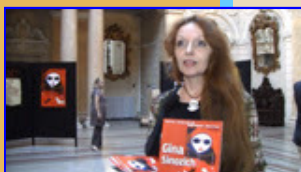


# Australia—where telling the truth and helping the tribes is seen as “just another form of invasion,” Part 2

By Vesna Tenodi MA, archaeology; artist and writer



**“The ever-growing list of suspect sacred customs recently invented to support land claims is something that no one is allowed to question.”**

## Archaeological material—free to steal

Following Ted Strehlow’s death in 1978, the tug of war between his widow Kathleen and the Aboriginal industry has gone on for years.

The passing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage (Interim Protection) Act, 1984, gave the Federal Government of Australia unlimited powers in matters concerning the protection of Aboriginal heritage, particularly in relation to sacred sites and sacred objects.

The part of the Act that troubled Strehlow’s widow stated that *any objects that were “used or treated in a manner inconsistent with Aboriginal tradition” could be impounded* and placed in protection. Kathleen saw this as a threat of “political attack” by the “land rights industry”—an alliance of “jealous advisors, white lawyers, anthropologists and politically-motivated bureaucrats” (Graham Duncan 1984).

Over the last forty years an entirely new “Aboriginal tradition” has been invented, often for the sole purpose of seizing the land and/or material objects, by claiming that something is “inconsistent with Aboriginal tradition,” under this absurdly worded law.

The “sacred ancient customs” that never actually existed are now routinely quoted in courts to persecute private collectors and

confiscate their objects of artistic and archaeological interest. The ever-growing list of suspect sacred customs recently invented to support land claims is something that no one is allowed to question.

One such claim is that in prehistoric times the tribes conducted a “Welcome to Country” ceremony, to greet some other wandering tribe and allow them passage through their territory.

That invention has taken root so quickly that by now every government department, every public service event, every official meeting and function must start with an Aborigine giving a “Welcome to Country” two-minute speech. The Aboriginal industry prescribes a hefty fee for such performances, and claims that it is well justified because it generates a stream of income for Aborigines. There are repercussions for anyone who refuses to follow this new “protocol.”

It has become so entrenched in our daily practice that not many Australians these days are aware that the “Welcome to Country” was invented by entertainer Ernie Dingo, who scripted it for a theatre performance in 1976, as a joke. Nevertheless, it quickly became an obligatory part of every official function (Keith Windschuttle, “Welcomes to country” are being foisted on us in error, *The Australian* 2012).

Likewise, new generations of Australians are not aware

that what is now called “sacred dot-painting” actually started when a white art teacher, Geoffrey Bardon, went to the Aboriginal settlement of Papunya in 1971. Papunya was, according to Bardon, “a problem place, a community beset with problems of alcohol abuse, inter-clan violence, and was a death camp in all but name” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, December 2011).

Frustrated with restlessness and the short attention span of Aboriginal children, he started teaching them to paint rows of dots, as a method for them to learn some discipline. The grown-ups who saw what the children were doing, asked him to let them try as well. Within a decade dot-painting was referred to as a “sacred Aboriginal tradition.”

This lunacy has taken such a grip on Australian life that any artist who puts three dots together is threatened with court action for “stealing” Aboriginal “sacred tradition.” To avoid bullying, contemporary artists using this style say it is a reference to French pointillism. They are fully aware that there is no copyright on any style, and that intellectual property law does not apply to ideas. And yet, the fear of Aboriginal violence is so extreme that artists comply regardless of how absurd—and often illegal—the demands might be.

With the Aboriginal industry rapidly growing during the 1970s, and seeing the pro-

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## Australia—where telling the truth = invasion (cont.)

**"The part of the Act that troubled Strehlow's widow stated that any objects that were 'used or treated in a manner inconsistent with Aboriginal tradition' could be impounded and placed in protection."**

posals for the Aboriginal Heritage Act, collectors realized that such legal gobble-dygook will be used to rob them of their collections. Before the passing of the Heritage Act in 1984, Strehlow's widow and his son Carl made a wise decision to secretly move the most important parts of the collection to New Zealand and then to Europe.

In 1986, the rest of the Strehlow collection was confiscated—or to put it more bluntly, stolen—by those in power, and is now kept at the Strehlow Research Centre (SRC) in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory.

In 1992, 260 Aboriginal artifacts, including "secret-sacred" material—belonging to Ted Strehlow's son Carl—were also seized and confiscated, using the South Australian heritage legislation as an excuse.

Kathleen and Carl both left Australia in disgust of what this country has become.

In 1999 Carl Strehlow again started putting sacred objects—from the part of the collection they managed to keep—up for auction, to show the world that he is the rightful and legal owner of Strehlow's collection.

In September 2016 more sacred objects from Ted Strehlow's collection were auctioned by Sotheby's in London.

Early on in his career, throughout the 1930s and

1940s, Strehlow kept calling for action to prevent ancient traditions from dying out. His calls fell on deaf ears. Back then, he said that Aboriginal cultures had died or

Why not join the pack and reap the benefits? Australian academics are an easy target, and most of them are ready to lie as soon as there is a threat to their career. Or are just bought or bribed into compliance with promotion or funding.

There are some notable exceptions, who have refused to be either bought or intimidated, with Ted Strehlow being one of them. He tried



**Fig. 1.** Dr. Mario Slaus at his laboratory. Slaus is Senior Research Scientist at the Department of Archaeology of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts and a professor of archaeology and anthropology at the University of Zadar, and is one of the international experts challenging the degraded state of Australian archaeology.

were dying not so much because they were in an evolutionary time warp and locked into a stagnant Stone Age mentality; but that their disappearance was also due to "avoidable neglect" (Ted Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions*, 1947).

Now, when the ancient traditions are long dead and beyond retrieval, the Aboriginal industry is aggressively promoting a fabricated past, as well as devising political and judicial methods to cover their tracks.

The relentless persecution of the Strehlow family is a perfect explanation why nothing coming from the Aboriginal industry can be trusted today.

Because of such harassment and bullying, which in some cases went on for decades, disobedient researchers and artists usually quickly give in and do what the Aboriginal industry orders them to do. Why fight a losing battle?

to fight off the Aboriginal industry and argued that the ancient customs no longer exist and that what we find instead is a "synthetic" and "hybrid" culture.

Strehlow's films recorded in the 1930s, of Aboriginal ceremonies now extinct, were shown publicly for the last time on the day he died. That was October 3, 1978.

Some international experts have openly been saying for years that the current Australian politically-driven legal system has destroyed even the vaguest semblance of any genuine, independent and objective scientific research in Australia. As a consequence of the new "ethical" requirements enforced in anything relating to Aborigines, Australian archaeology has become farcical.

One of such outspoken experts is Croatian anthropologist Mario Slaus (**Fig. 1**),

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## Australia—where telling the truth = invasion (cont.)

**"Australian academics are an easy target, and most of them are ready to lie as soon as there is a threat to their career. Or are just bought or bribed into compliance with promotion or funding."**

**"Some international experts have openly been saying for years that the current Australian politically-driven legal system has destroyed even the vaguest semblance of any genuine, independent and objective scientific research in Australia."**

Senior Research Scientist at the Department of Archaeology of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts and a professor of archaeology and anthropology at the University of Zadar, who also studied at the Smithsonian Institution and the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC.

Familiar with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), Dr Slaus sees it as obvious that the Australians just copy what the Americans do (Interview with Dr Slaus, 2011). They copied the NAGPRA law, but then decided to take it much further, to an absurd extreme. While NAGPRA provides for repatriation of human skeletal remains, Australian heritage laws are now used by Aboriginal tribes to claim ownership of not only material objects, but also of ideas, myths and stories, as well as of artistic expression, patterns and imagery.

Most of these things, if truth be told, are clearly taken from ancient traditions of indigenous people elsewhere in the world. This is especially in regards the American Indians, a lot of whose cultural customs and stories have been copied by the Aboriginal industry. Aboriginal tribes are then urged to promote those appropriated customs as their own ancient traditions, and to use quotes from heritage law—such as to claim that something is "inconsistent with Aboriginal tradition"—so they can go on demanding ownership and control.

Knowing all this, some of the best Australian researchers and collectors have removed their collections from Australia, seeing such action as the only way to save important items for future generations. Otherwise, they risk them being stolen, "repatriated," and subsequently destroyed

or misused by the Aboriginal industry.

Regrettably, this seems to have become a standard measure of last resort in this tragic ideological climate.

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