

# WOMEN OF

# THE SUN

A **STUDYGUIDE** BY SALLY CAMPBELL

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## Synopsis

*Women of the Sun* (James Ricketson, David Stevens, Stephen Wallace, Geoffrey Nottage, 1981) is an extraordinary drama series about the lives of Aboriginal women over two centuries of Australian history. The series tells the story of Aboriginal history from an indigenous perspective. It marked the first such portrayal of Australian history to a wide national audience and helped inspire a revision of the country's history to include the Aboriginal experience. First screened on SBS in 1981, the series was met with national and international acclaim, winning the United Nations Media Peace Prize, two Australian Writers' Guild Awards and five Penguin Awards.

The episodes are focused on the experience of Aboriginal tribes in South Australia. The first episode is set in 1824 and documents the initial contact of Aborigines with white men, providing valuable insights into the traditions, language, and culture of indigenous Australians prior to colonization, as well as the origins of the battle for settlement land and the clash of cultures. The second episode, set in 1895, focuses primarily on the experience of indigenous Australians living on Christian missions. The story outlines the loss of cultural identity and the battle to conquer Aboriginal spiritualism. The third and fourth episodes are set in 1939 and 1981 respectively, when the story shifts to the decision of Aborigines to fight back against the system and attempt to re-establish their rights and cultural traditions as part of the rapidly chang-

ing Australian nation.

Each episode portrays the life of an Aboriginal woman of the time, depicting their struggles as part of the broader social and historical context in which they lived. The drama is, on one hand, a story of personal strength and resilience, shaped and directed by the profound experiences of its protagonists, and, on the other hand, a much broader tale outlining the near-destruction, followed by the tremendous recovery, of Aboriginal pride and their vital cultural heritage.

### About this Study Guide

Key themes discussed in this study guide are: Australian history, Aboriginal history, indigenous issues, human rights, gender, identity, religion, spirituality, land rights, art and culture.

The study guide includes questions and activities to be explored prior to and after watching the film. 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 in this study guide are relevant for teachers and students from middle to senior years studying: Australian Studies, History, Social and Cultural Studies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, English, Religious Studies, Personal Development and Media Studies.



## Before Watching The Film

**B**efore viewing *Women of the Sun*, teachers may want to prepare students by considering themes and issues related to Australian history.

### Australian History

When Europeans first arrived in Australia, their notions of land ownership emphasized the land as a source of power and wealth, not least because it was a vital source of food production required for their survival. In the process of establishing Western agricultural practices and social systems, they showed no understanding of the profound spiritual connection of Aboriginal cultures to the land and openly disrespected sacred sites and rituals. Indigenous populations had been encountered as a result of European

colonization in other parts of the world and, at the time, were popularly understood to be savages. The Australian Aborigines unsuccessfully resisted the changes brought by white settlers and many lives were lost during hostilities between the two groups.

In the late nineteenth-century, the Aboriginal population of South Australia had decreased radically due to a combination of factors including violence against the tribes and the introduction of deadly diseases, against which indigenous people had no immunity. As settlements spread, Aborigines were relegated to poorer land on the outskirts of towns or on missions. Many of them were also sent to government reserves without taking into account their traditional groupings or ancestral links to the land. Abo-

riginal spiritualism was significantly challenged by the imposition of Christianity as the required religious and moral fabric of society. Efforts to sustain their culture were constantly challenged by the relentless attempts of missionaries to convert them.

Indigenous Australians had little to celebrate when Australia welcomed Federation in 1900. Laws were enacted to control the lives of Aborigines living on reserves and missions. Between 1880 and 1910, Australia's various states established boards for the 'protection' of Aborigines. These boards controlled the lives of every Aboriginal person in Australia. White managers were appointed to run the reserves and they supervised the day-to-day



activities of the inhabitants, who were not allowed to come and go as they pleased. Aborigines living on reserves were not allowed to own property and their managers controlled their bank accounts. They were given rations instead of payment and had no political rights or freedoms.

Homes on the reserves were regularly inspected and Aboriginal families were often forcibly separated. The Aboriginal Protection Board had the power to remove children from their parents to be 'apprenticed' to white employers. For example, between 1909 and 1930, nearly a third of all Aboriginal children in New South Wales were removed from their families and approximately seventy per cent of these were girls. Boys were trained as manual labourers, while girls were trained as domestic servants. These children were often subject to abuse and sexual harassment by their employers and many girls returned to the reserves pregnant. The Aborigines formed associations to protest such practices, including the Australian Aborigines League and the Aborigines Progressive Association.

Aboriginal soldiers fought side by side with white Australians in the Second World War, and, after the war, Australian state governments abandoned their protectionist policies in favour of assimilation. The Aboriginal Progressive Association and the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders worked tirelessly to improve the conditions for Aboriginal people. Their campaigns led to the 1967 referendum that finally granted Aboriginal people the same rights as all other Australian Citizens.

In 2006, it could be argued that Aborigines are still discriminated against, both on an institutional and personal level. As a result, Aboriginal organizations have been formed to combat discrimination, to further the cause of the Aboriginal people, and to protect the languages, cultures, and traditions of surviving tribes. Despite increased awareness and laws protecting the freedom of Australia's Aboriginal population, the fight for equality and a successful reconciliation process continues today.

## Questions and Activities

- Undertake a class debate. The topic is: 'Aboriginal people have no more connection to land than I do.' Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
- Do current and future generations need to apologise for the actions of the past generations? What if the results of those actions still have repercussions today?
- Research the importance of land to Aboriginal people's history and beliefs. Now compare your findings to those of other cultures in Australia. How are the claims different and similar?
- Does the land where your school is located have an Aboriginal past? Research and discuss.
- As a class, discuss the role of religion as a means of colonization. Identify other countries and other periods of time where religion has been used in the colonization process. Based on these examples, would you say religion in the colonisation process results



in a destructive or a constructive impact?

- Research both the negative and positive impacts of Christian missions on Aboriginal communities.
- Do you think Christian missionaries were misguided or malicious in the context of Aboriginal history?
- Place the four chapters of *Women of the Sun* on a timeline. Now research significant events in the history of land rights in Australia. When were the most significant results achieved? Why? What else was happening in Australia and around the world at this time that might have brought about these results?

### Episode 1: Alinta – The Flame

The lives of the Nyari people are completely disrupted when two escaped convicts are washed up on the beach of their tribal lands. This initial encounter between the two peoples highlights the unique customs and culture of tribal Aborigines. They provide food and shelter to the convicts despite

the possible threat to the tribe and the warnings of some of the tribe’s elders. The Nyari people subsequently meet other white settlers who arrive with the intent of settling their land. The episode emphasizes the spiritual and ancestral value of land to the Nyari people, in sharp contrast to the importance of land as a source of wealth and power for the white settlers. In the end, the settlers annihilate the tribe and only Alinta remains with her child.

### Questions and Activities

- This episode is sub-titled using the native language of the people of Lake Evela, Northern Territory. Why do you think the filmmaker chose to use Aboriginal tribal language in the film? Discuss the significance of this choice as a class.
- Explore the challenges involved in translation from a tribal language to English. What instructions would you give a translator converting tribal language to English for this film?
- What particular challenges would the director have faced in making

this episode?

- Discuss the different roles of women and men in the tribe. What is the special role of women in decision-making processes? How do the men and women relate? Is it similar to gender roles in Australian society today? Discuss.
- Write a story about Alinta and her daughter ten years after the massacre of their tribe. Where is she living? What is her future? The story should describe how her life has changed and the cultural traditions she hopes to instil in her daughter.
- What specific complaints does the tribe have about the settlers? In small groups, hold a tribal council outlining specific complaints and prepare a strategy for coping with the situation.
- If you could interview Alinta, what questions would you ask her? Prepare an interview with Alinta for a television or radio show. What questions would most interest a modern Australian audience? What do you think her answers would be to your questions? Working with a



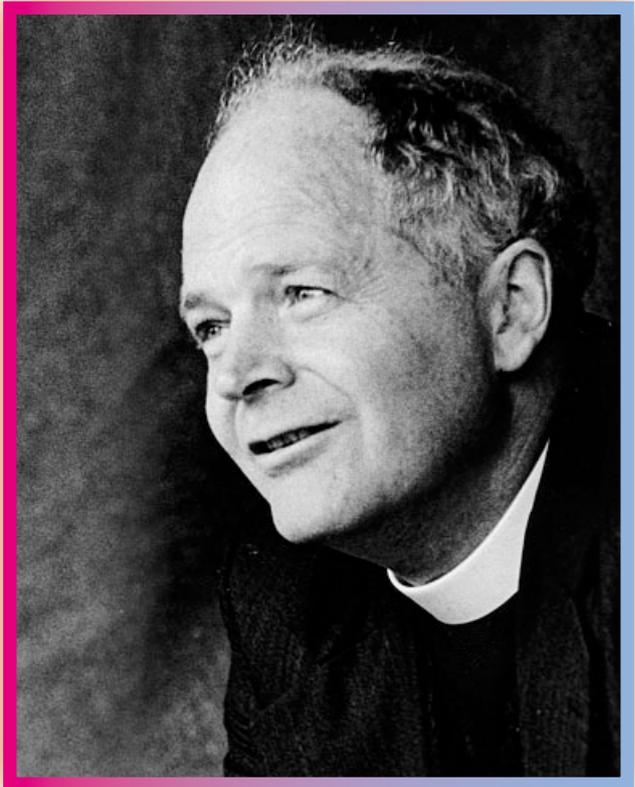
classmate, present the interview to the class. Classmates can ‘call-in’ questions to the radio station or ask questions as part of a ‘live studio audience’ at the end of the interview to share their insights and ask further questions.

- Describe the first meeting of the tribe with McNab and Findlay. Imagine that you are an Aboriginal person seeing a white man for the first time. Choose ten words you would use to describe him. With one of your classmates, share the words you have chosen and have them draw a picture of him based on your description.
- One of the European convicts is killed for breaking tribal law by assaulting one of its young women. Divide the class into two groups, one representing a traditional Aboriginal tribe, and the other representing a modern Australian court. Each group should prepare an argument deciding the fate of the same European convict according to its laws. Debate the issue as a class.
- Why did McNab betray the tribe? In your opinion, did he have a choice? Would you have behaved differently? What would have happened if he had stayed with the tribe and not gone back to his people? Re-write the story from this perspective.
- Describe the confrontation between the white settlers and the Aborigines. What are the differences in their weaponry? How does their approach to conflict and negotiation differ? Discuss these differences and their significance to the outcome at the end of this episode.
- Make a model of one of the items the tribe uses in their everyday life and research its use and the resources they used to make it.
- Imagine that you are McNab. Write a letter saying what changes are needed in the attitude of European settlers if they are to peacefully co-exist with the Aborigines.
- In small groups, give each other tribal names. Consider the names given to McNab and Findlay by the tribe to help guide the proc-

ess. What is in a name? How does it help form personal identity? Discuss.

## Episode 2: Maydina – The Shadow

The story opens with the escape of Maydina and her half-caste daughter Biri, from seal hunters who enslaved them. Their intent is to escape back to their traditional lands, but they quickly learn that these lands have been settled and their people have scattered. Without food or shelter, Maydina and Biri are ultimately delivered to a Christian mission run by a woman called Mrs McPhee. While Maydina is put into service at the mission, Mrs McPhee takes a special interest in Biri’s religious education and separates her from her mother. Sickened by her existence at the mission, Maydina escapes with Biri and another Aboriginal man to re-establish a tribal way of life. Mrs McPhee dispatches troopers to return the escapees. They shoot the man and separate Maydina and Biri forever.



## Questions and Activities

- What is your opinion of Mrs McPhee? How does her character change by the end of the episode? Do you sympathize with her position? If so, how? If not, why not? Discuss.
- What impact do you think changing Maydina and Biri's names have on their identity? Debate whether or not the name change is relevant to them in their lives. How would you react if someone changed your name? Does your first name have a special meaning? What is its background? Does it tie you to your family in a particular way? How so? Discuss.
- Prepare a DVD or video jacket for this episode including a picture and caption on the front and a summary of the film on the back.
- Is identity fundamental to understanding the film? Write a letter to a pen pal in a different country explaining your identity. Consider your identity at different levels: personal, community, national,

and global. To what extent is your identity shared across cultures? To what extent is it personal and/or local to where you live? As a class, share your letters. How many different cultures are represented in the class? How does this affect your individual and collective identity as Australian students? Discuss.

- Study the importance of sacred objects to Aborigines. How do they relate to Aboriginal spiritualism? What is their significance in this episode? What does Reverend Bligh mean when he refers to the 'instruments of Satan'? Discuss the confrontation that ensues from his remark.
- Describe the methods of farming, household tasks and transport in 1895. Imagine that you are a television producer creating a reality television show recreating life on a mission. Advertise for modern Australian families to audition to be part of your reality television series, including in the advertisement a list of the things they will have to wear and do to participate in the

show. What characteristics would candidates need to survive the experience?

## Episode 3: Nerida Anderson

The story of Nerida Anderson is set in 1939, based on an event known as the Cumerongunga Walkout. Nerida is a young and rebellious woman who returns to the government mission where her family lives, the Koomalah Aboriginal Reserve, after spending several years in the city. She is shocked by the conditions on the mission and attempts to motivate her people to improve them. The Aboriginal community first presents a petition to the governing body of the mission, the Aboriginal Protection Board, but when their plea is ignored Nerida decides drastic measures need to be taken. She convenes an illegal meeting to discuss collective actions that might be taken to improve the situation. The reserve manager retaliates by having Nerida and her family tried for treason. The court judges the charge to be inappropriate and questions why

the issue has not been taken up by the Aboriginal Protection Board. While the charge is dropped, the manager continues in his post and life on the mission continues to get worse. Realizing that nothing will change through due process, Nerida motivates all Aborigines on the mission to 'walk-out' and establish independent lives.

### Questions and Activities

- What were your impressions of the Koomalah Aboriginal Reserve? How would living standards there compare with general living standards in Australia during the Depression? Research the Australian experience of the Depression and its specific impact on Aborigines. Prepare your research in a report, including supporting pictures and statistics to explain the historical context of this episode.
- Why do you think that the film draws attention to the service of Nerida's father in the Second World War? Study the involvement of Australian Aborigines in the War. Write a diary of an Aboriginal serviceman during World War Two. Consider the social and cultural shocks he would have experienced and the extent you think he would have identified with Australians, regardless of race.
- Research the meaning of nationalism. Why does the term exist and what does it describe? To what extent does nationalism represent the Australian experience today? In your opinion, what does it mean to be Australian? How do you think an indigenous Australian might reply to the same question?
- In what ways do the characters in this episode balance their Australian and Aboriginal identity? Do the characters feel that they are Australian? Explain your answer using examples from the film to defend it.
- Design a questionnaire that might be given to Aboriginal people to find out their attitudes about conditions on the reserves. Consider the quantitative and qualitative information you would need to present a case to the government

- for improving the conditions.
- This episode draws attention to the importance of language, culture and tradition to sustaining the identity of Australia's Aborigines. Research other cultures in the world that have contested identities. What strategies are used to maintain cultural integrity and promote difference despite the strong push to assimilate? How has globalization made it more difficult for minority cultures to survive? Discuss.
  - In your opinion, do the filmmakers demonize the reserve manager unnecessarily? What characteristics is he given to make him a convincing villain? To what extent do you think he can be blamed for what occurs in the episode and to what extent are the problems systemic? Discuss.
  - As a class, prepare a petition for an issue that you care about. Collect signatures on the petition and present it to an authority that might be able to improve the situation. If it is an issue specific to your school, have students who agree with the issue sign the petition and then present it signed to your Principal. For local issues, consider sending the petition to members of your local council. For issues of national concern, you might send the petition to an official in the government. Another effective way of getting a broad range of petition signatures is by putting the petition on the internet. Explore other petitions on the web and see how many signatures they have collected.

### Episode 4: Lo-Arna

Ann Cutler is the 18-year-old adopted daughter of middle-class parents in an Australian country town. She has been told that she is French-Polynesian and that there is no record of her birth parents beyond knowledge of their nationality. The truth is that she is born of her adoptive father, Doug Cutler, and an Aboriginal woman called Alice Wilson, who lives locally. A land dispute with the indigenous community where

Alice lives brings her back in contact with Ann's father, who is responsible for representing the issue to the local government. Alice states her wish to be reunited with Ann, whose Aboriginal name is Lo-Arna, forcing Doug Cutler to reveal the truth to Ann. Ann's trusting relationship with her parents changes dramatically when the situation is explained to her. She feels conflicted and insecure, and attempts to resolve her emotional turmoil by establishing contact with Alice. Ann drives to Alice's home, but when she arrives there she finds the situation too confronting and turns to leave. Alice chases after Ann's car as she drives away. The film ends when Ann stops the car to finally meet her birth mother.

### Questions and Activities

- Doug Cutler says in his speech to the football club that 'some people, no matter what you do for them, will never be able to contribute'. As a class, discuss the context of his speech and what this says about his character in the film. Do you think his views in the film represent those of the majority of non-indigenous Australians today? Discuss.
- By 1982, Australia had become a multicultural society, and race relations in Australia were no longer focused exclusively on white settlers and indigenous Australians. How is this added complexity reflected in this episode? Discuss.
- The storyline in this episode requires that the characters portrayed all seek ultimately to reunite Lo-Arna with her mother. Imagine that Ann Cutler issued a search for her birth parents through an adoption agency but found that her birth mother did not want to meet her. Re-write the story taking this into consideration. Would she uncover the truth in this scenario? If so, how? If not, why not?
- What do you think of the music used in this episode? Is it appropriate for the type of story being told? What other genres of films could it be used in? What would be the effect of choosing a differ-



ent style of music to support this episode?

- Is the ending of this episode effective or disappointing? Imagine the meeting between Ann and Alice. Write a film scene that shows that meeting.
- In pairs, undertake a diary writing exercise. Have one classmate write a diary from Ann's perspective and the other from Alice's. Write diary entries in the week leading up to their meeting. How do the entries compare?

## The Characters

Divide into groups to write profiles of the major characters in the film. Each group should work on one character and then share their ideas with other class members. Pay particular attention to similarities and differences in how the characters are portrayed, how they view themselves, and how they are viewed by the other characters in their episodes. Use the following questions and activities to help guide your discussions.

### Alinta

Alinta is a thoughtful and quiet woman who respects the advice of her teacher and friend, Towradgi. Her development is strongly influenced by the customary role of women in the tribe.

- How does Alinta change over the course of the film? How do events impact her development in the tribe?
- To what extent might her experience be typical of Aboriginal tribes at this time and what aspects of her life make her different?

### Maydina

Maydina is a proud Aboriginal woman who is seeking to re-establish her connection with her people and who longs to return to her tribal land.

- To what extent is Maydina's character defined by her relationship with her daughter, Biri?
- Who does Maydina go to for strength and advice throughout her time at the mission?

- In what ways is Maydina an intuitive person? Is she strongly spiritual? What would you describe as her system of beliefs?

### Nerida Anderson

Nerida is a strong woman who is motivated to improve the conditions on the reserve. She is educated and determined to rebel against a system that denies her community their basic rights and freedoms.

- What do you think are Nerida's main qualities? What makes her a good leader?
- If Nerida were a leader in today's Aboriginal community, what role might she play in the community?

### Lo-Arna

Lo-Arna, known as Ann, is a typical Australian girl growing up in a middle-class Australian town. Her knowledge of herself is strongly challenged when she is informed of her Aboriginal heritage.



## After Watching All Four Episodes

The activities and questions outlined below aim to compare the four episodes and raise general issues relevant throughout the film.

- Write down a few of your thoughts about the film. Did you enjoy it? Why or why not? What do you think are the key themes? Which episodes had the greatest impact on you? Give the series as a whole a score from one to five and write a brief film review for your local newspaper.
- What problems would the filmmakers have had in casting this film?
- Why do you think the filmmakers selected the people of Lake Evela in the Northern Territory to portray Aboriginal tribes from Victoria? Identify Lake Evela (the towns of

Yirrkala and Gapwiyak) on a map of Australia.

- What are the benefits of approaching this issue as a drama as opposed to a documentary? How do the two mediums differ? Do you think the approach taken was the best option? Discuss as a class.
- What other titles might have been appropriate for the film? In small groups, enter in a competition for the best alternative film title. Each group should create a billboard advertising the film with its new title. As a class, vote on the best entry.
- What is the role of 'truth' in all four episodes of the film? What 'truth' have the filmmakers sought to uncover? Why? Discuss. With this in mind, work in small groups

to brainstorm how truth relates to reconciliation. What is reconciliation? Why is the truth so important to the reconciliation process?

- The film takes place over four distinct time periods. What effect does this have on the story being told? What are the issues linking the four episodes together? What are the significant changes that take place over time?
- In Lo-Arna, Alice Wilson says that the 'sacred land hasn't changed; it's the people that have changed'. Study the significant changes in the collective character of Aboriginal Australians from the first to the last episode. Now research the changes that have occurred to the land. What does Alice mean when she uses the term 'sacred land'?

Write an essay describing the role of the main characters and their identification with the land in all four episodes.

- The four episodes each explore the relationships between politics and cultural identity. To what extent does politics influence the identity of indigenous Australians in the four episodes? Study the systems that exist in a democratic system to ensure fair representation in politics. How many Aboriginal parliamentarians are there today and why does it matter? Discuss.
- Discuss the role of the authorities in all four episodes. What control do those with power have over indigenous Australians and how do they exercise their power? How has this relationship changed over time?
- Two women, Hyllus Maris and Sonia Borg, co-wrote the story for the film. Research their work. What

do they have in common? What do you think brought them together to do this project? What makes Hyllus Maris such an important figure to Australian Aborigines?

- Research the poetry of Hyllus Maris and write a retrospective editorial about her life and work.
- Is this a feminist film? Define how women are represented and whether the issues presented have a parallel message about women's roles in society. Are the issues raised specific to the Aboriginal experience or can they be applied more universally? Debate the issue as a class.
- Discuss the role of language throughout the film. How is language used to create a positive message about indigenous Australians? Alternatively, what demeaning terms are used and why? Is the language used in the film still

common in Australia today? Write an essay explaining the importance of language to creating and sustaining culture, and, conversely, its potential negative impact on cultural identity.

- Funerals are portrayed in the first three episodes. Compare them.
- The last episode of the film takes place in 1981. Create a sequel that tells the story of an Aboriginal woman in 2006. What would the story be about? What changes have taken place since 1981? What are the issues concerning Australia's indigenous population today?
- What would be the effect if the film was about the lives of four Aboriginal men? Discuss the significance of shaping the story from the perspective of four women and the possible reasons why the filmmakers would take this approach.

*Women of the Sun*

is distributed by Ronin Films in Australia and New Zealand.

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