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The Ethnographic Calling of a Lutheran Missionary in Central Australia: A Short Biography of Carl Strehlow

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German missionary Carl Strehlow occupies a peculiar place in the history of anthropology. His language-centered ethnographic work in central Australia contrasted in several respects with Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen's naturalistic and evolutionist approach. Strehlow's *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* (1907-1920) was regarded with suspicion by James George Frazer and other European admirers of Spencer and Gillen, but Strehlow's contemporaries in Germany, France and Britain were more familiar with his findings than Australian researchers. At the time of its publication, and until very recently, Strehlow's detailed study of the Arrernte and Loritja was largely ignored in Australia. This was partly a result of his work never having been published in English, but probably more importantly because Strehlow and his supporters disagreed with some of Spencer and Gillen's findings and methodology. [1] Their book, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) garnered a huge amount of attention and praise as one of the earliest anthropological studies based on detailed fieldwork, followed five years later by *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (1904). Strehlow did not pursue ethnographic research after 1910 and is best remembered as a

missionary. Both in his time and posthumously, his ethnography was obscured by the rivalry with Spencer, with long-lasting even if indirect effects in the historiography of anthropology.

From Bavaria to Hermannsburg

Carl Friedrich Theodor Strehlow was born on 23 December 1871 in the village of Fredersdorf, Uckermark, Germany and died in central Australia in 1922. His father was a teacher at the Free Lutheran Church school where Carl was educated. He was a talented student, particularly in the classical languages and was accepted as a student at the seminary at Neuendettelsau in Bavaria at the age of sixteen. [2] After he was ordained in 1892 Strehlow journeyed across the world to the remote Aboriginal mission Bethesda at Lake Killalpaninna in Dieri (Diyari) country in central Australia. The Neuendettelsau seminary did not train young men as missionaries, but to serve German migrant communities; nevertheless, quite a number of its graduates were appointed to mission stations. Bethesda was under the direction of another Neuendettelsau graduate, Johann Georg Reuther.

Strehlow's facility in learning languages quickly became evident, within two months of his arrival at Bethesda he was teaching children in the local Dieri language. [3] In early 1893 he and Reuther began translating the New Testament into Dieri. [4] Strehlow's primary motivation in learning Dieri was to teach the children in their own language as he believed this was more effective than trying to teach them in a language foreign to them. There is little indication that he was motivated by curiosity about Dieri customs and society. A long letter to his Neuendettelsau teacher Johannes Deinziger in September 1893 fifteen months after he arrived at Bethesda suggests he judged Aboriginal people from his own German and Christian values and morality with no concessions to Dieri understandings of the world. [5]

While Strehlow took an interest Dieri language, but not their customs or ceremonies, his colleague Otto Siebert believed he had to understand their culture and mindset as well as their language if he were to communicate effectively and make Christianity relevant to them. He undertook ethnographic research among the Dieri in consultation with the anthropologist Alfred William Howitt from 1897-1902. [6]

In 1894 Strehlow was sent to the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission by the Immanuel Synod which had recently purchased it from the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia. [7] Hermannsburg had been established in 1877 but had been abandoned by the missionaries in 1891. It is in Arrernte (Aranda/Arunta) country west of the central Australian town of Alice Springs.

On arriving at Hermannsburg Strehlow set about learning the Arrernte language. In 1896 Frank Gillen, who was already working with Walter Baldwin Spencer, wrote to Strehlow seeking information on ceremonies, marriage systems and counting methods of the Arrernte and the neighbouring Loritja (Kukatja). [8] Strehlow's grandson and biographer, John Strehlow, suggests that Gillen's requests for information may have stimulated

Strehlow's interest in ethnography. [9] But it was a request for information from faraway Germany that set Strehlow on the path to systematic ethnographic data collection. [10]

In 1901 he received a letter from Baron Moritz von Leonhardi, an aristocratic German intellectual and armchair anthropologist. Von Leonhardi had read publications on the Arrernte of central Australia including Spencer and Gillen's, *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) and the report of the Horn Expedition to Central Australia (1896) [11], as well as a letter written by Strehlow which was published in the Lutheran newsletter *Kirchliche Mitteilung* (1901). [12] Strehlow answered von Leonhardi's queries about Arrernte beliefs in divine beings. And so began a fruitful partnership in which the German anthropologist encouraged and guided Strehlow to undertake a detailed ethnographic investigation of Arrernte and the neighbouring Loritja (Kukatja) culture, social organisation, beliefs and material culture.

Von Leonhardi sent a copy of Strehlow's response to his initial questions to Andrew Lang in Britain, who in turn sent it to Spencer, as it contradicted some of his and Gillen's findings. Spencer contacted his friend and mentor James George Frazer. Even before Strehlow had begun his ethnographic study he became mired in controversy in Australia and Britain. [13]

Fig. 1

Rev. Carl Strehlow, undated.

Courtesy of the South Australian Museum AA1/65/1

Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien

Strehlow believed his religious calling prevented him from observing Arrernte ceremonies firsthand, as he thought his presence would condone activities he condemned as a missionary. Another influence which may have guided his approach to ethnography was the German humanist tradition which spawned Franz Boas' interest in folklore and linguistics. [14] Strehlow worked with male elders writing down verbatim the songs and stories they recited for him, working on the 'verandah', rather than in the field.

Strehlow collected a huge body of ethnographic data. According to Anna Kenny he was a very

thorough researcher, going over the information with senior men, some Christian, some non-Christian. [15] Von Leonhardi was an empiricist and urged Strehlow to collect detailed data in a systematic and open-minded way. Unlike many anthropologists of the era Strehlow acknowledged that the Arrernte (Aranda, Arunta) and Loritja (Luritja, Kukatja) men had been exposed to Christian teachings since their youth and that this could influence their cosmological beliefs. [16] He made judgements over whether information he was given reflected Christian influences. [17] Strehlow's research was published in German by the Ethnological Museum in Frankfurt am Main between 1907 and 1920 as *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien*. [18]

Strehlow focussed on the myths, legends, material culture and the customs of the Arrernte and Loritja and although an English translation of his magnus opus has never been published it was well received in Britain and Europe by some armchair anthropologists such as Andrew Lang, Northcote W. Thomas and Marcel Maus. [19] It must be said, however, that Strehlow's ethnographic work was controversial, if not engulfed by the ongoing totemic debate. Under the influence of Baldwin Spencer, James George Frazer, the champion of totemism, mistrusted Strehlow's data. The reasons for denigrating or supporting the missionary's ethnographic authority had to do with ongoing theoretical discussions in Europe. Andrew Lang, for example, was himself stigmatised because of his recent neo-degenerationist turn – his defence of primitive monotheism in *The Making of Religion* (1900) – and that is why he was so enthusiastic about Strehlow's description of Altjira. In the opening pages of his ethnographic monograph, the missionary introduced Altjira, 'a bigger and stronger man with reddish skin and long hair over his shoulder', as 'the good god of the Aranda' [20]. In short, Altjira was, in spite of his emu feet, a heavenly and moral entity.

Strehlow undertook his detailed research between 1904 and 1910. The book was published in seven volumes or five parts (*Teile*) between 1907 and 1920. [21] The first part, *Mythen, Sagen und Märchen des Aranda-Stammes in Zentral-Australien* ('Myths, Legends and Fables of the Aranda Tribe') was published in 1907, followed by a companion volume on the Loritja in 1908, which also included a section on the totemic conceptions of both tribes. Next came *Die Totemistischen Kulte der Aranda-und Loritja- Stämme* ('The Totemic Cults of the Aranda and Loritja Tribes') in 1910, the year of von Leonhardi's death. The remaining volumes were edited by F. C. A. Sarg, B. Hagen and Ernst Vatter from the Ethnological Museum in Frankfurt. Part four, published in 1913 described the social life of the Aranda and Loritja, including initiation ceremonies, marriage and sexual transgressions, and family trees. The following volume of part four, published in 1916, considered political and legal systems, including leadership systems, structure and layout of camps, punishments and responses to deaths, illness and magic. Finally, Part five, *Die Materielle Kultur der Aranda- und Loritja* (The Material Culture of the Aranda and Loritja), with an appendix containing an explanation of native names, came out in 1920. It included descriptions of how food was procured and prepared, clothing and decoration, and weapons and utensils. [22] The First World War interrupted communication between Frankfurt and Hermannsburg and the final volume was published without the editor being able to make contact with Strehlow.

Although Frieda Strehlow's assistance is not acknowledged, Anna Kenny suggests that she contributed to Carl's ethnographic work through her close association with Arrernte women at Hermannsburg. Kenny points out that part of the handwritten manuscript on giving birth and associated ceremonies is in Frieda's handwriting. Other information on women and women's knowledge is also likely to have been contributed by Frieda Strehlow. [23]

A major point of contention between Strehlow and Spencer and Gillen was over the meaning of *Altjira*. In his Introduction to the first volume of *Die Aranda and Loritja Stämme* von Leonhardi wrote,

> According to the tradition of the ancestors there is a being called Altjira who embodies the highest good (mara). This being is eternal … His habitation is in the sky …his realm is limited to the sky. He has neither created human beings nor does he care for their welfare … The Aranda neither fear nor do they love him. [24]

Von Leonhardi then noted that Strehlow found after much investigation that the Arrernte assured him that *Altjira* refers to him who has no beginning, who did not issue from another. Strehlow disputed Spencer and Gillen's claim that the word 'alcheri' means dream and went on to say 'The native knows nothing of a "dreamtime" as a designation of a certain period in their history.' The term that Spencer and Gillen translated as 'dreamtime' – 'alcheringa' -– actually refers to the time when *Altjiranga mitjina* traversed the earth.

As Walter Veit has pointed out Strehlow became a pawn in a broader dispute among anthropologists in the early twentieth century, but apart from the theoretical debates there were also disputes about methodology. Those like von Leonhardi argued that Strehlow's deep knowledge of Arrernte and Loritja languages gave him insights which Spencer and Gillen lacked, while their supporters pointed out that they observed ceremonies while Strehlow relied on interviews and descriptions by a number of male elders. This controversy has continued into the twenty first century. [25]

After von Leonardi's death and the Strehlows' return to Hermannsburg in 1912 from a long furlough in Germany, Carl Strehlow focussed on his primary tasks of evangelism and managing the mission station, while maintaining his interest in the local Aboriginal languages, translating the New Testament and other religious works into Arrernte.

Carl Strehlow's youngest son, and the only one of his six children who remained in Australia after 1910, Theodor (Ted, known professionally as T. G. H. Strehlow) learned Aranda as a child living at Hermannsburg. After his father's death in 1922 Ted and his mother moved to Adelaide where he completed his education. He then returned to central Australia and became a linguist and anthropologist revising and building on his father's work, defending his legacy against the criticisms of Spencer and his supporters. His 1969 book *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* gives an account of his father's final days as the family, accompanied by several Arrernte, made their way south to seek medical assistance in Adelaide for Carl who was critically ill with dropsy. But after an agonising few days he died far from a hospital at

Horseshoe Bend on the Finke River only 250 kilometres from Hermannsburg. [26] T. G. H. Strehlow's most celebrated work is *Songs of Central Australia* (1971) in which, Anna Kenny argues, he 'defends his father intellectually from the glib but damaging critiques mainly of Baldwin Spencer'. [27] Ted's son John has also defended his grandfather's legacy in his biography (2011, 2019) of his grandparents Frieda and Carl Strehlow. [28]

Despite the ongoing controversy stemming from the different approaches to fieldwork and linguistic study of Strehlow and Spencer and Gillen, Strehlow's careful recording of language, customs, folklore and other aspects of Arrernte and Kukatja life has survived over a century. The anthropologist Diane Austin-Broos sums up the differing approaches and contributions of Spencer and Gillen, influenced by British ethnologists of the period, with that of the German ethnological practice of the time:

> Whatever their respective failings neither Franz Boas, scientist, nor Carl Strehlow, missioner and amateur ethnologist, were social Darwinists. These men did not produce the detailed accounts of rite of a Gillen and Spencer but through their language facility and interpretation of myth they understood far more of the aesthetics, symbols and values of the peoples whom they addressed. [29]

Carl Strehlow's research, rather than the missionary work to which he devoted his life, may be his lasting heritage.

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[1] Walter F Veit, 'Carl Strehlow Ethnologist: The Aranda and Arunta Tribes in Australian Ethnology', in T.R. Finlayson and G.L. McMullen (eds), *The Australian Experience of Germany*. Adelaide: Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows, Flinders University, pp. 77–100, 1994.

[2] Veit 1990; J. Strehlow 2010, 182, 198.

[3] J. Strehlow, 2010, 310.

[4] Ibid., p. 326.

[5] Carl Strehlow to Reverend teacher (Deinziger), 6 September 1893 Lutheran Archives, Adelaide, South Australia. It is difficult to ascertain whether Strehlow's initial view of the Dieri world and its people was influenced by the concepts of *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker*, of "natural people" contrasted with "cultural people" who are literate with a recorded past. Often associated with Adolf Bastian's views, these concepts can be traced to Johann Gottfried von Herder, if not Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Common in the late Nineteenth centuru, they were not conceived by Bastian, though he used it as many others did. See Penny and Bunzl 2003; Penny 2008, 86-87. This can be deleted if you don't agree with it.

[6] Nobbs 2005.

[7] In 1846, the Lutheran body in Australia was divided into two synods, the Immannuel Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of South Australia, renamed as the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia in 1863. The first had millenialist inclinations, which was one of the reasons behind the split. Leske 1977, 23; Brock and Van Gent 2002, 303-318..

[8] Letter from FJ Gillen to C Strehlow 26 Aug 1896 http://spencerandgillen.net/objects/4fac6aac023fd704f475bd8e

[9] J. Strehlow, 2010.

[10] As regards the wider framework of German ethnological research in Australia, see Peterson and Kenny, 2017.

[11] Spencer participated in the Horn Expedition as a biologist, and he met Gillen on that occasion.

[12] Kenny, 2013, 102.

[13] Kenny, 2013, 105-106.

[14] Boas also used Indigenous informants in British Columbia; see Brock, Etherington, Griffiths and Van Gent, 2015, 183-187; Kenny 2008, 32-33; 2013.

[15] Kenny 2013.

[16] Strehlow refers to the Aranda, Spencer and Gillen use the spelling Arunta and the current accepted spelling is Arrernte. The Arrernte referred to their neighbours as Loritja, which Strehlow adopted. It is also spelled Luritja. These people are also known as Kukatja a term used by Norman Tindale in his book *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their terrain, environmental controls, distribution, limits and proper names*, 1974.

[17] Kenny, 2013, 158-159.

[18] Carl Strehlow, *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämmerin Zentral-Australien* Frankfurt-am-Main: Joseph Baer and Co., 1907-1920..

[19] Anna Kenny http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/strehlow-rev-carl-1871-1922.
There are two unpublished English translations of Strehlow's book in archival collections.

[20] Strehlow 1907, 1. I thank Frederico Delgado Rosa for sharing this quote and calling my attention to Andrew Lang's "neo-degenerationism" and "paranormal" inclinations. See Rosa 2003.

[21] Parts III and IV had two volumes each.

[22] Carl Strehlow's ethnographic monograph was translated by Hans D. Oberscheidt, (The Aranda and Loritja Tribes of Central Australia, Hermannsburg, September 1991). Held at the Library of the Lutheran Seminary, North Adelaide, South Australia.

[23] Kenny, 2013, 45-46.

[24] Leonhardi in C. Strehlow, 1907, Oberscheit translation, p. 15.

[25] Regarding the 'afterlife' of Strehlow's ethnographic collections, see Gibson 2020, Barwick, Green and Vaarzon-Morel 2020.

[26] T. G. H. Strehlow 1969..

[27] Kenny, 2013, 79.

[28] T. G. H. Strehlow, 1971; J. Strehlow, 2010..

[29] Diane J. Austin-Broos, 'Review Article: Bringing Spencer and Gillen Home' *Oceania* 69 (3), 1999, 209-216, 215.