Ceremony Men: Making Ethnography and the Return of the Strehlow Collection

by Jason Gibson

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Ceremony Men is a significant contribution not only to the history of Australian anthropology, but also to the study of Aboriginal collections that scholars and custodians alike wrestle with as a tangible legacy of the discipline’s flaws and merits.

The book takes as its focus the Strehlow Collection of secret/sacred men’s songs and ritual in Central Australia compiled by T. G. H. Strehlow in the mid-twentieth century. Comprised of hundreds of restricted ritual songs, associated film, images and artefacts, this is arguably the most important, and most contested, collection of such material in any Australian institution. There are many studies and analyses of the collection, and yet most of them orbit Strehlow and his engagement with restricted Arrernte knowledge. Gibson shows how our appreciation of the collection is limited by this narrative fixation; addressing two significant simplifications that have prevailed in the study of the collection: the overt focus on Strehlow as the heroic figure of the collector; and the complete focus (until now) on the Arrernte aspects of that collection.

By focusing on another group (Anmatyerr) well represented in the collection, Gibson is able to interrupt the dominant narratives that surround the Strehlow material and which have, as his study shows, inhibited greater critical discussion of its creation. In centring the role of Anmatyerr men in the making and interpretation of the collection, Ceremony Men reveals Anmatyerr cultural (and archival) ambitions in both the past and present. Gibson shows that – despite the rhetoric and self-wrought mythology of Strehlow having amassed the collection – the ethnographer was himself only one part of an ongoing process of Anmatyerr people navigating and negotiating the value and authority of their cultural heritage throughout
the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *Ceremony Men*, and the research and collections behind it, emerges here not so much as an anthropological study, but as a collaborative extension of that ongoing Anmatyerr cultural ambition.

Through his long-term engagement with both Anmatyerr and Arrernte collaborators, Gibson comes to see the Strehlow collection as a co-creation. He notes that some 50 Anmatyerr men (and over 100 men in total) contributed to the making of the collection. Until now, none of the writing around the Strehlow Collection has adequately addressed this fact, nor the aspirations or motivations of these men in participating in the ‘research’. Gibson shows that where Strehlow sought to record dying ceremonies, the men involved were mobilising different ambitions. They were using these occasions (and the resources of the white scholar) to galvanise interest from their peers and juniors, to both exercise their own authority and the possibility of passing that on. In contextualising the making of the collection from Aboriginal points of view, *Ceremony Men* helps erode the edifice of the archive into a more complex assemblage of motivations and intentions.

Strehlow’s own entanglement in the collection seemed bound to a romantic notion of heroic loss. He believed that the songs and rituals he recorded would die out – authorising not only his ethnographic salvage but also his own structural importance in the narrative. The songs he recorded became an artefact of Strehlow’s own mythos, and in doing so he consigned them to an ethnographic past. Much has been written about Strehlow’s hubris here. But Gibson’s gift is to move us past this white wormhole into richer soils. *Ceremony Men* reveals the definitive failure in Strehlow’s perspective was that, despite seeing himself as part of the Aboriginal system of ‘owners’ and ‘managers’, his narrative of cultural stasis and loss (combined with a fairly static theory of culture) meant he failed to grasp the role he or his archive might have in supporting cultural continuity. Having made a premature artefact of a living tradition – he overlooked the changes and recalibrations in the social and cultural fabric happening around him. He failed to see that, having been entrusted with so much, he was (within an Anmatyerr and Arrernte worldview) required not only to keep that knowledge safe, but also to pass it on to the descendants of the men he worked with.

The Anmatyerr men involved in this contemporary study with Gibson by and large do not see Strehlow as having ‘stolen’ the material. Their fathers and grandfathers were authors of these processes as well. Strehlow’s transgression in *Ceremony Men* is recast: it is not framed in the taking (as commonly and simplistically asserted), but rather in his failure to understand the expectations on him to give back; to participate reciprocally in the Anmatyerr cultural projects he had been inculcated into.

In unpicking the dominance of both Strehlow and the Arrernte narratives, the gift of this scholarship is not merely a correction of historical fact, but a meditation on the role of researchers, of the museums into which they deposit their legacies,
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and the reorientation of archival meaning that necessarily follows today. In this, *Ceremony Men* also offers nuanced contributions to the ethics of that ‘giving back’, and to the complexity of repatriation in Australia today.

Having framed the Strehlow archive as a co-production in which Anmatyerr and Arrernte men were playing out complex cultural motivations in the present, with an eye to safeguarding traditions for the future, Gibson eschews simplistic narratives of repatriation. The ‘return of the Strehlow Collection’ in the book’s subtitle offers rich and unresolved avenues for exploration and interpretation. It is in part about Gibson’s work in bringing these materials back to his collaborators. It is also about asking what repatriation looks like when an archive has been co-created. It is not an argument against repatriation, but a sober and searching engagement with the myriad challenges of contemporary museum practice today. But it is also about reimagining a different kind of return, one in which the Strehlow Collection is truly co-managed, and one in which the management of museums and archives is itself more broadly refocused and enriched through Indigenous ontologies and values.

*Ceremony Men* is a major scholarly contribution to the study of the history, and future, of one of the most important and controversial collections in Australia. More than that, it stands as a major contribution to the politics and practicalities of decolonisation, repatriation and custodianship in modern museums. Perhaps its greatest contribution is in mapping out some of the practical challenges that are still to be navigated by the custodians and the managers of that archive in the years ahead. Gibson notes in conclusion that he hopes the book:

> will help reframe the Strehlow Collection as a testament not to a heroic individual but the cohort of urrempel (ceremony) men who both made the collection and continue to make sense of it. (p. 253)

It is no small commendation that his book not only makes a mark on our thinking in anthropology and museums, but also places at its heart a contribution to the ambitions of the men – past and present – who made this work possible, and necessary.
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