

## RE-VISITING PHYLLIS KABERRY'S KIMBERLEY ETHNOGRAPHY

At the meeting of 6 May 1998, Dr Sandy Toussaint, Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Western Australia, provided an insight into the life and work of anthropologist Phyllis Kaberry, who was the first female anthropologist to work in Aboriginal Australia. Dr Toussaint, who has worked closely with Aboriginal women and men in the Kimberley since 1981 (and before that time with Aboriginal people in southern Australia), has a long-standing interest in Phyllis Kaberry's life and work.

Phyllis Kaberry was born in 1910 of English parents and migrated to Australia when quite young. She attended Sydney University, gaining Bachelor and Masters Degrees, with a Distinction in anthropology. Kaberry was encouraged by A. P. Elkin—an early figure in Australian anthropology and history—to work in the Kimberley. Elkin had noted that there was very little understood by outsiders about Aboriginal women and that only half the Aboriginal story was being told. Kaberry received a research grant from Sydney University and first undertook field work in the Kimberley in 1934, having gained the necessary permits from the Native Welfare Department (as it was then known). She also received support from several Kimberley pastoralists, particularly the Durack family, and became lifelong friends with Mary and Elizabeth Durack. Kaberry spent almost two years in the Kimberley travelling from the west to east. She spent most of her time around Moola Bulla near Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Forrest River, Turkey Creek, and some of the Dampier Land communities. She travelled extensively with Aboriginal people, walking or riding a mule, was allocated the sub-section or skin group of 'Nadjeri', and took her social incorporation and obligations very seriously. Kaberry was interested in languages and seemed to quickly learn the different languages encountered on her travels. When talking with Aboriginal people who knew Kaberry, Dr Toussaint found that she is remembered with respect and affection. She has recorded a number of stories about Kaberry's travels with Aboriginal people.

In 1936 Kaberry returned to London and completed her PhD in anthropology at the University of London. Her book *Aboriginal Women Sacred and Profane* was published by Routledge and Son in 1939. She returned briefly to Australia in the 1940s but then worked in Papua New Guinea, where study with women had also been neglected, for just over a year. In 1945 she commenced field research among the Nsaw in the Bamenda, Cameroons, West Africa. She is best known for her work amongst the Nsaw which continued for 18 years until 1963. She then became a lecturer and reader of anthropology at University College London, where she spent the rest of her days, apart from the occasional field trip to West Africa. Although she did not return to the Kimberley, Kaberry sometimes wrote to friends about her time there. Kaberry did not marry or have any children, and at one stage wrote to the Durack sisters saying that she was not looking forward to retirement. She died

suddenly in 1977 aged 67. At her memorial service Kaberry's death was "cried" by the Nsaw people and a research centre in the Cameroons has been named after her.

Many things have changed markedly in anthropology since Kaberry's time. Information about women was often superficial in the 1930s. Previously a great deal of work had been interpreted by the misguided belief that women were much less important than men. Kaberry's work was from the vantage point of Aboriginal women but she did not exclude Aboriginal men. Kaberry was particularly interested in Aboriginal women's religious life, and contested the generally held view at that time that sacredness belonged to men only. Kaberry concluded that Aboriginal women were both sacred and profane. Women, just like men, had certain social, psychological, emotional, and physical needs that religion met. She examined the male initiation rites, which were often treated as being very central to Aboriginal life and the pivot on which Aboriginal culture revolved, and from which it was thought that women were excluded. Kaberry demonstrated that women were involved in certain aspects of male initiation, performing rituals and song cycles to ensure that the initiation was effective. Kaberry also demonstrated that women had many rituals, some of which excluded men. There were fertility practices, not only with respect to having children but also for food resources, to ensure that survival was maintained. Land-based rituals were performed to ensure that the land was sustained, and also in connection with land tenure, and Kaberry found that women could inherit land in their own right. There were food taboos, such as during lactation, or after a person's death. Women also participated in the trading of material (eg food) and non-material (eg song cycles, knowledge) resources. They were also vital actors in solving disputes in the community. Religion was involved in the everyday activities of both men and women. The cyclical nature of Aboriginal religion also involved a complementary cyclical relationship between men and women. Kaberry argued that there was both shared and gender-specific activity for both men and women. It is evident that Kaberry brought a very human dimension to her work, for example when examining kinship relationships.

Kaberry's ethnography did not receive the attention that it deserved when it was first published, which could perhaps be explained by the gender blindness of that time, rather than the quality of her work, which was very detailed. In the book she also criticises a number of people for assuming that religion was not all-embracing, and this provoked a degree of debate following the book's publication. However it has become an increasingly important book and has been used, for example, by archaeologists examining how resources were used, and in Kimberley Native Title claims. Kaberry's work, not just in the Kimberley, contributed to intellectual and practical shifts in anthropology, especially in understandings about women and gender.

Kaberry was also very interested in literature and poetry and was an aspiring poet. She wrote a number of poems dedicated to her work in the Kimberley, and in concluding her talk Dr Toussaint quoted an extract from one titled "North Kimberley" which was written in 1936.

Dr Sandy Toussaint's book, *Different Voices: Re-Visioning Phyllis Kaberry's Australian Anthropology*, is to be published by Melbourne University Press in December.

*Bev Phillips*