

Gugu Badhun Sovereignty Sundays: An Adaptable Online Indigenous Nation-Building Method

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Nation-building research is a flexible approach to research that prioritises the voices and self-determination agendas of Indigenous Nations. This paper discusses our application of the Indigenous nation-building (INB) methodology in our research with Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Nation, Australia, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodology allowed us to pivot to online methods for civic engagement, data gathering, and information sharing. Beyond COVID-safety, other benefits included the involvement of diasporic Gugu Badhun people, and the enabling of positive digital civic participation. Our case study shows the INB methodology is open and responsive enough for a geographically dispersed group of participants and researchers to progress a nation-building agenda, even during a global pandemic, in a way that remains ethical and intellectually rigorous.

Introduction

In answer to the question of why some Indigenous Nations in North America are economically prosperous and demonstrate physical, cultural, social wellbeing whilst some seem unable to emerge from intractable poverty, the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development found that stable political governance was the most important factor to community wellbeing. Identifying and teaching about institutional practices and strategies employed by 'successful' Indigenous nations – successful according to their own criteria – led to what is now called the Indigenous Nation-Building (INB) approach, which describes a process of building effective and culturally relevant self-government and self-determination employed by Indigenous Nations (Jorgensen 2007). Following decades of research in the United States and Canada, explicit INB strategies have been adopted by several Aboriginal nations in Australia (Vivian et al 2016). The INB approach is community-led, and the primary outcomes centre on capacity-building. INB also requires a specific methodological approach for the academic researchers who work with

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partner Indigenous¹ Nations. As a methodology, INB must be flexible, adaptive, and responsive to community priorities.

Unlike First Nations in the United States of America and Canada, the sovereignty of Indigenous Nations in Australia has never been formally recognised by Australian settler-colonial governments. Through the highly circumscribed opportunities created through native title, cultural heritage laws and some states' land rights systems, the Australian state limits formal recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as distinct political collectives with inherent rights to self-governance or self-determination (Gertz 2022). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations have never ceded their sovereignty nor their inherent rights as distinct, self-identifying peoples. Many continue to engage in Nation-(re)building work, even in highly constrained and contested environments. Indigenous Peoples engaging in Nation-building work do so in highly contested and constrained political environments.

This paper discusses one component of our INB research with Gugu Badhun Nation, an Aboriginal Nation located in what is now northern Queensland, Australia. This research activity is part of a larger project funded by the Australian Research Council. Gugu Badhun Nation is one of two Aboriginal Nation partners on the project, which brings together Aboriginal and non-Indigenous practitioners and researchers from several disciplines, geographically located across Australia and in North America, to act on instructions given by the partner Nations to support their INB efforts and to observe their INB strategies in action. The project began in 2019, with substantial face-to-face research activities planned for 2020. However, the global COVID-19 pandemic comprehensively disrupted all research plans. Settler-colonial governments in Australia responded to the pandemic by severely limiting international travel and, for a large part of 2020, effectively closed internal state borders. Further, as Aboriginal people were identified as a high-risk group for COVID-19 complications, particularly those who are elderly and/or have other chronic health complications, many Aboriginal communities acted swiftly to restrict access to their communities except in the most urgent emergencies.

As a result of the travel restrictions, and the need to protect Gugu Badhun research participants, the research team had to quickly pivot our research methods. The academic researchers had met with the Gugu Badhun research committee in February 2020 to receive instructions and to discuss preferences for ways of working with Gugu Badhun people and organisations. The planned workshops and community consultation could not take place, so Gugu Badhun Nation opted to begin the research with an educative online webinar series open only to Gugu Badhun citizens, called 'Sovereignty Sundays'. This relatively sudden shift highlighted the critical importance of flexibility in INB activities and research, whereby research teams must co-design activities and processes according to each partner nation's INB goals,

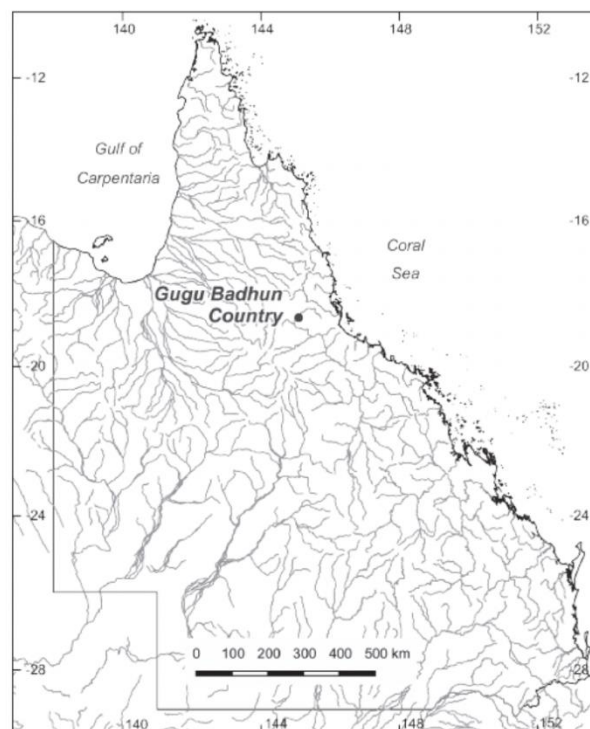
¹ We recognise the diversity of the cultures, languages, kinship structures and ways of life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and there is not one cultural model that fits all. In this paper, we use the term 'Indigenous' to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People collectively. We also use that term to refer to Indigenous peoples internationally. When referring to communities/nations that are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities, we refer to them specifically as 'Aboriginal' or 'Torres Strait Islander' and when possible, by the more correct name of the tribal group or nation.

desired outcomes and preferred collaboration approaches (following Norman & Kalt 2015). That is, working in the INB space, it is not possible for academic researchers to apply predetermined methods or activities.

The Sovereignty Sundays webinars also revealed unexpected benefits, most significantly including the ability to integrate geographically-dispersed researchers and Gugu Badhun people. Moreover, this online method revealed the positive potential of digital tools for enhancing civic participation. This paper explores these themes, beginning with an introduction of Gugu Badhun Nation and its nation-building work before discussing the shift to online methods in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It then explores the strengths and challenges of doing INB activities and research in the online space, and particularly consider the possibilities of digital civic engagement that this project has highlighted.

The Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Nation

Gugu Badhun are the sovereign people of the country located in the upper reaches of the Burdekin River catchment in what is now North Queensland, Australia. The Gugu Badhun Estate, or Gugu Badhun Country, is situated within the region now known as the Valley of Lagoons, surrounding the small township of Greenvale, located approximately 220km north-west of the regional city of Townsville (Figure 1). Gugu Badhun People were granted native title via consent determination in 2012 (Gugu Badhun People #2 [QUD85/2005]), covering an area of 6,540km of the larger Gugu Badhun Estate and recognising, amongst other things, Gugu Badhun's non-exclusive rights to access, camp, hunt, maintain important cultural sites, conduct ceremonies and meetings, and be buried on Country.



Map 1. Queensland, Australia, showing location of Gugu Badhun country

Figure 1. Queensland, Australia, showing location of Gugu Badhun country (from Cadet-James et al: xv).

While Gugu Badhun citizens are geographically spread throughout Australia, a significant proportion of the Nation lives within North Queensland, in the regional town centres of Greenvale, Charters Towers, Townsville, Atherton, Innisfail and Tully on the edges of Gugu Badhun Country. The number of Gugu Badhun people exceeds a thousand, and a large proportion of the Gugu Badhun population maintain a cultural and spiritual connection with their ancestral homelands and the inter-generational knowledge transfer of Gugu Badhun cultural traditions. A Gugu Badhun history book includes a preface which explains this ongoing connection (Cadet-James, McGregor & James 2017: 12):

Continuing the cultural and spiritual connections with country that have been forged over millennia, the Gugu Badhun people are working to maintain a modern identity that has its foundation in country and tradition but is forward-looking and adaptive to our ever-evolving culture. In the true spirit of self-determination, we are working to ensure prosperity for the Gugu Badhun people that enables the protection, maintenance, care and development of our community, culture and country.

In recent years, the Gugu Badhun Nation has invested significant time into a community engagement process that enabled Gugu Badhun citizens to actively engage in the development of the future goals and aspirations of the Nation for their community, culture, country and economy. The *Gugu Badhun People's Community Plan 2014-2020* was prepared in 2013 and revised in the *Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Corporation Strategic Plan 2020-2025* (the Strategic Plan). This is the current iteration of Gugu Badhun Nation's mitigation approach against settler-colonial social, cultural, environmental and economic impacts while attempting to maximise potential benefits and opportunities. The development of the Strategic Plan was informed by three rounds of input from engagement with Gugu Badhun leadership (Elders and GBAC leadership) and the wider Gugu Badhun community at workshops in the regional townships across northern Queensland. The Strategic Plan articulates the major aspirations, strategies and initiatives identified and supported by Gugu Badhun Nation, settler-colonial governments, and relevant stakeholders and business partners. Based on community input, it identifies the key strategies needed to achieve community goals in five sustainability areas: Governance and Administration; Economy and Infrastructure; Environment and Country; Community; and Culture (Figure 2).

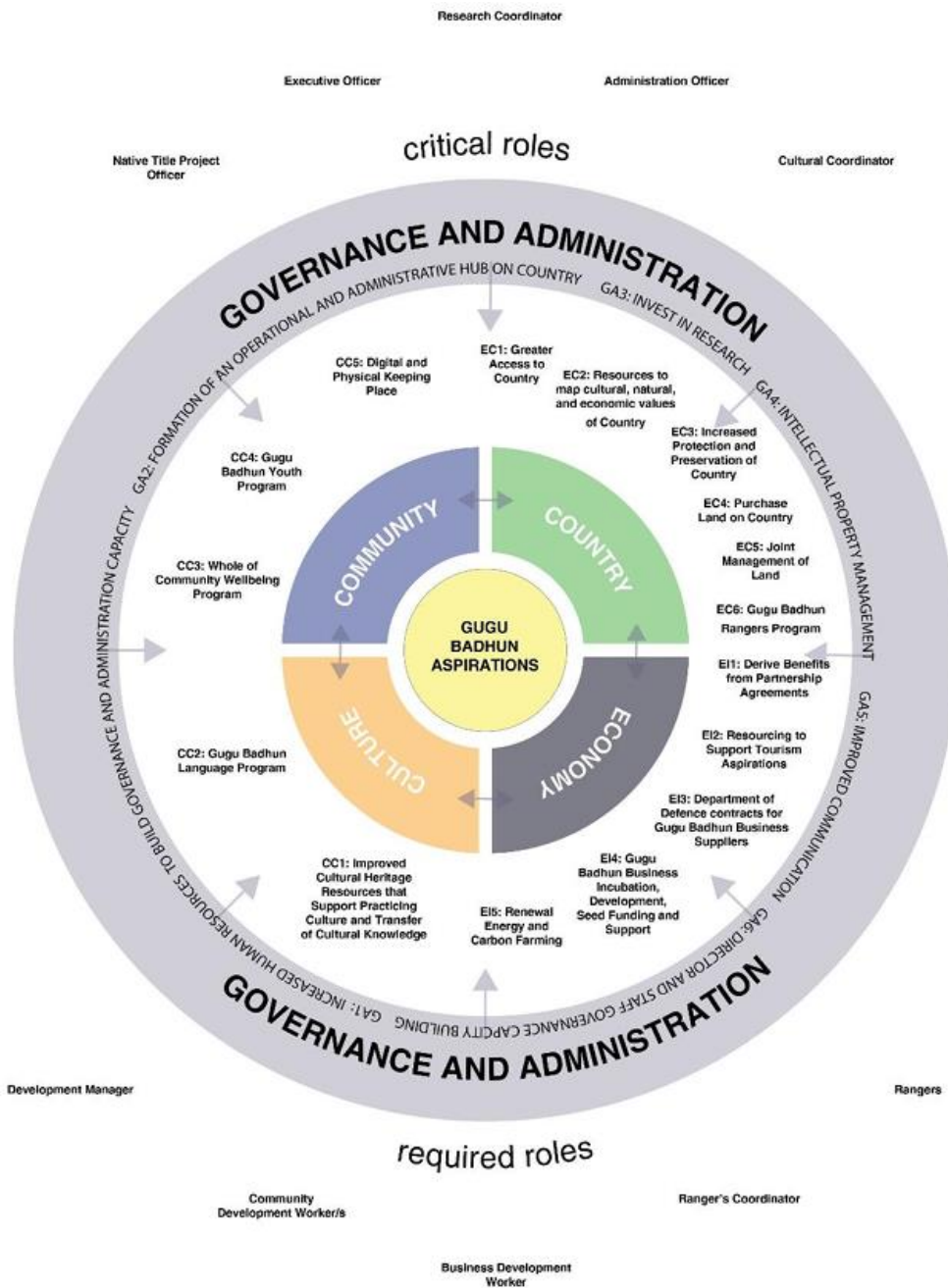


Figure 2. Gugu Badhun's 'Plan on a Page', showing Community, Country, Culture, Economy and Governance planning pillars, from Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC's Strategic Plan (2020-2025) Summary, 14

Respecting the self-determination agenda already articulated by the Gugu Badhun Nation, the Gugu Badhun INB Project was intentionally aligned with these five planning pillars of the *Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Corporation Strategic Plan (2020-2025)* (following Norman & Kalt 2015; Gertz 2022). The project approach focused research methods on three streams of nation-building activity: Political Governance; Economic Development; and Cultural Resilience.

Nation-Building, Offline and Online

This paper discusses civic engagement within and of the Gugu Badhun Nation. While 'civic engagement' is a widely-used term with many meanings, the definition proposed by Adler & Goggin (2005: 241) is a useful starting place: "Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future." Mainstream discussions of civic engagement focus on actions like volunteering, membership in community groups, and voting as key indicators. The Australian Electoral Commission (2020) reports that Indigenous people are enrolled to vote at rates lower than the broader population. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018) acknowledges there are very different cultural understandings of things like volunteering and 'giving' which limit their ability to truly capture data on Indigenous civic engagement. Some measures aim for cultural relevance to Indigenous peoples by including subsistence activities like hunting and gathering in their definition of voluntary work (Hunter 2000). However, even such 'inclusive' definitions rely on external expectations of what it means to be engaged in a community, and tend to report a 'deficit' (following Walter 2018). Even when the explanation for this civic engagement 'deficit' is placed on settler-colonial governments rather than on Indigenous peoples (i.e. Head 2011), the focus is still on engagement with the settler-colonial state. This state-centric definition continues the erasure of Indigenous citizenship (Sabzalian 2019). Thus, the way we look at civic engagement needs to be defined by the Indigenous Nation.

The INB project team uses 'Gugu Badhun civic engagement' to refer to Gugu Badhun citizens' engagement within the political governance of the Gugu Badhun Nation. Adapting Adler and Goggin's (2005) definition above, Gugu Badhun civic engagement is about participation in the Indigenous nation as distinctive from the settler-state. This may mean that civic engagement is not focused on the broader geographic community, nor even on the immediate community one lives in, if they live away from Country. However, Gugu Badhun civic engagement is centred on decision making processes that are within the geographic territories and cultural-political jurisdictions which are defined by the Gugu Badhun Nation.

Digital Civic Participation

Democracies rely on civic engagement for legitimacy and efficacy: civic engagement shows citizens' support for their government, helps socialise citizens into the processes of government, and assists governing bodies to accomplish tasks that require local collective action. Before the widespread adoption of the Internet, all these tasks had to be accomplished in person, as people came together 'in the public square' to vote, assist in the provision of public goods, and learn about their governing systems through hands-on participation. With the creation of the Internet, and particularly with the creation of online communication platforms that not only inform and educate citizens but also *involve* them, the public square can be virtual. As a result, in non-Indigenous society, digital participation and engagement are now both a reality and a key means of civic engagement overall (Vromen 2017, 2018): for

example, online civic activity has become a way to reflect, create, and shape collective identities (Dahlgren 2009).

Much of the research on digital civic engagement in the mainstream has noted how online tools, and especially social media, have changed not simply the context but also the content of engagement, for good and for bad. With regard to the shift in context from in person to online, early scholarship theorised about the value of the Internet to the public sphere in the face of otherwise falling political engagement (Dahlgreen 2005), and opined about the possibility that the availability and cost of technologies needed for online civic participation could create digital inequities (Norris 2001). Twenty years on, with technology now more available worldwide, the opposite argument can be found in the literature: that digital means offer the possibility of transformative civic engagement for otherwise marginalised groups; online access may further democratise civic engagement (e.g., Cho, Byrne & Pelter 2020). With regard to content, scholars and pundits have decried the loss of civility in online media (including the greater incidence of hate speech and surveillance) and the development of echo chambers that can harden viewpoints (especially through the introduction and reinforcement of ‘fake news’) (e.g. Kuehn & Salter 2020). On balance, however, research on digital civic engagement in mainstream society suggests that the content of such communication and engagement is simply different than live, in-person engagement; it is often extra-parliamentarian and more individualised (rather than reflecting a dutiful allegiance to party or policy), and more pedestrian (emphasising personal experience and the everyday nature of politics). Moreover, the literature suggests that online engagement is generally beneficial; echo chamber effects may be overstated (Dubois & Blank 2018), rapid response collective action is facilitated when needed (cf. the Arab Spring and BLM movements) and, especially for youth, digital participation can translate into ‘real-life’ civic action. In one example of the latter effect, research by UNICEF suggests that “young people who engage in digital participatory politics are much more likely to engage in ‘real’ offline political participation such as voting” (Cho, Byrne & Pelter 2020: 3). Political organisations and governments are increasingly aware of this phenomenon, with some turning to digital means to engage citizens in civic and political processes (see, e.g. Vromen 2017; Freeman 2016).

Nation-Building Methodological Framework: Gugu Badhun Djiman Research

Gugu Badhun’s Djiman Research Centre is responsible for coordinating all Gugu Badhun research activities, including engagement, strategy, methods, ethics and protocols. Underpinned by the Gugu Badhun Strategic Plan, Gugu Badhun’s Djiman Research Strategy prioritises research activities that strengthen Gugu Badhun sovereignty and self-determination.

Based on Gugu Badhun Nation’s achievements and aspirations to build capacity for self-governance and self-determination, Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research (Jumbunna IIER) approached the GBAC Board in 2018 to discuss the possibility of a research collaboration to investigate and document its INB endeavours. Jumbunna IIER is at the forefront of INB research and education in Australia and has collaborated in several initiatives with the Native Nations Institute (NNI) at the University of Arizona. In particular,

the Jumbunna-NNI team previously had collaborated with two Aboriginal Nations – the Gunditjmarra People and Ngarrindjeri Nation – to provide insights into the historical circumstances and political factors that influenced these Nations’ decisions to create self-governing institutions and processes.

The research with Gugu Badhun Nation seeks to expand knowledge about INB in Australia by exploring processes that may lead to the creation of governing systems in Nations and communities that do not yet have governing structures and mechanisms but seek to create them. This is part of a larger research project which asks the same research questions of Nyungar Nation. The project asks: What are the prerequisite conditions necessary for Indigenous Nations to begin the work of developing institutions and mechanisms of self-government, and what factors may stimulate this transition?

To answer these questions, the project team is using an INB methodology co-created by the research team and Aboriginal Nation partners in their attempt to conduct research *with* and *for* Aboriginal communities, rather than *on* and *about* them (Vivian et al 2016: 52-54). This was a critical element in seeking the GBAC Board’s endorsement to commence a research partnership, which must be led by the Gugu Badhun Nation. The INB methodology is underpinned by reciprocity and uses an operational structure that manages two sets of interests – academic and Indigenous community – that are both symbiotic and hierarchical (Vivian et al 2016: 62). These interests are symbiotic in that the Gugu Badhun Nation seeks to nation-build, using the expertise of the academic partners as a resource and, at the same time, the academic partners seek to learn more about the nature of INB by observing the Nation’s efforts. The interests are hierarchical in that Indigenous self-determination is the determining priority throughout all aspects of the partnership. In short, the Aboriginal partner Nations focus on ‘what’, the academic investigators focus on ‘how’, and all partners understand that self-determination is ‘why’. In this research, in the spirit of reciprocity, we explicitly situate ourselves in relationship to the research in our writing, in recognition that ‘we’ are part of the research, undertaking it *with* Gugu Badhun Nation.

In a practical sense, this means that the research team takes instructions from the partner nation about its nation-building goals. The academic and partner nation investigators work together with Elders, leaders, and key personnel to determine collaboration approaches and to co-design INB activities and processes. This partly occurred at the early stages of the Gugu Badhun project, with ‘introduction to INB’ community workshops and information sessions being held prior to Gugu Badhun agreeing to a formal research partnership. The community-led approach has always required a high degree of flexibility, with the research team and Nation both adapting to local circumstances and contexts, but became particularly evident in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In February 2020, the research team came together for a planning day and mapped out activities for the next two years across three research streams which aligned with priority areas identified by the *Gugu Badhun People’s Strategic Plan 2020-2025*. The planned activities included workshops on filmmaking techniques, in which Gugu Badhun youth would be trained and supported to record community stories and interview Elders, aligned with the Community Plan pillar of *Culture*. Community workshops for making decisions about Gugu Badhun’s government structures were also planned, with a view to

establishing Elders' Councils, Youth Councils, and developing a political constitution for Gugu Badhun Nation. Similarly, community workshops focused on economic development aimed to make decisions and establish appropriate structures and strategies for a successful Gugu Badhun economy. These workshops were all to be held face-to-face on Gugu Badhun Country and in nearby regional cities, requiring significant travel from the academic partners based around Australia and the United States.

In March 2020, the Australian Federal Government introduced strict COVID-19 safety restrictions to reduce the spread of the virus (Prime Minister of Australia 2020). State governments followed suit, restricting travel and public gatherings to varying degrees. Universities and schools shifted to online learning, elective surgeries were postponed, public and private gatherings were banned and national events were cancelled. At some times and in some states people were restricted to their homes. This public health response had very profound impacts on our research plans, and we regrouped via video-conferencing apps to reconsider what INB activities and research could be done under the circumstances. In March, it was unclear how long the restrictions would remain in place, and circumstances changed regularly. Two constants, though, were Gugu Badhun Nation's commitment to continue its INB planning and work and its priority to protect its citizens.

There is a growing body of research about how Indigenous people use social media for personal, cultural, and political purposes (i.e. Carlson & Dreher 2018; Carlson & Frazer 2018, 2020; Petray 2013; Petray & Collin 2017). That research provided context for us that digital tools can be very useful within Indigenous communities, but the literature on digital methods for *research* with an Indigenous nation is more limited. A systematic review of Indigenous research methods did not focus on digital techniques but did suggest that storytelling and yarning approaches centre relationality and listening, and can remove the power imbalance between researcher and research participants, and thus can be a decolonising method (Drawson, Toombs, & Mushquash 2017). Several researchers have adapted digital storytelling methods in which Indigenous people, especially young people, are supported to create digital stories that subvert structural inequalities and celebrate their culture, community, and identity (e.g. Flicker & MacEntee 2019; Cunsolo Willox et al. 2012). There is also literature on the development of digital archives and databases to store Indigenous knowledge, language and stories (see, e.g. Christie & Verran 2013; Clague 2019, 2020; Behrendt & Clague 2019). The potentially transformative nature of these databases for communities with historically limited access to archives has been canvassed (Thorpe, Galassi & Franks 2016; Verran & Christie 2007). Regardless, researchers are aware of the influence of Western epistemologies on data storage frameworks, and the continuing challenges surrounding community access (see, e.g. Verran et al. 2007; Barwick et al. 2020; Petronella, Barwick & Green 2021; Bow 2019; Clague 2019, 2020; Behrendt & Clague 2019).

This literature helped inform the terms of our engagement with Gugu Badhun Nation, as our research planning shifted to continuing INB conversations in a safe, physically-distanced manner. Given that face-to-face workshops could not be safely facilitated to share ideas and develop Gugu Badhun government and economic strategies, structures and mechanisms, we developed a series of online webinars. The webinars would allow for brief

presentations delivered by members of the research team, followed by discussion amongst Gugu Badhun citizens. The sessions were advertised on a private ‘members-only’ Gugu Badhun Facebook group; a members-only portal on the Gugu Badhun website; and via email distribution lists. The webinars ran for approximately one hour each and were delivered on a Sunday morning to enable community participation – and became known as ‘Sovereignty Sundays’. We ran 11 webinars between July and November 2020. Each webinar presented information to the Gugu Badhun Nation about a particular aspect of INB (Table 1). The presentations included relevant examples from North America and Australia of other Indigenous Nations which have worked through issues that are likely to arise for Gugu Badhun. In addition to information sharing, the webinars provided a space for Gugu Badhun citizens to share their questions, thoughts, and ideas on the topics of discussion. While attendance at each session was fairly small (between 3 and 9 Gugu Badhun citizens), several participants joined us for each seminar.

Table 1. Sovereignty Sundays Webinar Series Program

Political governance stream	Economic development stream	Cultural resilience stream
Why self-govern? 19 th July 2020	Why economic development? 19 th July 2020	Making decisions as Country 16 August 2020
Nation decision-making 26 th July 2020	Economies vs. Businesses 26 th July 2020	Filming on your smartphone 31 March 2021
Nation Constitution vs. Corporate Constitutions – Preambles 23 rd August 2020	Structuring Economic Development 23 rd August 2020	Filming on your smartphone 21 April 2021
Nation Constitution vs. Corporate Constitutions – Part B 20 th September 2020	Economic Development Values & Principles 20 th September 2020	
Who should make decisions for what? 22 nd November 2020	Funding Gugu Badhun Government 22 November 2020	

The webinars were all recorded. Edited versions were then made available to the Nation via a members’ portal on the Gugu Badhun website. These ongoing digital resources will enable the conversations about Gugu Badhun nation-building to diffuse amongst Gugu Badhun citizens. The recordings are also a rich source of qualitative research data, capturing the conversations that happened during the webinars, both verbal and in the chat function. Those

conversations illustrate Gugu Badhun citizens' priorities, goals, and vision for their nation-building work. These webinars are discussed further below.

Discussion: Research Impact

Challenges

The online method of Indigenous nation-building research presented both benefits and challenges, for the academic and Gugu Badhun Nation partners alike. The research project itself was subject to externally imposed guidelines. The nature of a competitive grant is that research needs to be completed within prescribed timeframes. Further, there are the expectations of research progress and outputs that exist for all academics, and while none of the research team value research quantity over quality, nor seek to progress our careers at the expense of meaningful research, these are externally imposed obligations. Of course, a global pandemic does hopefully shift expectations of what might be accomplished, and may also justify an extension to the three-year timeframe of a grant (though see Nigrovic & Napper 2021; Peterson Gabster, van Daalen, Dhatt & Barry 2020). However, we decided to continue with the research in a COVID-safe way to maintain, as much as possible, the project's momentum and to ensure good outcomes for the Nation, while also keeping in mind our obligations to the funding body.

Before beginning the research, the team needed to decide on a platform for the webinars. Given that the researchers are all attached to universities, and had a range of experiences with online teaching, our initial thoughts were to use a Learning Management System (LMS) like Canvas or Blackboard. This would allow us to interact with participants in a live way, using video conferencing and chat, but would also allow for asynchronous engagement. An LMS could act as a repository for content like video recordings, which Gugu Badhun participants could access in their own time if they were unable to attend live. This would also allow for the discussion to occur asynchronously – if participants had thoughts or questions outside of the live sessions, they could share them, interact with one another, and with the research team via discussion boards or comment threads. Despite our pedagogical reasons for seeking to use an LMS for this phase of the research, external structures once again presented a challenge. The universities that the research team are part of, which widely utilise these LMS platforms for teaching, would not extend their remit to community education as part of a research project. Negotiating this took time away from the research, and it meant a change of plans for the community education phase of the research. Instead of a community of learners who would engage with one another over the course of several weeks or months, we re-designed the project for discrete learning sessions. We decided to use Zoom as our platform, because many Gugu Badhun participants were already familiar with it. While Zoom allowed for recording of webinars which could be viewed by other citizens outside of the live sessions, the asynchronous *interaction* was not as readily available. Participants could reach out via email if they had questions, but that is a far more private form of communication than an LMS would have offered.

The webinar schedule needed to enable community participation. This required attention to the day and time sessions were scheduled, as well as the

frequency, in order to balance the continuity that frequent sessions offer with the competing commitments of citizens. This was particularly important given a series of other demands on the Gugu Badhun Nation occurring at the same time as this phase of the research project. As discussed above, webinars were held on Sundays in the late morning, to enable citizens with full-time jobs to attend outside of work hours. The initial plan was for monthly sessions, though the final schedule differed a little in response to scheduling requirements of the research team and the Gugu Badhun Nation.

In global responses to the pandemic, video conferencing software Zoom became a very common way of keeping in touch. As mentioned above, many participants were familiar with it before the webinars began. However, not all Gugu Badhun citizens were well versed in utilising tools like Zoom or email. Access to the devices required to participate, and to the infrastructure like reliable internet connection with adequate bandwidth, are not evenly distributed amongst Gugu Badhun citizens, as with the broader population (Wilson 2020). Our research plan needed to consider how to engage those citizens who were not able to participate via Zoom.

For all of the benefits of online learning, the loss of being in a physical space together was significant. Experts in higher education argue that online learning can lead to poorer educational outcomes (Blum 2020; Lederman 2020), specifically lower grades and higher attrition (Bettinger & Loeb 2017). Even synchronous but remote interaction, like Zoom meetings, have been found to be more mentally demanding (Wiederhold 2020). Of course, this online teaching is more accessible to a wider range of students, and our research does not assess learning. However, the importance of live, in-person interactions is even more important for the goals of this research: Gugu Badhun community members' learning about nation-building as a *community*. Whereas higher education focuses on individual achievement, our research is about the Nation collectively discussing, debating, engaging with other nations' experiences, and considering their own path forward. Although our online method did allow for Gugu Badhun participants to join from a variety of locations (discussed below), it did so at the expense of being together in the same place. Thus, the method potentially compromised Gugu Badhun ontological and epistemological ways of transferring and sharing knowledge within the community, especially between Elders and younger participants. The slight delays, difficulties with technology, distractions of multi-tasking, and the lack of body language (Wiederhold 2020) are all important factors that Gugu Badhun participants experienced in the webinars.

In addition to the basic human interaction challenges posed by Zoom webinars, the nation-building agenda is particularly limited by online methods. Gugu Badhun knowledge relies heavily on connection to Country and intergenerational relationships (Cadet-James et al. 2017). Gugu Badhun Nation are well-versed in using technological solutions to participate in research and enhance connections to the Nation, particularly amongst those living off Country (Gugu Badhun Digital History Project 2008; Hardy et al. 2008; Madden 2011; Hardy et al. 2016; Cadet-James et al. 2017), but the importance of *community* and *Country* cannot be fully replicated in a virtual space.

Benefits

Despite the challenges outlined above, the webinar method was ultimately beneficial. In particular, it meant that nation-building conversations were held well in advance of Gugu Badhun Nation decision-making; it enabled Gugu Badhun citizens living away from northern Queensland, to engage in those discussions; it allowed us to maintain continuity of the research project even during the uncertainty and restrictions of the pandemic; it prioritised the safety of our Gugu Badhun Nation partners, and our research team; and it resulted in the creation of important, long-term digital resources for continued use. More broadly, this approach illustrates the social well-being impacts for Indigenous people of being directly involved in their communities.

Practical Benefits

In very practical terms, the webinar method of research allowed for the project to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic, with researchers around Australia and internationally remaining involved with the Gugu Badhun Nation. While travel opened back up enabling in-person research engagement later in the project, the Sovereignty Sundays webinars highlight the possibilities of research without extensive travel. Webinars will not take the place of all INB research activity by any means, but they are a useful option in the INB toolkit. Further, because of the challenges discussed above, including participant distraction related to multi-tasking, our method adopted a series of shorter, semi-regular research events as opposed to fewer but more intensive meetings. This meant that Gugu Badhun participants could engage in the topics they were most interested in. For those Gugu Badhun participants who were involved in every session, they could do so without a large one-off time commitment, and in a more gradual and sustained way.

In addition to involving researchers in geographically distant locations, the same was true for our Gugu Badhun participants. Our pre-COVID research plan had been to hold in-person workshops in several locations in northern Queensland, to be accessible to as many Gugu Badhun people as possible. However, not all Gugu Badhun people live in northern Queensland. The webinar method, and the resulting recordings, meant that Gugu Badhun people living elsewhere were able to participate in these discussions. Our research activities since have included some online options, to enable this continued access even as in-person events have become possible again.

Researching during pandemic restrictions was a thankfully short-term experience, but it is important to stress that the webinar method meant we could actively continue our research without risking the health of Gugu Badhun participants. Gugu Badhun Nation were very clear that community health and wellbeing was a key priority in considering whether they would endorse our research methods, given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were considered at increased risk of COVID-19, and other compounding risks like age and other chronic health concerns. Since the end of pandemic restrictions, we have gained a new appreciation of the need to engage in research methods that *actively* and pre-emptively safeguard the health and wellbeing of participants.

Methodological Benefits

In terms of the INB methodology, the webinar method allowed us to enter Gugu Badhun participants' homes in ways that are typically unavailable. Much has been written about the positive and negative aspects about the way that video conferencing blurs the boundaries between home and work or education (Fontichiaro & Steadman Stevens 2021; Hacker et al. 2020). Many of the webinar attendees had their cameras turned off, and presenters did not ask anyone to make themselves visible to avoid the 'invasion of privacy' that video conferencing from home can feel like. The benefit, though, of 'entering' Gugu Badhun homes is that the person who logged in to the webinar was not always alone in their space. Other Gugu Badhun household members in the background were also engaged, to some extent, in the conversations.

Zoom webinars are also very easy to record. Every session was recorded, edited to focus on the presentation itself, and then posted to YouTube with protections ensuring only invited viewers could watch them. Thus, Gugu Badhun Nation now has a pool of long-term digital resources at their disposal. Importantly, these resources are tailored specifically to Gugu Badhun – the examples have been chosen for their relevance to the kinds of issues and decisions that the Nation faces. While the material within the webinars exists in other forms that Gugu Badhun citizens could access, these recorded webinars have already sifted through the vast quantities of information and distilled it down to what is particularly relevant.

Recording sessions also lowers the barriers of participation in nation-building discussions for Gugu Badhun citizens. People who were unable to attend the webinars live can catch up on what they missed, but the recordings are also available for those citizens who feel reluctant to publicly engage in discussions about nation-building. Through the recordings, they can become familiar with the key issues and use that as a foundation for future discussions. Furthermore, the recordings enabled immediate capture, for research purposes, of both the spoken conversation and the written live-chat with Gugu Badhun participants during the webinars.

Gugu Badhun Nation Benefits

The COVID-19 pandemic put a lot of things around the globe on hold. The focus was on responding to the immediate crisis at hand, and other concerns received considerably less attention. However, the webinar method meant that Gugu Badhun Nation were able to continue their discussions about nation-building and continue to strengthen the individual and collective cultural and political capital of Gugu Badhun citizenship.

Informal feedback provided from Gugu Badhun participants to researchers immediately following the webinar was positive and prompted further discussions via phone call or chat messages about what Gugu Badhun needs to or should do. These conversations were not formally recorded, however were an opportunity to discuss and encourage individuals to take personal action either within their family unit or family group, or within the conduct of the business of the Nation more broadly. This points to one of the key benefits of the webinars for the Nation; namely, the normalisation of citizens' participation in Gugu Badhun civic and government-related matters.

UNESCO (1999) describes the process of ‘self-determination’ as a collective’s right to: participate in decision-making; choice in how matters are governed; and control over their own lives and futures. In the context of articulating Gugu Badhun self-determination at the local level (Gertz 2022), the online webinars demonstrate potential as a tool which can enhance the decision-making processes of the Nation. Sovereignty Sundays online webinars show promise in normalising social, cultural, and political participation, choice and control of Gugu Badhun citizens within the business of the Nation — in other words the everyday communal manifestation and operationalization of Gugu Badhun sovereignty and self-determination (illustrated by Altamirano-Jiménez 2020).

Analysis

Our experience with the Sovereignty Sundays webinar series demonstrates the value of digital research methods to research taking an Indigenous Nation-Building approach. Further nation-building exercises have confirmed the above findings. During a series of phone interviews with 15 citizens of Gugu Badhun Nation (the next stage of the DP19 project), digital technologies emerged as significant to citizens’ visions for the Nation’s future. 13 of those interviewed either agreed to a prompt that suggested online tools could assist members of the Nation to feel more connected to community, Country and culture, or mentioned digital technologies in an otherwise explicitly positive light. Answers included the ability of digital technology to share and retain culture, and to facilitate meetings off-Country. Only one interviewee did not agree to the prompt, nor mention digital technology otherwise during the interview. This reinforces a long-standing openness by Gugu Badhun to use digital tools to “maintain a modern identity of Gugu Badhun rooted in country and tradition but reflecting the many generations since traditional times and their adaptations to their ever-evolving culture and identity” (Cadet-James et al. 2017: 121). Researchers should likewise remain adaptable to changing contexts.

As the Sovereignty Sundays webinars were not canvassed during the phone interviews, this paper cannot conclude that Gugu Badhun interest in digital civic engagement was affected by the webinars – particularly as Gugu Badhun Nation has previously utilised online technologies, like language apps, to contribute to Nation goals (Cadet-James et al. 2017). Regardless, the interview data suggest the ongoing currency of digital civic engagement for members of the Nation – and the corresponding need for Gugu Badhun to carefully evaluate how it chooses to engage online. Without prompting, five interviewees specifically mentioned Zoom, the GBAC website and/or Facebook. In their discussions of these different technologies, interviewees focused on the ability of the technology to assist in the dissemination of information about the Nation, and whether the platform was interactive, allowing online discussion. The GBAC Board are aware of this and are currently in the process of considering and developing effective and appropriate protocols for online engagement. The information gained from the Sovereignty Sundays webinars and DP19 project overall will likely be crucial to these deliberations.

Conclusions

Digital civic engagement within the context of Indigenous Nation-Building projects has both benefits and limitations. Even though much of the current literature focuses on the negative aspects of online engagement more broadly, the example of Gugu Badhun Sovereignty Sundays demonstrates the potential benefits of digital civic engagement within the INB framework. More research is required with Indigenous Nations however, not only in the design, purpose and testing of digital civic engagement tools and platforms, but in the development of Indigenous Nations' definitions of civic participation and engagement. Employing an Indigenous Nation-Building Methodology means respecting the sovereignty and self-determination agenda of each Indigenous Nation and their right to define civic participation and engagement.

As the Gugu Badhun Nation's Sovereignty Sundays concept is available for adaptation and use by other Indigenous nations involved in Indigenous Nation-Building projects, the online webinar method has already been embraced by the Guditjmara in their nation-building efforts. With the aim of adding to the literature and knowledge of digital civic participation and engagement within Indigenous nations, we intend to further research Indigenous Nation-Building projects that utilise online methods.

As the Gugu Badhun Nation reminds us, "connection, or re-connection, with country and with each other ensures that distance and time do not diminish the importance of identity and history" (Cadet-James et al. 2017: 110). Digital civic engagement cannot completely replace the desire and need for face-to-face discussions; however, what has been proven is that online civic engagement can be done. This paper finishes, importantly, with the words of a Gugu Badhun citizen involved in the activities of the Nation-Building, in recognition of their sovereignty and the importance of their voices to our work. As this citizen put it:

[civic engagement] doesn't have to be on country. It can be all around, where we're all scattered across the country. I think with technology now and with all this COVID19 stuff there's ways and means to meet... [but] it's always good to have that face-to-face.

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