

Long Synopsis

It is a thousand years ago, tribal times in the north of Australia. Ten men, led by old Minygululu, head into the forest to harvest barks for canoe making. It is the season of goose egg gathering, and the men are looking forward to getting out onto the swamp and hunting the magpie geese and their eggs.

Minygululu learns that young Dayindi, on his first goose egg hunting expedition, has taken a fancy to Minygululu's third and youngest wife. Tribal law is in danger of being broken: Minygululu decides to deal with the situation by telling Dayindi an ancestral story, a story that will take a very long time to tell, all through the next days of canoe making and swamp travelling and goose egg gathering. And this is that story:



The ten canoeists on their way to gather goose eggs.

It is long ago, mythical times, just after the great flood came and covered the whole land...after then, but a long, long time ago. Ridjimiraril lived with his three wives, wise Banalandju, jealous Nowalingu and beautiful young Munandjarra, in a camp with others, including Birrinbirrin, the fat honey man who always ate too much.

Some distance away, in the single men's camp, lived Yeeralparil, Ridjimiraril's younger brother.

Yeeralparil had no wives yet, and none promised, but he was keen on that beautiful Munandjarra, who he felt should be his. He would always make excuses to be near Ridjimiraril's camp, in the hope of catching a glimpse of her.

One day, while the men are engaged in cutting each other's hair, a stranger approaches, without warning. The men are alarmed, especially when the Stranger claims he is there to trade in magic objects. The Stranger is given food and sent on his way by Ridjimiraril, although some of the other men want to kill him. The sorcerer comes to warn the men of the possible dangers, but declares the camp is safe. Life goes on as normal.

Then Nowalingu, after a fight with Banalandju, vanishes. There's no trace of her. Ridjimiraril is convinced his beloved second wife was taken by that Stranger, but the consensus is that being jealous, she simply ran away. There's nothing Ridjimiraril can do.

Months later an old uncle turns up for a visit and reports having seen Nowalingu in a distant camp with that stranger. The men are galvanised into action: a war party is prepared; it sets off, but without Yeeralparil. Both brothers cannot go...if the older brother is killed, the younger brother must take over the other's wives. Yeeralparil hangs around the main camp in the hope of seeing Munandjarra, but Banalandju ensures a safe distance between the two.

The war party returns, without Nowalingu: the old uncle's eyes must have deceived him. Ridjimiraril, still convinced it was the Stranger who took Nowalingu, slides into depression, until Birrinbirrin runs into camp with the news that the Stranger has been seen near the waterhole.

Ridjimiraril tells Birrinbirrin he's going to talk to the stranger but grabs his spears and takes off, Birrinbirrin puffing behind.

Deep in the bush they see the Stranger, squatting for a shit. Ridjimiraril launches a spear. An inspection of the body, however, reveals that Ridjimiraril has killed the wrong stranger. There are sounds of approaching people. Ridjimiraril breaks the spear off and they quickly hide the body.

But they did not hide that body well enough. Days later Ridjimiraril and Birrinbirrin are accosted by a group of warriors including the Stranger. They have identified the spearhead in the Stranger's brother's body as having been made by Birrinbirrin, and they want payback. Ridjimiraril owns up, and the location and time for the payback ceremony is agreed to.

A sad little procession of men leave camp for the payback. This time Yeeralparil can go, as only one person is to be speared, either Ridjimiraril or his payback partner. Yeeralparil argues that it should be he, young and nimble, who ought partner his brother. Ridjimiraril agrees, and together the two brothers face the spears from the aggrieved Stranger's tribe. That is the law, and the law must be upheld.

Ridjimiraril is speared. Justice done, he is helped back to camp. Banalandju tends his wound, but instead of getting better, as he should, Ridjimiraril declines: it is as if a bad spirit has invaded his body. Even the sorcerer can do nothing. In his last moments before dying, Ridjimiraril staggers to his feet and begins to dance his own death dance...then he collapses and dies.

After all the correct ceremony has been performed, Yeeralparil finally moves into the main camp, to be with his Munandjarra. But he's inherited a great deal more than he expected...

Minygululu's story is over, the goose egg hunters return home. Dayindi has learnt his lesson, and when opportunity presents, he declines...maybe some day he will have a wife, but it won't be someone else's.



Ridjimiraril's death dance.

Glossary and Explanations

Below are a number of terms used by the people local to the area where the film was made, which may need explanation. There are also some places and processes that are helpful to know about when reading the press kit or writing about the film.

Yolngu: The literal translation of Yolngu is simply, "the people", but it is used nowadays as a term to describe the group of Australian Indigenous people (aboriginals) living in or originating from central and eastern Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory.

Balanda: A word meaning "white person(s)", coming from the word "Hollander"...the Dutch were the first white people to come into contact with the Yolngu.

Ramingining: A town of about 800 Yolngu people in the northern part of central Arnhem Land. The town was created in the early 1970s when the Mission of Millingimby became overcrowded. This meant that Yolngu from different areas were brought to live together, some quite a long distance from their traditional lands. There are fifteen or sixteen clans represented in Ramingining and about 8 different language groups.

Arafura Swamp: A large area of freshwater wetlands just south and east of Ramingining. The swamp extends to 130,000 hectares during the wet season, and is home to an incredible variety of bird, plant and animal life, including possibly the largest biomass of crocodiles in the world.

Magpie geese or *Gumang*: One of the many species of birdlife on the swamp, the Gumang is a black and white native goose which was an important food source in times gone by.

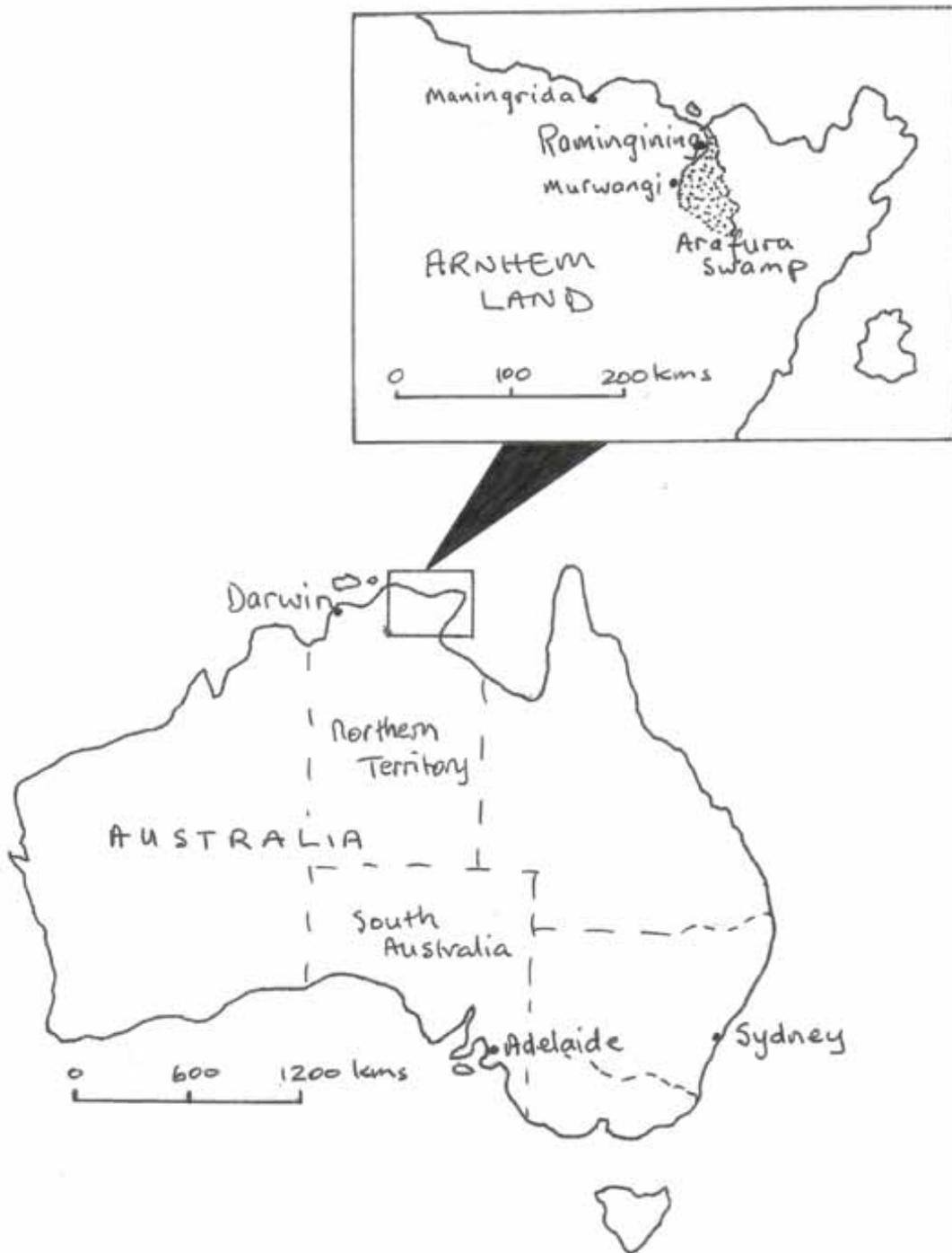
Goose Egg Gathering: Also known as Goose Egg Hunting. Expeditions by canoe of up to a week at a time used to be launched onto the swamp towards the end of the wet season, when the magpie geese had laid their eggs. Eggs were collected in numbers and the birds hunted for their meat.

Ganalbingu: The name of one of the clans local to the Arafura Swamp area. Ganalbingu means "magpie goose people". It was hence an important clan in the life of the swamp (and in the making of 'Ten Canoes').

Payback, or *Makaratta*: A formal and ritualised form of punishment or retribution, usually with attendant ceremony. Warriors from the aggrieved tribe throw spears at the perceived culprit until blood is drawn. Sometimes the wound is fatal, sometimes only minor. Occasionally a partner is chosen by the culprit, and both face the spears. Justice is deemed to be done when either one, the innocent or the perceived guilty, is hit. In many areas payback has been further refined to be a simple close-range spearing of the culprit in the leg.

Death Dance: When someone was at the edge of death, ceremony would start. People would gather and initially a dance would be performed for the dying person, to help him begin to make connections with his ancestors in the spirit world. Occasionally a person, still capable but knowing he was going to die, would perform the death dance himself. Ceremony would continue on and off for up to twelve months after the person had died.

The Place



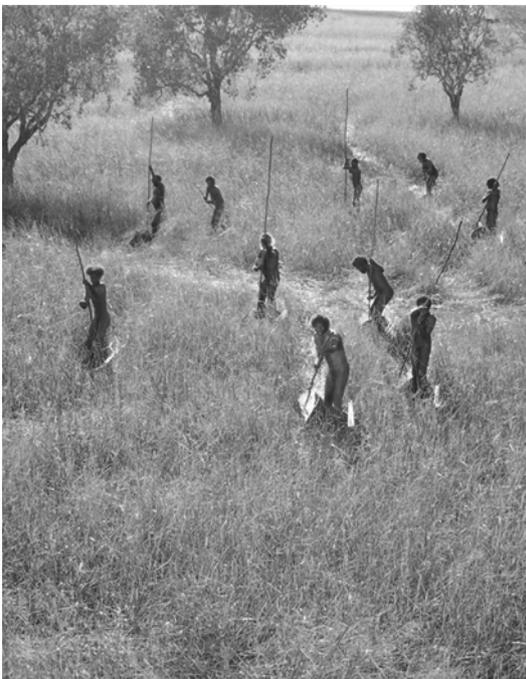
We Need Ten Canoes!...Origin of a Film

The country of the Arafura Swamp area is traditional to David Gulpilil, the great Indigenous performer (dance, film, theatre) who is an Australian screen icon. When not out performing somewhere in the world, David generally lives in Ramingining, close to his traditional land, although more recently Darwin has also been a home.

Towards the end of 2000, David was cast as the lead in the film that was to become 'The Tracker'. Upon meeting director Rolf de Heer in Adelaide some months before the shoot, David invited Rolf to Ramingining, to meet with him among his family, to see his traditional lands, to travel the Arafura Swamp. Rolf accepted the invitation and the two of them spent the time between Christmas and New Year together, talking, fishing, eating bush food and learning to understand each other. Even then David was keen on Rolf making a film up there with him and his people.

During the filming of "The Tracker", and on a number of subsequent occasions, David renewed his invitation to Rolf to make a film in Ramingining, any film, maybe a Western with cowboys and cattle, or a massacre film, even "The Tracker 2". Finally, in June 2003, David received a phone call from Rolf...could he come up and talk to David about making a film together, David to star in it and be the co-director, all shot up there on the traditional lands of his people, in their language.

The initial discussions that took place included a number of David's influential contemporaries, such as Richard Birrinbirrin and Bobby Bunungurr. A vague decision about the nature of the film was made: set it in "old times", maybe a century ago; make it some sort of Aboriginal story that ends, just before its own climax, with the massacre by Balanda of most of the Yolngu characters. This was not, however, to last very long as the idea for the film.



The ten canoeists in the style of Donald Thomson's photograph.

On the morning of Rolf's departure, David came to see him. "We need ten canoes," said David. Rolf looked at him blankly. "We need ten canoes," David repeated. Suddenly Rolf understood that David meant this for the film. "David, we don't even know what the film is really about, how can we need ten canoes?". David looked at Rolf as the ignorant Balanda he was and left, re-appearing half an hour later with a photo, black and white, taken almost seventy years before. Rolf took one look at it and said, "You're right, we need ten canoes".

The photo, of a group of ten men in their bark canoes on the swamp, was profoundly cinematic. It spoke of a world of long ago, where things were different, life was different to anything that could be imagined by almost any Balanda anywhere. To enter that world would be the essence of real cinema. And there were more of these photos. The film had started to form.

The Donald Thomson Photographs

That photo of the ten canoeists was taken by Dr Donald Thomson, an anthropologist who worked in central and north-eastern Arnhem Land in the mid-1930s, when life for the original inhabitants was still very traditional and culturally little influenced by the coming of white people...there had been wars against the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land, and massacres of them, but they had never been conquered and had thus retained, in very large measure, their traditional lifestyle.

Thomson lived there with the people for many months, by himself, funded by the government in the hope that understanding the Yolngu would bring peace, not only with the outside world, but amongst the warring factions of Yolngu themselves. Though many of his specific recommendations were ignored, he was very largely successful with his broader aims.

Thomson left a legacy of immense importance. He was an extraordinary photographer, of both still and moving image. The Thomson Collection of some four thousand black and white glass plate photographs of so many aspects of Yolngu culture is held in Museum Victoria (there are another seven thousand photographs taken in Central Australia and on Cape York); the many thousands of feet of nitrate film he took were all lost in a Melbourne warehouse fire.

The photographs are of many things...they depict daily life, like gathering and preparing food; they document the creation of artefacts like canoes and huts and spears; they trace special events, like a goose egg hunting expedition; they show people, a great range of people, precisely what they looked like and how they did their hair and what they wore...they are a portrait of a people in a slice of time that would otherwise have been lost.

Some of these photos have made their way back to Ramingining, and there they're considered with a lot more than idle curiosity. They've been consumed by the culture, become part of it. There's such a concept as "Thomson Time", fondly remembered. The web of kinship is complex: everyone is related to someone in the photographs, and everyone takes pride in them. They are their continuity, their history.



Peter Minygululu and Jamie Gulpillil collecting magpie geese eggs, in the style of Donald Thomson's photograph.

Life Then, Life Now

Life for the pre-contact Yolngu may have had its hard times, but the Yolngu had adapted very successfully to their environment. Their ceremonial and spiritual life was extremely rich and complex, due in part to the abundance of the food supply...Yolngu spent a lower proportion of their time obtaining food than any other known Australian Indigenous tribe; this allowed them more time to develop ritual and ceremony.

They were semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers, moving seasonally within well-defined boundaries depending on the best availability of food. They had a very complex kinship system, which determined extremely strict marriage rules; a highly developed system of law; and an extensive trading network with other tribes great distances away.

Macassans from the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia began to visit five or six hundred years ago, introducing new technology and a new economy. In return for camping rights and Yolngu help with their trepang (sea slug) fishing, the Macassans would trade items such as metal knives and axes, unknown in Australia to that point. That gave the Yolngu real advantage when ontrading to other tribes.



Richard Birrinbirrin at Ramingining airstrip.

Western culture, mainly in the form of cattlemen, didn't really arrive until the 1880s, and was strenuously resisted. Many Yolngu were massacred, but the Yolngu continued to hold out against white incursion. It was not until Thomson in the 1930s that peace, and ultimately a conversion to a mixture of white and Yolngu ways, came.

Nowadays life is very different for the people of Ramingining. There is a supermarket and a takeaway shop. People live in houses with plumbing and

television, and do their banking over the internet. Some of the old ways remain: the kinship system, though modified, is still strong; some of the ceremonial life is as important as it was a century ago; people still go hunting and fishing, though 4-wheel drives, guns and fishing lines are increasingly the tools of choice. Conventional work is scarce and increasingly there is engagement with the arts and craft, which in turn helps keep some of the traditions alive.

A Story to Please Two Cultures

It was with this community in transition that the story and script for the film were created. The Yolngu storytelling tradition is strong but its conventions are very different to those of Western storytelling. It was soon clear that the challenge would be to create a story, to make a film, that would not only satisfy local tastes and requirements, but that would also satisfy a Western cinema-going audience, used to Western storytelling conventions.

The Thomson photos were a great starting point. They were an invaluable reference, and having become part of the local culture, here were images that could be discussed, incident that could be derived from image...each photo had, in some way, a story that illuminated the whole of the endeavour.

Over the next year and a half, Rolf visited Ramingining on numerous occasions. Each time he came, more of the Yolngu would get to know him, and the circle of consultation became wider. This was crucial because by now David Gulpilil, Rolf's initial chief collaborator, was spending more and more time away from the community, but the work of the film had to continue.

There were several storytelling problems that needed to be overcome. The first of these was the desire of the locals who worked with Rolf to have the process of goose egg gathering (the ten canoes photo was taken during such an expedition) central to the film. The practice, and the ceremony that went with it, had been discontinued many years before, and it had been decades since one of the specialised swamp canoes had even been made. There were thoughts of a revival, and the film seemed an opportunity to trigger that revival. The only problem was that goose egg gathering itself is particularly non-dramatic in the paradigm of Western cinema.

'Drama' was also a problem of what should not be in the film. The old times, Thomson Time and before, were precious to the community, part of cultural continuity, and the Yolngu collaborators did not want to depict them as times of conflict. And conflict, being the essence of drama, was essential if the film was to work also for a Western audience.

And the third major problem was that the Thomson photos, which were somehow being represented in the film, were in black and white...the cultural history of the people was in black and white, but the film was contractually bound to be a colour film.

In the end, those and other problems were solved by introducing one device into the film, which was to have the main dramatic part of the story set in mythical times, when for the Yolngu anything was allowed to happen, and shoot that part in colour...that dramatic story could then be told as a cautionary tale during a goose egg hunting expedition, which would be shot in black and white to reflect the Thomson photos. A script which pleased both cultures was then possible.



Michael Dawu and Frances Djulibing in the Stranger Abducts scene.

Language...the Cosmological Divide

As noted before, Ramingining is a place of many languages. People speak to whoever in their own clan language, which is well understood by most others, who then tend to reply in their own particular language, also understood by most.

In the film, for example, a number of the ten canoeists are Ganalbingu speakers, but Minyngululu speaks Mandalpingu, also David Gulpilil's language. Crusoe Kurddal, who plays Minyngululu's ancestor Ridjimirail, speaks another language still, one from Maningrida about 150kms west of Ramingining. But in general, each understands the other perfectly well and apart from some on-set merriment about the way something would be said in a language other than Ganalbingu, each was perfectly comfortable acting with someone who spoke a different language.



"Canoeists" on the first day of the shoot - Michael Dawu, Steven Wilinydjanu, Crusoe Kurddal, Jamie Gulpilil, Carl Dhalurruma, Billy Black, Bobby Bunungurr, Peter Minyngululu, Peter Djigirr, and "Sorcerer" Philip Gudthaykudthay (Pussycat) seated.

For many of the Yolngu residents though, English is perhaps their fifth or sixth language...they speak it only rudimentarily if at all. They understand a little more than they can speak, but not speaking it, it becomes very difficult to know what of it they understand. And there is an immense difference between the Yolngu languages on the one hand (how they are spoken and structured, their tenses and syntax, even the very cosmology they describe), and English on the other hand.

In David's absence then (he pulled out of the film for complex reasons some weeks before the shoot), it was fortunate that several of the cast, notably Peter Djigirr and Richard Birrinbirrin, plus Frances Djulibing among the women, were good English speakers. They and others would work through the two-way communication problems between actors and director until everyone seemed well to know what to do and what to say.

A good example of the difficulties encountered was when there was an attempt to write down some material for Minyngululu, who spoke little English, so that he had a better opportunity to learn what roughly he should be saying. In the event it took five people to achieve the task...Rolf would explain the sense of the words to Djigirr and Billy Black, who would discuss and restructure in Ganalbingu and present this to Minyngululu. Minyngululu would then restructure further and tell Frances Djulibing in Mandalpingu how he would say what was required, and Frances would write it down according to Yolngu phonetics. But despite understanding Mandalpingu perfectly and being a fluent reader, Frances literally could not make sense of the words when trying to read them back. The three Yolngu men could not read, so it was left to the Balanda director to read it back in Mandalpingu for checking, though not without an immense amount of mirth at the fluent but badly pronounced language coming out of his mouth. The attempt was so time-consuming that it was soon abandoned.

Who Does the Casting?

Another area of unusual problem was the casting of 'Ten Canoes'. There were a number of stages to the casting, and each was more unconventional than the previous.

The first stage was during the construction of the story. Those participating in the story consulting had clear claims to being in the film and assumed they would be in it, but they weren't always obvious casting. Birrinbirrin, for example, was substantially overweight, in a way that no Yolngu was even seventy years ago, let alone pre-contact. And so a role was created especially for him, a comedic part of a man always after honey and always eating too much. This made his appearance in the film not only credible, but a real contribution to it.



Honey Man Richard Birrinbirrin with Rico Pascoe and Scott Gaykamangu.

Then there were the canoeists. The ten men in Thomson's canoes photo have, over the years, been individually identified, and many in Ramingining are related in some way to at least one of them. Those with the strongest claims to heritage chose themselves to play their ancestor, as they saw it, and that was the end of that. So much for directors being all powerful.

The third stage of casting was the most complex. If the characters in the film had a certain kinship relationship (for example a man and his wife), then the actors playing those characters also had to be able to have that kinship relationship. Every Yolngu is classified as being of one of two moieties: everyone is either Yirritja or Dhua. A Yirritja man cannot be married to a Yirritja woman, and hence half the women in Ramingining, being Yirritja, were immediately excluded from consideration for that role. But then there are a number of moiety subsections...if you're of the wrong Dhua subsection, then you can't be seen on screen as being married to a Yirritja man either...half of the rest of the women excluded. And if a character has a relationship with two other characters, then both relationships have to conform to the kinship system. From an already small pool of available actors, there was sometimes only one person who was possible for a particular role. No such thing as screen testing...if someone culturally appropriate and willing was found, they had the part, irrespective of looks or ability. And in the final reckoning, they all had both the looks and the ability.

The third stage of casting was the most complex. If the characters in

The First Swamp Canoe

As the shoot drew nearer, it became time for the Yolngu to begin making all the artefacts needed for the production: the spears and stone axes; the dilly bags and canoes; the arm bands and the shelters. As in old times, the work was divided very distinctly along gender lines...the men made the canoes and the weapons, the women the huts, the bags and the body decorations. At each step there was the feeling of doing something special, of cultural renewal, of bringing back the old times.

The canoes were a particular example of this. The canoes of the Arafura Swamp were of a design and function that took into account the precise environmental conditions of the swamp. There were no other canoes like them anywhere in Australia, but none had been built here for decades.

The expertise, however, still existed among the older men, in particular with Minygululu (in his sixties) and Pussycat (mid-seventies). Minygululu was away, so Pussycat, ably assisted by Djigirr and Dawu and several others, went bush to find barks.

Appropriate trees were selected and a sheet of bark up to four metres long and a metre wide was cut and pried off each tree in a single piece. The barks were soaked in a creek overnight and then the next morning firewood was gathered, and sticks from a certain plant to provide the string to sew the canoes, and sticks from a certain shrub to provide the supports. The first bark slab was removed from the water and thrown on the fire, heated through and softened, then bent into shape and clamped between two sticks that had been driven into the mud. One end was sewn, then back onto the fire for the other end, the prow.



Peter Djigirr cutting bark for the first canoe.



Pussycat secures the canoe supports.

There was gathering excitement, more so among the younger men who had never seen this before, as the canoe took shape. Then a moment's hesitation...Pussycat is not originally from one of the swamp tribes and was unsure about the exact way to sew the prow. Thomson photographs were consulted, and a drawing by Thomson in his monograph about the goose egg hunters. Work resumed in a new direction, and when the prow took shape in the manner of a "Thomson canoe", there was a sudden understanding and real pride.

By the end of the day, the first canoe had been completed. It sat there on the ground, on display. One of the younger men kept stepping into it and miming the poling action. The older men walked round it, admiring it. This one canoe was a small miracle, even for the Yolngu...forgotten aspects of their culture were being brought back from the brink extinction, and they knew it.



Steven Wilinydjanu tests the first canoe.

The Camp

Meanwhile the production crew arrived and began to transform Murwangi, an old cattle station at the edge of the swamp which was to serve as the base for filming, into something at least notionally habitable. Tent city sprang up among the scattering of rusty sheds, but at least there was power, a kitchen and some bathroom facilities (including an open air shower and toilet that had a grand view of the swamp but that was hell with mosquitoes).

The Yolngu cast were delighted with their accommodation...the tents had power, a light and a fan, and were largely mosquito proof. The citified crew had slightly different ideas about it all, and resigned themselves to many weeks of roughing it. Everything is relative...

The camp was a living, vibrant, noisy entity. The cast generally brought wives, husbands and families and friends, and it was not long before more tents had to be shipped in to accommodate the overflow. Children played around the camp and roamed the surrounding areas, those not working would go fishing or hunting and often enough the crew and cast would return from a day's shooting to the smell of fresh fish cooking on little fires scattered throughout the camp.



Murwangi Station and the beginning of tent city.

Extra food had to be shipped in to alleviate the pressure on catering...more than once there was an unexpected influx of visitors and all the food was gone before everyone had eaten. The Balanda crew, to their credit, took the stresses mostly in good humour. It was not easy for them, working hard through the hot days, then returning to a noisy, mosquito plagued camp with food shortages, no alcohol to wind down, nowhere to go to get away from it all, not even any real respite in one's own tent because it was surrounded by other tents, other people.

But there was a real benefit to this cheek-by-jowl living, and that was on set. The Yolngu and the Balanda, by their enforced closeness and intermingling during time away from shooting, were very quickly and very substantially demystified to each other, both personally and culturally. Accommodation to each other's ways was found in camp, had to be found. This led to a very easy and trusting atmosphere on set, which was generally much calmer and quieter than camp. With the increased understanding of both cultures, people were able to really enjoy working together on set.

Crocodiles, Leeches and Mosquitoes

The shoot itself was divided into distinct halves. First would be the black and white canoe making and goose egg gathering material, based on and at the edges of the swamp, then would come the colour material from the mythical times, to be shot mostly at the camp the Yolngu women had built and also in the forests and surrounds.

Of the goose egg hunting expeditions, Thomson wrote, in 1937, "...the irritation and loss of sleep due to the bites of mosquitoes and leeches, added to the physical exertion, makes the journey a severe ordeal." That describes fairly accurately the first half of the shoot. And crocodile numbers in the Arafura Swamp had built up enormously since hunting them became regulated in the 1970s and to the crew and cast, so had mosquito and leech numbers.

The swamp shoot was a long, hard haul for Yolngu actor and Balanda crew alike, much as a goose egg hunting expedition would have been. None of the cast had acted in a film before, and they were not only having to relearn old skills, such as poling a bark canoe through thick reeds without falling out, but they had to learn the new skills associated with screen acting, understand things like shooting out of sequence, storytelling that was fictional rather than based on reality, as even the most distant myth has a reality level to it for Yolngu that Balanda find difficult to understand.



Rolf de Heer directing in the swamp.

And there was also a sense of responsibility for these mad Balanda, who obviously weren't aware of the dangers of the swamp, otherwise why would they stand, vulnerable to crocodiles, waist-deep in the swamp all day? Good to have a croc spotter with a gun, even though old Pussycat's eyesight was deemed questionable, but better still to have croc spotting as a way of life, which it is for the locals. And so it was that there were eleven croc spotters on set, the ten canoeists plus Pussycat, enough to ensure the safety of the Balanda.

First screening of rushes was both riotous and awesome. Every Yolngu in camp crammed into the editing hut and every Yolngu in camp laughed at the repeated antics of the cast, and at what they said. But the style of the black and white filming had been chosen to reflect the Thomson photographs, and in a number of cases the shots, down to composition, had been planned to almost duplicate them...whenever such a shot appeared, there were gasps and mutterings of recognition, recognition that those on screen, and those Yolngu contributing

in other ways to the film, were, in some almost magical way, rebuilding their history.

Eventually the black and white section of the film was completed, and everyone moved to dry land. New cast members started, refreshing those that had been working solidly for weeks. The shooting style also changed, from still compositions to a camera that moved almost all the time. Everything became easier. Instead of doing only two or three shots a day, up to twenty a day

were possible. Instead of eating a dry sandwich standing in the mud or water, proper sit-down lunches were possible. Instead of long slogs through reeds, there was vehicle access and easy walking on dry land.

And by using a bit of local knowledge, there was usually a solution to every problem. During the death dance sequence at night, for example, layers of smoke were needed, but rather than flying in expensive smoke machines, good use was made of crumbled up termite mound set alight, freely available in large quantity. Not only was it possible to have dozens of smoke "machines", but the resultant smoke kept the mosquitoes away during the only night shoots of the film.

The pace of filming picked up to such a degree on dry land that the shoot finished some days early. Mixed with the satisfaction of having achieved what had seemed impossible, with the happiness for both Yolngu and Balanda of being able to return to some sort of normality, there were tinges of regret all round that this great, glorious and difficult adventure was over, and that the like of it would probably never again be experienced by anyone, ever, anywhere.



Co-director Peter Djigirr talking with camera operator Greg Gilbert (front) and focus puller Ricky Schamburg.

Many Canoes

From almost the beginning, there were too many things that too many people wanted for them all to fit in just one feature film. Additional, associated projects arose almost at random. Some have been completed, some are works in progress, other await finance while a few of them languish, perhaps to be re-activated once more time and resources can be found.

First there was *Eleven Canoes*, which was a project to teach the young people of Ramingining how to use video recording and editing equipment so they could make their own mini-documentaries. This was highly successful, with almost twenty shorts and a renewed and improved media course at Ramingining School coming out of it.



Sylvester Durrurmga, Marcus Dhamarranydji and Valerie Malibirr learning camera skills during the *Eleven Canoes* project.

Then *Twelve Canoes* came into being. This is a website project, not about the film, but about the environment, culture and people of Ramingining...the people there have much they wish to communicate to the outside world; not only is a film insufficient, but a website can do much more, and transmit it instantly to the entire world.

Thirteen Canoes soon followed...a multi-media art/cultural exhibition, using the artefacts made for *Ten Canoes*, the artworks commissioned

for *Twelve Canoes*, some Thomson photographs, perhaps videos from *Eleven Canoes*. And *Fourteen Canoes* was a logical extension...a book with the original Thomson photographs, the colour equivalents from the *Ten Canoes* shoot, photos of the Yolngu participants in a modern context, words to demystify the people in the photos.

Fifteen Canoes, a music preservation project; *Sixteen Canoes*, a project to restore the functioning of the closed-circuit television set-up at Ramingining; *Seventeen Canoes*, a video-making young people's exchange project with other remote communities; *Eighteen Canoes*, a one-hour television documentary about the effect of *Ten Canoes* on the community.



Steven Wilinydjanu interviewing Michael Dawu for the *Eighteen Canoes* project.

It is clear that the *Many Canoes* will resonate in Ramingining for a long time to come.

How the Film Has Been Received by the Community

There are three versions of the film in existence so far: there's the version that has Yolngu languages dialogue with English subtitles and English storytelling by David Gulpilil; there's the version that has both Yolngu languages dialogue and storytelling in Mandalpingu by David, with English subtitles; and there's the Yolngu version, no subtitles, everything in the languages of the people whose film it is.

It was this last version that played open air in Ramingining one steamy wet season night, as soon as it was ready enough to be screened and before any public screening of any of the versions.

For months the phone calls had been coming into the post-production office in Adelaide, starting almost as soon as the shoot was finished..."When is that *Ten Canoes* gonna be ready?", "When can we see that film?", "Can you send us a DVD?", "Why are you Balanda taking so long with the film?"

David Gulpilil was first to see it, for he had to record the storytelling in both English and his own language. He cried and laughed in equal measure. Peter Djigirr and Gladys Womati, who had worked on the translations, were next to see it, also in Adelaide, to check that everything was right and permissible in the film. They both cried and laughed and suggested only one change.



The first public screening of Ten Canoes at Ramingining, December 2005.

Then finally, after sound mixing, it was ready to show to the whole community. A projector and screen were flown in from Darwin and people began gathering on the basketball court as the set up commenced, hours before the screening. By the time it was 7.30 and dark, there was not a soul in the streets and houses of Ramingining...it would have taken four basketball courts to hold everyone who was there.

The film brought laughter, pride and joy to an entire community, even to those who'd had their doubts about the film being made at all. For days afterwards it was a dominant topic of conversation and set off many tangential conversations. Old ways were questioned, new ways were questioned. Culture was discussed, and history, and what it means to be Yolngu.

And numbers of people who were in the film, and those who'd made contribution to it, were changed by it...they had a confidence of their place in the world not seen before.

What the Film Means...Djigirr Speaks

We come from this land. People, Balanda, always come, miners and that, and we always say no to them, no mining, because we don't want to lose our culture. White man's ways will just destroy us.

We have our law from long time ago, important law for everything, but all them white men come more and more and we can't stay in that law. That law just dropping away.



If we go more further with losing our law then maybe white men can tell us, "Where's your culture?...Nothing, you're lost, all bad luck for you."

But you film mob came here to lift up this law for us, to show how they used to sit a long time ago, them laws. So white men can see, we can see, anyone can see, we got that law.

If we can't do this movie, all them Balanda put us down, but you people just come to lift us up, to teach them, because we don't want to lose our culture, you know.

We gonna try and lift up that law for us with this movie, so they can recognise, "Ah, these people still got that law for them, culture, all that." It's really important this movie get done from the start to the end. We gonna show this film, and then they can recognise, all them white mens...that's nicer.

*Peter Djigirr
April 2005*

What the Film Means...Bunungurr Speaks

When I'm acting out on the swamp in the canoes, I feel full of life. The spirits are around me, the old people they with me, and I feel it. Out there, I was inside by myself, and I was crying.

I said to myself, why I being like my people from long ago? And I would think way back and then I feel. Everything, like my hair, I'm going to be like my people and I said "Yeah!", because I remember...because the spirit of my older people they're beside me and they're giving me more knowledge.



And that never happened before...and that's why we all worked and no one was bitten by crocodile, because the spirit of the older people were with us. I feel them, and I see them through the dream, they talking to us, slow, smooth.

These old people went through this swamp in the past...no one can tell you now, but you can feel this, the spirit of the older people giving you more knowledge.

We're in the middle of the movie now. This is good fun, everyone together, teaching each other things, that's good.

We're looking to the future, not just acting, not for ourself, not for the money, but for our children.

*Bobby Bunungurr
May 2005*

What the Film Means...Dawu Speaks

Old time, maybe 100,000 years, me and you, we were all the same. We've got blood, eyes, nose and walking and laughing exactly the same...beginning, beginning, beginning, *beginning!*

But now my people, we're sleeping at the ceremony. Important, because our memory, she's gone...old people, and old women, they took our memory with them when they dies, you see?

And at this time, couldn't understand Aboriginal people. Couldn't wake up, fighting and argument, no people singing and dancing. They was forgetting culture, because everytime we sit in town, sugar, damper, air-conditioner, light, we forget. We forget it, longtime. Us people, children, grown up, we was doing wrong thing.



But for your memory, you have to go back. You show us..."All right Michael, bring your memory, your culture", but my memory was gone, only half memory left, full memory was gone far away, rest-in-peace...drink kava, ganja, grog...too hard for me.

But then I asked that woman, spirit, "Bring me my energy!" *Ten Canoes* done that, bring me my memory back and my energy. You wake me up.

I have to thank you for it, because you was like this..."Hey, come on, get up, you'll have to bring your memory." But memory gone. "Here, you'll have to follow like that then, like the old people, and you can make this one film and bring that memory back!"

Rolf, you bring us memory. We got culture because we got memory...what a story, brother...

*Michael Dawu
June 2005*

What the Film Means...Djulibing Speaks

When I first came here for the film I thought, I'm not gonna do this, I'm not gonna do that. But they took me out to the mosquito huts our women built for the film. I felt free then, I could feel the old people was with me, I could feel them.

Now I'm getting brave and I'm gonna do whatever I have to do, whatever the director tells me to do. I'm very proud of myself...it's good to be playing a traditional woman, the way I look for the film.

It is my destiny to do this, so all over the world they can see how my ancient ancestors had been like this before. Behind the black and white photos is the big story, and the kids of Ramingining have never heard that story...they just laugh at the funny photos, which is no respect. If they make fun of me I'll crack their heads together.



This film is for the kids' future, so when they grow up they're gonna see, because not enough of the older people is trying to teach the younger kids. It's very important what we're gonna do here with the acting so everybody can see and understand how people was first like this. This is not just only for me...I'm doing this for my grandkids and for the next one generation to generation. They can learn what's in this film, this movie is gonna remind

them about our ancient ancestors.

Everything is changing, everything is going going gone now. The only thing they know is some ceremony...they not even normal kids anymore. Maybe they gonna keep this film with them so they can put it in their head.

*Frances Djulibing
June 2005*

What the Film Means...Gulpilil Speaks

I got tears falling down, I been crying seeing that movie, it's such a good movie. I'm proud of my people who are in that film, acting is beautiful, just perfect, everything, everybody is just great. It will hold them in the heart, the people who will see it, it'll take you way down to the wilderness.

I showed a photograph from Donald Doctor Thomson to Rolf de Heer and said what do you think? Rolf de Heer started to write that story with Ramingining people, my people, and we started to work together.



I had to talk to Gudthaykudthay and Minyngululu and Bunungurr and Bunyira and Djigirr and Birrinbirrin and I said okay, we'll make that canoes. I wasn't even there but they started to work on the canoes and it's really hard work but it was really perfectly done.

I thought it wasn't gonna work but you know it was a thousand millions of mosquitoes and leeches and you name it but I tell you what, lucky it was Rolf de Heer, if Rolf de Heer wasn't there it wouldn't have been happening this story, this story of my people.

All I did when they showed me the film and the film started, I start to cry...I remember those days, I remember...and now I can see it in the film. I saw it. I really want to thanks to Rolf, what he done for my people and my people's story and a true Australian story, fair dinkum.

That story is never finished that *Ten Canoes* story, it goes on forever because it is a true story of our people, it is the heart of the land and people and nature.

David Gulpilil
November 2005