Deciphering Arrernte archives: The intermingling of textual and living knowledge

Abstract

Arrernte people are arguably the most documented Aboriginal group in Australia. Their language was studiously documented by Lutheran scholars, their ceremonies were subject to some of the most intensive ethnographic documentation and many of their songs were meticulously recorded. In addition, genealogical and historical archives are full of Arrernte social histories, and museum stores contain thousands of Arrernte-made artefacts. This chapter contains a condensed and edited transcript of interviews with two Arrernte men, Shaun Angeles and Joel Liddle, who discuss their deep and varied interests in these records and the archives that contain them. Both Joel and Shaun are of a younger cohort of Arrernte men living in the Alice Springs region who are increasingly interested in utilising the potential of archival material as a means of assisting Arrernte language and cultural transmission. These interviews explore some of the issues Arrernte peoples confront as they work through archives. We discuss the challenges of variant orthographies in the 19th and 20th century records, the limitations of conventional cataloguing requirements and the importance of reading archival texts in a way that sees them emplaced and tested against the knowledge of elders. Archival records are explained as being necessarily embedded within Arrernte social memory and orality and framed by local socio-cultural practices. Reflecting upon their own experiences, Joel and Shaun are able to provide advice to future generations in their dealings with collecting institutions and make recommendations to current and future researchers (ethnographic and linguistic) who are documenting Arandic material. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the role of digital technologies in the future dissemination of cultural materials.

Keywords: Arrernte, orality, Indigenous knowledge, anthropology, Aboriginal history
Introduction

Arrernte people are in the relatively fortunate position of having access to an extraordinarily detailed archive of linguistic and ethnographic information. Amassed over 130 years of assiduous documentation and observation by missionary and anthropological scholars, this archive now constitutes a treasure trove of linguistic detail, song texts, detailed descriptions of ceremony, and Indigenous toponymy. The following is a condensed and edited transcript of interviews with two Arrernte men, Shaun Angeles and Joel Liddle, who discuss their deep and varied interests in these records and some of the archives that contain them.¹ While much of the early linguistic work in the Arrernte region was carried out by Lutheran missionaries in the Western Arrernte region (Kempe 1891; Kenny 2018), my conversations with Shaun and Joel concentrate upon materials more relevant to their own ancestral ties to people of the Central and Eastern Arrernte area. Returning to these archives as passionate and engaged independent scholars, both reveal their commitment to seeing archival collections returned to communities for the benefit of Arrernte people. Both exhibit a desire to use the archive in a way that retains vulnerable aspects of the vivid, poetic, and empirically well-known local worlds of Arrernte people: place names, Dreaming stories, songs, and rituals.

Historical familiarity with literacy via Christian missions (Kral 2000) and greater access to education services via the Alice Springs township has enabled some Arrernte people to gain the necessary skills to engage with ethnohistorical sources (Malbunka 2004; Angeles 2016; Perkins 2016). Growing numbers of Arrernte people are now increasingly drawn to an archival body of material that is unmatched in size or scope anywhere in Australia. The plethora of Arrernte song recordings, texts, maps, stories, and genealogies present enormous opportunities for people to reconstruct cultural and individual identities, but at the same time they may be seen to impinge upon traditional forms of cultural transmission (Kenny 2013: 242). While the tensions between oral and literate forms of knowledge acquisition have been subject to considerable theoretical debate (Goody 1987; Ong 1988; Walsh 1995), Shaun and Joel accept the inevitable intermingling of archival and social memory. At the same time, they are also acutely aware of the need to carefully interpret, translate, and re-contextualise archival texts in social contexts and in dialogue with senior Arrernte people.

I first came to know Shaun as a friend in 2002 and our professional relationship developed further when we both serendipitously became involved in ethnographic collections. I was working in a curatorial capacity at the Melbourne Museum in 2013 when Shaun and a group of Arrernte men inspected the collections on pioneering anthropologists Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen (Morphy 1997; Jones 2005). Shaun later took on a role with the Strehlow Research Centre, the institution holding the manuscripts, artefacts, audio and film recordings of the linguist/ethnographer TGH Strehlow (Hill 2003; Gibson in press). Originally established by the Northern Territory Government in 1991 as a relatively autonomous government organisation, the centre has in recent years been transformed into an arm of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Shaun’s work on the collection over the last six

¹ Due to various complicating factors I (JG) was unable to conduct this interview with both men present. Instead it was agreed that very similar questions would be put to each person and then their responses edited together. Both Shaun and Joel assisted with the selection and final editing of the transcript.
years has become critical to the centre’s work of reconnecting Arrernte people (particularly men) with this dense corpus. I came to know Joel more recently, also via his interest in the Spencer and Gillen collection at the Melbourne Museum. In the discussion that follows, Joel describes his process of unearthing Arrernte language materials, deciphering their contents and navigating the politics and parameters of cultural knowledge.

What both men stress is the difficult work that is often required to make archival resources useful to contemporary communities. Coming to terms with inconsistent renderings of Arrernte, becoming familiar with multiple orthographies, negotiating access with institutions, and ensuring that one has a degree of local, cultural authority to work with significant recordings or texts are just a few of the challenges they face. While one of the principal ways of dealing with these documents is to return them to elders who possess detailed knowledge of Arrernte language and culture, the number of senior people with the required expertise needed to explain them is diminishing. Despite being sympathetic to the challenges institutions face, be they government-run museums and/or Aboriginal organisations such as the Central Land Council, to ensure that the use of cultural materials is managed sensitively, both men express a degree of frustration with access. Both Shaun and Joel express the sense of urgency that motivates them to identify and retrieve archival sources, transcribe and translate Arrernte texts, and extend upon the work of past ethnographers and linguists by further interrogating material with present-day elders. It is in this frisson between archives, orality, and sociality that they find both the pragmatic and existential value of these materials.

The interviews

JG: Each of you uses archival materials on a daily basis, either in your work or for personal edification. Can you give us some background to when you first started developing a curiosity about research materials that existed on Arrernte people?

SA: I’ve been curious since I was young, really. My grandmother spoke Arrernte, not fluently, but enough to teach us a little bit, a good sort of base, and I loved school and I loved learning. But I guess the point where I got really curious was after I was initiated and became a ‘young man’ according to Arrernte Law. After going through that ceremony, I had many, many questions. I guess I was very ignorant of the history of Arrernte people and the history of colonisation here in Alice Springs and Central Australia. I had learnt a little bit through school but learnt much more through conversations with my family. After I was initiated at age 19, I spent time with some really, really beautiful old men and it really opened up my eyes and made me ask, ‘Who the bloody hell am I?’ Then, when I was about 20 years old, I saw a film called Mr Strehlow’s film by Hart Cohen, on SBS Television. That really triggered more of my curiosity and made me ask questions about my Arrernte culture. I wondered who was this fellow TGH Strehlow? And, more importantly, who were all these old men that he worked with and recorded so much of our song, ceremony, and language?

You see, we had a lot of questions about our own Arrernte identity, too, growing up. My nanna, Maureen Trindle (nee Stokes), was really close with her brothers, all the Ayampe-arenye mape ‘all the people belonging to the Ayampe estate’, so we knew who our family was.
But for me, as a young man growing up in Alice Springs, I had a lot of questions about how I fit into the Arrernte cultural system. I started to buy my own books and put my own little library together, in an attempt to understand who I was, and where I fitted into that whole *anpernirentye* ’system of kin relationships’. So, in that time, I did a lot of my own research from home or just in my own time, as well as becoming familiar with anthropological and linguistic records.

**JL:** I started looking at archival Arrernte material probably in 2007–2008. I had lived with my family interstate in Victoria and in Canberra, but through my father we had these strong linkages back here to our Arrernte families. So, I had that exposure to people like my *aperle*, my ’father’s mother’, Emily Liddle (nee Perkins), too. She was a good pidgin English speaker but she also spoke Arrernte fluently. She was revered by my aunties and uncles as a sort of knowledgeable matriarch. I remember her saying a few things to … me in language just when we would visit Alice Springs. I’d hear her say things like *kele mwerre* ’okay, good’, *nthakenhe* ’what’s happening?’, or *werte* ’hello’. I think she probably swore at us a couple of times too [laughs], so that sort of stuck with me. When we’d go back to live in Victoria, in the area we were living, it was kind of isolating. You just wouldn’t see Aboriginal people around, and my dad is a visibly Aboriginal person, so you’d stick out in the street. It was kind of challenging because I knew I had this identity up here but I didn’t know anything about it. I had a lot of questions about my Arrernte heritage and I became more curious about it as I grew up.

**JG:** Can you name some of the key resources that each of you accessed in order to further explore and learn about Arrernte culture and language?

**JL:** Our family had *The Eastern and Central Arrernte to English Dictionary* by Henderson and Dobson (1994) and I would have a look through that every now and then. It got sent to us by family when it came out and we always had it in the house. That was my first exposure to Arrernte language in detail, really, aside from hearing Nana talk and Dad reeling off a few words. I had also heard of the anthropologists Spencer and Gillen, and we knew there were other researchers who had done work with Arrernte people in the early times. But I didn’t know that Spencer and Gillen had compiled these huge books, *The native tribes of Central Australia* (1899) and *The Arunta* (1927). They also left behind a huge archive of objects, notes, diaries, photographs, song recordings etc. When I did finally hear of their books I just went and bought them [laughs] and later I searched their archive using the Spencer and Gillen website. I also ended up visiting the collection at the Melbourne Museum. They’ve been the key resources I’ve used, but along the way I just started buying books or downloading any resource I could have access to. Sometimes they were academic papers written about Arrernnte culture, people, land, and language, but other books like *Listen deeply* by Kathleen Kemarre Wallace and Judy Lovell (2009), or *Iwenhe Tyerrtye* by MK Turner and Veronica Dobson (2010) have helped me a lot. My nanna had some involvement with the botanist Peter Latz and wrote the foreword for his book *Bushfires and bushtucker* (1995), which is a brilliant resource. I think at one stage I bought every Arrernte book sold through IAD [the Institute for Aboriginal Development] publishing too!
SA: The Eastern and Central Arrernte Dictionary has been my number one companion over the last 17 years! I’m just fascinated with the amount of depth in our language and a lot of it has been recorded in there. That’s where it really started for me. It was my entrance into my own world of being a young Arrernte man. Also, The town grew up dancing (2002) by Wenten Rubuntja and Jenny Green was really important.

JG: Publications are, of course, available to most, but few take that next step of digging further into the archives, into the historical, linguistic, and anthropological details. When did you go beyond the published work and begin to delve into the ‘raw data’ of archival collections?

SA: That’s only been a recent thing with me, since I started working here at the Strehlow Research Centre really, about six years ago, and what I have found has just blown me away. Before beginning at the Strehlow Centre I had coordinated an Arrernte male elders’ group at the Institute for Aboriginal Development and my first real sort of introduction into archives was when we were invited by yourself and Philip Batty to take a delegation of senior Arrernte and Anmatyerr men to Museum Victoria in 2013. I began to look at object documentation, access recordings of Arrernte song and realise the potential of this material. That was the start for me in terms of interacting and engaging with Indigenous archival material. It was such an exciting time. It was as if the world that I had been introduced to over the ten years leading up to this, with my own initiation and cultural work with elders, was also there in the archive ... It was a discovery of, ‘Did people really record all this?’ I had no idea. ‘Were people collecting and documenting all of our sacred artefacts?’ ‘Did they really record all of this cultural information?’ Well, actually, in some cases they didn’t document them very well. I knew a little bit about archives and museums before that, but it was just very surface level stuff. I knew that some of these collections existed, but there was no way for me to know that they held such vast knowledge of our people. That trip to the Melbourne Museum started my process of discovery and a year later I started working with the Strehlow archive. Well, that has changed my life, it has totally changed my life.

JL: I started with all the publicly available books and resources anyone can buy from IAD or bookshops, but when I went back to uni in 2013 and was having to research, it just became a natural thing that I would look at Arrernte and relevant desert materials in published journals. I haven’t really accessed anything that’s like ‘raw data’ so to speak, as I haven’t been employed as a researcher and until only recently didn’t have any research affiliation. I’m finalising my PhD application so it is my hope that the raw data in archives will inform the bulk of that work. That journey is only beginning for me. I have just tried to develop resources from materials I have used and look for how they complement each other. I also do mapping projects (Figure 1). I’m always searching for information on place names in Central Australia. I usually take the maps made by Spencer and Gillen and Strehlow, and later ones produced by Arrernte people of the Alice Springs region. When I find a new place name in historic materials I’ll try and work out how they sound and what they might mean, using my knowledge of the contemporary Arrernte orthography. I’ll look at this Spencer and Gillen orthography and then at Strehlow’s orthography and then try and put it into the Henderson and Dobson orthography. This helps me extract the place name in a form that we can read
and pronounce more accurately. Potentially from there you could go and talk to, for example, *utnerrengatye* ‘emu bush caterpillar’ people that belong to a certain site and its associated *Altyerre* ‘Dreaming’. There is the potential, with these archives, for people to reconnect with something very meaningful.

SA: I have also used maps that were made by the anthropologist Olive Pink in the 1930s, maps that you actually helped us find in the AIATSIS collection. I showed these maps to senior men and we’re still in a process of organising field trips to locate some of the sites on her maps. There’s one man in particular that could help identify a couple of those sites in Olive Pink maps that relate to Ayampe country. I guess my experiences around that kind of stuff is that it is important not to rely on archives but to go to the primary source, straight to grandfathers and recording material that is still remembered and lived. And then using those recordings to empower myself, which then empowers my sons and my whole family, I guess.

JG: So, you’re taking old records and interpreting them via a process of linguistic analysis so that they can be returned to contemporary Arrernte people?

JL: *Yewe alakenhe* [‘Yes, that’s how it’s done’]. The problem was, a lot of the stories recorded by Spencer and Gillen are sacred, and I had to be really vigilant to ensure that I didn’t look into anything I shouldn’t. You have to be careful when you uncover archival records. I didn’t want to know about anything that belonged to men until I had been initiated. I didn’t want to spoil that process. After going through Law² I’ve become a little more comfortable with looking more deeply into things, but you have to remain diligent. For the most part what I do is update

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² Participating in Arrernte men’s ceremonial life.
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the early work ... What I have done is change the Spencer and Gillen Arrernte into today’s Arrernte for place names or for people’s names. By doing this, if a similar word pops up again in the future I can identify the markers and will know what it says. It helps with pronunciation and also extracting a meaning from what was written down. You can then find the different components of the word that make up the place name. They’re really interesting processes, so not only do you have a map but then you have a story that could be used to discuss with those knowledgeable elders later.

Spencer and Gillen were really inconsistent in their spelling. I have learnt Arrernte from the Henderson and Dobson orthography and, unlike Spencer and Gillen, I have found that it is really consistent and it’s actually not that hard to learn. This orthography has been around for a long time too and elders were part of the process in developing it. But I also want to follow the rules that have been developed in this orthography. I’m not sort of advocating for linguistics or this really strict linguistic process, but I think in this day and age we need a spelling process, and we have one, and we should just stick with it. It’s bizarre to look around town and see all these bastardised attempts at using Arrernte language on street signs, buildings, or workplaces. Henderson and Dobson’s Arrernte was developed for people like me who are English speakers and are able to transfer our knowledge of English into utilising Arrernte, learning Arrernte, so that’s why it’s there. Arrernte has very distinct sounds, and they’re tongue-twisting and tiring. You can’t learn those sounds from Spencer and Gillen’s orthography, you can’t learn it from a phonetic orthography. Why use an inaccurate phonetic spelling for people (tourists and whitefellas) that have no interest in learning our language anyway? A language doesn’t exist so it’s easier for other people to say it who don’t have the interest in actually learning it. When, really, you look at language representations throughout the world: they’re symbolised differently for a reason, and often they’re hard. Just put up our orthography and people can learn it. Once you actually learn that it’s totally different, that’s how you start to look at the world through the eyes of Arrernte people. That’s the whole idea of learning another language.

Understanding Spencer and Gillen’s writing of Arrernte is almost impossible unless you have some knowledge of Arrernte and can speak it a bit. Using their work is kind of like a process of extracting or decoding. And you also have to work with linguists, like Jenny Green, David Moore, Myfany Turpin and Gavan Breen, who have all helped me out in the past. Once you get a few of Spencer and Gillen’s words identified you start to recognise them in the new orthography. You can then transfer this to the other Arrernte words they have written down. You will see something they’ve written, and then be like, “Oh I know what they’re saying here!” And when you actually discover a word, or when you unlock one of their words, it’s a real celebration. It is significant because within what is written can be a lot of secrets that reveal themselves. I use their books and their unpublished notes, which are on the Spencer and Gillen website, to work things out. When I do, it’s like, “Ah, that’s what that means, wow!”

It’s changed my mind in the way I look at things. When I drive around out bush now, as opposed to what I would have done before I started learning about Arrernte language or about apmere, ‘country’, I don’t think, “Oh, that’s a nice hill” or “This is good country,” I think, “I know that that’s this story” and “I know that that’s that place name.” It’s a different lens that
you look through. You’re looking at country with a new set of eyes. It’s really hard to explain but it kind of boggles your mind a little bit. You want to make sure that’s looked after, so you’re nurturing that to carry on that Altyerre ‘Dreaming’. It’s huge, it’s multilayered.

**JG:** Given these differences, is it hard to work with Strehlow’s orthography when you are conducting research? Do you also have to go through a process of translating or decoding his Arrernte to try to make sense of what he’s written?

**SA:** Initially it was hard, but then you work out his rules around his orthography, you can work it out. Because of my grounding in the contemporary orthography you can then make those distinctions between the two orthographies. But there are challenges with the Strehlow Collection, the Strehlow archive as a whole. For example, when he writes down an hour-long Arrernte story from a particular site and it fills 10 or 15 pages in his orthography, that’s when it gets tricky. I found that with how he recorded site names you can generally work them out, but with everyday language and terms and even the ‘old Arrernte’, that more ‘pure Arrernte’, that’s when it gets tricky. Or you come across words and you can sound them out but there’s always this wondering, I guess. You wonder, “Am I saying this word properly?”, “Can I find that equivalent in the contemporary Arrernte dictionary?”, “What does it mean?” You really need to work closely with the old speakers. You really need to work closely with them to work out what was being recorded.

**JG:** I imagine it would be hard for anyone to begin unlocking the potential of these archives, and it must be doubly hard for people located in remote areas and who might not have significant English literacy skills. What do you think are some of the biggest obstacles for Arrernte people wanting to access archives?

**SA:** Yes, absolutely, there’s thousands of challenges. I was, however, lucky to have a good base of literacy and numeracy, that was one skill that allowed me to float through archives with ease because I could understand the English (that’s what most of our archives are primarily written in, but also German) and I used my knowledge of Arrernte to work with the language material. I am very thankful that I have those literacy and language skills. As Joel says, there are multiple orthographies for Arrernte, and this can make things challenging at times. TGH Strehlow, for example, created his own orthography and it’s significantly different to our contemporary orthography, which was created by fluent Arrernte speakers with the help of linguists. That’s the orthography that I grew up with, I learnt to read Arrernte in that orthography and I can write a little bit in Arrernte. Although I can read and understand Strehlow’s Arrernte, I am often having to reimagine it in the new orthography, so that I can get the sounds right. If you don’t do that, in some cases, you’d be lost as to what a word might be.

**JL:** I really want to use these archives so that I can develop new resources that are useable for today’s generation. I’ve been able to learn from these archives, but they’re very hard to decipher. To actually be able to go in to them you need to have that level of intellect where you can extract this information, and for a lot of our mob if you can’t read and write, how are you going to benefit from these archives? You can’t go deeper. I’ve benefitted being educated. It’s like me and Shaun can do that, we’re educated. Now, I guess, what I’ve learnt through the
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process is, there’s so much work I have to do, I kind of feel responsible, in a way, to take what I have learnt through my research and put it in a format for more people to access.

I think, in general, the archive is very difficult for people to access and understand anyway, so I think even if people are using it there are issues of interpretation. I remember a time where you could go and get your genealogy from the Strehlow Research Centre, it was easy to access and all that, but that doesn’t happen anymore because people don’t understand how to interpret them properly. Unfortunately, in our community, people have lost knowledge of *anpernirrentye*, that kinship system. So, for example, you might see an ancestor name on a family tree or your grandfather on there and it’ll say their conception site, but most people don’t understand what a conception site means anymore. They’ll say, “What’s a conception site?” I’ve had a lot of people say this to me and I’ve had to explain it, and Shaun and I have discussed it; Shaun explained it to me really early on. So, I can see how genealogies, as one example, can be misused or misinterpreted. I think that some archival resources need keys or legends to help people understand them. They need to be decoded by someone who can do that work. I am happy to do that work so that our community can benefit from it.

**JG:** Have you ever had problems accessing archives or archival material?

**JL:** I’ve had plenty [laughs]. I’m not the only Arrernte person that’s faced this – it is difficult. I still struggle today with it. How can I access this information? What will they [museum staff] think when I go to this museum? Will they allow me to look at this stuff? That’s been the hardest thing for me, actually. I don’t have an anthropology degree, I’m not a linguist, I’m just a person who has Arrernte heritage and I am interested. I don’t fall into the sphere of being a museum employee, or a trainee, or someone that writes about this stuff. I have definitely found it hard to access archives at the Central Land Council. They have a closed-door policy. The Strehlow Collection has enormous potential but it is not easily accessed because it is under-resourced. Archives have a lot of information – not all of this stuff is sacred or even sensitive, but unfortunately processes for access have found themselves at a standstill. For example, I knew that my nanna recorded her *Untyeyampe ayeeye* ‘corkwood story’ with an anthropologist at the land council before she passed on. I think it was a written document, like maybe a transcribed document. But I have been denied access to it many times. The problem also is that this research work is always underfunded and there are such limited opportunities for Aboriginal researchers to actually get in and do this work that would have such a huge benefit to the community and people’s wellbeing.

It’s sometimes been hurtful, too, you know, because my research has never been about learning anything that’s not appropriate or that I’m not qualified to learn – given the opportunity my nan would say, “Yes, give that to Joel.” She’d be really happy that I’m interested in all this sort of stuff. But with some archives you feel like you never get the full story. People don’t know how to deal with you and I think I have had a lot of suspicion along the way, like they are suspicious. “What’s this guy’s intentions?”, “Who’s this guy, he just wants to learn everything and what’s he going to use this knowledge for?”

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3 The primary representative body for Aboriginal people in the southern half of the Northern Territory of Australia.
JG: Do you think there is a certain kind of wariness of Aboriginal people using archives because they might be taking ‘shortcuts’ or not engaging with oral histories or the memories of older people as a priority? This is certainly seen as being a more ‘authentically’ Indigenous mode of discovery. Do you think collecting institutions expect you to rely more on orality than the archive?

JL: It could be. I mean I have been directed to ‘go and speak to this person or that person’, and I have done that. But mostly that’s a palm-off. It is frustrating because there are important cultural leaders around but our systems of learning have had to change a bit. We no longer spend every day out in the bush learning and practising that knowledge, or showing our worth like in times past. Now we have to balance our religion with a lot of other day-to-day challenges in this modern world. Unfortunately, knowledge is actually in a vulnerable state where we really need to work to protect it for future generations. That’s what I want to do. I think we need to be working as hard as we can to make sure that we have everything in order, so that our future generations still have our religion, culture, and language. I’ve wanted to learn for myself because it’s been a healing process, but then it’s morphed into: okay, I see a lot of chaos in our communities, and I know what these archival collections have done for me, so I want to help it have that impact on other people’s lives. I think a lot of the social issues we see are a direct result of people losing their cultural and linguistic identity.

It is difficult, it is hard. I don’t know whether these institutions have dealt with this before or whether they’ve actually had an Arrernte person that’s going to come in and access the records – I guess it is kind of new. I think having those processes in place, it’s a professional relationship, and the institution is benefitting from the work that we will do, so being able to feed that back in to the archive. It was easy at the Melbourne Museum because the curator knew the work I was doing with Spencer and Gillen. But I think if it was someone strange coming off the street, maybe they wouldn’t have been given the same treatment. We need people managing and working with this material who know the people – the families – and understand what the cultural sensitivities are. I think museums and other institutions get caught up in looking at this stuff as a historic collection. It’s not, this collection is our religion, this is for us today. Look at the bible, for example; imagine if that had all these restrictions on access to their basic interpretations and rules for life? If that had been the case, that religion would have been finished long ago. Our community can benefit from the non-sacred stuff and, on the other hand, akngerrapate ‘senior people’ and qualified cultural people are the custodians of secret/sacred materials. We need to enrich it, like I said, to the point that we’re totally satisfied and that the next generation inherits this house that is in order.

SA: What I really want to say about this kind of work, using archive material in a positive way, is that this stuff can change lives. Indigenous archives can change people’s lives. We’ve seen a couple of examples of it here where a particular family group, a young family group that lacked strong leadership and strong cultural knowledge for their particular estate – we have been approached by them to conduct research into the Strehlow Collection. After six months of research, full-on intimate research, they found that their great-grandfather had worked with Strehlow in the 1930s. The way I see it is that their great-grandfather had left them, his descendants, 27 artefacts, an hour-long recording of ceremonial songs, multiple
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maps documenting significant sites in their country, genealogies, and this whole collection of archival documentation around their heritage. This was a group of young men who came into the building with their heads down and they were searching for cultural knowledge for their land. This process of researching, going through the archive with a fine-tooth comb, but knowing what we’re actually looking for, and then finding all this material that they never grew up learning.

We then did a couple of field trips with an important elder, Alan Drover, who holds a lot of that deep memory for country, their country. We visited six or seven really significant sites; we took copies of archival material out of the building – photographs, some recordings, film footage, and maps – out into the field, got it dirty with red dust, used it in a way that empowered people, empowered their family. I see these men now here in the community, a couple of them are just changed men. That’s no exaggeration. Those materials and that process of discovery changed the trajectory of their lives basically.

**JG:** How do you blend archival knowledge with the knowledge of senior men, Shaun? Have you taken Strehlow’s Arrernte language text and taken it to older people to try and work through it?

**SA:** We’ve done that with small parts of the collection. An example is Strehlow’s 1935 field diary, where he spent three months doing fieldwork in the Eastern Arrernte region. I went through a process of reading that diary out, word for word, to John Cavanagh, a senior East Arrernte man, with the objective of basically passing this information on to him. But it quickly evolved into something more interactive, where we were trying to articulate field maps that Strehlow had created which were primarily written in Arrernte, and certain paragraphs where he’d write fully in Arrernte. That process of going through approximately 150 individual pages took four to five months of reading word for word. But the thing that stood out to me the most was just how much of this language and cultural knowledge was still alive – how much of the Arrernte language was known to John Cavanagh. He was actually enriching Strehlow’s archive by going through that process. For example, there were sentences, old Arrernte phrases, that these old men were using which couldn’t have been interpreted or translated by anybody else but those old Arrernte speakers because much of it hadn’t been documented in the dictionaries. By going through that process, we learnt a lot about previously unknown parts of that field diary. My goal is to do that for all of the 44 field diaries Strehlow wrote because people deserve the right to have this record, this entire archive, shared with them.

**JG:** Arrernte people are lucky in that this fascinating material exists, and much of it was written in Arrernte. Groups elsewhere in Australia are not as fortunate. The work required to return material in a format that is digestible, especially when it is text that requires translation and interpretation, must be enormous.

**SA:** That’s right. And that was only one field diary and it took about four or five months. The field diaries are very different in nature to what Strehlow calls his ‘Myth Books’. While the field diaries are, I’d say – just a rough estimation – 90 per cent English and 10 per cent Arrernte, the Myth Books are primarily written in Arrernte; 90–95 per cent is written in Arrernte and 5 per cent in English. These books have long transcriptions of song texts and ancestral stories,
and in some cases translations, which makes our job a little bit easier. But the key thing is that these books correlate to the sound recordings. You have the audio record of the myth, and audio recordings also contain the *akngerrapate* ‘senior men’ speaking to Strehlow, telling him the story of a particular site, and that story can go for, like – in some cases those old men are explaining in fine detail the stories of these Arrernte sites – some of them can go for an hour. And then they will go straight into the song verses.

The thing with those sound recordings is that because the *akngerrapate* were speaking in a pure Arrernte, if we don’t do work with these sound recordings to translate what these old men are saying, potentially in another 10 or 15–20 years down the track, nobody is going to know what these old men are saying, because the Arrernte that they’re using is very, very different to the contemporary Arrernte that is being used. So, if nothing is done in this 10 to 15–year window, we run the risk of potentially not knowing large chunks of what this archive holds. It is urgent that we try to find some sort of funding, whether we have a dedicated person or persons working with the old speakers of Arrernte, and all the other languages of Central Australia, to just purely focus their time and energy into translating all this audio recording.

**JG:** Do you work on returning recordings of Arrernte song?

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*Figure 2. Shaun Angeles playing back song recordings from a laptop computer during a consultation session with senior men (photo: Ben Deacon)*
SA: Yes, song is absolutely critical in knowing what our *apmere* ‘land’ is all about. But where song is not well understood, where particular songs are not known anymore, we need translations of their meaning. That is why getting translations of what these men told Strehlow, men telling their stories of the landscape, is so important. What I have found is that there’s only a few old men – and I say old men because that’s who I work with primarily, as the songs recorded by Strehlow were sung by men only – who can retell these stories with the amount of intimate knowledge that is contained in these song recordings. These old men talked for over an hour about a particular site and the stories associated with it. Today, however, it seems that men aged in the 40 to 45 (maybe even the 50-year-old) age bracket, in some pockets of Arrernte country, that level of information just isn’t there.

JG: In your experience, how do you think Arrernte men generally feel about using returned song recordings to learn songs? Is this a growing trend?

SA: People love it – that’s what people want, in my experience. The song recordings, the sound recordings of the stories and the verses associated with that site, people ask for those more than what they do for other assets in the collection. People are also making song recordings of their own. What I’m seeing is that people are holding these recordings to themselves, which I think is totally up to them. If they’re recording something from their grandfather or their father or their uncles, it’s their property, it’s their intellectual property; they have the right to do what they want with it. There’s been a couple of occasions where men have brought in old tapes that record their grandfathers in the ‘80s and the ’90s and they’re wanting to use this facility here to deposit them and, in some cases, digitise them. I think they do that because there is a sense of security in doing that. Also, there is a bit of status that goes along with it. It must be ‘important’ if it is in a museum or archive. The Strehlow Centre is an important institution, people know about it, they know what we do; we’ve got our bit of cultural heritage, we’ve got our song, we’ve got our ceremony or whatever, film, let’s store it here. But I think the main factor is the security that these kinds of places offer people. I mean, that’s only happened a few times in my six years here; I don’t know if it’s happening much in other institutions around the country.

We need to think about how do we treat a USB or a hard drive or a laptop if it holds sacred material? Does that object then become sacred because of its contents? And what are some of the security measures that we should place around these particular objects? I know like with me I’ve done exactly that: I’ve recorded some of my grandfathers singing songs. Personally, I treat that hard drive like it’s a sacred object. I’ve gone out and bought my own safe and bolted it to the ground. I don’t know if it’s progress, if you can call it progression? But, it’s definitely a type of responsibility that people are now taking on. Now that we’re totally embedded in this new world – I mean we’re never going to go back walking the country naked – we need to take measures to secure sacred material.

JG: In this environment of ubiquitous digital technology, sedentary living, and so on, is it desirable for people to access their cultural heritage via online tools? Trying to decode this material is an intellectual and research-intensive exercise but I would have thought that ‘living archives’ like those relating to Arrernte language need to be examined within social context and under advice from knowledgeable people.
JL: Absolutely. That was where I found myself; I wanted to learn a lot and I wanted to use these materials and that, but there’s no point in just learning it yourself or trying to gain knowledge yourself and not actually utilising it within that social cultural context. What I have found is that a lot of the stuff I’m learning, some old people will remember these things and we’ll discuss certain points. Discussions come up and they’re like “oh yeah,” or I might mention someone and they’re like, “Oh I remember that old man,” or “I thought that was that Dreaming, that place, but a lot of people have forgotten that one.” People reconnect with that stuff. It’s not just a personal, intellectual process, like going to university and studying something, it has to be open to our community. But a lot of people haven’t had the opportunity to grow up knowing their culture and language – that’s not the experience for a lot of our mob, a lot of them are stolen generation people, or they have grown up under assimilation policies and haven’t had the access to that learning. I’d like to see basic learning materials they can access to get them up to speed so they can help maintain our language and culture.

Before I moved back to Alice and found out I could start learning I was like, “I’m going to start doing it!” It took a few years, but I made sure that I learnt as much as I could from these resources so I wasn’t coming back real fresh and green. I knew I’d have to go and talk to old people, my relations, and I didn’t want to be too ‘green’ for them.

JG: Can you think of any recommendation for getting archival records back to people in Central Australia? What advice could you give to researchers and institutions about what’s the best way of giving their documentation or recordings back to Arrernte people?

SA: We wonder about this at the Strehlow Research Centre as well. I guess the first step is to identify the correct *apmere-kartweye* ‘owners’ and *kwertengerle* ‘managers’. That’s the first step, you really need to identify the right people, and this takes time. And then there needs to be extensive consultations around all this stuff because it can be highly significant material. And I guess that’s the sort of work that we do on a daily basis here. Then there’s the issues around digital repatriation of material, it has a lot of issues around it. Originally all this information was stored in people’s brains, in their hearts, in their whole bodies, and their whole lives revolved around song, ceremony, place, story. Because of a whole lot of historical factors, there’s been a lot of knowledge that has now been lost and we now use these sorts of vehicles of transmission, like USBs and hard drives, all this kind of new technology. One of my biggest concerns around digital repatriation is losing control of the content. We’re potentially facing a situation where if we continue to repatriate footage and audio digitally, we could be in a situation in 10 to 20 years’ time where there’s thousands of copies out there.

People are loading stuff up to the cloud and on to their phones. Well, people lose phones all the time! So how do we work with that potentiality, how do we work with the issues, the dangers around that? Potentially history could repeat itself again, where you have this piece of technology that’s holding important material and then you lose it again.

JL: There is that sense of urgency, and there are a lot of people in our community that want to learn this stuff. We need Arrernte researchers working with these materials and these opportunities need to exist. Opportunities to engage and work with our *akngerrapate mape* ‘all the elders’ need to be made, too.
We need to develop everyday open knowledges into basic digital mediums so everyone can learn from them now. Our people who don’t speak need real opportunities and pathways to learn Arrernte language and they need to see that dual place naming exists within our community, and it’s done in the Eastern/Central Arrernte orthography. So far, digital media, it’s an untapped opportunity. But we’re seeing it being used to support language revitalisation in other parts of the country. I’ve thought many times about a lot of my research, “Do I create a website and just publish my own regurgitated material?” I am working on projects that I will publish, that will be publishable, so at some stage that will happen.

The sacred material in these archives should not ever be for public viewing and, throughout publications over the years, things have been published that should never be viewed by anyone today. That belongs to that environment, that sacred area. With regard to non-sacred material, it’s an urgent thing to actually go through what is out there so that then we can get that information and say, “Look this is what we as an organisation are going to publish or make available for people to learn from.” At the end of the day, the old people [aka informants] who told the early researchers this stuff are often listed, and this just needs to be communicated so people today understand where this knowledge comes from. Republishing could exist with the oversight of senior people. It is impossible to please everyone in this space, but we’ve got to do this work and it takes a bit of courage. A lot of people will be very happy to learn more about their country. Archives and museums need to realise that more and more Aboriginal people will be wanting to access this stuff as time goes on.

**JG:** There are quite serious conditions around who can access what, so when something is deposited in an archival collection, what sort of information should go with it? How could we all improve the accessibility of archival collections?

**SA:** As much information as possible! You have to be thorough. We need information on exactly who the people were, including their skin names, their *arrenge* ‘father’s father’s’ country, who they were *kwertengerle* for. For example, with songs, we need to know the singers’ names, their skin names, their countries, what the song is about, what country it belongs to, what *anyenhenge* (father/son clan group) is associated with that song. When people in the film industry say like, when you’re taking footage of something, ‘shoot the shit out of it,’ well I think you have to ‘record the shit out of it’. Record absolutely everything that you can. Because contemporary-day Arrernte people are faced with this legacy issue of going through archives where there’s hardly any prominent information whatsoever, and we’re in a situation now where we could potentially be facing thousands and thousands of objects, as well as many song recordings, that we don’t know where they belong. This is all because of the lack of documentation around recordings or collecting. We deal with this every day, all the time, and if we can’t relate an item to a person, family group, or country, it makes returning material very hard. This poses big questions for us around governance, around who cares for an object? How do we care for it? Where does it go?

What people have to understand is that Arrernte cultural knowledge is a really localised knowledge, even to the point where it’s an estate-based knowledge set. I mean, you could go further and further and further down on the ground with it. It’s just the nature of the culture and the *akngerrapate* ‘senior’ ancestors’ knowledge, it’s just the nature of it. People working
with this material need to understand this. Collections lacking important cultural information don’t do the community any favours. Institutions and researchers need to reflect back on themselves and have a look at their own internal requirements, processes and systems.

In the end, I’d love to see every community in Central Australia have their own repository of their own cultural heritage, because that’s where it belongs, it belongs with the people. And the people can make the most use out of their own cultural heritage, obviously. Look, I don’t know, that’s a big question. I definitely think that we should be doing all that we can to empower local communities. We need more access, I mean that’s what we try to provide as best we can here at the Strehlow Centre, so I understand that there are a lot of issues around doing that as well. Ideally, I would love to see archives with their custodians, with the families that are responsible for that particular song, documentation, or whatever. That’s what we want, in an idealistic world that’s what we want. I think it is happening, but it’s happening slowly.

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