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Slow Food Terra Madre: A Novel Pathway to Achieving Indigenous Australian Food Sovereignty?

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse the participation of Indigenous Australians in Slow Food International's 2018 Salone del Gusto-Terra Madre meeting in Turin, Italy. Slow Food is a global grassroots organisation created to promote local food cultures and traditions, and the organisation's Terra Madre network highlights the urgent need to protect the food-production systems of Indigenous peoples, valuing their holistic approach and recognising them as custodians of biodiversity. By creating a platform for Indigenous peoples to meet and discuss their challenges and ideas, and by putting Indigenous knowledges and stewardship of the environment at the centre of discussions about tackling global environmental challenges, the organisation encourages its Indigenous members to work toward food sovereignty in their respective countries as well as on an international level.

Keywords: Slow Food International, Indigenous Australians, decolonisation, food sovereignty, transnationalism

1. Introduction

Many traditional foods have been abandoned by Indigenous Australians as a consequence of forced relocation and assimilation, and the resulting loss of traditional knowledges, as well as the introduction of European foods, such as wheat, lamb and dairy. In addition, the domination of neoliberal agribusiness in Australia since the second half of the 20th century, has led to the widespread availability of processed foods, which are rich in sugar and fats, yet nutrient-poor. In effect, a large number of Indigenous Australians have been consuming a diet consisting predominantly of these processed foods, which results in decreased health and overall well-being of communities. In order to tackle these issues, Indigenous Australian educators,

farmers and activists have created different initiatives, organizations and corporations with the aim to bring back traditional foodways to their communities.¹ By doing so, they hope to improve the communities' health and to revive cultural traditions related to these foodways. The decolonizing strategies of these organizations range from recovering traditional knowledge to educational programs and cooperation with other Indigenous communities and nonindigenous food sovereignty organizations, both nationally and internationally.

It should be emphasized that “[t]he concern with food security after World War II has led the United Nations General Assembly to declare access to food a human right by incorporating it into the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25), at the same time making the provision of food to people the responsibility of the state” (Kruk-Buchowska 414; after Renzaho and Mellor). However, it was not until the first World Food Conference in Rome in 1974 that the definition of food security itself was introduced. It was defined as the “availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices” (Renzaho and Mellor 3). Large-scale agriculture's ability to produce substantial amounts of food at a low cost has spurred governments to consider it as an attractive “solution to feeding the growing world population and solving the increasing problem of food insecurity” in the past several decades (Kruk-Buchowska 414). However, this model of food production has proven to adversely affect not only many agricultural workers, but also the populations and economies of whole countries, particularly those in the Global South, as well as the environment (Kruk-Buchowska 414; after McMichael 2005, 270–271). Like many food producers and consumers worldwide, Indigenous Australians have suffered from its effects. In their case, as in the case of other Indigenous communities around the world, the introduction of neoliberal agriculture can be viewed as yet another form of colonization, adding to the existing political and economic oppression, as it has forced Indigenous Australians into the corporate food regime and exploited Australian lands.

In response to this situation, at the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996, the international organization *La Via Campesina – International Peasants' Movement* introduced the term “food sovereignty,” which can be defined as “the right of Peoples to define their own policies and strategies for the sustainable production, distribution, and consumption of food, with respect for their own cultures and their own systems of managing natural resources and rural areas, and is considered to be a precondition for Food Security” (Declaration of Atitlan 2002).² Food sovereignty is increasingly viewed as a more reliable and fair paradigm of food production, distribution and consumption, both by the United Nations and different international food organizations.³

2. Australian Food Policy: A Historical Perspective

In the introduction to his watershed book, *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of Agriculture*, Bruce Pascoe reflects on the picture of Aboriginal Australians' agricultural practices as portrayed in the journals and diaries of explorers and colonists. He writes:

Hunter-gatherer societies forage and hunt for food, and do not employ agricultural methods or build permanent dwellings; they are nomadic. But as I read these early journals, I came across repeated references to people building dams and wells; planting, irrigating, and harvesting seed; preserving the surplus and storing it in houses, sheds or secure vessels; and creating elaborate cemeteries and manipulating the landscape – none of which fitted the definition of a hunter-gatherer. Could it be that the accepted view of Indigenous Australians simply wandering from plant to plant, kangaroo to kangaroo, in hapless opportunism, was incorrect? (9)

Indeed, in his detailed analysis of these historical accounts, Pascoe refutes the widely accepted view of Indigenous Australians as only hunter-gatherers. He also points to the particular changes brought about by European colonization that have led to the disappearance, or near disappearance of their agricultural economy.

As asserted by Robert Mayes, agriculture has been used to dispossess Aboriginal Australians in a twofold manner: (1) European farming practices were used to distinguish the “civilized” from the “savage”; and (2) “grazing livestock, planting crops, erecting fences and damming rivers,” among other practices, meant the settlers occupied land. As Aboriginal communities were being pushed out of their traditional homelands, Australian land was being degenerated by the introduction of sheep and rabbits and by the removal of trees, which resulted in poor soil health and lack of climatic stability on the continent. Moreover, the spread of settler agriculture, particularly grazing, “led to violent clashes and severely disrupted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of life” (Mayes). As mentioned in the introduction, another significant change to Indigenous Australian foodways came with the development of large-scale agriculture and global agribusiness after WWII. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples consider it to be yet another iteration of the colonizing process that has started with European settlement on the continent.

Decades of brutal colonization, the Frontier Wars, and removal from traditional lands have had a ravaging effect on Aboriginal communities and their cultures. The ensuing policy of forced assimilation, which included removing children from their Aboriginal families and the creation of Aboriginal missions, has further added to that devastation, which included the loss of not just Indigenous agriculture, but Traditional Ecological Knowledge. TEK refers to “the accumulative body of knowledge, including skills, practices, and innovations (technology), which is often derived from Indigenous peoples' intimate interactions with their

traditional environment” (Huambachano 87). Thus, TEK may also be associated with fishing, hunting and gathering practices, as well as food preparation techniques. Langton and Ma Rhea explain how governments have impacted the loss of TEK among Indigenous communities:

The often poor understanding by national governments of inter-relationships between biodiversity and cultural diversity accounts in part for the rapid loss of traditional biodiversity-related knowledge. The rights of Indigenous and local communities are, more often than not, limited by statutes and regulations because of the ideological stance which modern nation states hold towards these subsistence economic systems, holding them to be backward ways of life as against the belief in ‘progressive’ ways of life that the modern global economy is purported to offer. Nation state absorption and assimilation of these groups and assertion of ownership and control of their knowledge systems for commercial and national purposes also poses a great threat to the capacity of these groups to sustain their social and economic systems and, in some cases, to the continued existence of these groups. (51)

The misguided policies have led to widespread poverty among Indigenous communities, many of which, especially those living in remote areas, lack access to fresh food throughout a large part of the year. Poverty, coupled with food insecurity results in high rates of overweight and obesity among Indigenous Australians (Liotta). Chronic diseases with strong environmental and behavioural etiology, such as cardiovascular disease and Type Two Diabetes are also prevalent among these communities (Beks et al.). Overall, “the burden of disease experienced by Indigenous Australians is 2.3 times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians,” with 19 per cent of it caused by mental health and substance disorders (AIHW). Therefore, reducing the burden of disease could be attained by improving social and emotional wellbeing, which in turn can be achieved through “engaging and participating in traditional food management” (Liotta). Thus, recovering traditional foodways can be considered as a decolonizing act and a solution to food insecurity and the physical and mental health issues that Indigenous communities in Australia face. Foodways are also part of the broader practices of “caring for country,” a concept which is central to Aboriginal Australian cosmologies. Furthermore, producing and selling food offers economic opportunities for Indigenous food producers and retailers. However, recovering traditional foodways is not always possible, or practical, and many precolonial foodways are also influenced by current Australian foods and food production practices, which is a testament to both Indigenous peoples’ resilience and creativity. As poignantly summarized by Mayes:

The capacity for Indigenous people in remote communities to hunt traditional foods and gather bush tucker is crucial for well-being and connection to country. Likewise, the food insecurity faced by Indigenous peoples living in remote areas is a

pressing public health concern. However, conceiving Indigenous food sovereignty as primarily concerned with traditional practices and remote communities relies on a rather narrow conception of indigeneity. This conception mirrors the settler-colonial imaginary that “authentic” Indigenous people live “out there” in the bush, and that “authentic” Indigenous culture is static. (2018)

3. Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Australia

There are a number of Indigenous initiatives, corporations and organizations working towards food sovereignty in Australia. Their goals vary, and they are often intertwined with other aims, such as the revival of Aboriginal languages, ways of “caring for country,” and other cultural elements, or creating opportunities for Indigenous youth, i.e., offering vocational training and mentorship. Some of them focus primarily on providing food for their community, some put emphasis on educating youth and passing on TEK from Aboriginal Elders, while others also focus on creating successful businesses in the food and hospitality industries.

One example of such enterprises is Aboriginal Catering, which forms part of the Koori Kulcha Aboriginal Corporation, located on the Kazcare grounds in the NSW Southern Highlands. The Corporation’s aim is to “provide education and employment for Indigenous people through training in catering, team building, cultural awareness, art, dance, cooking and cultural knowledge” (“Koori Kulcha Aboriginal Corporation”). Youth and adults trained in their program can later be employed in the organization. Aboriginal Catering itself, provides a unique dining experience based on native foods to its clients at various events, including government functions and weddings (“Aboriginal Catering”).

Another such organization is the non-for-profit Prepare Produce Provide (PPP), which the trading name for Live To Tell Your Story Inc., created in 2013 in WA “that provides pathways for indigenous youth to tell their stories and explore their culture through food and hospitality” (“Prepare Produce Provide”). Their aim is to “use food and cooking as a vehicle to help meet the needs of young people in their community while providing training and support for them to develop future career pathways,” by creating opportunities for youth “to work with top chefs, local producers and other leaders within the education, hospitality, tourism and agricultural industries, and to inspire and educate through programs that support and benefit a wide range of social and community causes” (“Prepare Produce Provide”). One of the major events that they organize is a unique dining experience called Kinjarling Djinda Ngardak – which means “Albany Comes Alive Under the Stars” in Noongar language. It sees “Indigenous students from across WA travel to Albany to participate in a week-long culinary camp where students participate in culinary masterclasses led by renowned chefs. Students are also mentored by local Elders and Cultural Leaders during activities on-country that facilitate the

exploration of traditional plants and ingredients and support cross-cultural sharing and connection to Country” (“Kinjarling Djinda Ngardak”). Thus, they use food as a means to improve health in their communities, create educational and economic activities for youth as well as opportunities to teach about Aboriginal cultures.

Since the Aboriginal Australian civil rights movement in the 1970s and the following period of self-determination, the ideas relating to food sovereignty have been pronounced as part of the larger Indigenous self-determination efforts. This is particularly visible in the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017), an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statement that calls for a “First Nations Voice” in the Australian Constitution and a “Makarrata Commission” to supervise a process of “agreement-making” between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and “truth-telling” about Australia’s history. In it, they emphasize their spiritual connection to the land. After the statement was rejected by government, the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA), which is not an Indigenous-run organization, called on the Prime Minister to reconsider his decision (Mayes 2018). They stated in a press release:

As stewards of the land, our farmer members are endeavouring to work with the original owners of this country to create a more socially equitable and ecologically sustainable nation, and a truly food sovereign future.

Through AFSA’s ongoing engagement with the international organisation, La Via Campesina, we stand in strong solidarity with the global movement for recognition and inclusion of indigenous and First Nation Peoples everywhere, without whom there can be no true food sovereignty.

We support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognising “the urgent need to respect and promote the rights of indigenous peoples affirmed in treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements with States. (AFSA 2017)

Thus, AFSA sees Indigenous Australians’ traditional knowledges as a key to achieving their goals of sustainable and sovereign farming, and as a member of La Via Campesina, it frames the issue in the context of international food sovereignty and international Indigenous Peoples’ rights. It is in this context that I would like to analyse the involvement of members of Prepare Produce Provide in Slow Food International, which also works towards food sovereignty on an international level.

4. Slow Food International and the 2018 Terra Madre Meeting

Slow Food was founded “in the 1980s in Italy, and it believes that food is tied to many other aspects of life, including culture, politics, agriculture and the environment” and that “through our food choices we can collectively influence how

food is cultivated, produced and distributed, and change the world as a result” (“Slow Food International. About Us” 2019). As such, Slow Food views food production and consumption as a political act. In 2004, Slow Food launched the Terra Madre network, “an international network of food communities – groups of small-scale producers and others united by the production of a particular food and closely linked to a geographic area” (“Terra Madre Network”). Its aim is to “give a voice and visibility to those around the world whose approach to food production protects the environment and communities” (“Terra Madre Network”). It brings together “food producers, fishers, breeders, chefs, academics, young people, NGOs and representatives of local communities,” and since 2004 it “has come together every two years at the global meeting, while national and regional meetings are regularly organized around the world” (“Terra Madre Network”).

Furthermore, in 2011, the first Indigenous Terra Madre meeting was held in Sweden bringing together representatives of Indigenous peoples from across the globe. They are not only welcome in the network, but they are seen as holders of knowledge that can help further the organization’s aims globally. I argue that involvement with Slow Food International (as well as other international food sovereignty organizations) offers a new avenue for Indigenous Australians to achieve their goals of food security and sovereignty. I will show this based on my observations at the 2018 Terra Madre – Salone del Gusto meeting, which took place in Turin, Italy, and which is organized by Slow Food biannually. More than 300 Indigenous delegates from over sixty countries attended the meeting, including several representatives of Prepare Produce Provide.

The event took place in several spaces. Three major halls showcased local Italian products, while international producers’ stalls were located in a separate building in the World Arena. Apart from visiting stalls, and trying or buying food, one could participate in numerous events, such as, dinners, guided tours, forums and taste workshops. The forums were meant as platforms for discussing important, often urgent topics regarding the relationship between food and land rights, refugee and migrant rights, climate change, education, biodiversity, food waste, ending pesticide use, etc. Apart from food producers, activists and educators, policy makers from the EU and other regions were invited to participate in them. The central place of the World Arena was the Terra Madre Arena, a round stage where many of the forums regarding the three groups represented in the Terra Madre Network – migrants, youth and Indigenous peoples – were held.

The Aboriginal Australian participants at the 2018 event were, among others, members of the Prepare Produce Provide (PPP) as well as the Slow Food Swan Valley and the Eastern Hills convivium. PPP first worked with Slow Food in 2016, when they took two Indigenous students and Wardandi Bibbulmun elder, Dale Tillbrook, to Terra Madre. Building on the outcomes of that inaugural trip, the delegation in 2018 included two additional highly respected Aboriginal elders, Dr. Noel Nannup and Tahn Donovan (Thierfelder 2018a). Together with the students, Johnnice ‘Gecko’

Divilli and Peter Roe, they presented in several forums at Terra Madre about the history and techniques of Aboriginal farming and the challenges and opportunities facing the Australian bush food industry. Moreover, they opened the 2018 meeting on its first day, they shared their foodways with the guests who approached their stand and participated in a variety of organized meetings. I will describe selected events to offer my interpretation of their participation in the Terra Madre network, focusing on the promotion of Indigenous foodways, the recognition of Indigenous ecological knowledges as central to solving current environmental issues, the fostering of a trans-Indigenous network of food producers, activists and educators.

For the Indigenous Australian delegates, sharing food and information about how it is produced at the stand, as well as talking about its meaning and the importance of their relationship with country, not only makes an international group of visitors to Terra Madre aware of the rich traditional Indigenous foods that many did not even know existed, but it also allows them to better understand the peoples' relationship with their food. In recalling her participation in the 2016 Terra Madre, Dale Tilbrook expressed her surprise at the dearth of knowledge about Aboriginal food culture and the eager interest of delegates following her address at the 2016 Indigenous Terra Madre: "When I talked about Noongyar six seasons and moving across the land according to the seasons, our approach to agriculture and fire stick farming, people were gobsmacked. They'd never heard anything about our culture or the sophistication of our connection to the land. I got mobbed afterwards by people wanting to know more" (Tilbrook; qtd. in Thierfelder 2018a).

Dr Nannup, Tahn Donovan and Dale Tilbrook also addressed the audience at Italy's University of Gastronomic Sciences stand where they discussed the impact of your blood type on your seasonal diet. The talk "introduced the six-season cycle of Western Australia's Noongar people as an example of a food system that respects weather, environment, social practices and individuals' health" (Thierfelder 2018b). Moreover, Dale Tilbrook shared her knowledge of the Australian bush food industry, its history, challenges and opportunities, while Tahn Donovan shared "the personal side of her entrepreneurial journey establishing bush foods brand, Max's Black" (Thierfelder 2018b). Therefore, participation in Terra Madre allows Indigenous Australians to promote Aboriginal foods and foodways, and to put them on Australia's food map.

Slow Food not only allows Indigenous delegates to promote their foods and foodways, but it also privileges Indigenous knowledges and supports Indigenous peoples in their struggles for food sovereignty and land rights. On the main page of the Indigenous Terra Madre website, we read:

It is clear that supporting indigenous communities and their traditional food systems means preserving the world's biodiversity. The Indigenous Terra Madre (ITM) network was born to bring indigenous peoples' voices to the forefront of the debate on food and culture and to institutionalize indigenous peoples' participation in the Slow Food movement, as an integral part of the larger Terra Madre network.

Slow Food believes that defending biodiversity also means defending cultural diversity. The rights of indigenous peoples to control their land, to grow food and breed livestock, to hunt, fish and gather according to their own needs and decisions is fundamental in order to protect their livelihoods and defend the biodiversity of native animal breeds and plant varieties.

Today, indigenous peoples are fighting against land and water grabbing, cultural erosion, social discrimination and economic marginalization. The partnership between ITM communities and Slow Food confronts these issues by promoting indigenous food systems that are good, clean and fair. (“Indigenous Terra Madre Network”)

A similar message was reiterated during the opening of the conference at the Terra Madre Arena. In addressing the Indigenous participants, one of Slow Food’s board members said that this was their place, their home, and that in the past years the organization has learnt so much from them. He called them to work together and give visibility on a global and local level. He emphasized that they needed to grow and have an impact. Indeed, these do not seem to just be empty words on the part of the organization. After the introduction, Indigenous people from different countries opened the meeting with prayers and speeches. First, a Masai Woman and member of the Advisory Board for the Indigenous Peoples’ Network, Margaret Tundra Lepore, offered a prayer in her language, followed by Whadjuk Elder, Dr. Noel Nannup, who offered a welcome in the Noongar language and Vincent Medina of the Muwekma Ohlone tribe of the San Francisco Bay area in California. Nannup was accompanied by the two young Aboriginal delegates, Johnnice ‘Gecko’ Divilli, a Nykina woman with links to the Ngarinyin people, and Peter Roe from Broome, WA. He acknowledged Slow Food and emphasized that the most important people for Aboriginal people are the future youth. He said that Slow Food was growing which was very important, and exclaimed in his Aboriginal Tongue – “Bad spirit, go away,” adding: “They go when we speak our ancient tongue. The vibration breaks into the spirit world, and as a race of people, our worldview is this simple: the spiritual world actions the physical world and we abide by that” (Nannup 2018). As such, Slow Food welcomes not only the ecological knowledge that Indigenous peoples bring to the table, but also recognizes the inseparability of their cultures and spiritual practices. This is an important acknowledgement, as from a traditional Aboriginal point of view, they constitute one and the same element. Indigenous speakers were also invited to share their perspectives on land stewardship and the environment at different forums concerning biodiversity, sustainability, climate change, etc. Policy makers also took part in many of these discussions. Moreover, the issue of Indigenous land rights, was addressed on many occasions during the forums by representatives of several Indigenous nations from around the world. Slow Food further assists Indigenous peoples by supporting 586 presidia and food communities around the world, many of which are Indigenous. Presidia protect “a traditional product at risk of extinction (an Ark of Taste Product); a traditional

processing method at risk of extinction (in fishing, animal husbandry, food processing and farming)”; or “a rural landscape or ecosystem at risk of extinction” (Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity).

Slow Food also serves as an important platform for trans-Indigenous cooperation, where the representatives of Indigenous groups are able to discuss their challenges and solutions, and create new networks for collaboration, both through Slow Food and beyond, for instance by organizing separate meetings for particular Indigenous or regional networks, such as the National Australian and New Zealand Meeting. It is important for Indigenous representatives to be able to make these links to further their causes both locally and internationally, and because they are keen to learn from one another. In an interview given before coming to Terra Madre, Johnnice “Gecko” Divilli said, “I want to learn more of that [...] I’m excited and a bit nervous to go to Italy. But I want to learn from other indigenous cultures, to learn how they do things, get ideas and then share that experience when I get home” (Divilli; qtd. in Thierfelder 2018a). Indeed, both Divilli and Roe acknowledged the wealth of knowledge and ideas that they took home after the 2018 meeting, as well as the realization that Indigenous peoples (particularly in the Asia and Oceania region) face a lot of the same problems and challenges as their communities do (MacDougall).

Last, as one of the Turtle Island participants put it, it is nice to see and feel that one is not alone in their endeavour. As such, Slow Food embraces a global Indigenous community of actors fighting for their rights. One of the most visible examples of this was the culminating point of the whole event, a huge, colourful parade of the Slow Food members from the World Arena, who, playing music on different instruments, singing songs in their language, often in their traditional dresses, and sharing bread, made their way to an outside stage, where Carlo Petrini addressed the participants in a speech emphasizing unity, strength and the power of millions standing against giants.

5. Conclusion

As shown above, by promoting Indigenous foodways, putting Indigenous knowledges and stewardship of the environment at the centre of discussions on tackling global challenges like climate change and food insecurity, and by creating a ‘trans-Indigenous’ platform for Indigenous peoples to meet and discuss their challenges and ideas, Slow Food encourages its Indigenous members to create change and impact food policies and practices in their respective countries. At the same time, through these efforts, new forms of cosmopolitanism are created, as Terra Madre fosters not only trans-indigenous cooperation, or what Niezen (2003) would call “international indigenism,” but cooperation between different international actors working toward the common goal of food sovereignty. Thus, in order to describe the work and cooperation that takes place at Slow Food, it is useful to employ McMichael’s

concept of “global citizenship,” understood as “novel forms of political mobilization that reformulate conceptions of sovereignty itself,” or “the unfolding of a world consciousness, or global social episteme, reaching beyond the principle of national self-determination to an alternative principle of cosmopolitan governance” (25).

Notes

- 1 I use the term “foodways” to mean “the systems of knowledge and expression related to food that vary with culture” and “the connection between food-related behavior and patterns of membership in cultural community, group, and society” (“Foodways”).
- 2 La Via Campesina “brings together millions of peasants, small and medium size farmers, landless people, rural women and youth, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the world and advocate for land rights and food sovereignty in the face of globalized agribusiness and food policy” (“International Peasant’s Voice” 2020).
- 3 Parts of the introduction pertaining to global food policy and food sovereignty have been printed in Kruk-Buchowska 2018, 414–415.
- 4 TEK “began to gain notoriety in the 1980s among various multidisciplinary fields of study, such as the environmental sciences, particularly in ecology. At present, TEK is considered an interdisciplinary theory drawing from social and cultural anthropology, biology, ecology, and resource management fields such as fisheries, wildlife and forestry” (Berkes, Folke, and Colding; McGregor; Huambachano 2019, 87).

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