



MONICA BYRNE / KATY MARRINER
STUDYGUIDE

The Pilot's Funeral

Bundurr Mangalili Yolngu
D h u p u n d j i



L-R: FUNERAL PROCESSION AT ADRIAN WAGG'S MEMORIAL, YIRRKALA, JUNE 2002. YOLNGU LEADER GAWIRRIN GUMANA IS IN FRONT OF ADRIAN'S SONS DAN (LEFT) AND TIM (RIGHT), WHO CARRY THE SACRED POSSUM FUR IN ACCORDANCE WITH YOLNGU FUNERAL RITES. © SALLY WAGG • MANGALILI CLAN LEADER BALUKA MAYMURA • BUWATHPUY GUMANA PLAYING CEREMONIAL CLAPSTICKS (BILMA) AT ADRIAN WAGG'S TEN-DAY FUNERAL IN THE BACKYARD OF THE WAGG FAMILY HOME IN YIRRKALA, JUNE 2002. © NFSA

Synopsis

CURRICULUM GUIDE: This guide provides information and suggestions for learning activities in SOSE/HSIE, English and Religious Education at secondary school level. *The Pilot's Funeral* is also relevant for subjects such as Aboriginal Studies, Australian Studies and Cultural Studies at the tertiary level.

Adrian Wagg arrived in Arnhem Land in the 1970s, a young man newly wed and looking for adventure. He soon fell in love with the place and its people, helping the Yolngu to build homes on their ancestral lands and establish their own airline. *The Pilot's Funeral* recounts the life of this gentle giant of a man. But more than this, it tells of the extraordinary ten-day funeral ceremony that followed his tragic death in a helicopter accident. Not since the arrival of missionaries in the 1930s had the Aboriginal people of northeast Arnhem Land buried their dead in a dhakandjali, a sacred painted hollow log. But on a June afternoon in 2002 in the remote Northern Territory community of Yirrkala, the Yolngu people revived this ancient practice - not for an Indigenous person, but for this white man who they embraced as one of their own. The ceremony, captured in this moving documentary, celebrates a remarkable bond, connecting black and white, people and land, past and future.

About the Filmmakers

» ROSE HESP – WRITER/DIRECTOR: Rose Hesp is a documentary filmmaker and TV journalist with a strong interest in social justice issues. For sixteen years, she has worked as a news and current affairs reporter/producer for Channel 7, ABC and SBS. In 1998 Hesp graduated from the Australian Film Television and Radio School with her documentary *Relative Strangers*. She went on to be co-writer and line producer of *Tosca: A Tale of Love and Torture* and was co-producer and writer of *Lonely Boy Richard*. Hesp also produced *Small Island, Big Fight*, a documentary about sea rights. *The Pilot's Funeral* is

Hesp's first project as director. » DENISE HASLEM ASE – PRODUCER/EDITOR: Denise Haslem is a producer and editor with over twenty years experience in the film and television industry. She produced and edited *Lonely Boy Richard* and the award winning *Mabo – Life of an Island Man*. Her editing credits include *Custody, My Life Without Steve, Canto a la Vida, The Night Belongs to the Novelist, Six Pack, Admission Impossible, Australia Daze, For All The World to See, The Opposite Sex, Aeroplane Dance, Mystique of the Pearl, Our Park, Hatred, Tosca – A*

Tale of Love and Torture and Minymaku Way. She has also produced *Doc – A Portrait of Herbert Vere Evatt, A Calcutta Christmas*, co-produced *Risky Business* and *Steel City*, and was consultant producer of *Ordinary People*. Haslem was producer, director and editor of *Film Australia's Outback DVD*. Haslem was President of the Australian Screen Editors between 1998 and 1999. In 2002 she was a recipient of an inaugural Australian Screen Editors Accreditation. » TREVOR GRAHAM – CO-PRODUCER: Trevor Graham is a documentary producer and director. He was the writer/director

of *Lonely Boy Richard*. His other films include *Land Bilong Islanders, Aeroplane Dance, Sugar Slaves, Punchlines* and *Mystique of the Pearl*. Graham was the writer, director and narrator of *Mabo – Life of an Island Man* and co-directed *Mabo – The Native Title Revolution*. He was also the director and co-writer of *Tosca – A Tale of Love and Torture*. Graham's films have won numerous national and international film and television awards.



ADRIAN WAGG'S EXTENDED FAMILY—BLACK AND WHITE—WITH HIS BURIAL POLE AT THE END OF HIS TEN-DAY FUNERAL CEREMONY IN JUNE 2002. COURTESY SALLY WAGG

Background to the making of the documentary

The idea for *The Pilot's Funeral* originated from a request by the Yolngu, the people of north east Arnhem Land, to film the traditional hollow-log burial ceremony they were conducting to honour Adrian Wagg, an adopted 'son' of the Mangalili clan. That the clan decided to revive this special ceremony is testimony to Adrian Wagg's importance. The makers of *The Pilot's Funeral* were in Yirrkala making another Film Australia documentary when Wagg was tragically killed. The invitation to film the burial ceremony was unexpected. It was a decision made by Djambawa Marawili, a senior ceremonial leader of the Yolngu people. The Wagg family had not been consulted and were initially hesitant, feeling that the filming was intruding on their grief. Subsequent interviews with Wagg's family and the discovery of archival footage of Wagg working with the Yolngu people allowed the filmmakers to tell a remarkable story. *The Pilot's*

Funeral highlights what is possible given mutual respect and understanding on the part of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It is a real story of reconciliation.

Adrian Wagg – A Biography

Adrian Wagg arrived in Arnhem Land in 1972. As a carpenter he worked with the Yolngu to build the tin and bush-timber houses that enabled the people of Yirrkala Mission to return to their ancestral homelands. Wagg worked alongside the Yolngu, helping them to establish outstation settlements where they resumed a more traditional lifestyle. The quality of Wagg's relationship with the people and the land saw him 'adopted' by the Mangalili clan from Djarrakpi, an outstation south of Yirrkala.

It was Wagg's idea to start an airline, Laynhapuy Aviation, in 1987 and provide the community with a helicopter service. Laynhapuy Aviation was Australia's first Aboriginal owned and operated helicop-

ter service. The service not only enabled people in remote areas to get where they needed to go but made life in the homelands sustainable. Wagg's dedication and generosity made the dream of Laynhapuy Aviation a reality.

Adrian Wagg's helicopter went missing on 5 June 2002. He failed to make a scheduled stop while conducting a routine survey for a proposed gas pipeline through Arnhem Land. The burnt-out wreckage of the helicopter was discovered the following day. Adrian was a meticulous and safety conscious pilot. He had flown his entire career in the Arnhem Land area. The helicopter had undergone scheduled maintenance three weeks prior to the accident and there had been no reported problems in the flying hours that followed the maintenance. It was estimated that the helicopter had approximately 150 litres of fuel remaining on board at the time of the accident and was within weight and balance limitations. Investigations indicated the accident was probably caused by engine failure. The reason why the

engine failed could not be determined due to the extensive fire damage.

The traditional hollow-log coffin burial had not been performed since the missionaries established Yirrkala in the 1930s. In life, Wagg had forged a remarkable bond with Arnhem Land and its people. In death, Adrian Wagg, was accorded the honour of this ancient ceremony.

Using *The Pilot's Funeral* in the classroom

These questions and tasks may either be discussed as a class, in small



groups, or completed as individual writing tasks.

Before viewing

- Discuss how contemporary society, your cultural background and religion have shaped your perceptions of death, grief and mourning.
- What is your understanding of family?
- Explore the concept of family in Aboriginal culture.
- What is your understanding of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians?
- What is the current government's stance on reconciliation?

About the Warning

The warning below appears at the start of the documentary:

'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers should be careful when watching as there are images of people now deceased.'

- Why is this warning necessary?

Key Terms

Students will need to understand the following key terms:

- Yolngu – collective name for the clans of north east Arnhem Land
- Dhakhandjali – sacred burial log
- Yingapungapu – sacred sand sculpture representing clan and country
- Place
- Clan
- Kinship
- Customary Law
- Homeland Movement
- Outstation
- Self-determination
- Reconciliation

After viewing

- The documentary begins with an aerial view of Arnhem Land, followed closely by the voiceover of a news report and the Yolngu people performing a funeral ceremony. What expectations does the opening create? How are you positioned as a viewer?
- What parts of the story resonated with you?
- What expectations did you bring to the documentary? Were any of these expectations challenged?
- How has your understanding of the issues facing Aboriginal people, society and culture changed after watching *The Pilot's Funeral*?



- After watching *The Pilot's Funeral*, what comments would you make about the purpose of this documentary?
- How can Adrian Wagg's story influence our future? In a personal sense? As a nation?
- Locate Arnhem Land and the other places mentioned in the documentary on a map of Australia.
- Find out more about the Yolngu people of north east Arnhem Land.

About the Title

The documentary has two titles: *The Pilot's Funeral* and *Bundurr Mangalili Yolngu Dhupundji*. The Yolngu title for the film translates as 'The ashes of the Mangalili man lies in the sacred hollow log'.

- Why does the documentary have two titles? Explain the significance of each.
- What does the title *The Pilot's Funeral* suggest about the way Adrian was viewed and his role in the community of Yirrkala?

Close Analysis

The Pilot's Funeral - A Personal Story

- How does the documentary portray Adrian Wagg?
- What picture do we get of Wagg from his wife Sally, his sons, his



FROM TOP: A SACRED CIRCLE OF YOLNGU MEN DURING ADRIAN WAGG'S TEN-DAY FUNERAL CEREMONY, HELD IN HIS BACKYARD IN YIRRKALA IN JUNE 2002. IT WAS THE FIRST TIME THE YOLNGU HAD PERFORMED A HOLLOW-LOG BURIAL SINCE THE ARRIVAL OF MISSIONARIES IN THE 1930S. © NFSA. • MOURNERS FAREWELL ADRIAN WAGG. MANGALILI CLAN LEADER BALUKA MAYMURU AND BOB WAGG, ADRIAN'S BROTHER, SHAKE HANDS IN FRONT OF THE SACRED BURIAL POLE AT THE END OF THE TEN-DAY FUNERAL CEREMONY. © NFSA. • CO-PRODUCER TREVOR GRAHAM FILMING ADRIAN WAGG'S FUNERAL CEREMONY IN YIRRKALA IN JUNE 2002. COURTESY SALLY WAGG.

brother Bob, Stephen Johnson and his Yolngu friends?

- ‘Adrian loved to be out exploring things and he was quiet, but he just liked things a bit different. He was an adventurer.’ What moments in the documentary support this perception of Wagg?
- What impressions do you develop of Adrian and Sally’s life together and of their love for each other?
- What do you learn about Adrian’s sense of family, both his own and his adopted family?
- ‘This was paradise to him.’ ‘The pilot was very important to us. He understood Yolngu way of life.’ What does the documentary tell us about Adrian’s love for the land and the people of north east Arnhem Land?
- What does the documentary reveal about Adrian’s motivation?
- What does Adrian Wagg’s story teach us about loyalty?
- What does the film tell us about Wagg’s generosity?
- Why did Wagg deserve to be honoured in such a significant way?
- What does the film reveal about what Wagg valued and how he was valued?
- How does the documentary celebrate Wagg’s life?
- ‘Wagg was an ordinary man who made an extraordinary difference.’ Discuss.
- What makes Adrian Wagg’s story an inspiring story?
- ‘*The Pilot’s Funeral* shows us that one life can make a difference.’ Discuss.

The Pilot’s Funeral – an historical and political story

For the last 200 years government policy and practice relating to Indigenous Australians has had at its core notions of cultural superiority. The colonial policy of protection led to extensive regulation over the lives of Aboriginal people. A central feature of the policy of protection was the segregation of Aboriginal people onto government controlled reserves or church run missions. The continuing problems experienced by the nation led to the development of the policy of assimilation in the 1930s and 1940s. The premise of this

policy was that all Aboriginal people were expected to attain the same manner of living as non-Indigenous Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community (though at the time they were not recognised as citizens). The policy of assimilation was eventually discredited because it was recognised that for Aboriginal people to ‘fit in’ meant to stop being Aboriginal. Since 1975 government policy has been directed towards self-determination. This policy has led to consideration of land rights legislation; the establishment of government departments dedicated to Aboriginal affairs and the provision of funding for Aboriginal advancement programs.

Yirrkala is a community which lies 650 kilometres east of Darwin on the Gove Peninsula. It became part of the



Arnhem Land reserve in the 1930s and was established as a Methodist mission in 1935. It soon became a major settlement for the clans of north east Arnhem Land.

Despite Yolngu protests during the 1950s and 1960s, the federal government authorized bauxite mining on their land and with it came the purpose-built mining town of Nhulunbuy with 4000 people, almost all of them white. In 1968 the 500 Yolngu of Yirrkala and

others became the plaintiffs in a case which became known as the Gove Land Rights case, arguing that they enjoyed sovereign rights over their land and seeking declarations that they were entitled to occupy the land free from interference pursuant to their native title rights. It is acknowledged as being the first case brought by Aboriginal people that argued Indigenous Australians should be accepted as the rightful owners of their traditional country. The plaintiffs’ claims were rejected but it alerted many Australians to the dispossession of traditional lands and many believe the claim paved the way for later claims such as Mabo and Wik.

Outstation/Homeland Movement

In the early 1970s, the Yolngu began returning to their ancestral clan lands. They established tiny ‘outstation’ settlements where they resumed a more traditional lifestyle – hunting, painting and raising their families away from the temptations and distractions of ‘town’. Over the years Yirrkala has hosted filmmakers, anthropologists, historians, politicians and activists from around the world, keen to gain some insight into the life of the people of north east Arnhem Land. It is a community with a proud history and is considered a showpiece, famous for its political will, creativity and art and the strength of its customary law¹.

- Research the role of missions in shaping Aboriginal communities in early 20th century Australia.
- Locate more information about the Homeland/Outstation Movement.
- “The first thing my uncle learnt was to listen to the old people’s stories. They talked to him and entrusted him with their wishes and dreams. Those old people’s wishes and dreams he helped make a reality.” Adrian Wagg, as a white Australian, supported Indigenous Australians/ Yolngu to reclaim their traditional lifestyle and create a self-sufficient

ABOVE: WANYUBI MARIKA PAINTING ADRIAN’S DHAKANDJALI (SACRED HOLLOW-LOG BURIAL POLE). HE WAS ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL ARTISTS WHO PREPARED THE LOG DURING THE TEN-DAY FUNERAL CEREMONY. © NFSA.

community. Why do you think it is important to tell his story in this sense?

- Explain how Adrian's widow Sally and oldest son Daniel continue to contribute to the Yirrkala community.
- As a class discuss how the documentary promotes understanding and respect of Yolngu culture and Wagg's contribution to the community of Yirrkala.
- What does the film reveal about the



state of the relationship between black and white Australia?

- Aboriginal elder Gawirrin Gumana in addressing the audience at the burial ceremony says, 'We've brought the past to the present'. How important do you think the past is in shaping our future?
- 'Adrian Wagg's story is a powerful symbol of reconciliation and suggests what is possible given mutual respect and understanding on the part of both black and white Australia.' Discuss.
- While the film is primarily the story of Adrian Wagg, it also becomes an important historical document. Do you agree? How is this achieved?

The Pilot's Funeral - A Cultural Story

Kinship Laws

A clan is a group of people who believe that many generations ago they had a common core of ancestors. The rule



among Yolngu people is that they must marry into different clans. The children of a marriage always belong to the father's clan and it is the family's responsibility to teach their children about kinship laws, particularly how people are related to them and how they should behave towards those relations. In non-Indigenous society one's mother's sister would be called one's 'aunt'; however, in north east Arnhem Land this woman would be called 'mother'. Likewise, one's father's brother would be called 'father' rather than 'uncle' and one's 'cousins' would be called 'brothers' or 'sisters', thus denoting just how strong familial ties are.

- Read in more depth about Indigenous families on the internet at www.dreamtime.net.au/Indigenous/family.cfm
- Why was Adrian adopted into the Mangalili clan?
- What does the documentary reveal



about Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' perception of family?

Burial Rituals

In many Aboriginal communities, dealing with death involves complex rituals which help the spirit return to its sacred site and allow the life of the clan to return to normal. Burial rituals serve many functions in relation to the individual and to the group. It is believed that they assist the passage of the deceased person on the journey to the ancestral world. The rituals allow relatives to accept the reality of death and to express their grief in socially approved ways. Attention is often directed to the fact that the deceased has fulfilled social roles and that others will now assume these roles. In Arnhem Land, burials are significant ceremonies. In traditional times they took place in three stages. Firstly, the body was laid to rest in a grave or on a platform. Later the bones



were collected and sealed in a bark cylinder. Later still, they were placed in a hollow log coffin on which there were paintings of clan designs. (These days the ceremonies have been modified around the use of Western-style coffins.) Rituals accompanying the burial included singing, wailing and dancing. The songs are said to make the departed person happy and the designs are recognised by the ancestors who receive the spirit of the dead person.

- As a class recall the rituals that are part of Adrian Wagg's burial ceremony.
- Explore the mortuary rites of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land.
- Consider the difference between the way the Yolngu express their grief and the way Adrian Wagg's family express their grief. What do you notice? What does this documentary reveal about how different cultures respond to loss and grief?

FROM TOP: ADRIAN WAGG IN ARNHAM LAND IN THE 1990S. COURTESY SALLY WAGG.

- SALLY WAGG IN HER BACKYARD IN JANUARY 2003 NEXT TO ADRIAN'S BURIAL POLE (DJANKANDJALI), WHICH IN ACCORDANCE WITH YOLNGU CUSTOM, CONTAINS HIS ASHES. © NFSA.
- SALLY WAGG, WRITER/DIRECTOR ROSE HESP AND ROSE'S DAUGHTER ANGELITA GRAHAM WITH ADRIAN WAGG'S BURIAL POLE. © NFSA.
- ADRIAN WAGG (PICTURED IN 1985) WAS AN ADVENTURER WHO LOVED ARNHAM LAND AND ITS PEOPLE. COURTESY SALLY WAGG.

- Aboriginal elder Gawirrin Gumana in addressing the audience at the burial ceremony says, "This is a coffin from way back. The patterns, the design you see are from the old days. And here as you can see is where our beloved one is in this hollow log. For you to see and to think about to thank him for what he's done for us."

Why is it significant that the Yolngu are now once again celebrating ancient rituals?

- Why do you think the Yolngu wanted the ceremony recorded? Research Aboriginal attitudes to traditional ceremonies being recorded and broadcast.

Production Values

- How are shots and scenes selected to highlight Adrian Wagg's love of Arnhem Land?
- What techniques have the filmmakers used to establish Wagg's commitment to the Yirrkala community?
- How are archival footage, home videos and still photographs used to establish Adrian Wagg's story?
- List the settings used by the filmmakers. What do these settings reveal about place and its significance in people's lives?
- What symbols and imagery are used throughout the film? What do they suggest about the filmmakers' purpose? How do they add to our understanding?
- How does music shape our response to *The Pilot's Funeral*?

Going Further

- Watch part of *The Yirrkala Film Project* (Film Australia, 1970-1996), a series by Ian Dunlop, which documents many aspects of Yolngu life.
- Find out more about the Gove Land Rights Case, which began in 1968.

Endnotes

- ¹ Jenny Munro with Kathy Malera Bandjalan *Lonely Boy Richard Study Guide*, Film Australia, 2003

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THE PILOT'S FUNERAL

A Film Australia National Interest Program. Produced with the assistance of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Writer/Director: Rose Hesp

Producer: Denise Haslem

Co-Producer: Trevor Graham

Executive Producer: Penny Robins

Year: 2005

Duration: 26 minutes

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ABOVE: ONE OF THE LAST PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN OF PILOT ADRIAN WAGG, TRAGICALLY KILLED IN A HELICOPTER ACCIDENT IN JUNE 2002. HE HELPED THE YOLNGU OF NORTHEAST ARNHEM LAND SET UP LAYNHAPUY AVIATION, AUSTRALIA'S FIRST ABORIGINAL OWNED AND OPERATED AIRLINE. COURTESY SALLY WAGG.