



Indigenous Dugout Canoe from Cobourg Peninsula

Vessel number

HV000612

Date

c1965

Primary Maker

Robert Cunningham (1930-2009)

Description

The dugout is about 4.6 metres long, and about 600 mm wide and called 'kubuny' in Iwaidja. The timber used for the dugout is likely to be from the capok or kapok tree *Bombax ceiba*, but it is known that other light density trees such as *Alstonia verticollis*, (also known as *Alstonia actinophylla*), *melaleuca* species and white cedar *Canarium australianum* have often been used elsewhere in northern Australia to build dugout canoe hulls, and these craft have an Indigenous name 'kubuny'. These trees are easier to work, and the lighter density is an advantage for a dugout canoe with its thick sides and thick bottom construction needed to retain strength. If a lighter timber is used it then allows the canoe to float higher in the water than one with a heavier timber construction. Robert Cunningham and four other men were filmed making and using a dugout in 1970 when they were living on Croker Island, to the east of Cobourg Peninsula. The process of building a dugout canoe was documented in the film titled 'The Wiril Canoe'.

(Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1971). 'Wiril' (spelt 'wirdil' in current standard orthography) is the

Iwaidja term for capok tree. The dugout in the film had a shape and size almost identical to the museum's example. The dugout in the film was built from the trunk of a felled capok tree that the community had chosen many years beforehand and preserved for building a dugout. It has been recorded on other dugouts that the wider base or root end of the trunk is traditionally made into the bow, and this appears to have been the situation with this dugout too. Once the tree is felled and cut to length the work was done

at the same site. First the log was gradually hollowed and roughly shaped with axes. Care has to be taken throughout to avoid the trunk drying out too quickly and then splitting through, but at this point the trunk is still quite green and moist. The blocking for the thwarts at either end and for the mast step are integral parts of the trunk, and were formed as the inside was hollowed out. Once the inside was finished, the outside was shaped by removing the bark and using axes to form the bow and stern. An adze was used as well for fine smoothing work. Towards the end of the construction the canoe was carried to the water's edge where the final trimming, smoothing and shaping was done, and the thwarts were put in place. The canoe was completed after eight days work since the tree was felled. Various examples of dugout canoes have been recorded in association with the indigenous communities along the northern coast of Australia, from the Torres Strait around to the Kimberley coastline. They were used for fishing and short passages along the coastline. In the film, the completed dugout was shown undertaking a successful hunt for turtle. The harpoonist stood at the bow while his companion paddled from the stern as they searched for a turtle in their feeding grounds. Once speared, a second harpoon was thrown to secure the turtle, and it was then hauled aboard for the return to the beach campsite. These canoes had distinctive shaped ends, incorporated on the museum's example and the 'Wiril Canoe'. They feature a stem and stern post or frame carved into the wood, and this is similar to shapes seen on Macassan built dugouts, reflecting the close association between these craft and the communities. The use of the dugout is understood to have come from contact with Macassan sailors as early as the 1600s, reaching this region in search of trepang (sea cucumber) and beche-de-mer. They came on larger sailing craft that carried small dugouts. It is understood that at first they traded the craft, but then they also traded metal tools and shared the knowledge of dugout construction. The WAM dugout canoe's builder, Robert Cunningham, was born on the Cobourg Peninsula at Cape Don c. 1930, and in 2003 he was noted as the senior member of the Akarlda clan, Iwaidjan language group when interviewed about his language for a study of endangered Indigenous languages that has been published on the Open Language Archives Community website, and titled: "Endangered Languages of the Cobourg Peninsula (Australia) in their Cultural Context." When indigenous communities moved off settlements on Cobourg Peninsula beginning in the early 1950s Robert was one of the last people to leave Cobourg (c.1968), and then one of the first to return in 1981. The intervening years were spent in Minjilang on nearby Croker Island. Robert Cunningham passed away in 2009. Provenance records indicate the actual owner of the canoe had been George Victor who had used it until it was acquired by Ian White, who offered the dugout canoe to the West Australian Museum on 14 May 1970. Records show that Ian White was then a lighthouse keeper from Cape Leeuwin in WA. It is assumed he was previously the lighthouse keeper at Cape Don where Robert Cunningham and George Victor had lived. Prepared with assistance from Bruce Birch, Australian National University.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 4.6 m x 0.6 m (15.09 ft x 1.97 ft)