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Book Review

James L. Cox, *Restoring the Chain of Memory: T.G.H. Strehlow and the Repatriation of Australian Indigenous Knowledge* (Sheffield, UK and Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2018), xix + 202 pp., $100.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-78179-337-4.

> In recent years the volume of relevant works [on Aboriginal Australian religion] has dwindled to a mere trickle as anthropologists have become remarkably reticent to write much about religious matters, fearing to transgress on powerful notions of secrecy which still pertain to this religion, and to injure the spiritual sensitivities of contemporary Aborigines. (Kolig 1989: 2)

This is a book about secrecy, responsibility, and trust; about who cares for sacred objects and knowledge; and about what happens when the researcher becomes the insider and the community the outsider. *Restoring the Chain of Memory* is a volume of considerable importance as it addresses a suite of topics ranging from understanding and respecting religious beliefs and cultural norms radically different from those of Western society, to the responsibilities that academic researchers need to be cognisant of when it comes to accessing or controlling other peoples' knowledge. James Cox offers a timely (indeed essential) contribution to the ongoing discourse relating to the ethical challenges of research being undertaken with, for, and by Indigenous peoples worldwide, as well as intellectual property concerns.

Owing to years of studying Indigenous religion(s), Cox has a deep understanding of how, in traditional Aboriginal Australian societies, there is a complete integration of religious beliefs, kinship relations, ties to place, and so on within the daily life of the community. The 'chain of memory' in the title refers both to the continuity of tradition and to the obligations that individuals have to each other and to the Dreaming. It is the behaviors of ancestral beings in the 'everywhen' of the Dreaming that is the basis of 'the Law', the expectations and obligations, gender relations, and such that subsequently shape their society. This includes the guarding and perpetuation by elders and initiates of the secret-sacred knowledge associated with places, with men and women having very different roles.

At the core of Cox's exploration of Indigenous religion is T.H.S. Strehlow (1908–1978), one of the most accomplished but controversial individuals in Australian Indigenous studies. He was highly respected by Central Desert communities and became a champion of Aboriginal rights at a time when Aboriginal Australians were being assimilated, persecuted, or worse. Yet he was also criticized for allowing the publication of photographs of sacred ceremonies, for refusing to return sacred objects and knowledge to the Arrernte later in his life, and also for giving a woman (his wife) control over information and items forbidden to women and uninitiated men.

Strehlow's remarkable life story, the subject of a provocative biography by Barry Hill (2002), is integral to Cox's careful analysis. He was born into a German Lutheran mission at Hermannsburg in Arrernte territory, central Australia. His father was head of the mission and an accomplished linguist who did pioneering work with local Indigenous groups. For the fourteen years Strehlow lived there, his playmates were Arrernte, and their language became his. After his father's untimely death in 1922, Strehlow and his mother moved to Adelaide for his education at Adelaide University where he majored in Literature and Classics. He returned to central Australia in 1932 to study Central Desert languages, culture, etc. as a linguist and untrained anthropologist. In 1954 he became Reader in Australian Linguistics at the University of Adelaide, and continued his research in the field in the 1950s and 1960s. He published his landmark volume, *Songs of Central Australia*, in 1971. He died literally hours before the opening of the Strehlow Research Centre, which was established to hold his vast collection of ethnographic and linguistic notes and cultural items.

Over the course of his life, Strehlow was entrusted with the songs and ceremonies associated with particular Dreaming locales, and the sacred objects (*tjurunga*) integral to them. He felt that the elders no longer possessed the requisite knowledge and was later not prepared to return these to those who, in his view, had become the outsiders to Arrernte culture. To whom, then, should traditional knowledge and sacred items be returned in the wake of acculturation?

Cox's first two chapters supply background material. In Chapter 1, he provides essential information about Strehlow and the Arrernte, along with a balanced review of Strehlow's biographers and critics. His assessment of Strehlow is sympathetic, foregrounding his efforts to inform 'public perceptions of Indigenous culture, encouraging enlightened choices among policy makers and ultimately fostering Indigenous pride' (p. xviii). Chapter 2 presents the theoretical model of Indigenous religion that Cox has developed and explored throughout much of his career. As an anthropologist, I find that his recognition of the *sine qua non* of Indigenous religion enlightened and essential to understanding the Aboriginal societies he writes of—a 'communally authorized tradition that operates though the conditions of kinship and location' (p. 39).

The next four chapters offer a measured analysis of Strehlow's fieldwork and writing on Arrernte religion. Chapter 3 is a detailed review of Arrernte worldview and social structure with a discussion on Strehlow's significant contributions toward a more complete and correct rendering of those, but also of what he got wrong. The next chapter focuses on the complex nature of Arrernte social organization and how kinship and totemic relationships and responsibilities are defined, to a large part through localized kinship groups, a situation that Strehlow described as 'personal monototemism in a polytotemic community' (p. 60). In Chapter 5, Cox focuses on Strehlow's most important publication, *Songs of Central Australia* (1971), essentially a compendium of Arrernte secret-sacred knowledge. While the songs and descriptions of ceremonies that he recorded or was entrusted with provide an astonishing glimpse into the core of Arrernte being, it raises the question of whether they were his to publish. Here Cox takes care to himself avoid including sensitive information, focusing on what is already in the public domain, but acknowledges Strehlow's goals of preserving for posterity what he saw disappearing. The impact of colonialism on Arrernte lifeways and religion during the first half of the twentieth century is

evaluated in Chapter 6. Central here is Strehlow's observation on resultant loss of collective memory, and that by the 1960s virtually all key knowledge of traditional stories, ceremonies, ceremonial locations, and such was forgotten. However, Cox notes that the situation is not so simple and that some elders were active in maintaining traditional ways, though Strehlow might still have argued that the authentic Arrernte beliefs and practices were no more.

In the final chapters, Cox weaves these many themes together. In Chapter 7, he establishes Strehlow as a phenomenologist of religion, discussing how he achieved the fundamental aim of gaining 'understanding of the religions studied by overcoming the "insider–outsider predicament"' (p. 130). Strehlow's status as an 'insider' to Arrernte society is also examined. Chapter 8 addresses repatriation, the elephant in the room (or really, in the Strehlow Research Centre). Most often viewed in terms of the return of material culture, what is most important here is the repatriation of knowledge to the Arrernte. Strehlow's vast collection includes his extensive notes but also audio recordings, films, and both secular and sacred items. As with the repatriation of Indigenous patrimony elsewhere, there are clear benefits to the community but also new challenges as to how to re-integrate (if possible) the knowledge.[1] This is complicated due to the secret-sacred nature of much of these materials[2] and the question of who should have access to or make decisions in the absence of fully initiated tribal members. Cox's final chapter could stand alone as a summary on the nature of Indigenous religion, as exemplified by the Arrernte, and for his broader discussion on types of knowledge and the tension between the traditional and the modern.

Long considered among the most primitive people on earth, reflecting the legacy of Victorian mores and the early dominance of unilinear evolution, Aboriginal Australians were anything but. Noted anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss famously characterized them as 'intellectual aristocrats' in regard to their complex kinship system, sophisticated worldview, and more. Cox teases apart with considerable skill the intersection of Indigenous religion, secrecy, and agency, with the legacy of Strehlow's fieldwork. In doing so, he addresses Kolig's lament (epigraph) and provides a vital resource for anyone involved with research with and for Indigenous communities and their intellectual property.

1. For an Australian example, see Garde 2011. There are also striking parallels between Strehlow and American ethnographer Frank Hamilton Cushing whose relationship with Zuni Pueblo (New Mexico) in the late nineteenth century included his admittance to the Priesthood of the Bow Society and access to their secret religious knowledge, his strong political advocacy, and ultimately his betrayal of the confidential information they entrusted him with (Thomas 1999: 70-77).

2. See Anderson (1995) for an essential examination of the issue of secrecy as it pertains to the Strehlow collection. Similar issues have also emerged with the writing and recordings of Baldwin Spender, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, Charles Mountford, and Richard Gould, amongst others.

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