



Chapter Title: Introduction

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Introduction

Around the turn of the twentieth century three outstanding researchers were investigating societies of central Australia. The writings of Baldwin Spencer, Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne, Frank Gillen, Post and Telegraph Stationmaster in Alice Springs, and the Lutheran missionary Carl Strehlow at Hermannsburg contain unique documentation of Australian indigenous cultures as they may have been pre-contact. Yet, while Spencer's and Gillen's work and achievements are a celebrated part of Australian intellectual history, Carl Strehlow's contribution to our knowledge and understanding of Aranda and Loritja language, oral literature and culture remains almost unknown.

Spencer and Gillen became central figures in international anthropology. British, German, French and American social scientists, such as Frazer, Malinowski or Durkheim, used *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) and *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (1904) to illustrate their theories and acknowledged these works as major contributions to the discipline. In contrast, Carl Strehlow, although known in Germany and cited by N.W. Thomas, Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss, has been consigned to obscurity in Australia and elsewhere. His magnum opus *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* (1907–1920), a masterpiece of classical Australian anthropology written at Hermannsburg in central Australia, is nearly unrecognised in English-speaking anthropological circles, although it always seems to have been a sort of omnipresent shadow that ghosted the better known Anglophone ethnography of central Australia.¹ Even though this work has been in the public domain for nearly 100 years, and two unpublished translations exist, one by Charles Chewings and the other by Hans Oberscheidt (1991), it has not been republished, which is astonishing, considering the ongoing general interest in Australian indigenous cultures in Australia and overseas.

Carl Strehlow's work is often inaccurately attributed to his youngest son, Theodor George Heinrich Strehlow, who also conducted extensive research in central Australia. The latter's research, however, received its initial impetus from his father's outstanding work. T.G.H. Strehlow was strongly influenced by his father and is unlikely to have been able to achieve what he did without his father's material.

1 John Morton, pers. comm., 13.11.2012.

The significance of Carl Strehlow's *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* was recognised by some of his contemporaries. The reviews were favourable. By the time the second volume of the work was published in 1908, N.W. Thomas noted:

Strehlow writes with full knowledge of the language, and we cannot but feel the enormous advantage which this knowledge gives him over all other enquirers. Further memoirs are to appear, and they will be eagerly awaited, for the two already published are masterly. (Thomas 1909: 127)

Andrew Lang wrote in *Man* that 'No one should henceforth write on Mr. Strehlow's tribes who has not mastered his valuable volumes' (Lang 1909a: 28). Lang suggested that the work should be translated into English, but World War I intervened and the leading figures of the British anthropological establishment had reservations about the German Lutheran who had spent over half his life in central Australia (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 124, 195, 379, 391; Veit 1991, 2004). Another attempt was made in the late 1930s by Charles Chewings, who had translated Carl Strehlow's monograph, and Adelaide Professor of Classics and English literature, J.A. FitzHerbert.² However, the publication of the translation was again eclipsed by war.

Other reasons for the 'disappearance' of *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* in Australia and elsewhere are anti-mission sentiment past and present, the impact of Nazism on anthropology in Germany, Australian hostility towards the German Lutherans of central Australia in the first half of the twentieth century, and finally the antagonistic debate between T.G.H. Strehlow and the Australian anthropological establishment in the 1960s and 1970s. Strehlow junior's unique relations with Aranda people, his idiosyncratic interpretation of that relationship, and his intellectual style all made him marginal to academic anthropology. His peripheral status seemed to transfer back to his father's work.³

Carl Strehlow's ethnographic oeuvre as well as Spencer's and Gillen's were written at a time when the discipline of anthropology was still 'transitional'. They preceded the development of modern field anthropology as the empirical study of cultures and social systems that underpin particular peoples (Morphy 2001: 41–43). Carl Strehlow and Spencer and Gillen were turn of the century empiricists, who collected data out in the field and referred it to mentors in Europe. These were the 'armchair anthropologists' of the discipline's mythic history. Strehlow collaborated with Baron Moritz von Leonhardi, a German

2 FitzHerbert Papers (Barr Smith Special Collection) and Tindale Collection Acc. No. 1539 (South Australian Museum Archives).

3 Also T.G.H. Strehlow's tragic 'Stern Case' in 1978 contributed to the marginalisation of his and his father's work and gave the name Strehlow a negative tinge. See Kaiser (2004: 66–75).

intellectual with interests in philosophy and anthropology. In England, Spencer's interlocutor was James Frazer although Spencer's dominant influence came from the natural sciences.

Baldwin Spencer was a biology professor in the Darwinian mould (Mulvaney 2001: 20), a representative of the evolutionary thinking in the British Isles. He believed that the Arunta [Aranda] belonged to a lower form of human beings (Spencer and Gillen 1927: vii). Morphy writes that Spencer and Gillen were 'both strongly influenced by Darwinian evolutionary theory' (Morphy 2001: 30) and 'concerned to affirm the position of Aborigines at the lower end of the hierarchy of the evolution of society' (Morphy 2012: 551). Jones (2005: 17) remarks that 'Spencer was constrained by the natural historical framework and the evolutionist approach' in which 'rudimentary customs and beliefs' among the Aranda were identified 'just as he had located primitive forms in the Australian biota' during the Horn Expedition. He quotes Spencer and Gillen as follows:

... it seems that in the evolution of the social organisation and customs of a savage tribe, such features as those which we are now discussing are clearly comparable to the well known rudimentary organs, which are often of great importance in understanding the phylogeny of the animal in which at some time of its development they are present ... we may recognise in them an abbreviated record of a stage passed through in the development of the customs of the tribe amongst which they are found. (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 105)

Their views influenced attitudes and policies towards indigenous people in Australia and elsewhere during the twentieth century and even today are manifest in policy making. In the nineteenth century, evolutionism was a common presumption of anthropology in the British colonial world and influenced, in some degree, the foci in ethnography. Baldwin Spencer's particular interest in biology gave his work an added evolutionary emphasis. The ethnographic material collected by Gillen and published in *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899), *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (1904) and *The Arunta* (1927) is still valuable as a reference for scholarly research. In this case, the broad ranging empirical work of the collaboration outlasted Spencer's Darwinian backdrop. If anything, the latter is regarded now as a period anachronism. Still, Spencer never abandoned his view that they were 'Stone Age' people. He maintained this position as late as 1927 in *The Arunta* (Spencer 1927: vii) as did Frazer until he died. The majority of the British establishment saw the original central Australians as representatives of an early and inferior stage of human development.

This view was embodied in museum collections. Terminology derived from the natural sciences was applied to Aboriginal artefacts as well as people. For example, in 1907 the South Australian Museum's director Edward Stirling called all the artefacts of Reuther's Diyari collection, 'specimens' (Jones 1996: 384). In his expedition diary of Wednesday, 11 February 1917, another director of the South Australian Museum Edward Waite described Nellie, an Aboriginal woman, as the finest specimen he had yet seen:

Had a hurried breakfast and then walked to the Black's camp and took photos of 4 youngsters and some gins, the latter objecting to undress, or rather I had not time enough to humour them. I then went across to another camp and found 3 gins. They all soon posed for me in the altogether. Returned to our own camp and the manager of the station (Battams) introduced the belle of the tribe (Nellie) to give me a sitting, she is a finer specimen than I have yet seen.⁴

In contrast, on the same issue Carl Strehlow commented: 'And these people with such mental capacities should form the "missing link"? Never.'⁵ Like his editor and mentor, von Leonhardi, Strehlow's views were shaped by German humanistic thinking. As a consequence, his monograph *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* is significantly different from other Australian anthropological work of the period. Guided by von Leonhardi's interrogations and his own sense derived from empirical observation and a Lutheran training, Carl's work reflected the aims of this tradition, 'centred on efforts to document the plurality and historical specificity of cultures' (Penny and Bunzl 2003: 1). Its central concern was language and the mythic corpus that was seen to be culture's main manifestation. Unlike the British anthropological tradition, which dominated Australian discourse, German anthropology was largely based on a humanistic agenda, and as a result it was anti-evolutionist, anti-racist and anti-colonial. The permanent general secretary of the German Anthropological Society, for example, took advantage of his position between 1878 and 1908 'to drum into his colleagues, at the annual assemblies, the unity of mankind and the equality of feelings and mental life of all humanity' (Massin 1996: 87).

The two most influential figures in nineteenth century German anthropology, Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) and Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902), rejected socio-cultural evolutionism. Bastian was particularly opposed to social Darwinism (Petermann 2004: 535), warning explicitly against simplification and generalisation, and did not believe in a straight line of stages of progression for one particular culture or for that matter for the whole of mankind. Bastian's

4 E.R. Waite Diary No. 63, 7.10.1916 to 30.6.1917. The Diaries of Edgar Ravenswood Waite are held at the South Australian Museum Archives.

5 Carl Strehlow, *The Register*, 7.12.1921.

anthropology was governed by methodological convictions rather than an overarching theory. He drew on induction and empirical observation to avoid the classification of data according to predetermined categories, regarding schemes of classification as work in progress rather than definite models (Penny 2003: 93). Also Rudolf Virchow, the leading physical anthropologist and pathologist at the time in Germany, maintained that no one race or people was superior to another (Evans 2003: 200). With most of his other colleagues he professed the unity of humankind.

One of the main reasons for this humanistic and pluralistic position was that Germany (like other politically less significant European countries) was not an imperial or colonial power until the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁶ It was therefore not committed to an ideology of racial superiority 'that is virtually a political necessity for colonial powers' (Adams 1998: 264; Gingrich 2005: 68). The intellectual roots of nineteenth century German anthropology reached back to philosophers who emphasised the ideas of particularism opposing progressivism and deduction. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), the founder of German historical particularism, exerted a major influence on the development of anthropological thinking, as he was interested in the differences of cultures from age to age, and from one people to another (Adams 1998: 271). He rejected the concept of race (Mühlmann 1968: 62) as well as the French dogma of the uniform development of civilisation. Instead Herder recognised unique sets of values transmitted through history and maintained that outlooks and civilisations had to be viewed from within; in terms of their own development and purpose (Berlin 1976: 174). Thus, humanity was made up of a great diversity, language being one of its main manifestations. Herder's concepts of *Volk*, a cultural group or entity, and *Volksgeist*,⁷ the individual expression of the being of a group of people, which sets it apart from others, provided the basis for this particularism. They were to become central tenets of German nineteenth century anthropological thought. The *Volksgeist* of a people, he believed, was embodied in their language and their literature, which included the oral traditions of indigenous peoples. Therefore language became crucial in German anthropological research. It became the pre-condition of authoritative ethnography. It is this tradition that led to a concept of cultures in the plural.

To achieve their Herderian goal, (i.e. to cover the various manifestations of cultures as completely as possible), German anthropologists were committed to inductive science and an empirical methodology. They stressed the need to gather as much information as possible before attempting to generate theories

6 Before Germany's unification in 1871 under Bismarck, it was made up of a large number of autocratic principalities.

7 The German word *Geist* is very difficult to translate. Literally *Geist* means 'spirit' or 'ghost', however, in this context it means something like 'the essence of a people' or 'the mind/intellect/genius and spirit of a people'.

about human difference (Penny and Bunzl 2003: 15). These aims made German nineteenth century anthropology a bustling enterprise. German anthropologists had networks of collectors, officials, missionaries and scientists throughout the world gathering information and examples of material culture. They launched some of the largest anthropological expeditions, sent researchers all around the globe, and were an influential presence at international conferences engaging in debates about human history, culture, environment and race. They founded the best equipped anthropological museums (Berlin, Leipzig, Hamburg and Munich) and a number of internationally recognised periodicals devoted to the discipline. The humanism of German anthropology with its pluralistic outlook and its anti-evolutionist position lasted nearly to the eve of World War I. This German humanism generated a number of humanist traditions as well as diverging streams of thought. It was ultimately contested and so marginalised that Franz Boas decided to leave Germany in the late nineteenth century exporting the German anthropological tradition to the United States.⁸ Its fate in a post-Imperial and Nazi Europe was replicated in Australia: to become a 'nontradition of good anthropology ... forgotten, repressed, and noticed only after tremendous time lags' (Gingrich 2005: 103).

Two routes to Empiricism

Carl Strehlow's route to empirical anthropology was traced through German philology, the German Romantic Movement, Humboldtian cosmography, history and comparative geography. Baldwin Spencer's, on the other hand, came through Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer and other evolutionists. This route was also shaped by the role of biology in the late nineteenth century. The excitement with which advances in biology were received meant that the discipline's procedures became a model for others, and a model for empirical science generally. Later, this method would be known as 'the organic' model for social sciences. The idea was that societies, like natural species, exhibit organic structure. Such a view influenced Radcliffe-Brown to term anthropology 'a natural science of society' (Barnard 2000: 62–63, 70–71).

The ethnographic classics of these very different field-researchers illustrate two distinctive pathways to empirical studies in social-cultural anthropology. One leads through natural science as method using the taxonomic process of collecting, describing and identifying specimens. The other uses mainly the study of language, its semantics, syntax and semiology to specify a social life and its oral traditions. I will trace the path to empiricism that Carl Strehlow

8 The antihumanism of anthropology of imperial Germany has been elsewhere well covered see for example Massin (1996), Zimmerman (2001), Gingrich (2005: 111–136) and Monteath (2013); its racism foreshadowed the developments in Nazi Germany.

and his editor Baron Moritz von Leonhardi followed. On this pathway language featured prominently as methodology and ultimately as evidence that Aranda and Loritja people were not by virtue of their material culture inferior human beings.

Carl Strehlow's *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* is the richest and densest ethnographic text written on Western Aranda and Loritja cultures of central Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is the first Australian work that comprehensively records the oral literature of Australian Aboriginal people in their own languages. The German tradition that grew out of Herder's seminal thoughts on language, the particularity of the 'other' and his humanism, which profoundly influenced German and North American anthropology, is also present in Carl Strehlow's work. It is not that Strehlow cites the scholars of German historical and philosophical thought. He does not. Like Boas, however, his work follows a distinctive form that privileges language and particularism. Moreover, his interests and emphasis reflect a pattern typical of the German tradition. Beyond diffuse influences, his teachers of Lutheran hermeneutics and von Leonhardi's probing questions secured him on this course. Like Spencer, Strehlow reflects his society and time.

Because his monograph was written in the German nineteenth century humanistic style, which was strictly descriptive, ethnographic and resistant to grand theory, nearly 100 years after its publication, *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* remains an invaluable resource for Aranda and Loritja people. In documenting the complexity and richness of central Australian cultures, this classic allows regional comparisons, and an opportunity to chart change and continuity across a century. These issues are particularly significant in the contemporary setting of state-sponsored recognition of land and native title rights for indigenous Australians. Strehlow's masterpiece, among other things, bolsters the evidence for the continuation of traditional laws and customs in relation to Aboriginal land ownership and has been used as evidence in land right claims, native title claims and the protection of large tracts of country from mineral exploration in central Australia.

Considering Carl Strehlow's opus from the vantage point of the twenty-first century tells us something about both Strehlow and his German tradition, and the nature of modern professional anthropology. Importantly, this latter development routinised fieldwork and with the beginnings of a global modernity also began to shrink its significance. Strehlow's lifetime 'in the field' provided a unique opportunity for his empirical work but also necessitated a mentor to guide him through the demands of scholarly production. Like Spencer's relationship with Frazer, and Gillen's with Spencer, the relation between von Leonhardi and Strehlow is a specific intellectual mode.

Central concern and overview of the book

The main aim of this book is to make a contribution to overcoming the longstanding omission of the role of the German humanistic tradition, represented by Carl Strehlow, in Australian anthropology and intellectual history. The German missionary Carl Strehlow had a deep ethnographic interest in Aboriginal Australian songs, cosmology and social life which he documented in his seven volume work, *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* (1907–1920) at the beginning of the twentieth century. This immensely rich corpus, based on a lifetime on the central Australian frontier, is barely known in the English-speaking world and is the last major classic ethnographic corpus on central Australian cultures that is to be discovered and evaluated in the English speaking world. I address with this book a long neglected research problem of the histories of Australian anthropology and intellectual history that have been almost purely Anglophone in their orientation so that untranslated work has been ignored. It is the first step towards an account of how this other anthropological tradition informed Carl Strehlow's work and highlights the key elements of his ethnography and brilliant scholarship.

Part One of this book (Chapters I to IV) positions Carl Strehlow's anthropological opus in its intellectual milieu: the German anthropological tradition of the nineteenth century and the Lutheran missionary background. His work falls in a German tradition of anthropological specification pursued through language which bears a strong resemblance to Franz Boas' approach. In this style of work language is a recurring theme because early German anthropologists believed it was the key to both a people's thought and sentiment. This language-based form of anthropology took hold in North America through Boas and his students, such as Edward Sapir, a crucial representative of early twentieth century linguistic anthropology, and Ruth Benedict who wrote on patterns of culture.

Chapter I begins with a general outline of Carl Strehlow's life and work in central Australia, a brief contact history of the Aranda and Loritja and an overview of the contents of *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien*. Carl Strehlow was interested, as it seems, in all aspects of religious and secular life, with special attention to song and myth. In this chapter I introduce 'altjira', a key Aranda term. This concept and its polysemy will be gradually explained, as it appears throughout the book. My discussion demonstrates how the term's meaning has changed in the course of 100 years.

Chapter II introduces the German anthropological tradition of the nineteenth century which is based on late eighteenth century German philosophy and in turn shaped a style of ethnography. The roots of this tradition are mainly to be found in Johann Gottfried Herder's concepts of *Volksgeist*, *Humanität* and

language that together provide the bases for a form of cultural particularism. The inherent cultural pluralism and particularism of German anthropology contrasts with biologically-based theories of human difference and evolutionary sequencing of nineteenth century Anglo-American and French schools. To position Carl Strehlow within a framework of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century anthropology, I discuss briefly Franz Boas and Fritz Graebner, two important representatives of German anthropology. Strehlow's masterpiece *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* is a typical example of German particularism and can be called Boasian.

In Chapter III I discuss the major influences on Carl Strehlow as a frontier scholar other than the German anthropological tradition. To understand his scholarship it is necessary to look at his missionary background which reveals some characteristics shared with the German anthropological tradition. The Lutheran language tradition in conjunction with the theological work of Warneck, Löhe and Deinzer, had a significant bearing on the manner in which Strehlow approached both his missionary and ethnographic work. Finally, von Leonhardi was indisputably Strehlow's major influence, as their heady intellectual partnership opened the questioning world of science to the pastor in the Australian desert.

Chapter IV is devoted to the letter exchange and dialogue between Strehlow and von Leonhardi and how this intellectual friendship between two diametrically opposed people, the missionary and the armchair anthropologist, produced a complementary partnership and a major ethnographic work. It is doubtful that Strehlow's classic monograph *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* would have been published without his mentor and editor who helped shape his ethnographic insights. It is noteworthy that this, like Spencer and Gillen's work, was collaboration. Where Spencer brought an evolutionary frame to Gillen's observation, von Leonhardi brought rigorous particularism to Carl Strehlow's Christian humanism. If Strehlow was in a sense 'pre-anthropological', then it was von Leonhardi's incessant questioning and probing, as he responded to a scholarly community that shaped Strehlow's work into an opus that would connect with other anthropology.

These three influences, the German philosophical-cum-anthropological tradition, missionary hermeneutics and cosmopolitan scholarship shaped Strehlow's major work. The meeting point for these three was an intense engagement with the particulars of human experience. Herder and his successors, such as the von Humboldts, the Neuendettelsau seminary and von Leonhardi, each required real engagements with the meaning that 'others' might give to their lives. Both through training and through personal propensity, Carl Strehlow responded to these demands. He wrote within a tradition that acknowledged that all cultures are equal, notwithstanding their different moral values, and have individual

features that cannot be rendered in terms of generalised stages of development. This position, though, did not prevent him from making remarks about certain customs he perceived as barbaric – for example, institutionalised homosexuality.

Part Two of this book (Chapters V to VIII) discusses the content and limitations of his masterpiece and how to position him in a history of anthropology. It shows the way in which Carl Strehlow, like Spencer and Gillen, represents a transitional phase in modern anthropology. An effective fieldworker, a committed empiricist, he nonetheless brought with him implicit models from Europe that did not fit indigenous Australian cultures. Still, his European preconceptions and assumptions allowed him to begin systematic data collection in a way that was rare for the period and remains of immense value. This data exemplifies many 'take-off points' for central developments in the modern field of twentieth century anthropology. I have chosen three areas of his work that demonstrate this paradox: his studies of myths, social classification and territorial organisation. The treatment of myth and kin build towards the understanding of land tenure because the former constitute the nature of traditional ownership.

Chapter V examines Carl Strehlow's focal interests, mythology and cosmology, which he recorded for both Aranda and Loritja groups. His linear and free translations of myth are innovative and provide some of the earliest insight into the true sophistication of Aboriginal cultures. Strehlow's explicit framework of Grimmian *Mythen, Sagen und Märchen* (myths, legends and fairy-tales) reflects his transitional status as a modern ethnographer. There are no traces of the more conventional approaches to myth of twentieth century anthropology. Among these one might list metaphoric or symbolic accounts that treat myth as integral to a particular culture specified by its master symbols and genres of metaphor. One would also include the twentieth century's three major comparative approaches: functionalism, structuralism and psychoanalysis that in their different ways address particular aspects of cognition taken to underlie all myth.

In Chapter VI, I discuss Carl Strehlow's studies on social classification, which he examined through 'marriage', the subsection system, kinship terminology, and family trees. Carl Strehlow had only a limited sense of comparative social analysis: subsections were mainly identified with 'marriage rule', and kinship with family trees. His ethnographic groundwork provides a point of departure to pursue an analysis of kinship systems. It gives a comprehensive overview of the subsection system and kinship terms that are still used today by Aranda and Loritja. His lists of relatives by generation and their totems, for example, provided the basis for his son's extraordinary genealogical exercise in data collection.

I examine in Chapter VII issues of land tenure and traditional ownership. Carl Strehlow did not study territorial organisation, which would become important in Australia in the mid-twentieth century. Nonetheless he provides significant information on the system at a particular time, one which resonates with current trends in Aranda and Loritja land tenure. His material informs modern views on these subjects and has been used in land and native title claims.

In Chapter VIII I discuss how Carl Strehlow might be positioned in Australian anthropology, how this might bear on the work of his son, T.G.H. Strehlow, and on more general issues of intellectual history in Australian anthropology. I discuss how I suggest that this history may be approached. My brief account of contemporaneous literature makes a beginning for other scholars who might, for instance, wish to compare and contrast Strehlow's and Spencer and Gillen's work with the numerous travellers tales that began Australian ethnography. My short address to current work in the history of Australian anthropology and ideas that is not well explored locates an area of scholarship in which much more could be done.

