



# THE **BALANDA** AND THE **BARK CANOES**



A **STUDYGUIDE** BY ROBERT LEWIS

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## Overview

> *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* (Molly Reynolds, Tania Nehme, Rolf de Heer, 2006) is a 52-minute film about the making of the ground-breaking feature film, *Ten Canoes* (Rolf de Heer, 2006). > **The film *Ten Canoes* is a film about traditional Aboriginal culture in north-eastern Arnhem Land, around Ramingining near the Arafura Swamp. The film is set in two time periods: the 'present', which is an unspecified time, but before the arrival of Europeans or other foreigners in Australia; and the Dreaming, a period referred back to by the storyteller in the film, who uses it to teach a young man about Law and proper behaviour. The film is ground-breaking in that it uses people from the community, who are non-actors, and who film in their own language. The narration is in English, with sub-titles for dialogue.** > The documentary about *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* takes us behind the scenes and illustrates the process of making the film. > **Ideally, students studying *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* will also have seen *Ten Canoes* and will have access to the study guide for that film (go to <http://www.metromagazine.com.au> to download a free copy).**



## Curriculum Guide

> *The Balanda and the Canoes* provides an excellent resource for considering representations of a semi-traditional Indigenous community, and the making of a feature film. It is suitable for mature students from middle to senior secondary schools, and at the tertiary level, in: English, Aboriginal Studies and Media Studies. Teachers may need to alert students to the fact that since the Indigenous actors are shown re-enacting a traditional lifestyle they are not clothed.

# Before Watching The Film >

Imagine that you are making a film. What would you expect the process to be like? Table 1 lists a number of the elements involved in the process. In the left column, record what you expect would happen. For example, you might expect that the documentary might be shot using a variety of cameras using equipment that allowed a variety of shots. Record your ideas and expectations. You may want to add other elements to the list as you discuss your ideas and expectations. > **After watching *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* you will be able to complete the middle column and compare your expectation with the reality that existed for *Ten Canoes*. You might also like to complete the final column, comparing the elements of a documentary with the elements of a film.**

Element	What you expect	Feature film: <i>Ten Canoes</i>	Documentary film: <i>The Balanda and...</i>
Cameras			
Sound			
Storyboard			
Sequence			
Rehearsals			
Actors			
Script			
Casting			
Design			
Lighting			
Special effects			
Editing			
Style			
Props			

TABLE 1



## Exploring Issues In The Film

*We are making a movie. The story is their story, those that live on this land, in their language, and set a long time before the coming of the Balanda, as we white people are known. For the people of the Arafura Swamp, this film is an opportunity, maybe a last chance to hold on to the old ways. For all of us, the challenges are unexpected, the task beyond anything imagined. For me, it is the most difficult film I have made, in the most foreign land I've been to ... and it is Australia.*

Rolf de Heer

*Making The Balanda and the Canoes* can help us understand how a feature film is made, and also offers insights into the working of a semi-traditional Indigenous community today.

### The making of a film

- 1 A feature film always begins with someone's idea, someone's vision. What were the origins of *Ten Canoes*? How did this influence the nature of the film? Discuss your ideas. For more information see page 9 of the *Ten Canoes* study guide.
- 2 A film requires a cast. What were the problems in casting *Ten Canoes*? Consider such aspects as:
  - the number of people available
  - the problems raised for de Heer by the traditional rules governing relationships between people
  - the variety of languages spoken
  - the lack of professional acting experience among cast members.
 For more information see pages 11-12 of the *Ten Canoes* study guide.
- 3 A film requires a set, or a setting in which it is made. What were the advantages and the disadvantages of making *The Balanda and the Canoes* in the Arafura swamp area? Consider such aspects as:
  - isolation
  - the naturalness of the setting
  - environmental 'nuisances' (such as mosquitoes)
  - dangers
  - weather
  - light
- 4 A film involves a base or support area for equipment, accommodation, food and services associated with making a film (such as editing, camera and lighting equipment). How was this base established in such a remote area?
- 5 A film set is a small community, in which people interact. Describe the nature of the community associated with *Ten Canoes*. What problems existed or developed among community members during the filming?
- 6 The film was successfully made. That means there were leaders on set who were able to overcome difficulties and solve problems. Who were the leaders/problem solvers on this set? Why were they able to solve the



Aspects of the community	Notes
Individuals	
Relationships	
Leadership	
Social interactions	
Values	
Attitudes	
Expectations	
Ways of settling disputes	
Gender roles and relations	

TABLE 2

- problems – what qualities did they show?
- 7 Look back at the table you are creating, and add any details or ideas to it.

**An Indigenous community** > *The Balanda and the Canoes* thrust a group of Indigenous people into a totally new situation. *The Balanda and the 10 Canoes* gives us some insights into this community.

- 8 Discuss what the film shows us about the aspects of life in the community, and summarize your ideas in Table 2.  
For more information see pages 12-16 of the *Ten Canoes* study guide. One of the key features evident in the community is the mix of languages. English is not the main language for most of the people.



- 9 What are the strengths that might exist in the mix and multiplicity of Indigenous languages in such a community?
- 10 In a recent report, commentator Gary Johns has argued that far from being a strength, the lack of English effectively condemns Indigenous people to inferior economic and social conditions, because they do not have equal access to equal education, and the opportunities it creates. Discuss this idea. What would it mean if Indigenous languages were to die out? Is there a way of ensuring access to both English and traditional languages in Indigenous communities?

For more information see page 11 of the *Ten Canoes* study guide.

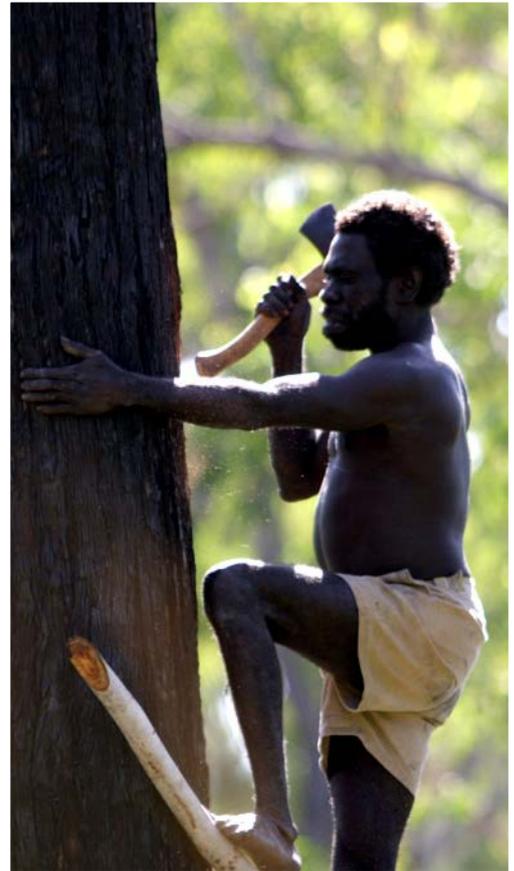
The key motivating force behind the Indigenous community's embrace of *Ten Canoes* was the impact it could have on renewing traditional cultural ways.

- 11 In what ways does *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* illustrate or emphasis this loss or weakening of traditional culture among the community members?
- 12 Why is this seen as an undesirable situation by the community members?
- 13 Are there any ways in which it might be considered desirable for the community to lose aspects of their traditional culture?

You will find information on pages 16-18 of the *Ten Canoes* study guide to help you discuss these questions. You will also find an article about Gary Johns' report, and a reply to it by Noel Pearson, at the end of this study guide.

***The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* as a documentary form** > *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* is a documentary film. Look back at your first table, and summarize your ideas about the documentary form. Then use your information and ideas to answer these questions.

- 14 What distinguishes the documentary as a media form? To what extent are these features evident in *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes*?
- 15 To what extent is the documentary an accurate account of an event or issue? How do we know? Does it matter if it is not accurate? To what extent do you think *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* is an accurate account of the making of *Ten Canoes*? Or does it have some other purpose? Explain your ideas.
- 16 How may viewing a documentary change the ways in which individuals view the world? Has *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* changed your view about either traditional Aboriginal culture, or contemporary Aboriginal culture? Why?
- 17 What issues might a maker of a documentary encounter in finding an audience for his or her work? Who do you think would be the audience for this film? Do you think it will find it? Explain your views.



## GARY JOHNS: WHY ABORIGINAL CHILDREN MUST ALL ATTEND SCHOOL. COMPULSORY EDUCATION CAN HELP IMPROVE THE INDIGENOUS WAY OF LIFE

*The Australian*, 30 May 2006

‘Those who leave school early, die early.’ The principal of a remote school made this statement recently for Aboriginal children. It is vital that Aboriginal children in remote areas get to school. Unfortunately, getting them there and keeping them there is difficult. It usually means dealing with parents who believe it is the job of the school to make them attend or who are powerless to make them attend. The difficulty in teaching Aboriginal children from remote communities is immense and the solutions lie mostly outside education policy. The investment in education is often wasted because there are limits to the extent to which schooling can compensate for a poor home environment.

There are solutions, however, and they lie in recognising that some Aborigines use the ‘cultural curtain’ as an excuse to avoid participation in schooling and in the economy.

Further, they lie in recognising that there is no real economy in many remote communities; and, in the few where an economy does exist, welfare and other incentives lead people to not work.

In short, it is time to draw back the cultural curtain in Aboriginal policy and bring back economics. Incentives to work must change if education is to save lives. If the changes are too slow, children will have to attend schools where they have an experience sufficiently intense to overcome their environment. That may mean leaving home at a very early age.

Consider this from another principal: ‘It requires two years of preparation for an indigenous child to be ready for school.’ Children have to be taken into the system almost from the beginning of their lives. Add the fact that, increasingly, teachers are also running parenting courses, which means, in effect, teachers are taking the child from the parent. After three decades of ignoring economics and privileging culture, the chickens have come home to roost. As well as socialising children, teachers have to reach back a generation to teach parents how to parent.

Culture has been used as a curtain, drawn by those who seek to avoid responsibility for their actions. It is used as an excuse by parents to take children from school, by children to leave school and by teachers to teach to a lower standard.

As another principal said of Aborigines in his remote community, ‘People are not land or culture-oriented, they are self-focused. It’s about money and cars.’ Too many think access and social justice mean being given things: money, services, houses and so on. They do not. They mean gaining the knowledge of how goods and services are produced. Getting this knowledge of the modern world requires at least ten years of schooling. Where children cannot gain access to ten years of schooling because they live in an environment where the importance of schooling is not well understood, then government has an obligation to intervene.

Compulsory schooling is well known and has been accepted in the



wider community, especially among the poor and non-English speakers. It should be equally accepted in remote Aboriginal communities.

If that smacks of paternalism, then so be it. But there are two types of paternalism: enabling and disabling. Although done with the best of intentions, privileging culture, land rights and passive welfare have provided a deadly mix of disabling paternalism. The troubles of recent weeks in Wadeye and the revelations of child sexual abuse have been brewing for a long time.

The ideologues who pursued the deadly mix of disabling paternalism will argue that theirs was an incomplete and interrupted experiment: if only they had the apology, a treaty, and another bucket of tax dollars!

The correct policy response to failure at school will be determined not simply by additional programs at school but by how various issues of transition to the real economy – work, individual obligation, mobility – are managed. The transition will be better managed if educators and governments understand that education is essentially an instrument in economic integration, and that many remote communities are not viable and schools should not be used as pawns to keep them afloat.

Moreover, teachers and governments should understand that Western education cannot and should not preserve Aboriginal culture. Most important, parents' behaviour needs to change and, where incentives to send children to school fail, compulsion must be used. Remember, in remote Australia 'those who leave school early, die early'.

Gary Johns, a former minister in the Keating Labor government, is president of the Bennelong Society and a senior consultant with ACIL Tasman. This is based on a paper, *Aboriginal Education: Remote Schools and the Real Economy*, launched by federal Education Minister Julie Bishop for the Menzies Research Centre.

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,19296877-7583,00.html>

## NOEL PEARSON: DON'T LISTEN TO THOSE WHO DESPISE US. INDIGENOUS CULTURES CAN ADAPT, JUST LIKE ANY OTHER.

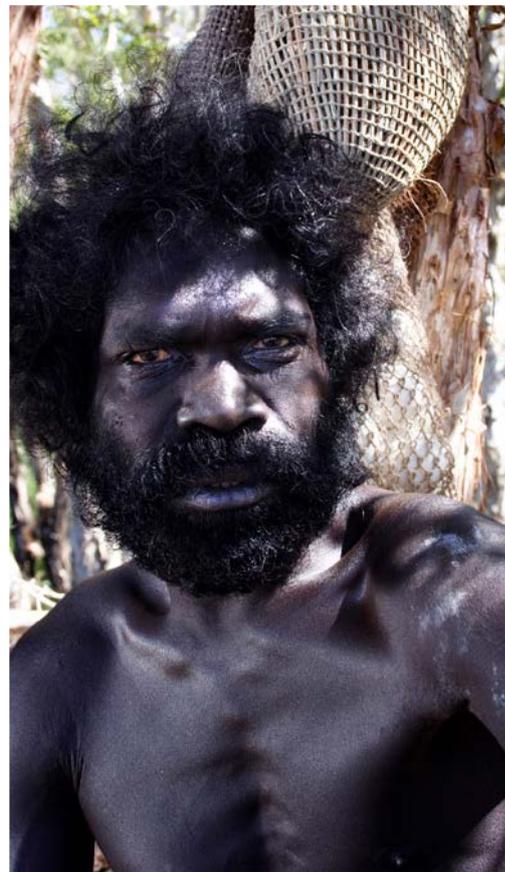
*The Age*, 26 June 2006

**T**oday's ministerial summit about violence and child abuse is a commendable initiative by Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough. Many people have reservations about whether another summit will lead to anything.

But that is not the only problem. The necessary focus on humanitarian emergencies and educational failure makes us as a nation less inclined to reflect on the relationship between the peoples of Australia and Aboriginal Australians' ultimate place in this country.

In Australia, we have had two great debates about national issues: the debates about the rights of Aboriginal Australians, and about Australian history.

Conservative Australians have lent considerable support to contributors Keith Windschuttle and Gary Johns. Windschuttle has been appointed



to the board of the ABC, and Education Minister Julie Bishop has endorsed the Johns' Menzies Research Centre paper *Aboriginal Education: Remote Schools and the Real Economy*.

I want to explain why Aboriginal Australians can have a dialogue with the conservatives about policy and history.

First, we should be able to agree with conservative and liberal people that Aboriginal Australians need modernity, geographic mobility, full command of English, education and economic integration.

Second, cultural relativism should be rejected in favour of embracing modernity when it comes to the fundamental economic and social organisation of societies. It is natural for peoples to advance from hunting and gathering to agriculture to industrialism. What peoples retain is a matter of cultural and spiritual choice.

Third, in the debate about Australian history, rigour and revision of history is essential.

Fourth, much of the political rights criticism of the progressive consensus about policies for Aboriginal Australians is correct, particularly in relation to welfare and substance abuse.

However, I am very concerned about the damage conservative Australians are doing to the prospects of reconciliation through their uncritical endorsement of people such as Windschuttle and Johns. Their influence has decreased empathy with Aboriginal Australians. Johns and Windschuttle would probably reply that it is their critics who lack empathy because the left defends flawed policies that ruin Aboriginal Australians' lives. The coldness that characterises Johns and Windschuttle is an inexplicable antagonism to Aboriginal Australians' wish to remain distinct.

Windschuttle's defence against the charge of lack of empathy is that the responsibility of the historian is not to be compassionate, it is to be dispassionate to try to get at the truth. But Windschuttle's and Johns' antagonism to Aboriginal Australians means that they are unable to remain dispassionately objective.

For example, Windschuttle's generalisation that the early stages of dispossession was not against the will of most Aborigines is not a correction of leftist distortion of history, it is distortion in the opposite direction. The influence of Johns' and Windschuttle's irrational contempt is causing their powerful conservative audience (and thereby Australia) to move further away from the modern, enlightened view that minorities have the right to agreements with the central power about securing the survival of their identity and political rights.

In his recent government-endorsed paper, Johns argued that Aboriginal Australians have no right to government-funded education about their culture and languages.

His irrational argument was that a modern Western education system cannot maintain a preliterate, nomadic culture. Of course it cannot. But we have a right to government support for a modern, literate, prosperous version of our culture. This right to cultural continuity is exactly the same right the non-indigenous conservatives demand when they fight to prevent postmodern gobbledegook from pushing knowledge about old Western culture out of the curriculum.



The difference between Australia and most other shared Western states is that the Australian minority peoples until recently had a pre-modern culture and no connection with the world economy. To secure Aboriginal economic development, it might be necessary for us to make far-reaching concessions to the dominant culture.

Aboriginal Australian culture and economy have changed and must change. But it seems that conservatives increasingly believe that the difficulties of this transformation justify a complete denial of Aboriginal Australians' rights as a minority.

There has been nothing more dispiriting for me than the prominence of Windschuttle's and Johns' ideas in conservative political and cultural circles. Windschuttle's thesis about the absence of a notion of land ownership in Aboriginal Australia, and Johns' notion that our culture is unable to change and must therefore be left to die, are threatening the prospects of successful co-operation between Aboriginal Australians and the conservatives.

Today's ministerial summit illustrates the dilemma we are facing: the extreme crises in Aboriginal Australia and the low capabilities of Aboriginal Australians make non-indigenous Australians and our political leaders lose sight of the natural ultimate goal, which is that Aboriginal Australians become a prosperous constitutionally recognised First-World national minority.

Noel Pearson is the director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/dont-listen-to-those-who-despise-us/2006/06/25/1151174068891.html>



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