

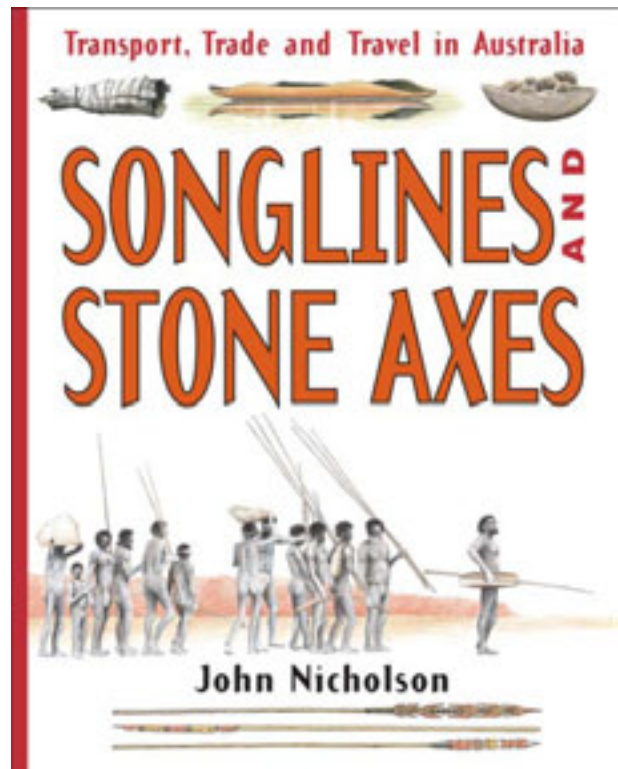
**Teachers Notes**  
**by Jim & Claire Smith**  
**Songlines and Stone Axes**  
**John Nicholson**

**ISBN 9781741750027**

**Recommended for ages 9 yrs or older**

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## INTRODUCTION

Covering the time period from 60,000 years ago to 1788, this book introduces students to the fascinating networks of trade and ceremonial exchange in Aboriginal Australia. It details the trade and exchange of a range of things, including pearl-shell pendants, greenstone axe-heads, belts made of human hair, outriggers for canoes, songs and dances, body paint, feathers, extra strong glue, and cloaks made of eighty possum skins sewn with kangaroo sinew. These and hundreds of other objects were traded around Australia before settlement by British colonisers. Some items were carried on foot over huge distances, through many lands and languages. When food was plentiful, several groups might gather for ceremonies and to swap goods at large markets. All this happened without money, until the Macassans and then the Europeans arrived.

This book can be used to enhance studies in general science, especially geography and environmental studies, as well as to augment studies of Aboriginal culture and history, and of the contact period in Australia. It provides an excellent, and very accessible, introduction to the long-term history of Aboriginal Australia. It is well researched, factually accurate, clearly written, and nicely illustrated.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Get students to use the Internet to obtain information on John Nicholson and his previous books.

Ask some of the students to get copies of John Nicholson's books, and to organise a display for the school or class.

Students can then identify themes in Nicholson's previous work, and discuss the kinds of issues that he has explored in his publications.

Get students to use the Internet to find Norman Tindale's or David Horton's maps of Aboriginal Australia. Print the maps onto clear overheads, so that you can superimpose the linguistic diversity of Aboriginal Australia on the linguistic diversity of comparable areas of land in Europe.

## CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER DISCUSSION

### 1. A SHORT HISTORY OF 60,000 YEARS

This chapter details the intricate and long distance trade in pearl shells, and uses this as a platform for a brief introduction to the main issues covered in the book. It also lightly delves into some deeper issues that you may choose to explore with your classes.

This chapter highlights **major changes in the sea levels** of Australia and New Guinea, over the last 140,000 years. This is depicted in a graph of changing sea levels and in a map of the coastline of Australia when it was linked to New Guinea between 60,000 and 70,000 years ago. The map could be used for introducing the terms *Sunda* (the larger Indonesian land mass) and *Sahul* (the larger Australian/New Guinea/Tasmanian land mass). This section can provide a basis for starting discussions about how environments change through time, and the implications of this for populations of flora and fauna, as well as for people. For upper level classes, this could be linked to contemporary debates about global warming. The important points for students to take from the environmental aspect of this chapter is an understanding that the Australian land mass was, and is, in continual change. It is not a static environment.

Another important point made in this chapter is that Aboriginal people had to have watercraft in order to colonise the Australian continent. This can be used to initiate discussions about **the kinds of people that were likely to colonise the continent**. What kinds of behaviours are likely to accompany the ability to build boats? Symbolic communication? Language? Group co-operation? Planning? This is also a nice opportunity to encourage students to think about the personal qualities of these first explorers. Were they innovative? Brave? Risk takers? Think about the kinds of risks they had to take in order to find the Australian land mass. Even at the lowest sea levels, there was always a water journey of around 100 miles that would have to have been undertaken. Teachers of upper level classes might want to link these discussions to the recent discoveries of *Homo floresiensis* in Flores (commonly known as 'the hobbits').

The map of language groups in the Kimberley region (p.7) provides a great platform for getting students to think about **the social complexity of Aboriginal societies**. You might want to get them to compare this map to one of language diversity in Europe, over similar geographic areas. How much do differences in languages indicate major cultural differences? Are cultural differences expressed in other ways as well? What do language differences mean in terms of the ability of groups to co-operate, or plan joint activities? It is important at this point to emphasise that prior to British colonisation probably all Aboriginal people were multi-lingual—much as people in Europe are today.

For upper level classes, you may wish to make the point that in Europe, linguistic and cultural differences became enshrined as national boundaries, providing tangible ways through which to identify social and cultural differences. A process of **defining boundaries between different language groups** also took place in Australia, but not in a way that the British colonisers of Australia were able to recognize or understand. Aboriginal Australians were self-governed and politically autonomous. Firm boundaries were maintained through a refusal to trade or conduct social or political activities with particular groups of people, although people did not have contact equally in all directions. As in Europe, they looked to share cultural practices with people from certain directions, and not others.

In the introductory story Nicholson refers to the Nangatara and Walmadjari groups as 'two nations'. This can be used to introduce the idea of the autonomy of Aboriginal groups and of Aboriginal systems of governance. If you link this to the linguistic diversity of the region, you can try to convey a sense of **the diversity of Aboriginal cultural groups**—and the associated notion of one British colonial policy being imposed upon a large number of different Aboriginal nations. Upper level groups could be encouraged to consider why the British did not make a treaty with Aboriginal groups. Was it too hard, because there were so many groups? Were there no clear leaders? Did the British understand Aboriginal systems of governance? This could also be linked to the idea of *terra nullius*, the Mabo decision, and contemporary native title claims.

In this chapter Nicholson introduces the idea that **food was not to be traded or stored** but only used within the family. This can be linked to a spiritual belief that each person's land provided the amount needed to sustain its people. Songs and dances are treated as practical objects with real and very powerful applications.

This chapter introduces students to the idea that Aboriginal people operate as a community, rather than as disparate individuals. This can be used to initiate discussions about **differences in the cultural practices of different groups of people**. Do all groups of people have the same behaviours? Religion? Values? Cultural rules? Material culture? This is a nice opportunity to try and get students to understand that the way things are done in their own particular group (be it family, town, city, country) are not the only possible behaviours—and that sometimes other groups may have better ideas than you do.

## Discussion Questions

- Why does Nicholson call Aboriginal groups 'nations'?
- Why do you think that many scholars now spell 'Indigenous' with a capital 'I', like 'Greek', 'Australian', 'Italian'?
- What are the main differences and similarities between Aboriginal and European ways of thinking?
- Do Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people think of 'country' in the same way?
- What does Nicholson mean when he says 'they are outside the security of their own country'? Is he referring to country in the way we think of Australia as a nation? Or to country in the way we think of our neighbourhood, the places we know and feel safe?

## 2. TRAVELLERS AND TRADERS

Chapter 2 opens with a discussion of the **songlines and Dreaming tracks** that the Aboriginal people used as guides and maps to help them traverse the country. These originally began as oral stories of Dreamtime ancestors making their way throughout Australia and creating the topographic features of landscape and seascapes as they went. These ancestors created many of the features of the landscape—rivers, waterholes, hills and boulders—in the creation period known as the Dreaming. Finally, they 'sat down' in one place and became a living part of that place forever. Sometimes their bodies form part of the landscape. For example, a hill may be a young woman's breast, special stones may be someone's tears, or a group of boulders may be the excreta of an ancestral being! These features guided Aboriginal people across the land, and trade routes often followed these tracks. Normally, people knew only short sections of the longer tracks, those parts that were relevant to their local networks.

There are three important points to be drawn from this part of the book, each of which is part of the notion of Aboriginal people inhabiting **living landscapes**, in which the land itself communicates, and has a plan. Firstly, the rules that govern Aboriginal cultures are embedded in the Dreaming, laid down by ancestral beings. Elders interpret these rules in much the same way as a priest interprets a bible. Secondly, because ancestral beings exist in the topographic features of the land, Aboriginal landscapes are full of meaning, inherently powerful and potentially dangerous. These lands are full of spirit people, who can either help you or harm you if you don't follow the rules. Thirdly, the Dreaming is both 'then' and 'now'. It encompasses events of the ancestral past, but also exists in the present.

In this chapter, Nicholson makes the point that 'large amounts of discarded bones, shells and broken tools discovered by archaeologists along these paths indicate that most stayed the same for thousands of years'. This provides a nice opportunity to get students to think about what this means in terms of social relationships between these groups of people. In our view, this archaeological evidence of trading relationships that existed through a long period of time suggests **long-standing social ties** between the same groups of people.

This chapter also gives some detail on the **variety of watercraft** used in different parts of Australia. These ranged from the simple bark canoes of the Murray River to the more complex dugout canoes of Arnhem Land and the Kimberley coasts, which were adapted from Macassan design. This can form a starting point for discussions concerning the likely differences between maritime, riverine and terrestrial economies, whether watercraft had the same uses in all parts of Australia, and how Australian Aboriginal societies may have been influenced by other groups with whom they came in contact.

For example, many Macassan words have been incorporated into Aboriginal languages in northern Australia—linguistic evidence of the important components of contact between these groups.

### Discussion Questions

- What is the Dreaming? Do other societies have a creation era, such as that of the Dreaming?
- What is the significance of the fact that some trade routes were used for many thousands of years?
- Why are there such variations in watercraft design? Here are some factors to take into account:
  - Differences in maritime environments. Sea-going boats had practical requirements that were very different to craft that were only going to be used on lakes or in rivers.
  - The availability of raw materials for building watercraft. Not all materials were available in all parts of the country.
  - Access to new technology. For example, Aboriginal people in Cape York adapted the double outrigger design from New Guinea and Torres Strait Islanders because they had access to this technology. Aboriginal people in Tasmania would not have had the same access to this technology.
  - Stylistic differences between groups. Were all the differences in watercraft due to practical factors only, or were some of these differences due to groups of people signalling their identity? This can be compared to national flags, in which stylistic difference is part of the function of the object.

### 3. NETWORKS OF EXCHANGE

Chapter 3 begins by delving deeper into Aboriginal trade. It starts by explaining that the whole process of Aboriginal trade is actually closer to gift-giving than true trade. The gift giver fulfils a religious obligation while hoping for a gift in return. It was more serious than plain gift-giving, though, for a person might be punished, made sick, or even struck down dead if they did not fulfil their obligation. At this point, Nicholson challenges his use of the terms 'trade' and 'traders'. Here, he argues that Aboriginal trade was more like gift-giving, with the hope of getting a return at a future date, rather than a strict trade of one item for another. Nicholson concludes that the term '**exchange**' is a more appropriate word to use to describe Aboriginal trading behaviours, as these behaviours are based on the notion that reciprocal benefit will be achieved at some point, as part of long-standing social relationships. This would be a good point to introduce the notion of **reciprocity** in Aboriginal societies, and to think about how this can help societies to survive, especially in harsh environments, where you may need access to your neighbour's resources, if yours fail.

In this chapter Nicholson makes the point that knowledge was an economic resource that could be traded for other items. For example, an old man might host an initiation ceremony for younger members of another group, and they then had gift giving obligations towards that old man. In this way, he was able to trade his knowledge of that ceremony—and his right to host that ceremony—for goods. Because of this, knowledge was respected and not traded away easily. This can be linked to the great **respect for Elders**, the senior traditional owners and custodians of traditional knowledge. As with other societies with oral traditions, the continuity of cultural practices rests with these people. Often, only a few will have the knowledge that is most critical to

the survival of the group, and the **right to knowledge has to be earned** by each individual. This is a good point to introduce the idea that in Aboriginal societies access to knowledge is not open, but has to be earned.

This chapter introduces the idea of Aboriginal '**copyright**' over the design of objects, and that givers never relinquished all rights to a gift and the original owner always retained 'copyright'. These points can be used to start discussions about how designs are inherited in Aboriginal societies, so that you can only produce the designs to which you have a right. This can be contrasted with European notions of open access to knowledge, and the idea that, in theory, anyone has a right to paint anything. Upper level classes could be encouraged to consider current debates concerning Indigenous **cultural and intellectual property rights**, and could be directed to Vivien Johnson's (1999) work on the 'Copyrite' exhibition. A brief history of the cultural copyright campaign in Australia can be found at the related website: <http://www.mq.edu.au/hoa/briefhistory.htm> .

One of the best examples of Aboriginal people operating as near as can be to **one giant family** is the complicated ceremonial exchange system through which groups bound together by totemic relationships transfer gifts to each other. Gifts would usually be kept by a person for a time and then passed on to the next person in the chain (though if the gift was particularly useful or hard to get one might keep it long term or even permanently). Look at how large families operate today. Most pass down gifts through a less complicated exchange system. This may involve handing down anything from old clothes, to a watch or even a computer. Thus, this exemplifies how Aboriginal people of old and modern times operated like one large family.

In the past as well as in the present, Aboriginal people can have very strong **totemic and kinship ties** that require the exchange of gifts. Sometimes two people might be linked in a special way and give gifts to each other through middle-men, but never come face to face. Discuss with the class how this relates to the **modern day** world. Do similar relationships still exist? Look at World Vision and other such child sponsorship programs. What do the sponsors get out of such arrangements?

The Dieri people very profitably ran much of the Central Australian Exchange Network. Though they created very little themselves, the Dieri were great traders and travellers. They sent large expeditions to acquire particular goods and then traded these goods to other groups. Ask the class what countries today exist in a similar state or in perhaps slightly different arrangements. Take a look at Japan: though the Japanese possess very little raw materials and so shouldn't be able to create much, they have made vast trade deals to acquire coal and iron ore with Australia and are one of the leading producers of technological goods and cars in the world. What skills did they use to do this? Are there **parallels between the Japanese and Dieri** trading networks?

The section on farmers and fishers provides an excellent opportunity to go into some depth on the beginnings and **customs of the Torres Strait Islanders**. You might like to make the point that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders comprise around two per cent of the total Australian population: there are about 360,000 Aboriginal people and approximately 35,000 Torres Strait Islanders. You could make the point that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have distinct cultures and different, though interlocking, histories. Teachers of upper level classes may wish to discuss the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' to address the common misconception held by the British at contact and long afterwards, that Indigenous Australians were a unified, relatively homogeneous group of people. You should point out that at the time of British invasion there were around 200–250 different languages and 600 dialects spoken throughout Australia, and you can use the evidence put forward in Nicholson's book to demonstrate the **cultural diversity** that existed at contact, and which still exists today.

One of the most interesting parts of this chapter is the section on **buying a boat on credit**. This was in essence the same as the modern-day mortgage system, though more symbiotic and sympathetic in approach—if a boat broke down mortgage payments would cease. Get the students to think about how this compares to how a modern day bank works—if you were to take out a mortgage on a business venture and have it fail, would you still be required to pay the money back?

#### Discussion Questions

- Look at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags. What do the designs mean?
- Why do some Aboriginal people use the word 'invasion', rather than the term 'colonisation'? Do these two terms mean the same thing?
- Some of the early literature described Aboriginal people as an 'unchanging people in an unchanging land'. Is this a correct description of them?
- Why do you think that Torres Strait Islanders chose not to become agriculturalists, like the people from New Guinea, with whom they had contact?

#### 4. THE GREAT MARKETS

Chapter 4 discusses the range of 'markets' that existed in Aboriginal societies. This keys into one of the most important debates concerning changes in the economic life of Indigenous Australians. Modern scholars are investigating a process called '**intensification**': the more intensive use of economic resources and an increase in social complexity. While there is much evidence for population movement, successful colonization and the development of a variety of subsistence techniques during the Pleistocene, there is little evidence of major technological change in Aboriginal Australia until the last 3-5,000 years, during the mid-Holocene. The most notable of these changes took place around 2-5,000 years ago, when there is evidence for refinements in existing technologies, new resource exploitation strategies, and the exploitation of a range of new food resources. There is increased evidence of long-distance trading networks, sometimes spanning many thousands of miles. So, in this later, relatively short period, economic activity 'intensified'.

The motivations for the **great ceremonial gatherings** are intriguing, and they would have been important for many reasons. At one level, there are likely to have been practical reasons, such as the propagation of particular plant or animal species, or the proper training of young people. One suggestion is that the increased use of exotic raw materials for stone artefacts reflects an increase in inter-group exchange, as these materials are likely to have been traded during ceremonial gatherings. At a level removed from this, but still with practical implications, the intense social bonding of such gatherings acted to reinforce both individual and group ties and to provide social safety nets. In desert regions, when ceremonies tended to be less frequent but of longer duration, such ties would have been particularly important, as people would have needed to call upon their neighbours' resources in times of environmental stress.

Trade and exchange were integral to ceremonial and religious affiliations. The need to maintain **socio-economic networks** can over-ride bonds of enmity—consequently exchange meetings, like other ceremonial gatherings, often start with a settlement of personal hostilities so that group activity will be unmarred by prior disputes. Possibly, the cultural networks that developed during the mid-Holocene as part of social intensification helped to hasten the dissemination of ideas and materials throughout the country. The changes that occurred during this period, however, were subject to enormous regional variation, not only in timing but also in the range of technologies that were used by

different Indigenous populations. **New technologies** were invented in different parts of the country, often related to the more effective exploitation of seasonal foods. Nicholson makes the point that in some places, this involved building stone structures, such as eel traps. For upper level classes, it may be worthwhile getting students to think about the substantial investments of time that are necessary for the construction of such structures, and to consider how the organization of this might affect the shape of Aboriginal societies.

### Discussion questions

- Nicholson describes the original Australian Rules football game at Mount Noorat, played with a possum skin ball. What other Aboriginal games were there?
- Identify differences in the roles played by men and women in Nicholson's descriptions. What factors would cause these different behaviours?
- What is a socio-economic network?
- How would European goods have affected traditional Aboriginal trading networks? Would they have been integrated into these networks or ignored?

## 5. OVERSEAS TRADE

In Chapter 5, Nicholson makes the point that prior to the arrival of Europeans Aboriginal people were protected from many diseases as Australia is an island. However, when these new people arrived, they brought new diseases with them and Aboriginal people had not built up resistance to these diseases, so they became **killer diseases**, hidden and unwelcome accompaniments to contact between Indigenous Australians and outside peoples.

Nicholson discusses **contact with the Macassans**, seasonal visitors from Indonesia who came to harvest *trepang*, or *bêche de mer*—a sea slug much valued as a delicacy, or as an aphrodisiac. The Macassans developed cordial relationships with Aboriginal peoples along the coastline, who were also fishermen. Given our understanding of Indigenous sea rights today, it is likely the Macassans had to pay Aboriginal people—almost certainly in kind—for the use of their traditional fishing grounds. The visits of the Macassans appear to have been peaceful and even welcomed. They are recorded in stories and songs, in the rock art that depicts Macassan boats, and in the numerous Macassan words that became part of Aboriginal languages along the northern Australian coast. Much in the way that links were formed with the peoples of Torres Strait through gradual cultural exchange, so, too, were they with people from the southern part of Indonesia.

Trade throughout the Torres Strait region occurred not only between the islands but also between New Guinea and the Australian mainland. Ideas and technologies skimmed throughout the region, facets of networks of enmity and amity. When discussing these issues you should remind students that **trade is not uni-directional**: while Aboriginal people in Cape York adopted the dugout canoe with outrigger, people from New Guinea began to use spears and spear-throwers. Similarly, cultural and trading links across the Torres Strait produced a demand for Aboriginal shell ornaments and other items, in one direction, and for ceremonial objects, such as masks and drums, in the other. Discussion of these issues provides an opportunity to get students to think about contact as being multi-directional. You might like to get them to think about how contemporary Australian identity is founded upon a deep sense of living on Aboriginal lands.



### **Discussion Questions**

- What is the significance of the dingo arriving about 4000 years ago? How did the dingo get here, given the inevitable sea crossing? Is the presence of the dingo indirect evidence for a new group of colonisers at around this time?
- Do you think the Macassans would have had to give something to Aboriginal people for the use of their traditional fishing grounds? If so, what kinds of things might they have given them?
- Why is it that the British colonisers were unable to establish amicable relationships with Aboriginal people, as the Macassans did?
- What do you think Aboriginal people would have thought about their encounters with the first European visitors to the continent?

### **GROUP ACTIVITIES**

These are our suggestions for group activities that can help you to teach the ideas in Nicholson's book.

#### **THE IMPETUS FOR TRADE: CULTURE OR COMMERCE?**

In the final section of his book, Nicholson reiterates that 'exchange was a ceremonial or spiritual activity rather than a commercial one'. He suggests two reasons for this: that Aboriginal people had no wheeled vehicles or working animals to transport goods, and that Aboriginal people did not have much spare food or know how to preserve it if they did. Divide the class into buzz groups of five or six, and get them to see if they can think of any other reasons why trade in Aboriginal societies might be more cultural than commercial.

#### **MAKE A TIMELINE**

Get students to make a timeline of major developments in Aboriginal Australia, from the first colonisation by Indigenous peoples to the present day.

#### **TYPES OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES**

Divide the class into buzz groups of five or six, and get students to discuss the kinds of Indigenous sites that exist in Australia. They should be able to identify hearths, camp sites, rock art sites, middens, sites where axes were ground, stone artefact sites, quarries, carved trees—and Dreaming sites.

### **ESSAY QUESTIONS**

1. Were Aboriginal people 'unchanging people in an unchanging land'?
2. Aboriginal people had very complex and sophisticated societies, yet many of the British colonisers of Australia thought Aboriginal people were 'backward' or 'primitive'. Why did they think this?
3. Nicholson says that we should be careful not to confuse 'change' with 'progress'. What does he mean?

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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## ABOUT THE WRITERS

### JOHN NICHOLSON

John Nicholson is an award-winning author and illustrator, who has produced a number of children's books for Allen and Unwin. Three of his books, *A Home among the Gum Trees*, *The First Fleet* and *Fishing for Islands*, have been awarded the Children's Council of Australia's Eve Pownall Award for Information Books. He was trained as an architect but now writes and illustrates full-time. His books are mostly non-fiction, and he attempts to make 'information books' as exciting and adventurous as fiction. He lives in a bush setting and his favourite colour is yellow. Nicholson's other publications for children and teenagers include:

*Paper Chase* 1993

*Homemade Houses* 1993

*Gold!* 1994

*The Cruellest Place on Earth* 1994

*The First Fleet* 1995

*Australian Explorers* 1996

*Kimberley Warrior* 1997

*A Home Among the Gum Trees* 1997

*Who's Running This Country?* 1998

*Fishing for Islands* 1999

*The State of the Planet* 2000

*Building the Sydney Harbour Bridge* 2000

*The Mighty Murray* 2002

*Animal Architects* 2003

*Australia Locked Up* 2006

Within NSW school visits by John Nicholson can be organised through Lateral Learning. Visit <http://www.laterallearning.com> or email [bookings@laterallearning.com](mailto:bookings@laterallearning.com).

Within Victoria school visits can be organised through Booked Out. Visit <http://www.bookedout.com.au/> or email [bookings@bookedout.com.au](mailto:bookings@bookedout.com.au)

### **JIM AND CLAIRE SMITH**

Jim Smith is a student at Hamilton Secondary College, Adelaide. Though white, he is a member of the Barunga Aboriginal community, Northern Territory, Australia, and he has spent part of the year in this community ever since he was born. His skin name is Gela and his Aboriginal name is Lamjerroc.

Claire Smith is Associate Professor in Archaeology at Flinders University, South Australia, and President of the World Archaeological Congress. Along with her husband, Jacko, and son, Jim, she has conducted fieldwork with the Barunga community since 1990. She is interested in using archaeology to help redress negative stereotypes of Indigenous peoples.

