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Families food cultures in the communities and socio economic transition in the Pacific: a qualitative approach on « eating well » in New Caledonia

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Introduction

In recent decades, and mostly since the Second World War, the food cultures of the Pacific populations have undergone a sharp transition, particularly caused by the fact that trade exchanges with Western countries facilitate access to a wide range of processed foods, especially in the Polynesian area (Pollock 1990), and more recently in Western Pacific islands. This already has a major incidence on traditional local foodways (westernized), food supply (from autoproduction to monetarization) and chronic diseases (NCD linked to way of life) in the next decades since today onwards 35% of 11-16 years old New Caledonian teenagers are overweight or obese. So, how food socialisation taken place in New Caledonia families including 11-16 years children? What “well eating”, “good food”, or “bad food” means for young Caledonians and for their parents? How these social and cultural representations impact food representations and practices? And how it may explain food habits leading to obesity?

AIM : understanding how “eating well” could be defined in the family context and more largely to know current food practices and representations in new caledonian families according to their various socio-economic situations (family location and constitution, level of incomes, ethnicity).

Methodology

A double qualitative methodology has been applied:

→ 59 face-to-face interviews with 30 parents and 29 adolescents from rural and urban areas. The socio-economic status, location and ethnicity (European, Melanesian, Caledonian/Caldoche, Polynesian) of these families were considered for sampling. Face-to-face interviews were conducted during 1h to 1h30 with adults, and from 45mn to 1h with children in six cities (urban, rural, “tribes”, islands).

→ 15 collective structured discussions with high school classes (11-16 years old pupils) of almost 25 students. For each group, collective discussions with young students were animated during one hour each with two researchers, one animating and one taking notes.



I. Socio-anthropological theoretical frame

It is now established that food is not only a question of nutrition, but also of social and cultural influences (Fischler 1990, Poulain 2007). Food practices and representations are explained by sociocultural factors, especially in Oceania where food has a great importance in social and traditional interactions and situations (Serra-Mallol 2010). Eating, including producing, preparing and cooking food, may be seen as a “total human fact” (Mauss 1950).

Food practices and “eating well” were related to socio-economic status (level of total incomes and of graduation), to food availability in the family (high level of income, or being involved in food production or sharing as non-monetary food supply), and to location of family residence (urban or rural). In addition, access to nutritional information of food and the role of food socialisation between parents and children impacted on food practices and representations (what is “eating well”, “good food” or “bad food”).

Discussion

II. Food practices and socialisation in New Caledonian families

A globally analysis permits to observe :

1-Food practices at home are compelled by **social** (time of transportation) and **professional** temporalities (both parents working and work temporalities), almost in low income families. As a consequence, breakfast skipping, and money given to teenagers for bus transportation and midday food are currently spent on candies and take-away food.

2-The importance of **food socialisation** is highlighted, with the ordered roles of :

- parents as primary source of social norms for children. We noticed in low income families a great lack of food information among parents sometimes less informed than their children.
- public and institutional campaigns (through TV, local and newspaper),
- health experts messages (doctors, school nurses, sport and biology teachers),
- information available on the internet which may induce a gap with institutional messages.

3-No nutritional discourse have been noted in “tribes” where live most of Melanesian children met during the study live.

III. What « well eating », « good food » and « bad food » means in New Caledonian families

✓ From **individual face-to-face interviews** we drew 5 main observations of “well eating” and “good food”:

1- the most quoted signification of “well eating” and “good food” is linked to **nutrition**, citing fruits and vegetables, appearing in families with high incomes and high level of information : a complete and balanced meal with various food.

2-“Eating in **large quantities**” among low income families almost in the urban area, and traditional Melanesian and Caledonian families in rural and tribal areas.

3-“**Local and traditional**” food is perceived as “bio” or “organic”, almost among Melanesian and Polynesian respondents.

4-“Eating well” means “**commensality**” in European native and Caledonians families.

5-**Personal taste** appears as significant in low income families and young respondents.

→Indeed, the meanings of concept like “well eating”, “good” or “bad” food, are normatively constructed (Fischler 1990, Poulain 2002), they may reflect norms and values inducing food representation and practices (Regnier et Masullo 2009). The purpose is to reveal social distribution of the use of these concepts, related to the description of yesterday’s meals.

From individual interviews we drew 2 main observations of “**bad food**”:

1-“Bad food” is seen as **fat and sugared food** first, but also as processed food sold in convenience food or take-away stores.

2-For children and parents with low level of education, it is linked to personal **food disgust**.

→Many answers refer to a cognitive dissonance between social norms related to food, and everyday practices compelled by food prices and constraining professional temporalities.

✓ From **collective structured discussions** we extracted 3 main observations of “well eating” and “good food”:

47% of quotes express a **nutritional aspect** of food according to most institutional campaigns about food and health, from most cited to less (n=289) : varied and complete foodstuff, less fat and sugar, less snacking and fast food, less salt.

22% **personal taste**: specific food or meal; sugared products and take away food.

15% **local food** : local products and meal; local ways of food preparation.

Quantity of food and commensality (4% each) and other food evocation (price, body, commensality, drugs and alcohol...) don’t reach 8% in total.

And 2 main observations of “**bad food**” :

Nutrition is the most evocated meaning (266 citations, 62%) dealing with institutional influences, **personal dislike** (101 citations, 24%) including personal disgusts and food focused by institutional campaigns (sugared food, take-away food)

Drugs and alcohol (7%), non-eatable stuff (3%), local food (2%) and other evocations (body, price etc.) for less than 2%.

Conclusions

This qualitative study shows the social and cultural structure of food culture in families living in urban, rural and tribal areas in New Caledonia, and the importance of prime (familial) and second (institutional) socialisation in food representations and practices.

Affordable nutritional food is a condition to improve its use, and traditional food production and sharing must be protected.

The positive perception of “traditional and local food” as “organic food” may help government authorities to spread a clear message to reach a sustainable food system. Educational food programs, with a special focus on youth but also parents, are strongly recommended to continue.

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