

A certain trajectory: the journey of Aboriginal cultural material in the Strehlow Collection

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Introduction

In 1935 Strehlow was at his Arltunga camp east of Alice Springs:

It was wonderful to hear chanting again. A group of men, their heads & bodies shaking rhythmically, chanting with the enthusiasm that made them forget age & weakness & become young again in spirit...the rising & falling of the chant melody, like the breathing that gives us life,—what an unforgettable scene! It seems too terrible to think that all that is to pass away in another generation or less unless something is done by the blind stupid white usurpers of the native country of these men. [Kemarre] introduced his half caste wife to me this morning, & proudly showed me his two fat boys...they were his own sons, he repeated several times, & not the offspring of whites... His half caste wife looked happier than those unfortunate girls of the bungalow [the "half caste" institution in Alice Springs] who have grown up without mother love who who (sic) fall an easy prey to syphilitic ruffians as soon as they leave the bungalow. What's the earthly use of education to them without home or affection or kinship while they are yet children! Better let them be happy amongst the blacks, & rear babies whom they can fondle & bring up themselves. (Strehlow 1935:25 emphasis in original)

Strehlow's diaries provide us with a snapshot of the changed world of Aboriginal people, and the interconnectedness of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lives. He was born in 1908 at Hermannsburg in Western Arrernte country in Central Australia to German missionary parents Carl and Freida Strehlow.

He grew up speaking Arrernte and identified, in part at least, as Arrernte by virtue of where he was born, his childhood and adult experiences, and his identity as recognised by the Arrernte community including senior Aboriginal men. He once wrote 'I am that complete anomaly—a white-skinned Aranda man' (Strehlow 1978:42).

The Strehlow Collection is an extraordinarily comprehensive and diverse collection and includes film, sound, photographs, ceremonial objects, manuscripts, published and unpublished works, genealogies, and of course, his field and personal diaries. Whilst it is largely a collection of Aboriginal traditions and material culture, it also encompasses European history, Strehlow's professional and personal life, and German social history. The collection is derived from Strehlow's work with Aboriginal people, Strehlow's parents, wives, siblings, children and friends.

Strehlow passed away in 1978 and the collection became the property of his second wife, Kathleen. The Strehlow Collection is now housed in the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs.

In this paper I outline the context and movement of a particular group of sacred objects across the landscape from their storage places in the bush east of Alice Springs in Central Australia—through to Adelaide—and then back once again into Central Australia to the Strehlow Research Centre. Most of the discussion relates to three periods: 1935, 1958 and 1962, and is drawn from Strehlow's unpublished field diaries.

I won't be mentioning anything of a culturally-sensitive nature in my paper, and have changed the names of people and places to protect privacy and property where necessary.

Movements and contexts

I have been reading Strehlow's diaries and thinking about the way in which some sacred objects had been moving between totemic sites; Strehlow's persistent view through his career that he was witnessing the end of Arrernte traditions; and the issue of repatriation of cultural material.

1935

As we've already seen, Ted Strehlow—in his mid-20s—gives us some moving insights into what he perceived as the at once glorious but dislocating Arrernte society he was emersed in. In 1935 he had set up camp at Arltunga about 100-odd km east of Alice Springs with several Arrernte men who would provide him in the months to come with ceremonial knowledge and sacred objects.

Two of the old men wanted to take Strehlow down to the 'South-East' to show him the country (Strehlow 1935:27). This fitted well with the plans to perform the ceremonies at Arltunga because sacred objects had to be collected as integral components of ritual. During that broad sweep of a journey they visited a Kangaroo/Rain totemic site on the Hale River and saw the 'last [sacred object] of [the Kangaroo/Rain site]' (Strehlow 1935:42-45). The 'Rain stone' was handled ritually by the men and then put back in its place.

A few days later Strehlow and the men headed back to the Arltunga camp. They had with them some sacred objects, whilst others—including the Rain stone—were left behind.

Five months later after more journeys viewing totemic sites, and participating in a Board of Enquiry investigation into the shooting murder of an Aboriginal man at Uluru, Strehlow returned to his Arltunga camp. Various ceremonies were performed for his film and still cameras, and his pen. On their completion Strehlow returned to Alice Springs packing 'two beer boxes with [sacred objects] & all other chattels that [were] not needed on the trip itself' (Strehlow 1935:124).

On 10 December 1935 Strehlow left Alice Springs on the train—11 days later on 21 December 1935 he was to marry his first wife Bertha James. The sacred objects he had collected during that 1935 field trip went to Adelaide with him.

1958

23 years later in 1958 Strehlow disembarked from the train in Alice Springs for further research and was in Hale River country again. An old man, Peltharre, had by this time inherited many of the Hale River traditions.

Strehlow visited Peltharre at Claraville, not far from Arltunga. Peltharre was now very old and frail and sitting at his camp surrounded by 15 or 16 dogs. The old man did not have much longer to live and would probably never get down to the Hale River ceremonial sites again. It was decided that Strehlow and a group of men should gather up all other Hale River sacred objects for:

It was no further use [Peltharre] hanging on to any [sacred objects] any longer. The few youths that remained in this country were ignorant off all traditions & completely disinterested in them... (Strehlow 1958:10-12)

Peltharre would see the sacred objects once more, touch them, and decide their fate. He might even want to keep some until he passed away.

Strehlow and a group of men headed out once more to visit the Hale River totemic sites. Peltharre stayed at his camp. At one site a station track had come within 100 yards of the site and a vehicle had recently been through. Strehlow said: 'Now that we were taking these [sacred objects] away, we did not have to worry about their safety any longer...' (Strehlow 1958:17).

At the Kangaroo/Rain site visited in 1935 they removed the Rain stone and took it with them (Strehlow 1958:23). A few days later Strehlow reflected on the process he was now involved in:

Tomorrow I shall leave behind the ... Lower Hale River area. I feel sad when I think that I am taking away all the treasures of past generations of native men & women with me this time.

If only we white Australians were not such inveterate thieves, all these [sacred objects] could be left in their resting places... (Strehlow 1958:36-37)

On 1 September 1958 the sacred objects are loaded into Strehlow's Landrover to be taken to a temporary ceremonial camp near Love's Creek Station a little closer to Alice Springs again.

Strehlow's informant Penangke told Strehlow that there must be many other lost caves containing ceremonial objects but no one knew where they were anymore. Strehlow also noted that:

...the second half of the 19th century must have seen a gradual drying up of the natural waters everywhere in this area. I had been told in 1935 by my Hale River informants how [sacred objects] from some of the more distant ceremonial centres had been moved to the safer waters of the Hale River by their fathers & grandfathers even before the first whites arrived on the scene; & [some places] had apparently been deserted for some generations before 1935. (Strehlow 1958:39-40)

Gathered at the ceremonial camp not far from Love's Creek Station, the men and Strehlow inspected the sacred objects that had been collected over recent weeks. Old Peltharre travelled from his camp at Claraville to join them. The assembled group were keen for Peltharre to display his knowledge and exercise his seniority. But his memory failed him: 'It was tragic' said Strehlow 'to see the collapse of the mental powers of a noble brain, the fading away of one of the most fantastic memories ever possessed of any man' (Strehlow 1958:44-45).

Nonetheless the ceremonies were performed and Strehlow recorded them. Then all the sacred objects were assembled and divided into two piles: one to be given to Strehlow, and the other to be stored at a Rain totemic site closer to Alice Springs and the settlement of Santa Theresa where some of the men now lived.

The sacred objects stored at the Rain site were being kept for certain people including the sons of some of the men, and for two of the old men—including Peltharre—until their deaths. The Rain stone was among the sacred objects to be left at the Rain site. After several more journeys around other parts of Central Australia, Strehlow departed Alice Springs on the train on 30 October 1958. Some Hale River sacred objects left with him. His diary notes that on 1 November 1958 he moved these sacred objects into his room at the Adelaide University. Old Peltharre passed away not long after the 1958 field trip.

1962

1962 was another major year when Strehlow recorded ceremonies in Central Australia. This time the ceremonial ground was located on the Todd River behind the Aboriginal settlement of Amoonguna just outside Alice Springs.

Sacred objects were again required for the ceremonies. Strehlow and a group of men once more travelled about the eastern country collecting sacred objects from sites including the Rain site where objects had been stored in 1958. The sacred objects were taken to the ceremonial ground in September of that year. Of this ceremonial 'festival' Strehlow wrote:

The staging of these acts—for most of them it will be undoubtedly their very last performances... At a festival such as this the pride of being able to reveal these acts is undoubtedly tempered by the fact that the younger men are not only no longer persons fit to be entrusted with these acts but persons who don't even bother to come along & witness them. (Strehlow 1962:57a)

The ceremonial festival went on for some two months. At the end more sacred objects were given to Strehlow, including the Rain stone which he had first seen back in 1935 way out on the Hale River.

The ceremonial festival ceased on 10 November 1962. On 21 November Strehlow, his gear and sacred objects departed Alice Springs for Adelaide on the train. Three days later on the 24 November 1962, with the help of his sons Theo and John, Strehlow unloaded everything at the Adelaide University.

Post-1962

1962 was not Strehlow's last field trip into Central Australia but this story for the moment ends there. In the years that followed, what was to become known as the Strehlow Collection resided at the Adelaide University and at Strehlow's home in South Australia. In 1978, with the assistance of his second wife Kathleen, and other supporters, Ted Strehlow established the Strehlow Research Foundation but passed away on the eve of its opening on 3 October 1978.

In 1984 the Northern Territory Government expressed an interest in the collection after being approached by the Strehlow Research Foundation. In 1985 parts of the collection were delivered to the Darwin Museum as a first step in the acquisition process. In 1988 an agreement was signed with Strehlow's widow. That same year an Act of the Northern Territory, the *Strehlow Research Centre Act 1988*, was assented to.

The Strehlow Research Centre building in Alice Springs was completed and opened in 1991 and was jointly funded by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and the Northern Territory Government at a cost of \$3 million. The Strehlow Collection—or most of it—has over time made its way to the Strehlow Research Centre.

Conclusion

In conclusion I'd like to return to the three themes mentioned above: the movement (or *journey* if you like) of sacred objects; Strehlow's view that he was witnessing the end of Arrernte traditions; and the repatriation of cultural material.

The Rain stone, to use one example, is currently housed at the Strehlow Research Centre. It once was stored on the Hale River, it went to Adelaide, then to Darwin, and now it is back in Central Australia—closer to its totemic site and to traditional owners than it has been since 1962. Senior men who are associated with it know it is at the Strehlow Research Centre but to date no-one has come to visit *that* particular object. Strehlow's view that he was witnessing the end of things is not unique to him. We all do it every day in one way or another. He appears to have had this view reinforced to him by the old Aboriginal men. Given the opportunity to read Strehlow's diaries we can see not so much the end of things but change over time. Not an earth-shattering observation obviously. But it is a view afforded by distance. Distance in time mostly—that thing called perspective.

Strehlow's experiences are valuable anecdotes that we can all learn from. Not in the sense of making judgements about his 'diatribes against Arrernte youth' (Austin-Broos 2001:191) and his view that the end of Arrernte traditions was nigh—but in reflecting on the way we view issues of culture and tradition; and the way we negotiate these.

In the scheme of things, the Strehlow Collection is at one point in time. The *Strehlow Research Centre Act 1988* currently precludes repatriation of material held in the collection. But this is being reviewed. Repatriation is a complex issue as many cultural institutions are now discovering. Why haven't those men come in to see the Rain stone yet? Maybe they just don't feel the need to. Maybe they see this as some kind of continuum of what began in 1935 and earlier. It may be that for the moment—this moment in time—things are safe where they are. The Kangaroo/Rain site is no longer a secure place to keep sacred objects, being as it is adjacent to a station bore and track. And in any event, the men are getting very old and can rarely get to the site.

My experience in these issues over time in Central Australia suggests that non-Aboriginal people working in cultural institutions may feel the most anxiety about whether or not Aboriginal people come to view sacred objects or seek their repatriation.

And I think how we view time is a key in any discussion of this issue. The fact that the sacred objects are secured in the Strehlow Research Centre at this time does not mean that they won't ever leave it. There is a pattern that has been established as we've seen: sacred objects leaving Central Australia over time, and now most of those same sacred objects have returned. If we view the Strehlow Research Centre as the final resting place for the material then we are caught in the same immediate view of history that informed Strehlow's 'diatribe' against Arrernte youth; that all youth were hopeless and that the halcyon days of Arrernte traditions had passed. *But the youth of Strehlow's time are the senior men of mine.* Traditions have changed, some have been lost, but Arrernte traditions, however they are defined, seem alive and well to me. And just as those traditions continue their journey through time ever changing, I expect that over time it will be seen that the sacred objects in the Strehlow Collection were always headed on a *certain trajectory*.

References

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