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# "We eat more than kangaroo tail or dugong you know...": Recent Indigenous Australian Cookbooks

### Introduction

In the past five years, a number of cookbooks have been published by Indigenous Australian groups in association with government departments and non-profit organisations. These

cookbooks typically involve community and public health nutritionists, dieticians, and health workers working with local communities to produce cookbooks that will improve the health status of Indigenous Australians. These cookbooks are one strategy in broader public health interventions that are designed to teach people how to cook simple, nutritious, cost-effective meals.

In this article, we discuss four recent examples of Indigenous Australian cookbooks. We identify their value as a low-cost strategy in broader interlinking public health interventions. But we question their place within the broader context of colonisation and the ongoing health disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians. We ask whether these cookbooks might be more effective if they were to incorporate more Indigenous knowledge and food-related traditions rather than be based on western nutrition and food preparation models governed by public health dietary initiatives.

Throughout, we use the term Indigenous Australian people to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, except when referring to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people specifically or using a direct quote.

### **Recent Indigenous Cookbooks**

In recent years, two broad groups of cookbooks relevant to Indigenous Australian people have emerged. The first group comprises those produced for a reason that could be identified as "specifically for Indigenous Australian people" through a collaboration of nutritionists, dieticians, government health officers, and Indigenous community members. These books tend to focus on ways to cook basic affordable, nutritious food based

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on broader Australian nutrition initiatives. The second group is about Indigenous Australian foods and "bush foods," and the primary target of these books is the broader (non-Indigenous) population. These books tend to be stylised to appeal to people's intrigue with the "other". Our focus in this paper is on the first group—cookbooks published specifically for seemingly "everyday use" by Indigenous Australian people and begin by reviewing four recent examples. We will demonstrate, however, that these books are still constructed in ways that reflect Western concepts of food, food preparation, and what the dominant culture considers healthy. These are, moreover, primarily funded through government sources.

The Kukumbat Gudwan Daga "Really Cooking Good Food" Cookbook (Women's Centres) was produced in 2012 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 states that it was developed throughout 2008 as a "collaborative effort between women from remote Indigenous communities of the Jawoyn region, a chef, and Alison Lorraine, a nutritionist from The Fred Hollows Foundation" (Fred Hollows Foundation 1). The women's centres within these communities work on increasing self-determination of women through increasing networking, communication, capacity to manage and govern, and knowledge sharing.

Information about the cookbook explains that the need for this cookbook was identified by the local women, who wanted healthy recipes to cook for their families and large numbers of people (Fred Hollows Foundation). The project was structured in a way that enabled the women and the women's centres to make decisions about the cookbook and the process as a whole. It was also designed to increase the local level of capacity and empowerment, improve literacy and numeracy skills, and increase nutrition and food safety. The resulting cookbook is beautifully presented. It provides step-by-step photographs, lists of ingredients, and techniques to create meals for 10 people or more. In fact, the ingredients are divided into portions for 10, 30, 50, and 100 people. The recipes 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 launch of this book, Miliwanga (Mili) Sandy performed an especially composed song and said that the cookbook will "help us to avoid illnesses like diabetes, heart problems—all the problems that our people have been facing for many, many generations" (Fred Hollows Foundation 1). The launch involved a cook-off using the recipes from the cookbook, all cooked on wood-fuelled woks in the outdoors.

The Living Strong: Healthy Lifestyle Cookbook (Charteris et. al) was developed in response to requests from Indigenous Australian people who were clients attending the *Healthy Weight* and *Living Strong* Programs that have been delivered in Queensland since the

mid-1990s. These programs are specifically designed for adults Indigenous Australian and are offered in group environments in urban, rural, and remote communities. This cookbook was designed to complement these programs which were originally developed as an Indigenous version of the Lighten Up Program designed for whole of population by Public Health Nutritionists employed by Queensland Health.

In most cases, the programs are offered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers with supporting community and public health personnel. The *Healthy Weight* and *Living Strong Programs* involve nutrition education. Participants help to prepare recipes and then share the food. The cookbook was developed as an adjunct to the program, because many community members who attended these "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 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 and is based on the program. It was not designed to incorporate Indigenous food pathways, practices, or concepts. The recipes focus on vegetables, fruit, fish, lean meat, and low fat dairy products. The book provides nutrition information, including the importance of daily consuming two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables. Each recipe provides information about the number of serves of fruit and vegetables in the final dish. Like the Kukumbat Gudwan Daga "Really Cooking Good Food" Cookbook, the Living Strong: Healthy Lifestyle Cookbook shows step-by-step instructions for each recipe, along with coloured photographs.

This cookbook is available free as an entire book or a series of downloadable recipes from the Queensland Government website. Each recipe is designed to fit on one page, so it is possible to print only the recipe you might want to read about or cook. Health Workers can also just print one recipe to demonstrate in their healthy eating and cooking programs.

Quick Meals for Kooris (Harris) was first developed in 1998 to address, its author states, the need for Indigenous Australian people to "have easy access to relevant food programs in order to gain knowledge and develop skills that will promote healthy family eating" (Harris 2). The cookbook is part of a group program designed to be run by Aboriginal Health Workers or Aboriginal community members. The program offers hands-on cooking sessions and encourages participants to practice their cooking skills at home. *Quick Meals for Kooris* is structured into sessions that are relevant for these programs: Healthy eating for people with diabetes; Heart disease; Obesity and overweight; People recovering from drug and alcohol abuse; Kidney (renal) problems; People with chewing and swallowing problems; and, Food allergy and food intolerance. It provides practical advice about teaching cooking skills, including that people may not have "the skills or motivation to cook" and that "some people may not have a fridge or stove. They may not be able to read very well. They may think that it costs too much to buy all the ingredients" (Harris 14).

*Feeding Your Mob With Fruit & Veg: Bush Tucker Tips* (Mid North Coast Aboriginal Health Partnership) was developed in 2009 by the Mid North Coast Aboriginal Health Partnership in conjunction with the local Aboriginal Health Service and their communities. It was adapted with permission from the original *Feeding the Family* cooking program conducted in Western New South Wales

This cookbook focuses on fresh, frozen, canned, and dried fruit and vegetables. It promotes the preparation of meals that are enjoyable for the whole family. The recipes are economical, and the background information states that the recipes cost "only a fraction of what it would cost to buy the food already prepared" (Mid North Coast Aboriginal Health Partnership 1). Each recipe in *Feeding Your Mob* includes a bush tucker tip and encourages community members to "experiment with traditional ingredients used in Aboriginal food preparation. Using these ideas will add to the nutritional value and flavour of the recipes. In addition to growing in their natural areas, the bush tucker ingredients may, the book advises, be cultivated or purchased in specialty shops or online" (1). There are no instructions on the cultivation of the foods these need to be sourced elsewhere.

# A Common Purpose and Funding

These recent cookbooks are all designed to improve the health status of Indigenous Australians based on the Australian Dietary Guidelines, and other broader health documents, policies and programs. They are designed as everyday cookbooks that will provide low-cost, nutritious meals for families. They were all produced with involvement from community and public health nutritionists, dieticians, and/or Indigenous health workers. Their public health objectives are made clear in their titles, abstracts, prefaces, and/or cooking introductions.

The cookbooks produced for Indigenous Australians are also all designed to be used by Health Workers in community based cooking demonstrations and cooking classes. They include simple recipes that are designed to develop participants cooking skills in supportive social environments where participants can learn from one another. The recipes are designed for cooking on a low budget and with minimal equipment. They provide opportunities for users to explore new recipes while making minimal financial outlay and with little risk of waste (Foley 2005).

These cookbooks can thus be understood as low-cost strategies that form part of broader public health interventions that are directed towards long-term nutritional change. In the absence of robust evaluations, it is difficult to say whether they have an impact on the confidence of people in cooking low-cost healthy meals, or whether any cookery learned from them is sustained over a long period of time. It is recognised that cooking classes and the use of cookbooks do not exist as stand-alone strategies but exist within a complex web of community issues, events, access to food, food security, and storage and cookery facilities (Foley 2010; Foley et al 2011). Moreover, as Indigenous women we are also well aware of the place food has within Indigenous cultures.

Cookbooks produced for Indigenous Australians are typically supported either wholly or partly by government funding. For example, the Living Strong: Healthy Lifestyle Cookbook is funded entirely by the Queensland Government and continues to be made freely available by that body. Two books (Quick Meals for Kooris, and Feeding Your Mob With Fruit & Veg: Bush Tucker Tips) grew directly from community-based, publicly funded nutrition programs. The Kukumbat Gudwan Daga "Really Cooking Good Food" Cookbook was produced by a group of non-government organisations (and may have included government funding). This funding model sets these Indigenous Australian cookbooks apart from other cookbooks, which tend to be commercially produced and sold through bookstores. Their funding demonstrates that these cookbooks are designed as health strategies, produced by organisations with a stake in the health status of Indigenous Australians and that want to influence the food behaviours of Indigenous Australians.

# Why So Focused on Nutrition?

The cookbooks are designed as a response to the appalling health statistics of Indigenous Australians. They should be seen, first and foremost, as health strategies that are attempting to improve health status through nutrition.

Indigenous Australians are the most socially and economically disadvantaged population group in Australia, and they have the poorest health status. The statistics describe the degree of sicknesses and disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians—including a 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).

Statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show that: approximately 12 per cent of the Indigenous population has diabetes (compared with 4 per cent of the non-Indigenous population) (AIHW viii); Indigenous Australians are likely to be hospitalised for cardiovascular diseases at between 1 and 7 times the rate non-Indigenous Australians (viii); Indigenous children aged 0-14 years die at twice the rate of non-Indigenous children and infant mortality rates are almost twice that of non-Indigenous infants (ix); and, between 2004 and 2005, 66 per cent of all Indigenous deaths were before 65 years of age, compared with 20 percent of non-Indigenous deaths (ix). These statistics contribute to a life expectancy for Indigenous women that is 9.7 years less than that for all Australians, and a life expectancy for Indigenous men that is 11.5 years less than that for all Australians (AIHW ix).

While these statistics reflect poor health status and a high level of illness at the community level, it is clear that individual and family

behaviours play a key role in Indigenous health and wellbeing outcomes (AIHW 30). Behaviours that are particularly important include use of tobacco, alcohol, and other substances, along with nutrition and physical activity. The research reveals that Indigenous Australians consume only small amounts of fruit and vegetables, particularly in remote areas (AIHW 34). Indigenous people are more likely to be overweight, obese, or underweight when compared to non-Indigenous Australians (35). The nutritional messages directed towards Indigenous Australians are the same as those targeting the rest of the community: that we eat too many foods that are high in salt, fat, and sugar, and that our health would improve if we paid more attention to our diets and undertook more physical activity. The cookbooks for Indigenous Australians are a direct response to these statistics and an attempt to communicate nutritional messages in a culturally appropriate way.

## Our Health and Diets Weren't Always like That

The health and nutrition problems of Indigenous Australian have emerged since colonisation, and are a direct result of it. Foley notes that "the colonial impact on Indigenous people's food practices was cataclysmic and its effects still reverberate today" (25). This is true for many Indigenous peoples of the world (Mihesuah). Before colonisation, Indigenous Australian diets were filled with nutritious foods that supported good health. Prior to 1788, Indigenous Australian people had, in general, a relatively good lifestyle and strong health status (Saggers, and Gray). Thomson claims that, when the British invaded Australia, Indigenous Australians were "physically, socially and emotionally healthier than most Europeans of that time" (Thomson 939). This is supported in other sources (see, for example, Saggers, and Gray).

The historical records of British and European explorers present a consistent picture regarding the health of Aboriginal peoples. For example, Edward Eyre, a European explorer writing on the Murray River area, described the Aboriginal people he encountered as "almost free from diseases and well-shaped in body and limb" (qtd. in Cleland). There are many other similar accounts from the observations of Arthur Phillip, Australia's first governor (Stone 20), from James Cook (qtd. in Clark), and from historical records (see, examples such as Abbie, Elphinstone). The colonial invasion, with the establishment of the British penal colony at Botany Bay, began the destruction of Indigenous lifestyles and cultures through colonising practices. Prior to colonisation, Indigenous food sources consisted of different types of plants and animals available in the particular locations and seasons. They had an extensive knowledge of plants and animals, including where such foods would be available and when. After colonisation, the food sources of Indigenous Australians were gradually diminished through farming and colonial frontier violence (Saggers, and Gray).

Over time, Indigenous Australians were gradually and increasingly separated from their land bases (Saggers, and Gray). Traditional foods were replaced with rations of bully beef, salt, flour, jam, sugar, and, at times, tobacco. While the rations differed from place to place, they were generally inadequate (Foley). Indigenous people gradually moved away from their native diet, which was high in fresh food, low in kilojoules, and high in carbohydrate, fibre, protein, and nutrients. Their new diet was energy-dense, starchy, fatty, and salty (NHMRC).

As nutritionally poor foods entered into Indigenous diets, they became entrenched over time. Some of these foods are now even understood as culturally part of the Indigenous diet, such as damper (simple raising agent bread) and Johnny cakes in Australia (Foley), and Fry bread in the USA (Waziyatawin). A Johnny cake is a type of flatbread made of wheat meal and baked on the ashes of a fire or fried in a pan. Fry bread is flat dough with yeast or baking powder added as a rising agent and then fried in oil, lard, or shortening (Mihesuah). These foods are not traditional Indigenous foods. They make us unwell and contribute to our poor health status. It is clear that the loss of traditional foods is directly linked to the diet-related illnesses currently experienced by Indigenous Australian people. As Indigenous women, we are well aware of the illness experienced by those we love and care about and we attend the funerals of those who die way too early. We hear the stories of the foodways of our peoples and we long for answers that will contribute to improved health and wellness.

# Are There Other Answers?

The Indigenous cookbooks reviewed in this paper focus on Western measures of health. They prioritise nutrition guidelines, simple recipes, and low-budget meals ahead of traditional Indigenous ingredients and Indigenous ways of cooking. They do not address the long-term impacts of colonisation on the once healthy diets of Indigenous Australians nor do they, apart from a brief mention of "bush tucker ingredients" (Mid North Coast Aboriginal Health Partnership), identify any Indigenous foodways or the food practices that we used to, or might still, follow. Moreover, simply offering mainstream nutrition initiatives grounded in predominately Anglo-Australian ideology cannot fix problems that were also caused by that ideology over many decades of colonisation. Furthermore, nutritionists and dieticians in this context are positioned as holding the "legitimate knowledge" and (consequently the paid positions) that underpin their power within the development of these cookbooks (Alfred, Smith). They are insulated in these roles since the community groups involved cannot access funding for such projects without such knowledge holders, their disciplines, and the systems that support them (Smith). Their positioning, privilege and advantage is demonstration of the possessive of a larger white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, Talikin' Up, Whiteness, Possessive Logic).

The work of Moreton-Robinson is important to draw on in this context. She explains that the protection of, and investment in, white values and interests is rooted in the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty (Possessive Logic 1–9). In the development of the cookbooks, the knowledge of nutrition and values of the dominant culture are embedded within the "legitimate knowledge" holders, the systems they work within, the funding model, and the greater public health domain. Moreton-

Robinson contends that, if questioned, the system and sometimes the people in it might work in ways that protect and maintain their own interests in Indigenous issues by the denial and exclusion of Indigenous people and our sovereignty (Whiteness). Thus, this may result in their inability or unwillingness to recognise Indigenous food knowledge and practices within the cookbooks.

Moreton-Robinson explains that we need to challenge the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty that continues to subjugate Indigenous peoples (Possessive Logic). When read through this lens, these and other such cookbooks further marginalise and subjugate Indigenous food knowledge and foodways and, therefore, add to the processes of colonisation, and its ill affects. Waziyatawin asserts that Indigenous people need to decolonise our diets and that this would help to reverse some of the effects of colonisation. She recognises that changes in dietary practice may be difficult in some areas due to inaccessibility to land, economic means, transport, and the other structural issues. Despite these obstacles she urges Indigenous people to do what they can. Waziyatawin explains that "it is important to determine your current access to traditional foods and prioritize your attempts to recover various foods" (76).

Waziyatawin's work is important because she speaks of recovering past practices and forming new habits, both for own our survival and to help us counter the ongoing impacts of colonisation and to thrive as Indigenous peoples. She contends that, "if we consciously correlate our eating habits with our participation in our colonization, the experience becomes less enjoyable" (8). Waziyatawin 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).

Mihesuah, in her writing about Indigenous foods, also stresses the need for Indigenous people to reclaim our relationship with the environment. She recognises that current Indigenous dietary practices mean that we no longer need to seek out food through foraging and hunting, and that many food preparation techniques require little effort. She argues that this is in direct opposition to the ways our ancestors needed to seek and prepare food. In her book titled Recovering Our Ancestors' Gardens: Indigenous Recipes and Guide to Diet and Fitness, Mihesuah outlines how our Indigenous ancestors sought food sources, prepared meals, cared for themselves, and supported their wellbeing. She argues that Indigenous people need to reclaim some of these past practices if they are to thrive in contemporary society. The work of Waziyatawin and Mihesuah reflects a growing recognition of the value of traditional Indigenous food and their health benefits. However, we see little uptake of these foods or of traditional approaches to cooking in the government-funded cookbooks discussed in this paper.

Foley suggests that contemporary, urban Indigenous Australians have developed a separate food culture that is built around the sharing of food. She identifies a food culture that is similar to that of mainstream Australia, yet also distinct. Foley demonstrates how Indigenous Australians express their identity through the "occasional consumption of symbolic bush foods" along with "everyday consumption of unpretentious, plain food which is based on the colonial staples of meat, vegetables and bread" (34). Indigenous people expect to share food with others and experience the sharing of food as an affirmation of connections and identity. They also demonstrate the "values of sociability, equality and simplicity" (Foley 34) through the sharing of food with one another and others.

Some authors argue that traditional Indigenous foodways are needed to promote Indigenous healing from the effects of colonisation and improved health amongst Indigenous communities (both across Australia and in other parts of the world) (see, for example, Milburn, Mihesuah, Wall and Virgil, Waziyatawin). Moreover, it is likely that one of the best ways of addressing the ill health that plagues Indigenous communities is through reclaiming and revitalising Indigenous knowledge and foodways (Bodirsky and Johnson). The Decolonizing Diet Project (Layne, Reinhardt), Decolonizing your Diet blogs, and Native Foods Week all support these types of reclamation and revitalisation initiatives. In Australia, some of this is becoming slightly easier through the selling of kangaroo meat in supermarkets and dried native herbs and spices through mail order. Much more is needed. It also requires people to pass on cookery knowledge and skills to future generations, or to learn how to cook these foods in home kitchens.

We propose that Indigenous cookbooks need to incorporate Indigenous food knowledge and food-related traditions. We argue that, unless these traditions are recorded, they risk being forgotten and embedded in the everyday as they should be. We believe, moreover, that the cookbooks intended for Indigenous Australians need to move beyond Western measures of health and nutrition and seeing bush foods as symbolic representations of Indigenous peoples, fetish objects of our cultures or culinary curiosities (Craw). They need to push out from the clutches and the comfort of white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson 2000) towards Indigenous ownership and sovereignty of knowledge about ourselves and our ways. Cookbooks should include the preservation, practices, ceremonies, and knowledges associated with Indigenous food and foodways. These aspects should inform the recipes within cookbooks that are designed for Indigenous Australians and contribute to the knowledge base about how to eat well and be healthy. As an added benefit, this knowledge would help all Australians, not just Indigenous Australians. We do acknowledge that this is easier said than done, as the knowledge held by non-Indigenous people of native foods is ingrained within colonial understandings of culture, nature, and Indigenous peoples (Craw). Much re-imagining and reframing would need to take place to "address the ongoing, deeply-embedded colonial attitudes that have framed settler relationships to the environment and Indigenous peoples" (Craw 21). Having said that, it is not impossible and but essential if we are to move towards improved health outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

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