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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cookbooks: promoting Indigenous foodways or reinforcing Western traditions?

ABSTRACT

This article examines the recent emergence of cookbooks written for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. The cookbooks are health promotion initiatives, developed through a desire to improve the health status of Indigenous Australians. They focus on nutritious, family meals that can be cooked on a low budget. In this article, the authors argue that the cookbooks designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are developed within a Western paradigm of health and nutrition that subtly reinforces Western approaches to food and disregards traditional diets. While the authors recognize the value of the cookbooks as health promotion tools, they suggest that cookbooks centred around Indigenous foodways – with a focus on traditional ingredients and traditional cooking methods – may be more appropriate for improving the health of Indigenous people and helping Indigenous cultures to thrive. They advocate for a decolonizing approach to food and nutrition, that specifically promotes Indigenous traditions and culture, and incorporates traditional foodways into modern recipes.

KEYWORDS

food writing
cookbooks
Aboriginal
Torres Strait Islander
Indigenous foodways
decolonization

INTRODUCTION

This article examines two recent cookbooks written specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – *Kukumbat gudwan daga 'Really cooking good food' cookbook* (Women's Centres 2009) published in conjunction with the Fred Hollows Foundation, and the *Living strong: Healthy lifestyle cookbook* (Charteris et. al 2008) which is freely available from Queensland Health. These two cookbooks focus on recipes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to cook at home. Through their ingredients, they acknowledge some traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foodways and community-based approaches to food. However, they are primarily designed as health promotion activities, with an underlying goal of promoting healthy eating and improving the health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In this article, we explore the roles of the two cookbooks and question their contributions to promoting traditional Indigenous foodways. We suggest that the cookbooks subtly reinforce Western approaches to food and disregard traditional, healthy diets. We also explore some of the ways that our families are seeking to reclaim traditional foodways.

TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER FOODWAYS

Historical records suggest that, prior to colonization, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had nutritious diets and experienced generally good health (NHMRC 2000). For thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait people relied on the land and sea for their food. They lived in harmony with their environment and ate a rich and balanced diet of seasonal fruits, nuts, roots, vegetables, meats and fish (NHMRC 2000). They exercised daily to hunt and gather and, in some cases, harvest (O'Dea 1991). Their ongoing survival depended upon an intimate knowledge of the land, water and available food sources. At times, they would travel long distances to find or trade food in the lands of other Aboriginal tribes. There is good evidence that the overall diet was healthy, being low in sugars and fat, and high in complex carbohydrates (NHMRC 2000; O'Dea 1991).

Torres Strait Islander people traded amongst the islands for food, weapons and artefacts (Mosby & Robinson 1998). Their community lifestyles were based around hunting, fishing, gardening and trading. Some islanders kept gardens and grew produce. It is likely that seafood was a major food source in the Torres Strait, with easy access to

fish, shellfish, crustaceans, squid, octopus, turtle and dugong. Many Torres Strait Islander people continue to prize these foods today.

Prior to colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people gathered and hunted only sufficient food for their immediate requirements; they rarely stored food for later use (NHMRC 2000: 36). Foods were eaten fresh: either raw, or roasted in an earth oven. While many of the traditional food preparation techniques have disappeared, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to use earth ovens for cooking.

DIETARY CHANGES THROUGH COLONIZATION

Colonization brought rapid changes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's diets. Traditional ways of hunting and gathering food started to disappear. In their place, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people began to depend on food rations distributed by colonizers.

Foley (2005: 25) states that the 'colonial impact on Indigenous people's food practices was cataclysmic and its effects still reverberate today'. This has been true for many Indigenous peoples of the world; for example, Mihesuah (2005) highlights the dietary changes experienced by Native American peoples. Through colonization, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people began to depend on Western foods. They came to believe that Western foods were superior, and they lost access to their traditional ways of eating. Their staple rations included bully beef, salt, sugar and flour (Foley 2005). Westernized crops emerged in gardens and on farms, and access to traditional foods became more difficult. On the mainland, access to food sources was greatly diminished as thousands of acres were cleared for cattle, sheep and wheat. These introduced practices caused disruption to Aboriginal ways of life.

Throughout the period of colonization, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people came to eat less fresh food and rely more on processed starchy, fatty, salty food (Foley 2005; NHMRC 2000). At the same time, they experienced a rapid deterioration in their overall health and wellbeing (NHMRC 2000; Siggers & Gray 1991).

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH STATUS TODAY

Today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the poorest health status of any group in the Australian population (AIHW 2011). The statistics describe lower life expectancy, elevated mortality rate, increased risk of cancer and increased risk of chronic disease (including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, respiratory disease and kidney disease) (AIHW 2011).

Approximately 12 per cent of the Indigenous population has diabetes, compared with 4 per cent of the non-Indigenous population (AIHW 2011). Indigenous Australians are hospitalised for cardiovascular diseases at between 1 and 7 times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians (AIHW 2011: viii). Contributing factors include higher use of tobacco, alcohol and other substances, combined with poor nutrition and low levels of physical activity. Indigenous people are more likely to be overweight, obese or underweight when compared to non-Indigenous Australians (AIHW 2011: 35).

RECENT EFFORTS TO IMPROVE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH THROUGH SPECIAL COOKBOOKS

In recent years, efforts to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health have been expanded to include nutritional messages and health promotion. The message for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is the same as the message for non-Indigenous Australians: that the community eats too many foods that are high in salt, fat and sugar, and that people's health would improve if they paid more attention to their diets and undertook more physical activity.

Cookbooks that target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are starting to emerge as part of this health promotion activity. Two of these cookbooks are our focus in this article: *Kukumbat gudwan daga 'Really cooking good food' cookbook* (Women's Centres 2009) published in conjunction with the Fred Hollows Foundation, and the *Living strong: Healthy lifestyle cookbook* (Charteris et. al 2008) which is freely available from Queensland Health. Other available cookbooks include *Quick meals for Kooris* (Harris 2008) and *Feeding your mob with fruit & veg: Bush tucker tips* (Mid North Coast Aboriginal Health Partnership 2008).

The cookbooks for Indigenous Australians are a direct response to the community's poor health status, and are an attempt to communicate nutritional

messages in a culturally appropriate way. These books are primarily a public health strategy that is part of a larger public health agenda that is trying to improve health status through nutrition. They acknowledge traditional Indigenous foodways through some of their ingredients, but the recipes include a mix of Indigenous and Western ingredients, and recipes are drawn from many cultures. The cookbooks focus on how to provide nutritious, low-budget food for a family.

KUKUMBAT GUDWAN DAGA 'REALLY COOKING GOOD FOOD' COOKBOOK

The *Kukumbat gudwan daga 'Really cooking good food' cookbook* (Women's Centres 2009) was produced by the Women's Centres of Manyallaluk Gulin Gulin and Wugularr and the Health Promotion Women's Development Coordinator from the Fred Hollows Foundation. It was developed throughout 2008 by women in the Jawoyn region, who worked with a chef and a nutritionist from The Fred Hollows Foundation (Fred Hollows Foundation 2013: 1).

The resulting cookbook is beautifully presented. It provides step-by-step photographs, lists of ingredients and techniques for creating meals for 10 people or more. The ingredients lists are divided into portions for 10, 30, 50 and 100 people – a clear recognition of the community focus of meals for many Indigenous people. The recipes all fit within the school nutrition program guidelines and the Australian dietary guidelines. The book includes local and easy-to-access ingredients, ranging from kangaroo tail stew to spaghetti. The recipes particularly highlight local ingredients, which is important when the nearest supermarket might be hours away.

At the cookbook launch, Miliwanga (Mili) Sandy performed a song composed for the occasion and said that the cookbook will 'help us to avoid illnesses like diabetes [and] heart problems' (Fred Hollows Foundation 2013: 1). The launch involved a cook-off using recipes from the cookbook, all cooked on wood-fuelled woks in the outdoors.

LIVING STRONG: HEALTHY LIFESTYLE COOKBOOK

The *Living strong: Healthy lifestyle cookbook* (Charteris et. al 2008) was developed in response to requests from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were clients attending the *Healthy Weight* and *Living Strong* Programs that have been delivered in Queensland since the mid-1990s. These programs involve nutrition

education, and in most cases are delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers with supporting personnel. Participants help to prepare recipes and then share the food. The cookbook was developed because many community members who attended the programs ‘felt there was a need for a cookbook with healthy recipes to complement the program and to assist them in making healthier choices when preparing meals for their families’ (Charteris et. al 2008: 1).

The *Living strong: Healthy lifestyle cookbook* was compiled by three Queensland Health staff members – two Nutrition Promotion Officers and one Senior Network Project Officer with Population Health Services. It offers a variety of recipes based on the Australian dietary guidelines, and is designed to be used by individuals who want simple, healthy recipes to cook at home. The recipes focus on vegetables, fruit, fish, lean meat and low fat dairy products, with each recipe providing information about the number of serves of fruit and vegetables in the final dish.

The *Living strong: Healthy lifestyle cookbook* shows step-by-step instructions for each recipe, along with coloured photographs. It is available for free download from the Queensland Government website. Each recipe is designed to fit on one page, so it is possible to print only the recipe you want. Health Workers can also just print one recipe to demonstrate in their healthy eating and cooking programs.

WESTERN MEASURES OF HEALTH

The two Indigenous cookbooks reviewed above have clear public health goals. They prioritize nutrition guidelines, simple recipes and low-budget meals. However, they are written with a paradigm that accepts and promotes Western measures of health. They do not address the long-term impacts of colonization on the once healthy diets of Indigenous Australians. In addition, apart from mentioning some bush tucker ingredients, they do not identify how Indigenous food practices can be revitalized. (We recognize that the *Kukubat gudwan daga ‘Really cooking good food’ cookbook* goes further in this regard than other cookbooks.)

We argue that offering mainstream nutrition initiatives that are grounded in Western foodways will not address Indigenous nutrition problems that stem from the impact of colonization. While education about food and nutrition is clearly important in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, we believe that it needs to be coupled with a deep understanding of Indigenous history and a respect for Indigenous cultures.

Some of the recipes in the *Living strong: Healthy lifestyle cookbook* (Charteris et. al 2008) are for foods that have become accepted as cultural foods in the time since colonization, and are not pre-colonial Indigenous foods. For example, damper (21) and dumplings (14) are made with wheat flour, and wheat was not grown in Australia prior to colonization (NHMRC 2003). Wheat entered Indigenous diets after colonization, and has become so entrenched that wheat-based foods are understood as being culturally part of Indigenous diets (Foley 2005). Today, these foods are reflected back to us as being traditional foods in cookbooks designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These are not traditional foods at all: they are the result of colonization.

Other foods in the *Living strong: Healthy lifestyle cookbook* (Charteris et. al 2008) are not directly from Indigenous traditions or early colonization, but are still recognized as being widely eaten by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Examples of these include Outback Apple Crumble (25) and Creamy Custard (26). In many ways, these cookbooks reflect the colonial era, rather than supporting Indigenous people to move away from it.

Waziyatawin (2005) explains that Indigenous people need to ‘decolonize’ their diets and that this would help to reverse some of the effects of colonization. Chilisa (2012) explains that decolonization is ‘a process of centering the concerns and worldviews of the colonized Other so that they understand themselves through their own assumptions and perspectives’ (13). She describes decolonization as both ‘an event and a process’ (14). The decolonizing process challenges the ‘dominant modern methods of knowing and reinforces Indigenous identity and discourse’ (Habashi 2005: 771) and provides for ‘the unmasking and deconstruction of imperialism, and its aspect of colonialism, in its old and new formation alongside a search for sovereignty; for reclamation of knowledge, language, and culture; and for the social transformation of the colonial relations between the native and the settler’ (Smith 2008: 117). In this way, decolonizing processes allow for Indigenous control and ownership (Smith 1999); they empower or re-empower Indigenous peoples (Fredericks 2010).

From the perspective of diet and nutrition, decolonization is a process of reclaiming traditional foodways: it involves prioritizing Indigenous practices without constant references to the assumed superiority of Western ways. Waziyatawin (2005) recognizes that changes in dietary practice may be difficult in some areas due to

inaccessibility to land, economic means and transport, and because of other structural issues. Despite these obstacles, she urges people to do what they can and to ‘determine your current access to traditional foods and prioritize your attempts to recover various foods’ (76).

Waziyatawin’s (2005) work is important because she speaks of recovering past practices and forming new habits, as a way ensuring cultural survival and countering the ongoing impacts of colonization. Indigenous Australian woman Sherwood (2009) explains that decolonization requires Indigenous people ‘to examine the impact colonization has upon their past and present in order to formulate a future that does not reinstate the past’ (24). Waziyatawin relates this to food by contending that, ‘if we consciously correlate our eating habits with our participation in our colonization, the experience becomes less enjoyable’ (2005: 8). She explains that the ‘recovery of these practices becomes a means of countering the forces of colonization as well as a way to restore health and wellbeing’ (83). It is possible that recovering some of the traditional foodways may help Indigenous peoples to move beyond mere survival, and allow them to thrive.

Some authors argue that traditional Indigenous foodways could promote Indigenous healing from the effects of colonization and lead to improved health amongst Indigenous communities (both across Australia and in other parts of the world) (see, for example, Milburn 2004, Mihesuah 2005, Wall & Virgil 2004, Waziyatawin 2005). It is likely that one of the best ways of addressing the ill health that plagues Indigenous communities is through reclaiming and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge and foodways (Bodirsky & Johnson 2008). The Decolonizing Diet Project (Layne 2013, Reinhardt 2013), Decolonizing your Diet blogs, and Native Foods Week all support these types of reclamation and revitalization initiatives.

EMERGING TRADITIONAL FOODS

Some traditional Indigenous foods are now becoming more widely available throughout Australia. For example, kangaroo meat is available in general supermarkets, and dried native herbs and spices are available through mail order. Much more of this is needed.

Some Indigenous foods require cookery knowledge and skills that were traditionally passed from one generation to the next. But many Indigenous Australian people today have never learned these skills. A process of decolonization may involve

explicit teaching about traditional food practices – with cookbooks playing an important part in this education process.

Of course, traditional foods need to be eaten in a modern context. The current cookbooks don't always provide detail about alternative ways to cook traditional foods or how different foods might be served together. Cookbooks that prioritize decolonization might present a variety of approaches for traditional ingredients – including traditional cooking methods, methods from the colonial era, and modern methods.

For example, in Bronwyn's family, children of a range of ages like to eat kangaroo, but they like it served in a range of ways that incorporate both traditional and modern approaches. Living in tropical Central Queensland, they don't always like the piping hot kangaroo stew described in the *Living strong: Healthy lifestyle cookbook* (page 13). Bronwyn's family love Kanga Bangas (sausages) (see Figure 1), served with salad or green vegetables and sweet potato (dry baked, not fried). This is a nutritious meal: low in fat, high in dietary fibre, and catering for people who may have diabetes.



Figure 1: Kanga Bangas (sausages) and Kangaroo Steaks. These were purchased from a general supermarket and cooked in a suburban kitchen (Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2012).

In decolonizing one's diet, it is not necessary to always cook in the same way, nor to always use traditional cooking methods. We argue that decolonization means that we have access to traditional ingredients and are able to choose what we cook, how we cook, what we eat and how we eat it, in a way that is inclusive of a wide range of ingredients (see Figure 2).

Australians today are increasingly opting for a mix of cooking styles, with a fusion Asian, Indian, European and African recipes. All of these foods can be fused with Indigenous Australian foods. For example, in north Queensland there is a blend of Asian influences in Indigenous people's diets, and this is reflected in mainstream foods sources. The cookbooks discussed in this article both show an Asian influence in their recipes, although the *Living strong: Healthy lifestyle cookbook* demonstrates this more.



Figure 2: Cookin' Up in the Kitchen.

This [Fig.2] is Rodney Stoter, a Kuku Yalanji man and partner to Bronwyn Fredericks who enjoys cookin' up kangaroo, local fish and vegetables in the kitchen. Here, he is cooking fish cakes made of freshly caught local fish, grated vegetables, bush herbs and egg whites. Rodney tries to use no flour, butter, breadcrumbs or oil. He always makes enough to share and loves feeding family members (Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2012).

Perhaps the most vital aspect of decolonizing food is the need to pass on cookery knowledge and skills to future generations, and to learn how to cook foods in both traditional and modern ways. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who hunt and gather food need to teach young people how to do this and how to prepare foods in traditional ways (see Figures 3 & 4). This is a skills gap that could be filled by cookbooks.



Figure 3. *The catch for the extended family.*

This catch [Fig. 3] will be shared across an extended family and the fish will be prepared using a range of recipes (Photograph by Margaret Anderson, 2013).



Figure 4: Fish grilled over hot coals.

Fresh fish cooked directly over coals without foil although using a wire rack to avoid fish having direct contact with the coals (Photograph by Margaret Anderson, 2013).

CONCLUSION

We recognize that cookbooks that are specifically designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be an important health promotion initiative. Any strategy that improves the health of Australia's Indigenous peoples must be welcomed.

However, we argue that the current range of Indigenous cookbooks have been designed within a Westernized food paradigm. We believe that Indigenous cookbooks need to become part of the move towards decolonization by incorporating Indigenous food knowledge and food-related traditions.

If Indigenous foodways are not recorded, they are at risk of being forgotten. Instead, they need to be embedded into the everyday food practices of Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander people, and made available to all Australians. The cookbooks written specifically for Indigenous Australians need to move beyond Western measures of health and nutrition. Ideally, they would contribute towards a process of decolonization, where Indigenous foods and foodways can be recognized as beneficial to all Australians, not just to Indigenous Australians.

Clearly, the current health status of Indigenous people and the health disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians demand a challenge to previous colonial ideologies. Incorporating decolonizing processes into food practices and health promotion could provide one step forward. Several researchers show that decolonizing processes can assist in the process of learning and developing a deeper understanding of the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (for example, Sherwood 2009, Smith 1999).

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