

Chapter 2

Framing Indigenous Foodways Prior to Colonization

Aspects of this chapter have been published as: Ma Rhea (2013, 2014).

Abstract This Chapter of first section of this book, ‘Food and Food Knowledge’, frames the analysis of historical records relating to the foodways of Indigenous people. It focuses on what is known about food cultivation and dietary practices of people before newcomers explored and then settled on the lands and waterways of inhabitants, now known as Indigenous Australian and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A matter of importance is central to the analysis offered in this chapter. Explorers and early colonial diarists created a fiction that the inhabitants they encountered were in some indeterminate way less than human. Commonly described as natives, savages, and ‘les naturels’, the recorded observations of the newcomers were overloaded with interpretations that tried to fit inhabitants into an eighteenth and nineteenth century British or European worldview that was collapsing under the weight of the very colonial expansion they were causing. Old European worldviews were collapsing because of colonial encounters with Indigenous peoples around the world. This chapter argues that at the time of first contact, sustainable equilibrium had been reached, as evidenced by the fact that communities existed, and are known to have existed continuously in Australia since the late Pleistocene era (between 2000 and 3000 generations of people). Using food security as the focus, the chapter then gives a detailed examination of the edible foods used by people across the various ecosystems that comprise the modern Australian landmass.

Keywords Indigenous food knowledge · Edible foods · Australia

*Their treachery, which is unsurpassed, is simply an outcome of their savage ideas, and in their eyes is a form of independence which resents any intrusion on THEIR land, THEIR wild animals, and THEIR rights generally. In their untutored state they therefore consider that any method of getting rid of the invader is proper.*¹

¹Cook and Wharton (1893, Chapter 8).

This chapter focuses on what is known about food cultivation and dietary practices before newcomers explored and then settled on the lands and waterways of inhabitants, now known as Indigenous Australian and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A matter of importance is central to the analysis offered in this chapter. Explorers and early colonial diarists created a fiction that the inhabitants they encountered were in some indeterminate way less than human. Commonly described as natives, savages, and ‘les naturels’, the recorded observations of the newcomers were overloaded with interpretations that tried to fit inhabitants into an eighteenth and nineteenth century British or European worldview that was collapsing under the weight of the very colonial expansion they were causing. Old European worldviews were collapsing because of colonial encounters with Indigenous peoples around the world. Established classifications of the European world by bloodline, breeding, status, class, and gender were being reconfigured by race through the popular works of those such as Rousseau² and Darwin.³ Others veered into the realms of fantasy following the very popular ideas of Diderot⁴ who is attributed with promoting the view of Indigenous people as ‘noble savages’. As observations flowed back to England and France through the writings of earlier explorers and settlers in the Americas and of those exploring Australia and the Pacific such as Cook,⁵ D’Entrecasteaux,⁶ Dampier,⁷ and Bougainville,⁸ the views formed of inhabitants became self-perpetuating and mutually reinforcing even as it was challenging the foundations of British and European worldviews. Cook perhaps most insightfully records in his journal that:

*...they think themselves provided with all the necessaries of Life and that they have no superfluities.*⁹

This view is one that is still held by the original inhabitants and one that challenges orthodoxy about progressive evolution so favored by the modernist project that was brought to Terra Australis (Fig. 2.1).

One of the enduring challenges of researching about the foodways of people living on the landmass of Australia prior to British colonization is that there are scant traces and fragments of insight on which to base an understanding of this important topic. First, and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the stories that have been shared with me over my life by Indigenous Australian people about foodways of the past and present. Of note, in some cases families still hold intimate knowledge of their traditional estates and waterways. While this book focuses on

²Rousseau (1762), See also: Hannaford (1996).

³Darwin (1845/1997).

⁴Diderot (1772).

⁵Cook and Wharton (1893).

⁶Labillardière (1800).

⁷Dampier (1703).

⁸Diderot (1772).

⁹Beaglehole (1969, 399).



Fig. 2.1 *A large Tasmanian canoe seen on the eastern shore of Schouten Island (Fortier 1807).* Image courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and National Library of Australia

food, people's knowledge goes beyond what was edible and many times in my discussions with descendants of ancestors of particular places. The stories they shared about food were given in a much expanded, ecologically sustainable, and aware context within discussions about seasonality, selection, and management of food resources, of their medicinal properties and of distinct cultural practices about particular food avoidances and food sharing responsibilities. This has been in sharp contrast to marked levels of disinterest shown by descendants of newcomers for whom historical understanding of their food, foodways, nutrition, and their dietary practices hold little interest. Even so, matters regarding those of Australian Indigenous people remain decontextualized and often founded on ignorant curiosity, disgust, and rejection since their ancestors first met inhabitants of these lands. Later chapters will provide discussion of the different contact experiences.

This chapter argues that at the time of first contact, sustainable equilibrium had been reached, as evidenced by the fact that communities existed, and are known to have existed continuously in Australia since the late Pleistocene era (between 2000–3000 generations of people¹⁰). Traditional owners can recount events that occurred long into the past, as the land was forming and reforming, corroborated by recent studies that date between 58,000 and 75,000 years in some places according

¹⁰Mulvaney (2002), Smith (2002).

to new methods of analysis discussed by Lourandos and others.¹¹ Recent studies that involve Indigenous Peoples in research about their traditional foodways (see for example the excellent work being undertaken by Kuhnlein Erasmus and Spigelski and the Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment) amply demonstrate that 'the dimensions of nature and culture that define a food system of an Indigenous culture contribute to the whole health picture of the individual and the community—not only the physical health but the emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of health, healing and protection from disease'.¹² Outsiders and newcomers to Australia did not have access to inhabitants' cultural understandings of the ecological context with which they were confronted, had little or no knowledge to draw on to understand what they were seeing, and as unwanted intruders were rarely invited into inner community knowledge about something so vital as food. As Sahlins observes 'food has too much social value—ultimately because it has too much use value—to have an exchange value'.¹³

This ignorance of something as fundamental as edible local food is replete in the historical records left by newcomers, whether seafaring or overland explorers, or later diarists of colonial life. Quoting such resources does not imply that these views were 'correct' in an absolute way. In this book, such sources are treated as being an accurate reflection of the colonial mindset, views and opinions that generated a cohesive, often corrosive and disparaging, narrative about endogenous edible food and Indigenous peoples who ate such foods. Following the method adopted by Pascoe¹⁴, I have quoted from such resources despite the limitations of their worldview, to undertake a critical analysis of newcomer responses to endogenous edible flora and fauna, and Indigenous knowledge about such resources where that knowledge was recorded, responses that I will argue continue to shape contemporary understandings of food in the postcolonial, globalized world (Fig. 2.2).

By way of example, Heeres records one of the earliest reflections by Janzoon about his responses to what he saw on arrival to the Great South Land. It is notable both as an historical artefact and also for the lack of knowledge held by Janzoon's explorers about what foods were available to inhabitants, how they were procuring food, or how such foods were being prepared¹⁵:

The land between 13° and 17° 8' is a barren and arid tract, without any fruit-trees, and producing nothing fit for the use of man; it is low-lying and flat without hills or mountains; in many places overgrown with brushwood and stunted wild trees; it has not much fresh water, and what little there is, has to be collected in pits dug for the purpose ... The natives ... chiefly live on certain ill-smelling roots which they dig out of the earth...

¹¹Lourandos (1997, xv), Hiscock (2008).

¹²Kuhnlein et al. (2009, 3).

¹³Sahlins (1972, 218).

¹⁴Pascoe (2014).

¹⁵Heeres (1899).



Fig. 2.2 *Fishing No. 2* (Orme 1814, 165). Image courtesy of Monash Rare Books Collection, Monash University Library

Indigenous Australian Food Security in Pre-contact Australia

Records such as these were the stuff of school curricula, newspaper speculations, fantasist diaries sent back to England, Europe, and America, and of university history courses across the colonial world. Despite their problematic nature, for this project, such records also leave glimpses, carefully teased out, of what inhabitants ate prior to the arrival of newcomers. There are some oral histories being shared by Indigenous people about the knowledge that their ancestors held about their traditional estates and of the food and water sources on which their ancestors, extended families, and clan groups relied on to live but they are not yet generally available.¹⁶ I have had the privilege to be ‘on country’ with traditional owners¹⁷

¹⁶Gammage (2011), Zola and Gott (1992), Gott (2008).

¹⁷*Traditional owners* is a descriptor used for Indigenous Australians who have had their claim to Native Title right recognized. It pertains to a particular part of ‘country’ that has been legally recognized as previously belonging to their ancestors and whose right to that land was not extinguished by subsequent legal mechanisms overlaid by the British and then Australian legal frameworks.

who can trace their ancestral rights to a place back 40–60,000 years and in some cases longer. Broome speaks in numbers of generations in Victoria, noting, for example, that ‘At least 1600 generations of Indigenous Australian people have made continuous life in Victoria...’¹⁸

There has been considerable scholarly work on many of the aspects of this complex space of food sovereignty as it intersects with food procurement and production methods used by inhabitants prior to the arrival of newcomers from Britain and Europe, especially in archaeology, anthropology, and history disciplines.¹⁹ My sociological training has led me to ask questions of the ever-present now, about how inhabitants of this vast continent managed their food resources despite the absence of farms, petrochemicals, supermarkets, and slick advertising. Over many years, I have been invited to, connected to, and shown how to, experience a living, breathing relationship with ‘country’, always present, and all encompassing, and always with available edible flora and fauna. Even with these precious experiences, it is difficult to write about such foods without resorting to comparisons about the differences between subsistence and industrialized, capitalist food production, between nomadic and sedentary populations, and many other binary distinctions that abound in this space of intellectual work. Past historical, archaeological, and anthropological work has predominantly interpreted Indigenous Australian knowledge about edible food practices, without necessarily providing necessary corroboration from knowledgeable Indigenous people. More recent research such as that being undertaken about Australian Indigenous foodways by Briscoe, Cahir, Gott, David, Lourandos, Keen, McNiven, Mulvaney, Pascoe, and Russell amongst others starts to provide some answers in their collaborations with Indigenous Australian and Torres Strait Islander families, clans, and nations. In the future, there is the potential for accurate information to be given into the public sphere by traditional owners of handed down oral histories, of ‘history in person’.²⁰ It forms an emerging field of scholarship whereby an understanding of living from country might arise. Food security for what were termed ‘hunter and gatherers’²¹, wanderers, or nomads who are now more internationally acknowledged as Indigenous peoples, implies a general recognition of their land, civil, and property rights over an area, complex systems of governmentality, inherited and ongoing environmental knowledge, including an intimate knowledge of edible foods and clean water sources.²² Food knowledge was not uniform across regions, or indeed within language groups. As will be discussed more fully in later chapters, coastal

¹⁸Broome (2005, xviii–xix).

¹⁹See, for example, Keen (2004), Lourandos (1997).

²⁰Holland and Lave (2001).

²¹Lee and Daly (1999).

²²See for example: Bonney (1939, 2004), Goddard and Kalotas (1985/2002), Turner-Neale et al. (1994).

dwelling people had access to a broad range of foods from land, waterways, and sea. Moving further inland, the estates were very large and the food and water resources were harder to access because of the unpredictability of rainfall and the general harshness of the land. Berndt and Berndt surmised that²³:

In the Aborigines' hunting and gathering economy ... Their exploration of the Australian continent was channelled into exploration of the specific environments in which they finally settled. In each region, the combination of terrain, climate, and plant and animal life was different to some extent. The Aborigines knew all about their surroundings, not superficially, but through patient, diligent investigation and study. They learned what was edible and what was not, or what could become edible once it had been treated in certain ways.

Brock makes a similar point, noting that²⁴:

In pre-colonial times the Arrernte, Pitjantjatjara, and Yangunytjatjara survived in regions of unpredictable rainfall by moving to sources of water and food. They consumed food as it was procured, preparing and distributing it according to their own protocols, rather than eating set amounts at regular times during the day. The Arrernte lands were, however less arid than the central and western deserts where many Pitjantjatjara lived. Few accounts of pre-colonial food production exist. Those that do, document careful use of resources with periods of shortages.

The life history of Moses Tjalkabota, translated from Arrernte by Albrecht²⁵ provides many references to Tjalkabota's extensive food knowledge. Brock summarizes these in the following²⁶:

[Tjalkabota] recalled the women gathering seeds which they ground and mixed with water, the fish which were caught in water holes and cooked over the fire, and the emus and other game brought back to camp by his father. Tjalkabota described a journey east from their main camp at Laprapuntja on Ellery Creek to a place known as Tnatjera (Owen Springs Point) where the family feasted on abundant food for two months, including putata (small grey wallabies), grubs from the witchetty bush, kura, knaia, kangaroos and possums. The children were taught which foods they could eat and which they should leave. Downstream from Laprapuntja lay an area where yelka (a small onion-like bulb and a staple food in the region) grew. It could sustain a large gathering of people for several months. Rain-filled claypans provided drinking water in good seasons.

Given the expert knowledge held by people about reliable sources of food and drinking water, Pascoe's challenge to the field is that we begin to take seriously that the original inhabitants of the Australian landmass were agriculturalists who managed their vast estates in sustainable, innovative, and purposefully selective

²³Berndt and Berndt (1964, 10).

²⁴Brock (2008, 20).

²⁵Albrecht (2002, 237–244).

²⁶Brock (2008, 67).

ways.²⁷ He rejects the primitivist, ‘hunter gatherer’ label of the colonial narrative that has served to diminish the rights and recognition of people over their lands and waterways, something that has also been widely debated by other contemporary scholars such as McNiven and Russell, David and Denham, Lourandos and Keen.²⁸ While I am sensitive to this approach, my research suggests that it is only in the mind of the colonial narrative that there is a revolutionary triumphalist view of progress that hierarchically places hunters and gathers at the bottom of the evolutionary pile and western industrialized agricultural food production methods at the top (Fig. 2.3).

Rather, I would argue here that hunters and gatherers, by whatever descriptors were, and remain, highly skilled in the management, procurement, and preparation of local, fresh, highly nutritious, delicious edible food beyond the capacity of most people who rely on their highly processed food being provided for them by a profit-driven, global, industrialized food system. Each endogenous, ecological context has shaped a variety of human responses to food cultivation and procurement ranging across many techniques of food resource management, collection, propagation, preparation, and distribution depending on a complex interaction between culture and landscape (see, for example, Langton²⁹). Colonization brought significant exogenous foodstuffs into the Australian endogenous context, the legacy of which remains to the present (Chap. 4). As outlined above, this chapter will focus on the *endogenous* as the theoretical starting point for examining, in Chap. 3, what inhabitants did to create, manage and prepare what was endogenous, edible flora and fauna.

Before the sea explorers came, there is evidence of significant variety in settlement patterns of people as told in ancestral stories and through explorers’ early contact records. These data suggest that some communities lived on relatively small estates and were more sedentary and others had large estates, travelling around their lands and waterways to care for them as the availability of foods and water changed with the seasons. Therefore, I follow Pascoe in rejecting the negative connotations of the descriptor ‘hunting and gathering’ but will employ it as useful to specify techniques of food procurement in the English language, as imprecise as it is and as pejorative as it has become (see also Berndt and Berndt³⁰).

Little is known about what modern science has termed ‘nutritional value’ of the foodways of people in Australia in the time before colonization. Some early explorer journals, colonist diaries, and anthropological studies examined food consumption practices as far as was possible to observe given the nature of the

²⁷Pascoe (2014).

²⁸McNiven and Russell (2005, Chapter 2), David and Denham (2006), Lourandos (1997), Keen (2004).

²⁹Langton (1998).

³⁰Berndt and Berndt (1964, 13–17), Gammage (2011).

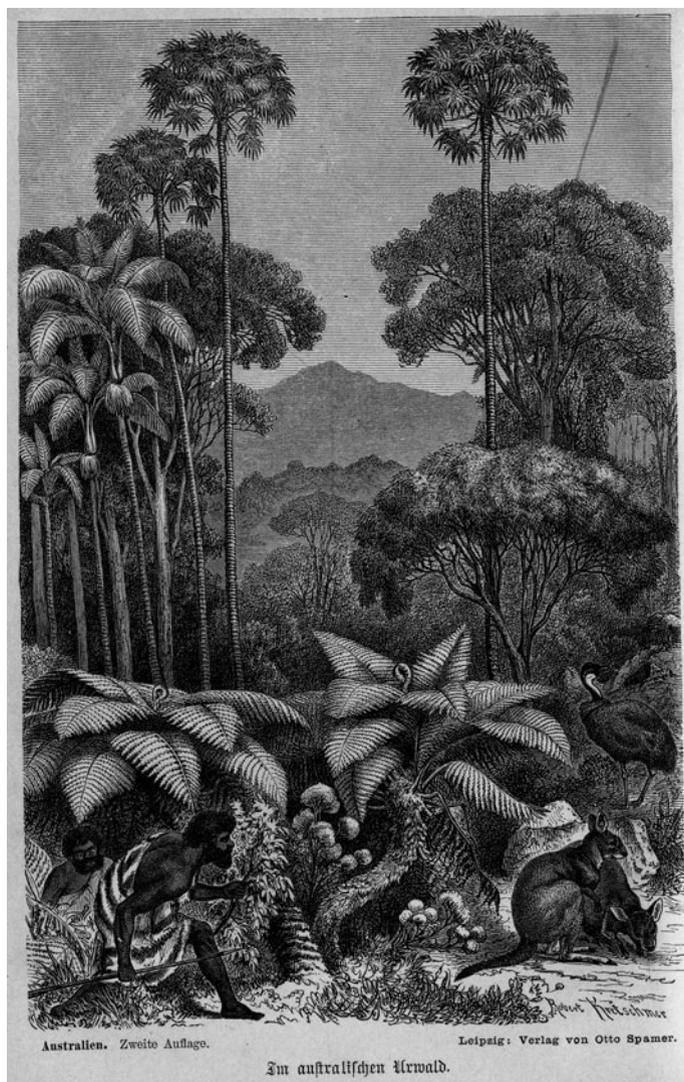


Fig 2.3 *Im australischen Urwald (In northwestern Australia)* (Christmann and Oberländer 1880, 271). Image courtesy of Monash Rare Books Collection, Monash University Library

activities but, as will be discussed throughout later chapters, the worldviews of these outsider/observers were poorly adapted to understanding what they were looking at. As Petersen observes³¹:

³¹Petersen (1978, 25).

...the genetic evidence suggests that people of the Western Desert have long been isolated, so it may be assumed that not only is the subsistence adaptation of great antiquity, but that it was fully adequate to maintain the population without supplementation by migration. This is important because some medical writers appear to believe that because the levels of nutrition differ to our own, it was inadequate, although they give no substantive reasons for this judgement.

Even though written records of first contact were generally ignorant and/or pejorative, they will be used here provide opportunity to evaluate observations with the newer perspective demanded by those such as Pascoe, Gammage and Petersen in mind, that assumes profound Indigenous Australian agency in their maintenance of themselves and their estates. Such an approach also gives insight into the nutritional value of endogenous food sources about which ‘modern’ Australia is only now becoming aware.

Food, Food Gathering, and Food Preparation Traces: Categorizing Edible Foods

In a classificatory sense, questions arose as I tried to develop a way of writing about inhabitants’ knowledge about what they ate without demeaning the expert knowledge they held (knowing as I do how hard it would be for me to feed myself day after day in all weathers from birth until death). Thomas opines that: ‘Broadly speaking, the Australian has four kinds of nourishment, fish, flesh, grubs and insects, and vegetable; but the supply of these varies very largely in different parts of the country’.³² After analysis of the data and consideration of myriad classification methods, I found that there were a greater number of categories than Thomas suggested. Turner-Neale et al. for example, use³³:

Kere *food from animals; meat, fat, offal, blood*
Merne *food from plants; fruits, vegetables, seeds*
Ntange *edible seeds*
Tyape *edible grubs and insects; witchetties, cicadas*
Ngkwarle *honey-like foods; wild honey, gum*

They also reserve a special section for *Kwatye* (water), which includes ‘all forms of water including rain, dew and running water. It is also used to describe related things such as frost, ice and steam as well as sources of water such as rainclouds,

³²Thomas (1906, 88).

³³Turner-Neale et al. (1994, viii).

rockholes, and soakages in creeks'.³⁴ Grey provides an example of his attempts to classify endogenous edible foods drawn from his observations of inhabitants on his travels in Western Australia³⁵: *Six sorts of kangaroo; Twenty-nine sorts of fish; One kind of whale; Two species of seal; Wild dogs; Three kinds of turtle; Emus, wild turkeys, and birds of every kind; Two species of opossum; Eleven kinds of frogs; Four kinds of freshwater shellfish; All saltwater shellfish, except oysters; Four kinds of grubs; Eggs of every species of bird or lizard; Five animals, something smaller in size than rabbits; Eight sorts of snakes; Seven sorts of iguana; Nine species of mice and small rats; Twenty-nine sorts of roots; Seven kinds of fungus; Four sorts of gum; Two sorts of manna; Two species of by-yu, or the nut of the Zamia palm; Two species of mesembryanthemum; Two kinds of nut; Four sorts of fruit; The flower of several species of Banksia; One kind of earth, which they pound and mix with the root of the mene; The seeds of several species of leguminous plants.*

In addition to the lists left by explorers and later scholars, there has also been considerable detailed archaeological work on the numbers of food items, both plants and animals, known to have been eaten by various Australian Indigenous groups. For example, McNiven and Hitchcock provide a table listing some 450 different species of marine animals known to have been eaten by Torres Strait Islanders.³⁶

After consideration of a number of sources, I have organized the materials by: flesh, fish, shellfish and molluscs, grubs and insects, vegetables and seeds, fruits and sugars, eggs, fungi, salt, and water in order to give a general but informative discussion of the range of foods eaten at the time that explorers were first encountering inhabitants. Of note, many of these flora and fauna remain available into the contemporary period but as yet have been disregarded by the general population of Australia in favor of highly industrialized, globally sourced, locally available food resources. Table 2.1 (below) provides a broad framework for examining the foods that were known to be eaten that will be referred to in the following chapters.

Questions arose about how to classify food procurement methods, as yet unresolved. For example, why is catching fish not hunting or gathering except if it is something like shark or whale hunting? Why is using a net to fish or catch birds across a river not a gathering practice? (Fig. 2.4).

What makes edible food 'wild', 'native' or to be considered 'game'? Do these descriptors only arise in distinction with foods produced through industrialized agricultural processes? There are clearly worldview biases in these somewhat arbitrary categorizations, so care has been used when employing such descriptors. The above table has been crafted through analysis of contemporary understandings

³⁴Turner-Neale et al. (1994, 50–53).

³⁵Grey (1841/1983, Vol. 2, 169–170).

³⁶McNiven and Hitchcock (2004, Appendix 3).

Table 2.1 Framework for examining Australian endogenous edible foods

Examples			
Flesh	Animals	Kangaroo Kangaroo rat Flying fox Wombat Anteater/echidna Short-legged bandicoot	Dingo Opossum Flying squirrel Quokka Quoll Numbat
	Reptiles	Crocodile Tortoise Snake	Lizard Turtle Frog
	Birds	Emu Duck Swan Galah Pelican	Pigeon Turkey Mallee fowls Small birds Wedge tailed eagle
Fish and related	Fish	All fish	
	Other	Oysters Cray fish Yabbies Shrimps	Water rats Lobsters Mussels
Grubs and insects		Caterpillar Moths	Witchetty grubs
Vegetables and seeds		Nardoo Grass Seeds Pittosporum Acacia Yams	Cumbungi Murnong Water plant bulbs and stalks Wild onions Bracken roots
Fruits and sugars		Quandong Bush tomato Berries Lerp Honey ants	Nectar Manna Honey Tree exudates
Eggs		All (including turtles)	
Fungi			

Compiled from sources such as: Eyre (1845/2009), Stranger (2004, 2009), Swan Hill Aboriginal Learning Centre (2004), Zola and Gott (1992), Thomas (1906), Andrews (1862), Goddard and Kalotas (1985/2002)

considered alongside historical records written by newcomers who did not know what they were seeing. It has been developed with an understanding that historical records barely do justice to the range of possible food sources that were available to people. Even so, when read alongside contemporary knowledge, much of what was recorded has been found to align with contemporary Indigenous narratives, where such information is being shared. Therefore, the next chapter will extrapolate from these records to examine the foodways of the people living on the coasts of the landmass of Terra Australis.

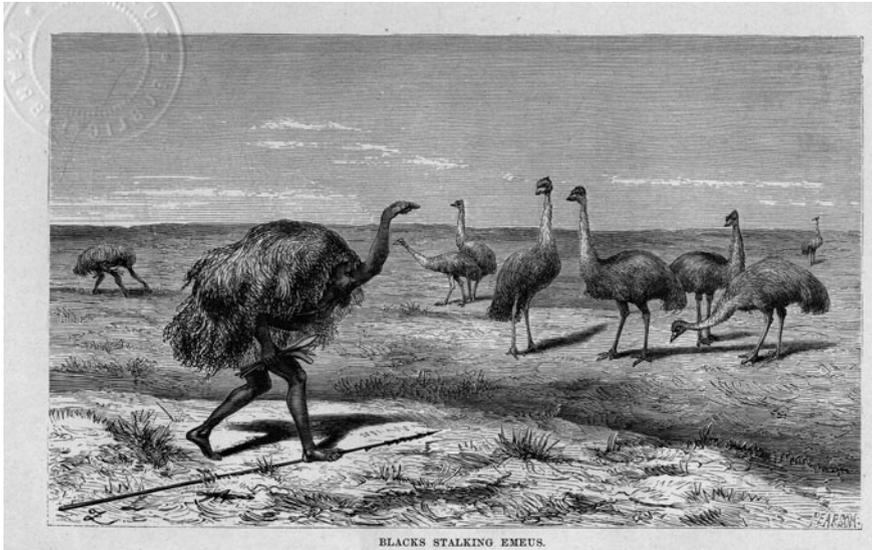


Fig 2.4 *Black stalking emus* (Baden-Powell 1872, Fontispiece). Image courtesy of Monash Rare Books Library

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Frontiers of Taste

Food Sovereignty, Sustainability and Indigenous-Settler
Relations In Australia

Diamond, Z.M.

2017, XV, 208 p. 33 illus., 17 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-10-1629-5