



# THE SONG KEEPERS



COME ON AN ADVENTURE AS THE UNLIKELIEST BAND ON EARTH  
GOES ON TOUR...TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD.



<http://www.metromagazine.com.au>

<http://theeducationshop.com.au>

© ATOM 2018. ISBN: 978-1-76061-158-3



AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS OF MEDIA

A STUDY GUIDE BY  
FIONA VILLELLA



Clockwise top left:  
Heather, Vanessa,  
Daphne in Germany;  
Naina Sen, Director;  
Choir performance

## SYNOPSIS

*The Song Keepers* tells the extraordinary story of a group of women and men from remote Central Australia who form part of a unique historical legacy.

When the German missionaries arrived to Central Australia in 1877, they established congregations in local communities and spread their faith not through dominance and subjugation but through a genuine spirit of mutual collaboration and cultural exchange. The Lutheran missionaries understood that oral storytelling played a central role in indigenous culture and therefore decided to translate sacred German hymns into the local indigenous languages.

This required the methodical, highly laborious task of learning the intricacies and complexities of various indigenous languages, providing the German missionaries with a bank of knowledge any anthropologist would marvel at. Marrying German hymns with indigenous languages fostered a choral movement and love of singing amongst Central Australian indigenous communities in 1877 that

continues right up to the present day.

Despite ebbs and flows in popularity over the years, the choral movement today is known as the Central Australia Aboriginal Women's Choir and boasts 32 members, which include four generations of women (and a couple of men) with members ranging in age from their 80s to their 20s.

Writer, director and producer of *The Song Keepers*, Naina Sen spent three years with the choir members in the making of the documentary. She was with them as they prepared for a special 3-week trip to Germany, where they planned to return the original hymns to their homeland but showcase them in a vastly different guise – that of their indigenous

## CONTENT HYPERLINKS

- |                   |                                          |                    |                                          |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------------|
| <a href="#">2</a> | <a href="#">SYNOPSIS</a>                 | <a href="#">6</a>  | <a href="#">EXPLORING KEY THEMES</a>     |
| <a href="#">4</a> | <a href="#">CURRICULUM LINKS</a>         | <a href="#">9</a>  | <a href="#">EXPLORING KEY CHARACTERS</a> |
| <a href="#">5</a> | <a href="#">BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM</a> | <a href="#">9</a>  | <a href="#">THE DOCUMENTARY GENRE</a>    |
| <a href="#">5</a> | <a href="#">AFTER WATCHING THE FILM</a>  | <a href="#">11</a> | <a href="#">REFERENCES</a>               |



Choir performance

languages. *The Song Keepers* highlights the majestic fusion of two cultural worlds.

Sen forged deep bonds with the women and men of the group and gained unfettered access to their lives and personal stories. For many of the women in the choir, the hymns hold a special place in their hearts having grown up hearing their grandparents sing the hymns in the home and at church. Some of the women also regularly performed the hymns as children with their school choir to an audience of parents and family.

Continuing the tradition of the choir is a deeply personal and emotionally fulfilling exercise for these women. For younger members also, the choir offers them the powerful experience of belonging to a creative, artistic and collaborative movement.

Sen's documentary is a remarkable, uplifting story about genuine cross cultural collaboration, creative skill and the role of community and friendship in peoples' lives.

The Choir's 32 members come from six remote communities throughout central Australia: Hermannsburg, Areyonga, Titjikala, Mutitjulu, Docker River, and Alice Springs. It was formed after an amalgamation of numerous individual community choirs, including the renowned choirs from Ntaria (Hermannsburg), Areyonga and Ernabella.

Morris Stuart, a choral singer in his 70s born in a South American British colony, learnt of the choral tradition after moving to Central Australia in 2006. He played a key role in the formation of the Choir

and has worked as the choir's conductor ever since, forming a unique and special bond with the women.

*The Song Keepers* presents a vastly different story of colonialization in Australia to the one we typically hear. As key characters from the documentary attest, whilst massacres and incidences of children being taken away occurred in surrounding communities, the indigenous peoples living under the German Lutheran missionaries were protected from such horrors. The film also implies indigenous peoples were never ordered to cease their traditional beliefs.

*The Song Keepers* shines light on a remarkable historical legacy. Originating in the colonial era, the choral movement in Central Australia has survived the last 140 years. It continues a tradition that honours both sacred poetry and baroque hymns dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century and indigenous languages, themselves thousands of years old. The Choir is like a time capsule, preserving ancient languages and cultures.

*The Song Keepers* highlights an extraordinary confluence of historical traditions and, importantly, showcases the powerful message that vastly different cultural worlds and systems of belief can coexist in harmony. Many of the women featured in the documentary describe how they live according to traditional beliefs of Country as well as following the gospel handed down by the German missionaries.

They are also highly skilled singers in their own right, and their trip to Germany highlights their status as word class musicians.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

*The Song Keepers* can be linked to secondary studies in English, History, Civics and Citizenship, The Arts (Media Studies and Music) and Health and Physical Education. It also meets the Cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, promoting greater understanding of the world's oldest continuous living culture.

### ENGLISH

- Understand how language use can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people ([ACELA1564](#))
- Evaluate the impact on audiences of different choices in the representation of still and moving images ([ACELA1572](#))
- Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts ([ACELT1812](#))
- Identify, explain and discuss how narrative viewpoint, structure, characterisation and devices including analogy and satire shape different interpretations and responses to a text ([ACELT1642](#))
- Analyse and evaluate text structures and language features of literary texts and make relevant thematic and intertextual connections with other texts ([ACELT1774](#))
- Identify and explore the purposes and effects of different text structures and language features of spoken texts, and use this knowledge to create purposeful texts that inform, persuade and engage ([ACELY1750](#))

### HISTORY

- Identify and select different kinds of questions about the past to inform historical inquiry ([ACHHS184](#))

### CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP

- The challenges to and ways of sustaining a resilient democracy and cohesive society ([ACHCK094](#))
- Present evidence-based civics and citizenship arguments using subject-specific language ([ACHCS101](#))

### MEDIA ARTS

- Evaluate how technical and symbolic elements are manipulated in media artworks to create and challenge representations framed by media conventions, social beliefs and values for a range of audiences ([ACAMAR078](#))
- Analyse a range of media artworks from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their media arts making, starting with Australian media artworks, including media artworks of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and international media artworks ([ACAMAR079](#))

### MUSIC

- Analyse a range of music from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their music making, starting with Australian music, including music of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and consider music in international contexts ([ACAMUR105](#))

### HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

- Evaluate factors that shape identities and critically analyse how individuals impact the identities of others ([ACPPS089](#))
- Investigate how empathy and ethical decision making contribute to respectful relationships ([ACPPS093](#))
- Critique behaviours and contextual factors that influence health and wellbeing of diverse communities ([ACPPS098](#))



Top-Bottom: Choir performance;  
Daphne Puntjina;  
Choir performance;  
Carolyn Windy



## BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

**Predictions:** Based on an analysis of the film's title and accompanying artwork, have students brainstorm and predict what they think the documentary will be about. Get them to share their thoughts with a peer before discussing as a whole class.

## AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

### PERSONAL RESPONSE

Immediately after watching the film, have students complete an extended written response in their notebooks. The following can be used to guide their responses: What emotions did the documentary elicit? What did you learn that you didn't know beforehand? Which section of the film did you enjoy the most? Which character did you connect with the most? After a silent writing period, have students share their responses with a peer.

### CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Students can respond to the following comprehension questions in writing:

1. How is the music of the Central Australia Aboriginal Women's Choir unique?
2. What role does the singing of hymns play in these women's lives?
3. What are some of the reasons why the choral movement dwindled over the years?
4. What role did Morris play in reviving the 100+ years old choral tradition?





Top-Bottom:  
Carolyn  
Windy; Choir  
performance;  
Choir ladies  
in rehearsal

## EXPLORING KEY THEMES

### COLONIALISM

*The Song Keepers* shows how German missionaries arrived in Central Australia in June 1877 and sat with local indigenous people and completed drafts of 53 hymns in Western Aranda language. This experience is vastly different to that involving the British colonisation of parts of Australia, which resulted in the massacre and cultural obliteration of indigenous peoples.

Have students discuss the following key questions in small groups:

- What is your understanding of ‘colonialism’?

- Does the version of colonialism presented in *The Song Keepers* conform to this understanding, or is it different? If so, how?
- Does *The Song Keepers* show that colonialism can be a positive force? How?

Have students research British colonisation of Australia, specifically, the frontier wars. Then, in small groups, get students to complete a Venn Diagram comparing and contrasting the British colonisation of Australia with the German colonisation of Central Australia.

Conclude the activity with silent extended writing on the topic: “*The Song Keepers* presents a story of colonisation as a force for creative synergy not of destruction or annihilation”.

### INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE & CULTURAL IDENTITY

German Lutheran, Carl Strehlow, arrived to Central Australia a few years after his predecessors. According to Pastor Rob of the Lutheran Church of Australia, “He really began to appreciate the intricacies of the Aranda language, much more





Top–Bottom:  
Marion Swift and  
Pantjiti Mackenzie  
in rehearsal;  
Marion Swift;  
Daphne Puntjina;  
Choir ladies in  
rehearsal

than anthropologists and other ethnographers of his time. The Aboriginal people themselves made their own hymns in their own language. And today we have this huge collection of Aboriginal songs in Aranda, Pitjantjatjara, Pintupi-Luritja, and other languages as well. It's amazing!"

The last couple of years has seen a renewed interest in indigenous languages. In August 2016, Labor MP Linda Burney's maiden speech included an introduction in Wiradjuri, which was the first time an Aboriginal language had been spoken in parliament. Not long after, *The Guardian* Australia showcased the role of language in indigenous identity in its series 'Our Country, Our Voices'.

Today, some schools across Australia offer Aboriginal languages as a LOTE subject. Recently, ABC's Radio National launched a podcast called *Word Up*, which explores a host of different indigenous languages, enlightening its audience by studying individual word meanings.

Read the following excerpt by Professor Jakelin Troy, the Director of the University of Sydney's Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Research Network. It shows a strong connection between one's language, one's identity and one's knowledge of their culture.

*"I'm not racist, but I don't like speaking English. I would rather speak my own language – Ngarigu of the Snowy Mountains in south-eastern Australia. It's not that I particularly dislike English as a language, it's just that saying who I am – "Ngaya Ngyamitjimitung" in my own language – feels much more authentic than saying "I am Aboriginal" in English. To me, "Aboriginal" sounds like a label someone else has given me and, in fact, that is just what it is.*

*It seems a crying shame that we don't ensure that every Australian child in every Australian school learns an Australian language. [Otherwise]*

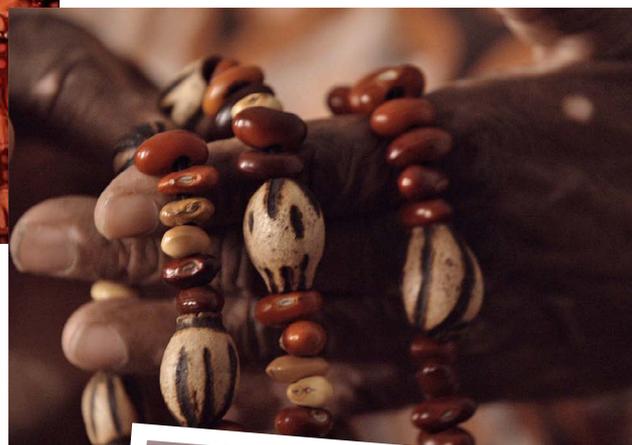
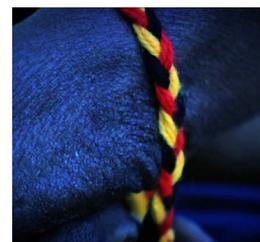
*how would you know that what was once 'Ayers Rock', named after a colonial administrator, is actually Uluru, as it is now so commonly known since its Pitjantjatjara name was officially restored in 1993?*

*This is just the beginning. In knowing an Australian language you will also know how to talk to its first people. You will know the human relationships, the connections to Country, the foods, the plants, the animals, the philosophies, the sciences, the religions and the truths about Australia."*

In small groups, discuss the following:

- Do you agree that the term "Aboriginal" is a label given by someone else?
- Who imposed this label? How might it restrict





one's identity?

- In what way does speaking one's native language enable one to know their culture?
- How does learning an indigenous language help present-day reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians?
- How important do you rate knowledge of language in terms of preservation of one's culture: 5 being extremely important and 1 being of little importance. Justify your answer.

Sydney-based PhD candidate Amy Thomas has done extensive research in the field of indigenous languages and the threats to their posterity.

*"Australia presents one of the worst examples of language death anywhere in the world. There were around 250 distinct Aboriginal languages at the time of colonisation and, it assumed, hundreds of dialects. (...) According to the NILS [National Indigenous Languages Survey], only 120 Aboriginal languages are still spoken in any way at all, with only thirteen categorised as 'strong'. Most are considered severely or critically endangered..."*

- In this light, how do you classify and describe the work by the German missionaries in Central Australia – learning numerous indigenous languages in order to translate German hymns into those languages?
- Rate the importance of the Central Australia Aboriginal Women's Choir in terms of language and cultural preservation: 5 being extremely important and 1 being of little importance. Justify your answer.
- In small groups, discuss the topic "All Australians should learn an indigenous language". Then run a class debate on this topic with one team on the affirmative and one team on the negative side.

Clockwise top left: Choir performance; Hand in Sand; Arm (Daphne Puntjina); Hand with beads; Choir ladies in rehearsal

## CULTURAL DUALITY

One of the members of the Central Australia Aboriginal Women's Choir is Pantijiti McKenzie, who has been a part of the Ernabella Choir since 1962.

She makes insightful comments in *The Song Keepers* about the harmonious coexistence of two very different cultural belief systems:

*"I think maybe if I left my traditional culture to just be one way, I'd go mad. I believe in both ways and it makes me stronger. My identity stays strong with both.*

*It's really simple for us. On Saturdays I take the young girls out bush. I teach them tradition dance and singing. And then later, the choir gets together to sing hymns in the church.*



## THE DOCUMENTARY GENRE

Documentaries today have become an important medium used by filmmakers to critically inform their audiences. Ground breaking documentaries such as *The Look of Silence* (2014), *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God* (2012), *The Queen of Versailles* (2012), and *Blackfish* (2013) illustrate the power of the medium to explore the pressing issues of our time. Recently, documentaries have become high-grossing cinema releases such as *That Sugar Film* (2014).

It is important students have an understanding of the conventions of documentaries. Although their status as ‘non-fiction’ works implies they are vessels of ‘truth’, documentaries are highly-constructed artefacts. They are the result of a varied and complex set of decisions made at the production and post-production stages such as who to interview, what questions to ask, which stories to include in the final edit, whether to use archival footage, what score and soundtrack to use, and so on.

*I don't feel like I have to choose between them. They're both equally important to me. We stand by both."*

Consider the following:

- “*The Song Keepers* offers a powerful message of hope that indigenous culture can exist in harmony alongside Western culture”. Discuss this topic in small groups, using examples from the film.

## EXPLORING KEY CHARACTERS

There are a variety of choir members we get to know throughout *The Song Keepers*. Filmmaker Sen uses techniques such as voice-over and talking heads to give each of these members a prominent voice in the documentary. The characters include:

- MORRIS STUART
- THERESA NIPPER
- DAPHNE PUNTJINA
- HEATHER
- MARION SWIFT
- NICHOLAS WILLIAMS

For each one, write a character profile that includes the following:

- Age
- Position / role in the choir
- Position / role in their local community
- Personality traits
- How long they have been part of the choir
- What belonging to the choir means to them
- Any other important information

Clockwise top left: Choir performance; Morris Stuart in performance; Naina Sen, Director





After spending over three years with the members of the choir, including their trip to Germany, Sen had gathered over 50 hours of footage. It was a difficult process deciding which stories would stay and which would go.

*“We had to work with a large canvas – there are countless stories that could have been included, and numerous elements of the history and tradition to contain. It was tricky and painful to choose the people who appear in the final film, and we carefully debated about which stories to include. There is an immense unseen collection of archival material of the arrival of the Lutheran missionaries in Central Australia from the early 1900s that is held at the Finke River Mission in Alice Springs, Hermannsburg and Areyonga. This material was*



**Top–Bottom:**  
Daphne Puntjina  
and choir; Choir  
performance; Naina  
Sen, Director



*available for us to use in the film and provides a stunning illustration of the historical elements of the film”.*

Archival footage is often used by documentary filmmakers to re-construct an earlier period in history and to help build the viewer’s knowledge of historical contexts. It can add a sense of authority to the project.

In addition to archival footage, *The Song Keepers* uses talking heads and ‘fly-on-the-wall’ devices to weave together various narrative strands.

Complete the following tasks and questions:

- Make a list of the main devices and conventions used by the filmmaker in *The Song Keepers*.
- For each device and convention, consider what effect it has on the viewer.

*The Song Keepers* follows a clear narrative arc, the clear focus being the choir’s historic trip to Germany and the emotional release this provides both to the members of the choir and the German audiences.

Re-watch the key sequences where the choir troupe are travelling through and performing in Germany. In small groups, consider the following questions:

- What emotions are present during the performance sequences?
- What camera angles and shots does the filmmaker use during these sequences?
- What is the tone of these sequences?
- What emotions are present during the sequences in which they explore German neighbourhoods and museums?
- What camera angles and shots does the filmmaker use during these sequences?
- What is the tone of these sequences?

Re-watch the sequence where Daphne and other choir women are performing on the streets in the heart of a German town. Then consider the following questions:

- What happens in this sequence?
- What qualities of the choir women does it emphasise?
- Why do you think the filmmaker choose to include this sequence?
- What effect does it have on the viewer?

Re-watch the sequence where Morris is joking with the choir women about bringing wild chewing tobacco onto the plane. Consider the following questions:

- What happens in this sequence?
- What qualities of the choir women and of Morris, as well as their relationship, does it emphasise?
- Why do you think the filmmaker choose to include this sequence?
- What effect does it have on the viewer?

Below: Morris and Areyonga ladies in rehearsal

Documentaries present a specific way of understanding the world. They also explore a range of human qualities (such as honesty, hope, fear, anxiety, pride, happiness) and human experiences (such as challenges and struggles, success and triumph). Consider the following:

- What are the key messages the film puts forward about ‘the world’?
- For each character, decide which human quality and which human experience that character exemplifies. Include evidence from the film to justify your responses. Use the chart on the next page to organise your ideas.

## WRITING ACTIVITY

“The filmmaker uses specific devices to build empathy for and understanding of the choir group’s significance in the personal lives of all those involved”. Discuss

## REFERENCES

ABC Radio National, *Word Up*, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/wordup/>

*The Song Keepers* Press Kit

Thomas, Amy, “It is still the Balanda way – How Governments Approach Indigeneity”, *Overland*, Issue 226 Autumn 2017

Troy, Jakelin Professor, “Why every Aussie should learn to speak an indigenous Australian language”, *Junkee*, 1 June 2016, <http://junkee.com/why-australian-kids-should-learn-to-speak-australian-indigenous-languages-at-school/79752>





**Human qualities**

**Human experience**

**MORRIS  
STUART**

**DAPHNE  
PUNTJINA**

**MARION  
SWIFT**

**NICHOLAS  
WILLIAMS**

**THERESA  
NIPPER**

**HEATHER**



This study guide was produced by **ATOM**.

(© ATOM 2018)

ISBN: 978-1-76061-158-3

**editor@atom.org.au**

To download other study guides,  
plus thousands of articles on Film as Text,  
Screen Literacy, Multiliteracy and Media Studies,

visit <<http://theeducationshop.com.au>>.

Join ATOM's email broadcast list for invitations  
to free screenings, conferences, seminars, etc.

Sign up now at

<[http://www.metromagazine.com.au/email\\_list/](http://www.metromagazine.com.au/email_list/)>.