

Superfood for thought: Celebrating and preserving Aboriginal Intangible Heritage

Alice Mora ^{a*}, Darren Griffin ^b, Daniel Clarke ^b, Ben Muir ^c, and Maurizio Campanelli ^a

^a Department of Archaeology and History, La Trobe University, Bundoora, VIC 3086, Australia;

^b Baringi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, Horsham VIC 3400, Australia;

^c Wimmera Management Catchment Authority, Horsham VIC 3400, Australia.

*A.Mora@latrobe.edu.au

Abstract

Food nourishes and strengthens the body against diseases. Food connects people in communal gatherings. Traditional ways of processing food are transmitted across generations keeping alive ancestral and cultural identities. Indigenous cooking techniques and the organoleptic characteristics of the processed food are invaluable aspects of Culture to be preserved and protected as Intangible Heritage.

Throughout the last three centuries, Aboriginal Australia experienced forced disconnection from Country, losing powerful memories of food processing and taste. In south-eastern Australia, yam daisies (*Microseris* spp.) were a staple food with significant cultural and socio-economic value. Yam keeping, harvesting, and cooking in earth ovens was a social practice that involved the participation of all the community, with a special role held by Indigenous Australian women.

This paper explores how stratigraphic reconstruction of the archaeological record, experimental archaeology and community engagement came together to successfully revitalise the traditional way of cooking one of the most symbolic and nutritionally important Aboriginal tubers. It is highlighted the significance of cooperatively practising earth-oven cooking and experiencing the familial taste of Murnong in reconnecting people to Country. Moreover, it is described how the re-empowered feeling of identity fostered the creation of an annual festival event celebrating traditional earth-oven cooking and the continuity of its knowledge.

We express our respect and gratitude to the Traditional Owners whose Country and cultural heritage is presented in this poster – the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk Peoples (Wotjobaluk Nations). We acknowledge that they are the owners of the cultural information presented herein.

SUPERFOOD FOR THOUGHT: CELEBRATING AND PRESERVING ABORIGINAL INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Alice Mora, Darren Griffin, Daniel Clarke, Ben Muir, and Maurizio Campanelli

A.Mora@latrobe.edu.au

July 2015
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION
 OF AN ABORIGINAL EARTH OVEN
 AT MILL SWAMP (HORSHAM, VIC)

October 2015
EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY,
 TRADITIONAL EARTH-OVEN
 COOKING OF YAM DAISIES
 (*Microseris scapigera*) AT WOPET
 BUNGUNDILAR (HORSHAM)

2016-2019
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT,
 BAKANG DYAKATA EVENT AND
 WOTJOBALUK FESTIVAL HELD BY
 BARENGI GADJIN LAND COUNCIL
 ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

November 2017
 WOPET BUNGUNDILAR
 REGISTERED AS A **CULTURAL**
PLACE ON THE VICTORIAN
 ABORIGINAL HERITAGE
 REGISTER (VAHR)

FUTURE REGISTRATION OF THE
 EARTH OVEN AS **ABORIGINAL**
INTANGIBLE HERITAGE ON
 THE VAHR

1 Indigenous food and cooking techniques as Intangible Heritage

Intangible Cultural Heritage includes knowledge and skills that are transmitted from a generation to another, keeping alive a sense of cultural identity and continuity within the social group (Ahmad, 2006). Indigenous ways of cooking native foods are invaluable expressions of Intangible Heritage that should be protected.

2 Lost memories of ancestral flavours

In Aboriginal Australia, the powerful memories of native food processing and flavours are often lost as a result of forced disconnection from Country and Eurocentric records of Traditional practices (Builth, 2009).

3 The cultural and socioeconomic importance of earth-oven cooking of yam daisies

In south-eastern Australia, the cooking of yam daisies (*Microseris* spp.) in earth ovens was a routine communal experience, before the arrival of Europeans and the introduction of sheep (Gott, 1983). Earth-ovens were reusable cooking structures that were easy to set up, could be left unattended overnight, and produced large quantities of palatable food (Campanelli, et al., 2018).

Murnong (*Bam-munja* in Wergaia) grew easily, mainly cared for and gathered by women with the help of digging sticks. Yams cooked in the earth ovens were a staple food, which provided a healthy and reliable caloric intake to Indigenous Australians (Gott, 1983).

4 The science behind earth-oven cooking

In 2015, the unearthing of a well-preserved Aboriginal earth oven at Mill Swamp (near Horsham, western Victoria) gave the opportunity to study this traditional cooking structure and to subsequently re-create it based on stratigraphy (Campanelli, 2015). The experimental replication of *Murnong* cooking was successful in investigating the cooking process in the earth oven and how it affected the nutritional and organoleptic characteristics of these Aboriginal tubers (Campanelli, et al., 2018).

5 Reconnecting people to Country through earth-oven cooking of *Murnong*

The community participation in the experimental cooking event and the experiencing of the ancestral taste of *Murnong* re-empowered a feeling of identity, which ultimately fostered, in 2016, the creation of an annual festival celebrating traditional earth-oven cooking and the continuity of its knowledge.

Connection to Country through regeneration of familial food practices is not only a means of self-determination but also has a major role in fostering Indigenous health and wellness (Thompson, et al., 2000).

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Traditional Owners, volunteers, students, and members of the general public who participated in the excavations, experimental re-creation, and annual events held over the years.

6 Traditional earth-oven cooking as Aboriginal Intangible Heritage

The peoples of the Wotjobulak Nations plan to register the Earth Oven as Aboriginal Intangible Heritage on the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register, recognising the Traditional Owners as the custodians of their traditional cooking practice (Aboriginal Victoria, 2020; McMillan et al., 2019).

References

- Aboriginal Victoria, 2020. Protecting Aboriginal intangible heritage, www.aboriginalvictoria.vic.gov.au/protecting-aboriginal-intangible-heritage
- Ahmad, Y., 2006. The scope and definitions of heritage: From tangible to intangible, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12, 292-300.
- Builth, H., 2009. Intangible heritage of Indigenous Australians: A Victorian example, *Historic Environment* 22, 24-31.
- Campanelli, M., 2015. Archaeological Investigations at Mill Swamp and Clear Lake, Jadawadjali Country, Report to the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (OAAV).
- Campanelli, M., Muir, J., Mora, A., Clarke, D.R., Griffin, D., 2018. Re-creating an Aboriginal earth oven with clayey heating elements: Experimental archaeology and paleodietary implications, *EXARC JOURNAL*.
- Gott, B., 1983. *Murnong-Microseris scapigera*: A study of a staple food of Victorian Aborigines, *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2-18.
- McMillan, R., Griffin, D. and Muir, B., 2019. Site seen, place unknown: Indigenous intangible heritage management in Victoria, *Excavations, Surveys and Heritage Management in Victoria* 8, 57-64.
- Thompson, S.J., Gifford, S.M., Thorpe, L., 2000. The social and cultural context of risk and prevention: Food and physical activity in an urban Aboriginal community, *Health Education & Behavior* 27, 725-743.