Australia—where telling the truth and helping the tribes is seen as "just another form of invasion"

By Vesna Tenodi MA, archaeology; artist and writer

"In order to hide the truth, archaeological evidence of sophisticated earlier cultures was destroyed, thanks to the repatriation law, also enforced by the Aboriginal industry."

The new Australian paradigm—its enforcers, its opponents

When I wrote that nothing about Australian prehistory as told by the Aboriginal industry nowadays should be trusted, some of the readers asked me why? Why is the Aboriginal industry so determined to hide the truth? Why are they so eager to fabricate the past, as well as present, losing all credibility in the process?

It comes down to guilt-driven Australian politics. By way of justifying the destruction of archaeological material and reinventing the past, the Aboriginal industry offers reasons such as that the truth is "offensive to Aborigines" and standard archaeological methods are "unethical."

One of the books deemed as offensive for containing accurate information about Australian prehistory is *Cape York: The Savage Frontier* by Rodney Liddell. It was self-published in 1996 when political correctness was on the rise. The book was the author's response to academics who were "deliberately lying and distorting the truth on Australian history in the name of political correctness" (Rodney Liddell www.capeyorkbooks.com). Attempts to ban the book failed, and according to Liddell, *The Savage Frontier* is now more popular than ever. Political attempts to censor books and similar forms of research or other publications often have that effect.

Liddell was attacked for almost every chapter in the book. Speaking about the Aboriginal invasion of Australia, about the "sacred customs" of infanticide and cannibalism performed openly until just a few decades ago, or about morphological analysis of skeletal remains was deemed unacceptable under the new political regime. Liddell remains unapologetic and is still collecting the facts as learned from his Aboriginal informants.

Fig. 1. Ted Strehlow with two Aranda elders grew up with the tribe.

Sacred Violence

Before contemporary researchers such as Liddell there are other sources of the 'forbidden past' which are increasingly difficult to access.

What the authors have in common is that they acted out of love for Aboriginal people, dedicated their lives to examining and recording the Stone Age culture as they witnessed it, kept helping the tribes and advocating for them, and urging the government of the day to treat the tribes with more compassion. *Those calls were ignored*. But today, the Aboriginal industry claims that "telling the truth and helping the tribes is just another form of invasion" and threatens legal action against anyone who offers constructive criticism or mentions some unpalatable facts about Aboriginal past and present.

Long before Rodney Liddell revisited some politically undesirable facts such as the ever-present problem with Aboriginal violence, British explorer George Gray and humanitarian Daisy Bates detailed the same brutal mindset and violent customs they observed for decades which they recorded in detail in their journals.

More recently, Ted Strehlow (1908–1978), an anthropologist who studied the Aranda people of Central Australia, documented tribal life for forty years (**Fig. 1**). He amassed

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what is possibly the greatest collection of Aboriginal artefacts and other items ever.

Much like Grahame Walsh, who documented Pre-Aboriginal rock art and was attacked by the Aboriginal industry for his findings including that there was a more technologically-advanced people inhabiting Australia long before the arrival of the Aboriginal tribes, Strehlow too fell out of favor when he asserted that 'real' ancient culture was well and truly extinct and was replaced with a fake culture as devised by the Aboriginal industry.

With the rise of the Aboriginal industry which is well-known to no longer allow for free thinking, Strehlow too (just like Grahame Walsh discussed in prior articles) went from glorified to vilified, and was betrayed even by his closest friends. Walsh was vilified for committing the unforgivable sin of attributing Wanjina and Bradshaw rock art to a pre-Aboriginal race. Strehlow's sin? He refused to hand over his privately owned collection of artefacts, etc., to contemporary tribes.

The collection consisted of the photos, songs and stories he gathered, as well as the archaeological and ethnographic items entrusted to him by the Aboriginal elders.

Strehlow was one of the greatest promoters and defenders of Aboriginal culture. He was born on the mission run by his father Carl Strehlow, grew up with the Aranda Aboriginal tribe, speaking Aranda before learning to speak English. He was loved and embraced by the tribe as being an Aranda man himself. Seeing that tribal customs were rapidly dying out, Strehlow started recording the Aranda language in 1932. This was the first methodical study of any Aboriginal language ever undertaken. He recorded the customs, ceremonies, thoughts and attitudes of the Aranda people—paying equal attention to the good and the bad, the positive and the negative, and accurately described the lives of the Central Desert tribes (Ted Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions*, 1947). The book was considered to be a brilliant work, and a pioneering study that provided a great insight into a dying culture (Again, see Fig. 1 on prior page).

Fig. 2. Ted Strehlow's photographs were published in two 1978 issues of *People* magazine.

The Aranda elders were appreciative of his work to the extent they said he was the only man they can fully trust with their important tribal objects. They kept bringing him archaeological and ethnographic items, and explained that the old customs were dying and the new generation of tribal men can no longer be trusted. Over forty years, on top of recording images, songs, and stories, Strehlow kept building his collection of sacred ceremonial objects and artistic items given to him by the tribal chiefs.

After a lifetime of dedication, in the last years of his life he clashed with a new generation of Aborigines—with exactly the type of people the elders warned against. But since the tribal elders who had been giving him the artifacts by the early 1970s were all dead, the new breed of politically empowered people who claimed to be Aranda started demanding ownership of the collection.

Strehlow refused, saying that to do so would be contrary to the promise he had given the real Aranda chiefs. Also, he pointed out that by the 1970s the Aranda culture was extinct, with all spirituality evaporated and customs forgotten. He enraged the Aboriginal industry even further with his objections to what had become known as "Aboriginal art," claiming that genuine ancient art had turned into national kitsch, with all authenticity gone.

Seeing the Aboriginal industry aggressively promoting an invented culture, Strehlow simply said it's all a lie, and started publishing his own records of tribal customs (Ted Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia*, 1971). For this defiance, Strehlow—who was until the 1970s regarded as the 'last Aranda man,' the last person knowledgeable about real Stone Age tribal culture—fell into disgrace. When he decided to publish some of the photographs from his personal collection, under the title "Secrets of the Aranda" in two issues of *People* magazine in 1978 (**Fig. 2**)

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and provided the German magazine, *Stern*, with 211 color slides and 78 black & white photographs—he became the enemy of the state. The Aboriginal industry was enraged and *People* magazine which published his material was banned.

Who can you trust?

Seeing even his lifelong friends and supporters falling into the trap of political correctness and siding with the Aboriginal industry Strehlow made a will and left the entire collection to his wife Kathleen Stuart Strehlow. He believed she was the only one he could trust to resist the pressure and not allow the collection to fall into the hands of modern Aborigines who, in Streblow's own words at the time, "no longer have any knowledge of the authentic tribal culture, since the elders and guardians of the secrets were all dead and that whole world is finished, and will never come back" (*Songs of Central Australia*, 1971).

Following Streblow's death in 1978, Kathleen inherited the collection, as the sole legal owner of his lifelong work. She did resist the harassment—for a while. However, Aborigines kept making demands for her to hand over the collection. She replied that the material was Ted Strehlow's personal property and that he was free to leave it to anyone he wished. Since she was now the rightful owner and guardian of the collection she ignored the Aborigines who tried to claim any rights over the material. She dismissed them as pretenders—"nouveaux Aborigines," as she called them, in league with "rip-off white advisors" and "plagiarising anthropologists" (Janet Hawley, "The Strehlow Collection: Preserved in Vitriol," *Sydney Morning Herald* 1987).

When a delegation of Aboriginal people came to make claims on the collection, she dubbed them "The Gang of 15" and later came to say: "When sweeping statements are made 'give the objects back'—I answer, to whom? Which Aborigines? I have flung down the challenge: Any Aborigine who thinks he has a legitimate claim to any object can come and see me and I'll check his credentials. I want to know the names of his ancestors, his totem, the name verses of the songs. **Not one has come forward**" (Hawley 1987; author's emphasis).

To the complaint that she, as a woman, should not have right of control of tribal objects, Kathleen Strehlow replied: "I am a white woman, so those Aboriginal laws don't apply to me" (ibid).

Such statements further infuriated the Aboriginal industry, which kept up the demands for her to "hand over the collection."

To be continued…

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