

# ‘For the good of the Gugu Badhun people’: Indigenous Nation building, economic development and sharing as sovereignty

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## Abstract

As part of an ongoing process of Indigenous Nation Building, Gugu Badhun Nation is engaged in developing an economy according to Gugu Badhun values. Rather than simply mimicking capitalism, the practice of visioning this economy begins with considering core cultural principles for the Nation. Sharing is central for Gugu Badhun, and we argue that sharing is considered an act of sovereignty stemming from Gugu Badhun law. Other factors emerge from the focus on sharing, such as the responsibility to

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look after one another, Country, plants and animals, and neighbouring Nations. This articulation of sharing as *sovereignty* illustrates Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty as a verb, rather than a noun. Storytelling is one way that Gugu Badhun enacts economic sovereignty through centring the Nation. Our research demonstrates the transformative potential of Indigenous Nation Building and Gugu Badhun people's freedom to consider and express a preference for alternative economies.

### Keywords

sovereignty, self-determination, Indigenous Nation Building, alternative economies

### Djilbalamba

Within the great valley of *gungunubu* (lagoons) on *gugubadhungu* (Gugu Badhun Country) the *murmun* (water lilies) grow. *Murmun* are a vital source of food and materials for Gugu Badhun *bama* (people). *Murmun* not only provide sustenance for Gugu Badhun *bama* and animals; they are also important to the ecological balance of the wetlands on *gugubadhungu*. A creation story handed down in Gugu Badhun oral traditions communicates the central values which order the Gugu Badhun framing of their<sup>1</sup> natural resource management practices and their political relationships with neighbouring Nations. The story warns of the consequences of greedy, wasteful actions, and informs the Gugu Badhun understanding of the importance of accepting consequences, learning lessons and *sharing*. The story about Gugu Badhun's obligation to share was recorded by Richard Hoolihan Snr (in Sutton, 1973) and is retold by his granddaughter, Janine Gertz, below. This is the story of *djilbalamba*:

A family gathering food was being wasteful and careless. They were taking too many water lily seed pods and too many lily stalks – too much for what the family needed. *Yamani* (rainbow serpent), seeing their greediness, got angry and swallowed the father. *Yamani* took off with the man in his belly, leaving the rest of his family members behind. When the family of the man alerted the other *bama* about what had happened, a *gubimurri* (cleverman) gathered a group of men and chased after the *Yamani*. It was very difficult to track down *Yamani* as he went north. *Yamani* was travelling fast and using the existing lagoons and waterways to mask his tracks and speed away from the men on foot. *Yamani*, eventually tired and needing to rest, decided to sleep in an open area amongst woodlands on Country. The men eventually caught up to him, and whilst *Yamani* was sleeping, they tied him down using ropes and the surrounding trees to trap him. They drove stakes into the ground and fastened a restraint made from loya cane around *Yamani's* neck. Demanding the return of the man in *Yamani's* belly, one of the *gubimurris* struck the restraint around *Yamani* to wake him up. *Yamani* awoke alarmed and fought back, wriggling his body with force, and thrashing his tail around violently. The thrashing action of the *Yamani's* tail made a very large waterhole. The men managed to overcome *Yamani* after a long and difficult fight; they killed *Yamani* to free the man inside his belly. When they cut *Yamani* open, the man was still alive. Relieved to be alive, the man learnt his lesson about being greedy. Not wanting to waste anything, the men who killed *Yamani* decided to share him within Gugu Badhun and with the neighbouring tribes. They divided *Yamani* up and they

all had a big feast. After learning his lesson, the man eventually became a big important man who taught others the importance of sharing and not being greedy. The place where this happened is called *djilbalamba* – meaning ‘eel’s tail’.

## Introduction

This paper is about storytelling *as* sovereignty, and about how this ancient creation story about *sharing* underpins the thinking about economic development of the Gugu Badhun Nation. Still informing the Gugu Badhun present and future, this story and others have been shared for hundreds of generations. Gugu Badhun’s recent history has been one of active engagement in the necessary political work required to maintain their cultural and political identity in the face of colonisation (Cadet-James et al., 2017). The settler-colonial nation-state known as Australia is new and overlaps with hundreds of other still-sovereign Nations that existed prior to colonisation. Gugu Badhun is one of these Nations, located in the northern part of what is now known as the Upper Burdekin region of northern Queensland. The Gugu Badhun people’s ability not only to survive but to thrive on their Country is evidence of the Nation having always been engaged in the work of nation building – even before colonisation. Post-colonisation, however, Gugu Badhun have become active agents in a deliberate programme of work to ensure the continuation of connection to culture, community and Country.

Gugu Badhun began to formally engage with a framework known as Indigenous Nation Building (INB) in a 2015 research project undertaken by Petray and Gertz (2018) on building economic development aspirations through discussions of community-owned businesses. INB is a holistic approach focused on sovereignty and strengthening Indigenous Nation governments to enable Nations to thrive in the ways that they decide are important. INB is a set of principles but, in practice, looks different for each Nation. Though the work began with the project on economic development, it evolved into a bigger focus on Gugu Badhun Government (Gertz, 2022). In 2019, Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Corporation Registered Native Title Body Corporate (RNTBC) entered into a research partnership with the University of Technology Sydney, the Native Nations Institute at the University of Arizona and James Cook University through an Australian Research Council Discovery Project titled ‘Prerequisite conditions of Indigenous Nation self-government’.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, we focus on the economic development components of our research since 2015, and the shifts we have seen amongst Gugu Badhun in that time. We refer to previous work based on the first few years of our research (Petray and Gertz, 2018). We reflect on what has changed since we began our research and the ways that Gugu Badhun speak about and practise INB. In particular, we discuss a Gugu Badhun Citizenship Forum held in July 2022. At that event, we realised that the types of economic development ideas coming from participants had shifted in the context of INB political literacy. Discussions of sovereignty felt elevated. The wider social and political context of native title compensation matters outlined within the High Court’s Timber Creek decision (Little, 2016), the initiation of a treaty process in Queensland (Hobbs, 2020) and discussions at the national level of voice, treaty, and truth influenced by the ‘Uluru statement from the heart’ (Uluru Statement, 2017; see also Davis and Williams, 2021) are important context for this shift, but we suggest that more explicit conversations about sovereignty and INB over the previous seven years of research is another essential driver.

We argue that sharing is a fundamental value embedded in Gugu Badhun storytelling/law, and is foundational to enacting Gugu Badhun economic sovereignty, and the Nation's vision for building a Gugu Badhun economy. This is why we began the paper with Gugu Badhun's story of *djilbalamba*: to respect the sovereignty of our Nation partner, and to respect storytelling *as* their law. Our argument is based on the premise, discussed below, that sovereignty is not simply a noun but an active process. Although we use terminology familiar to western critical theory, our theoretical framework is from a different paradigm. Just as successful INB requires cultural match, so too does Indigenous theorising, though storytelling is a common thread in such approaches. We begin by providing background and context on Gugu Badhun Nation and briefly describing the INB approach. We do so in the context of sovereignty and self-determination, two essential theoretical concepts that also underpin our research process. We then discuss key themes that arose during an economic development session at the 2022 Gugu Badhun Citizenship Forum, referring to previous INB discussions throughout that section. Although there are clear threads linking the research we initiated in 2015 with the research conducted more recently, Gugu Badhun storytelling has become more purposeful in the context of INB. The elevation of thinking about and the articulation of *sharing as sovereignty* has guided the discussion about the implications for self-government responsibilities to Gugu Badhun citizens and intergovernmental relationships with neighbouring Aboriginal Nations.

### **Yarugubadhungu – this is Gugu Badhun Country**

Gugu Badhun are the original inhabitants of the area known as the Valley of Lagoons in the Upper Burdekin region of northern Queensland (Cadet-James et al., 2017). Gugu Badhun's claim to their ancestral homelands stems from a volcanic event which occurred at least 7000 years ago (Cohen et al., 2017; Gertz, 2019). Gugu Badhun sovereignty and self-governing authority derive from being the direct descendants of the original witnesses of this ancient geological event (Gertz, 2022). Gugu Badhun's landscape – its physical and metaphysical nature (*gugubadhungu*) – was created through the conflict and fire of two Gugu Badhun ancestor-beings.<sup>3</sup> Gugu Badhun people maintain a modern cultural and political identity post-colonisation, stemming from their customs and traditions that emanate from *gugubadhungu* and existed pre-colonisation (Cadet-James et al., 2017; Gertz, 2022).

In 2012, Gugu Badhun were formally recognised as the Native Title<sup>4</sup> holders of approximately 650,000 hectares of their wider Gugu Badhun Estate.<sup>5</sup> The Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Corporation Registered Native Title Body Corporate (GBAC RNTBC) administers the Native Title rights and interests of the Gugu Badhun people, primarily via oversight of Indigenous Land Use Agreements, Native Title Protection Conditions and Cultural Heritage Management Plans on Country.<sup>6</sup> Gugu Badhun people strategically leverage the governance and administrative capacity of the RNTBC to achieve the Nation's self-determined cultural, social, economic and political development goals (Compton et al., 2024; Plan C, 2020). The Nation has been purposefully discussing the importance of building an economic development framework to build the financial and human resource capacity of its RNTBC to fulfil its Native Title

obligations, but moreover to achieve the wider cultural aspirations of the community (Petray and Gertz, 2018). Economic development discussions are in the context of inadequate government funding for the administrative burden of Native Title and the desire of Gugu Badhun to become more economically independent in conducting the cultural business of the Nation. Native Title established that Gugu Badhun's primarily diasporic population (est. 1500) has maintained ongoing and continuing connection to its ancestral homelands despite being dispossessed through colonisation (Cadet-James et al., 2017). However, Native Title is yet to deliver substantial economic returns for Gugu Badhun Nation as it provides only limited recognition of rights to access, camp, hunt, maintain important cultural sites and conduct ceremonies and meetings, as well as to be buried on *gugubadhungu*.

Gugu Badhun's recent history is like many other Indigenous Nations across the Australian continent. Since the 1860s, *gugubadhungu* has been occupied by pastoralists and miners seeking to exploit the natural resources that the landscape offers in its open grassy woodlands, seasonal and permanent water supplies, and underground minerals (Allingham, 1977). A potential new mining boom looms over *gugubadhungu* due to green energy market demands for rare minerals required for power production, storage and transmission, creating new dilemmas for Gugu Badhun. Despite the intergenerational trauma that violent dispossession of their lands has brought them, Gugu Badhun's story since colonisation is one of adaptation and survival (Cadet-James et al., 2017). Throughout every settler-government policy era, Gugu Badhun people have been active, self-determined players in their response to the social and political dilemmas that colonisation has brought them. In 2014, following their successful Native Title determination, Gugu Badhun leadership undertook a process of community consultation with its citizens about the aspirations, needs and future visions for the Nation. This effort resulted in the 'Gugu Badhun people's community plan 2015–2020' (Plan C, 2014); the engagement process was repeated in 2019 and updated within the 'Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Corporation's strategic plan 2020–2025' (Plan C, 2020).

Continuing their active programme of self-determination, Gugu Badhun had been preparing to enter a new policy era of 'recognition' through the promise of the legal and political reforms delivered federally via the 'Uluru statement from the heart' (voice, treaty and truth), and via treaty discussions at the Queensland state level. 'Preparedness' for Gugu Badhun means having the capacity to enter treaty discussions in a way that asserts Gugu Badhun sovereignty and self-determination – not only to represent Gugu Badhun politically as a nation, but also to take on the responsibility of self-government (Gertz, 2021, 2022). Preparedness also means planning and responding to the changing attitudes of federal and state governments towards treaty-making and truth-telling programmes. Recognising the need to be strategic and forward-thinking, the work of capacity building and preparedness continues for Gugu Badhun despite – and in response to – the 60.06% 'no' vote in the 2023 national referendum on a proposed amendment to the Australian constitution that would establish a Voice to Parliament for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Australian Electoral Commission, 2023). The need to be strategic also follows the 2024 repeal of the Queensland's Pathway to Treaty legislation by the Liberal-National Party immediately following their election. Gugu Badhun sovereignty and self-determination initiatives remain not only in readiness for

forthcoming Australian government policies and political reforms but as processes of internal and inherent self-realisation and self-legitimation.

Indigenous Nations do not need economic success before they undertake INB, and in fact Nations with a more deliberate economic strategy are more prepared for economic success. However, exercising sovereignty and self-determination today is easier for a Nation to sustain if it has economic independence from settler-governments (Petray and Gertz, 2018). Gugu Badhun will need to (re)build political governance structures that strengthen internal decision-making processes and facilitate external political relationships with other Indigenous and non-indigenous governments (Gertz, 2021, 2022). Gugu Badhun Nation will also need to enhance its self-governing and administrative capacity to design, develop, adopt and endorse its own policies and procedures, and to develop techniques for designing programmes for the cultural, social and economic benefit of the citizens of their Nation (Gertz, 2022; Jorgensen et al., 2023). Gugu Badhun Nation policies, programmes and procedures are needed to maintain ancient laws and customs and to assert political jurisdiction over people and lands within the context of settler-colonialism.

## **INB and sovereignty: theoretical framework**

The research we present here is part of a larger Gugu Badhun self-determination project informed by INB research. INB ‘refers to the processes by which an Indigenous nation enhances its own foundational capacity for effective self-governance and for self-determined community and economic development’ (Jorgensen, 2007: xii). The term describes the approaches used by First Nations peoples, and it encompasses a ‘sovereignty attitude’, effective and culturally appropriate instruments of self-government, a long-term, strategic vision and community-focused leadership (Begay et al., 1998). When Nations adopt a sovereignty attitude – acting as if they have sovereignty and making their own decisions about their Nation – there is considerable evidence that the outcomes are better than when decisions are made externally (Jorgensen, 2007). The process differs depending on the Nation, internal and external structural factors, and the people’s cultural context, goals and aspirations. Despite different approaches, what is consistent across decades of research is that acting as a sovereign Nation leads to better outcomes across a range of indicators (Jorgensen, 2007). Many Nations consider this work an act of rebuilding (Rigney D et al., 2021) – that is, recovering from the inter-generational harm caused by colonisation and actively self-determining their governance, social relationships, relationships to Country, and economies. The ‘Gugu Badhun people’s community plan’ is an example of this work, which began before Gugu Badhun engaged directly with INB discourse (Plan C, 2014).

Much of the academic research about Indigenous nations’ INB practices emerges from First Nations in North America (e.g. Begay et al., 1998; Jorgensen, 2007; Native Nations Institute, 2023), but it is increasingly considered in the Australian context (e.g. Cornell, 2015a, 2015b; Hemming et al., 2017, 2019; Vivian et al., 2016, 2017). This Australian-focused scholarship considers INB as a practical tool to advance self-determination in a number of fields, such as Nation-led natural resource management, including land and water management in Australia and beyond (Hemming et al., 2017, 2019);

and internal Indigenous Nation policy-making (Jorgensen et al., 2023), including health and wellbeing (McMillan et al., 2016; Rigney D et al., 2022) and treaty-making (Rigney D et al., 2021).

Although research from North America is clear that strong economies correlate with strong governance and self-determining Nations (Begay et al., 1998), few researchers explicitly consider the relationship between INB and economies in Australia. However, the context in which Indigenous Nations operate within Australia is quite different. Thus, it is important to critically consider the relevance of this approach within Australia as a primary focus rather than just as extrapolation from questions about governance and sovereignty from the North American experience.

In the course of our initial research with Gugu Badhun Nation (described below), we came to argue that economic development that is underpinned by Indigenous values – that is, cultural match – is an act of resistance to colonialism and capitalism even with superficial resemblance to capitalist approaches (Petray and Gertz, 2018). Although much focus from development programmes and academics alike is on individual Indigenous entrepreneurs and wealth creation (Foley, 2006; Shirodkar et al., 2018), an INB approach to economic development is conversely driven by the cultural values of a Nation and directly contributes to its cultural self-determination programmes. Australian government approaches tend to focus on mainstreaming Indigenous peoples, highlighting deficits relative to the non-Indigenous majority (Altman, 2011; Hunt, 2011). In contrast, rather than individual accumulation of wealth, competition and expansion, INB approaches to economic development focus on community-wide prosperity, cooperation and caring for Country (Petray and Gertz, 2018; see also Jacobsen et al., 2005).

Ultimately, the goals of INB are practical sovereignty, meaningful self-determination and thriving nations (Rigney D et al., 2021). INB is a framework through which Indigenous Nations can go about the important business of operationalising their own versions of sovereignty, self-determination, self-government and nationhood in order to counteract settler-colonial assertions that Indigenous peoples no longer have the right to assert or exercise them.

## **Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination**

Beyond the colonial violence used to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their ancestral homelands, the ongoing political conflict between Indigenous peoples and their colonisers stems from the philosophical differences from which each party derives their sovereignty. Similarly, the exercise of Indigenous self-determination is a matter of political conflict concerning the differences between the political integrity of state-sovereignty and Indigenous aspirations to cultural, social, political and economic development. Within international law, the definition of ‘sovereignty’ refers to the legal personality of a state that exercises ‘jurisdiction’ over a geographic territory via the administration of ‘rights’, ‘claims’, ‘liberties’ and ‘powers’ of government (Crawford and Brownlie, 2019: 191). Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty stem from spiritual and philosophical frameworks that are about an ancestral and collective responsibility to and not ownership of the land (Moreton-Robinson, 2007). When considering the differences between

Westphalian and Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty, it is important to remember that *both* are socially and politically constructed (Alfred, 2005) and that ‘sovereignty is claimed, asserted and enacted by those who have the ability to do so’ (Bauder and Mueller, 2023: 157).

## **Gugu Badhun sovereignty and self-determination**

Gugu Badhun sovereignty consists of the laws, culture, language and knowledge systems from which Gugu Badhun responsibility and authority to govern its territories originate (Gertz, 2022). Gugu Badhun sovereignty is a manifestation of Gugu Badhun cultural values and the paradigm of the people’s inner logic, which is in turn reflected in interactions with the outside world (Gertz, 2022; Horse and Lassiter, 1997; Moreton-Robinson, 2007).

Within this paper, and within the wider Gugu Badhun INB project, we adopt a position that moves beyond analysis of the problems of western constructions of ‘sovereignty’ and ‘self-determination’ and beyond discussions of these concepts as Indigenous rights (Alfred 2005; Watson, 2002). This work is primarily about Gugu Badhun cultural, social, legal and political constructions of these terms (Alfred, 2005; Gertz, 2022). Working from a locale of Gugu Badhun sovereignty and self-determination means that Gugu Badhun’s construction of these concepts emanates from their own values and principles. Gugu Badhun’s social, cultural and political construction of their sovereignty is manufactured in the nexus between their cultural identity, ways of knowing, doing and being, and their relationships with the external world (Gertz, 2022). In this way, Gugu Badhun axiology brings forth and creates Gugu Badhun *legalisms*.

Gugu Badhun’s claim to sovereignty plays out in the telling and retelling of the ancient creation stories that predate the current era of colonisation (Gertz, 2022). These ancient stories are the foundations of Gugu Badhun law that have been handed down over hundreds of generations and anchored in traditions which for many thousands of years were never in relationship with, or to, a coloniser. Gugu Badhun self-determination is the ongoing process of self-realisation and self-legitimation (Gertz, 2022).

## **Djiman and INB research methodologies**

Our research recognises that self-determination and sovereignty come from First Nations peoples themselves. As our research team includes Gugu Badhun researchers, and the project is overseen by Gugu Badhun governance, we aim to first and foremost centre Gugu Badhun worldviews of and concerns about colonisation (Gertz, 2020). From this position, we then incorporate western theories, methods and words with the goal of furthering Gugu Badhun sovereignty and self-determination (following Smith, 2021: 43; see also Gertz, 2020, 2022). We are thus conducting research *with* Gugu Badhun rather than *about* Gugu Badhun (following Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2018).

The research we discuss here began in 2015. In the ensuing years, the research team has grown, as have the research questions – in parallel, as we argue below, with the growth of our Aboriginal Nation partner’s commitment to asserting its sovereignty. The research project has adopted an INB methodology (Vivian et al., 2016) *and* a



Gugu Badhun *djiman* research methodology (Gertz, 2020). These two methodologies are complementary. The INB methodology means that the work is directed by the Nation, with Gugu Badhun and non-Gugu Badhun researchers providing support when requested in the form of facilitating discussions, sharing useful tools to inform decision-making, providing evidence from other Indigenous Nations and observing the process. *Djiman* methodology means Gugu Badhun leads the research that asserts Gugu Badhun intellectual sovereignty and at the same time furthers their practical sovereignty and self-determination agendas (Gertz, 2020; see also Rigney L-I, 2001). The INB methodology works *with* and *for* the Nation in an action research project that actively seeks change (Vivian et al., 2016). In this section we briefly outline the nine years of research, focusing in particular on the collection of data discussed in this paper.

In 2015, Gertz, a Gugu Badhun researcher, and Petray, a non-Indigenous researcher, began a small research project, 'Growing Self-Determination through Aboriginal Business Enterprise'. This was in response to the 'Gugu Badhun people's community plan 2015–2020' (Plan C, 2014), which identified economic development as a priority, and was endorsed at a Gugu Badhun annual general meeting (AGM) in late 2014. Key research activities in this project included community workshops in September 2015 at a Gugu Badhun Culture Camp, in December 2015 with visiting academic Professor Stephen Cornell, and in September 2016 at the Culture Camp. In that research, we highlighted the key values that Gugu Badhun had begun articulating for their economy: that is, to be communal rather than individual; cooperation rather than competition; the centrality of land without goals of expansion; and that it be part of a holistic Gugu Badhun society, culture and government rather than understood as a 'free market'. Thus, we understand Gugu Badhun economic development as prefigurative resistance to capitalism and colonialism because the values differ greatly from capitalist values (Petray and Gertz, 2018).

The 'Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Corporation strategic plan 2020–2025' (Plan C, 2020) identifies strategies related to research, governance and wellbeing. The ongoing work on Gugu Badhun economic development within the GBAC strategic plan specifically relates to the Nation's goals around economy and infrastructure. The project overlaps with Gertz's (2022), looking beyond economic development to questions of sovereignty, self-determination and self-government for Gugu Badhun Nation more broadly. The research team also expanded to a collaboration with Vivian and Jorgensen, and others, eventually leading to the Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded project, submitted in early 2018. In May 2018, another community workshop was held in Townsville to discuss INB principles and did not explicitly focus on economic development on the understanding that self-determined, culturally legitimate governing systems are foundational to building Indigenous economies. Upon receiving research funding, an additional workshop was held in Cairns in June 2019, for formal endorsement of the research project by the Gugu Badhun Research Committee. From 2019 to 2022, the research project ran, though it had to change considerably from what was planned due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gertz et al., 2024).

In 2020, in response to physical distancing requirements to protect community safety, the team delivered a series of webinars for Gugu Badhun citizens. These 'Sovereignty Sundays' webinars covered a range of topics, including five dedicated to economic development (Gertz et al., 2024). The webinar format was a 60-minute session, including

approximately 20 minutes of information sharing, with discussion via chat function, and via participants' microphones (Gertz et al., 2024). Webinars were followed by individual interviews with Gugu Badhun citizens, family group interviews and then a Gugu Badhun Citizenship Forum. This five-day event was held on *gugubadhungu* in July 2022. It provided an opportunity for 11 Gugu Badhun citizens, current and future leaders from 3 of the 5 family groups, and 4 non-Gugu Badhun researchers, to hold focused discussions on INB and what it means for Gugu Badhun people. Within the Citizenship Forum, we held a session on Gugu Badhun economic development, delivered by Petray and Jorgensen. The session invited participants to discuss generally, and to vision a Gugu Badhun future within small groups. Notes were collected by researchers and by participants themselves on butcher paper. Further, at the Citizenship Forum we presented a draft version of a report to Gugu Badhun, 'Indigenous Nation-owned businesses? Or individually owned businesses? The pros and cons of each' (Petray et al., 2023). This discussion paper was prepared in response to questions from Gugu Badhun about how to structure their economy as it develops and presents considerations and examples from other Nations. Following discussion at the Citizenship Forum, it was finalised and published on Gugu Badhun's website for citizens and the GBAC Board to access. Our discussion below largely focuses on analysis of data collected in the webinars and the Citizenship Forum, and we also refer back to data collected in 2015 and 2016.

## Indigenous stories as Indigenous law

Indigenous storytelling can be described as a 'pedagogical tool for learning life lessons' where 'Indigenous peoples engage oral traditions, historical/ancestral knowledges, and cultural resources to examine current events and Indigenous understandings in ways consistent with traditional worldviews and cosmologies' (Iseke, 2013: 553, 559). In this way, Indigenous stories are both method and epistemology (Chan, 2021), but can also be about resistance and resurgence (Sium and Ritskes, 2013).

Storytelling is a regular cultural practice at Gugu Badhun events, especially in the context of INB workshops. Through this method, Gugu Badhun assert a story of themselves, in order to control their own narrative and not be 'storied' by their colonisers (following Chan, 2021; see also Gertz et al., in review). Within the Gugu Badhun Citizenship Forum held in 2022, we observed storytelling as a way to position Gugu Badhun at the centre of its relationship with the rest of the world. We also observed storytelling as a technique in (re)building sovereignty. As a Gugu Badhun oral tradition, the *djilbalamba* story was the ancient foundation that gave meaning to contemporary values and principles. Embedded in cultural and political identity, Gugu Badhun's customary law was articulated to explain a collective responsibility not only to divide resources within the Nation, but to ensure that the principle of sharing is central to external political relationships with Gugu Badhun neighbours. Thus, events like Culture Camps and webinars, and even documents like the GBAC strategic plan, are themselves an act of Gugu Badhun re/storying, advancing the Nation and its citizens as sovereign.

Western scholarship gives weight to the conceptualisation of 'sovereignty' as a noun, as if sovereignty is a paramount, indivisible entity (Barnes, 2023). The *djilbalamba* story demonstrates the intersection of language, law and sovereignty, where *verbs* have

primacy (following Barnes, 2023). Within these stories the conceptualisation of Indigenous sovereignty is not articulated as a thing to possess but articulated as a way to *do* and *be*. Stories are not simply accounts of historical events or myths; they hold currency within Indigenous legal traditions whether they be sacred, natural or deliberative (Borrows, 2010). Stories are both law and instruction and are a manifestation of sovereignty.

## **Gugu Badhun economic development – values and principles**

In the Citizenship Forum, we asked participants directly what Gugu Badhun values and principles are essential to embed in a Gugu Badhun economy. The discussion that followed echoed a number of features that had been implicit in previous discussions. Woven throughout many of the values that were articulated is the centrality of sharing, and there were a number of points where the discussion returned to the *djilbalamba* story, above. The recurrence of themes across time suggests they are core to the ongoing nature of Gugu Badhun sovereignty, drawn from the stories first told thousands of years ago. Although the sovereignty attitude expressed by participants has become more animated since 2015, the role of sharing stories is a constant.

Caring for *gugubadhungu* is a key feature of Gugu Badhun values. This was identified by Gugu Badhun Nation previously, in their 2015 community plan, as a key pillar (Plan C, 2014). It has remained central to all our discussions with Gugu Badhun about economic development, but the sovereignty attitude has advanced over time. The focus here is on reducing harm to *gugubadhungu*, and returning it to previously healthy conditions wherever possible. Discussions in 2015 focused on business ideas that would have neutral or positive effects on *gugubadhungu*, such as restorative agriculture, removal of introduced pest species, and cultural-eco-tourism. In the more recent ‘Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Corporation strategic plan 2020–2025’ (Plan C, 2020), this is more specifically articulated. Goals include role-modelling land use and management, and a priority aspiration is for Gugu Badhun people to develop an ‘all of Country Sustainability Policy’ and to invest in renewable energy generation and carbon farming to contribute to long-term environmental sustainability. In Sovereignty Sundays webinars, this was identified as one of Gugu Badhun’s ‘core principles and values’ (26 July 2020). These themes were also central to individual and family group interviews (Achterberg et al., 2022). For Citizenship Forum participants, caring for Country must underpin the design and management of any infrastructure developed to support a Gugu Badhun economy. It should be a key consideration in choosing what economic activities to pursue and it should be a focus of training for Gugu Badhun people, and visitors to *gugubadhungu*.

Related to caring for Country, Citizenship Forum participants discussed the need for an understanding of how all things are connected. This includes not just Gugu Badhun people, but also the plants and animals with whom Gugu Badhun people live, the lands and waters themselves that shape Gugu Badhun lives, and the ancestors and stories that continue to underpin Gugu Badhun worldviews today. This became more explicit through the stories told at workshops during our research. At a discussion workshop in 2015, a Gugu Badhun young person suggested a potential business opportunity

around emu farming, for meat, oil and egg products. The older participants in the group gently clarified that emu are Gugu Badhun (human) ancestors, so this would not be a good business for the Nation. A more holistic approach to Gugu Badhun political and economic development arose throughout the Sovereignty Sundays webinars. For example, discussions of wellbeing were explicitly framed broadly: ‘economic development facilitates the cultural, environmental, social, health, employment, and political wellbeing of the whole community’ (26 July 2020). This is directly linked to the value of caring for Country: ‘Protection of country/people and all things living essential for well being [sic]’ (16 August 2020). *Gugubadhungu* is traversed by several bodies of water, including the Burdekin River. The river system provides a good example of how all things are interconnected, because Gugu Badhun people have seen the negative effects of downstream infrastructure like dams and weirs on the river that flows through *gugubadhungu*. Understanding the connection between ancestors, animals and Country is important to underpin all decision-making about economic development, and these discussions are reaffirmed through the storytelling at Gugu Badhun events.

There is consensus across the years of this research that Gugu Badhun economic development should ‘do no harm to other mobs’, and that Gugu Badhun must continue to have regard for their neighbours. In early discussions about potential Nation-owned businesses, this took the form of ideas around multi-Nation business partnerships. For example, a hiking trail that traverses several Nations’ Countries could create business opportunities beyond just one Nation. This early inclination to consider partnerships with neighbours was more explicitly stated in the Citizenship Forum. This focus on sharing with neighbours was told through the lens of the *djilbalamba* story, above, when *Yamani* was shared amongst neighbouring nations after being killed.

There is a desire to ensure that economic development for Gugu Badhun people ensures equality of opportunity for all Gugu Badhun people. This means sharing the opportunities amongst the Nation as a whole. This was expressed, in the Citizenship Forum, as equality regardless of age, gender or location. Again, this is a more clearly articulated version of earlier discussions of potential Gugu Badhun business opportunities. Several of those, for example, were to establish a healing centre or retreat on *gugubadhungu* to ensure that all Gugu Badhun people, including elders and people with disabilities, could comfortably and safely spend time on *gugubadhungu* for their own wellbeing.

Similarly, the Citizenship Forum participants suggested that a distributed approach to an economy was essential. This took the form of distributed responsibility, power, resources and opportunities. This once again led participants to explicitly discuss the importance of sharing to Gugu Badhun Nation. It was also discussed in terms of respect for what all Gugu Badhun citizens ‘bring to the table’ – consideration of what all can offer, and building an economic strategy around that, rather than centring a particular individual or family group and leaving others out. In Sovereignty Sundays webinars, the focus was on sharing opportunities amongst all family groups that make up Gugu Badhun Nation: ‘Absolute family inclusion essential for ownership in moving forward as a Nation ... Equal representation’ (23 August 2020). At the Citizenship Forum this principle was reiterated again but in the context of sharing the cultural heritage assessment work across the family groups.

Several final and interrelated values were articulated at the Citizenship Forum that, again, echo previous discussions. These include developing a shared understanding of both what is the minimum standard of living all Gugu Badhun Citizens can expect, and continuing discussions about ‘what is *enough*’. There was discussion about curbing desires for continuous accumulation of wealth and material resources, to ensure that there is plenty to share amongst everyone. This was framed in terms of the *djilbalamba* story, and the importance of avoiding excess and accumulating more than is needed. In webinars, it was discussed in terms of the threat of external interests seeking to exploit rifts within the Nation. Mining was used as an example of something which goes against Gugu Badhun values, especially caring for Country, and that individuals may be persuaded to ‘contravene the core Gugu Badhun values’ because ‘mining companies can divide people’ (26 July 2020) through individual benefit. Many Indigenous Nations experience this through the process of negotiating and monitoring Indigenous Land Use Agreements. Scambray (2013) and Holcombe (2021) discuss how the mining sector so often seeks to exploit division and lack of negotiation capacity within Indigenous communities for its own economic gain. Along with the INB process of *identifying, organising and acting with purpose* (AIGI, 2024; Cornell, 2015a), the goal of instilling a shared understanding of what is *enough* attempts to avoid division, ensuring that individuals are not tempted by the prospects of individual gains at the expense of the collective.

Linked in with the discussions above is the value of ‘leaving no one behind’, and not setting people up to fail. In the *djilbalamba* story this is the rescue of the ‘greedy and destructive’ man by other Gugu Badhun people and was framed as ‘the Gugu Badhun way of doing things’ (Sovereignty Sundays webinar, 23 August 2020). This was further explained in terms of being good financial stewards – that all Gugu Badhun people, especially young people, be given an understanding of the value of money so that it can be managed well for the Nation. In Sovereignty Sundays webinars, in response to a question about ensuring prosperity for the Nation, one participant suggested: ‘Cadetships, traineeships and work experience that provides for young GBAC people acquire building blocks that are essential to operate GBAC business’ (23 August 2020). In the 2022 Citizenship Forum, the discussion noted that although opportunities like these are important for young people, they should also be inclusive of older people as well, particularly those needing to reskill or change careers. Similarly, another webinar discussion of articulating the Nation’s values and principles warranted this suggestion: ‘I would like to see us have a “Gugu Badhun school” where our young people can learn these things, our history, our culture, our politics, our country [sic]’ (20 September 2020). Ideas of training and education are also linked to the sharing of opportunities and wealth and sharing as an act of Gugu Badhun sovereignty. As one webinar participant put it, the purpose of the training and education is to embed Gugu Badhun young people into the Nation so they ‘continue to invest in themselves and help others’, ensuring that ‘whatever [business] endeavours are chosen, it is carried forward to all Gugu Badhun people’ (23 August 2020).

## Discussion

The broad consistency between what we hear from participants across our research confirms the ongoing nature of Gugu Badhun sovereignty and self-determination. In this

section, we consider the general trends in our recent research, outlined above, and particularly how this has changed over time within strategic community planning documents. We explore how these changes coincide with the changing socio-political context in which Gugu Badhun operate, and how this process informs academic research into INB.

In early discussion workshops, many of the ideas for business development focused on partnerships, particularly with non-Indigenous businesses. For example, economic development was considered in terms of job creation, proposed both as ensuring that mining companies operating on Gugu Badhun land employed Gugu Badhun people, and as opportunities for satellite businesses like laundry and food services for mines and defence operations on Country. However, this has shifted. As discussed in the webinar series, engaging with mining is seen as a risky proposition. This is not a new perspective – Gugu Badhun people have known for considerably longer than we have been researching with them that mining companies damage Country and may seek to divide the Nation for economic gain. What has changed is the earlier sense that Gugu Badhun have no choice *but* to engage with mining companies. Today, the sovereignty attitude is more overt and assertive. There is still a deeply pragmatic approach, with the ‘Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Corporation strategic plan 2020–2025’ (Plan C, 2020) seeking joint management of land, focusing on the benefits of partnerships. This is alongside aspirations for the establishment of positions like a business development officer and establishing seed funding and skills building to promote Gugu Badhun business and economic development. The latter aspirations suggest the sovereignty attitude is strengthening, though Gugu Badhun are still aware of the political and social structures within which they work. The Native Title recognition that Gugu Badhun have over parts of their Country is largely non-exclusive and gives Gugu Badhun the ‘right to negotiate’ (Plan C, 2014), so partnerships are essential. However, there is increasing consideration of how those partnerships can better benefit Gugu Badhun, such as suggesting that a Gugu Badhun Ranger Program could incorporate fee-for-service elements with those partners (Plan C, 2020).

Discussions about economic development with Gugu Badhun have also largely shifted from a smaller-scale focus on *business* ideas to broader discussions of what a Gugu Badhun *economy* should look like. This indicates the importance of creating spaces for the Nation to come together to discuss INB, not only in general terms but especially in ways that apply specifically to their Nation. As Gugu Badhun citizens become more confident discussing sovereignty and INB amongst themselves, and with researchers, they are likely to feel more confident taking that approach into their discussions with other partners. Although this paper focuses on advances in the community’s sovereignty attitude – that is, the assumption that Gugu Badhun sovereignty already exists and can be enacted – we should note that the research team has also grown in our academic understandings of sovereignty and self-determination since 2015. Thus, whereas early discussions we led with Gugu Badhun people were framed in terms of ‘stealth governance’ (Cornell, 2015a: 15), more recent conversations have been less stealthy and more overt.

In the early stages of our work, Gugu Badhun spoke about many of the same principles that have been discussed more recently, particularly sharing. However, this was not considered an act of sovereignty in the same way that it increasingly is. Sovereignty was an important principle of early discussions, but it was discussed more abstractly, justified by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, rather than

grounded in Gugu Badhun law and cosmology. The ‘Gugu Badhun people’s community plan 2015–2020’ (Plan C, 2014) identified community, culture, Country and economy as key priorities, and these have remained central to how Gugu Badhun people talk about their priorities, with discussions increasingly taking Gugu Badhun self-determination and self-government in these domains as self-evident. In the 2022 Citizenship Forum, sovereignty was discussed as a verb, with its justification in Gugu Badhun stories, and the articulation of that expressed through the act of sharing.

## Conclusions

INB is a comprehensive approach that needs to be applied holistically; visioning an economy cannot be independent of strong governments. Gugu Badhun people are aware that an economy cannot exist in a vacuum, but that ‘underpinning all this is the need to have a good structure and governance in place’ (26 July 2020). Gugu Badhun’s INB work is in progress, particularly defining what prosperity means, and how to determine what is *enough*. The workshops we have held throughout our research have provided fruitful opportunities for these discussions, allowing the Nation to express the importance of cooperation, community, sharing and caring for Country as key foundations for their economy. In all the discussions we have had throughout our research, participants focus on the importance of Gugu Badhun values, like sharing, to their INB work. As we discussed in our previous work (Petray and Gertz, 2018), the Gugu Badhun values that underpin any economic activity mean that it is fundamentally different from mainstream colonial and capitalist approaches, though asserting itself as distinct from mainstream is an ongoing process for Gugu Badhun Nation. In particular, the emphasis on sharing rather than individual accumulation of wealth presents an alternative model of how economies could be developed. However, noting the importance of cultural match as a key principle of INB, and respecting the sovereignty of other Indigenous Nations, Gugu Badhun does not seek to universalise its approach to economic development outside its territories and jurisdictions.

Ultimately, INB and the work Gugu Badhun has done in recent years is about *sovereignty*. As one webinar participant articulated, the purpose of economic development in an INB context is to ‘fund our own way of governing so that we can control our own country, economy, culture and community [sic]’ (23 August 2020). We can see the shift in Gugu Badhun’s sovereignty attitude in the evolution of the community plans. The second version of this plan articulates sovereignty more explicitly, and we expect future iterations will continue this trajectory. Our ongoing work with Gugu Badhun will provide a longitudinal understanding of this process. Likewise, Gugu Badhun storytelling is a basis for articulating cultural values, social structures and ways of connecting themselves to their ancient sovereignty, by enacting these terms in a form of contemporary Gugu Badhun law. We have seen the stories used more and more as evidence for enacting Gugu Badhun sovereignty, and as the foundation for a Gugu Badhun future. Storytelling in this way is a self-determined act of restoration, resurgence and sovereignty.

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## Notes

1. We use 'their' when describing Gugu Badhun because just two of the authors are Gugu Badhun citizens, and the others are not.
2. DP190102060 began in 2019 and ended in the first half of 2023. See: <https://www.uts.edu.au/research-and-teaching/our-research/jumbunna-institute-indigenous-education-and-research/our-research/indigenous-nations-and-collaborative-futures/research-and-projects/prerequisite-conditions-indigenous-nation-self-government>.
3. For further information about Gugu Badhun's creation story of *Numalnali* and *Bubunba*, see Gertz (2019).
4. Gugu Badhun People #2 [QUD85/2005] Hoolihan on behalf of the Gugu Badhun People #2 v State of Queensland [2012] FCA 800. Gugu Badhun's application for a Native Title Determination was lodged with the Federal Court of Australia on March 22, 2005 and was successfully determined on 1 August 2012. Gugu Badhun have lodged a further Native Title application with the Federal Court, Gugu Badhun People #3 [QUD777/2019] on 6 March 2020.
5. 'Estate' refers to the traditional geography that Gugu Badhun asserts to be its ancestral homelands, the total territory of which is not formally recognised within Australian State legal frameworks. Gugu Badhun Estate or Gugu Badhun Country refers to the area of land, boarded by the boundaries established with their Aboriginal neighbours pre-colonisation.
6. Incorporation as an RNTBC is compulsory under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act (Cth) 2006. Their functions are defined by Australian federal and state legislation and regulatory frameworks (e.g. Native Title Act (Cth) 1993, Cultural Heritage Act (Qld) 2006).

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