

Gugu Badhun: People of the Valley of Lagoons

by Yvonne Cadet-James, Robert Andrew James, Sue McGinty
and Russell McGregor

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As Australia discusses and debates the 3 claims made by the Uluru Statement from the Heart – an Indigenous voice to parliament, a *makarrata* commission and a truth-telling process – some Aboriginal nations are advancing their sovereignty in other ways. Following the terminology of Indigenous Nation-Building scholars, they are beginning to identify, organise and act as sovereign nations.¹

A key discussion in this nation-building process is data sovereignty and control over narratives. This is, in fact, central to the Uluru Statement's truth-telling process. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices need to be centred in any discussions of Australia's colonising process. To this end, *Gugu Badhun: People of the Valley of Lagoons* is an example of the next great opportunity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. The book offers a concise history of one Aboriginal nation. It builds on the past few decades of historical work that has addressed the unacknowledged history of colonisation in Australia, and the growing recognition of the effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, rather than taking a pan-Indigenous focus, its single-nation focus enables the book to be specific, not just in terms of events that happened but also in the analysis of how these events have affected the Gugu Badhun people.

Gugu Badhun academic Professor Yvonne Cadet-James and her co-authors Robert James, Sue McGinty and Russell McGregor have put together a sharp and engaging history. It builds on previous research by archaeologists and historians, the written

1 Cornell, 'Processes of Native Nationhood'.

archives and, most importantly, oral histories. Most of these are from Gugu Badhun people themselves, with some collected from white pastoralists and others. The writing is accessible and engaging, with a storytelling style.

A clear argument of this history is that the Gugu Badhun people were not pawns at the whim of governments and white people. It of course acknowledges the unsavoury aspects of history: violent clashes over land with white pastoral settlers; the role of the Native Police; the exploitation of Gugu Badhun workers on cattle stations; the oppressive administration of the Queensland *Aboriginal Protection and the Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* and the removal of Gugu Badhun people from their country and their children from their families. But instead of an exploration of top-down power, Cadet-James and colleagues weave in details that demonstrate how people exercised considerable agency despite the odds that were stacked against them. For example, they chose to leave country to pursue schooling and employment: 'Opportunities for educational and job advancement required both that people made choices and that circumstances made those choices possible' (p. 79). Some readers might be sceptical of the claims of agency as being a contemporary interpretation of the past. But the book uses specific examples and evidence as the basis for its claims. For example, in a chapter on the famous exploration parties that moved through Gugu Badhun country, evidence from Leichhardt's and Gilbert's journals supports claims that 'the Gugu Badhun were equally curious about the intruders' (p. 17).

This focus on agency is well balanced with a recognition of structural constraints. One chapter discusses the experience of pastoral workers and their relationships with white station owners. This chapter includes discussions of the unequal sexual relationships between Gugu Badhun women and white men, but primarily focuses on the positive relationships and 'mutual dependence' that existed between Gugu Badhun people and white pastoral families. This chapter ends, however, with the astute observation that 'living together' was still marked by a power imbalance:

This imbalance of power was mitigated, but never completely removed, by the relationships forged between Aboriginal and pastoral families who grew up and worked together over generations in some cases. There was always a boss and a worker in those relationships, which could never be completely equal. (p. 69)

Another powerful feature of this historical account is the discussion of what Gugu Badhun have done over the past few decades, and will continue into the future, to make the best from history and build on their strengths. Moving off country was important for work and education, but Cadet-James et al. make clear that this does not mean a loss of identity: 'Connection, or re-connection, with country and with each other ensures that distance and time do not diminish the importance of identity and history' (p. 110).

The book demonstrates that culture is constantly changing in response to everything else around it, and that can be a strength. Using technology to re-learn language, for example, is evidence that engaging with the contemporary western world does not automatically mean loss for Gugu Badhun culture. This is because Gugu Badhun are not swept along the current of change, but rather, 'as ever, they are active players in their own destiny' (p. 121).

In addition to this history itself *being* an act of sovereignty, it is also aware of itself as such an act. The book opens with a preface, written by my colleague and Gugu Badhun PhD student Janine Gertz and former chairperson of the Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Corporation Dale Gertz, about Gugu Badhun cosmology and the importance of this history in ensuring Gugu Badhun self-determination into the future. The truth-telling in this book is an important foundation for Gugu Badhun nation-building, and it is an important step in disrupting the unequal power relations that still exist on Gugu Badhun country and across Australia. I look forward to reading more nation-specific histories as they become more common.

Reference

Cornell, Steven. 'Processes of Native Nationhood: The Indigenous Politics of Self-Government'. *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 6, no. 4 (2015): 1–27.

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