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THREE LIVES

TWO LAWS

ONE COUNTRY

# YOLNGU BOY

M 15+ RECOMMENDED FOR MATURE AUDIENCES 15 YEARS AND OVER  
Adult Themes,  
Low Level Coarse Language.

## Study Guide

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# YOLNGU BOY

L to R: Milika (Nathan Daniels) Lorrpu (John Sebastian Pilakui) and Botj (Sean Mununggul)

## STUDY GUIDE

**SYNOPSIS** Caught in a collision between the modern world of rap, football, street cred and the oldest living culture on earth, Lorrpu, Botj and Milika are three Yolngu teenagers who once shared a childhood dream of becoming great hunters together. But things have changed and their paths are diverging. Botj is walking on the wild side, a lost soul in search of a place to belong. Milika is more interested in football and girls than any of the traditional knowledge he is being taught. Only Lorrpu seems to care about the dream any more. Their paths are diverging, and he is the only one who can see it.

When Botj goes too far and finds himself on the wrong side of both black and white law, Lorrpu must weigh up his own future against saving his friend.

He persuades the boys to trek to Darwin to argue Botj's case with Dawu, a tribal leader. Leaving behind their community, they journey through the unforgiving wilderness of north-east Arnhem Land to Darwin. To survive, Lorrpu, Milika and Botj must draw on the ancient bush knowledge they were taught as boys and, most importantly, the bonds of their friendship.

**Yolngu Boy** is about the search for identity, making the journey from adolescence to adulthood and the implications of belonging to a larger social group, whether it be a culture, a family or a group of friends.

## ABOUT THIS STUDY GUIDE

Key Themes discussed in this Study Guide are :

Rites of Passage and Personal Growth, The Search For Identity, Friendship, Rules, Rights and Responsibilities, and Culture.

The Study Guide includes questions and activities to be explored prior to and after watching the film *Yolngu Boy*.

Each topic contains questions and student activities. The questions can be incorporated into classroom discussion or students can provide individual written responses. The activities in the Study Guide include a mixture of individual investigation, class discussion and small group work.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

The themes and activities developed in this study guide will have interest and relevance for teachers and students from middle to senior years studying: Australian History, Cultural Studies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, English, Personal Development and Media Studies.

## BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

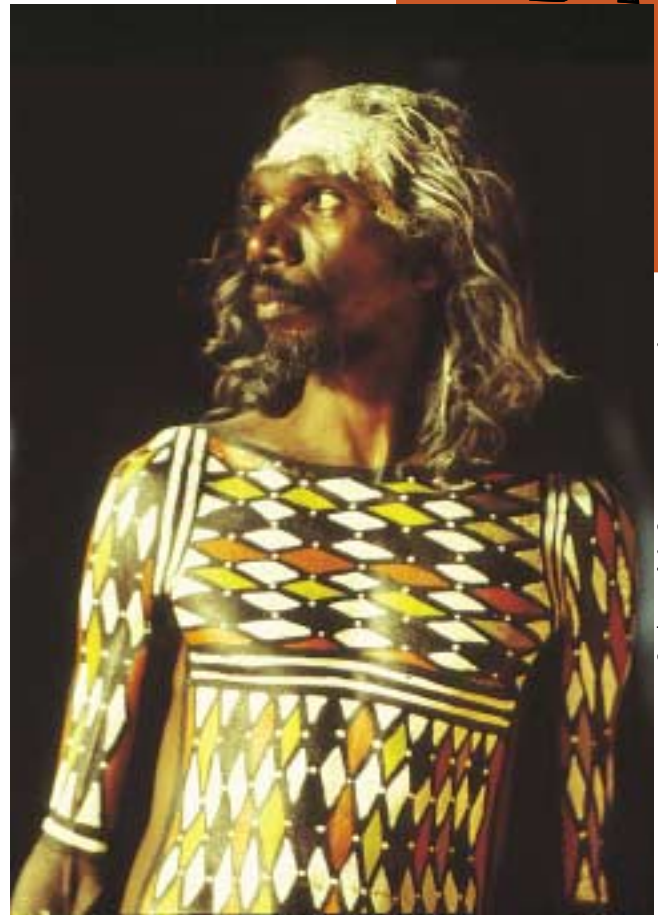
Prior to students viewing *Yolngu Boy*, teachers may want to prepare them by considering the following topics. The suggested activities related to these topics aim to enhance students' understanding of the film by introducing its central themes. The activities also assist with development of students' language skills.

### Topic 1: Dreams

All people, regardless of race or culture, have dreams. Our dreams can motivate us to strive to do better, but they can also cause frustration when they seem impossible to realize, or cause conflict when they are inconsistent with the lives of the people around us.

#### Activities

- In small groups, students discuss what they feel to be the benefits or drawbacks of having a dream. A representative of each group reports the group's views to the class, and a class list of the pros and cons is developed.



Maralitja Man - Baru (Mangatjay Yunupingu)

■ Students select one of the following topics and produce a sustained piece of writing in response:

1. 'Dreams may be important, but reality is always better'.
2. 'Without our dreams our lives would be empty'.
3. 'My dream'. Write about one of your dreams and its importance in your life. (If a student selects this topic, make sure they feel comfortable sharing it with others.)
4. 'Dreams may lead to progress or even greatness, but create significant risks as the individual becomes vulnerable because of his/her commitment'. Discuss with specific examples from fiction and real life.
5. 'It is a mistake to take the dreams of childhood into our adult life'.

### Topic 2: Destiny, Choice and Alternative Outcomes

How much control do we have over the direction of our own lives? Most people like to believe that they control their own lives, that the choices they make will determine their futures. But our lives are also affected by factors that we cannot control, such as our personal circumstances (the time and place we are born, family background, etc.) and by the actions of the people



Photo: Lorrpu (John Sebastian Pilakui) Milika (Nathan Daniels) and Botj (Sean Mununggurr)

around us. Many people also believe in the existence of a god or another higher power with the ability to affect their lives. Others believe in fate; that the course of some or all of their lives is predestined.

### Activities

- Discuss with students the factors that have an impact on the course of our lives. Consider what we mean by common expressions such as ‘I don’t know how it happened’, ‘It wasn’t my fault’, ‘I was so lucky’, or ‘It was meant to be’.
- Form small groups to discuss these topics:
  1. ‘You can choose your friends, but not your family’. How much does family background affect the type of person you are?
  2. ‘Fate was against me...’ Consider times when circumstances had a beneficial or detrimental impact on your life.
  3. ‘Sometimes I just want to let go and not be in control’. Do you always look before you leap?
- Ask students to form groups, and have each group sit in a circle. One student in the group then states a choice or an action which they might undertake in their normal lives (eg. going to the video store to rent a particular movie before the store closes; or completing a school assignment). Then, one

by one working around the circle, the next student nominates a possible event or an action by another person that would make it harder or easier for the original goal to be attained.

- Have students interview an older member of their family or community. The focus of the interview is ‘Plans and Alterations’. Try to find out if the person interviewed feels that they always have a choice or control over their life, or if outside factors have had an influence. Prepare questions carefully and take notes during the interview. Findings could be presented as a written or oral report or a creative piece of writing, dramatizing a significant moment in an individual’s life. Findings can also be posted on the school’s web site.

### AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

Students should be provided with the opportunity to air their views on the film and develop their own opinions on the issues it raises.

### Questions

- What issues do you think the film explores that are particularly relevant to teenagers?
- What experiences and issues do you and your friends share with Lorrpu, Milika and Botj?

Explain some of the experiences they have that are different from yours. What factors account for these differences?

- What do you think are the key themes of the film?
- What emotions did you experience at various stages as you watched the film? Comment particularly on how you felt at the end.

## Activities

- Students write for five to ten minutes in response to one of the following statements, before sharing their views with the rest of the class:
  1. ‘First and foremost *Yolngu Boy* is a film about the challenges and difficulties of adolescence’.
  2. ‘Viewers may find the backgrounds of Lorrpu, Botj and Milika too different from their own to respond to the boys’ experiences’.
  3. ‘The film shows us that to dream is to risk, but the risk is always worth taking’.
- Students write a review of the film for a magazine read by students of the same age group.
- Students imagine they are asked to talk about the film live on television. Allocate the roles of the interviewers and interviewees and have the interviews performed to the class. Discuss the views presented by each team.

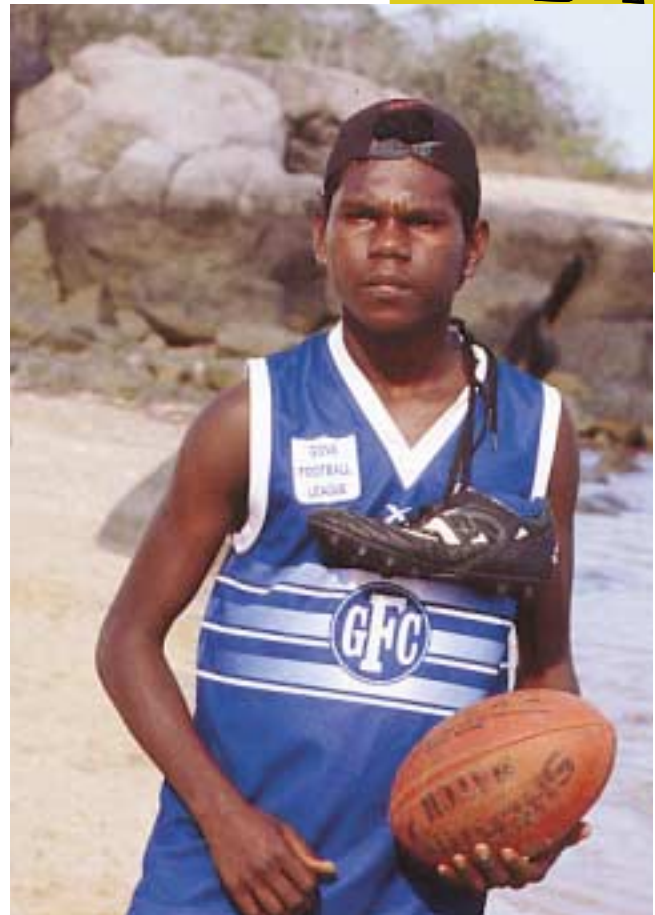
## CHARACTER PROFILES

The characters Lorrpu, Milika and Botj are of central importance to the film. Although they have been life-long friends, each boy has a very different personality and goal in life. The film uses these differences, highlighted as Lorrpu and Milika attempt to save Botj, to explore its major themes.

### Lorrpu

Lorrpu believes strongly in the traditional ways of his people. He looks forward to his upcoming ‘ceremony’, when he will become a man and find his place in his tribe. He is also troubled by his friend Botj’s abandonment of his tribal beliefs. The only thing Lorrpu believes in as strongly as his tribal culture is his bond of friendship with Milika and Botj.

The importance to Lorrpu of these two beliefs is encapsulated by his dreams: when Lorrpu dreams, he can see himself and his friends as children, wading through the water at low tide, the sun warming their skin, great hunters in the making. It is an image of the boys not only following their tribal customs, but



also operating as a harmonious unit, not yet divided by time and circumstance – one skin, one blood. To save his friend, Lorrpu will risk everything else he values in life.

## Questions

- How significant is Lorrpu’s dream?
- Why does Lorrpu decide to encourage Botj and Milika to walk the 500 kilometres to Darwin?
- Do Lorrpu, Milika and Botj all relate to their tribal culture in the same way? How does each boy’s relationship to their traditional culture affect what happens to them?
- What predictions could you make about possible pathways in Lorrpu’s future?

### Milika

Unlike Lorrpu, Milika isn’t overly interested in traditional Yolngu life, preferring to dream of a future as a professional football player. For him, the outside world beckons seductively and he relishes the trappings that material success can provide, such as his Discman and CD collection. Indeed, the first thing Milika does on arriving in Darwin is to purchase a new pair of football boots!

Botj (Sean Mununggurr)



Milika has lost respect for Botj since Botj has stopped behaving responsibly, but still shares a strong bond of friendship with Lorrpu.

## Questions

- What evidence is there to suggest that Milika does want to hold onto some aspects of traditional life?
- Is Milika reluctant to go to Darwin? Why or why not? Why does Milika agree to go, given that he says Botj is a ‘loser’?
- What predictions could you make about possible pathways in Milika’s future?

## Botj

Botj is caught in the conflict between two very different worlds – the world of his traditional culture and the white man’s world – both with their different laws.

Lorrpu’s dream at the start of the film shows Botj as the childhood leader of his friends, a protector, skilled in the hunting techniques of his tribe. But by the time Botj first rejoins his friends in the ‘real time’ of the film, as a teenager, he is at war with himself and his community. Botj is addicted to sniffing petrol, and has

fallen into a destructive lifestyle which has left him with only one more chance to establish a peaceful and constructive life in his community.

Starting afresh is difficult, though, when Botj feels like an outsider in all aspects of his life. He is forbidden from seeing his mother, who is frightened by his destructive past. The prevailing attitude in his community seems to be that he will end up a hopeless drunk like his father, living among the ‘long grass people’, a collection of lost souls in Darwin. And he will have a difficult task proving to the tribal elders that he is ready for ‘ceremony’, without which he can never truly have respect and a place within his tribe. Botj only has his two childhood friends to rely on, but even that relationship seems to be changing, now that Lorrpu and Milika are preparing for ceremony – soon they will be men, while Botj remains a boy. This separation from those around him leaves Botj feeling confused, angry and defiant.

As the boys return to their childhood patterns of behaviour during their trek to Darwin, Botj rediscovers the person he used to be, regaining his sense of tribal history and connection with the land, and finding peace within himself. Lorrpu acknowledges this change by recognizing Botj as the leader of their group once again.

But, just as childhood must eventually be left, the boys must eventually end their isolation and return to society, to face the consequences of their actions.

## Questions

- What impressions do we gain about Botj from flashbacks and the trek to Darwin?
- Do you think Botj wishes he could be part of the ceremony? Why is it significant to be chosen by the elders?
- What factors do you believe have contributed to Botj’s problems?
- Why does Botj’s mother want him to stay away from home?
- As they near Darwin, Lorrpu tells Botj he can be ‘boss, like when we were kids. But the right way, okay?’ Why does Lorrpu let Botj be leader again? What does he mean by ‘the right way’?
- After reaching Darwin, why do you think Botj runs off and goes back to petrol sniffing? Why does he fear Dawu? How does he react to seeing his father



R: Milika (Nathan Daniels) Lorrpu (John Sebastian Pilakui) and Botj (Sean Mununggurr)

among the ‘long grass people’ and the awful realization that his father doesn’t even recognize him?

- Unlike Lorrpu and Milika, Botj doesn’t have a dream. To what extent do you think this contributes to his fate?

### Activities

- Students write their own description of each character and their qualities.
- Students develop concept maps, placing the name of their selected character from the film in the middle of a sheet of paper. Around the name place these influences:
  - dreams
  - fears
  - needs
  - friends
  - choices
  - destiny
- Students discuss how these factors come into play in each character’s life.

## KEY THEMES IN THE FILM AND ISSUES ARISING FROM THEM

### 1. RITES OF PASSAGE AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Our growth as individuals is not something that is measured in simple terms of physical development or progression in years. Personal growth is measured by our developing maturity. Unlike physical growth, personal growth cannot be expected simply to happen. It is something that happens in response to significant events in our lives.

The phases of growth that a person may undergo can be viewed as ‘rites of passage’. Sometimes these rites occur in formally observed ceremonies that are intended to mark a new stage of life for the individual. They may also be more personal in nature, such as when a person encounters a challenge in their life that leads to increased self-awareness and growth.

*Yolngu Boy* explores the growth of Lorrpu, Milika and Botj as they make the crucial movement from childhood into adulthood. It shows that the process is not always easy and just as certain insights are gained, so too valuable things are lost along the way.



Lorrpu (John Sebastian Pilakui) and Yuwan (Lirrina Mununggurr)

The film begins and ends with the boys participating in ceremonial rites of passage. In Lorrpu's dream at the start of *Yolngu Boy*, we see the initiation of the boys into the tribe, during their younger years. At the end of the film, we see Lorrpu and Milika participating in the ceremony marking their transition into manhood. But the boys also complete a personal rite of passage by undertaking the journey from Arnhem Land to Darwin. They learn that sometimes the values that are important to them conflict with each other, and that sacrifices must be made. The choices the boys make between those values help determine their identities.

### Questions

- How does the movie demonstrate the idea that our choices lead to our growth?
- What celebrations and rituals do the boys participate in that mark a transition in their development?
- How does the film demonstrate the inevitability of leaving childhood behind? You may wish to consider how the film highlights the positive and negative aspects of the transition from childhood to adulthood.
- What does it mean to you to move from childhood to adulthood? What will you lose? What will you

gain? What events and occasions have marked/will mark this transition for you?

- What ceremonies have you participated in during your life? Do you know other young people in a religious and cultural group who celebrate transitions in their personal life in different ways? How do they do this?

### Activities

- Students discuss what impact white Australia has on the boys' growth.
- In small groups, students discuss ideas, beliefs or attitudes each of them held as a child. Some of these may have changed and some may have remained the same. Which have changed and which haven't? Why?
- Ask students to discuss this statement: 'We learn more from our mistakes than from the lessons handed down to us'.
- Ask students to imagine they are re-writing the film from the point where the boys reach Darwin and to storyboard an alternative ending to the film which details each character's journey. Students might also like to form small groups and consider role playing their scenarios to the class.



## 2. THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

*Yolngu Boy* encourages us to think about the many factors that influence our sense of identity – who we are and where we belong.

The search for a sense of identity is at the heart of the journey undertaken by each of the three boys in the film. As Dawu, the tribal elder, tells Lorrpu and Milika during tribal council,

*‘You boys have got to remember who you are and what you want.’*

Although they share a common culture as members of the Yolngu clan, each of the boys is developing a distinctive personal identity. The influences forming these identities have varied since they were young. In the film, we see glimpses into each boy’s past, and insights into the forces that have shaped their development.

The search for identity is an experience common to adolescents in all cultures around the world. It can be an exciting but also difficult time, as the teenager attempts to reconcile the multitude of influences on his or her life, such as personal goals, family circumstances, and cultural upbringing, to achieve a harmonious sense of who he or she is as a human being.

For Lorrpu, Milika and Botj, this search is made even more difficult by the impact of integrating both Yolngu and Western cultures into their lives.

### Questions

- In what ways are Lorrpu, Milika and Botj’s sense of identity different? Which character do you relate to the most? Why?
- Australia is a country where children from many different cultures live together. Why can it be particularly difficult for adolescents who have grown up in one culture, but live among other cultural traditions, to find their identity? Have you or your friends experienced a tension between two cultures? What has been the impact on your/their identity?
- What aspects of adolescence do you see as challenging?

### Activities

- Divide the class into groups of three. The students in each group are assigned the roles of Lorrpu,



Little Lorrpu (Buywari Munungurr)

Milika and Botj and take turns answering the question ‘What is most important in your life and why?’, pretending to be their character.

- Ask each student to compile a list of the possible influences on their identities. Some of these influences could be :
  - ethnicity
  - where you were born and where you now live
  - heritage
  - parents and family origins
  - gender
  - your age group
  - your peer group
  - sexuality and relationships
  - religion
  - social life and groups to which you belong
  - media
  - leisure activities
- Ask each student to rank the influences on their lives from the least to most important and have students compare and talk about the ranking of these influences. Students can also discuss which factors listed above influenced Botj, Lorrpu and Milika’s sense of identity.



R: Lorrpu (John Sebastian Pilakui) Botj (Sean Mununggurr) and Milika (Nathan Daniels)

■ Ask students to select one of these activities:

1. Produce an annotated album of your childhood. Include photographs, mementos or drawings. Each item should be annotated to explain the significance of that item in your development.
2. In *Yolngu Boy*, the boys learn the songlines, stories teaching the history and geography of their area, which are passed on orally from generation to generation. Each student creates a songline which explains to the class how they find their way to school each day. The songline should include a short description of who they are and what defines them as an individual. Students then divide into pairs and pass their songline on to their partner. Each student then passes on the songline of their partner to the class as a whole.
3. 'That was a moment that changed me forever'. Write a response to this statement in a personal or creative mode.
4. Create an advertising poster image for the film using the heading : *Three lives, two laws, one country*. Students could also create their poster in a paint or desktop publishing program.

### 3. FRIENDSHIP

*Yolngu Boy* is a powerful study of the friendship of the three boys, and of what it means to be part of a larger social group. Botj, Lorrpu and Milika have been friends since childhood. The bonds of their friendship are strong, but are being tested. The boys are making the difficult transition into adulthood and their individual circumstances and dreams may drive them apart.

Botj is losing his way in life, and many people in the boys' community appear to have given up on him. There is also social pressure on Lorrpu and Milika not to join Botj on his destructive path. But Lorrpu believes in Botj's potential and, as his friend, will not give up on him. Lorrpu knows Botj's future is at stake and Lorrpu will risk everything – even his chances of receiving ceremony – to save him.

During their trip to Darwin, Botj is able to redeem himself and find a connection to his Yolngu heritage and his friends.

When Botj gets to Darwin he is reminded of the circumstances that make him feel an outsider, alone in life. But Botj can never truly be alone because he is *a part of* his two friends, and they are a part of him – 'one skin'.

## Questions

- What changes do the relationships between Lorrpu, Milika and Botj go through during the film and why?
- Why do Milika and Lorrpu decide to go to Darwin with Botj?
- Why are the boys so happy in the wilderness?
- In what way is the rope symbolic of the boys' relationship?
- What are the important components of good friendships?
- Describe one of your most important friendships. How has this friendship changed over time? Why has it changed?

## Activities

- Ask students to discuss one of these statements :
  1. 'There are both responsibilities and benefits involved in being part of a friendship'.
  2. 'A true friend is not critical of our goals'.
- Organize a class debate around this topic: 'The boys would have been better off if they had never taken the journey to Darwin'. Students should draw upon scenes from the film, their own views and other relevant texts.

## 4. RULES, RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In the film, each of the boys has to confront rules, rights and responsibilities, and make choices. Producer Patricia Edgar says *Yolngu Boy* is about:

*the multiple choices that all teenagers must confront – should you opt out or accept the responsibilities of adulthood? There is a moment in everyone's life when a choice has got to be made which can send you down one path or another, and in this film these three boys ... are at that moment in their lives.*

Lorrpu and Milika are being prepared for ceremony, a tribal ritual signifying that they have earned respect within the tribe, and can be trusted with knowledge and with the law.

But when Botj's future is jeopardised, the boys learn that friendship brings with it its own set of responsibilities, which are not always consistent with the boys' other responsibilities.

## Questions

- Why do you think that Lorrpu and Milika agree to break in to the community centre with Botj? What are the implications for all of them?
- What behavior shown in the film is acceptable and unacceptable in the broader community? Does this reflect standards in your community?
- Why do groups have rules? Why do particular cultural groups have different rules?
- What rights and responsibilities do we all share? What are the consequences when people do not accept their responsibilities?
- What rules are designed to protect people from harm?
- What are some of the rights and responsibilities of adulthood?
- When do you become a man or a woman? What changes, other than physical changes, must occur before you can claim to be a man or a woman?

## Activities

- Divide the class into two teams and debate the topic: 'It was wrong for Lorrpu and Milika to take Botj out of hospital and go with him to Darwin'.
- Consider the conflict between the boys' responsibility to respect the law, and their responsibilities to Botj as friends.

## 5. CULTURE

These are two definitions of 'culture':

'(Culture is) ... the skills, arts, beliefs, and customs of a group of people, passed on from one generation to another.' *Macquarie Dictionary*, 1989

'Culture embraces the beliefs, values, ideals, customs, languages, discourses, artistic products and symbols of a group ... The expression of a people's culture can be found in their traditions, memories, treasured materials and artifacts which can create a sense of personal and group identity.' C. Marsh (ed.), *Teaching Studies of Society and Environment*, Prentice Hall, Sydney, 1994.

A sense of culture is extremely important to many of the characters in *Yolngu Boy*, particularly Lorrpu. The film begins and ends with scenes of significant

Yolngu ceremonies, marking transitions in the boys' lives. The importance of the boys' sense of tribal culture is also emphasised by the recurring visits throughout the film of 'Baru', the boys' crocodile totem and spirit ancestor, whom they are taught will protect them, make them strong, and guide them through life.

However, the traditional Yolngu culture is not the only culture represented in the film. *Yolngu Boy* depicts a community in which the traditional culture is juxtaposed with modern Western culture. Strong symbols of Western culture are present - football, CD-players and modern music, alcohol, cars, aeroplanes, and the baseball caps worn by many of the kids.

Lorrpu, Milika and Botj are affected by both Yolngu and Western cultures. Many young Australians have multicultural backgrounds and, like the boys in *Yolngu Boy*, this influences their daily lives, their sense of identity and direction in life.

### Questions

- Why do the boys release the crocodiles they find at the poachers' camp?
- How do you think the boys feel when they catch the turtle? Is the killing of the turtle by the boys different from the killing of the crocodiles by the poachers? Why?
- Suggest one example from the film where an element of Western culture has mixed with the Yolngu culture in a positive way.
- Suggest one example from the film where Western culture has had a negative influence on Yolngu culture.
- Rituals are an important part of any culture. What rituals does your family have to celebrate occasions such as birthdays, Christmas, religious days or national days?

- Do you see yourself as different from your friends because of your cultural background? In what way? Do you involve your friends in your cultural traditions? Discuss.

### Activities

- Ask students to list the tribal knowledge the boys use in the film. For example, the songlines the three boys sing which teach them the geography of their area, their hunting abilities (including their use of body paint as camouflage), and the medical treatments Lorrpu uses to help Botj's arm to heal.
- Students discuss the significance of the Yolngu traditions seen in the film including initiation, dance, song, body painting and decoration, bush foods, making the rope, putting the bones in the fire for the old people.
- Students discuss these views of tradition:
  1. 'Traditions are damaging and serve only to stifle the individual'.
  2. 'Most ceremonies these days have lost their special value and are only driven by commercial interests'.
  3. 'In Australian society, the only rituals we really attach any value to are those to do with sport'.
- Ask students to explore the traditions, rituals and ceremonies found in another cultural group and prepare a report that provides a brief history, explanation of the ceremony/ritual/tradition, and any striking features or practices associated with it. Reports may be presented in written or oral form or as a multimedia presentation.