Aspects of a Life

Working with Indigenous Australians

Film Collectors Edition and Book by Michael Edols

Aspects of a Life: working with Indigenous Australians

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Cover image:
David Gulpilil, actor and dancer, at an Aboriginal Memorial ceremony, 1988

Introduction

The Package Content

The four films:

LALAI DREAMTIME 1972

FLOATING … like wind blow'em about. 1975 (aka... FLOATING THIS TIME) 1980

WHEN THE SNAKE BITES THE SUN 1985

HERE'S MY HAND - A Testimony to an Aboriginal Memorial 1988

This resource of four films and an essay is primarily intended as a collector's edition for worldwide distribution. These new edition films and accompanying text are set out as an historical educational package and a legacy of Indigenous Australian cultural heritage.

As Australian on-line film critic Andrew Urban[1] wrote in 2000 of one of the four films,

> LALAI DREAMTIME is: … *fascinating for anyone interested in cinema, Aboriginal culture and basically, humanity.*

Urban's declaration reflects my life's philosophy where I have been enlisted by Indigenous Australians on assignments.

This writing aims to address the general public as well as researchers and students in schools and universities, in particular those who pursue the Liberal Arts, screen studies, the humanities and anthropology. It also addresses those dedicated people who have worked with Aboriginal people over the years and want to be stimulated to reflect on their experiences. In addition it would be of interest to Aboriginal people, young and old, who want to know more about the background to the films.

A summary of each of the four films follows, with information about how they were made, the themes and content and the people involved. Then a final section explains my motivation in writing this essay, discussing a return visit I made in 2006 to the remote community of Mowanjum in the Kimberley, North Western Australia. It also explores how I was originally in the 1970s invited by the Aboriginal elders of the Kimberley to collaborate with them, and the hopes we shared for the survival of traditional Aboriginal lore and culture.

Marketers frequently announce their latest Hollywood film is an 'instant' classic. There is nothing instant about these films, they require focused attention. Nevertheless these works have stood the test of time. They are worthy of consideration as they have left many a viewer deeply moved to witness another world view and the oldest living culture.

[1] *Urban Cinefile* http://www.urbancinefile.com.au

Lalai Dreamtime

1972 Eastman colour 16mm, 60 minutes

Produced by The Australia Council, The Aboriginal Arts Board, the Film, Radio and Television Board

and Michael Edols Films Pty Ltd

The power of fiction is twofold; first it requires imagination,

Imagination is more important than knowledge.

Knowledge is limited; imagination circles the world.

-- Albert Einstein

Secondly, the choice of fiction rather than relying on factual knowledge alone, allows the authors of the work to enter powerful realms which can transcend world views and speak of truths of esoteric insight. Film is a perfect medium to move freely in this time space and in LALAI DREAMTIME truth is readily accessible for the audience in this creation of a fiction. The construct is grounded in a faithful depiction of two key events: a traditional Aboriginal ritual, and a pilgrimage of some tribal Aboriginal people showing how they connect deeply with their ancestral lands. These events were generated for the film.

To reach inner truth, this film was made like a scripted drama (long format film[2]) and the actors were not to be found in the casting books. Rather the roles were created with the consent of the Worrora people and by instruction from the elders of the tribal communities dwelling in the Christian-based Mowanjum Presbyterian Mission near the tidal delta township of Derby on the edge of the Kimberley. This film required members of the Derby Indigenous tribes to return to their 'spirit country'[3] hundreds of miles north, where according to lore the ancestral beings are seen within the cave galleries that overlook the rugged escarpments and tidal waters.

In collaboration, as storytellers we set out to recreate the rawness of tribal life and its harmony with nature with the purpose of unveiling something of Indigenous cultural heritage. This was orchestrated first by filming a purification and blessing ritual about an Aboriginal family passing on their fundamental law of correct human behaviour to an infant. Known as Wudu, this tactile 'smoking the child'[4] had always struck me as every bit as much of a revelation as Moses and the Ten Commandments. During this ritual of Wudu between an elder and grandchild in the film, commandments are spoken:

Wudu, Wudu
At the fire I touch you.
I hand you the strength of Wudu.

Don't let yourself be turned (from our laws)
Don't let your forehead swell with envy and pride.
Don't say the words of the men which are forbidden.
Don't go begging, grand-daughter.

[2] North American industry expression for a full length cinema drama.

[3] Spirit country is the place of customary law such as initiation rites and ancestral lore of country that gives meaning to the landscape, the waterways, and all living things.

[4] This purification ritual is where while chanting the law, the hands of grandparents warmed over a smoking fire are placed upon the child's mouth, nose, eyes, forehead, down to the torso and joints. Each part of the body has its own chant corresponding to meaning and law.

Secondly we created a pilgrimage where my collaborator, the storyteller and song man Sam Woolagoodja takes one of his sons to the cave gallery of the 'first ones'[5] who give wisdom through the lore.

> Namaaraalee is the highest one, he made it all.
> We must keep those ways he pointed out.

Having chosen the construct of fiction I set out to make a poetic evocation as homage to these First Nation Indigenous Australians whose heritage and code of human behaviour is as legitimate and unique as any cultural heritage. LALAI DREAMTIME shows Aboriginal culture intact and stands in deliberate contrast to the isolated mission and township life that is depicted in the companion film FLOATING … like wind blow'em about.

The first private screening of LALAI was in a tin shanty home at Mowanjum with my clients the tribal elders of the circle of Wunan lore and law.[6] Armed with a double header projector,[7] the film work-print laced on one side, the matching magnetic sound on the other side, alterations were made for the elders with a splicing tape, as a tailor does when fitting a new suit for a client. In this case a number of men gathered together in a blacked-out tin shed home in the midday sun, north of Capricorn, and signed-off their approval.

On my return to Sydney those elders at the Mowanjum Presbyterian Mission asked Professor Michael Silverstein to write to me, as he had been principally responsible for translating the Worrora language. What the elders had to say was that the film in their 'spirit country' was a 'bridge' that allowed their children to witness the cave galleries and the place of their ancestors, the Wandjinas. For their children, the elders explained here now was 'a bridge between cultures', which allowed them direct access to their heritage, a defined placed within their country, whereas up until then, they had greatly been exposed to and lived within the white Australian world view.

This film remains iconic for the community and over the years has become the only 'bridge' of its kind, through storytelling, to their ancestral world of knowledge and ancient Aboriginal wisdom.

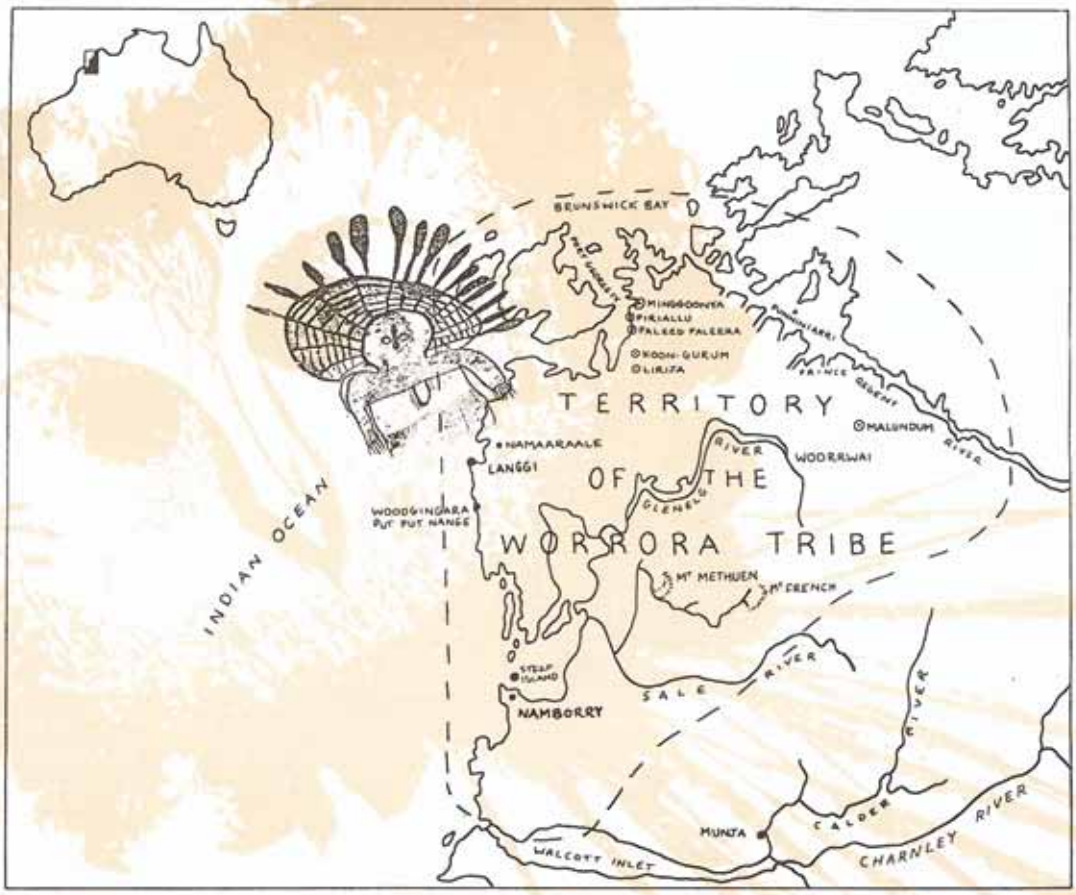
These places and the practice of ancient lore were and continue to be the very soul of Aboriginal living heritage, their ancestral Dreamtime of the past, present and future. It is an 'everywhen' of cultural heritage. Bill Stanner, anthropologist, humanist and without doubt one of the greatest, sharpest minds in his field in Australian history, coined the term 'everywhen' as one word in an attempt to distil in the mind of the Anglo Celtic world view that the Dreamtime is not a dream or the past. The Dreamtime is the past, present, future, of the ancestors, of all living creatures, the world and cosmos; it is the everywhen.

---

[5] The ancestral Wandjina spirit-being Namaaraalee and the other ancestors.

[6] Wunan is twofold: first as lore expressed in corroborees through the sacred knowledge of the song-men, the performers carrying totemic lore expressing the tribal relationship to landscape, cosmos and ancestor as being one entity. Secondly as sharing law: an ancient agreement fixing the family 'dambun' and/or 'dambima' estate, exchanging and establishing moieties – a skin system and division of their society into two cross-marriage groups. In the case of the Mowanjum community the three separate tribal language groups (Worrora, Wunambul and Ngarinyin) make up the estate (called 'dambun' in Ngarinyin and 'dambima' in the Worrora language) - creating connections and responsibility for defined portions of land in their ancestral country hundreds of kilometres to the north of Derby.

[7] In the analogue world of sprocket film and magnetic sound, a double head screening meant running both the editor/director's cut (which is taped film) and the sound as a synchronised frame-to-frame whole. For every sprocket hole, the sound is synchronised to the image.



Credits - Lalai Dreamtime

Storyteller -	Sam Woolagoodja
Son -	Stanly
The Elders -	May Lanjji Gerty Yabu Flora Woolagoodja
Young Wife & Child-	Shirly and Kerry Tataya
The Hunter -	Barry Tataya
and	Alison Burgu Alfie Umbergai Ruth Umbergai Rhonda Woolagoodja
Location & Sound Recorder -	Max Hensser
Assistant Director -	Les McLaren
Poetic Translation -	Andrew Huntley from the original story by Sam Woolagoodja
Translated from Worora by -	Jean Bangmoro Albert & Pudja Burunga David Mowaljarlai
The producer wishes to thank -	Professor Michael Silverstein Jennifer Isaacs Bill Sykes - Graphic artist
Produced with the assistance of -	The Australia Council The Aboriginal Arts Board The Film, Radio & Television Board
Editors -	Les McLaren Esben Storm
Produced by -	Michael Edols

Floating … like wind blow'em about

1975 Eastman colour 16mm, 72 minutes

(aka... FLOATING THIS TIME)

1980 analogue 2 inch quod broadcast tape for SBS Television release.

Produced by the Australia Council, the Aboriginal Arts Board, the Film, Radio and Television Arts Board

and Michael Edols Films Pty Ltd

The tribal circles of elders of the Wunan lore and law[8] were specific with their brief and I found myself enlisted as their 'whitefella film man'. Unlike the companion film LALAI DREAMTIME the task requested was to use film as a means to hold up a mirror to the younger generation, who at that time had left behind their Aboriginal traditions and culture. The intention was to make a direct appeal to their sons and daughters. The elders said that by not listening to ancestral Wandjina wisdom and the lore passed down by them, the younger generation would wander, FLOATING … like wind blow'em about.

In fact this brief and its expectation was an eloquent solution to a problem. These elders had successfully managed to balance both world views, the Western world view and their own traditional Aboriginal one. They realised they had no alternative but to use the medium of film. The tyranny of distance had isolated their tribal communities from their spirit country. This was especially so for the young who had no first-hand experience of living in their 'spirit country', that opportunity was not theirs. The elders urgently wanted to draw attention to the tantalising possibility of keeping their heritage alive. Those elders were quite well aware that once they had all died, the knowledge of a unique world view and the significance of living heritage, as they knew it, would fade with the same certainty as the last rays of the sun at the close of day.

As a number of tribal men and I stood on the Derby tidal delta lands one day in 1972 watching the sun sink, I said "there she goes", and a dry timbered voice next to me responded, "it will be back again tomorrow". It was as though I had been asked to stand next to these elders to witness on camera a living heritage, as they knew it, with the sinking sun. The concern was that with the inevitable dying out of each elder in the hours of darkness, a different beginning would open up before the next generation with the rise of the sun in a new day; but would they be prepared? This cycle since the dawn of man and this moment and into the future was eloquently expressed to me by the leading elder in the lore of WHEN THE SNAKE BITES THE SUN which became the third film in the Kimberley triptych.

It took courage and great trust on our part to reflect on the screen that their own children who were no longer listening to Aboriginal wisdom and following its lore were becoming a lost generation. This tragedy of rejecting the aunts' and uncles' knowledge and the stepping stones to ancestral heritage, and having to deal with the starkness of redneck pub life; white itinerant racist and sexist Kimberley men; and misguided mission life reflected a growing cultural schizophrenia. In

[8] Reiterating the information in Footnote 6: Wunan is twofold: first as lore expressed in corroborees through the sacred knowledge of the song-men, the performers carrying totemic lore expressing the tribal relationship to landscape, cosmos and ancestor as being one entity. Secondly as sharing law: an ancient agreement fixing the family 'dambun' and/or 'dambima' estate, exchanging and establishing moieties – a skin system and division of their society into two cross-marriage groups. In the case of the Mowanjum community the three separate tribal language groups (Worrora, Wunambul and Ngarinyin) make up the estate (called 'dambun' in Ngarinyin and 'dambima' in the Worrora language) - creating connections and responsibility for defined portions of land in their ancestral country hundreds of kilometres to the north of Derby.

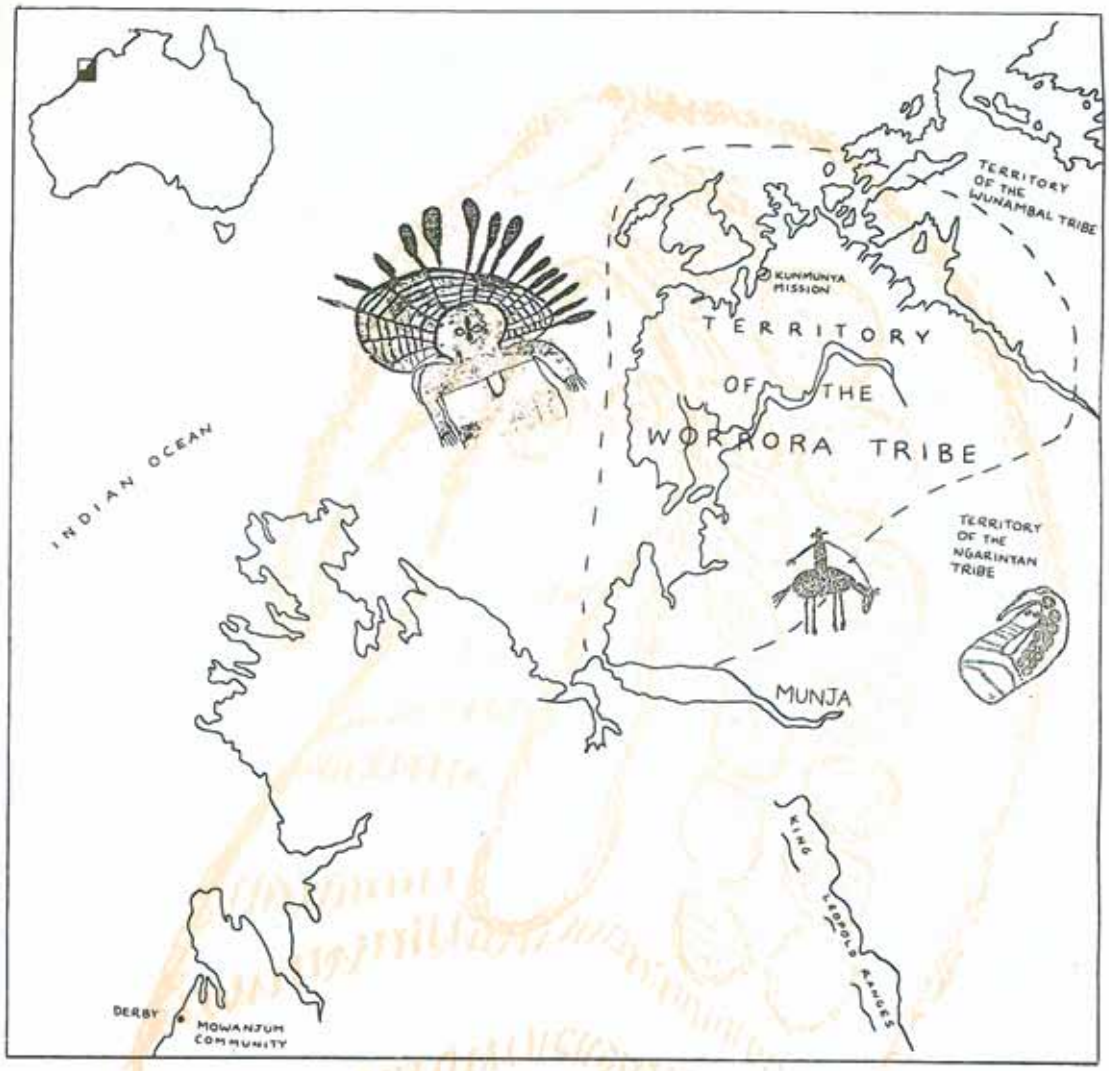
fact that rift began to grow between the young generation and those who had once lived on their spirit country.

The film was too confronting for Australians and so had limited distribution in Australia during the 1970s. In an endeavor to find a broader audience, to make public the travesty for our First Nation Australians, I went to the 1978 Berlin Film Festival. Not only was I welcomed, but the films were highly commended. There was something unique about this festival, for prophetic critics did not always come from the professional journals. Several exceptional German filmmakers made themselves known to me, first because they considered this was their festival and secondly because these films of an ancient peoples and the Kimberley stood out. Noted director Werner Herzog invited me to Munich where he wanted the films to be screened. Leading up to this special screening Herzog with his wife wrote the following review in *Su Deutsche Zeitung*, Munich, 1st April, 1978: -

> *For me, the most interesting film is "Floating" by Michael Edols. It deals precisely with the collision of the white's lack of history with the black's prehistory. The director has simply presented images, without comment, but with intensity and insight – images of destruction. Every one of them, however fleeting, reveals a tragedy. The frail and questionable nature of white technological civilisation, the planes, the sirens, the bars, the hymns on the mission, everything.*
>
> *Faced with all this, the pre-historic has no chance of survival and it hurts to be an onlooker. Not that it makes you yearn for a state of natural, innocent primitiveness. For though the Australian Aboriginals are indeed pre-historic and by our standards primitive, when you realise that their culture is a highly complicated one, with an extraordinary mythology and a world view in which people, objects, time, the dream-time and especially dreams are still one. Seen from this point of view, it is our civilisation which is shattered. And we harbour the secret hatred of the alienation. We destroy cultures, animal species die out; but here a rare human possibility is being swept from the face of the earth, a whole rich culture. With it goes our own pre-history, which we ourselves lived for 50,000 years and which somewhere deep within us we still presumably carry. We are the poorer.*

It is significant to recall the roll-up title of this film *Floating, like wind blow 'em about,* in the light of what Hermann Hesse wrote in his 1927 novel *Steppenwolf* about his own profound crisis of his spiritual world. Hesse's quote is prophetic as a timeless echo of a loss to a spiritual being.

> *Every age, every culture, custom, tradition, has its own strengths, its beauties and its ugliness, accepts certain sufferings as a matter of course, puts up patiently with certain evils.*
>
> *Human life is reduced to real suffering, to hell only when two ages, two cultures and religions overlap.*
>
> *Now there are times when a whole generation is caught in this way between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standard, no security, no simple acquiescence.*



Credits - Floating This Time

Only by the help and agreement of the "Mowanjuna Community Incorporated" and with the guidance of the elders was this film made possible.

The traditional songs were composed and sung by - Watty Ngurdu
Sam Woolagoodja

Contemporary songs sung by - Joy Morlumbun and the children of Mowanjum

Location Sound Recordist - Max Hensser

Assistant Director - Les McLaren

Editor - Esben Storm

Producer - Michael Edols

Produced with the assistance of - The Australian Council
The Aboriginal Arts Board
The Film, Radio and Television Board

When the Snake Bites the Sun

1985 Eastman colour 16mm, 57 minutes

Produced by Michael Edols for Film Australia.

This film starts out from the experience of my Aboriginal collaborator of many years, Sam Woolagoodja, dying in my arms. The sequence of events around this film is worthy of historical note, so I chose to make this a first-person narrative film, and in so doing to be responsible for leading the audience into this unpredictable journey.

This again was a return to a remote community and people I had known well who were caught between neglect, isolation and lack of any hope for a foreseeable future; and where someone (me in this case,) by remembrance of old tribal lore must face the blame for the death. In this case I wanted the audience to see who was taking them back into the community and the very people who would be part of this event. So I chose to be upfront, on camera, and again with my crew bear witness, to see what might unfold in this parable of old tribal lore and traditional Aboriginal ceremonies transcending contemporary confusion, hurt and regret.

This highly provocative cinema verité work shows the rebuilding of relationships through a shared pilgrimage to ancestral lands and a traditional Aboriginal ceremony, despite occasional failures of cross-cultural communication. It reflects a community in transition through the journey of a family, especially the sole remaining custodian of that spirit country Amy Peters, and also Shirley the daughter of Sam Woolagoodja. Shirley sixteen years previously had taken her baby daughter to be purified ceremonially in a traditional ritual in the film LALAI DREAMTIME. This event on film created a unique bond between daughter, grand-daughter, grandfather and aunts right in the middle of their spirit country. So in my heart of hearts I set out to regain that trust I had with Shirley Woolagoodja, and indicate my respect for her father, and remind her of his wisdom, a man of high degree of the sea.

The film WHEN THE SNAKE BITES THE SUN shows our return with her tribal family to 'spirit country,' the ancient tribal grounds in the Northern outreaches of this continent, and commemorates a ceremony that puts to rest the spirit of Sam Woolagoodja, one enormously important song-man of the Kimberley. The custodian, daughter and family connect deeply with his tribal lore and wisdom.

This film's title WHEN THE SNAKE BITES THE SUN may well have a byline 'crying for country'. This work and the return to the soul of the country, ('spirit country' as it is known to those elders of bygone years,) is about remembering both the ancestors of the ancient past and those of recent years. Crying for country is surprisingly not only tears of suffering; they are also tears of relief for being able to call out to the ancestors that family has returned with the custodian of that spirit country.

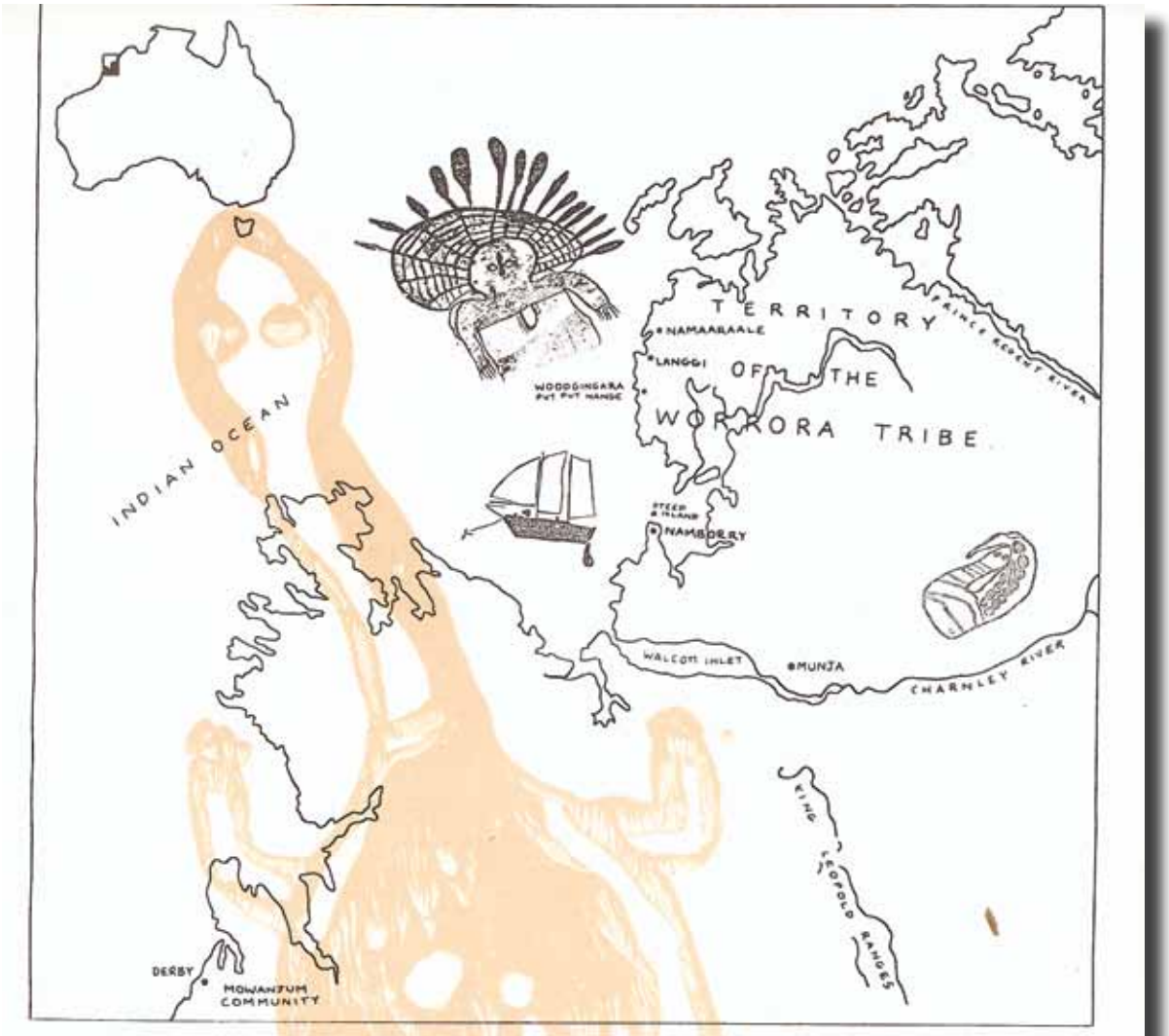
As an audience we witness taking a custodian who is initially blocking her unhappiness with too much alcohol, from the Kimberley township of Derby back to her 'spirit country,' where for the first time since her youth she calls out to her ancestors. The transformation is visibly powerful because in a matter of days she has been renewed, for she was empowered through crying for country and with great relief they have as a family connected to their ancestors and the soul of their spirit country.

Crying for country in the manner witnessed in SNAKE/SUN is profound. Historically with the removal of Indigenous Australians from their tribal ancestral lands and waterways, that 'spirit country' eluded them in white Australian settlements. Yet deep within those individuals 'spirit country' is never truly forgotten, it is a part of their phylogenetic memory.

My impetus to make this third film came from my stewardship of knowledge of tribal lore and what had been asked of me by the tribal circle of elders who had enlisted me sixteen years previously. One of those Aboriginal elders David Mowaljarlai said, in my time with them, that with the passing of each elder who knew old lore, the images of the ancestors in the Kimberly cave galleries became like unreadable chapters in a book. Without these elders, no-one can read

these chapters, and the knowledge is only here on the walls, nowhere else, so it can be lost. Without David Mowaljarlai (who was my skin-son in customary law) leading the pilgrimage in the film, I would not have had an elder to advise me about my role in the ceremony for the release of Sam Woolagoodja's spirit to his ancestral spirit country.

Memories for any of us are like a little drawer we keep locked away in the recesses of our mind and I would argue in our very soul; we need prompting to find that little drawer to remember. In my experience of those elders, they needed to return to country and follow their ritual in song to remember, as any one of us might return to our bookshelves, or our library. For me, if the film commemorates the importance of returning to spirit country, it also points to the fact that while the sunset of the past cannot be relived, new Aboriginal generations are in a new sunrise and within them is their phylogenetic memory of ancestral lore, country and heritage, which can be reawakened. Connecting with the ancestors, they can become the new custodians of ancestral wisdom. This is proof of the oldest living culture which shall continue to evolve, and in time survive and be celebrated with full reconciliation, as was predicted by those elders of yesteryear when they spoke of a new sunrise.



Credits - When The Snake Bites The Sun

We gratefully thank the Aboriginal participants of the Mowarjum community and in particular;
David Mowaljarlai
Amy Peters
Pudja Burunga
Shirley Woolagoodja
Ruth Umbagai
Kerry Tataya

Cinematographer - Michael Edols ACS
Fabio Cavadini
David Jackson
Kerry Brown
Wayne Taylor

Location Sound Recordists - Mark Brewer
Wayne Barker
Max Hensser

Assistant Art Directors & Script Writers - John Lind
Les McLaren

Aboriginal Liaison - Rose Wise
Warwick Niess

Editor - Tim Litchfield

Assistant Editor - Rhyl Shirley Yates

Sound Editor - Rosemary Lee

Narration Co-writers - Kate Grenville
Liz Watters

Aboriginal Composers - Wattie Ngudu
Sam Woolagoodja
Jimmy Chi Jnr
Mike Minolous
Steven Pigrum
George Hart

Sound Mix - With grateful acknowledgement to Aboriginal Arts Board
Dr David Isaacs and Jennifer Isaacs
Ian Adkins

Producer - Tom Haydon

Executive Producer - Michael Edols

Director -

Here's My Hand - A Testimony to an Aboriginal Memorial

1988 Eastman colour 16mm, 27 minutes

Produced by Michael Edols Films with SBS Television

for and on behalf of the Ramingining Community.

The 1988 Australian bicentenary prompted many artistic events and contemporary expressions of Australia's living cultures. One of the most remarkable of these was the first memorial ever created by Aborigines for Aborigines - two hundred bone burial poles were carved and painted by Arnhem land artists to honour the deceased of the past - lost people, lost tribes, lost languages. This unique Aboriginal Memorial captures this spiritual event.

John Mundine, an exceptional conceptual artist and at the time arts adviser to the Ramingining Community in Arnhemland, Northern Territory, saw the need for and engineered the circumstances to create this memorial.

> *This forest of hollow logs was put together as a memorial to all Aborigines who have died over the last 200 years defending their country ... many of these people had been massacred and had no-one to perform funeral rites for them. This exhibition is for them.*
>
> - John Mundine

This collection seeks to reassure surviving Aboriginal Australians that there is a living continuity of traditions.

On the merit of my work with Indigenous Australians and proven skills in film production I was invited by John Mundine to make what would become in part a compilation film. First there was documentary footage of some of the forty-two artists and elders from Arnhem Land who contributed in producing this memorial. Secondly of great significance was some remarkable anthropological film footage of the living rite where a ceremony of the departure of the soul reflects a unique world view.

Enlisted on this assignment, I set about with my production company to raise the shortfall in the budget. For me the immediate opportunity as film director was to celebrate this Aboriginal Memorial, which was all but at my door step, at the historical Rocks area adjacent to the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It stuck me as ironic as this Memorial was displayed in one of the old docks with darkened wooden warehouses on the pier in Walsh Bay, an easy walk under the Harbour Bridge to Sydney Cove, the very place where the tall ships arrived in the late 1780s and where the British Empire placed its Union Jack into the soil. This was the stuff of drama and with John Mundine's blessing I knew we could create a work of significance.

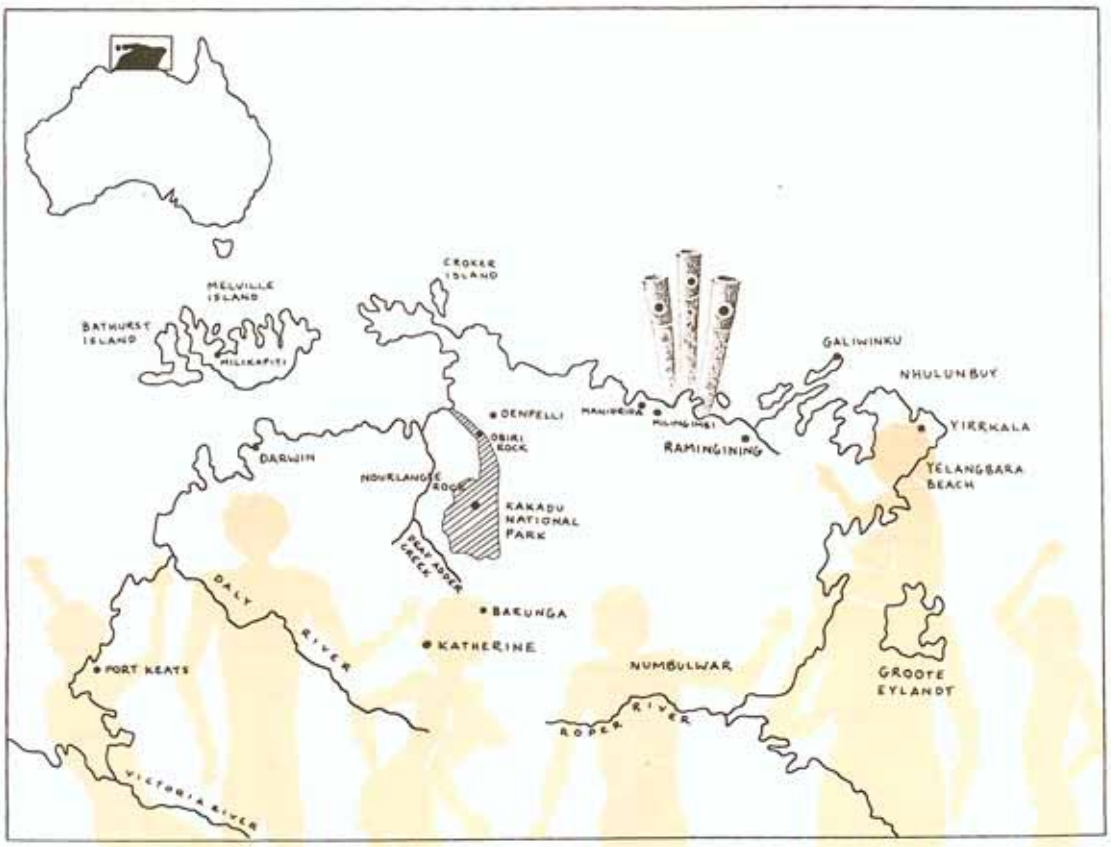
It was agreed between us that the Memorial at Walsh Bay would be narrated by the actor David Gulpilil, whose own heritage is of these bone burial poles. The concept in mind was to set up a production shoot with a fully fledged feature film-style crew. This meant I could transform the poles and darkened pier into a dawn celebration of light. Gulpilil and I had been friends for years and we always wanted to work together, so for one day we created cinema. Complete with a juxtaposition against Sydney's "birthday" celebration fireworks on January 26, 1988, this Memorial and film is a timeless historic record, a powerful testimony to the spirit of Aboriginal people.

It was during the actual film shoot in Walsh Bay, and not when I wrote the original script, that I came up with the idea of asking Charlie Perkins (Permanent Secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs) whether HERE'S MY HAND could be a hand offered by Aboriginal people in reconciliation. Perkins agreed, and with no further prompting, under shaded paperbarks he addressed the camera, and indeed all Australians with what I regard as one of the first rational insights of reconciliation.

Post script to HERE'S MY HAND - A Testimony to an Aboriginal Memorial

On 30 September 2010, the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra had its official opening of a new entrance and wing. The forest of "Dunpuns" – the hollow log bone burial poles – is seen as a permanent display in the new entrance of the NGA. This collection and eleven new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander galleries, is singularly and arguably the most important action in Australia's capital since the Prime Minister of Australia's apology of February 2008. At that time, PM Kevin Rudd offered an apology to all Aborigines and the Stolen Generations for their "profound grief, suffering and loss."

To acknowledge the primary culture of Australia up front and centre, in an apology as well as from the entrance and adjacent gallery rooms of the NGA, is worthy of celebration and shall be, for the enquiring mind, a lasting experience.



Credits - Heres My Hand

Exhibition co-ordinated by	John Mundine Ramingining Community
Extracts from "Waiting for Harry" (by Kim Mackenzie) courtesy of the Institute of Aboriginal Studies	
Ramingining footage courtesy of Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, Alice Springs.	
Camera -	Mick Barker - Kamu Films
Main Unit Cinematography -	Michael Edols ACS Phillipe Charluet Felicity Surtees
Location Sound -	Pat Fiske Sally Fitzpatrick
Editor -	Peter Hammond
Associate Producer -	Chris McGuigan
Written & Produced by -	Michael Edols
Directed by -	Michael Edols
Produced with the assistance of -	Australian Film Commission Department of Aboriginal Affairs The Australia Council
Produced by Michael Edols Films with SBS Television and the Ramingining Community.	

Leading Motivation

> *The ultimate test of our worth as a nation is how we treat the most vulnerable and disadvantaged of our people.*
>
> - Sir William Deane, Governor-General of Australia 1995-2001

In March 2006 my good friend and wife Marion van den Driesschen, and I had returned from a number of disturbing experiences amongst remote Indigenous Australians of the Kimberley with whom I first collaborated in the early 1970s. The grandparents, the 'old people' as they are now spoken of, had tasked me to develop a relationship with them and within their tribal kinship lore, known as Wunan. This counsel was and had always been the traditional instruction right through from an early childhood into initiation and there was respect for the elders, and as they said of themselves instructors of Aboriginal wisdom. There was a place for each individual, starting at infancy they were taught that they were a part of all things, the still waters, the rivers, escarpments, ocean, the cosmos, and the ancestral beings, and also at one with all living creatures past and present. Through language, song, Caribberie (aka Corroboree) and finally into initiation they were taught that stepping into adulthood they were in the present living wisdom that dated from their cultural dawn. The relationship expected of me was simply that I respect the elders and their heritage. This was innately a part of my own childhood as I had for a short time been raised amongst the Indigenous tribal people of Borneo, and there too I had learnt through the process to respect the wisdom of the elders, and with this came the knowledge of their heritage.

The circle of elders held the Wunan lore, wisdom and law common to three tribes: Worrora, Wunambul and Ngarinyin. As they ushered me into skin relationship, whereby we all knew where we stood in relation to each other, they said I was now 'their whitefella film man'. Though I escaped physical initiation and failed to be anything like fluent in Worrora, I would however, in time, enter the sacred. How I came to be enlisted on this assignment is explained in detail within these pages, nevertheless the overriding feeling within me today is that I was entrusted by those elders of Wunan wisdom to keep alive what was created on film and the archival sound and footage that I have protected all this time.

In recent years Marion, my wife and I have resided in a small saltwater community hugging National Parklands on the east coast of Australia. In this time I only know of one anecdote describing unnatural death, by hanging. By contrast we learnt in the previous six months in 2006 in Mowanjum community housing, that those three tribes had too many deaths comprising both suicide and homicide. These unnatural deaths are symptomatic evidence of the gravity of a whole array of medical and mental problems from failed organs, failing sight or hearing, and obesity, to cultural spiritual grief. Far the most disturbing cultural spiritual grief was revealed to us when we were invited to a demountable building in the township of Derby to engage with 'kids at risk' from the Mowanjum community. These 'kids at risk' are potential suicide cases as they had a member of their family who had died by their own hands; the outcome was profoundly alarming as it was near impossible to engage these broken spirits. As I sat opposite these kids I thought to explain that their grandparents were the elders I had respected for their cultural and spiritual strength. The fact is, I thought better of this insight for two reasons: -

- First this issue was beyond comprehension for these 'kids at risk,' we could see they had no hope.
- Secondly their eyes reflected the greatest tragedy for any young life. What is reflected in such eyes in my experience is where a soul wants to leave the body.

These are big concepts. Nevertheless, as I have witnessed, there is no greater indictment of humanity than the spirit of a child or youth that is disembodied. If you are attentive you can sense the very being of the youth floating and this was one such disturbing experience. One elder in the 70s on film said: "…these kids need to listen to Aboriginal wisdom otherwise they will be Floating … like wind blow 'em about; like a leaf blow 'em about".

Not since I walked my camera lens past another kind of 'kids at risk' in a Somalia refugee camp

food line in 1983 had I met such young eyes with broken spirits. As I was with the Mowanjum community 'kids at risk' my mind's eye flashed to when my camera lens at arm's length had paused on a young Somali girl. Apart from her eyes looking past the Spring of her childhood that gazed into me and beyond, I could see a gaping hole on this young face that passed from her jaw through her nose and above her left eye. Her face had been struck by a recherché bullet from a strafing Mig fighter that cut her family down as they tried to cross a bridge. By this time I had lowered the camera from my face and for a moment, that felt like an eternity, we were in each other's universes as we crouched close to the ground. This violation, this wicked wrong was now a permanent healed injury upon her very being.

My sound man, colleague and good friend, Max Hensser, who first came with me to the Kimberley, then for the second time to Africa, grasped my shoulder, leant down to me and whispered 'keep rolling'. The one and only Somali doctor for this refugee camp of an estimated forty to sixty thousand, whom we had accompanied, now arrived next to the girl. While he had his arm about her he explained he was only one of two doctors and there was no field hospital or plastic surgeon for this girl.

Those 'kids at risk' in the Derby demountable building had such eyes, their spirits torn from their youth. This was in stark contrast to the Mowanjum kids who I had met merely 27 years earlier. We may all wonder what went so terribly wrong that these 'kids at risk' are as much violated as those 'kids at risk' in a Somalia refugee camp food line. Tormented souls of this kind, children and youth, in my experience are to be found in war zones of one kind or another: Central America, Africa and now Australia.

In all humanity where there is no hope we go from being resilient to being vulnerable and then disease and mental health problems become prevalent.

My aim in writing is the same as it is in film-making, that is to try to be coherent, courageous and historically true to the topic. This process of writing has become another aspect of my life's work with the purpose of addressing how I approached my brief and aimed to give the work longevity. Collaborating with the elders in the 70s meant to explain living creation stories set in the actual remote land and seascape of their ancestral place as a cultural bridge for future generations. Much to my surprise I had been briefed by the elders that the camera lens and sound had to be a mirror for those who, even then, were no longer listening to Aboriginal wisdom, their lore and thus their heritage.

We documented a young man drunk in a creek bed who pulled down the front of his tee-shirt to reveal his initiation scars and said he had forgotten why he was brought into lore. Those elders of the 70s understood the predicament and why they needed 'their whitefella film man'. Not, as we documented on film, a visiting Bible-bashing preacher or redneck, rather a receptive cinematographer and storyteller who could hold up a mirror for them and the world at large. The elders saw this as a moment of opportunity, even an awakening bringing hope. Tragically the ears of the young were blocked, and as one elder woman said to us in Mowanjum in 2006, "we were not interested in what the elders were telling us then."

I wish to develop this essay into a complete book in its own right which will hopefully be published in the near future, not just an introduction to the films. Regarding this work I make no apology that I place myself in the central drama of relating these historical events. It seems political correctness implies that an historical event ought to speak for itself. Nevertheless in my experience the moment you feel empathy with people of another world view and you are enlisted to document on their behalf and uphold their heritage of great significance, you are by definition a part of the central drama. Furthermore between my return in 2006 and 2009 to the Mowanjum community, I came to learn that over the previous years the now leading members of the community had simply forgotten how I came to be there in the first place. My leading motivation of writing became urgent to explain how some 35-38 years earlier the elders had enlisted me on merit, and that I had an affectionate bond with their parents, grandparents and then very much living heritage.

There has also been a different point of view presented to me, in the world of academe where they now use the term 'post-colonial studies'. In part, the argument suggests that collaborations of the past between Aborigines and the rest of us were generating exploitations. It seems to my mind that there must be a collective guilt amongst my fellow white Australians where it is assumed

that in all collaborations between Indigenous Australians and those of us enlisted to help them, we were the exploiters. It was said to me of the elders that "they did not know better". Yes, you would be correct to assume this is offensive and patronising to the Wunan circle of elders of yesteryear.

In addition there are countless examples in the Kimberley of documented collaborations where, as early as 1910, there were good white men and women who lived in the heart of ancestral country with the First Nation peoples. Without a doubt those Aborigines were better equipped and assimilated into two world views than the vast majority of youth of remote communities anywhere in Australia today. It was with those Wunan lore Aborigines of two world views that I had the privilege of collaborating. They were worldly in a manner understood by too few today, Indigenous and white Australians alike.

For our collaboration was an ability to recognise two world views, and while I was enlisted to be useful as a cinematographer we (the elders and our crew of three young men) celebrated the fact that we were storytellers. This made the process of report and dramatisation within a film achievable; there was no hidden agenda, no exploitation on either side of the fence.

The end game (of preserving this source material for a living heritage), as I know it, may well not be fully realised in my lifetime. It is a legacy however, not unlike the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, the world's largest seed bank housed in Norway's permafrost; within the work are the seeds of a forgotten past. Within the sound archives of my films are the voices of the Wunan elders and a very special song man, a man of the sea of high degree.

In my heart of hearts I know the songs will again be sung by voices in a future generation with another inflection. A dear friend of mine Reinier van de Ruit wrote to me and expressed this issue well when he said: -

> *I think that 'echoes' of the songs is more likely what will remain. From what I've seen and keep hearing I am not at all confident that any of the young people at Mowanjum, born and raised hundreds of kilometres from their ancestral lands where the songs, language and lore originate, will have much idea of the world that their people have just left. Without the continued presence of active song men and women, only vestiges will reverberate through their psyches, both individual and collective, and some social patterns persist.*

All humanity when it is vulnerable and torn apart has that need to heal or it will not survive. In today's world it is the activity of art that is the connecting link to their heritage and history. In song is the language, the heritage and means to find identity, dignity and strength.

Nevertheless for all Australians there is an overriding issue that must be addressed beyond a Prime Minister's apology. We have to address the truth of our continual neglect of the health of our First Nation Indigenous Australians, which is shameful to our family of man. One day a hundred years and more in the future this family of man means a vast number of Australians will be directly related to people of Aboriginal blood, so why would we not want all Aboriginals to have pathways to education? Why as Australians would we allow consecutive governments to invade remote Indigenous Australian people's lands, to confiscate again their tribal spirit country on a wicked pretext? Without exposing such truths and wholeheartedly addressing the issues there will never be a meaningful reconciliation.

> *At Corroboree 2000, the Governor-General Sir William Deane received a standing ovation even before beginning his address, and three cheers as he left the Opera House. Between those two demonstrations of affection and respect, he sought to show how Australians could not remove themselves from their past. Deane said that all pilgrims on the road to Aboriginal reconciliation had reached a crossroads. As for the present, there were material problems - health, education, employment, housing and living conditions - and spiritual things, such as hope, belief, self-confidence and self-esteem. He said that the present plight of Aboriginal Australians was "largely the consequence of the injustices of the past." He suggested that one generation could not excuse itself for what had gone before: "It's wrong to see those past injustices as belonging, as it were, to another country. They have been absorbed into the present and the future of contemporary Indigenous Australians and of the nation of which they form such an important part. They reach from the past to shape who and what we are. They and the land that was taken are our country."*

This extract comes from *Sydney Morning Herald* writer Tony Stephens. The *SMH* editorial of 26 October 2002 commences:

> *William Deane's contribution as Governor-General to the public debate on values and social issues means that Australians expect more of the vice-regal office and the person who holds it.*

Stephens and the SMH editorial team's banner on this article proclaims that Dean is *A Hard Act to Follow.* However I would argue that Governor-General Deane has shown the way and at this crossroads each one of us can and should have the courage to go forwards, and that honesty must prevail from all Australians. What we do as individuals is more far-reaching than we might imagine, and so we have a responsibility to help rekindle the embers in the ashes for a meaningful future of what *ought* to continue to be the longest living culture in the world.

Michael Edols, May 2011

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments first and foremost are due to the elders of bygone days, who enlisted me in this work, and their descendents in the Mowanjum Community. Also the Ramingining Community and special thanks to John (aka Djon) Mundine, who also enlisted me on behalf of the Aboriginal elders of Ramingining.

This introductory essay comes long after the films were produced. All the work of restoring the films and this writing as you see it today was self-funded. To this end there are a number of fine individuals who continue to play key roles in keeping the spirit alive, this legacy and thus a small piece of Aboriginal heritage.

- Marion van den Driesschen is my wife, intellectual and moral companion. Above all she has been the bedrock of unrelenting support.
- Kathleen James has not only been my literary editor, on numerous assignments and on this work a champion to hold true to my integrity. Like great film editors, Kathleen as my literary editor has had the unique ability to allow me, a dyslexic non-writer to find my voice.
- Sally Fitzgerald is a professional journalist and generously gave her time to read and pass on critical candor. Sally also gave me a wonderful manta: *Remember,* she said, *blow your trumpet gently in order to sound true.*
- Reinier van de Ruit: here is a man who as a social worker amongst Aborigines lived in the Kimberley in the 80s, and for years has been confidant to one of Sam Woolagoodja's sons, Donny, who is a key figure in today's Mowanjum. Reinier above all else lives by what he says and does so with great diplomacy.

Interest in this body of work came surprisingly, for me, from the world of academe and the creative team of Ronin Films.

Dr Andrew Wright Hurley (Lecturer in Cultural Studies, International Studies Program, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney) has written a number of academic papers on my relationship to cinema, history and ethnology, notably *From Aboriginal Australia to German Autumn: On the German reception of thirteen 'films from Black Australia'*.

Dr Susan Lowish (Lecturer in Australian Art History & Art History Honours Co-ordinator, School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne). When Susan first contacted me she wanted to source the best quality DVD of the film, HERE'S MY HAND. By late 2010, Susan was my host at the University of Melbourne where we have been working collaboratively to present seminars.

Dr Andrew Pike, (Managing Director of Ronin Films) is a significant presence in Australian cinema, author of a major book and writer-director of documentaries. His achievements in the Australian film industry have won him the honour of the Order of Australia Medal in 2007 and an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Canberra. We enjoy an agreeable collaboration with the distribution arm of his production entity.

A long way up the Segama River, North-East Borneo, Michael aged 6.

Edols Biog as Image-maker and Storyteller

Starting as a child and without knowing it, I was shaped to be a human rights activist; in time I would make films about disenfranchised people, all over the world.

Some people's life experience transforms them, making it almost impossible to define links with the past. Michael Edols' life hasn't been like that. It's been a series of stepping stones, beginning in Northern Borneo at age three.

He and his father (who was building an open-air cinema on the banks of the Segama River) lived amongst the Murut longhouses for seven years. Each day of those years, Michael was taught by the Dusan jungle hunters, learning to observe and tell stories as they do. Hundreds of images and sensations still flood his memory – perspectives on the natural environment and a way to live far beyond Western experience. At the age of ten, he was sent to a Melbourne boarding school, and his stories were not believed. On returning to Borneo for his school holidays, he picked up a box Brownie with serious intentions, and began to record images.

By 1962, 20-year-old Edols was working in commercial still photography, and three years later, he was lugging a clock-wound film camera for ABC-TV news in Sydney. No longer the omnipotent observer, he experienced what he calls the 'witness state' recalling*: I was uncomfortable with the power of the lens to make so-called history from a visit by a new American President.* For Edols there had to be a better way of collecting news and documentaries as factual report.

He met the Australian author, Charmian Clift, not long afterwards, at the Vietnam moratorium. Little people didn't matter, she told him. To effect real change, you had to work from the inside. Edols dropped the news camera and began to make documentaries, with the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU). A colleague Tom Cowan gave him the opportunity to collaborate and he gained his first credit as Cinematographer on the 35mm black-and-white feature film, *The Office Picnic* in 1968. Edols had arrived in his chosen media of fictional storytelling for the cinema.

Edols' next stepping stone would have him refine the art of cinematography and storytelling with the CFU. A 35mm Reflex Mitchell, 35mm Cameflex and 16mm NPR sync camera were his tools. On assignment for the CFU, he rolled hundreds and thousands of feet of film throughout Australasia, the Pacific and the subcontinent of India, scooping awards for titles including *Sports Medicine, Mr. Symbol Man* and the *Our Asian Neighbours – India Series*. Over the years he continued developing his skills, yet by necessity he had commenced to 'cross the line' with the independent documentary *Tidikawa and Friends*. His contribution and cinematography on TF brought him international acclaim with the coveted Kodak Golden Medallion for Best Colour Photography, the Chicago Festival Blue Ribbon Presentation - Best Film and Golden Tripod Award ACS Best Photography, and this would qualify him to become a full member of the Australian Cinematographer Society. He was now Michael Edols ACS; however his next stepping stone would be his greatest challenge and prove to be a continuing life-long work.

Some award highlights: three times winner Gold Cinematographer Award Chicago • Gold Hugo Award Chicago International Festival • Australian Film Institute two Silver Awards – one Golden Reel Award – one Best Documentary Award and twice Best Feature Film Of The Year • Golden Tripod Australian Cinematographers Society Award for Excellence for in-camera special effects • 25th Asian Film Festival Award - Best Cinematography • Australian Logie for feature film Cinematographer of the Year. • Australian Film Awards – Silver Boomerang Documentary Category.