

# Finding My Story: Exploring Cultural Identity in Ten Canoes to Inform My PhD Screenplay about My Kiribati Birthplace

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Joseph Grogan  
Griffith Film School  
Australia  
joseph.k.grogan@gmail.com

## Abstract

This article contributes to the emerging field of script development in the academy through exploring how a screenwriter can draw upon key elements of an indigenous culture to inform a screenplay. My PhD feature film screenplay, *Kiribati Phoenix*, is set in my birthplace, the small Pacific island nation of Kiribati. Located about 5000 km from Sydney, Kiribati is speculated as the first place on earth to witness the sunrise. Despite their 5000-year history, the I-Kiribati people have a limited voice in feature film cinema. My screenplay journeys with my Australian father and I-Kiribati mother during the decades after Kiribati's independence from British colonial governance in 1979. My family story reflects the grapple with preserving traditional Kiribati cultural heritage amid the sweeping influences of Western modernity. Further, the narrow low-lying atolls of Kiribati currently confront the challenges of climate change, particularly rising sea levels. Against this backdrop, my screenplay offers a Kiribati voice exploring Kiribati cultural heritage for cinematic posterity. While culture remains an amorphous concept, this article will examine how my PhD screenplay draws upon key elements of my Micronesian Kiribati heritage to explore my family's cultural identity. Further, it discusses how the critically acclaimed Australian film *Ten Canoes* (de Heer and Djigirr) explores the cultural identity of the Aboriginal Yolgnu People for posterity. While there are significant differences between Kiribati culture and Aboriginal Yolgnu culture, this article reveals how the hallmarks of storytelling, language, landscape and ritual have emerged as key parallels to inform my PhD script development. This unique synthesis contributes to the emerging field of script development in the academy.

*Keywords:* screenwriting, script development, creative practice, Kiribati People, *Ten Canoes*

## Introduction

This paper explores the development of a personal story into a PhD screenplay set in my birthplace, the Pacific island of Kiribati. Located about 5000 km from Sydney, Kiribati was settled over 5000 years ago, endured the World War II Battle of Tarawa, and is speculated as the first place on earth to witness the sunrise (MacDonald 1). However, Kiribati has a limited voice in feature film cinema. My screenplay in development, *Kiribati Phoenix*, journeys with my Australian father and I-Kiribati mother during the decades after Kiribati's independence from British colonial governance in 1979. My family story reflects the grapple with preserving traditional Kiribati cultural heritage amid the sweeping influences of Western modernity. The narrow low-lying atolls of Kiribati also confront the challenges of climate change, particularly rising sea levels (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 333). Against this backdrop, my screenplay explores my Kiribati cultural heritage for catharsis and posterity.

Culture is an amorphous concept, as is cultural identity. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity notes that:

culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs. (Stenou 4)

Sociologist Nick Stevenson reflects that cultural identity is “never fixed and final, but [rather] constructed through the variable resources of language and culture” (1). This article thus explores how a screenwriter can draw upon key elements of an indigenous culture to inform script development. As a screenwriter in an academy context, I will examine key elements of my Micronesian Kiribati heritage to deepen my PhD feature film screenplay. Further, I draw upon the critically acclaimed Australian film *Ten Canoes* (de Heer and Dijigirr), which centres on the Aboriginal Yolgnu People, to argue that although there are significant differences between Kiribati culture and Aboriginal Yolgnu culture, the hallmarks of storytelling, language, landscape and ritual have emerged as key parallels that have informed my PhD script development.

In addition, this exploration contributes to the emerging field of script development in the academy. Screenwriting practitioner-academics such as Batty et al. (242) highlight that practice-based/led PhDs in screenwriting offer fertile ground to explore the emerging academic field of script development. They note:

Script development is a part of the screenwriting process that has not received sustained attention ... partly because it is a process often veiled and mysterious:

proprietary and commercially sensitive; sustained and agonizing (the “development hell” version); or simply personal, private, difficult to account for and articulate. (Batty et al. 220)

Through this article, then, I draw on excerpts from my personal journal and script to reflect deeper on my screenwriting journey and contribute to the academic field of script development.

## Background

I was born in Kiribati, was raised travelling back and forth between Kiribati and Australia, but have now lived and studied for most of my life in Australia. This provides me with a unique insider/outsider lens relating to my Kiribati heritage. My father is an Irish Australian Catholic missionary who travelled to teach in Kiribati, and my mother is an I-Kiribati villager, daughter of a traditional Elder of the *maneaba* (central meeting place). Writing about my childhood in Kiribati has reconnected me with my estranged maternal cultural heritage. As storytellers, “we focus on places as a means to highlight the emotional, symbolic, spiritual and widely perceived intrinsic values of the environment” (Brandenburg and Carroll qtd. in Adger et al. 2). As I will go on to explore, the Yolngu People also share a sacred, mythological relationship with their homeland.

As an I-Kiribati Australian storyteller, I am perturbed that despite Kiribati’s history spanning millennia, the I-Kiribati People have a limited voice in feature film narratives. Images of Kiribati surface mainly in post-World War II Battle of Tarawa movies or documentaries, in amateur YouTube videos, in snapshots of British Royal visits, or at the Olympics. I am also concerned by increasing news headlines highlighting how rising sea levels in the Pacific may threaten the future survival of small low-lying atoll islands such as Kiribati (Hodgkinson et al. 69-120; Walsh 1; Global Humanitarian Forum Geneva). This has inspired a recent wave of Kiribati climate change documentaries, such as *Kiribati: The President’s Dilemma* (Heer) and *Anote’s Ark* (Rytz). With a limited Kiribati voice in cinema and political debate surrounding Kiribati’s future survival amid climate change, my screenplay aims to offer a unique insight into my Kiribati cultural identity for posterity.

## Finding my story

During a screenwriting class at Griffith Film School, my lecturer introduced me to what screenwriting guru Dona Cooper identifies as the ‘Dramatic Centre’ of a creative idea: the “visceral click, a compelling mix of relief, clarity, certainty, and excitement” that guides the story development (Cooper qtd. in McVeigh 9). At the time, I was reminded suddenly of Neil Diamond’s introduction to his autobiographical song “Brooklyn Roads”:

I remember reading somewhere a long time ago, that if you really wanted to truly write meaningful music, you had only to dig into your own experiences and your own life to

find something which you found passionate about ... and so I decided for the very first time to write something about my own life and my own experiences.

Growing up, I was mindful of the storytelling potential inherent in my family journey: the unique, cross-cultural context of my childhood in Kiribati, one of the least-visited places on Earth; my Irish–Australian father’s coming of age from rural farming roots to teaching as a missionary in the various villages and townships of Kiribati; my I-Kiribati mother’s insight into her father as a revered yet increasingly anachronistic Elder of the traditional *maneaba* leadership system; the impact of my mother’s sudden psychosis upon the arc of my parents’ marriage, from beautiful to increasingly turbulent, tragic yet enlightening. However, the private trauma of my family journey always dissuaded me from translating the threads of memory into writing. As I sat in this class, brainstorming the story I most wanted to tell, I could not shake the feeling that I needed to confront my family’s story so that I could perhaps “let go and move on”. I began to journal to release my memories, thoughts, doubts, hopes and story ideas. While my story centres on my parents’ journey, I was surprised at how my Kiribati grandfather began to emerge in my journals.

## Journal 1 – Translating my grandfather into script

A few years ago, if anyone had have asked me what my story is about, I would’ve said my mother’s tragic relationship with my father and me, my father’s selfless love and my need for catharsis. And no doubt this remains pivotal. However the more I journal, the more I start remembering, the more my maternal grandfather emerges into frame.

The wiry, austere, venerable Elder. Wise custodian of his clan’s oral history and traditional healing methods. His pathos as he witnessed the end of an era. Even some of his own children forfeited learning the traditional customs of “the old ways”.

## Journal 2 – Returning to the village of my birth

Recently I returned to Kiribati. The new Parliament House is inspiring and impressive. In many places, the natural landscape is picturesque and the people are wonderfully welcoming.

But if my grandfather was still alive, he may not recognize the village where I was born. I barely recognize it. The landscape has changed immensely. Traditional thatch-roofed, wooden *Maneabas* have been replaced by concrete with roofs of tin and steel. Fewer canoes, more motorboats. Once spacious greenery now houses dense makeshift shelters. Stray dogs roam in packs. Beloved cousins around my age have tragically died from causes preventable in Australia.

Through my journal reflections, I began to see my family's Kiribati journey not only through my eyes, or my parents', but also through my late grandfather's lens. Beyond my personal catharsis, I began to contemplate a bigger picture of how my screenplay could offer a cinematic 'time capsule' of an era, place, and way of life that no longer exists. I am reminded of screenwriting specialist Craig Batty advocating theme as a driving impetus for storytelling (229).

This deepening realisation inspired me to canvas feature films that explore and preserve cross-cultural insights into indigenous contexts. I was surprised to realise how many cross-cultural stories I have watched over the years, particularly set in Native American contexts, from Disney's *Pocahontas* (Gabriel and Goldberg) to critically acclaimed epics such as *Dances with Wolves* (Costner) and *The New World* (Malick). I was moved by the recurring motifs of a 'white man's' empathy and immersion in an indigenous tribal clan, the challenges of cross-cultural relationships and the complex, violent grapple of native tradition and Western modernity. This resonates thematically with my father's cross-cultural journey into Kiribati. Further, each movie offers unique cultural insight into their respective tribal communities, particularly relating the hallmarks of storytelling, language, landscape and ritual. These films provided foundational themes, guiding my entry into my father's story development. Each film often featured an indigenous Elder as a supporting character and mentor. However, as my journaling and brainstorming delved further into the character of my I-Kiribati grandfather, a further model was needed to explore his bond with his indigenous culture as a traditional Elder.

## Entering *Ten Canoes*

*Ten Canoes* (de Heer and Djigirr) emerged as a cinematic 'time capsule' of the Aboriginal Yolngu culture, with the main story unfolding through the storytelling flashbacks of a traditional Elder. *Ten Canoes*, which explores the Yolngu People's relationship with their cultural heritage, is noted as a "groundbreaking ... significant innovation in the history of Australian Aboriginal cinema" (Riphagen and Venbrux 266). According to Hiatt, this "brainchild of a celebrated Aboriginal (Yolngu) actor (David Gulpilil) intent on honouring his homeland and an innovative Dutch/Australian film-maker (Rolf de Heer) mindful of obligations to his (funding) sponsors ... (produces) a remarkable hybrid, part ethnographic reconstruction and part fictional drama" (70). It received critical acclaim, including six Australian Film Institute Awards in 2006 as well as the Special Jury Prize 'Un Certain Regard' at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival.

The film was inspired by Gulpilil showing de Heer a 1930s black-and-white photograph taken by the anthropologist Donald Thomson of 10 Aboriginal men in canoes hunting for goose eggs in a swamp (Rutherford 1). The story follows a Yolngu Elder as he leads his men on a goose egg hunt while mentoring his younger brother through an ancestral parable about forbidden love. While cultural identity is a vast and malleable concept, *Ten Canoes* offers a framework of identifying the key hallmarks of a culture to distil into a screenplay. While the Aboriginal Yolngu and Micronesian Kiribati cultures are considerably different,

interesting parallels are apparent in *Ten Canoes*, and these have informed my script development; notably, storytelling, language, landscape and ritual.

## Storytelling

As an Elder custodian of his clan's oral history, my I-Kiribati grandfather was a respected storyteller. It is important that I convey the cultural significance of this through my screenplay because the "telling of personal stories connects the many strands of people's lives in a holistic study", providing an insight into culture and identity (Geetz qtd. in Clandinin and Connelly 6).

### Journal 3 – Grandfather as storyteller

My grandfather wasn't a "once upon a time" escapism storyteller. His storytelling often took the form of moral parables drawing on ancestral narratives passed down through generations.

*Ten Canoes* adopts a complex narrative structure, with multiple storytellers. It begins in the present, with Gulpilil's unseen character warmly narrating about his people's mythic bond with their homeland. His first words include an affectionate, ironic joke: "Once upon a time, in a land far, far away ... [Laughs] No, not like that, I'm only joking ..." This sets the tone of the narrator-viewer relationship, and the story to follow. "Once upon a time" references Western fairytales, evoking parental warmth. "In a land [galaxy] far, far away ..." harkens to the iconic opening of the mainstream pop culture film franchise *Star Wars* (Lucas). This shared frame of reference offers a welcoming, common ground for narrator and viewer to share a tragicomic journey into an exotic culture of tribal law.

The narrator then offers a story that flashes back to the black-and-white landscape of Thomson's photo. While leading his men's goose egg hunt, Minygululu suspects his younger brother Dayindi of coveting one of his wives. Through the course of their canoe making and goose egg hunting, Minygululu wisely and patiently tells Dayindi a story. This parable occurs in the distant past and is conveyed in colourful flashbacks. The story follows the ancestral warrior Ridjimiraril, whose younger brother Yeeralparil convets one of his three wives. When one of Ridjimiraril's wives is abducted, his quest to save or avenge her leads to his own death when he is speared by a rival clan as part of a tribal law ritual. Yeeralparil suddenly realises he is in over his head as he must accept the responsibility of caring and providing for Ridjimiraril's three wives.

Minygululu's parable persuades Daynidi to cease coveting his older brother's young wife. He learns to appreciate the traditional communal balance. The film ends on the coloured landscape of the present, with the narrator content to have shared a 'good story', an intimate insight into his cultural heritage. As Riphagen and Venbrux comment, "The events that unfold in the ancestral past constitute a story within a story" (266). Further, Clothier and Dudek (86) reflect, "By moving backwards and forwards through different time frames,



viewers bear witness to the community's cultural continuance and to the connection between individuals and the community both past and present".

Through this story, Minygululu "teaches Dayindi both the practical skills required for hunting and the moral skills needed for cohesive living" and introduces the viewer to the unique cultural balance of the Yolngu People (Clothier and Dudek, 85):

Given the ubiquity of storytelling, it may perform an important adaptive role in human societies ... storytelling may function as a mechanism to disseminate knowledge by broadcasting social norms to coordinate social behaviour and promote cooperation ... These stories also possessed a moral dimension, by either rewarding norm-followers or punishing norm-breakers. (Smith 1)

*Ten Canoes* highlights the capacity of cinema to translate the cultural significance of storytelling through an indigenous context. In the amorphous scope of culture, Minygululu's example has helped to sharpen my screenwriting focus upon my grandfather as moral storyteller, offering insights into his humanity. Below is an excerpt:

### **Scene. Ext. Sea. Night**

The moon and stars shine brightly. The ocean is calm. Phoenix sits on the edge of the canoe. His feet dangle in the ocean. He rolls a small cigarette.

John sits safely inside the canoe, as they wait for the tides to go out, leading fish into their nets. John notes the slow rolling of Phoenix's tobacco as a cue that a story beckons.

### **Phoenix**

Peace is a curious thing. When the Japanese came in the war, they recognised my family as an Elder clan. They treated us well. And invited us to help them keep the peace in the villages. Their main enemy were the Americans.

When the Americans came, American, Japanese and Kiribati blood flooded the sands.

Afterwards, the Americans also respected the Elder clans. And invited us to help them keep the peace in the villages.

When I looked at the blood in the sand, I could not tell which blood belonged to the Japanese, the Americans or the Kiribati. I only saw human blood.

Through expanding on snapshots of my grandfather's reflections, I hope to convey the role of Kiribati storytelling as a cultural practice, archival method and moral compass.

## Language

In both *Ten Canoes* and my screenplay, language surfaces as a defining expression of cultural identity. Notably, *Ten Canoes* is the "first Indigenous language film to be produced in Australia", with the entire cast comprising indigenous Aboriginal Australians (Clothier and Dudek 82). Clothier and Dudek observe:

For Yolgnu audiences, the use of their own languages in *Ten Canoes* highlights the vibrancy of a continuing linguistic heritage. It creates a reflection that affirms their community's culture and offers possibilities of cultural and linguistic resurgence for other Indigenous communities. (87)

Through this, the Yolngu are "portrayed as empowered and in control of their language, their culture and their lives, rather than conforming with the frequent media presentation of Aboriginals as passive victims" of colonialism (Starrs 1). Further, de Heer highlights how the storytellers' "cascading repetition" characterises the film's plot with its Aboriginal style of storytelling (Starrs 4).

My feature film screenplay includes key sequences set in Kiribati villages centred on my father and I-Kiribati grandfather speaking Kiribati. As Clark observes, "It is impossible to write about using language without mentioning the users themselves. In life, these users aren't generic speakers and addressees, but real people, with identities, genders, histories, personalities, and names" (xi). My grandfather was fluent in Kiribati and English but he would never relate his ancestral parables in English. They must always be spoken in the language, words and nuances of his native tongue, as his ancestors had passed on through the generations.

The role of language in conveying and affirming cultural identity informs the scenes wherein my father learns to speak the primary Kiribati dialect. As he becomes more immersed in the village context and worldview, he increasingly uses Kiribati over his own English mother tongue. However, his natural fluency in English and increasing proficiency in Kiribati also provides a bridge for him to translate between the Western spheres of the island and the traditional village clans. It affirms him as an outsider/insider, empathetic to both contexts, privy to the private sentiments of each, yet not wholly at home in either sphere.



As *Ten Canoes* was the first indigenous language film to be produced in Australia, I am unaware of a feature film to date that features the Kiribati language in a substantial way. This imbues my screenplay with a unique Kiribati cultural dimension.

## Landscape and Ritual

The Yolngu and I-Kiribati peoples share a sacred relationship with their landscapes, often characterised through ritual storytelling or ceremony. The depiction of landscape in film can be steeped in cultural and political import and “benefits from some comparative considerations, especially where landscapes can take on aspects of changing historical and cultural conditions” (Harper qtd. in McVeigh “Different but the Same” 146). Furthermore,

while landscape can constitute a place that affords narrative realism by grounding a film to a particular location’s regional sense of place and history ... landscape in cinema is never a pure or simple reproduction. Rather it is a technical, economic, cultural and semiotic (discursive) production. (Costa 247 qtd in Duong 262 in McVeigh “Different but the Same” 145)

While “a text can never be completely understood because all readings are socially situated”, textual analysis can provide guideposts for understanding the conventions of cinematic language, providing deeper insight into the cultural subject (Saukko qtd. in Given 865). The first frames of *Ten Canoes* highlight the physical, symbolic and cultural significance of landscape for the Yolngu People. Because “film is a performative text ... the audience both hears or reads the narration” (Clothier and Dudek 87). The film opens with long aerial shots gliding gently above and through the Arafura swamplands. Sounds of nature underscore each frame, with sound recordist James Currie and composer Tom Heuzenroeder mindful “to capture the sonic authenticity of the Arnhem Land wetlands” (Starrs 6). Complementing the visual meditation on the landscape is the narration, which reveals the Yolngu’s sacred cultural bond with their homeland.

### Narrator

This land began in the beginning.

Yurlunggur, the Great water Goanna, he travelled here.

Yurlunggur made all this land then.

He made this water...

that stretches long and gives us life.

I come from a waterhole in this land Yurlunggur made.

I looked like a little fish in my waterhole.

Then, my father came near my waterhole.

I asked him for my mother.

I wanted to be born.

My father pointed out one of his wives...

Then my father had a dream.

That dream let him know she had a little one inside her.

That little one was me.

When I die, I will go back to my waterhole.

I'll be waiting there, like a little fish...

... waiting to be born again.

This narration provides important insights into the Yolngu people's sacred bond with their land. This introduction also "discloses cultural information that may be foreign to the Western audience", relating indigenous deities, polygamy and spiritual reincarnation (Clothier and Dudek 83). This illuminates the Yolngu people's cultural bond with their land as physical, cosmological, mythical and spiritual.

The Yolngu bond with land and creation/recreation spirituality is mirrored in the climactic scene of Ridjimiraril's ceremonial death dance ritual. In the Yolngu culture, "a dance would be performed for (or by) the dying person to help him make connections with his ancestors in the spirit world ... The ceremony would continue intermittently for up to twelve months after the person has died" (O'Hara 98). Having failed to rescue his abducted wife, the mortally wounded and stoic clan leader Ridjimiraril musters his last strength to perform his own death dance.

During this sequence, the narrator guides the viewer through the ritualistic dimensions of this ceremony. The narrator signposts ritual acts to come, preparing the viewer to focus on precise details of cultural significance. The camera complements the narration, highlighting each nuance as guided by the narrator. For instance, the narrator signposts "hear now", then we hear "the clap sticks, the didgeridoo, and the singing that begin one after the other" (Clothier and Dudek 91). After Ridjimiraril finally collapses and lays dying, his tribal brothers complete his death dance. After his final breath, his body is painted with the symbols of his ancestral waterhole of birth, to guide his soul back to its origin for future rebirth. The camera then follows his spirit's path home, gliding over his body, across the land and back to his original waterhole. This runs full circle with the film's opening mosaic of landscape and creation mythology. Through this, *Ten Canoes* captures for posterity an intimate cultural dimension of the Yolgnu's spiritual relationship with land and ritual.

The I-Kiribati people also share a sacred relationship with their homeland. Notable is the I-Kiribati ritual of burying a newborn's umbilical cord in the soil of their birthplace, along with the seeds of a coconut tree. The ritual serves to bond the child with his birthplace throughout the person's life. The coconut tree's growth symbolically reflects the child's growth through life. The tree also offers sustenance for family and future generations. Included in my screenplay is a story shared by my grandfather, and parents of my grandfather, following this custom when I was a newborn. My grandfather cradled me, cut my umbilical cord, introduced me aloud to his ancestors then buried my umbilical cord with the seeds of a coconut tree in the land of my birth. Including this ritual in my screenplay offers a new and unique cinematic insight into Kiribati cultural identity, relating the I-Kiribati people's relationship with land and ritual. The significance of using film to highlight and preserve the I-Kiribati people's bond with their land carries a deeper dimension against the backdrop of climate change.

## Journal 4 – Losing my motherland?

My Kiribati home island of Tarawa is narrow and low-lying. If the rising sea levels of climate change one day submerge parts or all of my home island, what will become of my grandparents' graves? What will remain of my family land? Photos? Memories? Stories? The coconut tree planted with my umbilical cord now towers over my head. I need to try to capture and preserve a cinematic "time capsule" of this beloved place, and my I-Kiribati grandfather's way of life. While I still can.

## Conclusion

This article has described how my screenwriting research in an academic context has informed and structured an organic autobiographical mode of script development. While there are myriad forms of script development, my research delves into my family history, as well as research into the approach taken to make *Ten Canoes*. Both types of research have provided inspiration and a practical way forward in terms of the writing of my screenplay and the exploration of cultural identity through film. The article highlights that while culture remains an amorphous concept, *Ten Canoes* offers a valuable insight into the cultural identity of the Yolngu people. Distilling storytelling, language, landscape and ritual as cultural hallmarks in *Ten Canoes* frames my writing about my I-Kiribati cultural heritage. Meanwhile, my PhD script development gains further impetus against a backdrop of the limited I-Kiribati voice in cinema, as well as climate change threatening the future survival of my birthplace. It is said that Kiribati is the first place on Earth to witness the sunrise. One day, the sun may rise sadly on waves where parts of Kiribati used to be. However, my proposed film about my Kiribati birthplace may live on, much like the Yolgnu funeral dancer.

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## Biography

Joseph Kokoria Grogan is an Australian-Kiribati screenwriter and director. His passion for Hollywood cinema inspired him through his Bachelor's degree in film and Master's degree, with First Class Honours, in scriptwriting. He is currently studying his Doctor of

Philosophy through a scholarship with Griffith Film School. He is also co-writing the feature film screenplay *Until the Dolphins Fly* with award-winning director Professor Vilsoni Hereniko and award-winning producers Trish Lake, Catherine Fitzgerald and Jeannette Hereniko. In his personal time, he is involved with the United Nations Association of Australia, Queensland Division.

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