



# CANOE CULTURE

by Richard Thompson





Every year we take a Duke of Edinburgh Gold group canoeing across Lake Tanganyika, in Zambia. It is an unforgettable experience for most. The only way we can get to our beach camp is by canoe, there are no roads, no bridges and no ferries! It is a six hour journey if the lake is calm, a twelve hour trip if it gets choppy.

The students are self sufficient, the tents, food and gear are packed away in plastic barrels before they head out into the big open water. The purpose of this adventurous journey is to compare their canoeing journey with the local canoe culture, especially the reliance and use the local people have on wooden canoes. This plus the demands and dimensions of the Lake Tanganyika environment have a big impact on the young people.

Canoeing for the Mambwe-Lungu people of Lake Tanganyika is not a sport, an activity session or a weekend recreation, but a necessary lifestyle. Primary aged children canoe up to ten kilometres just to get to school and parents canoe to fish and collect groceries. Bus and taxi drivers canoe their passengers to different villages along the lake edge.

For our relatively privileged students canoeing in this environment is a great 'leveller' and a powerful way to experience the local peoples simple and appealing 'canoe culture'. We don't burst through on a speed boat to relax on a beach watch the sunset and move on like a lake storm, our students take their time, adjust to the pace, buy fresh fish on the way from fellow paddlers, learn to read the wind and waves and slowly get an insight into the challenges and attractions of this new culture. Somehow it feels the way canoeing should be.

On the way they will see the craftsmen making their wooden boats on the beaches in front of the villages. They will get a chance to use the local paddles and try the deep 'digging and scooping' style of paddling the local people use. They will start to appreciate the care and



maintenance they give their boats and the personalised decorations. They will learn how to sail a canoe on the lake in a similar way to the local people. Here the canoe is one of the most prized and useful possessions, a means of income, transport and status. We want our students to understand this on their five days on the lake.



This DoE Adventurous Journey goes beyond fulfilling a set of requirements to providing an opportunity for long lasting learning in the young people. Immersed in this canoe culture, vulnerable to its challenges and open to its appeal, the young people gain a deeper respect for the canoe lifestyle of the lake people. They appreciate the value of the canoe in its design and use. They understand better the reliance the local people have on the canoe and ultimately on God in this unpredictable environment. This 'wide' experience tests and develops the young person's character in many ways, which is what the DoE is all about.

How can this experience impact on readers and practitioners in the UK? Perhaps when planning a DoE adventurous journey in the UK aspects of culture and the environment can be missed in the pursuit to conquer the route and specific requirements. Are there opportunities to adjust to the pace of the environment? Are there cultures to explore? Is there a humility and vulnerability required to fully appreciate the landscape? Is there a spiritual message? How can I take this experience deeper for the participants? ■



#### About the Author

**Richard Thompson** is the Head of Ndubaluba Outdoor Centre, part of Chengelo School in Mkushi Zambia. He is originally from the UK but has been helping to develop adventure education in Zambia and specifically at Ndubaluba Outdoor Centre for the last 22 years. He is currently the Chairperson for the Duke of Edinburgh International Award Zambia. He has a passion for using adventure to enhance the character development of young people in Zambia.

Ndubaluba is an organisational member of the IOL and its instructors are hoping to soon go through the accreditation process.

**Photos by Mwaba Mwila** (instructor at Centre) Used with his permission.