

# Conclusion

Perhaps it is fair to say that Carl Strehlow's masterpiece and its context, demonstrate that every 'hero' of past scholarship is but one notable route among others to better understand contemporary thought. This book has been devoted to elucidating his work, both its strengths and its limitations, and the tradition of German humanistic anthropology in Australia. In Part One of this book, I have addressed the wider intellectual context in Germany and in Lutheran Australia that might have shaped his ideas, directly or indirectly. In Part Two, I have discussed his legacy for today's anthropology, and also the ways in which his intellectual method fell short of a modern anthropology. Carl Strehlow's opus represents a transitional phase in modern anthropology.

Noting the transitional status of Carl Strehlow's text in its relation to modern anthropology, it is also worth noting what Carl Strehlow offered, and what modern ethnography has lost. A decade or a lifetime 'in the field' has become almost unknown in anthropological practice. An acute and effective fieldworker, a committed empiricist, he nonetheless brought with him implicit models from Europe that did not fit indigenous Australian cultures. Still, his European preconceptions and assumptions allowed him to begin systematic data collection in a way that was rare for the period and remains of immense value. This data as discussed in Chapters V to VII furnished many starting points for central developments in the modern field of twentieth century anthropology. In this sense he was collecting material for a new century of anthropology; the ingredients that would be essential for a modern comparative and specifying study of societies and their cultures are present in his work. While *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* supplies source material for the study of religion and society, it serves another purpose which he could not have anticipated at the turn of the century: land rights, native title and mining and royalty agreements. These matters make *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* a work of international significance in anthropology's history. It is a classic that stands beside other transitional Australian works of his time such as Howitt, Spencer and Gillen, Langloh Parker or Mathews, and even the early works of Franz Boas.

Carl Strehlow's importance into the present is particularly evident in the context of land and native title claims in which his materials have provided unmistakable evidence that connects claimants to named ancestors who occupied and exploited the area claimed before 'Sovereignty' occurred in 1825 in the Northern Territory. T.G.H. Strehlow integrated his father's data collection into his work and together they produced a truly unique record of marriage, relatedness, place and ritual significance. In the land rights movement and

native title context the ethnographic detail of this record has not only shown the physical connection of named Aboriginal individuals to their traditional lands but has also demonstrated cultural continuity. No other indigenous Australian group can draw on such a rich cultural heritage record and deep and detailed genealogical documentation. Maybe ironically, this record has so impinged on Western Aranda consciousness that it has become an artefact in their modern culture, invested with their own use-values.

I have also sought to draw out some of the anthropological implications of Carl Strehlow's views in relation to the social Darwinistic work of his contemporaries, the role of language, the high god and 'altjira' issues, European frameworks that impinged on and limited Carl Strehlow's anthropology, and his humanistic position that accepted cultural diversity and the gamut of human possibilities among the Aranda and Loritja. The main difference between Strehlow's work and that of most other Australian researchers of his time is that he did not use ranked categories to position Aranda and Loritja beliefs at the baseline of mental development.

For an intelligent young missionary as Carl Strehlow was, educated in a Lutheran humanistic tradition, Baron von Leonhardi's request to train his gaze on language and myth, and those for further clarifications that followed, made sense. This was the simple foundation on which their collaboration was built. This simple fact reflects that Strehlow's orientation to the world and the people he encountered in it was shaped by a particular cultural milieu, intellectual life, theology and missionary practice. It is important to note that beyond von Leonhardi's engagements with Andrew Lang, and Lang's engagement with James Frazer, not to mention Baldwin Spencer's jousts with the shadow of Strehlow, von Leonhardi and Strehlow opened up a correspondence in which the recording of myth and language was foundational for learning about central Australian life. This was their route to an empirical science that differed in radical ways from the route through developmental stages as reflected in biology. Though engaged with ritual practice, Gillen and Spencer used their data on that practice to distance and subordinate Aboriginal intellectual life to that of Europeans. This was reflected especially in their views on Aranda nescience concerning human birth (see Hiatt 1996; Wolfe 1999: 9–42). Possibly the true nature of Strehlow's work was most evocatively rendered by Marcel Mauss when he remarked that the volumes represented a form of an Aranda Rig Veda (Mauss 1913: 103). This ancient collection of Hindu hymnal chants is also one of the earlier records of Indo-European language and thereby a philological treasure. Perhaps the same might be said of Carl Strehlow's work on myths collected in Aranda and Loritja language as well of his son's later work.

The singularity of Carl Strehlow's work is underlined not merely by the contrast it presents to Spencer's and Gillen's texts but also by the contrast that the work

on Aboriginal myth of the Strehlows, father and son, presents to the rest of Australian anthropology. Save for the work of Róheim, also at Hermannsburg shortly after Carl Strehlow's time, there is nothing in the Australian literature quite like their early attempts to specify an indigenous ontology. Yet the manner in which Carl proceeded, supported by von Leonhardi, seems to have been nothing more than a shared and self-evident method. Carl Strehlow's route may have seemed the natural course for a German missionary-scholar. In the first instance, he lived intimately over a long period with a group of hunting and gathering people who were gradually becoming sedentary. He learned their languages as required by good missionary practice. But as he learnt, and began recording myth from his key Aranda collaborators Loatjira, Pmala, Tjalkabota and Talku, it became evident to him that their cultures were being revealed through their oral forms. So absorbing was this task, and illuminating, that less than a year before he died Strehlow confidently repudiated any suggestion that the Aranda's modest technology might reflect a limited intellectual life. 'Never' Strehlow said.<sup>1</sup>

This confidence was born of both extensive exposure 'in the field', and also of an enviroing intellectual milieu. This milieu was both secular and theological. It suggested the possibility of multiple cultures, once thought of as God's plenitude but, in Carl Strehlow's time, increasingly identified with a multiplicity of languages that each carried a people's *own spirit and intellect* but also the capacity to translate Euro-Christian truth. Through the particular inheritance embodied in the rise of nineteenth century German anthropology based on thought initiated by Herder and developed in the work of the von Humboldts and then Bastian and Virchow, an appreciation of the psychic unity of humankind was fostered along with an active engagement with language work. This line of thinkers preceded Graebner and Boas who began to shape a recognisably modern tradition within anthropology. Carl Strehlow's work falls in this German tradition of anthropological specification, which bears a strong resemblance to Franz Boas' approach. Although Boas entered the academy, while Strehlow remained a missionary-scholar in the field, Strehlow's opus sits comfortably as an early field project in the Boasian tradition of anthropology.

The Lutheran missionary training in Germany and missionary practice in colonial Australia demonstrates the types of tool and worldview that Strehlow brought to life in central Australia. To begin with, the German Lutheran tradition sustained at Neuendettelsau placed importance both on classical language study – Greek, Latin and Hebrew – and on the study of vernacular, the medium for worship in Lutheran churches. This emphasis on vernacular led at least some pastors to take an interest in the *Weltanschauung* (worldview) of the people they worked with. Strehlow was one of them. In addition, both Johannes Deinzer at

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1 Carl Strehlow, *The Register*, 7.12.1921.

Neuendettelsau and Wilhelm Löhe, whose teachings Deinzer supported, placed an emphasis on the 'outer mission' to unbelievers as well as the 'inner mission' to those settlers in colonised areas already admitted to the Lutheran faith. This Lutheran emphasis on the vernacular and the fluid relation between an outside mission that might become an inside mission over time almost certainly informed Strehlow's practice in central Australia. It involved a Christian frame in which the Aranda and Loritja people who lived at the mission became his Lutheran community. The mutual engagement between Aboriginal people and the pastor is to some degree reflected in Basedow's comment:

As a disciplinarian he has established himself at the head of the tribal group he manages, and even in quarrels and feuds of the bitterest nature his word is and must be final. Moreover the religion taught is sincere and not overdone. (Basedow 1920–22: 22)

This comment suggests that, possibly, the Western Aranda word *inkata*, or ritual leader, was more readily applied to Strehlow than it might have been to other missionaries. Facilitated both by his language studies and his particular missionary persona, Strehlow's engagement through research may have encouraged the Aranda to provide him with a status that referenced their world and very possibly tried to make him part of their world. It certainly appears that towards the end of his life, the Aranda had made him part of their world; whether he knew or felt this, is not known. Letters written in Aranda to him during his last days at Hermannsburg and later to Frieda Strehlow in South Australia show the emotional attachment his Aranda congregation had to him.<sup>2</sup>

The different types of intellectual context in which Carl Strehlow proceeded into the field also informed his collaboration with von Leonhardi. The foci that von Leonhardi suggested were just the ones that Strehlow with his Lutheran background would likely have chosen for himself. In addition, it is pertinent to underline again that, as an armchair anthropologist, von Leonhardi subscribed to the full range of professional journals, especially in German and English, that otherwise would have been unavailable to Strehlow. This bore on Carl Strehlow's work in two particular ways. First, it meant that von Leonhardi's comments kept current issues such as the 'high god' issue present. Through reference to Andrew Lang and others, von Leonhardi encouraged Strehlow to explore these matters as thoroughly as he could. Strehlow's view shifted over time as did his understanding of *altjira*. Whether or not a later ethnography would endorse all Strehlow's positions, the dimensions of meaning concerning these issues

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<sup>2</sup> Between 13 September and 9 October 1922 when Carl was still at the Hermannsburg Mission, Jakobus, Rufus, Nathanael and others wrote letters to their 'Inkata' and after his death letters written in 1923 from Mariana, Jacobus, Nathanael and Maria give touching testimony to the relationship between the missionaries and the Aranda people. Other letters written between 31.8.1903 and 28.8.1911 by Aranda people have survived and are held at the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs.

that the correspondence with von Leonhardi brought to the fore reveals the subtlety of Aranda culture and belief in ways that are foreign to other works of early ethnographic work in Australia. Notwithstanding Strehlow's position as a missionary, the fact that he could consult with his informants in their language gave them some agency and allowed the building of an ethnographic record that still fascinates today. The correspondence between Strehlow and von Leonhardi had a second major impact. It reinforced Strehlow's own propensity to focus on the empirical record and turn away from premature theory. Time and again, von Leonhardi enjoined Strehlow to check his facts and to record the precise meaning of particular terms and the nature of particular practices. This focus on empirical particulars may have encouraged Strehlow towards a limited, yet refined diffusionism that his studies of the Aranda and Loritja involved. His recording of the ways in which forms of myth overlap and interpenetrate foreshadows the work of T.G.H. Strehlow and other subsequent field research.

The foregoing comments summarise some important issues I have discussed and underline the different factors that led Carl Strehlow towards the prolonged empirical study of individual cultures, one in particular among other cultures. Carl Strehlow was almost certainly Eurocentric in his view of central Australian indigenous people. He was not, however, an evolutionist who would present central Australians as simply culturally homogeneous. This gives his work a modern feel despite its transitional nature. Carl Strehlow was not yet a part of modern professional anthropology, notwithstanding the fact that he produced immensely valuable data in central areas of research. I have shown (i) that although his recording of myth lacked a truly comparative frame beyond the immediate region and a sense of symbolism, his ethnographic record began in earnest the specification of central Australian Aboriginal ontology of person-land relations (Róheim and Morton, not to mention Strehlow junior, have followed this route); (ii) that although Carl Strehlow collected genealogies as family trees rather than as data used to specify a social structure, his material make major contributions to our understanding of social classification among Aboriginal people and most importantly, has given the Western Aranda and Loritja a detailed record of their ancestry which they have successfully used in claims to their traditional lands; and finally (iii) that although Strehlow did not quite connect the issues of social classification, knowledge and land in an understanding of 'countries', territorial (local) organisation or land tenure, he recorded thought-provoking data on the different ways in which individual people could be connected with place. Most important, these data suggest that in his time and subsequently, what today we call 'land tenure' was involved in change that would be intensified with the impact of settlement. His data make a major contribution to loosening the 'straitjacket' of interpretation imposed by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and resonate with current views on traditional Aboriginal land ownership.

Carl Strehlow's opus is a unique Australian work that allows us both to look back to a classical tradition not well represented or studied within Australia, and forwards to a modern anthropology that carried his interests, and others, in multiplicity into the academy and well beyond. Boas' critique of evolutionism rested on this German historical particularism, an appreciation of the historically conditioned plurality of human cultures, and thus his 'notion of culture also called for a stance of cultural relativism, the idea that it is necessary to understand cultures in their own terms and their own historical contexts before attempting generalisations' (Silverman 2005: 262). Both wrote within a tradition that acknowledged that all societies are equal, despite their different moral values, and have individual features that cannot be rendered in terms of generalised stages of development. Carl Strehlow's work reflected the aims of this early German anthropological tradition, which was to document the plurality of peoples and their cultures in their own right.