

# Myths, sagas, and tales of the Aranda\*

*Carl Strehlow*<sup>†</sup>

TRANSLATED BY *Christian Romuss*<sup>‡</sup>

## Altjira

According to the traditions of the ancients there is a highest good (*mara*) being, Altjira. This being is eternal (*ngambakala*)<sup>1</sup> and is represented as a large strong man red of skin, whose long fair hair (*gola*) falls down over his shoulders. Altjira has emu's feet (*ilia* = emu, *inka* = legs, feet) and is therefore called Altjira Iliinka. He is painted with a white stripe on his forehead (*tjilara*), a necklace (*matara*) and an armband (*gultja*), he also wears a belt (*tjipa*) made out of hair, as well

---

\* This extract is from Carl Strehlow's *Mythen, Sagen und Märchen des Aranda-Stammes in Zentral-Australien*, the first part of the seven-volume *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* (Frankfurt: Joseph Brauer & Co, 1907-20). This work is in the public domain in the original German. Two English translations of the complete work are known to exist, but these either have not been published or are not readily available. For this translation, Strehlow's spelling of Aboriginal (Aranda and Loritja) words has been preserved, and these have been italicised unless the translator has understood them to be proper nouns. Except where indicated, endnotes are Strehlow's from the source text. All instances of 'McDonnell Ranges' have been corrected to 'MacDonnell Ranges'.

† Carl Friedrich Theodor Strehlow (1871-1922) was a German-Australian linguist, anthropologist, and Lutheran missionary. In October 1894, he became superintendent of the Finke River Mission at Hermannsburg in the Northern Territory, at that time under the administration of South Australia. He remained in this position until his death.

‡ Christian Romuss is a Brisbane-based translator. He is editor of *Synkrētic*.

## *Myths, sagas, and tales of the Aranda*

as a *worrabakana* [loin cloth]. He has many wives, called *ineera* [the beautiful ones], who have dog's feet (*kenulja-inka*) and, like Altjira himself, are red of skin. He has many sons and daughters, of which the former have emu's feet, the latter dog's feet. He is surrounded by beautiful young men and girls.

His abode is the sky (*alkira*), which has existed since eternity (*ngambakala*); this sky the natives imagine as a continent. The milky way is a great river (called *larra*, also *ulbaia* = creek), with high trees and inexhaustible springs of fresh water; here there are fine-tasting berries and fruits in abundance; swarms of birds enliven the great realm of Altjira, while many animals, such as kangaroos (*āra*), wild cats (*tjilpa*), and the like roam his immense hunting grounds. While Altjira himself hunts the game that comes to quench its thirst at the springs, the wives of Altjira gather *latjia* [edible roots with turnip-like leaves], *jelka<sup>2</sup>* and other fruits which grow there in excess in every season of the year. The stars (with the exception of some constellations which are considered totem-gods risen to the sky) are the campfires of Altjira.

Altjira is the good god of the Aranda, who is known not only to the men but also to the women. His dominion, however, extends only over the sky; he neither created men nor do their lives concern him. *Tjurunga<sup>3</sup>*-woods or -stones of Altjira do not exist. The Aranda neither fear Altjira nor do they love him; their only fear is that one day the sky might collapse and kill them all. The sky rests on pillars or, as the Aranda say, on stone legs.

Note: A linguistic derivation of the word *Altjira* has not yet been found; the natives now connect with it the concept of not-having-become; asked about the meaning, they assured me repeatedly that *Altjira* denotes one who has no beginning, who is not produced by another (*erina itja arbmanakala* = him no-one has created). When Spencer and Gillen (*Northern Tribes of Central Australia*) assert: 'the word *alcheri* means dream', this assertion is not accurate. Dreaming is *altjirerama*, derived from *altjira* [God] and *rama* [to see], therefore: 'to see God'. Likewise in the Loritja language to dream = *tukura nangani*, composed out of *tukura* = God and *nangani* = to see. I will show later that, in this regard, the terms *altjira* and *tukura* are not to be taken as referring to the highest God of heaven but only a totem-god which the native believes he sees in his dreams. Dream in the

## *Synkrētic*

Aranda language is not *alcheri*, but rather *altjirerinja*, yet this word is seldom used, usually the black man says: *ta altjireraka* = it dreamed to me. The word *alcheringa*, which according to Spencer and Gillen is supposed to mean ‘dreamtime’, is obviously a corruption of *altjirerinja*. Of a ‘dreamtime’ as a temporal period, by the way, the native knows nothing; what is meant is the time in which the *Aldjiranga mitjina* wandered the earth.

## The Primordial Age

The earth (*āla*), which is likewise eternal (*ngambakala*), was in the beginning covered by the sea (*laia*). Out of this immense mass of water protruded various mountains on which lived individual beings endowed with divine powers, *altjirangamitjina* [the eternal uncreated]; these same beings are also labelled *inkara* [the immortal ones]. In the northern MacDonnell Ranges, for example, there rose up above the surface of the great water a high mountain called *Torulba*<sup>4</sup>, and on this mountain two kangaroo (*aranga*)<sup>5</sup>-men led their lives. Also in the vicinity of the Finke Gorge, at the place where the Finke River breaks through the MacDonnell Ranges, stood a high cliff with the name *Erálera* [the resolute], on the inside of which there was a great cave in which duck (*wonkara*)-men lived. Since they found on the water-covered earth no nourishment, these *wonkara*-men flew time and again up to the sky in order to hunt in the realm of *Altjira* and returned laden with quarry to *Erálera*.

On the side of this mountain (*patta itéela*)<sup>6</sup> there were many unevolved men, called *rella manerinja*<sup>7</sup> because their limbs were fused. Their eyes and ears were closed (*manta*), in place of the mouth there was a small round aperture, their fingers as well as their toes were fused (*manerinja*), their hands clenched in fists had fused to their chests (*turba* or *innopúta*)<sup>8</sup> and their legs were drawn up against their bodies. Furthermore, these helpless beings in human form were fused to each other, for which reason they are also designated *rella intarinja* (fused men). These *rella manerinja* who lived on the side of the mountain were divided in four classes: *Purula*, *Kamara*, *Ngala* and *Mbitjana*, which—because they lived on dry land—were called *alarinja*<sup>9</sup> [land-dwellers]. Other unevolved men, however, lived in