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Historical and cultural roots of tobacco use among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Abstract

Tobacco smoking has been identified as a major contributor to the high morbidity and mortality rates of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. After years of inattention, smoking cessation projects designed for Indigenous Australians are beginning to emerge. Dealing successfully with smoking cessation would be enhanced by an understanding of the long-standing historical, social and cultural antecedents to present-day usage of tobacco. This paper provides a brief account of the historical precursors to present-day patterns of tobacco use among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Historical records and mission documents, together with ethnographic accounts, suggest that Indigenous tobacco use today demonstrates strong continuity with past patterns and styles of use. These sources also reveal that Europeans deliberately exploited Aboriginal addiction to nicotine.

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Smoking is now more common among Indigenous people than among non-Indigenous people in Australia – almost double the national rate.[1] Tobacco is also ingested in conjunction with cannabis.[2] Torres Strait Islanders are significantly less likely to smoke than are Aboriginal people. Almost one-third of Aboriginal respondents to a survey in 1994 believed that it was safe to smoke a pack of cigarettes a day, and many Indigenous health workers are smokers.[3] Smoking is an important risk factor for a variety of diseases and conditions, particularly circulatory disease, respiratory disease, cancer and low birth weight. Significantly, it is these conditions that are major factors in the observed disparity in health between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians; deaths from respiratory disease among Aboriginal people are five to six times greater than for non-Aboriginal people.[4]

Providers of public health interventions into smoking (and other drug uses) in Indigenous populations have a complex series of underlying historical and social issues to take into consideration. For example, there is debate about the supposed root causes of drug and alcohol misuse among Indigenous people, including the argument that excessive use of substances can be explained by their absence prior to contact with outsiders, or to the lack of pre-contact social rules constraining their use. In the case of alcohol, many commentators believe that contemporary high rates of consumption occur because Aborigines had no traditional knowledge of intoxicating beverages.[5,6] Others have suggested that contemporary alcohol misuse is a reaction to the restriction of alcohol during prohibition.[7] In addition, social scientists propose that the more a substance is used to signify selection and exclusion, then the more it might be expected to appear among those who are excluded.[8] In the case of tobacco, however, all these arguments founder. Aboriginal people had long used indigenous sources of tobacco and other mood-altering drugs before contact. Far from being denied the use of tobacco, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were willingly provided with tobacco products by Europeans and by visitors from South-East Asia. Tobacco was used as payment for labour and was an acceptable item of exchange for intellectual and cultural property. It was even provided free as part of official government rations. Introduced tobacco became highly prized, and is now embedded in the sociability and exchanges of everyday life for thousands of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

It is now well established that most of the convicts, marines, soldiers and settlers of colonial Australia were heavy users of alcohol.[9] Less frequently we are told that they were also heavy users of tobacco. In 1819, it was reported that every second adult (British) male was addicted to tobacco.[10] During the invasion of the continent, tobacco, alcohol and opium were used to pacify and exploit the Indigenous owners of the land, but tobacco came to hold a dominant position in this endeavour. The Indigenous populations already made use of naturally occurring, regionally specific drug

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substances, but they were unprepared for the impact that the desire for introduced alcohol, opium and commercially produced tobacco would produce.

Pre-contact use

The Indigenous peoples of the continent and its islands exploited psychoactive plant substances with skill; northern groups actively incorporated new drug substances that were introduced by visitors long before the British arrived. A little is known about pre-existing alcohols, as some early commentators documented the manufacture and consumption of mildly intoxicating fermented drinks made from flora.[11-14] There is more detailed documentation of the use of indigenous nicotine-bearing plants ('bush tobacco'), which were used as stimulants. Before the arrival of outsiders, Aboriginal people did not smoke any form of tobacco, but chewed the leaves of several plants, some of which were nicotine-containing (including *Nicotiana excelsior, N. suaveolens, N. ingulba and N. gossei*). The leaves were dried in the sun and rolled into balls or lumps, which were wetted with saliva before use and dipped in and mixed with ash from the bark, leaf or twigs of particular trees. This alkaline ash is added in order to give more juice and bite to the quid and it 'free-bases' the nicotine.[12,13] Wads of mixed ash and tobacco were stored behind the ear, which delivers a mild dose of nicotine, and was believed by some groups to have the power to improve a person's hearing.[14] Bush tobacco such as this was (and is) used as a stimulant and a depressant. When chewed, it has a narcotic effect and was used as a medicament to alleviate physical stress, hunger, headache and dryness of mouth. The leaves of the most highly favoured tobacco bush found in central Australia *(N. gossei*) contain 1.1% nicotine.[15] Women from this region told me that bush tobacco was so strong that it would make people sick until they became used to it (Maggie Brady 1/12/1988).[16] Some species are said to be 'hot' and 'biting', with the ability to blister the mouth. Bush tobacco was so desired that people would refer to themselves as 'starving' for it.[17] It was highly sought after, traded over long distances and chewed with enthusiasm by young and old. It is not clear, though, whether native tobaccos were used by Aborigines in every part of the continent. Aborigines did not cultivate tobacco, although, according to eyewitness accounts, tobacco (of unknown species) was grown by Torres Strait Islanders.[18,19]

A psychoactive drug

Apart from these indigenous tobaccos, an even more powerful nicotine-containing drug was used, known as *pituri*, which was made from the cured leaves of the shrub *Duboisia hopwoodii* of the *Solanaceae* family. Like native tobaccos, the leaves were dried, mixed with ash and chewed. Prepared and chewed quids were stuck behind the ear. *Pituri* was offered to the explorers Burke and Wills, who described its effects as similar to "two pretty stiff nobblers of brandy". In the prime growing areas, *pituri* plants appear to have contained up to 8% of nicotine (commercial cigarettes contain about 2%). It was a powerful stimulant, an addictive anesthetic and was widely traded.[20,12] It is likely that users were addicted, rather than merely habituated, to the drug. Rolled into tight balls or pellets and wrapped in bark or fibre plant, it kept its narcotic properties for months.[21,22] Although *Duboisia hopwoodii* was highly valued and widely traded, it was not used as a mood-altering drug by Aborigines everywhere. Both historical and modern accounts of its use become confused, because the word '*pituri*' was rapidly assimilated into English and Aboriginal English as a general term that was applied to *all* indigenous chewing tobacco, not just the product made from *Duboisia*. '*Pituri*' has even been used to describe cigarettes.

The ethnography reveals that, traditionally, communities understood and employed a number of social control mechanisms over nicotine-containing plants, which included contraints on production, distribution and consumption. Mature men maintained restricted knowledge of the processing of *pituri*. With the decimation of Aboriginal populations and the loss of economic knowledge *pituri* use declined, coinciding with the increased availability of tobacco, alcohol and opium.[12] The entrenched use of native tobacco and *pituri* by Aboriginal people in many areas meant that a habituated clientele had been created for the commercially produced tobacco brought in by Europeans and other visitors. Aborigines quickly became addicted to introduced tobacco and went to considerable lengths to obtain it. The manner in which *pituri* and tobacco had been traded, and the fact that a wide variety of goods were obtained in exchange for these drugs, provided the socio-cultural basis for the way in which imported tobacco was obtained, exchanged and traded with Europeans.

Methods of ingestion

The first major distributors of imported tobacco to Aboriginal Australians were the Macassans (from what is now Sulawesi), who visited northern Australia from around 1700 until the early 20th century to fish for trepang, a marine invertebrate prized as a food by the Chinese. Tobacco was used by the Macassans in an apparently respectful way to facilitate good relations with the Aborigines, who they recognised as having rights over the land.[23] The Macassans introduced numerous items to coastal Aborigines from the Kimberley to the Gulf of Carpentaria, including language terms, dugout canoes, shovel nosed spears, liquor, particularly *arrack* (probably derived from palms), brandy, betel nut, tobacco and pipes. Some items were distributed as payment or tribute each season to Aboriginal traditional owners for the right to fish for trepang and pearls. Of these exchange goods, tobacco and tobacco pipes have had the most enduring influence. The distinctive long Macassan pipe was incorporated into Aboriginal social and ceremonial life and is still in use today.[24,25] Tobacco was also introduced into Cape York and the Torres Strait, although it is not clear by whom.[26] An eyewitness account documents Torres Strait Islanders fainting and becoming sick after smoking tobacco they had obtained from mainland Aborigines.[19] The Islanders used smoking pipes of bamboo, traded from other islands, and perfected a method of inhaling deep into the lungs. Haddon observed:

> *The effect of this kind of smoking appears to be very severe. The men always seem quite dazed for a second or two, or even longer, and their eyes water; but they enjoy it greatly, and value tobacco highly, they will usually sell almost anything they possess for some. I have seen an old man reel and stagger from the effects of one pull at a bamboo pipe, and I have heard of a man even dropping down on the ground from its effects.*[18]

In southern Australia the English officers and members of the upper social echelons took snuff and later cigars, while seamen and convicts smoked tobacco in pipes. Early reports and illustrations from the 1820s show that Aboriginal men and women quickly took to smoking tobacco from the ubiquitous clay pipe of the day – the pipe of the manual workers.[27,28] It is clear that imported tobacco rapidly became a highly desired commodity and was even shared with children.[29] The ethnographer Donald Thomson collected miniature smoking pipes from Arnhem Land that were used as toys by children.[25]

The uses of tobacco

Tobacco had a number of uses for the colonists. They made gifts of tobacco in order to conciliate with local people, as documented in the diary of Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1821.[30] Tobacco was frequently used in the first encounter between white men and the Indigenous people they met. In the early 20th century, a Chief Protector of Aborigines argued that tobacco as a form of reciprocation could be used as a civilising influence:

> *There can be no better civilising influence than that of continually moving about among the various tribes, each time taking a little tobacco or coloured cloth. How often has the weary traveller had to trust to the natives for a drink of water?*[31]

Tobacco and other desired goods were commodities that – intentionally or unintentionally – caused hundreds of Aboriginal people to leave their traditional homelands and brought them into contact with white settlements. Groups of Aboriginal people voluntarily undertook long journeys into settlements and stations and endured considerable hardship in order to obtain tobacco. These accounts date from the 1920s and 1930s.[32,33] European cattle-station managers were ready and waiting to exploit the supply of cheap labour that had been indirectly placed at their disposal by a desire for tobacco. Langton[9] writes of this process as 'taming' Aborigines, by drawing them into ration depots and towns.

The desire for tobacco (and other items) also prompted Aboriginal people to part with sacred and other objects. Expeditions such as those of Spencer and Gillen (1901-02) carried enough tobacco (400 pounds of it) as well as 'innumerable' pipes to trade with the Aborigines.[34] In 1898, the multi-disciplinary Haddon expedition to the Torres Straits offered after-dinner cigars to the Islanders.[18] Other researchers gave tobacco in exchange for items of material culture, for witnessing ceremonies, as payment for taking photographs, as tokens of esteem and as restitution for wrong-doing.[35,24] Missions exploited Aboriginal desires for tobacco in order to gain converts to Christianity and to elicit work from the 'natives'.[29] Later, missions distributed rations of tobacco on behalf of the government, a role that provoked a revolt from a Church Missionary Society establishment in north Australia. In 1948, one CMS missionary at Oenpelli successfully lobbied against the distribution of tobacco, saying that it was an addictive substance and contrary to the Christian principle of healthy living. The Northern Territory Administration instructed the organisation to resume distribution at the risk of forfeiting their licence to conduct missions.[36]

The manipulation of an addiction

The historical record suggests that Aboriginal people rapidly became addicted to introduced tobacco, including those who had not previously used native tobacco. In 1889, the explorer Lumholtz noted that Aborigines near the Herbert River in Queensland had no prior stimulants and suggested that this was the explanation for their desire for introduced tobacco. He noted that tobacco was believed 'to be good for everybody' and that it was an item of exchange with other groups.[37] It is puzzling, however, that Aborigines with access to strong native tobaccos should have so rapidly come to crave the 'new' tobacco. It may be that introduced tobacco was rapidly adopted because it was available in relatively large quantities and represented a great saving in labour.[38]

Europeans were happy to exploit the addiction. From the first days of settlement, it was argued that if Aborigines could be induced to give up their unsettled habits they could become progressively useful to the colony.[39] Colonists found that Aborigines were more willing to work for blankets and tobacco than for any other kind of payment.[40] In the cattle industry, tobacco was commonly part of the payment of stockworkers together with food and a regular issue of hat, boots, trousers and shirt.[41] In the Northern Territory, it was not until 1947 that cash payments were made to Aboriginal pastoral workers, and the figures included the value of keep and tobacco supplied by the employers. Tobacco 'payments' (often of poor quality) varied from two to four plugs per week, which were known across a wide area as 'nicki-nicki'.[42] Angelo observed that in the Kimberley region in the 1940s:

> *If it were not for the lure of tobacco they would not go through the long, hard mustering seasons as there is plenty of native food available in the Kimberleys ... Tobacco, however, holds their allegiance ... they return starving, not for food, but for tobacco.*[43]

Other industries paid in tobacco for Indigenous labour on sugar plantations and in the pearl shell and trepang trade. Narcotic dependency was a cheap means of keeping a regular Aboriginal workforce and employers commonly enticed men and women (including Pacific Islanders) with bribes of tobacco, adulterated liquor, and the dregs of opium. Agents of the government also overtly manipulated the addiction to tobacco. A Queensland police commissioner, for example, suggested that confidence in the police could be bought through its introduction. It was so addictive that

> *even the wildest, when once they have smoked, try and become friends with and hang around the haunts of whites.*

Such addicts, he reasoned, could prove very handy as police informers.[44]

Many historical descriptions imply that Aboriginal people were passive victims of their desires, drifting nomads who became unwillingly entangled in European settlement. On the contrary, it is clear that Aborigines were active, purposive and enterprising in their quest for food, clothes and tobacco.[31] The determined search for tobacco (from Europeans) was a cultural transformation of a pre-existing economic activity. Procuring tobacco (as well as blankets and food) from Europeans was viewed as a rightful exchange for the loss of land and resources incurred at the hands of outsiders.[45]

The past and the present

These uses of tobacco show a remarkable continuity over time, with minor adaptations to new resources. For example, in 1986 a Ngarinman woman in the Timber Creek (NT) region showed me an indigenous *nicotiana* plant saying: "Two-fella same: Log Cabin and this one". Log Cabin is a popular brand of loose tobacco. In 1897, WE Roth noted that people would prepare their tobacco (for chewing) in a similar manner to the preparation of *pituri*.[22] There are accounts from 1897 and 1939 of *pituri* being smoked, rather than chewed, an innovation that occurred after the introduction of commercial tobacco.[22,25] In addition, geography influences today's methods of tobacco ingestion, so that smoking is now more prevalent among Aborigines from the top end of the Northern Territory than among those living in central regions where tobacco once was, and still is, chewed.[46] More women than men chew tobacco, and all who chew mix their chewing tobacco (either loose, flake or plug) with ash, just as they had done with chewed bush tobaccos and *pituri*. Central Australian Aborigines continue to store prepared wads of chewing tobacco behind the ear, as was done in the past with bush tobacco. Nineteenth century sources show that children were allowed to smoke and chew tobacco; today in central Australia it is possible to see a child with a quid of tobacco. Aboriginal people were inventive in their uses of tobacco, rapidly incorporating introduced Macassan or European clay pipes in the 18th and 19th centuries. New smoking paraphernalia were created from crab-claw, shell, wood, drift bamboo and in the 20th century, the spent cartridges of .303 rifles and soda syphons.

In the 19th century convicts, the labouring classes and Aboriginal people smoked tobacco in clay pipes, while the gentrified classes used other methods of ingestion. Today, Winfield Red and Marlboro (with its cowboy associations[28]), containing high levels of tar and nicotine, are popular brands selected by Aborigines. (Paul Hogan, as an icon of the working man, was used to promote Winfield Red to a blue-collar clientele).

These brands target Aboriginal consumers; in 1998 Rothmans even used Aboriginal images to market Winfield Red in Europe.[47] Their manufacturers organise special promotions in some northern Aboriginal communities. In one, a percentage of every dollar spent on a particular brand of cigarettes was donated to the purchase of football jumpers for the local Aboriginal team.[48] In another (in an area where the Macassans first introduced the smoking of imported tobacco), one high-tar brand made up 87% of cigarette sales from the local store in 1998.[49]

The difference today is that people no longer have control over production and therefore over consumption. Social controls *were* developed for some drug substances (*pituri* for example); sources of the drug plants were closely guarded and distribution was well-established. It is not known, however, whether these social controls prevented over-use leading to ill health. Tobacco is highly addictive, but there are also social explanations for its entrenched use among Aboriginal people. It is a substance firmly grounded in an economic and cultural life that has long antecedents. The sociable sharing of cigarettes and passing around the same cigarette when supplies are low are normative behaviours. Cigarettes or loose tobacco frequently change hands (along with food, cash, alcohol) in circumstances described by the anthropologist Nic Peterson as 'demand sharing',[17] rather than spontaneous giving. This form of sharing is epitomised by the Aboriginal English term 'humbugging' for tobacco.[50]

Conclusion

Perhaps the most damning aspect of this account of Indigenous tobacco use in Australia is the extent to which Europeans are implicated in it. It is not that Europeans necessarily thrust tobacco on to an unwilling Indigenous population. After all, many Aboriginal people were already enthusiastic users of nicotine from the bush, and had sourced their own supplies of non-indigenous tobacco from South-East Asian contacts. The unpalatable truth is that an addiction was intentionally manipulated by Europeans for a number of ends. It would be as well for those engaged in health promotion to have an appreciation of this context, not only because it highlights some historical and cultural determinants of use, but also because such knowledge may help health professionals to free themselves from implicit assumptions about tobacco use. These historical and social understandings may also inform current programs of intervention by reminding us that it is not possible to use the argument 'it's not Indigenous culture' when dealing with tobacco use.

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