom, idleness, anticipation, and anxiety about results and university placement. Mentor RM4 described the period succinctly: "I think that in the year you have before you transition to university, many things can happen…freedom you never had before…access to places you never had access to before…new information about yourself and others…the reality of life around you. If you're not guided at this time, some habits you form will take you till thirty, thirty-five, forty…some things you'll struggle with even in your marriage."

This liminal period implied leaving the protected zone and entering the world, though not yet fully, as most remained at home. These experiences align with Turner's liminality: school and college are relatively stable spaces, but in between, the person is detached from the familiar ways of "feeling, thinking, and acting," a period that can "transform, destroy, or generate new configurations" (Enríquez and Fernandez-García 2025, 5).

Boredom, Idleness, and the Transitional Vacuum

Separation from school led to disorientation among most participants, who suddenly had a great deal of unstructured time with little to do, yet were curious about what lay ahead. The fatigue of reading, waking early, and the rigor of examinations ended abruptly, producing a vacuum of

idleness, a situational boredom that, left unaddressed, can shade into restlessness and risk-taking (Finkielsztein 2024). Participants G1 and D5 described it as "not being tamed, no program during the day." The resumption of normal routines by parents and siblings left some youth with diminished responsibilities, revealing the transitional vacuum characteristic of post-school life. Some adapted comfortably, while others spent excessive time on social media and partying.

Freedom and Openness to Experience

Reflecting on freedom beyond school, most participants compared school and out-of-school life, focusing on freedom from school demands and the freedom to relax. D3, G3, and D8 described school culture as laden with rules, reading, and assignments, exacerbated by parental pressure and sleep deprivation, especially in boarding schools where students slept 5 hours or less. Outside school, by contrast, people did as they wished. On a positive note, there was time to reflect on the future; D3 explained, "I got time to relax and figure out what I wanted to do before joining the university, even before getting my results." D8 described himself as "just at home watching movies, anxious, stressed, tired…I slept a lot the first 3 weeks; didn't want disturbance." Post-school youth often demonstrate an openness to experience in various aspects of life, and self-efficacy is a significant determinant of that openness among youth in transition (Elom et al. 2024). From a mentor's perspective, GM1 noted that youth are eager to see the world and open to new experiences. The limited exposure of the primary- and high-school "bubble," under teacher and parental supervision, means they begin encountering the real world only after high school, often with an incomplete understanding of friendship and human diversity.

Vulnerability to Negative Influences

Many youths perceived spiritual life as something for older people and did not invest time in seeking God. Social media often painted a glamorous picture of constant partying and substance use, tempting them to indulge alongside former schoolmates and new friends. Some, however, were already aware of these dangers and avoided them. G1 and D5 recognized the pull toward long hours on digital media, joining groups of strangers, and attending leavers' parties ("bashes") that served as avenues for initiation into alcohol, drugs, and immorality. Under the pretext of visiting a neighbor or friend for a sleepover, some youth traveled to distant places such as Gilgil and Naivasha in hired public vehicles, often characterized by loud music and reckless driving. Resisting such temptation, participants reported, required moral and faith grounding: D6's Christian heritage enabled an assertive stance against peer influence, while G3 learned "the hard

way" from a failed relationship. These patterns echo wider evidence on alcohol and substance use among Kenyan first-year students, where the early post-school months are a period of heightened exposure (Musyoka et al. 2020, 11).

Faith under Pressure

Leaving the school frontier also meant leaving the protective umbrella of the school Christian Union. While some navigated the transition well, many were drawn to the seemingly attractive side of pleasure. Mentor RM5 observed that some abandon faith on campus because of a weak foundation; meeting new "cool" friends tests their faith, and if it is not strong, they give in. Mentors, therefore, wrestle with the question, "What will make these people keep their faith when they get to campus?" Intentional discipleship helps them grow and sustain their commitment, overcoming the desire to appear "cool" (Tsekpoe 2021, 24; Mwangi 2018, 342). D1 confirmed that a strong faith foundation laid at school served as a good starting point and safeguarded him against addictions on campus.

Constructive Engagement and Coping

Meaningful engagement with small-scale business ventures, employment, and short courses fostered constructive use of time for some youth. This aligns with Schlossberg's fourth "S," Strategy, which holds that individuals actively create coping mechanisms during transition (Oosterom 2021). The strategies included acquiring computer skills in person and through online tutorials (D5 and G8), selling porridge at bus termini (D5), learning soft skills such as photography and videography (G3), and gaining employment. R1, a self-taught photographer, explained, "I technically learned how to edit photos properly and the basics of editing. I also fix cars, a hobby I learned while at school." These ventures enhanced self-discovery as youth explored their interests. Taken together, the evidence for this first sub-question shows that the post-school separation is genuinely liminal: it strips away prior structure and identity, exposes youth to both danger and possibility, and thereby establishes the need that the programs were designed to meet.

The Programs as Liminal Spaces

Although the period between school and campus is itself a liminal phase, the programs also served as liminal spaces between home and pre-campus life. They offered a timely intervention against boredom and idleness, even as they curtailed the freedom the youth had just acquired. Whereas D1 and D6 appreciated that YDP shortened idle time, R13 reflected: "VUMA helped because

instead of staying idle at home for the 8 months, we should engage in Christ…We just engaged with Christ to learn more about God. I thank God for the VUMA program at Nairobi Chapel that helps the ex-cans." These accounts demonstrate that structured interventions were necessary to help youth find meaning amid disruption. R11 noted that freedom was curtailed by the residential setting, an early-morning run, and a formal dress code reminiscent of high school, yet conceded that "after one or two weeks into the camp, I felt like this thing makes sense." The residential setting also became a melting pot for varied sociocultural backgrounds; as Mentor RM2 acknowledged, "You get a blend of both worlds: those from well-to-do families and those whose background is not that good…Coming together enables them to share different perspectives and encourage one another."

Each program had distinct strengths. YDP, held on a university campus, conveyed the feel of university life, routine, assignments, and class attendance. Bridge was primarily a Bible-based discipleship program, while VUMA integrated career, faith, and practical life issues into its mentorship. Despite their different emphases, all three transitioned youth into post-school life and shared the elements discussed below. Such structured camp and residential experiences are consistent with research on Christian camp settings, which finds that immersive, set-apart environments produce distinctive formative outcomes (Sorenson 2018, 184).

Program Processes as Liminality

The programs constituted a further form of separation from the home environment, with attachment to a peer group and shared learning through formal and informal activities over several weeks. Participants repeatedly credited the venues themselves with shaping them: from the serene environment at Karen and Word of Life for VUMA, to the church gardens at Bridge, to the quiet campus at YDP, the common theme was a serenity ideal for meditation. Across the programs, participants developed peer bonding through shared experience in the community, which became a stage for identity formation and self-awareness. Drawing on Psalm 1:1–3, Mentor DM2 emphasized the moral and spiritual implications of social networks, noting that Christian youth must choose the right friends and build sound relationships, a point well supported by research on peer support in educational transitions (Too, Sang, and Njage 2022, 8). Having grown up without siblings, R10 found peers who could encourage and affirm her: "When people tell me you can do this, I feel encouraged…I used to be hot-tempered…but now at least I can control my feelings."

The design of activities influenced social outcomes, especially interactive ones such as

treasure hunts, retreats, and group discussions. The integration of fun in a relaxed, informal setting enhanced socialization among participants and with mentors. G2, G3, and G4 reported increased socialization through day retreats and interactive Bible study that incorporated icebreakers; the benefits included greater confidence in public speaking, improved listening skills, greater discipline, and a preference for fairness over winning (D7). Decision-making sessions and football enabled D6 to rebuild his social networks and set healthy boundaries, while R10 observed that humor enhanced long-term bonding. Social media, by contrast, was a source of distraction; phone withdrawal in residential VUMA met initial resistance but gave way to better interaction. These findings resonate with Turner's communitas, in which everyone is treated alike regardless of status, age, gender, or name (Lipska and Zagórska 2021, 12; Hayton 2018, 870), while Haggar's four features of communitas "physiological and psychological experience, the anti-structural setting, the emotional effect, and ephemerality" capture its ambiguity (Haggar 2025, 323).

Formal and informal instruction was provided across the programs by mentors and experts. A Bible-based, Christ-centered approach equipped the youth through residential VUMA, which covered most topics in depth, including Bible survey and doctrine, practical Christian living, sexual purity, and career pathways. Plenary sessions, Bible study groups, discussions, and practical ministry in schools, parks, and children's homes formed the core of the pedagogy. The use of audiovisual aids and engaging, learner-centered methods strengthened comprehension and recall, consistent with evidence on the effectiveness of audiovisual instruction (Vishnupriya and Bharathi 2022). These approaches parallel the traditional society in which initiates received instruction from elders on sociocultural, religious, and moral values; sex education and gender roles were emphasized in a compulsory rite with dire consequences for noncompliance (Schroeder et al. 2022, 183), in contrast to the optional, cross-cultural contemporary programs.

In traditional societies, rites of passage were considered religious; Weyel et al. recognize the link between the living and the "living dead" and how initiation rites facilitated stability and harmony with the supernatural through the transmission of morals (2022b, 379). Church programs, comparably, emphasize a close relationship with God and an established routine of prayer, fasting, and Bible study. Whereas the traditional format was communal, Christianity focuses on the individual, with the community serving as a platform for fostering individual faith commitments; R9 explained, "How I relate to God on a personal level…talking to God the way I discuss with my friend, telling her or him about my issues." Evangelism and discipleship become the means of

induction into the "secrets" of the Kingdom, with the Holy Spirit as the enabler of upright living. The communal (communitas) experience can be compared with the traditional age-set system, in which initiates were deeply bonded; however, whereas such bonds lasted a lifetime in traditional societies, those formed in transition programs rarely outlasted the programs, as participants returned to differing social contexts and had to build new support systems. Church-based post-school programs thus exhibit liminal elements comparable to traditional initiation rites, community, instruction, and the transmission of values, even where their objectives and processes differ markedly.

Incorporation into New Adult Roles

At the close of traditional initiation, initiates were welcomed back as adults with new roles, rights, and responsibilities; Weyel et al. explain that puberty rites admit youth into membership in the immediate and extended family (2022b, 382). Comparably, some church programs held graduation ceremonies and issued certificates and awards recognizing participants' contributions. Some youth recommended that the certificates be made stackable to attract more participants (R5) and that parents be invited to the graduation (DM2). Beyond graduation, re-incorporation took the form of short-term mission and outreach opportunities, which allowed participants to practice and internalize what they had learned, with some confirming a calling to full-time ministry while others moved directly into campus or work. Through these program experiences, participants were prepared for college culture: time management, commuting, meeting deadlines, socializing across gender, computer literacy, and spiritual disciplines. In answer to the second sub-question, the programs functioned as genuine liminal spaces that not only occupied the in-between season but also actively equipped youth for re-incorporation into adult roles.

Implications

This study contributes to the understanding of the liminal role of church-based post-school transition programs and carries several implications for theory, practice, and policy. Theoretically, it extends Van Gennep's and Turner's frameworks to a contemporary African Christian setting, showing that the post-school gap functions as an extended liminal phase comparable to Honwana's waithood (Honwana 2014, 28; Starr 2024, 3–4). For youth practitioners, the findings underscore the centrality of the relational, trust-based youth–mentor relationship in faith formation during transition; mentorship proved most effective when it was informal, authentic, and non-judgmental

rather than merely instructional (Brailey and Parker 2020, 112; Burton et al. 2022, 220; Tsekpoe 2021, 24).

Pedagogically, participants consistently preferred participatory, audiovisual, and experiential methods over lectures, suggesting that programming should prioritize engagement and reflection (Vishnupriya and Bharathi 2022; Sorenson 2018, 184). The peer community emerged as a strong but often overlooked support system, echoing Turner's communitas and the traditional age-set; churches should therefore invest intentionally in building peer networks that outlast the program (Too, Sang, and Njage 2022, 8; Hayton 2018, 870). Because parental expectations strongly shape African youth transitions, programs should also engage parents through dialogue, workshops, and practical involvement (La Rosa, Ching, and Commodari 2025, 165).

For programming, a holistic, long-term approach that builds relationships that outlast the programs is essential, as is capacity-building for mentors, facilitators, and administrators to reduce fatigue and improve delivery. Practical recommendations arising from participants include strengthening program awareness through alumni, church, and school networks rather than relying on social media; extending the duration of day programs so that the curriculum can be completed; incorporating a short residential or camp component for non-residential cohorts; and developing intentional post-program follow-up that integrates youth into church and campus Christian communities. Finally, given the programs' limited reach and resource constraints, the study highlights the value of partnerships among churches, families, educational institutions, and government to extend effective transitional support to many more youth.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how church-based post-school programs function as contemporary rites of passage for youth transition in Africa. The literature review established that traditional African rites of passage were at once educational, moral, communal, and spiritual, but that they have been eroded by colonization, schooling, urbanization, and economic change, leaving a transitional vacuum that prolongs youth waithood. Drawing on Van Gennep's tripartite scheme and Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas, the study analyzed qualitative data from three Nairobi programs: VUMA, YDP, and Bridge.

In response to the first sub-question, the findings showed that leaving school produces a liminal separation marked by freedom, idleness, anxiety, and vulnerability to negative influences, alongside genuine opportunities for constructive engagement. In response to the second, the

programs were found to operate as structured liminal spaces that foster peer communitas, relational mentorship, spiritual formation and identity, and, ultimately, re-incorporation through graduation, service, and pre-campus preparation. In response to the third, participants identified improvements in program awareness, mode and duration, participatory pedagogy, mentor capacity, peer-community building, and post-program follow-up. Taken together, the evidence supports the central claim that youth can still be prepared, within an organized system, to make sound decisions and live responsible lives beyond school, following Jesus Christ. Church-based programs thus offer a modern, holistic framework for African youth transition that recovers, in Christian form, the formative functions of the traditional rite of passage. Future studies could explore the long-term influence of such programs across denominations and contexts, the role of the peer community in sustaining faith and identity, and the potential of online and hybrid models, ideally through mixed-method and longitudinal designs.

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