

The Gugu Badhun Researched: Intellectual Sovereignty versus Indigenous Intellectual Nullius

By Janine Gertz

According to anthropologist Peter Sutton, “the present day [Gugu Badhun] tribe has undergone almost complete destruction” (20). Gugu Badhun scholar Yvonne Cadet-James and colleagues rebuke this assertion for being excessively simplistic as Gugu Badhun culture and identity, whilst rooted in county and tradition, today has modern characteristics (107–121). In contrast with Sutton’s description in the 1970s, the Federal Court¹ in 2012 held that:

The Gugu Badhun people have used and occupied Gugu Badhun country prior to the assertion of British Sovereignty in 1788. The use of the Gugu Badhun language and acquisition and transfer of Gugu Badhun cultural knowledge has continued throughout the 20th Century to the present day.

Peter Sutton is regarded as an authoritative voice in the discipline of anthropology and linguistics and his words in the 1970s are a construction of



published knowledge and truth, produced through the western traditions of the disciplines of social anthropology and linguistics. If left unchallenged, the world would remain under the mistaken impression that if in the 1970s Gugu Badhun had undergone almost complete destruction, 50 years later in 2020, Gugu Badhun must be extinct—thus, perpetuating a Gugu

¹ Federal Court of Australia: *Hoolihan on behalf of the Gugu Badhun People 2 v State of Queensland* [2012] FCA 800.

The Gugu Badhun word for “fire-stick” is *Djiman* and knowledge of fire-stick farming has been transmitted down through the Gugu Badhun generations for millennia.

Badhun *nullius*.

The idea that science² is authoritative, neutral, rational and universal suggests it is a status or standard to which all knowledge is to be measured against. Indigenous research must *rewrite* and *reright* the Indigenous position in history and society. Moving beyond the inherited colonial legacies of western knowledge and western sovereignty, Indigenous scholars Taiaiake Alfred,³ Lester-Irabinna Rigney, and Aileen Moreton-Robinson⁴ promote “intellectual sovereignty” as the emerging field of questioning aimed at de-colonising epistemologies and methodological practices. As Ngarrindjeri⁵ scholar Lester-Irabinna Rigney explains, the shackles of neo-settler-colonialism “cannot be discussed meaningfully outside the practice of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty” (10). Western orthodoxies must be interrogated, and the basis of their power challenged otherwise they will continue to reproduce the colonised as a fixed reality and perpetuate a type of *intellectual nullius* within the structures of the academy.

Rigney proposes that “if science indicates to

us that there is no such thing as Indigenous Dreaming, then the Indigenous Australians whose realities are informed by the logics of Dreaming are therefore deemed irrational” and their worldviews dismissed as illegitimate systems of knowledge (3). My reasoning as a Gugu Badhun researcher then, particularly as a female researcher, is to be disregarded and dismissed as irrational. Through a program of decolonial epistemic counter-violence, however, Indigenous scholars can transform knowledge toward Indigenous intellectual sovereignty.

Gugu Badhun people understand and appreciate the importance of Peter Sutton’s anthropological work. My grandfather Richard Hoolihan (Snr) sought western science out to assist Gugu Badhun in recording Gugu Badhun language, demonstrating that he had an appreciation for what it could deliver. Nonetheless, Gugu Badhun still need to be critical of western science because whilst knowledge of Gugu Badhun may have begun with western science in the 1970s; *Gugu Badhun knowledge* began many thousands of years earlier.

² The term “science” is used throughout this essay to describe the western traditions of scientific investigation and philosophy in both the social and natural social sciences unless otherwise explained.

³ [Gerald Taiaiake Alfred](#) is from Kahnawá:ke in the Mohawk Nation.

⁴ Aileen Moreton-Robinson is from the Goenpul tribe, part of the Quandamooka nation on Stradbroke Island in Queensland, Australia.

⁵ Ngarrindjeri are the Aboriginal people of the lower Murray River, western Fleurieu Peninsula, and the Coorong of southern, central Australia.

Setting Fire to Colonial Fences: Gugu Badhun Djiman Research

After the conflict there is not only the disappearance of colonialism, but also the disappearance of the colonised man.

Franz Fanon—*Wretched of The Earth*.



Gaybaldji dūlay gandjiya yagu waḍuya (Take a Burning Stick and Burn the Grass)

Above: “Djiman Country” by Janine Gertz ([CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)). Burn, regain and reclaim, repair and regrow. The continuous improvement of country through the cycle of fire-stick farming.

The open grassy woodlands which first attracted the European pastoralists to Gugu Badhun country, was created by the conflict and fire of Gugu Badhun ancestor-beings thousands of years ago. Early Europeans mistakenly believed that the landscape was “natural” and that the native peoples on these lands were somehow subservient, passive participants of the environment. However like all Aboriginal peoples across the continent, Gugu Badhun people had been purposely intervening in the

improvement and productivity of the environment through the regular and deliberate practice of controlled burning of country, or fire-stick farming. The fact that Gugu Badhun’s *Bubunba* and *Numanali* creation story links us to an ancient geological event on country, represents Gugu Badhun’s cyclical intervention in the regeneration and regrowth of the *yarugugubadhungu* (country) maintained by Gugu Badhun fire-stick farming. The artwork above, “Djiman Country,” demonstrates the continuous

improvement and cyclical nature of fire-stick farming.

Ironically, the present occupiers have prevented Gugu Badhun from carrying out fire-stick farming management practices on Gugu Badhun country for reasons most commonly expressed as “in case Gugu Badhun damage the fences.” Behind this modestly conveyed reasoning, is the pastoralists’ arrogant conviction in the superiority of their traditions of western capitalist agriculture and its subsequent justification for colonisation. As the term suggests, fire-stick farming resembles western conceptions of agriculture because Aboriginal societies used it to carefully to control seasonal crops and weed suppression for at least 45,000 years. As Europeans displaced Aboriginal societies, the fragile environment on the Australian continent collapsed into a much less productive state. Even now Europeans ignore the ecological benefits of regular and repeated low-intensity fires, not understanding this practice can prevent catastrophic bushfires.

Aboriginal peoples’ practice of burning the bush in order to control growth and condition of country throughout Australia has been well established. As Boonwurrung Kulin⁶ man Bruce Pascoe explains, fire-stick farming operated across Aboriginal Australia through a common framework of five principles. First, rotation of the areas of controlled burning to provide refuge for plants and animals. Second, the type and

condition of country determined the time year for which burning was conducted. Third, weather patterns were crucial in the decisions of the timing and intensity of the burns. Fourth, neighbouring clans were advised of fire activities. Fifth, seasonal growth patterns of plants were taken into consideration and avoided if necessary (118). This sophisticated and ancient pyro-technology requires knowledge of Aboriginal sciences, which if valued within the western traditions would be classified in the disciplines of biology, agriculture, agronomy, meteorology, astronomy and politics.

The Gugu Badhun word for “fire-stick” is *Djiman* and knowledge of fire-stick farming has been transmitted down through the Gugu Badhun generations for millennia. When fire-stick farming returns to Gugu Badhun country it will signal a reassertion of Gugu Badhun ways of knowing, being and doing. *Djiman* farming is a not only a practice of land management, it is a framework for Aboriginal knowledge, law, politics and decision making. Its return to Gugu Badhun country will signal a resurrection and reassertion of Gugu Badhun sovereignty.

Gugu Badhun creation stories tell us that good things can be created from fire and conflict. For Gugu Badhun, *Djiman* is not only a framework for Gugu Badhun law, knowledge of and responsibility to community, culture and country, it is a literal and metaphorical tool for transferring fire and symbolises the transfer of

⁶ The territories of the [Boonwurrung peoples](#) of the Greater Kulin Nation are located in south-east region of Victoria, Australia.

knowledge through research. “While Aboriginal people use fire as a tool to increase productivity of the environment, Europeans [see] fire as a threat” (Kohen 42). This is a fitting comparison to the threat Gugu Badhun research can become to colonisation if it seeks “to locate tensions, conflicts, and contradictions within investigative methods” in order to overcome the “epistemic violence” imposed on Indigenous people (Rigney 7).

While the Gugu Badhun Nation uses and embraces Research as a tool towards Gugu Badhun sovereignty and self-determination across the fields of governance, community, culture, country and economy, the academy will predictably engage in an epistemological contest with Gugu Badhun. Through this contest of knowledge systems, Gugu Badhun actions a decolonial program of epistemic counter-violence with western science. The conflict with the academy will serve as a transformation praxis through which Indigenous research can challenge and increase the productivity and usefulness of western knowledge to Gugu Badhun. The contested area of epistemological interaction is what Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata refers to as the “Cultural Interface”:

a multi-layered, multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance,

different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation. It is a space of many shifting and complex interactions, between different people with different histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses. (10)

Nakata’s cultural interface model provides a framework from which to test the conflict, challenges and tensions between Gugu Badhun and non-Gugu Badhun; Indigenous and non-Indigenous philosophies and perspectives in Gugu Badhun *Djiman* Research. *Djiman* research will then order the negotiation of complex realities and competing discourses within Gugu Badhun; between Gugu Badhun and other Indigenous peoples; and Gugu Badhun and the Australian state.

It is the aim and purpose of the Gugu Badhun *Djiman* Research Centre⁷ to grow and encourage Gugu Badhun scholarship in order to dislodge the current “Indigenous Intellectual Nullius” occurring within the academy. Through this assertion of Gugu Badhun intellectual sovereignty, non-Indigenous scholars will experience their metaphorical “knowledge fences” constructed through western science, being burned by Gugu Badhun *Djiman* research. By engaging

⁷ The Gugu Badhun Research Centre’s Framework including Research Strategy and Research Protocols were developed by Gugu Badhun elder and research academic Professor Yvonne Cadet-James and this is my analysis and interpretation of the framework. It is available at <http://www.gugubadhun.com/djima-research-centre>.

in a decolonial program of epistemic counter-violence with western science, Gugu Badhun will most certainly set fire to the colonial knowledge fences that seek to contain and exclude us.

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