

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

PHYLLIS KABERRY, *Aboriginal woman: Sacred and Profane*, Routledge Classic Ethnographies, Routledge, 2004, 294.p.

Phyllis Kaberry is not a standard entry in the “Who’s Who of Anthropology.” In fact, few modern scholars think of making reference to her work in Australia or the contribution she made to feminist studies. It was by chance that I was introduced to her work when I spent a sabbatical in Australia and my colleagues at McQuarie University suggested I might benefit from her work.

Between 1934 and 1936, Phyllis Kaberry entered the field in the Kimberley area of north east Australia and by 1939 she produced her dissertation—*The Position of Women in an Australian Aboriginal Society*. Kaberry’s research was a direct challenge to anthropology’s singular focus on one gender and it stands as a seminal piece of field research that challenged the earlier work of some major anthropological figures, e.g., Warner, Malinowski. She focused on Aboriginal women and addressed issues that had previously thought to be already resolved. Prior to her research, the only woman to address the role of Aboriginal women in society was Ursula McConnel (1935), although George Roheim (1933) has carried out some preliminary research that dealt with the role of women in Western Australia.

Kaberry argued that anthropologists had neglected an important sector of Aboriginal society and that previous characterizations of women misrepresented or failed to appreciate the contribution Aboriginal women made to their communities. Moreover, she opined that the nature of women’s relationships with other women and men also were misunderstood. But perhaps of most significance was her concern over the fact that anthropologists had, in much of their research of the day, silenced the voices of Aboriginal women. Since Kaberry’s time, others such as Catherine Berndt (1950) and more recently Diane Bell (1983), have confirmed the overall thesis of Kaberry and validated her seminal work. In short, Kaberry “gendered” her field research and explored issues and topics that previously had not been considered.

Kaberry’s field research is carefully crafted and she provides extensive information on a number of issues related to the question of “sacred or profane.” Her research describes the daily and cosmological life of Aboriginal women, the ceremonies and the power they held (and

sometimes exerted) and the contribution they made to their community in both sacred and profane ways. Reading through the ethnography, one is able to obtain a thorough understanding and appreciation of the structure of the community and the culture and the sense of change that was taking place in various Aboriginal communities. Her detailed interpretations and visual images of Aboriginal life allow the reader today to better understand the role women played well over a half century ago. Kaberry's ethnography critiqued earlier anthropological works on Australian Aboriginals and argued that women, just like men, were involved in conflict resolution and ceremonies surrounding death and grieving as well as knowledgeable about and responsible for Dreaming. Attesting to the value of her work is the fact that it has been utilized in several Kimberley native title claims (Post Mabo), especially the Mirriuwung and Ngurrura claims.

Kaberry challenged the binary opposition about gender and religion that had been held by her mentors as she entered the field. Her work shows that women, like men, had affiliations to land and water; they had a rich ceremonial life and they held positions of power and authority within their community. Her meticulous and rigorous field notes, comprised of maps, genealogies and language translations, recorded the Aboriginal way of life in a manner that had not previously been done. This classic ethnography provides a "gold standard" for current researchers heading into the field and reveals the importance of her contribution to anthropology.

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