

L.R. HIATT

# WHO WROTE *TEN CANOES?*



FROM THE ADMIRABLE documentation available on the making of *Ten Canoes*<sup>1</sup> we know that the film is the brainchild of a celebrated Aboriginal actor intent on honouring his homeland and an innovative Dutch/Australian film-maker mindful of obligations to his sponsors. The result is a remarkable hybrid, part ethnographic reconstruction and part fictional drama. While the achievements of the director, the photographer and the actors have been singled out as leading reasons for the resounding success of the film, the story itself has been received more tentatively. In this article I take up the question of its provenance and significance, writing not as a film critic but an anthropologist.

## FILM

enabling him to effect an ingenious compromise. The film could proceed within two separate time-frames: “Thomson Time”, where the technology and techniques of goose-hunting could be faithfully presented; and “Mythical Time”, where the creative imagination was free to roam at will.<sup>3</sup> To codify the distinction visually, Thomson Time could be presented in black-and-white, Mythical Time in colour. All that was needed was a screenplay set in the mists of antiquity that would sustain the interest of modern filmmakers. Whatever the cultural details, the basic ingredients would have to be sex and violence.

## STORY

### CONCEPT

AFTER DAVID GULPILIL was cast in *The Tracker* in 2000, he began talking to the director Rolf de Heer about making a film at Ramingining in Arnhem Land. It was not until mid-2003, however, that the idea became a serious possibility. According to de Heer, there were two critical moments in the conceptualisation of the film. The first occurred when Gulpilil came to him one morning and said: “We need ten canoes.” In support of the requisition, he produced a photograph taken in the 1930s by anthropologist Donald Thomson of ten goose-hunters poling canoes in the Arafura Swamp. Gulpilil’s clan territory bordered on the Arafura Swamp, and the canoeists were his ancestors. After due consideration de Heer said: “Yep, we need ten canoes.”<sup>2</sup>

As Gulpilil’s compatriots became increasingly committed to the idea of a documentary depicting their traditional way of life, de Heer became increasingly worried about the prospects of making a movie with the power to attract a paying audience. There is a joke in the trade that sitting through an ethnographic film is as exciting as watching paint dry. Fortunately—and this was the second critical moment—he had a brainwave

HERE IS AN OUTLINE of the story as it appears on screen. We are transported to a time in the remote past, not long after the creation of the universe, and introduced to a warrior ancestor called Ridjimiril. He has three wives: first Banalandju, wise and important; second Nowalingu, jealous of her husband but interested in other men; and third Munandjarra, young and beautiful.<sup>4</sup> Ridjimiril also has a younger brother, Yeeralparil, a bachelor without immediate prospects of marriage who resents his deprivation and lusts after Munandjarra. But Banalandju and Nowalingu exercise a duenna-like surveillance over their pretty young co-wife and easily frustrate Yeeralparil’s transparent attempts at flirtation.<sup>5</sup>

With the romance going nowhere, our attention is diverted to other curiosities of camp life among the ancients: an ageing male seeks to regain his sex appeal by having a haircut; Birrinbirrin, an important elder with an enormous belly, pesters his grandsons to satisfy his craving for honey; a stranger from the “stone country” appears, offering to trade objects for making black magic;<sup>6</sup> the local medicine-man inspects the camp afterwards for signs of sorcery and warns of the dangers of leaving turds lying around.

## WHO WROTE *TEN CANOES*?

For a while life goes on as usual. Birrinbirrin pesters his wife for honey, who responds with a tirade of abuse. Yeeralparil continues his gauche courtship of Munandjarra, who tells him to lay off or she'll be in trouble. Banalandju and Nowalingu compete for their husband's affections<sup>7</sup> and come to blows.<sup>8</sup> Ridjimiraril goes hunting in search of peace and returns with meat to restore harmony in the harem.

Suddenly the ebb and flow of daily life is disturbed by a mysterious calamity: Ridjimiraril's second wife disappears without trace. Momentarily we see her standing alone by a stream. A few seconds later Munundjarra and other women are calling her name and searching for her. The medicine-man appears from nowhere to announce that Nowalingu has gone.<sup>9</sup> Men speculate on what might have happened. One suggests the "cross-river mob" took her. Another thinks she may have been seized by a crocodile. Birrinbirrin gives his considered opinion that she ran away of her own volition. Her husband disagrees: "She didn't run away, she wouldn't do that. That stranger took her." No one else thinks so. The final consensus is that she just "took off".<sup>10</sup>

Many months pass without news.<sup>11</sup> Then a kinsman returning from a trip to the stone country reports that halfway there he saw Nowalingu camped with a stranger. So Ridjimiraril was right after all! The men decide to form a war party and retrieve her. When Yeeralparil volunteers to join, Ridjimiraril says no, one of us must stay alive. As the warriors depart, Banalandju and Munandjarra weep. Later Yeeralparil makes an attempt to see Munandjarra, but the ever-vigilant Banalandju intercepts and leads her away. Yeeralparil follows, whistles from the bushes, and is eventually hunted off.

The war party returns in good spirits. It was a case of mistaken identity. Nowalingu was not at the mid-way camp. Someone else must have seized her. But who and where? Ridjimiraril remains convinced that it was the stranger. Perhaps he had killed her, and it was her ghost that the kinsman had seen. The possibility preys on his mind, he becomes irritable and morose. It is as if a bad spirit has driven off his proper soul and possessed him.

One day some boys tell their honey-loving grandfather that the stranger from the stone country is back. They have seen him near the waterhole. Birrinbirrin rushes off to tell Ridjimiraril, who reaches for his spears. Alarmed, Birrinbirrin asks him what he intends to do. Ridjimiraril replies: "Just talk to him." His answer expands into an imaginary scenario in which he confronts the stranger and asks him if he knows where his wife is. The stranger says no but offers to help find her. The two men smile at each other and embrace.

Birrinbirrin's anxiety is not allayed, and when

Ridjimiraril heads for the waterhole he follows him and catches up. A man comes into view standing with his back towards them, preparing to defecate. As soon as he squats, Ridjimiraril moves stealthily forward and hurls his spear. The camera swings back to Birrinbirrin, waiting in anxious expectation. Seconds later we hear a cry: "No-o-o-o!" Birrinbirrin runs to where Ridjimiraril is looking down at a man with a spear in his back. Turning to Birrinbirrin, he says: "It's the wrong stranger."

In haste, the two men hide the body and agree to say nothing. Not long afterwards, as they walk along a trail with their companions, a war party led by the original stranger confronts them. "You killed my brother," he says to Birrinbirrin. The murder weapon had indeed been made by Birrinbirrin but traded to Ridjimiraril in return for honey. Ridjimiraril acknowledges his guilt and submits to the *makarrata*. When two tribes wish to avert all-out war, an accused man in one may allow aggrieved members of the other to throw spears at him from close quarters, on the understanding that as soon as he is hit the grievance is expiated and no more spears should be thrown. A kinsman may stand with him during the ordeal for moral support. Yeeralparil offers to do this, and Ridjimiraril accepts.<sup>12</sup>

For a time the two men successfully dodge the missiles from the stone-country warriors, but at length Ridjimiraril is hit under the ribs. The *makarrata* formally ends with an exchange of ritual objects between Yeeralparil and the murdered man's brother. Ridjimiraril, who continues to believe that this was the man who stole his wife, manages to limp home. But the signs are ominous. Feverish, he calls out for Nowalingu to bring him water. The medicine-man examines him and tells him he is about to die. With an heroic effort he struggles to his feet, performs his death dance and falls to the ground. His soul leaves his body as his countrymen sing the songs of the brown python, his totem.

At the moment when Ridjimiraril's soul re-enters the waterhole where he was conceived, Nowalingu returns. She was kidnapped by the cross-river mob, who traded her to a desert tribe<sup>13</sup> from which she eventually escaped and found her way home just in time to weep for her deceased husband. The men consider going to war against her abductors but deep down are relieved when Birrinbirrin says no, this is where we stop.

With his older brother dead, Yeeralparil can at last take Munandjarra as his wife. But there is a catch. As he approaches Ridjimiraril's old camp, Nowalingu takes him roughly by the arm and says: "This way to my shelter." Then Banalandju grabs his other arm and declares: "I'm your first wife, you're with me." As the two women pull him in opposite directions, he gives a loud cry of exasperation.<sup>14</sup>

## CONNECTING THE TIME-FRAMES

A DEVICE IS NOW needed to tie the two time-frames together. This is neatly achieved by representing two of the canoeists in Thomson Time as brothers, the older with three wives and the younger with a yearning for the youngest of them. The older brother is Minyngululu, the younger brother Dayindi. In the early scenes of Thomson Time, some of the canoeists make joking allusions to the budding romance. Soon afterwards Minyngululu broaches the subject with Dayindi, not threateningly but in order to tell him a story from long ago illustrating the dangers of “wrong feelings”.<sup>15</sup> From this point the film alternates between black-and-white and colour, the former as canoe-making and goose-hunting proceed in Thomson Time, the latter as Minyngululu intermittently finds an opportunity to continue his story set in Mythical Time.

In addition to these two time-frames, there is a third which may or may not have been envisaged by de Heer when he had his brainwave. It is a voice-over narration by David Gulpilil which introduces the audience to the characters of the two ancestral periods, as well as providing guidance to their traditional beliefs and practices. In an interview broadcast on Northern Territory ABC early in 2004 before filming began, de Heer speaks of the *Ten Canoes* project as a collaboration between himself and Gulpilil: “I couldn’t do it without David and David couldn’t do it without me, and it will be a collaboration where we are both relying on each other a great deal.”<sup>16</sup>

It was intended that Gulpilil would play the part of the older brother in both Thomson Time and Mythical Time, just as his son Jamie would play the younger brother in both. Circumstances prevented him from being on location during the filming, and the older brother roles were ultimately given to two different actors: Peter Minyngululu as the fictional Minyngululu in Thomson Time and Crusoe Kurddal as Ridjimiraril in Mythical Time.<sup>17</sup> Gulpilil recorded the narration in Adelaide after the film had been made.<sup>18</sup>

## PROVENANCE OF THE CONTENTS

HAVING COMPREHENDED the time structure of the film, we can now consider the source of the contents. The material for the Thomson Time reconstruction comes from Thomson’s archives, and *Ten Canoes* will undoubtedly stand as a lasting memorial to his gifts as a photographer and anthropologist.<sup>19</sup> But where did the Mythical Time story come from? In the wealth of ancillary material accompanying and following the release of the film, this question is never satisfactorily answered. According to

the *Ten Canoes* website, the story and script were created expressly for the film, which rules out the possibility that the latter was knowingly based on an existing myth, folktale or legend in the traditional corpus.

De Heer is credited at the end of the film with having written the screenplay in consultation with the people of Ramingining, and the Australian Film Institute awarded him the prize for the best original screenplay in 2006. However, in an interview published in the same year, he disclaimed authorship of the story: “People talk about, What is a white director doing making an indigenous story? But I’m not,” insists de Heer. “They’re telling the story, largely, and I’m the mechanism by which they can.”<sup>20</sup> In that case the originality of the screenplay must be regarded as different from the originality of the story.

In attempting to understand these puzzling discriminations, it may help to distinguish between plan and realisation. Let us say that, by the time de Heer is ready to make the film, he has on paper a rough outline of the narrative structure: older brother with three wives, younger brother with desire for third wife, fighting between first and second wives, mysterious stranger, disappearance of second wife, husband’s misguided suspicions, murder of innocent interloper, retaliation, death of husband, return of missing wife, tug of war between senior widows for young successor. This plan he presents in summary form to the community (however defined and mustered) for suggestions and approval. Then step by step as the film proceeds he relies on the cast and other helpers to provide the necessary knowledge, know-how and wit for detailed realisation, adaptation and embellishment (techniques of sorcery, death ritual, honey addiction, penis jokes, and so on).

Notwithstanding that the Mythical Time narrative was devised to appeal to the tastes of a modern white audience, there is no doubt that it is constrained by a sound knowledge of and respect for Aboriginal customs (though I have indicated in various endnotes where I think liberties have been taken). Furthermore, it has a coherence that would be difficult for a community or even a small cast of actors to achieve over a pot of tea. Assuming de Heer is serious in denying that he is the author, whose story is it?

David Gulpilil begins his four-minute, pre-title introduction to *Ten Canoes* by saying to us: “I am going to tell you a story. It’s not your story ... it’s my story.” Half a minute earlier we may have noted in the roll-on list of characters and actors that Ridjimiraril is his third name. As we fly over his homelands, he describes his own conception, birth and eventual death in the metaphysical terms of Yolngu belief systems. Having thus placed his personal imprimatur on the film, he introduces us to Minyngululu, who recounts the Mythical Time story he himself would have told had he been able to play the

## WHO WROTE *TEN CANOES*?

part as originally planned: "It is Minyngululu's story for Dayindi back then," he says, "and it's my story for you now." He adds: "And it is a good story," as indeed it is.

Now I will tell you my story. Fifty years ago, as a young anthropologist, I lived with western neighbours of Gulpilil's people. I learnt the Burarra language and became increasingly dependent for instruction on a man a few years older than myself called Frank Gurrmanamana. One day I arranged some matchsticks on a table to represent imaginary people and said to him: "The parents and maternal uncles of this girl want to promise her in marriage to this man. What do they say to him, and what does he say to them?" By the time I stopped writing (no tape recorders then), I had a set-piece for marriage bestowal.

Pleased with the results, I replaced the matches with human figures drawn on blocks of wood and proposed other topics for exposition along similar lines. Later, with the opening words "I'll tell you a story", Gurrmanamana began to set up the blocks himself. At the end of six weeks' inspired activity he had presented the Burarra life cycle from birth to death in twenty fictional episodes, with casts ranging from three to twelve. Of particular relevance to the present inquiry are five dramas grouped under the heading "Love's Variations and Vicissitudes": "Sharing a Wife", "Jealousy", "A Wife-Beater", "An Elopement", and "A Lover's Accomplice".<sup>21</sup> Maybe some day, inspired by the example of *Ten Canoes*, Burarra-speakers will use the texts as the basis for a film about the way of life of their own ancestors.

While Gurrmanamana was unusually good at adapting the skills of traditional storytelling to the needs of a visiting scholar, his ability to construct a narrative was certainly not unique. David Gulpilil's immersion in the imaginative artistic pursuits of his own people, his long experience in the white film world, and his evident talent as a narrator would combine to endow him with at least the potential to create a story of the kind needed for Mythical Time. In short, given his capabilities, motivation and understandings with de Heer, he was well placed in the course of their collaboration to make a significant contribution to the screenplay of *Ten Canoes* as it finally appeared. Whether in fact he did has been neither confirmed nor denied.

### MEANING

**T**HAT IS AS FAR as I can take the question of authorship. I want to shift the focus now to the question of meaning. In his voice-over narration Gulpilil says Minyngululu will tell Dayindi the story "to help him live the proper way", and many commentators seem happy to accept that *Ten Canoes* is a cautionary tale.<sup>22</sup> How it goes about achieving its

moral purpose is not entirely clear, but presumably the message to the younger brother is that an unwanted consequence of pursuing the youngest wife might be the inheritance of the two older ones as well.

Apart from the fact that it imputes cynical rather than principled motives, such a characterisation raises two problems. Ethnographically, it is at odds with the realities of hunting-and-gathering economics, where a plurality of wives is generally regarded as a necessary condition of wealth and status. Analytically, it leaves the main part of the story unaccounted for.

The Mythical Time story is really two stories: Yeeralparil's infatuation with Munandjarra, a farce; the decline and fall of Ridjimiraril, a tragedy. The themes are tangentially rather than integrally related. At any rate there is nothing in the second theme that contributes to the alleged cautionary purpose of the first. If anything it presents a warning, not to one who would steal another's wife, but to one who would react irrationally to the loss.

Ridjimiraril when we first meet him is the paradigm of a good and successful citizen: strong and brave, courteous and just, admired by his fellows and loved by his wives. When a man he has never seen before appears and his cherished second wife disappears, he puts two and two together and gets the wrong answer. Abandoned by sound judgment, driven by grief and anger, he spears an innocent man in the back. After compounding his crime by trying to hide it, he suffers a wound in the course of a ritual punishment. Morally corrupted and spiritually damaged, he is unable to recover his physical integrity. Nothing is left but to observe the last rites and return to the beginning.

The story of Ridjimiraril resonates in some ways with core elements in Aboriginal religion and philosophy. Whatever its provenance, it resembles a fairly widespread genre of myths in which an original happy state of affairs is permanently disfigured by a mysterious and apparently motiveless act of wrongdoing. It was on the basis of an analysis of such myths that W.E.H. Stanner characterised the Murinbata concept of life as "a joyous thing with maggots at the centre", and their religion as "the celebration of a dependent life which is conceived as having taken a wrongful turn at the beginning, a turn such that the good life is now inseparably connected with suffering".<sup>23</sup>

In his narration of *Ten Canoes*, Gulpilil gives us clear warning that a wrongful turn is about to take place, just before the disappearance of Nowalingu: "Back in that long ago time, maybe someone had done the wrong thing. Or maybe the spirits were angry for no reason. Whichever, the lives of the ancients were about to change."

Whether or not the narrator of *Ten Canoes* drew unconsciously from the deep well of Aboriginal mythol-

## WHO WROTE *TEN CANOES*?

ogy is a question that in the nature of the case would be difficult to settle one way or the other. I raise the possibility partly to strengthen the case for regarding Gulpilil as the original and dominant influence in the construction of the screenplay, but partly also to show that there is more to the Mythical Time story than the didactic purpose he himself assigns to it. How he would have played Ridjimiril had he not felt constrained to withdraw we will never know. We must rest content with the superb performance of the man who replaced him.

### Notes

1. See *Ten Canoes*, Disc 2, Madman Films, 2006; *Ten Canoes* website ([www.tencanoes.com.au](http://www.tencanoes.com.au)); *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes*, Fandango Australia.

2. "Interview with Rolf de Heer", *Ten Canoes*, Disc 2; see also *Ten Canoes* website.

3. Michael Guillen (*Twitch*, 9/9/06) says this idea came to de Heer while walking through a park in Toronto in September 2003; see also "Interview with Rolf de Heer".

4. According to W.L. Warner (*A Black Civilization*, 1937), the average polygyny rate among middle-aged men in eastern Arnhem Land in the 1920s was about three and a half. He attributed this unusually high level to inter-clan feuding which had resulted in the deaths of several hundred young men during the previous twenty years.

5. Senior wives probably hoped to earn favours by exercising vigilance on their husbands' behalf over junior members of the harem.

6. While materials for black magic may have been transferred in private between established trading partners, it is implausible to suppose that a stranger would hawk them publicly. Nevertheless, the scene is consistent with a widespread belief among coastal tribes in Arnhem Land that the inland escarpment ("stone country") was a hotbed of sorcery.

7. Both Banalandju and Nowalingu are shown embracing their husband publicly. Traditionally this would be regarded as indecent, not least importantly because of the offence it would give to the woman's brothers (see L.R. Hiatt, *Arguments about Aborigines*, 1996, pp. 152–64).

8. Fighting between co-wives was fairly common, especially if they were not closely related to each other. For that reason, men preferred to marry sisters. In the present case relationships between the co-wives are not indicated.

9. Immediately afterwards a flock of geese takes off, which is interesting inasmuch as elopement in one of the languages of the area (Burarra) is indicated by the imagery of a pair of ducks flying away.

10. The three hypotheses are offered without conviction, probably because (a) women were highly skilled at avoiding crocodile attacks; (b) they did not normally just "take off", nor did they expose themselves to rape by strangers by travelling alone; (c) abduction occurs not

when a couple of men jump out from the bushes and drag a woman along by the arms but in the context of a general tribal war when a camp has been ambushed and all the men killed (Warner, *A Black Civilization*). No one mentions what in the circumstances would be the most likely explanation for such a disappearance, namely, that the woman had an assignation with a lover by the stream and eloped with him. Such reticence in the husband's presence would be consistent with good manners. Given that Ridjimiril prefers to believe that Nowalingu has been dragged off by a stranger against her will, it would be insensitive to canvass the possibility that she has betrayed him for another man. Such a subtle and authentic scenario could, in my opinion, only emanate from an intimate knowledge of indigenous etiquette.

11. Given the liveliness and range of gossip networks in Arnhem Land, this would have to be regarded at the very least as surprising.

12. For a detailed description of the *makarrata*, see Warner, pp. 174–76; see also L.R. Hiatt, "Treaty, Compact, Makarrata ...?", *Oceania*, 1987, vol. 58, pp. 140–44 (this article includes a photograph taken by Donald Thomson of two groups of men assembled for a *makarrata*).

13. The notion of an Arnhem Land woman as an item in a long-distance trade chain is a fantasy. Boomerangs came up from the desert but they did not return in the form of wives.

14. The tug-of-war between Banalandju and Nowalingu is good theatre but not a serious real-life possibility.

15. It is an oversimplification to say that sexual relations between a man and his older brother's wife constitute a breach of tribal law (*Ten Canoes* website). An ethic of generosity prevailed in Arnhem Land which exerted some pressure on older brothers to waive rights to second or third wives in favour of bachelor younger brothers; or, probably more commonly, to turn a blind eye to discreet sexual liaisons between them. For a dramatisation of an older brother afflicted by this dilemma, see "Jealousy" in *People of the Rivermouth: The Joborr Texts of Frank Gurrmanamana* (2002) pp. 98–101.

16. Fiona Churchman, "David Gulpilil's Tale of Ten Canoes", ABC (Northern Territory), April 2004.

17. *The Balanda and the Ten Canoes*, Fandango Australia.

18. *Ten Canoes* website.

19. The best account of Donald Thomson's work in Arnhem Land is *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land* by Nicolas Peterson (1983). Far from being a celebrity in his own lifetime, Thomson felt that the professional establishment in Australia had depreciated his true worth. During the Second World War he captained a patrol boat manned by an Aboriginal crew, and there is a fateful irony in the fact that when one day he headed up the Roper River without permission a shore battery turned him back with a shot

## WHO WROTE *TEN CANOES*?

across his bow. The commander was W.E.H. Stanner, who went on to become a household name in Aboriginal anthropology, whereas Thomson was long buried before another Aboriginal crew elevated him to stardom.

20. Michael Fitzgerald, "Keeping in Time with Rolf", *Time*, 13/3/2006.

21. See *People of the Rivermouth*.

22. For instance, the *Ten Canoes* website says in a section headed "A Story to Please Two Cultures" that the Mythical Time drama "could then be told as a cautionary

tale during a goose egg hunting expedition".

23. W.E.H. Stanner, *On Aboriginal Religion*, 1963.

**L.R. Hiatt writes:** *I owe a debt of gratitude to Roger Sandall for impressing on me the importance of **Ten Canoes** and encouraging me to write about it on the basis of my own experience. For their advice and support I also thank Christina Ashby, Judith Barbour, Louise Hamby, Alfred Hiatt, Adam Kuper, Jacque Lambert and Nicolas Peterson.*

---

## ROSEBERY, TASMANIA

My brother and I set a fire  
Beneath our parents' bedroom floor,  
But being damp the wood just smoked  
And gave him time for second thoughts

And telling tales. Locked up alone,  
To wait for Sergeant Hammersmith  
To take me to The Ashley Boys'  
Correction House, and in my first

Long trousered suit, not worn before,  
As though status had been conferred,  
I felt release from misery at  
The promise of another home.

He never came, and I was sent  
Back out in normal short pants to  
Split morning sticks, gaoled by a grey,  
Relentlessly wet West Coast day.

## THE TEXTURE OF OUR FLESH AND SOULS

The texture of our flesh and souls,  
Our nitty-gritty, warp and woof  
Imposed upon and foreign to  
The natural fabric of the world,

We don't fit in, and are but non-  
Related growths that have arrived  
By biological mishap.  
To gain relief I lean hard up

Against the trees and disappear,  
Feel much more integrated now  
I've learnt to use the language of  
The leaves instead of humankind's,

Their irritated rustling, or  
Exasperated hiss and sigh  
I join in with when just the mere  
Sighting of passersby is hell.

**Graeme Hetherington**