V. **Geist through Myth: Revealing an Aboriginal Ontology**

It is a given of contemporary Australian anthropology that at the heart of Aboriginal ontology lies the person-land-ancestral inter-relationship (Rumsey 2001: 19), and that this system of belief, glossed in English as ‘the dreaming’, encompasses all dimensions of life (Stanner 2011; Berndt 1970). These elements of Aboriginal cosmology and ontology are taken for granted. Most land claim or native title claim reports, for instance, dedicate a chapter or a substantial section to the dreaming, outlining its main features and key terms, such as altjira, tnankara (tnengkarre/tnangkarra) or tjurunga (tywerrenge), and their translations. They summarise how the landscape was created and imbued with meaning by ancestral beings and how, at the same time, this landscape represents ancestral connections to the land and the mythical beings that created it, as well as furnishing central narratives, including travelling and local dreaming stories. Further sections of such reports outline how land described in these myths are held or owned by certain people or groups of people thereby conferring on those owners rights, responsibilities and duties.

Today the Western Aranda term tnankara, in Luritja tjukurrpa, encapsulate this key concept. It explains how the world came into being and is the source of traditional laws and customs that provide codes by which people abide. Western Aranda people translate this term often with the word ‘dreaming’ which is a polysemic expression. Dreaming can mean mythological ancestors, the travels and actions of the ancestral beings and their deeds, or their marks and physical representation in the landscape (trees, rocks, etc.). It can be used to connote spiritual power, religious laws and objects, ritual, design and songs and ceremonies although there are other indigenous terms that describe these concepts more accurately. ‘The dreaming’ can also refer to a past era in which the supernatural ancestral beings created the physical and spiritual world of people living today.

Yet what we take for granted in rehearsing this Aboriginal ontology is the product of a long process. It led to an understanding of the dreaming only after decades of ethnographic writing. Carl Strehlow stood at the beginning of this process and he came surprisingly close to understanding its unusual particularity. His approach to Aboriginal mythology still contributes to our empirical knowledge of the Aranda and Loritja’s engagement with the land and

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1 These are Western Aranda terms.
2 In other Arandic languages and dialects altyerre is used for this concept.
3 Tjukurrpa is also used in Pintupi and Pitjantjatjara and Jukurrpa in Warlpiri.
its natural species. In this chapter I propose to show how Carl Strehlow’s study of myth, although characterised by European assumptions and some distance from approaches of professional anthropology in the mid-twentieth century, realised a Boasian ideal: to pursue the Geist or logic of a people’s culture through attention to their myth. To understand what Carl Strehlow achieved through his empirical approach, I will draw on insights from Lévi-Strauss regarding ‘savage’ thought and ‘primitive classification’. It was his recording of the intimate relation between nature and social-cultural life among Aranda and Loritja people that would lay the ground for T.G.H. Strehlow’s work. Although Carl Strehlow’s corpus of myth lacked a modern sense of symbolism, or comparison beyond its region, it allowed his son to conceptualise the person-land relationship which led to a contemporary view of an Aboriginal ontology.

My point is different from the one made by Hiatt who calls Stanner’s approach to myth ‘ontological’ (Hiatt 1975: 10–13). He described Stanner’s approach in terms of isolating, through the study of myth and rite, a certain structured (and moral) order that Stanner describes as ‘good-with-suffering’ or ‘order-with tragedy’. It is grounded in the social world of kinship, sexuality and rite. Instead, I have chosen the human specifying view and experience of environment (person-land and -species relations) that were constituted through Australian hunter-gatherer life. The focus here relates more closely to Heidegger’s observations on nature: that far from being a given, the ‘Things of Nature’ are always constituted through a particular practice of life and in turn confer on that life particular forms of experience, a particular ‘World’ (see Heidegger 2002: 288–289). For this reason, Lévi-Strauss’s The Savage Mind rather than his structural analyses of myth as such is useful here (cf. Hiatt 1975: 12–13). These ideas are more at home with contemporary phenomenology in Australian anthropology than with the work to which Hiatt refers. This contemporary writing was foreshadowed by Strehlow (1947, 1970) and Munn (1970). It is of some interest that, in his 1975 discussion of myth and ontology, Hiatt did not judge either T.G.H. Strehlow’s magnum opus, Songs of Central Australia (1971) or his essay on the ‘totemic landscape’ (1970) worthy of direct discussion. The former is cited only for its view on Róheim, the latter, not at all.

This chapter’s main focus is the substantial record of a cultural logic that Carl Strehlow produced in his studies of central Australian myth and song. The value of his work lies here rather than in his framework which I contextualise briefly at the outset. I then show how a particular sense of Aboriginal ontology grew as Carl recorded in extraordinary detail an indigenous engagement with environment, with species and the land itself. T.G.H. Strehlow in turn connected these data with issues of identity, authority, sentiment and ownership, issues that were further explored by Róheim, Munn, Peterson, Myers and Morton to produce a contemporary account of indigenous ontology.
Frameworks for studying myth: Modernist approaches and Carl Strehlow’s

Four methods which may be designated as functional, structural, social symbolic and psychoanalytic help position Carl Strehlow’s early twentieth century study of myth among Aranda and Loritja people. To a greater or lesser extent, these approaches allow comparison between the myth-complexes of different cultures, and also some degree of specification. Comments from Hiatt’s discussion of approaches to Australian myth will link these four general categories to the world of Australian ethnography.

Malinowski was the most explicit about a ‘functional’ approach to the analysis of myths that counted them as charters for ritual and social life. Speaking of the rites and myths that informed the Kula, he remarked that ‘myth possesses the normative power’ to fix custom, to sanction modes of behaviour and to give ‘dignity and importance to an institution’. He wrote:

The Kula receives from these ancient stories its stamp of extreme importance and value. The rules of commercial honour, of generosity and punctiliousness in all its operations, acquire through this their binding force. This is what we could call the normative influence of myth on custom. (Malinowski 1979: 237)

Malinowski comments further that a role of myth is to present in idealised form, the practices and realised aims of the living. Its message is that ‘the best of all possible worlds’ is attainable. These ideas are made more real by the fact that myths and the ancestral heroes that they describe are owned by particular ‘members of a sub-clan, or a local unit’, who ‘can claim a mythical hero as their direct ancestor, and members of a clan can boast of him as of a clansman’. He observed:

Indeed, myths, like songs and fairy stories, are “owned” by certain sub-clans. This does not mean that other people would abstain from telling them, but members of the sub-clan are supposed to possess the most intimate knowledge of the mythical events, and to be an authority in interpreting them. (Malinowski 1979: 238)

Likewise Ronald and Catherine Berndt have maintained that Australian myth acts as a charter for moral behaviour. Their proposal is that frequently wrong behaviour is punished in myth or singled out for moral comment by narrators or an audience in the process of performance (cited in Hiatt 1975: 6). The repertoire of Aranda myth recorded by both Strehlows, renders this proposal somewhat implausible. Murders of fathers by their sons and vice versa occur without the
orderly moral accounting that the Berndts imply. As Hiatt observes, the quite high incidence of ‘bad examples’ in Australian myth suggests that it acted ‘to undermine morality as much as to safeguard it’ (Hiatt 1975: 7).

This approach to myth was revolutionised by structuralism. Lévi-Strauss shifted the focus of the analysis of myth from the domain of explicit rule to the implicit and rational unconscious. He argued that the myths of a region, and indeed around the world, should be seen as (logical) transformations of each other. Far from relating mainly to the contingent present or to an imagined past, myth or rather its ‘specific pattern’ is timeless; ‘it explains the present and the past as well as the future’ (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 209).

Among the human minds (‘primitive’ as much as the ‘modern’) around the globe, Lévi-Strauss sought to demonstrate ‘the invariant human mind coping with variant environments and trying to reduce them to manageable systems’ (Maranda 1972: 12). Through forms of transformation and inversion, the cognitive oppositions of the mind work to define the problems of existence and especially those that devolve on the distinction between nature and culture, including the getting of fire, the problem of incest and humankind’s distance from the sky. Lévi-Strauss’s view of myth was closely related to his view of totemism and received heavy criticism from Australianists (see Hiatt 1969; Peterson 1972). Even Maddock, who saw some virtue in structuralism, was tempered in his use of Lévi-Strauss’s ideas when it came to myth (Maddock 1982: 137–138). Nevertheless, the impact of Lévi-Strauss’s abstract and cognitive approach was to stimulate other forms of symbolic analysis, grounded in social life, the social treated as text, or in intra-familial relations interpreted through psychoanalysis (see for instance Turner 1968: 13–24).

The social symbolic in Australia soon became a particular genre of phenomenology – the type of account of subject-object transformations that in Munn’s work spoke equally about belief, semantics, environment and experience. Influenced by the Africanist, Victor Turner, Munn sought to address a symbolic experiential world in which ancestors and their descendants were embedded in the landscape. She wrote:

The purpose of this paper is to push our attempts to understand transformation beyond the artificial boundaries of “mythology” into the domain of socialization or, more generally, the problem of the relationship between the individual and the collectivity as mediated by the object world. (Munn 1970: 141)

She took as her focus the travels of people and mythic heroes across the land, and transformations that were not cognitive and abstract but, rather, embodied – as subjects went into the land, imprinted the land, or else drew objects from their
bodies to be transformed as they lodged in the landscape. These intimate and transforming subject-object relations were foreshadowed by T.G.H. Strehlow (1947) and in ‘Geography and the Totemic Landscape in Central Australia’ he wrote:

In a land where the supernatural beings revered and honoured by their human reincarnations were living, not in the sky, but at clearly marked sites in the mountains, the springs, the sandhills and the plains, religious acts had an immediate personal intimacy … The human reincarnations turned into living symbols during the impersonations of the supernatural beings at the sacred sites. The visible totemic landscape was considered to be an integral part of reality of eternity. … each major sacred site was the geographic fountain of authority for the territory that surrounded it. (Strehlow 1970: 133–134)

Like Munn, T.G.H. Strehlow emphasised that the makers of this myth-rite complex were people who travelled across the land. Contemporaneous with Strehlow junior, and just prior to Munn, Géza Róheim established a psychoanalytic rendering of these travels (1925, 1945). Guided by Freud’s Totem and Taboo, Róheim, as Hiatt observes, formulated at least three different positions, concerned at the outset with an historically or personally encountered ‘primal scene’, the father in coitus with the mother, and later with the ‘separation anxiety’ for which travel and return to the land become the master symbol. Hiatt summarises Róheim’s intent:

The central theme of The Eternal Ones of the Dream is that Australian religion acts both to widen the gap created naturally by parturition and to compensate the offspring for the loss of his mother. Within this general scheme, myths play three important functions. First, by celebrating phallic heroes and libidinising the countryside that they created and wandered over, myths counteract the deprivation felt by maturing youths … Second, myths help to effect an eventual transfer of libido from the mother to the father (or, in social terms, the removal of the boy from the domestic group into the all-male cult group) by offering a heroic and supernaturally conceived dual unity of Father and Son in place of the natural dual unity of mother and son. Finally, myths keep alive the dream of an eternal union with the mother. (Hiatt 1975: 9)

Both Hiatt (1975) and Morton, in his discussion for instance of the symbolic significance of the native cat hero (western quoll), ‘a provocative image of prolific reproduction through loss’ (Morton 1985: 224), provide accounts of the manner in which indigenous myth and rite re-genders parturition and creates a solidarity among men. In his treatment of mainly Aranda and Loritja myth, Morton (1985) integrates these symbolic insights with an analysis of opposition,
fragmentation and reconstitution between earth and sky marrying Lacan to Lévi-Strauss. Later, as I show below, he uses this approach not only to libidinise Munn’s indigenous landscape, but also to place within it active male agents driven by desire.

In this ontology, Morton would synthesise Freud, Lévi-Strauss and the Dukheimian tradition foreshadowed by Hiatt (1975) in his discussion of Stanner and Róheim. These Australianists sought to integrate analyses in ways advocated by others. One was Robin Fox who argued that the sociological and psychological in the study of myth and rite can be used to complement each other without resort to reductionism (Fox 1967b). Similarly, Turner described Ndembu rite and myth as stretched between two poles, the one referencing social norms, the other, ‘organic and physiological phenomena’ (Turner 1968: 18). Turner remarked, ‘it would seem that the needs of the individual biopsychical organism and the needs of society, in many respects opposed, come to terms with one another in the master-symbols of Ndembu society’ (Turner 1968: 19).

These various insights on myth drawn from different types of approach, not always mutually exclusive, were one of modern twentieth century anthropology’s significant achievements. What made these approaches different from those that had preceded them is that they were based on direct observation of the manner in which peoples used myth as genres of knowledge and ritual performance. The ‘present’ of myth, as Lévi-Strauss described it, was directly apprehended. However, most myth, including Aboriginal Australian myth refers to a distant past which led many nineteenth century interpreters to render it either within the domain of history as legend, or in that of imagination as fable or fairy-tale. As Hiatt relates, even Ronald and Catherine Berndt in their early formulations classified Aboriginal myth in terms of types of history either factual or imagined. Based on their 1958 account, Hiatt constructed the following diagram.

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                  Sacred
                  
       Myths--------                   Unreal events
                  
     Secular---------Universal themes

     Verbal literature---------                 Spirits

                Legends
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Source: Hiatt (1975: 2).
Legends and myths that were sacred or secular involved a classification that was not too distant from Carl Strehlow’s own categories, myths (*Mythen*), legends (*Sagen*) and fairy-tales (*Märchen*). The important feature of Strehlow’s work is the juxtaposition of a European perspective on types of oral literature that clearly pre-dates modern anthropology, and a fieldwork-like empirical record of people’s accounts of ancestral life and its natural environment. Carl Strehlow was transitional not simply for the lack of modern theory, but also for the way in which his empiricism made his approach feasible.

**Carl Strehlow’s framework in context**

Strehlow’s framework for the study of myth, evident in the structure of his published myth collections, derived from German intellectual life. It was a common form of classification in nineteenth century German anthropology and ethnography, invoking the German Romantic Movement and its orientation towards folklore and philology. Originally an ethnologist and folklorist (Morton 1988: viii), Róheim too was grounded in similar European traditions and adopted similar Grimmian terms to classify Aboriginal stories – see for instance *Children of the Desert II* (Róheim 1988).

Well-known representatives of this genre, the Grimm brothers, coined the terms *Mythen, Sagen und Märchen* (myths, legends and fairy-tales). They established myth as a form of story told in traditional oral societies and distinguished by its reference to matters of ‘collective, usually sacred, importance’ (Von Hendy 2002: xiii). The Grimm brothers developed their triple distinction over a generation. A brief sketch of its generic criteria appears in Jacob Grimm’s preface to the 1844 edition of *Deutsche Mythologie*:

> Looser, less fettered than legend, the Fairy-tale lacks that local habitation, which hampers legend, but makes it more home-like. The Fairy-tale flies, the legend walks; the one can draw freely out of the fullness of poetry, the other has almost the authority of history. … The ancient mythus, however, combines to some extent the qualities of fairy-tale and legend; untrammelled in its flight, it can yet settle down to a local home. (Grimm 1883, vol. 3: xv in Von Hendy 2002: 63)

According to the Grimm dictionary, *Mythen* (myths) are narratives of sacred events that are held to be true by their tellers, and may have features of both *Sagen* and *Märchen*. The term is usually applied to the myths of ancient Greece

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4 The German terms do not correlate exactly with their English translations. The English term legend, for instance, does not correspond precisely with the German *Sage* or *Legende*. Thus, *Sagen* can be translated as myths or legends.
or Rome. *Sagen* are a genre of stories that are locally rooted in true events; typically used for Nordic myths. *Märchen* (fairy-tales) are narratives that are not bound to a specific landscape, place or true events. Their content can draw from fiction and imagination. The Grimms saw it also as a ‘sunken myth’ (Schweikle and Schweikle 1990: 292).5

Strehlow was aware that the brothers Grimm’s three-fold classification *Mythen, Sagen und Märchen* did not describe Aranda and Loritja cosmology adequately. In his handwritten manuscript titled *Sagen* he used ‘traditions’ to label the different types of stories he had collected. The two main categories of Aranda myths were ‘The oldest traditions of the Aranda’ and ‘The specific traditions of the Aranda’. The second category was split into four sub-categories: ‘Traditions about celestial bodies and natural phenomena’, ‘Traditions about the most ancient time’, ‘Traditions about totem-gods, who travelled in animal shape’ and ‘Traditions about totem-gods who travelled usually in human shape’. He also used the word ‘traditions’ to describe Loritja myths, trying new categories and headings like ‘The highest being (Tukura)’, ‘The Tukutita, the first people’ and so forth.

On the title page of *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien*, however, the classification *Mythen, Sagen und Märchen* appeared. It is not clear if this was Strehlow’s or von Leonhardt’s decision. Possibly it was an editorial decision to make the content obvious to potential buyers. Within the publication the classification was not consistently followed; it is not explicit which narratives are to be understood as *Mythen* or *Sagen*, and only a small number of stories are clearly labelled, namely those called *Märchen*. Carl Strehlow made a comment on the difference between fairy-tales and myths:

The difference between these Märchen and the Sagen is that the latter may only be told to people who have been accepted by the men as members of their society, and who accept the veracity of these stories. The Märchen, however, may be told to women and children. They serve to divert from the secrets of the men (see the Märchen of Tuanjiraka) or to instil into the women and children a fear of the pursuits of the evil beings (bankalanga). Other Märchen, like the one concerning the arinjamboninja, are simply told for entertainment. (Strehlow 1907: 101)

The last two narratives in Carl Strehlow’s Loritja myth collection are also labelled as fairy-tales. It is hard to see why he called these narratives fairy-tales, other than to differentiate them from restricted stories.6 The distinction foreshadows the Berndts’ effort at distinguishing sacred and secular myth (Hiatt 1975: 1–2).

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5 This Grimmian model is still an accepted taxonomy in folklore studies and often taken for granted.
6 Today unrestricted stories are sometimes referred to as ‘children’s stories’. In Strehlow’s view, this might have made them ‘fairy stories’ as well.
Yet both categories draw their content from the happenings in a mythological past, which blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the mundane — a typical feature in traditional Aboriginal Australia (Berndt 1970: 216).

The classification of indigenous narratives was an issue for von Leonhardi. In a response to a critical remark on Strehlow's categories made by W. Foy, the director of the museum in Cologne, in the Kölnische Zeitung in 1908, he discussed in a letter to Carl the terminology and classification of indigenous narratives and proposed that in volume two a justification was required. He remarked in a preface:

The critic in the Cologne newspaper further regrets the term “Märchen” used for some of the stories told. He is of the opinion that “they represent serious concepts of belief, also for men.” I do not wish to debate the word “Märchen”. It does not stem from me, but from the author. I completely agree with the meaning it conveys. There is indeed a great difference between the sacred Sagen, known only to the men, and these “Märchen”. The stories that are found on p.101–104 of the first instalment count on the women and children’s fear of ghosts; though it must be admitted that the men themselves believe in the bankalanga and their evil deeds. In this way they are not Märchen in the true sense of the word. (Strehlow 1908: Preface)

Although von Leonhardi did not like Carl Strehlow’s narrative classification, as well as the terminology used to describe the mythical ancestors, namely ‘gods’ and ‘totem gods’, he did not change them when he edited the manuscripts. He maintained that the meaning was clear. He seemed to accept that to a degree, classification and terminology were arbitrary affairs, and that a precise ‘fit’ for a narrative corpus could not be found. In the same period, in 1906, Arnold van Gennep commented that European classification of mythological narrative was not adequate for indigenous mythology and admitted that he used ‘mythes’ and ‘légendes’ interchangeably (Hiatt 1975: 185) and ‘that each of the assumed classes overlaps the others’ (van Gennep [1906] 1975: 193). In his Songs of Central Australia (1971), T.G.H. Strehlow resolved the classification issue by defining how he used ‘song’ and ‘poem’ in the central Australian context. He made it explicit that they were place bound and pertained to cosmology.

Today the narratives that Strehlow called Mythen, Sagen and Märchen are generally labelled in English as ‘myths’, some restricted to gender or age.

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7 Kölnische Zeitung, 26.4.1908.
8 Aboriginal people in Central Australia often label today their stories in Aboriginal English: Olden time stories, bush Tucker stories, dreaming stories (‘proper’, ‘true’ story). Within the category of dreaming stories, Western Aranda people distinguish ‘inside’ and ‘open’ stories. The general public, including children, may hear outside or open stories, which are often public versions of restricted dreaming stories.
Many of Strehlow’s myths were male versions of particular stories. All of his main informants were men and in Aboriginal society this type of knowledge is gender specific. He does not seem to have made a remark on the existence or non-existence of women’s-only myth, to which he is unlikely to have had direct access. Nevertheless, there is some suggestion of women’s sacra in his collection. These narratives may be a public version of women’s myth in the event told by men (Malbanka 2004: 14) or are a male version of a restricted women’s dreaming. An example is the Loritja myth of the Pleiades:

The Pleiades are many girls (okarâla) who once resided in the west at Okaralji [place of girls], a place to the north of Gosse’s Range, where they lived on the fruit of a climbing plant (ngokuta = (A) lankua). Some time later they ascended to the sky and, after many journeys, returned to Okaralji, where they once more gathered ngokuta-fruit and performed the women’s dance (untiñi = (A) ntaperama). During this time the Pleiades are not visible in the sky. (Strehlow 1908: 9)

Just as he used the categories Mythen, Sagen and Märchen, to organise his data, which denoted in a German intellectual context particular genres, Carl Strehlow was also drawn to compare Aranda and Loritja myth with the European corpus:

But as in the Greek mythology, the Supreme God Zeus receded in the background, and the greatest interest, was bestowed on the semi-gods just the same thing happened in the religious traditions of the Australian aborigines. They neglected the Supreme Being, and turned their main interest to the demigods, half-animals and half-men, and endowed them with supernatural powers. The Aranda call these demi-gods Altjirangamitjma (the eternal uncreated); the Loritja, Tukutita; the Dieri, Muramura ... These semi-gods wandered from place to place, instructed their novices and performed ceremonies by which the Totem animals or plants were produced.¹⁰

The structure of his myth accounts seems to indicate that he tried to present indigenous mythology as a whole, internally connected, like Greek or Nordic mythology or like biblical myth. These corpuses unfold in a well-defined realm in which the protagonists interact and events intertwine. These myth collections start usually with setting the general scene and describing what was at the beginning of time and where the protagonists dwelt: Olympia and Hades, Asgard, Midgard and Jötenheim, or Heaven and Earth.

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⁹ Much detail of mythology and ceremony belonging to Aranda women has vanished in the course of the last century mainly due to mission life. The basic story lines as well as place names, however, are often still known, and some song and dance is still held by Aranda women who have close ties to Pertame and Luritja women. These ceremonies relate to some of the female ancestors as well as to other stories which have a ‘woman’s side’. Other beliefs in spirits have survived in modified forms (see Kenny 2004a,b).

¹⁰ Carl Strehlow, The Register, 7.12.1921.
Both Aranda and Loritja myth collections begin with general descriptions of ‘primordial times’; where the ancestral figures would live, travel, interact and end their journeys. These introductions are summaries of the narratives Strehlow collected from a number of people which usually begin with particular ancestors emerging out of the earth or commencing a journey. Read together they are indeed connected, because the same places and ancestors appear often in a number of narratives; and the main motives and themes in these myths are the travels, petrifying, naming, actions, and interacting of ancestors. They can create the impression that the mythic whole was shared knowledge in Aboriginal societies.

However, knowledge about myths was and is not evenly distributed. The transmission of knowledge generally, and in particular about country, was and is gradual. The entire body of information about a particular site or story is never conveyed all at one time. Learning about traditional laws and customs was a long process that could last a lifetime. Dreaming stories involve layers of knowledge, and the sum of these layers may be transmitted over several decades. In the case of male initiation, which took place between ten and 30 years of age, Morton (1987: 110) writes, ‘Throughout the cycle of initiation, perhaps lasting as long as twenty years, a youth constantly absorb[ed] knowledge and ancestral powers into his body’. No single Aranda or Loritja person would have known the entire body of mythology pertaining to Aranda and Loritja countries, because myths played and still play a very important role in land ownership. Therefore, considering a myth complex from different ownership positions gives it a different orientation. Rights and interests in land in central Australia were and are usually articulated through knowledge of particular dreaming stories, segments of dreaming tracks, songs, ceremonies, and sacred designs that describe the country and places created by the ancestors of a landholding group (Pink 1936; Strehlow 1965; Morton 1997a,b; Kenny 2010).

As a result of presenting Aboriginal mythology like European mythology and organising the myths in terms of a creation story, and a descent from the heavens to the earth, the modus operandi of Aranda and Loritja myth was masked. These European preconceptions made it difficult, even for von Leonhardi, to address why the Grimm brothers’ classification seemed only partly to fit. At the same time, and in the spirit of Herder and Boas, these ill-wrought tools of a transitional anthropology allowed Carl Strehlow to make a start. He embarked on the collection of raw material, which left his corpus open to subsequent interpretation because he tried to document the myths in their own right – notwithstanding his presuppositions. This type of work contrasts with attempts like Frazer’s monumental The Golden Bough, which looks for universal myth themes and rules applicable around the world. Owing to Carl’s reluctance to analyse, it is difficult to evaluate what he derived from his investigations. It
seems however fair to say that his research led him towards an understanding of the normative order he saw reflected in Aboriginal religion. In this his views were both like and unlike the Berndts. In addition, indigenous knowledge of the natural environment became a matter which he recorded assiduously. Finally, as his attention turned to the Loritja he also gained a sense of regional fine grain diffusion and borrowing.

What Strehlow saw: Normative order, natural history and regional diffusion

In 1906 Strehlow wrote to N.W. Thomas that the tjurunga songs he collected gave ‘valuable clues on the religion of the blacks, because they tell of the wanderings and the deeds of the ancestors, their totems’¹¹ and to von Leonhardi that these songs give insight into the Aranda’s ‘religious beliefs’.¹² Berndt’s remark that in Aboriginal Australia ‘Morality and religion are not conceived of as being separate spheres of experience’ (Berndt 1970: 219) is likely to approximate Carl Strehlow’s view. Christianity is a moral religion, and in German intellectual life mythology was understood as reflecting normative aspects of a people’s culture. This position on issues of the social-moral order in myth may be seen as a harbinger of the later functionalist view ‘that the narratives constitute a conservative, socialising force’ and a ‘normative influence ... on custom’ (Hiatt 1975: 5; Malinowski 1979: 237). The lives of the ancestors reflect issues of everyday life and ‘[i]n the majority of situations it is taken for granted that the majority of people will follow the socio-cultural patterns laid down in the creative era’ (Berndt 1970: 219).

The myths of the earth-dwelling beings and their activities explain how the world was created and reflect many aspects of Aranda life. Strehlow believed that they represented the indigenous understanding of the world and their perception of how the laws of life came into being. This interest is evident in the first sections of his myth collections (see for example Strehlow 1907: 8, 9–11) in which he chose to call some of the ancestral beings ‘teachers’ (‘Lehrer’) who establish and pass on ‘laws’ (‘Gesetze’). On the 12 September 1908, his life-long friend and mentor Seidel wrote:

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¹¹ Carl Strehlow to N.W. Thomas, mid to end of 1906 (SH-SP-6-1).
¹² Carl Strehlow to von Leonhardi, 2.6.1906 (SH-SP-2-1).
It was a great pleasure to receive your book and letter, – thank you very much – I was particularly pleased about the book. I have not read it yet cover to cover, but I can glean already now, that the myths contain what one can call the religion or the teachings of the natives.\(^\text{13}\)

The conundrum of myth as charter – how to regard bad examples – is evident in Strehlow’s work. The following myth presents an obvious case that a wrong doing, theft, has major consequences for the perpetrator:

Soon after this, the inhabitants of Mulati went off to avenge the theft. They travelled via Arambara, Tnolbutankama, Taraia, Jinbaragoltulta, Ruékana and Ratata to Iwopataka. When the inhabitants of the latter camp saw the approaching group of avengers, they said to the ngapa-chief, “You have stolen the latjia, that is why the inhabitants of Mulati are coming here.” When the group of avengers had come close to the camp, the inhabitants of Iwopataka said to them, “Here is the man who stole your latjia. Kill him with your sticks (tnauia).” Although the raven-man took flight, the latjia men threw their tnaui at his neck and he fell down dead. Then all the raven-men and latjia-men entered the local stone cave and everyone, including the gathered latjia-roots and the thief, became tjurunga. (Strehlow 1907: 76–77)

However, moral statements in Aranda and Loritja myths are usually less explicit. An example is provided in a mythic trespassing incident concerning the ancestral native cats, who are important both to the Aranda and Loritja (Strehlow 1907; 1908: 24–26). Loritja native cats, coming from the south, were stopped from proceeding into Aranda country as they arrived at a place just south of Gilbert Springs, a main Aranda native cat place, where the chief Malbunka was residing. Malbunka was angry to see them there and furiously uttered an Aranda spell on them which inflicted blindness on the Loritja native cats which stopped them from continuing their journey. Instead they metamorphosed into trees and cliffs.

There are also more mundane and prosaic instructions on how to prepare or do certain things, such as cooking game and distributing it correctly to kin, in Strehlow’s myth collections. The following are some common examples on the subject of cooking:

Lakalia, who had meanwhile come near, lifted big grey kangaroo LurknaLurkna with ease and laid it on the coals. After it had roasted a little, he took it from the fire, scraped off the singed fur and with a stone knife lopped off the legs and the tail, which he kept for himself, while giving the legs to the young fellows. Then he laid the rest of the meat back on the coals. When this had roasted sufficiently, he spread tree

\(^{13}\) Carl Seidel to Carl Strehlow, 12.9.1908 (SH 1908-2-1).
branches on the ground, cut up the meat and laid the individual pieces on the cushion of branches. While leaving most of the meat for the young fellows, he took for himself the spine of the kangaroo (toppalenba), the tail and the fat, and returned to Irtjoata, where he sat down near a stone cave. (Strehlow 1907: 42)

This typical myth, on how to do things the ‘proper way’, often includes how particular laws and customs came about. For example, in the beginning, two ‘indatoa’ (handsome men) lived with their blind aunt, Kaiala, at Umbañi, a place in the far south-west. Every day the men went hunting in a different direction, killing emus and cooking them in a particular way. They gave their blind aunt enough meat, but very little fat. Fat is still highly valued in central Australian Aboriginal societies. One day they accidentally gave her a very fat female emu and she noticed that they had not done the right thing by her. As punishment she gave eyesight to all emus. The myth goes:

Every day the two indatoa went hunting in a different direction, killing many emus with their sticks, digging pits in the ground and roasting the emus in them. After they had first eaten the entrails, they plucked (bailikiuka) an emu, broke its legs (lupara mbakaka) and spine (urba ultakaka), placed the cooked meat on green twigs and consumed it. The remaining emus they tied together, put a circular cushion made of woven grass (nama ntjama) on their heads and carried their prey home on it. They gave Kaiala sufficient meat, but very little fat. One day they were delayed while hunting and returned home after night had fallen. They accidentally (balba) gave the goddess a very fat female emu. After she had eaten the meat, the goddess went away from the camp but returned very soon because she had poked a twig into her blind eye, causing it to water a great deal (alknolja = tears). She rubbed the fat into her eyes and – she regained her sight. When she saw all the fat emus in the camp she said to the two men, “You have always withheld the fat emus from me, therefore all the emus will receive their sight from now on.” (Strehlow 1907: 30–31)

Aboriginal people in central Australia today still say that any activity in their landscape should be carried out in the ‘proper way’ or ‘right way’, implying that it is done according to the rules set down by their ancestors. These activities can apply to virtually anything: cooking traditional food, hunting, approaching a sacred site or performing a ritual or ceremony. As Berndt noted, ‘Aboriginal religion was, and is, intimately associated with social living, especially in relation to the natural environment and its economic resources’ (Berndt 1970: 219). His remark echoes Herder’s view that ‘the mythology of every people is an expression of the particular mode in which they viewed nature’ (Herder cited in Von Hendy 2002: 20).
Carl Strehlow understood myths not only as reflecting normative order, but also as reflecting an indigenous engagement with environment, a key element of their ontology. Aranda and Loritja mythology represented for him indigenous natural history, ‘as the totems of the Aranda belong usually to the animal and plant world, reflecting their knowledge of the natural world; thus, they contain the popular natural history of the blacks.’ He wrote:

The tjurunga-songs in their totality therefore present the blacks, who grew up without education, with a fine popular study of nature. They frequently show a transition from the narration of the exploits of the altjirangamitjina to a description of the totem animals or plants. Even the actors who perform the cult rituals are mentioned in them. (Strehlow 1910: 5)

With great enthusiasm, he recorded in detail the flora and fauna of central Australia as perceived by Aranda and Loritja people. While doing so, he admired their empirical knowledge of species and land. He not only collected the precise description of species and their behaviour in myth, he also collected additional practical information on them. In 1906 he started to send animal and plant specimens to his editor who distributed them to leading German scientists for classification. Von Leonhardi, who loved to cultivate these exotic plants in his hothouse at his country retreat in Gross Karben, had as many classified as he could and inserted these new data in their publications. As a result, descriptions of animal and plant behaviour abound in the prefaces, and footnotes throughout the text. To a certain degree their research became a cosmographic project. Von Leonhardi remarked how often ‘the fine nature observation of the various bird species’ in the ‘Tjurunga songs’ amazed him. In this way, Strehlow’s data testified to the Aranda and Loritja’s intimate relations with their natural environment. What his data also show is the manner in which the life of the species in this environment became the medium for narratives that concerned human normative order. The mythical ancestors were part as were flora and fauna of the environment, each of these with their attributes specified meticulously. A section of an Aranda fish myth exemplifies these features:

During a great flood, which had begun at Tnenjara a tributary of Ellery Creek situated in the northern part of the McDonnell Ranges, a great shoal of fish came swimming down the Ellery Creek. All types of fish were among them. These fish were being pursued by a crayfish (iltjenma) who kept driving them onward, while a cormorant (nkebara)-totem god stood at the banks and speared some of the passing fish with a short spear (inta). He threw them on the banks, roasted them on coals and ate them. When the fish had swum past him, the cormorant ran ahead of the

14 Carl Strehlow to N.W. Thomas, mid to end of 1906 (SH-SP-6-1).
15 Von Leonhardi to Carl Strehlow, 31.10.1909.
The Aranda’s Pepa

flood and came to the place Tolera. There he threw a big heap of grass into the water in order to detain the fish. However, he could only catch the small fish, for the big fish pushed the barrier aside. After he had devoured the captured fish and spent the night at this place, he again ran ahead of the flood on the following morning. He positioned himself at a particularly narrow spot, threw a large amount of grass into the oncoming water and speared a few fish. (Strehlow 1907: 46–47)

Predators of the fish, and their strategies, are described in equal detail with the strategies, technologies and practices of humans. The passage of a flood, its impact on a waterway as well as the detailed features of that waterway that may help both human and animal ancestors, are all described. Parallels are drawn between the techniques of a species and ancestor whom fish may avoid in similar ways. In the myths, human and animal experiences can merge in a shared space. They interact and respond to a topography in both practical and moral ways. Along with these extended accounts come a multitude of singular details and specificity:

A big grey kangaroo, named Lurknalurkna [sinewy one], used to live a long time ago at Irtjoata, a place to the north-west of the Finke Gorge. It ate the stems of the porcupine grass (juta wolja) and slept in a cave (intia) at night. (Strehlow 1907: 40)

Listening to these forms of myth, Carl Strehlow was able to compile a list of Aranda and Loritja totems containing 442 totems, of which 411 were animal and plant totems (Strehlow 1908: 61–74); of these 312 were used as food or as stimulants. Additionally he listed 20 plants and animals that were not totems for various reasons, remarking that this was not a comprehensive list. In the following issue on songs and ceremonies, he presented a list that showed which totems had friendly relationships to each other (Strehlow 1910: xiii–xvii). In a number of cases, animals are paired with other species that are their food or shelter. The relationships are usually immediate. The species which have been filled with significance ‘are seen as exhibiting a certain affinity with man’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 37).

Carl Strehlow’s text conveys an appreciation of this ‘World’ that anticipates Lévi-Strauss’s enthusiastic account of the concrete logics and classifications of indigenous people. In *The Savage Mind* (1966) Lévi-Strauss cited case after case of early ethnographic accounts of the intimate relations between indigenous people and their environments including examples from Strehlow senior. On Hawaii ‘the acute faculties of the native folk’ was noted, as they described ‘with exactitude the generic characteristics of all species of terrestrial and marine life and the subtlest variations of natural phenomena such as winds, light and colour, ruffling the water’. On the Philippines it was observed that the Hanunóo
classify all forms of the local avifauna into seventy-five categories’, ‘distinguish about a dozen kinds of snakes’, ‘sixty-odd types of fish’ and ‘more than a dozen … types of fresh and salt water crustaceans’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 3–5); and about a people of the Tyukyu archipelago it was observed that:

Even a child can frequently identify the kind of tree from which a tiny wood fragment has come and, furthermore, the sex of that tree, as defined by Kbiran notions of plant sex, by observing the appearance of its wood and bark, its smell, its hardness and similar characteristics. (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 5)

Lévi-Strauss famously concluded that ‘Examples like these could be drawn from all parts of the world and one may readily conclude that animals and plants are not known as a result of their usefulness: they are deemed to be useful or interesting because they are first of all known’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 9). From this he drew conclusions about the rational propensities of peoples and the logic of their concreteness. For Strehlow, and his interpretation of Australian religion, the impact was more specific. This intimacy both with the animal and plant world as well as with place contextualised the propensity of ‘totem gods’ to become earth bound either as tjurunga or as natural features in the landscape. As I discuss below, Strehlow would remark that ‘These totem gods are associated with certain localities where they had lived and generated their totem animals’ (Strehlow 1907: 4).

Strehlow’s interest in myth as shaping normative order, and reflecting the species and landscape of an Aboriginal world, was also marked by his interest in particularity. As he collected terms and myth from two different cultures, naturally both similarities and differences emerged. His initial impression was that the belief systems of Arandic groups were similar, although he had observed differences, obvious in individual myths, which were ‘local-myths that refer to particular places’.

He made a related remark again when he started research on Loritja mythology:

I am now researching and recording the traditions of the Loritja and have discovered that the views of the Loritja are in their basic structure similar to the ones of the Aranda, however, the individual myths are very different.

The mythologies of the different Arandic groups and Loritja were specific, despite some basic common features. In his Loritja account of ‘primordial times’,

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16 Carl Strehlow to von Leonhardi, possibly on the 6.4.1906 (SH-SP-1-1).
17 Carl Strehlow to von Leonhardi, 19.9.1906 (SH-SP-3-1).
for example, he points to a number of differences between the groups. Aranda ancestors tended to change more often into tjurunga, and Loritja ancestors into natural features, such as rocks and trees (Strehlow 1908: 3–4).

The main marker of difference was language and dialect variation; his comments on these particularities showed that he had a sense of the changing nature of cultures. He cross-referenced differences, changes and similarities. He documented the incorporation of myth motives and expressions as well as whole sentences or verses in foreign languages (such as Warlpiri, Anmatyerr, etc.). His data collection show that the interaction between different cultural and linguistic groups resulted in ‘borrowings’. In Loritja myths one finds Arandic words, sites and dreaming beings as well as Warlpiri words and sentences woven through the narratives (Strehlow 1908: 32–33). He collected evidence of amalgamation and assimilation of foreign cultural elements which produced variations. He and his editor were aware that cultures influenced each other and changes took place. He discovered similar motifs in myths of different cultural and linguistic groups and evidence of language change in myths that contained expressions and ‘speech’ not found in the vernacular and were clearly dated (see Strehlow 1910: 6). This was one of the reasons he was ‘intending to write a short grammar and a dictionary of the local language, so anyone can independently translate the Tj-songs, and see, in how far the older language deviates from the current vernacular’.

Although his comparative work indicated small-scale diffusion, he did not articulate this point explicitly. He simply remarked on the import of cultural elements from other regions into his study area, while von Leonhardi appears to have been testing ‘refined diffusionism’ in a Boasian style. Most of Strehlow’s examples and comments relate to the Western Aranda-Loritja border area. His precise recording showed particularities which defied generalisations. At the same time, it showed similarities that were understood to be diffusion through close and immediate interaction between peoples of different cultures. His son, T.G.H. Strehlow, remarked in the 1930s that these communalities were the result of the ‘constant intercourse between the two tribes’ and that ‘Western [Aranda] religion has been deeply influenced in many respects by Matuntara and Kukatja [Loritja] ideas; and Aranda beliefs, in turn, have set their stamp unmistakably upon Loritja traditions’ (Strehlow 1947: 66). He observed that ‘in Western Aranda ceremonial chants, a great percentage of the verses are composed in the Loritja language’. About half of the verses of the native cat dreaming of the Ltalultuma (Lthalaltweme) landholding group, for instance, were borrowed from the Loritja songs (Strehlow 1947: 66–67). His father had already observed

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18 See Strehlow (1910: 6); Carl Strehlow to N.W. Thomas, mid to end of 1906 (SH-SP-6-1).
19 See, for example, Strehlow (1907: 79, fn. 9).
20 Carl Strehlow to N.W. Thomas, mid to end of 1906 (SH-SP-6-1).
a similar situation and wrote that in the Loritja songs a large amount of Aranda existed (Strehlow 1910). His son also maintained that shared dreaming tracks, that link people, had similar features due to ‘diffusion’ or close interaction. The dreaming of the Dancing Women, for example, traverses a number of countries:

One of the Western Desert mythical tracks that go across the Aranda-speaking area is delineated in the myth of the Dancing Women of Amunurknga. This trail begins in the country west of Mount Liebig; and I have traced it eastward as far as Love’s Creek Station, near Arltunga, in the Eastern Aranda area; but the trail goes even further. (Strehlow 1965: 128–129)

T.G.H. Strehlow found that these affinities expressed themselves in a number of ways ‘particularly where the animals and plants form ceremonial totems’ (Strehlow 1947: 66). Based on his father’s material he estimated that about 60 per cent of the terms of dreamings were shared between neighbouring Aranda and Loritja (Kukatja) peoples. He wrote on Tuesday 12 April 1932:

From my father’s A[randan] dictionary I compiled today as complete a list of Aranda names of plants and animals as possible together with their Kukatja equivalents. The result was very interesting:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Common terms</th>
<th>Separate terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animals: 300</td>
<td>167 (56%)</td>
<td>133 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants:  220</td>
<td>147 (67%)</td>
<td>73 (33%)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* T.G.H. Strehlow’s Diary I (1932: 2).

**Premonitions of ontology**

The type of mythological material Carl Strehlow collected is the core of Aboriginal belief systems and what today is referred to as the dreaming in English. Strehlow’s material contains most elements that allowed – in hindsight – a concept of the dreaming. It supplies excellent source material and empirical evidence. He did not have the tools of modern anthropology and linguistics at his disposal to formulate this concept, and did not experience the intimate relationship first hand that Aboriginal people have to their land. He did not have the opportunity to travel with his informants over their country. Nevertheless his work and data were suggestive of the ‘subject into object’ transformation (Munn 1970; Morton 1987) and to a certain degree the person-land relationship in indigenous Australian cultures (Strehlow 1947; Myers [1986] 1991). It would certainly help his son conceptualise and articulate it.
The conceptualisation of ‘subject into object’ was latent in his data collection. Ever recurring motives are the vast travels and the transformations of the ancestral beings into natural features or tjurunga or kuntanka (objects) in both Aranda and Loritja myths. He realised that these journeys and transformations, described in ‘their religious traditions’ and ‘their sacred songs (tjurunga songs)’ recited by the old men during ceremonies, were essential features of Aboriginal cosmology.  

He remarked that nearly all Aranda songs end with the ancestors returning to their home (Heimat) very tired from their long wanderings, and usually turned into tjurunga. The issues of growing tired, going to sleep or ‘going in’, and actually becoming part of the land, are implicitly all speaking about a particular way that landscape and species are linked to ancestors. The ancestors would ‘altjamaltjerama’, which means ‘become a hidden body, i.e. to assume a different Gestalt’ (Strehlow 1907: 5), at particular named places or ‘tjurungeraka’ (meaning ‘change into wood or stone’) at the end of their activities:

For not only the whole body of the totem ancestor but also individual parts of it were tjurungeraka, i.e. changed into wood or stone, e.g. the fat of a totem snake (apma andara), the kidney of a possum ancestor (imora topparka), the heart of an emu (ilia tukuta), etc. Indeed, even some of the sticks belonging to the totem ancestors are regarded as tjurunga, etc. (Strehlow 1908: 77)

There are countless examples of this process of becoming country, or being lodged in the country. In a Loritja myth ‘The two brothers Neki and Wapiti on the mountain Mulati’ (Strehlow 1908: 10) the ancestors Neki and Wapiti (synonyms for a type of edible root) end the story by turning into two cliffs on a mountain called Mulati, meaning twins. The events of this myth take place not far from Merini, a mountain also mentioned in Aranda mythology. In ‘Papa tuta. Knulja ntjara’ (reproduced in Loritja, Aranda, a German interlinear translation and a German free translation) the dog ancestors change into tjurunga at Rotna, a site on Aranda territory. ‘Katuwara’, a short Loritja myth about two eagles (Strehlow 1908: 20), tells of an excursion of the eagles to a mountain called in Aranda Eritjakwata (meaning eagle egg/s) and their flights to the north. Like most ancestors, they petrify at their place of departure, Kalbi (meaning eagle feather) west of Tempe Downs. At the end of some of the songs he notes where the ceremony and rites were performed. For example, the Arandic red

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21 Carl Strehlow to von Leonhardi, 2.6.1906 (SH-SP-2-1). See also Carl Strehlow to N.W. Thomas, mid to end of 1906 (SH-SP-6-1).
22 The German Heimat carries strong notions of emotional attachment to landscape. Meggitt ([1962] 1986: 67) chose in his Desert People the notion of die Heimat to describe ‘the affection that a man feels for his wider community and its country’.
23 Carl Strehlow to von Leonhardi, 2.6.1906 (SH-SP-2-1).
kangaroo ceremony takes place at Ulamba (Strehlow 1910: 10–13) and the large
tawny frogmouth ceremony of the Loritja is held at Kumbuli in the north-west
of Hermannsburg (Strehlow 1911: 19). He wrote that the ‘mbatjalkatiuma’
ceremonies are performed at sites which are in one way or another connected to
the relevant ancestor, because they are believed to be hidden at these places in
rocks or underground and that they emerge when the old men let their blood
flow on these sites during the performance of ceremonies (Strehlow 1910: 8).

The transformations are a main feature of Aboriginal ontology as ancestors
externalise themselves in their environment. Carl Strehlow wrote to von
Leonhardi, not quite sure what to make of the phenomenon of place names and
their creation:

Esteemed Sir!

With this mail I send you again some myths. I have placed red brackets
around the ones that are not worth publishing, because they only
contain names that are important to the blacks and for science they seem
rather of minor value. However, you are completely free to publish an
extract from these as well as from the others I have sent you. The myth
of the ‘fish totem ancestor’, for example, is quite uninteresting, as it
contains many fish totem places, and yet I do not want to miss them
entirely. They show how the natives imagine the creation of the fish
totem places.24

Naming, making and marking of places are important features of the creation
process. Names such as Rubuntja (Mt Hay), Irbmankara (Running Waters),
Aroalirbaka (2 Mile in the Finke) and many others are prominent in all
mythological accounts. He wrote about the ‘altjirangamitjina’ (dreaming
ancestors):

These totem gods are associated with certain localities where they had
lived and generated their totem animals. Such localities are mostly
found in the vicinity of a high mountain, a spring or a gorge where the
totem animals that bear their names usually gather in larger numbers.
For example, there is a lizard totem place near Hermannsburg, at
Manángananga, where there are many lizards. Fish totem places can
be found only in places where there is much water, e.g. in the Ellery
Creek. Some of the totem gods remained in their original habitations;
these are referred to as atua kutata, i.e. the men who always live in one
place. Other altjirangamitjina, however, went on extended journeys and
returned home in the company of several young men. (Strehlow 1907: 4)

24 Carl Strehlow to von Leonhardi, probably mid 1906 (SH–SP-9-1). See Strehlow (1907: 46–48) on fish
dreaming.
All narratives Carl Strehlow collected belong to particular localities of Aranda or Loritja territory and take place during a mythological creation era. He wrote that Aranda myths are local-myths that refer to particular places. As early as 1894 missionary Reuther explained in the *Kirchlichen Mitteilungen* that the muramura (dreaming ancestors) had created the land:

> There are many Muramura. Each one of them established something good, and created the earth; however, because there are so many of them, each made only a part of the land of which he is the patron guardian.

As a result of his empiricism and maybe an intuitive understanding of the significance of place for Aranda and Loritja people, Strehlow collected and recorded hundreds of site names. He had grasped to a certain degree the importance of naming and metamorphosing, writing that their journeys ended with the ancestral beings fossilised or petrified into the landscape, from which spirits rose (Strehlow 1907: 2). He even wrote to his editor that it was unlawful to change or damage natural features of the landscape. But he did not get to the specific subject-into-object ontology as described by Munn (1970), expanded by Myers ([1986] 1991) and elaborated by Morton (1987) and Redmond (2001). Still, he came close:

> The totem, the totem ancestor and the totem descendant, i.e. the actor, appear in the tjurunga-songs as a single entity. Some of the tjurunga-songs are simply beyond understanding unless one bears in mind the inseparable unity between the totem, the altjirangamitjina and the ratapa. (Strehlow 1910: 5)

It was T.G.H. Strehlow who would travel on camel back with Aranda men over their country mapping the exact places of events that had taken place in the mythological past. T.G.H. Strehlow understood the overwhelming significance of land as well as the emotional attachment of indigenous people to ancestral figures in place, as well as to their travels and acts as represented in performance.

‘and it was an eye-opener for me’

Ten years after his father’s last journey to Horseshoe Bend, T.G.H. Strehlow returned to Hermannsburg on the 5 April 1932. In his baggage he carried his father’s publication *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* and

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25 Carl Strehlow to von Leonhardi, possibly written on the 6.4.1906 (SH-SP-1-1).
26 Reuther (1894: 57) in *Kirchlichen Mitteilungen*.
27 Carl Strehlow to von Leonhardi, 2.6.1906 (SH-SP-2-1).
28 Among other things ‘ratapa’ means in Carl Strehlow’s work spirit-child that enters a mother to be and gives a person a soul.
unpublished dictionary. He was 23, only one year older than his father had been when he first arrived at the mission in 1894. Hill (2002) describes Ted’s feelings and his motives for returning to his birthplace; they were fraught with ambivalence. Yet he was very keen to learn everything he could about central Australia. Once he had familiarised himself again with Hermannsburg and its people, he started studying and checking his father’s data and brushing up his Aranda with old friends of his father.29 Ted found it difficult to get back into the language of his childhood, although he had an enormous head start and was equipped with his father’s myth collection and unpublished dictionary, that contained thousands of Aranda and Loritja words.

Within a few weeks he was tracking the bush on camel back in the company of Tom Ljoŋa, an Aranda man, collecting data for his thesis on Aboriginal language. His fourth trip in November and December of 1932 took him onto his ‘father’s country’, Tjoritja (Tyurretye) country, the country that features prominently in Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien. When he got back to Hermannsburg he wrote that ‘The long-dreaded trip is over at last’ and ‘Now I am home.’30 After this trip – it had been an important one despite not having collected much linguistic data – he wrote to his supervisor, Professor J.A. FitzHerbert in Adelaide:

On my last trip I did not find many natives, except at Hamilton Downs and Napperby: since my July trip one of the Western stations has closed down, and the numerous natives have all dispersed, mainly to Hermannsburg. My own camel boy, however, had his original home in these parts. Accordingly, I had a splendid opportunity of getting an insight into the former life of this Aranda group – how their wandering depended on the seasons of the year and the failing or replenishment of their water supplies. I was shown many ceremonial sites and a sacred cave (Ulamba) with the last few tjurunga in it; and it was an eye-opener for me to see how the old legends fit in with the general geography of the tribal territory.31 It is only after a trip such as this that the old legends – which are usually told in an extremely terse style, an intimate knowledge of the locality described on the part of the listeners being presupposed by the story teller – really begin to live in one’s mind.32

This trip in late 1932 made him realise how intimate the relationship between person, species and the land is. Hill (2002: 175–176) writes that it is surprising that he had not realised the close connection of natural environment and

29 T.G.H. Strehlow’s Diary I (1932: 1–11).
30 T.G.H. Strehlow’s Diary I (1932: 130).
31 Emphasis added.
32 T.G.H. Strehlow to Professor J.A. FitzHerbert, 5.1.1933 (SRC Correspondence 60/32).
people, and that it was only taking shape now, despite his language skills and childhood milieu. However, this is not at all astonishing because the specificity of an Aboriginal ontology, as we understand it today, had yet to be articulated.\footnote{This remark reveals that the impression that Ted evokes in his award winning \textit{Journey to Horseshoe Bend} that he was aware of the significance of landscape on his father’s death journey is to a certain degree fiction. He may have been unconsciously aware of this fact.}

T.G.H. Strehlow was struggling with many aspects of central Australia. He was relearning Aranda, acquainting himself with the indigenous and non-indigenous population of the Centre, acquiring survival skills and grappling with geography. It was hard going. An entry for Wednesday the 9 November 1932, camped near Ulamba on Tom Ljoŋa’s father’s and father’s father’s country, illustrates his difficulties, which were met on many other days as well:

A warm day. We spent another morning, tjurunga hunting, and then had to give it up as all likely places had been exhausted. There is only one vague chance that the caves may be right at the Western extremity of Eritjakwata; but its no use messing around any more. For I discovered, when taking the camels down to the waterhole this afternoon that it will be quite dry in a day’s time or so after that we’d have to carry the water down to the camels a long distance. Besides, Tom, instead of getting me a wallaby, went out in quest of kangaroos; “the wind reared around in all directions”. And Tom returned late – without anything. He threw his own remaining bit of euro away as well because it had gone maggoty. He also informs me tonight that “Baby” is developing a tender left forefoot on the stones. Old “Ranji” is still limping and only this morning I had to pull out some more little splinters and spikes from the open sore on his sole. Such is life, and yes people would “give anything” to have my job – “it must be so fascinating the insight it gives you into the souls of such an interesting people”. I climbed the mountain straight North from here today in desperation, in order to reconnoitre the leg of the country. I took angles galore, but nothing corresponds with any of the maps I have – which is a good thing. I got a splendid view right around – all high peaks of the McDonnell and all the ranges North, and the sandhills and plains and salt lakes between [only Karinjarra was hidden by another formation]; but everything was shrouded in haze unfortunately. This made it impossible to gauge distances, and I am still quite in a muddle as to which peaks are Mt Chapple, Heughlin, Zeil and Razorback.\footnote{Later he plotted these sites on a map as Eritjakwata, Emalgna, Ulatarka and Latjima (Strehlow 1971).} – Well here’s another moon-light night. I suppose, I’ll have to shift tomorrow owing to lack of water – no rest for the wicked.\footnote{T.G.H. Strehlow’s Diary I (1932: 121).}
Two years after this crucial fourth trip,\textsuperscript{36} he wrote three seminal essays in 1934 that would be published as \textit{Aranda Traditions} in 1947; they are the beginning of the arduous work of conceptualising the Aboriginal ontology. Significantly the first essay starts with a fictional visit of the owners to Ulamba. This description is based on his visit to Ulamba with Tom Ljoŋa and was much influenced by the feelings of his ‘camel boy’, a man in his fifties who was disillusioned and deeply saddened by the loss of his country and the fate of his people. T.G.H. Strehlow (1947: 30–33) captured what Ulamba meant emotionally to Tom. These feelings towards country, he also consciously noted when he was checking his father’s version of Tom’s ‘Atua Arintja from Ulamba’\textsuperscript{37} with Angus, Jonathan and Moses in January 1933 back in Hermannsburg:

I first gave the three men my father’s version of the legend, with which they agreed: according to Moses, Loatjira had been the original narrator. Angus could not tell, why the cult was ever performed – the erilkngibata had not given any explanation for it any more. …

Strangely enough, in those fragments of the song which are remembered by Angus, Jonathan and Moses and also in those which are recorded in my father’s works, the whole stress is laid not on the horrible cannibalism of the atua erintja, but on his longing for home, for his own green Ulamba, and on his sorrow at finding that birds have desecrated his own cave at Ulamba. It sounds almost like an Aranda version of the lost son.\textsuperscript{38}

T.G.H. Strehlow was able to formulate the relationship and feelings of Aboriginal people towards country and what the stories of species-ancestors mean in these first essays, because he had experienced it first hand. He saw the parallels between the people’s relationship to land/place and the ancestors ‘Longing for home’ which is the motif that ‘lead[s] most of the weary ancestors of legend back to the place whence they originated’ (Strehlow 1947: 32). Nearly 40 years later he still wrote about feelings connected to country and ‘that in the days of the totemic ancestors the landscape itself reciprocated these feelings of affection’ (Strehlow 1971: 584). In the course of his long career T.G.H. Strehlow would gradually articulate explicitly the specific ontology of the Aranda.

\textsuperscript{36} T.G.H. Strehlow’s Diary I (1932: 118–130).
\textsuperscript{37} In his father’s work simply called ‘Atua arintja, der bösse Mann’ (Carl Strehlow 1907: 90–92). Ted added ‘from Ulamba’ and nearly 40 years later it appears in his \textit{Songs of Central Australia} as ‘The Arintja Song of Ulamba’ (1971: 577–584). Ulamba is also connected to an herre (kangaroo) dreaming (Carl Strehlow 1910: 10–13) where its ceremony is performed.
\textsuperscript{38} T.G.H. Strehlow’s Diary I (1932/33: 145–146).
**Conceptualising the dreaming**

Unable to travel the Aranda landscape for research, or avail himself of early models of local organisation, Carl Strehlow would not articulate explicitly his informants’ intimate relationship to country. Thus, while he had rigorously documented what his informants told him about their dreaming ancestors emerging out of the earth, travelling over its surface during the creation period and metamorphosing into natural features or objects, his son T.G.H. Strehlow would be able to formulate explicitly what these procreational movements and transformations meant. He would pull the threads together that would connect ancestor-person-land with each other. Already in *Aranda Traditions* (1947) T.G.H. Strehlow touched on what would lead in the following decades to an understanding of the essence of Aboriginal religion by himself and other eminent anthropologists, such as the Berndts, Stanner, Munn and Myers. T.G.H. Strehlow writes about the significance of ancestral foundational acts and transformations, the person-land relationship, and also about the libidinal and procreational aspects of myth and rite that have been extensively discussed by Röheim, Hiatt and Morton. Finally, this sense of place and sentiment in Aboriginal culture would lead Hiatt (1969) and Peterson (1972) to reject the juggernaut of Lévi-Straussian rationalism. Morton (1985) would in turn temper the latter’s insights with those of Lacan and the emotional struggle against fragmentation, both in the landscape and within the self.

The foundational acts, the travels and actions of these ancestral figures that brought the world into being have been discussed numerous times. For central Australia, T.G.H. Strehlow (1947, 1964, 1971), Munn (1970) and Myers (1976, [1986] 1991) are the outstanding accounts. They describe the significance of ancestral singing, marking and naming places, embodying ancestral figures in performance, and transforming parts of themselves into natural features or sacred objects. They explain what the metamorphosing into the landscape at the end of their journeys, where they are still believed to be resting or sleeping as part of the land, means to Aboriginal people and how the landscape is the symbol of the truth of this time and its system of order. In 1964 T.G.H. Strehlow emphasised again:

> After emerging from their eternal slumbering places, these supernatural beings, commonly labelled “totemic ancestors”, moved about on the surface of the earth. Their actions and their wanderings brought into being all the physical features of the central Australian landscape. Mountains, sandhills, swamps, plains, springs, and soakages, all arose to mark the deeds of the roving totemic ancestors and ancestresses. (Strehlow [1964] 1978: 16)
T.G.H. Strehlow (1947: 25–28) made his first attempts in the 1930s to convey how Aboriginal people perceive and understand the dreaming (although he does not use this term). For example, many features of the MacDonnell Ranges are attributed to the blows of ceremonial poles:

The terrible blows of these smiting poles have left their marks in countless valleys and chasms and gorges in every portion of the MacDonnell Ranges and elsewhere. They cleft gaps in otherwise inaccessible bluff slopes; they fashioned many mountain passes for the feet of wandering hordes at the beginning of time. (Strehlow 1947: 25)

Sometimes simply by camping at a place and eating, hunting, gathering or making tools, behaving and acting as their descendants would, the ancestors gave meaning to the landscape and a code for the people who followed to live by, because ‘all occupations originated with the totemic ancestors’ (Strehlow 1947: 35). He clearly stated that the dreaming encompasses all aspects of Aranda life, which was also observed by Munn (1970) among Warlpiri and Pitjantjatjara and by Myers (1976: 158–160) among the Pintupi who see the tjukurrpa ‘as the ground of all being’. Other activities of course included the performance of ritual and ceremonial dances and songs (which Stanner seems to have rated as more sacred).

The exploits of the ancestral beings were vast and complex. As they created on their wanderings the land and everything on it – water, animals and plants – they also populated the land with spirits and thus ‘throughout the Aranda-speaking area it was believed that the totemic ancestors and ancestresses had left a trail of “life” behind them’, a constituted world (Strehlow [1964] 1978: 20). Spirits emerged from those parts of the ancestral beings, and the sacred objects representing them, which they left embedded in the land. Some of these spirits were child-spirits, who enter a woman and give human-beings their ‘soul’, and thus humans owe their existence to the dreaming (see also Morton 1985: 118). People’s attachments to country are thus indestructible because they are derived from the ‘life-giving properties’ left behind by the ancestors at the beginning of time (Strehlow 1947: 88). In this way, they are part of the land and the ancestors who created the land and the people. T.G.H. Strehlow described the significance of the landscape for Aboriginal people:

A Central Australian Aboriginal community was thus made up of men and women for whom the whole landscape in which they lived represented the work of supernatural beings who had become reincarnated in their own persons and in those of living and dead forbearers, relatives, and friends. (Strehlow [1964] 1978: 39)
Thus, land and things are imbued with notions of person. At the centre of Munn’s discussion lies the relationship between the subject and the (inanimate or non-sentient) object world. The objectification of the ancestors in land through transformation symbolises the relationship that people have to land, because they originate from the ancestors who are still in their transformation features of the natural world present in country and objects. Generally, anything created in any way or left behind by an ancestor is thought to contain something of this being. Munn (1970: 143) writes that ‘country is the fundamental object system external to the conscious subject within which consciousness and identity are anchored.’ Thus, human beings have unbreakable bonds with particular parts of the country (Munn 1970: 145), because their spirits come from these transformations in the landscape. People treat the landscape like a relative, because it also represents their kin (Strehlow 1947; Myers [1986] 1991). Carl Strehlow, for example, wrote that the species-ancestor associated with a man is perceived to be his big brother and treated with great respect (Strehlow 1908).

As Munn (1970) remarked the transformations of subject into object involves a disappearance linked with a new appearance, in most cases parts of the landscape. It is thus the land that can tell about the noumenal world beyond immediate perception. Myers ([1986] 1991) writes that for the Pintupi the land reveals aspects of that past era that bear on the present and can explain phenomena in the lived experience of the everyday. The living are obliged to sustain this inheritance because these traditions are the basis for the continuation of life. Drought and illness may be thought to be a consequence of deviations. T.G.H. Strehlow wrote:

For in Australia the operation of the concept of the totemic landscape ensured that such things as the stability of tribal boundaries and of linguistic groups, the distribution of interlocking and intermarrying subgroups, and the firm establishment of authority – and hence of the agencies of social control, and of law and order – were all based on the geographic environment. (Strehlow 1970: 92)

T.G.H. Strehlow, Munn and Myers’ work on the specificity of Australian indigenous ontology can be juxtaposed with the way in which both Röheim and Morton adapt universal themes drawn from psychoanalysis to the specificity of dreaming myth. In the process, they seek to link central Australian issues of sentiment and desire to themes that might be judged universal, just as Lévi-Strauss sought to establish a cognitive unity for humankind that linked his ‘primitive’ naturalists with ‘modern’ minds.

Based on field-research in the late 1920s at Hermannsburg, Röheim championed the psychoanalytical approach to Aboriginal religion by seeking general human dream patterns and wish dreams in Aranda myth. His records include not only
references to myth but also many dreams and mundane stories recounted by Aranda people a few years after Carl Strehlow died. Some of these provide matter of fact corroborating evidence for the details of daily life that Carl recorded through his study of myth (see Röheim 1974, 1988). However, Röheim’s main concerns were the celebration of the phallic hero, male transition from child to adult and, finally, reparation of separation from the mother in a return to the land (Hiatt 1975: 9). In The Eternal Ones of the Dream, Röheim wrote that myth represents repressed wish dreams, particularly day-dreams that ‘hide a real difficulty, and offer a consolation. Instead of the mental picture of struggle for daily food or wandering on the scorching sand, the myth describes a state of perpetual erection, a perpetual state of lust’ (Röheim [1945] 1971: 10). This means ancestral is ‘necessarily’ libidinised, i.e., ‘as if it were a sexual act’ (Röheim [1945] 1971: 9). Hence, foot, tail and making tracks are all seen as euphemisms for sexual intents and acts.

In his work post-1985, Morton, like Munn, carried the study of myth into an analysis of how (male) agents filled with desire created a libidinised landscape (Morton 1985, 1987). In Singing Subjects and Sacred Objects he develops the theme of mythic ‘procreation’ events as the substance of ancestral travels (1987: 100–117). Morton focuses on ‘naming’ and ‘marking’ up, complex ancestral performances that are related ‘to ancestral singing as the creative outpouring of names’ (Morton 1987: 110) that bring the world into being. He also notes Munn’s account of how women ‘lose’ boards. Morton argues for a double transformation:

Thus men, at initiation, take corporal bodies from women and ultimately transform them into tjurunga bodies, [while] women appear to take tjurunga bodies from men and turn them into fleshy beings. It is these analogous, but also opposed, transformations which I believe to lie behind Munn’s discernment of a correspondence between the ancestral surrender of tjurunga and the giving up of boys by women at initiation. (Morton 1987: 115)

He suggests ‘that the notion of alienation from The Dreaming’s depths during the course of childhood growth may also be general’ (Morton 1987: 116), and that male children (at least) are taken from mothers to bring them back to the dreaming, guarantee of the human condition. As Victor Turner remarked, in this myth and rite the needs of ‘biopsychical’ beings (the boys) might here be reconciled with ‘the needs of society’ notwithstanding their apparent opposition (Turner 1968: 19).

Other contemporary views by Myers ([1986] 1991) and Redmond (2001), for example, take closer account of the Lebenswelt (lifeworld) of Pintupi and
The Aranda’s Pepa

Ngarinyin people. They describe how land constitutes and reveals the world by being able to ‘speak’ and ‘explain’ itself, and how people are active in interpreting these experiences.

**Altjira and tnankara**

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that many rounds of observation, and myth interpretation, were required to specify a central Australian ontology. It was beyond Carl Strehlow’s time and conceptual method to grasp the essence of an Aboriginal world. Nevertheless, I would like to end this discussion by returning once more to the word ‘altjira’ and its semantics. The trajectory of the word’s interpretations shows, in condensed form, the power of Carl Strehlow’s work on myth.

The term has a certain magnetism, being continuously revisited over time and stimulating many discussions on its meanings (Spencer and Gillen 1927; Róheim 1945; T.G.H. Strehlow 1971; Morton 1985; Veit 1991; Hill 2002; Austin-Broos 2010; John Strehlow 2011; Green 2012). It was, for example, one of the first concepts that T.G.H. Strehlow checked with his father’s informants when he arrived back at the mission after ten years absence, in April 1932. 39

Carl Strehlow was aware of the multiple uses and meanings of the term altjira. The pivotal remark for subsequent debate was published at the beginning of his masterpiece (Strehlow 1907: 2; see quotation in Chapters I and VII). Yet he also wrote to his editor about the term after he had completed his collection of Aranda myths:

> You will note in the section on Altjira, that I had to retreat from a number of points I had made earlier, because it does not hold together after further investigation. … What I say on page 2 about the derivation/etymology of “Altjira” = (altja era), is my opinion of course, which I cannot prove, but is an obvious and logical explanation which seems very likely. … However, the natives are very definite, that the current meaning of the word Altjira is the ‘uncreated one’, ‘the not-made one’ who has no beginning. Already Schulze (in Royal society etc. page 242) wrote 15 years ago that the meaning of altjira is ‘not made’. 40

This ambiguity led him to discuss a possible etymology of ‘altjira’. He wrote that according to his Aranda informants the concept of the ‘non-created’ was central and that Spencer and Gillen’s (1904: 745) view that the word ‘alcheri means

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39 T.G.H. Strehlow’s Diary I (1932: 2–8); Hill 2002.
40 Carl Strehlow to von Leonhardi, 13.12.1906 (SH-SP-7-1).
dream’ was incorrect, because ‘altjirerama’ means ‘to dream’, and it is derived from altjira (god) and rama (see), in other words, ‘to see god’. Concurrently, he indicates that altjira and tukura can also refer to any mythical ancestor seen in a dream. Spencer and Gillen’s explanation and translation of ‘Alcheringa’, as ‘dream times’ (Spencer 1896: 111; Spencer and Gillen 1904: 745), Carl Strehlow considered as a misunderstanding of the concept:

The Aranda language does not render the word dream with alcheri but rather with altjirerinja, though this word is rarely used. The normal expression of the blacks is, “ta altjireraka”=“I have dreamed”. The word “alcheringa”, which according to Spencer and Gillen is supposed to mean “dreamtime”, is obviously a corruption of altjirerinja. The native knows nothing of a “dreamtime” as a designation of a certain prior in their history. What this expression refers to is the time when the Altjiranga mitjina traversed this earth. (Strehlow 1907: 2)

With the help of his editor, Strehlow became sensitive to the term’s polysemy. His editor had realised before Strehlow had that the expression ‘altjira’ had a wide semantic field and could denote a multiplicity. This was reflected in one of his early remarks. He expressed surprise that Strehlow would use ‘Altjira’ for God in his service book, Galtjindintjamea-Pepa Aranda Wolambarinjaka (1904):

Today I finally get around to answer your letter and thank you for the book in Aranda. Your letter was very interesting; with the text, however, I unfortunately cannot do much, as long as a grammar and a dictionary are not available, – the only thing I could discern was that you translate God with Altjira; intriguing, that you after all think that this term contains sufficient meaning to convey the biblical concept of God.41

A few months later he asked Carl Strehlow to further investigate the underlying concepts of the word ‘Altjira’:

Dream is altjirerinja (obviously Spencer and Gillen’s Alcheringa). You wrote to me that no term exists for the abstract concept of dream. This needs clarification. I ask you to pay the outmost attention to any words related to the concept of Altjira; all are very important. Can the word Altjira also be used as an adjective?42

Von Leonhardi’s reaction to Carl Strehlow’s subsequent discussion of the semantics of Altjira was enthusiastic and begged for further research. He commented in August 1906:

41 Von Leonhardi to Carl Strehlow, 9.9.1905.
42 Von Leonhardi to Carl Strehlow, 17.3.1906.
Your explanation of the word altjirerama with the help of the corresponding term in Loritja appealed very much to me. Thus, the Loritja’s tukura means ‘god’. Hopefully you will have something to tell us about Tukura? In that case Spencer and Gillen’s Alcheringa = Altjira-ringa means “belonging to the gods”, “the divinities”. Therefore the word Altjira would not only be a proper name, but would also be used for the totem ancestors? Have I understood you correctly in this matter? Are the totem ancestors Altjira = gods as well? This is not an unimportant matter.43

Strehlow continued to investigate ‘the different uses of the word Altjira and tmara and deba altjira’ 44 Gradually, he grasped the term’s polysemy and tried to conceptualise his new insights. By the time he published, he had noted and explained that altjira is connected to mother’s conception dreaming and place (Strehlow 1908: 57; 1910: 2). Von Leonhardi had alerted him to this aspect of the word by directing his attention to Schulze’s work (1891). Strehlow also found that ‘altjira’ could mean ‘the totem god who reveals the people’s future in dreams and inkaama = to set up’ (Strehlow 1913: 6; see also Strehlow 1907: 2). Thus, he came to use the word in a number of different contexts. One attempt to solve the polysemy of ‘altjira’ was to use upper and lower cases, i.e. Altjira and altjira. Upper case ‘Altjira’ was used for Aranda supreme being or high god; and in the Christian context of the mission, for ‘God’. In lower case, ‘altjira’ was used in a vast array of contexts, assuming meanings in indigenous use and standing in stark contrast to the new meaning the missionaries had tried to impress on it. Spencer noted the use of Altjira upper and altjira lower case, but could not understand the intention of this use (Marett and Penniman 1932: 110).

Carl Strehlow also recorded a synonym for Altjira/altjira – tnankara (tnengkarre). In his entire published work the word tnankara appears only twice (Strehlow 1913: 29; 1915: 48), for a very obvious reason. In his time, tnankara was the synonym for altjira used in ‘the secret language that is taught to a rukuta, a novice or young circumcised man’ (Strehlow 1913: 29). Röheim ([1945] 1971: 211) too observed that ‘Another Aranda word for dream, ancestor, and story, is tnankara. It is not often used, and as far as I could see it means exactly the same as altjira’.

Röheim typically emphasised altjira’s meaning ‘dream’ which is crucial for a psychoanalysis based on dreams. In The Eternal Ones of the Dream, Röheim claims that altjira does not mean god or ancestor as Strehlow maintained, but that its meaning covers ‘dream, beings seen in a dream and a narrative with a happy ending’ (Röheim [1945] 1971: 210–211). He believed ‘that Strehlow, from

43 Von Leonhardi to Carl Strehlow, 7.8.1906.
44 Carl Strehlow to von Leonhardi, 19.9.1906 (SH-SP-3-1).
the preoccupation with Altjira (God) in the Aranda bible, managed to miss the real meaning of the word, which is known to every Aranda both at the mission and elsewhere’. Róheim also remarked that ‘in the Luritja group of languages tukurpa is the universal word which, like the Aranda altjira, covers several meanings of dream, story and also of the oracle game’ (Róheim [1945] 1971: 211). Therefore he missed, in turn, that Strehlow also proposed that the term refers in a certain context to ‘a totem god which the native believes to have seen in a dream’ and that ‘every person is also connected with another particular totem which is called altjira. This is the totem of his mother. … This altjira appears to the blacks in dreams and warns them of danger, just as he speaks of them to friends while they are sleeping’ (Strehlow 1908: 57).

T.G.H. Strehlow discusses the term ‘Altjira’ and his father’s view on it in Songs of Central Australia (Strehlow 1971: 614–615). He wrote that ‘altjira’ is a rare word ‘whose root meaning appears to be “eternal, uncreated, sprung out of itself”; and it occurs only in certain traditional phrases and collocations’. Part of T.G.H. Strehlow’s examination of Altjira/altjira is reminiscent of a note his father wrote to von Leonhardi:

The word Altjira is a noun. By adding the suffix –erama to a noun a verb can be made denoting ‘to become’ in Aranda. … Thus, it is grammatically correct to perceive the verb ‘altjiererama’ as ‘become God’. Rama however, also means: to see; Altjire-rama = see God (in dreams God reveals secrets to them). That this is the meaning of altjiererama = dream follows clearly from the comparison of the Aranda words with the Loritja (neighbouring tribe of the Aranda, who refer to themselves as Kukatja) ones; in this language too ‘to dream’ is: tukura nangani; tukura = god (altjira) and nangani = to see. Therefore to compose grammatically correct the word ‘dream’ (the natives very rarely do this and do not say: I had a dream, but I dreamed (altjireraka); thus, ‘dream’ is altjirérinja. So what does Gillen and Sp. Alcheringa mean?45

It is clear now that altjira covered a very complex issue and that its semantic field and syntactic range were vast. Without doubt ‘dream’ was part of altjira’s polysemy (Green 2012: 166, 171–172). The altjira discussion also indicates that language changes over time. Thus, Strehlow’s corpus of myth allows some tracing of the history of key concepts and terms. This term has undergone in the course of the past century some major semantic shifts. Carl Strehlow and von Leonhardi had observed a wide semantic field for the term altjira and Carl had discovered a secret synonym of the word – tnankara. In his time, T.G.H. Strehlow (1971: 614) found that ‘altjira’ was rarely used. Decades earlier Róheim ([1945] 1971: 211) had noted a synonym for altjira ‘tnankara’ that ‘is not often

used’. Today in Western Aranda areas the term altjira is used to denote the Christian God and tnankara (tnengkarre) for concepts relating to indigenous spiritual beliefs (Kenny 2003, 2004a, 2010).\footnote{Green (1999/2004: n.p.) has observed a similar development for the Anmatyerr words altyerr and anengkerr, that used to be synonyms.}

‘Altjira’, and the initial debate about it, distils in one instance the journey of interpretation through which Carl Strehlow’s corpus of Aranda and Loritja myth has passed. Transitional or pre-modern in his ethnography, Carl Strehlow’s scholarly pursuit of cultures, propelled forward by von Leonhardi, opened doors to contemporary research on indigenous ‘Worlds’. In the process, within Australia, the study of myth became an account of a unique Aboriginal ontology.