

FOOD INTAKE PATTERNS IN A TRADITIONALLY-ORIENTATED ABORIGINAL
COMMUNITY: DIETARY FAT AS AN EXAMPLE

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The aims of this paper are two-fold first, to demonstrate how nutritional anthropology can have an important influence on the methods of nutrition survey and nutritional epidemiology, and second, on a more specific level, to show why long-term studies of subsistence and diet are crucial in the interpretation of nutritional data from traditionally-orientated Australian Aboriginal communities, where there is great seasonal variation and considerable local and individual differences in food intake (White 1985; O'Dea et al. 1988).

The observations to be reported here were made in the remote Aboriginal community of Donydji which is located near the slopes of the Mitchell Ranges in north-eastern Arnhem Land. Donydji is one of a number of Homeland Centres, or outstations, located in the lands of people known to anthropologists as the Yolngu. It is the focus for the ongoing La Trobe University Human Ecology Project established in 1974. Annual field trips of between one to two months have provided a valuable opportunity to investigate the social and biomedical consequences of changing diet and lifestyle. The overriding concern over recent years has been to help the Yolngu people understand and coping with their rapidly changing world.

In 1985 the residents of Donydji volunteered to participate in a "long-term study to monitor the markers of nutritional status and the risk factors for diabetes mellitus and cardiovascular diseases" (O'Dea et al. 1988). The biochemical analyses of plasma lipids were, overall, consistent with a diet which was substantially derived from the hunting and foraging of traditional bushfoods. However, the considerable variation found among individuals in their cholesterol concentrations, triglyceride levels and fatty-acid profiles can only be understood through detailed research into food beliefs and practices. Fat, in particular, is a much sought after food which is differentially incorporated into the diets of men and women, and among the young and old, according to customary rules of sharing and avoidance. This reflects the place of fat in the indigenous belief system.

To the Yolngu, fat is more than a rich source of energy it can be endowed by marr or spiritual power - sometimes a positive force associated with happiness, strength, health and fertility; at other times, for certain people, it can have a dangerous dimension (Thomson 1975). In Yolngu religious art animal fats are said to have properties of shininess and brightness (Morphy 1989).

Nutritional anthropological studies of the kind reported here not only allow us to interpret nutritional parameters more meaningfully, they also enable us to predict which individuals and groups in Aboriginal communities are most at risk from nutrition-related disorders as their diets and lifestyle become more westernised.

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