



One hundred and fifty spears, ten canoes, three wives...trouble.

# TEN CANOES

A FILM BY ROLF DE HEER AND THE PEOPLE OF RAMINGINING

FILM FINANCE CORPORATION AUSTRALIA presents a FANDANGO/VERTIGO production in association with SOUTH AUSTRALIAN FILM CORPORATION, ADELAIDE FILM FESTIVAL and SBS INDEPENDENT TEN CANOES  
CRUISE KURDDAL, JAMIE GUPPILL, RICHARD BIRRINGBIRRI, PETER MINYGULULU, FRANCES DJULIBING with DAVID GUPPILL as the Storyteller  
Director of Photography IAN JONES, ACS, Film Editor TANTA NEHME, Sound Design by JAMES CURRIE, TOM HEUZENROEGER, Art Director BEVERLEY FREEMAN  
Associate Producers RICHARD BIRRINGBIRRI, BELINDA SCOTT, NILS ERIK NIELSEN, Executive Producers SUE MURRAY, DOMENICO PROCCACI, BRUCE MENZIES  
Producers ROLF DE HEER, JULIE RYAN, Written by ROLF DE HEER in consultation with the PEOPLE OF RAMINGINING, co-Director PETER QUIGGIR, Directed by ROLF DE HEER



A **STUDYGUIDE** BY LIBBY TUDBALL / ROBERT LEWIS



[www.tencanoes.com.au](http://www.tencanoes.com.au)  
[www.metromagazine.com.au](http://www.metromagazine.com.au)  
[www.theeducationshop.com.au](http://www.theeducationshop.com.au)



RICHARD BIRRIJBIRRI  
AND THE BOYS

*The authors of this study guide wish to recognize the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the land in which we live and work.*

## INTRODUCTION TO *TEN CANOES*

**T**en Canoes (Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr, 2006) is set in central Arnhem Land, in the time when the Indigenous peoples of Australia lived in traditional ways, as their ancestors had for many thousands of years before them, with close connections to the land.

When the film begins, the viewer is swept across the Arafura swamp and waterways of Arnhem land from above, as the storyteller (played by widely acclaimed actor, David Gulpilil) begins to tell a Dreaming story, how he started life in a waterhole like a little fish. He then begins to journey back in time, and adds layers to the story.

We hear how Dayindi (played by Gulpilil's son, Jamie Gulpilil) fancies one of the wives of his older brother. But traditional Indigenous communities always had their own traditional Laws to guide behaviour. To teach Dayindi the proper way, he is told a story from the mythical past, a story of wrong love, kidnapping, sorcery, bungling mayhem and revenge gone wrong. Through English storytelling and subtitled Ganalbingu language, *Ten Canoes* provides rich insights into Australian Indigenous lifestyles and cultures, and explores the more universal themes of relationships, family life, values, social mores, laws and systems, community and living in natural environments.

The entire cast of the film are people indigenous to the Arafura Swamp area, mainly Ganalbingu and related clans, and were involved in developing the script, and responsible for the making of all the traditional artefacts needed for the film, such as the swamp-specific bark canoes, the spears and other weaponry, and the dwellings.

What evolved finally was a film set in two different times: the mythical past, a long ago time, just after the time when the ancestors lived and set the rules and standards of life, and then a more recent but unnamed past, when people lived according to the laws created by the ancestors.

The film is an excellent vehicle for helping students to explore a vibrant representation of the nature of traditional Indigenous culture, and to critically explore the changing nature and place of that culture in modern Australian society.

### Curriculum Links

It is Australian government education policy that all Australians should learn about and value the cultures and experiences of Indigenous Australians, and that curriculum should be culturally inclusive. It is critical that every young Australian has the opportunity to understand and value the history and cultures of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There must also be a bridging of the cultural gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians through generating greater awareness and understanding. Indigenous issues and Reconciliation remain key issues for inclusion in school curriculum and in Australian public life.

*Ten Canoes* provides an excellent resource for studying two aspects of Indigenous culture:

- 1 **A study of the film** offers us a way of exploring the rich depiction of the traditional Indigenous culture, lifestyle and language of Arnhem Land.
- 2 **A study of the making of the film** offers us a way of exploring change and continuity in that culture in modern times.

*Ten Canoes* will therefore be relevant and of interest to teachers and students of:

- Australian history
- Cultural studies
- Indigenous studies
- Australian studies
- Studies of Society and Environment
- Art
- Geography
- Anthropology
- English
- Drama
- Studies of Religion
- Media studies.



BILLY BLACK



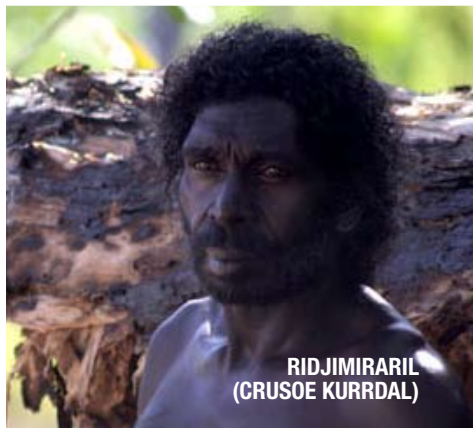
CASSANDRA  
MALANGARRI



CARL  
DHALURRUMA



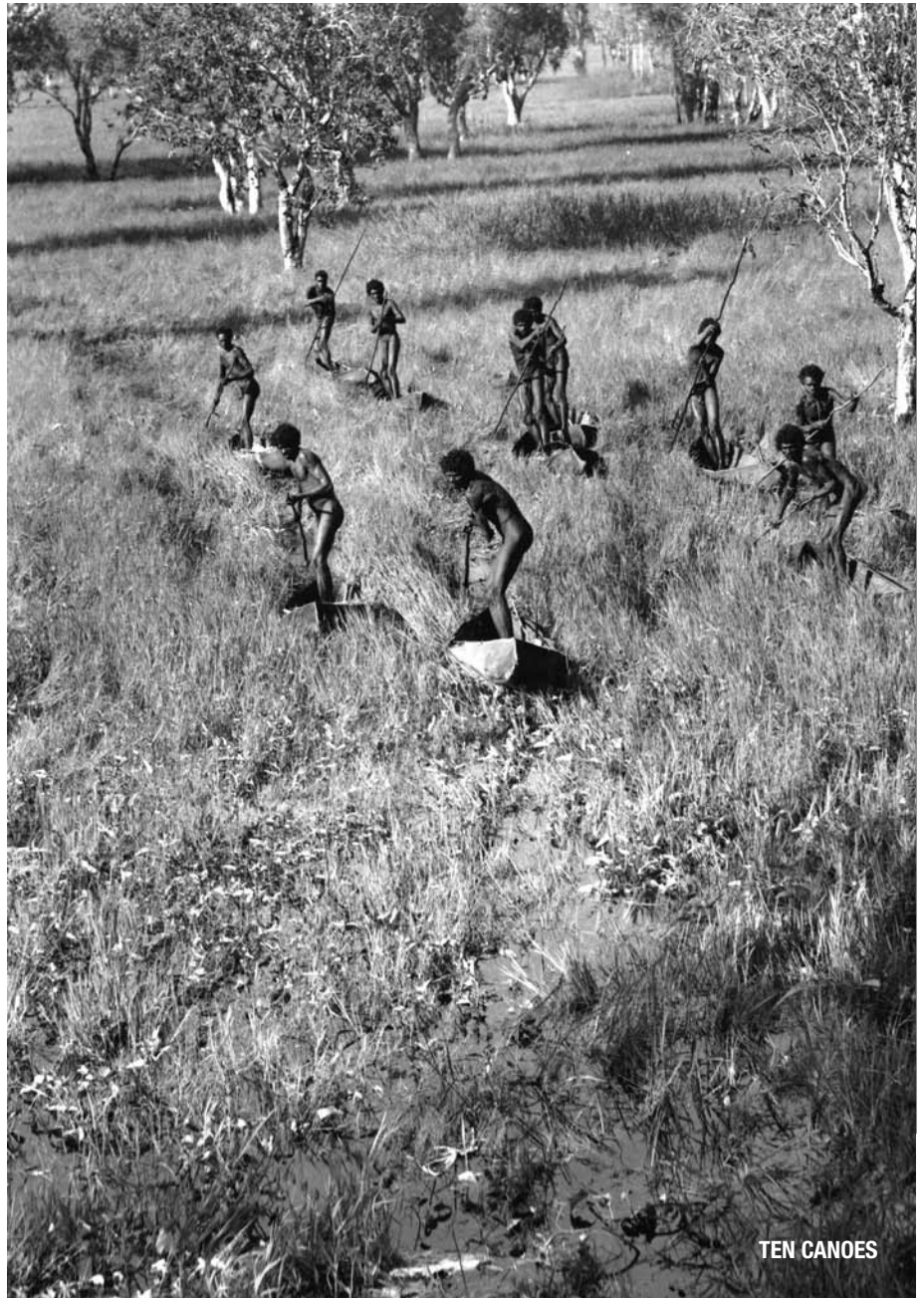
**BIRINBIRIN**  
(RICHARD BIRINBIRIN)



**RIDJIMIRIL**  
(CRUSOE KURRDAL)



**BOBBY BUNUNGURR**



**TEN CANOES**

The film is suitable for mature students from middle to senior secondary school, and at the tertiary level.

Teachers may need to alert students to the fact that since the characters are re-enacting traditional Indigenous lifestyles, they are not clothed.

### **BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM**

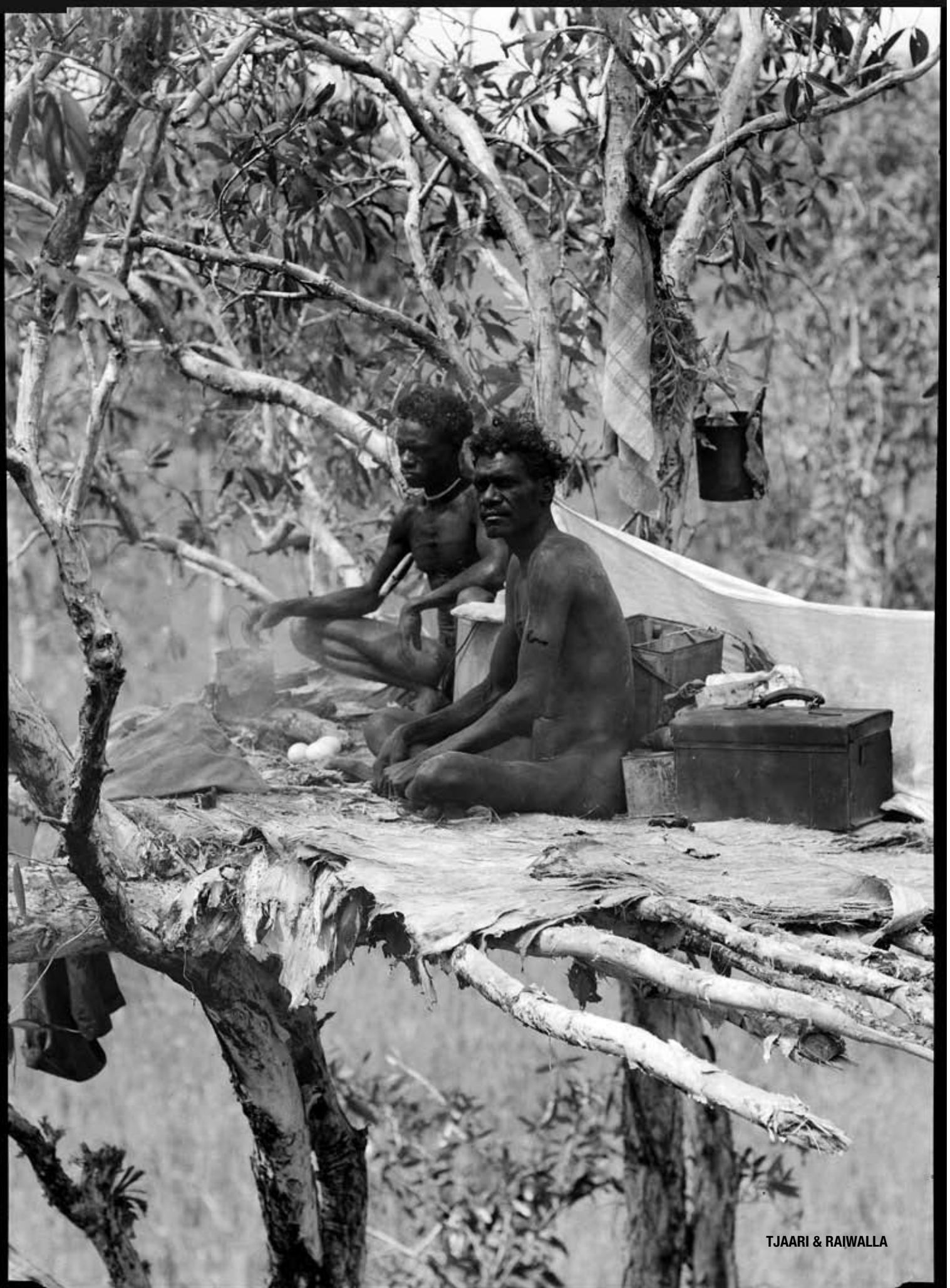
#### **Interpreting photographs**

Look at the photograph above, and answer the questions that follow. Give reasons for your answers in each case.

- 1 Where do you think the photograph was taken?
- 2 When?

- 3 What is happening in the photograph?
- 4 Why is it happening in that place at that time?
- 5 Who are the people in the photograph?
- 6 What, if anything, does the photograph suggest about the following?
  - skills
  - attitudes
  - values
  - laws
  - social organization
- 7 Do you think this photograph is good evidence about Indigenous culture in Australia?

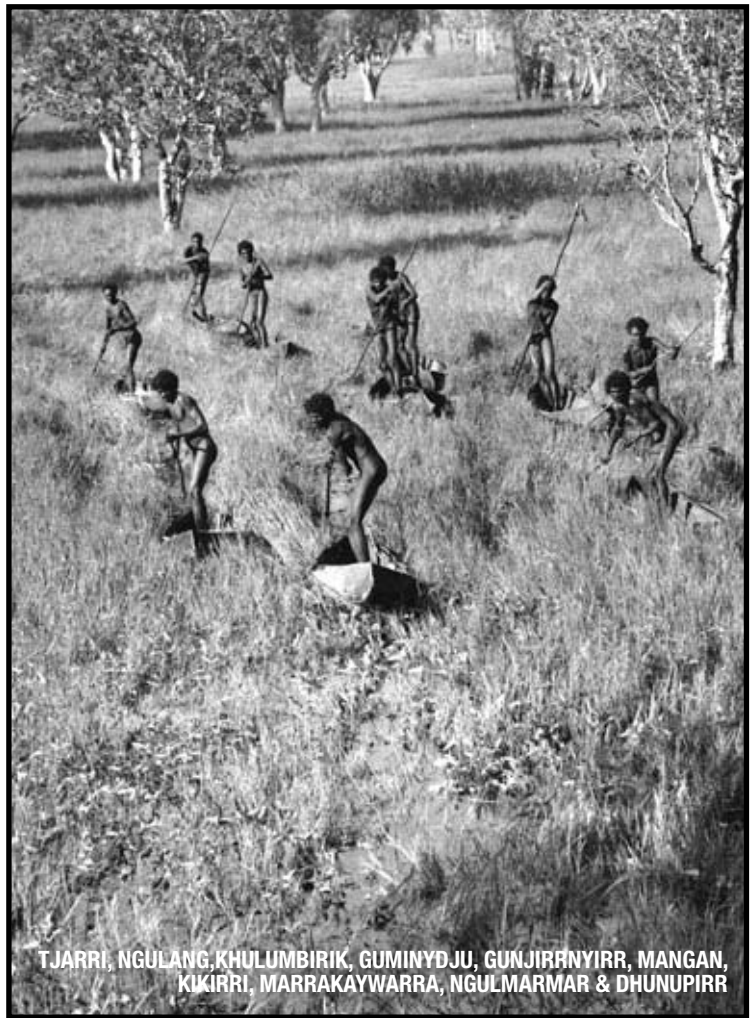
On pages four and five are more photographs from the same time and place. Decide what they help you add to your answers to the previous questions.



TJAARI & RAIWALLA



TJAARI & KIKIRRI



TJARRI, NGULANG, KHULUMBIRIK, GUMINYDJU, GUNJIRNYIRR, MANGAN, KIKIRRI, MARRAKAYWARRA, NGULMARMAR & DHUNUPIRR

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THE EGGS OF THE MAGPIE GEESE BEING COLLECTED; BATJI MINDIR, DJINBA AND GANALBINGU MEN POLE THEIR WAY THROUGH THE ARAFURA SWAMP; PLATFORMS, MÄKKÄRNBI, BUILT ABOVE THE SWAMP – THE PHOTOGRAPHS ON THIS PAGE AND THE ONE ON PAGE FOUR ARE FROM THE DONALD THOMSON COLLECTION, MUSEUM VICTORIA



GUMINYDJU, MARRAKAYWARRA, NGULMARMAR AND MANGAN

# Arnhem Land



[SAVANNA.NTU.EDU.AU/INFORMATION/AL/AL\\_AT.HTML](http://SAVANNA.NTU.EDU.AU/INFORMATION/AL/AL_AT.HTML)



RIDJIMIRARIL  
(CRUSOE KURRDAL)

## Testing Your Ideas

Here is some more information to help you decide if your ideas in response to the photographs are accurate.

The photograph of the ten canoeists, and the other photographs, were taken by Donald Thomson in the mid-1930s.

Thomson was an anthropologist who worked in central and north-eastern Arnhem Land, the top end part of Australia east of Darwin, when life for the original inhabitants was still traditional and barely influenced by the coming of white people. Thomson spent time with the Yolngu people, and the photographs are of them and aspects of their everyday life.

There had been wars between the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land and other Indigenous groups, and there had been some attacks on them by white settlers, but the Yolngu had never been conquered, and had thus retained much of their traditional lifestyle.

Thomson lived there with the people for many months, 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 largely successful with his broader aims.

Thomson left a legacy of immense importance. Throughout his life he fought for Aboriginal rights. The thousands of artifacts he collected, the detailed field notes he wrote, and the more than 10,000 exquisite photographs he took, provide a cultural record of traditional Aboriginal life beyond value. The Thomson collection in Museum Victoria is considered one of the most significant ethnographic collections in the world. The many thousands of feet of nitrate film he took in Arnhem Land were lost in a Melbourne warehouse fire.

- Go to <http://www.museum.vic.gov.au/collections/indigenous/indnorth.asp> to find out about the *Thomson Collection* held at Museum Victoria

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 what people 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.

Museum Victoria has provided copies of these photographs as part of ongoing curatorial and community projects with the Yolngu settlement at Ramingining, where the locals consider them with a great deal of interest.



CANOEISTS



JOHNNY PASCOE

In Arnhem Land there is a concept of ‘Thomson Time’, fondly remembered. This refers to the time when the Yolngu practised their traditional cultural ways, unaffected by contact with outsiders. The web of kinship is complex: everyone is related to someone in the photographs, so everyone takes pride in them. They are their continuity, their history.

These photographs are at the heart of the film you are about to see.

### UNDERSTANDING THE STORY OF TEN CANOES

*Ten Canoes* is set in two time periods.

It starts in a time before the non-Indigenous contact with Australia, when Indigenous people were living a traditional life. This part of the film, the ‘present’, is shot in black and white. During this ‘present’ the young man, Dayindi, is told a story from the past by old Minygululu, about the origins of the laws that govern good behaviour. This mythical past, is shown in colour, symbolising its richness and reality for the lives of the Indigenous people.

The story begins with ten men, led by old Minygululu, heading into the forest to harvest bark for canoe making. It is the season of magpie goose egg gathering, and the men are looking forward to getting out onto the swamp and hunting the magpie geese and their eggs.

1 In this early scene, how does the filmmaker introduce humour?

2 How did you react to the use of colloquial language and larrikin behaviour (when the subtitles tell us that the men were discussing in Ganabingu language that the farts were ‘silent but deadly’)?

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.

- 3 What tribal law do you think was in danger of being broken?
- 4 Why would this be a serious matter?

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:

*It is long ago, mythical times, just after the great flood came and covered the whole land ... Ridjimiriril 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, Ridjimiriril’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 Ridjimiriril’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 ap-*

Aspects of Indigenous culture	In the past (as represented in the film)	In the present (from information about the making of the film)
Law, rules and justice		
Skills		
Values		
Gender roles		
Social organization		
Technology – tools and weapons		
Spiritual life		
Relationship to the environment		
Power and authority		
Daily life		
Contacts with others		

TABLE 1



NOWALINGU (FRANCES DJULIBING)



DAYINDI (JAMIE GULPILIL)



PLATFORM

*proaches, 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 Ridjimirail, 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. Ridjimirail 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 Ridjimirail can do.*

- 5 How does the filmmaker contrast this 'mythical' element of the story with the 'present' period in the film?
- 6 Do you think this device is effective?
- 7 Are you surprised by the people's reaction to the Stranger? Explain your reactions.

*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 galvanized into action: a war party is prepared; it sets off, but without Yeeralparil.*

- 8 Why can't Yeeralparil go?

*Yeeralparil hangs around the main camp in the hope of seeing Munandjarra, but Banalandju ensures a safe distance between the two.*

- 9 Why would Banalandju take on this role?

*The war party returns, without Nowalingu: the old uncle's eyes must have deceived him. Ridjimirail, 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. Ridjimirail tells Birrinbirrin he's going to talk to the stranger, but grabs his spears and takes off, with Birrinbirrin puffing behind. Deep in the bush they see the Stranger, squatting in the bush. Ridjimirail launches a spear. An inspection of the body, however, reveals that Ridjimirail has killed the wrong stranger. There are sounds of approaching people. Ridjimirail breaks the spear off and they quickly hide the body.*

- 10 How would you describe this scene? Is it humorous or serious or a mixture of both?

- 11 What values and dilemmas are set up in this section of the story?
- 12 What various responses could Ridjimirail and Birrinbirrin have had to what happened? Why did they react in the way they did?

*Days later Ridjimirail 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. Ridjimirail owns up, and the location and time for the payback ceremony is agreed to.*

- 13 How did the warriors find out about the killing?
- 14 What does the Law decree should happen in this instance?
- 15 How would you define payback?
- 16 Why does Yeeralparil partner his brother?

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

- 17 Do you think that the Law actually does achieve justice?
- 18 Why do you think the people have such ceremonies to mark such significant events?

*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.*

- 19 The film ends humorously, almost as an anti-climax. What are your reactions to this?

Once you have discussed and understood the story of the film you are now ready to start thinking about what the film tells us about traditional Indigenous culture, both as it possibly existed in the past, and how it might still exist in Australia today.



DAYINDI  
(JAMIE GULPILIL)



BIRINBIRIN  
(RICHARD BIRINBIRIN)  
AND RIDJIMIRARIL  
(CRUSOE KURRDAL)



DJIGIRR  
(PETER DJIGIRR)

## EXPLORING TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS CULTURE

One of your tasks for the remainder of this Study Guide is to create a summary of the nature of Indigenous life and culture as it is represented by the film for the Yolngu people in this place before European contact.

- 1 Look at the different aspects of life listed in the first column, and summarize what you are told about them in the film. (See Table 1 on page 7)
- 2 What is your opinion about the life and culture that are shown in the film?

You may also add more information to the 'Past' column as you read the following material.

## INDIGENOUS CULTURE TODAY

*Ten Canoes* offers us a view of the past.

But what about today? What is the position of Indigenous culture now? Is it similar? Is it changing? Does it provide Indigenous people with a way that allows them to be a successful part of modern Australia?

Information about the making of *Ten Canoes* can help us explore this question. As you read the following information about the making of the film, summarize your ideas and findings in the right hand column of the table.

### The making of *Ten Canoes*

The making of *Ten Canoes* began towards the end of 2000, when Indigenous actor David Gulpilil was cast as the lead in Rolf de Heer's film *The Tracker*.

After meeting Rolf de Heer in Adelaide some months before the shoot, David invited him to Ramingining, to meet his family, to see his traditional lands, and to travel the Arafura Swamp. 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, in their language.

- Go to <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/remote/ramingining/> and [http://www.ozoutback.com.au/postcards/postcards\\_forms/arnhemland\\_](http://www.ozoutback.com.au/postcards/postcards_forms/arnhemland_)

[central/index.htm#Pics](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/remote/ramingining/) to find information and to look at photos of the town and area surrounding Ramingining.

- 1 Imagine that you are a journalist interviewing Rolf de Heer about his impressions of the area. Construct a dialogue between yourself and him about the possibilities of making a film in this area. Questions about the landscape, isolation, and cinematographic opportunities could be explored.
- 2 Would you want to visit Ramingining? Why or why not?

On the morning of Rolf de Heer's departure, David Gulpilil said: 'We need ten canoes'. De Heer looked at him blankly. Gulpilil left, re-appearing half an hour later with Donald Thomson's black and white photograph, taken almost seventy years before. De Heer took one look at it and said, 'You're right, we need ten canoes.'

- 3 Why do you think he would have agreed with David Gulpilil?
- 4 Look at the Donald Thomson photograph of the ten canoes that you studied earlier. In your class, discuss how a filmmaker might say that this photograph could be 'the essence of real cinema'?

The film had started to form.

- 5 Add any information or ideas to the 'Present' column of your summary table.

### Indigenous lifestyles in Arnhem Land: Life then, life now

Life for the pre-contact Yolngu may have had its hard times, but the Yolngu people 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 less of their time obtaining food than any other known Australian Indigenous tribes; 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.

The Yolngu people 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 dis-



RICO WITH MESSAGE STICK



THE SORCERER (PHILIP GUDTHAYKUDTHAY)



MINYGULULU (PETER MANYGULULU) AT HUT

tances 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 on-trading to other tribes.

6 Why would this have been an advantage to the Yolngu people?

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.

- If you have not already looked at the websites showing images of modern day Ramingining, visit [http://www.ozoutback.com.au/postcards/postcards\\_forms/arnhemland\\_central/index.htm#Pics](http://www.ozoutback.com.au/postcards/postcards_forms/arnhemland_central/index.htm#Pics) to see how life has changed.

7 How would changes to traditional life affect traditional culture?

8 Suggest reasons why conventional work would be scarce in Ramingining.

9 Add any information or ideas to the 'Present' column of your summary table.

### 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 dif-

ferent 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 Western cinema-going audience, used to Western storytelling conventions, tastes and requirements, but that would also satisfy Yolngu requirements.

10 Why would two different cultural traditions need to be accommodated within the one film?

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, incidents that could be derived from the images, and each photo had, in some way, a story that illuminated the whole of the endeavour.

Rolf de Heer visited Ramingining on numerous occasions before commencing the filming of *Ten Canoes*. 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, de Heer's initial chief collaborator was spending more and more time away from the community, but the work of the film had to continue.

11 Why was it so important for de Heer to get to know the community?

There were several storytelling problems that needed to be overcome. The first of these was the desire of the locals who worked with de Heer 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.

12 Suggest reasons why the local people would have been so keen to have goose egg gathering re-enacted?

13 Do you think that this process is dramatic or not?



SHAVING



DAYINDI  
(JAMIE GULPILIL)



MAKING CANOES



THE STRANGER

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. Yet 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 photographs, 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.

- 14 How did the filmmaker solve these three problems in the final product of *Ten Canoes*?
- 15 How effective is the use of black and white and colour in the different stories of the film?
- 16 Add any information or ideas to the ‘Present’ column of your summary table.

### Language

Another complicating element was language. Today, there are more than 200 Australian Indigenous languages. Fewer than twenty of these are strong and even these are endangered. The others have been destroyed, or live in the memories of the elderly, but many are being revived by their communities.

Ramingining is a place of many languages. People speak 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 Minygululu speaks Mandalpingu, also David Gulpilil’s language. Crusoe Kurddal, who plays Minygululu’s ancestor Ridjimiril, speaks another language 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.

English is secondary to the Yolngu people of the region. There are about sixteen clans represented and eight language groups within the Ramingining community alone:

*They know that all indigenous languages are under threat in this country and they want theirs to stay alive. There’s an incredible desire to show their stories to the rest of Australia.*

(*The Australian*, 8 March 2006)

For many of the Yolngu residents English is perhaps their fifth or sixth language, so they speak it only rudimentarily if at all. Several of the cast, notably Peter Djigirr and Richard Birrinbirrin, plus Frances Djulibing among the women, are good English speakers. During filming, they and others would work through the two-way communication problems between actors and director until everyone seemed to know what to do and what to say.

- 17 If you were the filmmaker producing the film, which language or languages would you use? Remember that you can also use subtitles.

The filmmakers actually produced three versions of the film:

- (1) the Yolngu languages dialogue version with English subtitles & narration;
- (2) the Yolngu languages dialogue & storytelling version in Mandalpingu with English subtitles; and
- (3) the Yolngu language only version without any subtitles.

- 18 Suggest reasons why this is a highly significant decision to make three versions?

- Go to <http://www.goodstaff.com/gallery/Australian%20Tribal%20Art/Ganalbingu%20Tribe/index.html> to read about the culture of Ganalbingu speakers.

- 19 Add any information or ideas to the ‘Present’ column of your summary table.

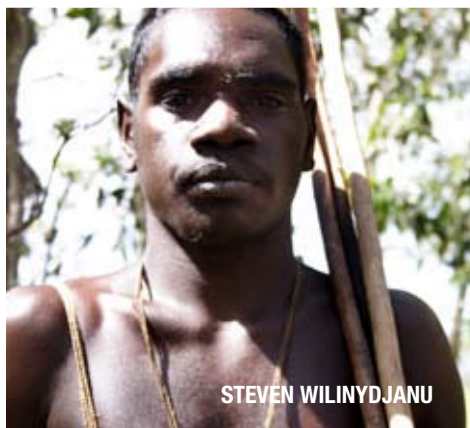
### Casting *Ten Canoes*: The issue of kinship

Casting the film was a very unusual process in making *Ten Canoes*. 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.

- 20 Do you think this is reasonable in casting a film like *Ten Canoes*?



PETER MINYNGULULU



STEVEN WILINYDJANU



SPEAR THROWING



NOWALINGU  
(FRANCES DJULIBING)

Another stage of casting was 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 wanted 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. Also, 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, so 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.

- 21 Why would this be important in casting a film like *Ten Canoes*?
- 22 Add any information or ideas to the 'Present' column of your summary table.

### Building 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 armbands and the shelters. As in old times, the work was divided very distinctly along gender lines, so 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.

- 23 Why would it have been so important for the Indigenous community to be so precise about the division of duties?

The expertise to make the artefacts still existed among the older men, in partic-

ular with Minyngululu (in his sixties) and Philip Gudthaykudthay also known as Pussycat (mid-seventies). Minyngululu was away, so Pussycat, ably assisted by Djigirr and Michael Dawu and several others, went bush to find bark. 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 bark was 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, and then back onto the fire for the other end, the prow.

- 24 Create a poster illustrating the various stages in the construction of the canoes.

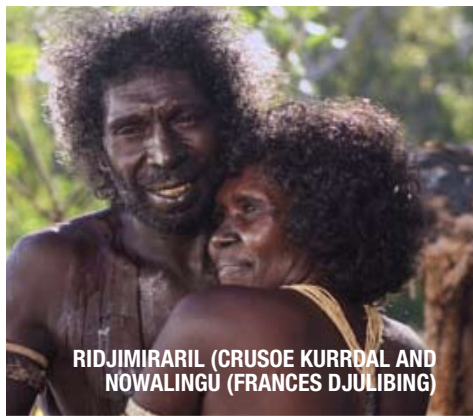
There was gathering excitement, more so among the younger men who had never seen this before, as the canoe took shape. However, Pussycat is not originally from one of the swamp tribes, so he was unsure about the exact way to sew the prow. Thomson photographs were consulted and a drawing by Thomson in 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, because forgotten aspects of their culture were being brought back from the brink of extinction, and they knew it.

- 25 In what ways does this knowledge about the building of the canoes increase the significance of the film?
- 26 Add any information or ideas to the 'Present' column of your summary table.

### The camp

Meanwhile the production crew arrived and began to transform Murwangi, an old cat-



RIDJIMIRARIL (CRUSOE KURDAL AND NOWALINGU (FRANCES DJULIBING)



DEATH DANCE



DEATH DANCE

tle station at the edge of the swamp, which was to serve as the base for filming, into something at least notionally habitable.

27 What basic facilities would a film crew need to be able to produce a film?

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 was hell with mosquitoes). The Yolngu cast were delighted with their accommodation, since the tents had power, a light and a fan, and were largely mosquito proof. The urban crew had slightly different ideas about it all, and resigned themselves to many weeks of roughing it.

28 Why would there have been such different reactions to the accommodation?

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 days shooting to the smell of fresh fish cooking on little fires scattered throughout the camp.

29 Imagine that you are either an indigenous or Balanda (white) person living at Murwangi. Make comments on how you might be feeling about the process as filming started.

30 What challenges would the production team have faced to ensure that all the various needs were met?

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 and 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.

31 Add any information or ideas to the 'Present' column of your summary table.

## 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.

32 Suggest why the filmmaker would have divided the filming into two sections

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.

33 What kinds of skills would be required for screen acting?

There were eleven croc spotters on set, the ten canoeists plus Pussycat, enough to ensure the safety of the Balanda.

The 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... there were gasps and mutterings of recognition that those on screen, and those Yolngu contributing in other ways to the film, were, in some almost magical way, rebuilding their history.



RIDJIMIRARIL  
(CRUSOE KURDDAL)



DAYINDI (JAMIE  
GULPILIL)



BIRRINBIRRIN  
(RICHARD BIRRINBIRRIN)

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.

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.

34 Add any information or ideas to the ‘Present’ column of your summary table.

### The actors as real people

Information about some of the actors in the film can help us understand some aspects of modern Yolngu culture.

Crusoe Kurddal (Ridjimiraril)

Crusoe Kurddal is an artist known for his large mimih sculptures, which are reminiscent of those made by his father, Kuningbal, who was well known for his art. Crusoe is also an accomplished dancer and has performed throughout Australia and overseas. (This paragraph is reproduced with permission from Maningrida Arts & Culture.)

- Visit [http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/sub/crossingcountry/2\\_EXHIBITION/exh\\_highlights3.html](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/sub/crossingcountry/2_EXHIBITION/exh_highlights3.html) to find out about Crusoe’s father’s mimih sculptures and their significance in Indigenous culture.
- Type ‘mimih sculptures’ into a Google search and you will find many links to conduct further research about these fascinating sculptures.
- Visit the Flinders Gallery online to look at examples of Crusoe Kurddal’s mimih sculptures’ at [http://www.flg.com.au/FLG\\_dreamings.htm#mimih](http://www.flg.com.au/FLG_dreamings.htm#mimih)

Jamie Gulpilil (Dayindi/Yeeralparil)

22-year-old Jamie Gulpilil is the son of the great actor, David Gulpilil. His interest in acting began when accompanying his father to various film shoots and film premieres. *Ten canoes* is his first feature film. Jamie was born and continues to live in Ramingining, north-eastern Arnhem Land.

35 Visit <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2006/s1596495.htm> to locate the script of an interview on *The 7.30 Report*, broadcast 20 March 2006. Divide your class up to play the various parts and present the show, then discuss what insights this provides into Jamie’s character and views about his role in the film.

36 Also read the *Sydney Morning Herald* article <http://www.smh.com.au/news/film/shy-stars-present-their-true-selves/2006/03/19/1142703218130.html> What further insights does this provide of Jamie’s views about being in *Ten Canoes*?

Richard Birrinbirrin (Birrinbirrin & Associate Producer)

Richard Birrinbirrin is an artist and treasurer of the Aboriginal artist’s co-operative, Bula’bula Arts, in Ramingining, and an Executive Member of ANKAAA (a peak Indigenous Arts advocacy organization). Born in 1953 at Milingimbi mission, Birrinbirrin was initiated on the beach outside his father’s (David Malangi) self-constructed tin-shed home. Malangi was always keen that his sons and daughters received ‘two way’ (Balanda and Yolngu) education and Birrinbirrin went on to become a mental health worker for the Ramingining Clinic for ten years.

As a leader in ceremonies Birrinbirrin is not new to performance. He made his



MINYGULULU  
PETER MINYGULULU



THE SORCERER  
(PHILIP GUDTHAYKUDTHAY)  
(PUSSYCAT)



THE STORYTELLER  
(DAVID GULPILIL)

public performance debut in New York in 2002 when he and his brother Gulayguly were commissioned to perform a dada (smoking) ceremony. Birrinbirrin has travelled to Taipei, Tokyo and Canberra to make public art.

Birrinbirrin is substantially overweight, in a way that no Yolngu was even seventy years ago, let alone pre-contact; so a role was created especially for him. It is 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.

37 Visit ANKAAA at <http://www.ankaaa.org.au> Explore this site to explain why it is so important that Indigenous artists have advocacy organizations

- Go to [http://www.indigenart.com.au/Dynamic/Current/view\\_ex.asp?Status=Current&Gallery=Subiaco&GalleryID=1](http://www.indigenart.com.au/Dynamic/Current/view_ex.asp?Status=Current&Gallery=Subiaco&GalleryID=1) to find out more about Birrinbirrin's art.

Peter Minygululu (Minygululu)

Peter Minygululu, an exhibiting artist, and ceremonial leader, was born near Mirrngatja around 1942.

Minygululu paints the story of his father's country - the land around Mirrngatja, which is on the eastern side of the Arafura Swamp. During the development of *Ten Canoes*, Minygululu was consistently supportive of the project. He is an authority on making traditional artefacts such as bark canoes and remembers the time when poling across the Swamp to collect the magpie geese was an annual event. (Reproduced with permission from Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal Corporation.)

38 Visit <http://www.cdu.edu.au/northerneditions/exhibitions/PeterMinygululu.htm> and [http://www.moragalleries.com.au/pminygululu/img\\_2988.html](http://www.moragalleries.com.au/pminygululu/img_2988.html) to see examples of Minygululu's art. What do you think might be the stories of these paintings?

- You can also visit <http://www.bulabula-arts.com/artists/index.php> to see a profile of Minygululu's experience

Philip Gudthaykudthay (The Sorcerer)

Born in 1935, Philip Gudthaykudthay is the most senior artist from Ramingin-

ing. Taught by great artists such as his father Dawidi and his uncle Djawa, Gudthaykudthay has been painting since the 1960s. A stealthy old man with a languid gait, *Pussycat*, as he is colloquially known, is a senior ritual leader. His nickname comes from one of his principal totems: *Burruwara*, the native cat. You just have to watch him walk to see the connection.

In the 1960s Gudthaykudthay first sold his paintings through Alan Fidock at the Milingimbi Mission. He was living on the mainland at Nangalala and worked variously as a fencer, stockman and crocodile hunter, while painting in his free time. Gudthaykudthay was the first Ramingin-artist to have a solo show. Held at the Garry Anderson Gallery in 1983, the show was a sell-out. Since that time he has participated in numerous national and international exhibitions, including four more solo shows. (Reproduced with permission from Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal Corporation.)

39 Go to <http://www.bulabula-arts.com/search/index.php?search=Search&id=19> to look at or even buy one of Gudthaykudthay's paintings. What do you think his paintings are about?

David Gulpilil (The Storyteller)

David Gulpilil was born in 1953, in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. He grew up in a tribal lifestyle in an area north east of the world famous Kakadu National Park where his ancestors have lived for thousands of years.

David Gulpilil is one of Australia's most accomplished actors, traditional Aboriginal dancers and is a noted player of the native wind instrument, the didgeridoo. He has toured his dances Australia wide and internationally and has performed with his troupe in the United States, Great Britain and France. Gulpilil's career as an actor since the film *Walkabout* (Nicolas Roeg, 1971) has been extensive. He also appeared alongside Paul Hogan in *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986), and choreographed the Aboriginal dance sequences. He also starred in the Australian film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), directed by Philip Noyce.

- Find out more about Gulpilil's career by visiting his 'official' website at <http://www.gulpilil.com>
- Go to <http://www.abc.net.au/>



DAVID GULPILIL



PETER DJIGIRR



BILLY BLACK

message/blackarts/film/s725610.htm to watch film clips of Gulpilil talking about his life, family, traditions and culture.

- 40 Director Rolf de Heer was particularly keen for David to have a core role in the film. Why would many members of the Indigenous community also believe that it is particularly important for Gulpilil to have this role?

Peter Djigirr (Co-director, *Canoeist*)

Djigirr is a member of the Arafura Swamp people. He was born in 1963 in the country around Djilpin Gorge. He is known as the 'crocodile man' and is regarded as the local expert on catching crocodiles and locating their eggs for harvest on the Swamp each year. Djigirr's assistance as co-director was vital during the shoot. He was involved extensively in casting, locations and logistics, and was a key liaison between the Yolngu community and Balanda crew.

- 41 Why is it particularly important for films about Indigenous cultures to have involvement of local people?
- 42 Add any information or ideas to the 'Present' column of your summary table.
- 43 What would you now say were the main changes and continuities between traditional Indigenous culture as depicted in the film, and as it exists today at Ramingining?

### The significance of *Ten Canoes*

- 44 The making of *Ten Canoes* had an effect on the community. Look at the following comments and summarize what impacts the film made.

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 may-*

*be 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.*

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.*

What the Film Means ...  
Dawu Speaks

*Aboriginal people was forgetting culture, because every time 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. 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. 'Bring me my energy!' Ten Canoes done that, bring me my memory back and my energy. You wake me up. Rolf, you bring us memory. We got culture because we got memory ... what a story, brother ...*

What the Film Means ...  
Djulibing Speaks

*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 ... 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.*

What the Film Means ... Gulpilll 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 ...*

*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.*

## REFLECTING

- 1 A modern historian, John Hirst, has said that he believes Aboriginal society must have been one of the least 'free' societies ever. What do you think he means by this? Is Indigenous society depicted in this 'unfree' way in the film? How would you describe the society you see?
- 2 History tries to tell us what life in the past was like. *Ten Canoes* is a modern representation of traditional Indigenous life. What are its strengths and weaknesses as evidence of how life was lived hundreds and perhaps even thousands of years ago?
- 3 Co-director Peter Djigirr, who plays a canoeist in the film, said the community wanted to make *Ten Canoes* 'so our children can grow up so they know where we are coming from'. What do you think Peter meant in this statement? In future generations, what will the young people of Arnhem Land learn from watching this film?
- 4 Are all aspects of traditional culture worth keeping? For example, is it important to be able to make bark canoes when modern power boats are available for people to do the same task more easily? Are old laws about relationships, developed when people were more isolated, still significant? Is it important for English to become the main language in Indigenous communities if they are to be able to take full advantage of the modern world?

Are old ideas of spirituality still appropriate? Are old ceremonies that kept people in touch with the environment still valuable? Is traditional justice in the form of the 'payback' still appropriate in an era when we have strong traditions of individual, as opposed to group, human rights? You might divide these questions among your class, with each group responsible for creating summaries of arguments and ideas for and against each idea.

- 5 The authors placed a statement at the start of this guide. What does this statement mean? Is it an appropriate and meaningful thing to do? Or is it just an empty 'feel-good' statement that has no actual significance and effect? Discuss ideas that support and oppose the use of such statements. What is your final opinion about them?

## RESEARCHING FURTHER

### Using film as a resource for Indigenous perspectives

In recent years, there have been a number of films produced that are excellent classroom resources for teaching and learning about indigenous issues. Visit the *Metro* website <http://www.metro magazine.com.au> and *The Education Shop* <http://www.theeducationshop.com.au> to access these resources.

The following is a list of some study guides that may be applicable:

- *Rabbit Proof fence*
- *Yolngu Boy*
- *Black Chicks Talking*
- *Stolen Generation*
- *Mr Strehlow's films*
- *Australian Rules*
- *Beneath Clouds*
- *Whispering in our Hearts*
- *The Tracker*

These guides provide information about links to curriculum, background information, and suggestions for classroom activities.

### Websites with Indigenous perspectives

There are many websites that provide information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history, on current Indigenous issues and on Reconciliation. Many provide further links.

- The *Ten Canoes* website has details of the film, and the many other projects that have flowed out of the making of the film: <http://www.vertigoproductions.com.au>
- The Reconciliation Council has been succeeded by Reconciliation Australia: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/orgs/car/index.htm>
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission: [http://www.atsic.gov.au/default\\_ns.asp](http://www.atsic.gov.au/default_ns.asp) Look for the issues page for ATSIC. It includes links to articles and reports about land rights and native title.
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au> Search within the site for information and links to items such as an online native title newsletter, native title research services and fact sheets.
- Community Aid Abroad Aboriginal Tours: <http://www.caa.org.au/travel>
- Gary Foley's Koori History website for alternative views on Indigenous issues and reconciliation: <http://www.kooriweb.org>
- Lore of the Land website: <http://www.loreoftheland.com.au>
- Message stick ABC Indigenous Online: <http://www.abc.net.au/message/> (This site has a good section on protocol and culture called 'Proper Way', that would assist schools and students working with local Aboriginal communities.)
- Racism. No Way: <http://www.racismnoway.com.au>
- Stories of the Dreaming website: <http://www.dreamtime.net.au/main.htm>
- VICNET's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander page lists a huge number of websites Australia-wide: <http://www.vicnet.net.au/aboriginal/>
- Face the Facts: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~aar/factfile.htm> (This has answers to Frequently Asked Questions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people prepared by the Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner.)

- A commercial website with an enormous number of links on a wide variety of topics: [http://didjshop.com.au/didjlinks/links\\_AbOz.html](http://didjshop.com.au/didjlinks/links_AbOz.html)
- The Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action <http://www.faira.org.au> This site, established by people from Indigenous communities, includes information and links to related sites, including the subsite: National Indigenous Working Group for Native Title. This subsite includes information about the role of the working group as well as information and links to related sites.
- National Native Title Tribunal <http://www.nntt.gov.au>
- Koori net service from Sydney University. Includes articles, information and links to related sites <http://www.koori.usyd.edu.au>
- Look for 8080/Blacktracka, the Indigenous Australian Internet Search Engine.
- A Canadian website that provides links to information about Indigenous People from around the world. Extensive links to Aboriginal Australia sites on law and legislation, <http://www.bloorstreet.com>
- Koorie Research Centre: <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/cais/research>
- Victorian Education Department Koorie education website: <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/koorie/overview.htm>
- Yarra Healing – the Melbourne Catholic Education Office’s Reconciliation site: <http://www.yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au>
- Koorie Heritage Trust: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~koorieht/>
- [http://www.abc.net.au/program-sales/ind\\_hm.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/program-sales/ind_hm.htm) This site provides an extensive listing of annotated videos for teaching and learning about all aspects of indigenous history and culture, social and contemporary issues.



This study guide was produced by **ATOM**  
**editor@atom.org.au**

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