

ABORIGINAL  
WOMAN  
SACRED AND  
PROFANE

PHYLLIS M. KABERRY

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# ABORIGINAL WOMAN

## Sacred and profane

Providing remarkable insights into Australian Aboriginal society through the vantage point of women, *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane* illustrates the importance of the study of gender in anthropology. Phyllis Kaberry was the first anthropologist to examine and understand the fullness of Aboriginal women's lives, which had hitherto been classified as restricted and uninvolved with religious practice. She portrayed the Aboriginal woman in a realistic light, as a complex social personality with her own prerogatives, duties, problems, beliefs, rituals and points of view.

In her new preface, Sandy Toussaint looks at how *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane* came to be written, the book's original context and its influence on the study of gender in anthropology.

**Phyllis M. Kaberry** (1910–1977) was educated at the University of Sydney. Her first major fieldwork, conducted in 1935 and 1936 in north-west Australia, formed the basis of *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane*. She was a reader in Social Anthropology at University College London for twenty-six years. She is the author of *Women of the Grassfields* (also available from Routledge).

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# ABORIGINAL WOMAN

Sacred and profane

*Phyllis M. Kaberry*



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Two women decorated for a secret corroboree.

To  
BRONISLAW MALINOWSKI

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This book contains photographs of now deceased persons. These images may cause distress to some Australian Aboriginal people.

## PREFACE TO NEW EDITION

Until recently, aboriginal woman has occupied rather an obscure place in Australian anthropology; and in popular imagination, at least, she has too often been lost to view beneath the burdens imposed upon her by her menfolk... It was with the object of making a more specific study of the position of women in an aboriginal community...that I carried out research in North-West Australia, both in 1934 and in 1935 to 1936.

(Phyllis Kaberry 1939:ix)

The 1939 publication of Phyllis Kaberry's *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane* marked a quiet but defining moment in the history of anthropology. That responses to its original publication and until recently were generally subdued or resistant, reflects the gender-blindness and partiality of its time, rather than the quality of its contents.<sup>1</sup>

Adapted by Phyllis Kaberry from her doctoral thesis<sup>2</sup> titled "The Position of Women in an Australian Aboriginal Society", *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane* provided substantive insights into 1930s Australian Aboriginal life via the vantage point of women. While Kaberry noted that she offered "no new theory of culture" (1939: xii), one of her most significant contributions was that she examined the complex interconnections between gender and culture. By pursuing an approach that emphasised women but did not exclude men, a comprehensive recording and analysis of culture was given life. That Kaberry's depiction incorporated data on women's active religious knowledge and authority—some details of which were restricted from men, young people and uninitiated women—enabled her to argue that not only was women's productive role central to daily survival, but women were also key participants in religion, or the *Narungani*, described by Kaberry as 'The Time Long Past'.<sup>3</sup>

The Aboriginal groups with whom Kaberry worked and her Kimberley field locations varied, but most of her material developed from research among members of the Kija (or Kidja, also known as Lunga), and the "Wolmeri...Djaru, Miriwunn, Malngin, Wula, Kunian, Punaba, and Nyigina" language groups.<sup>4</sup> As experiential participant and observer, Kaberry was socially classified into a subsection, or 'skin' group, by Aboriginal people then living at the Moola Bulla Native Settlement in the East Kimberley. She was called "Nadjeri", a name remembered by some Aboriginal people today (Williams 1988; Toussaint 1999, 2002).

Kaberry's evident enthusiasm for her discipline minimised the intellectual, social and political climate in which she lived and worked. Anthropological thought and practice in the 1930s tended to emphasise function rather than process, and to minimise questions related to its own cultural practices. Some of these epistemological influences and behaviours affected Kaberry. On reflection, she may well have paid more attention to the

impact of the State, colonial relations and frontier violence, for instance. Seventy years on in a different time and place, Kaberry may also have treated with greater caution, description of certain aspects of Aboriginal culture.<sup>5</sup>

Kaberry's challenge to anthropology's 1930s gender-partiality, however, had the potential at that time to shape the discipline's trajectory. Her methodology and analysis were progressive with respect to developing an understanding of Aboriginal kinship where loyalty to kin often preceded gender identity, for instance, and her rich description of women's lives, concerns and aspirations was exemplary. That such findings were overshadowed by those of some of her contemporaries, such as Lloyd Warner's *A Black Civilization* (1937), resulted in an absence of attention to the interconnections between gender/culture/religion in a way that has been increasingly explored by recent scholars.<sup>6</sup>

### **Placing *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane* in Context**

In the comparatively short history of Australian anthropology, women have always been present in some form, as in genealogies or with respect to their nurturing or food production role, and in relation to male/female status. With the exception of Phyllis Kaberry, Ursula McConnel (1935) closely followed by Catherine Berndt (1950, 1965), and later Marie Reay (1970), Isobel White (1970) and Jane Goodale (1971), it was mainly men, rather than women, who wrote about Australian Aboriginal cultures.

Roheim (1933) was one of the few men to show an interest in women. Emphasising a Freudian analysis, Roheim argued, on the basis of his 1930s research in Central Australia, that women were excluded from religious activity. His characterisation typified representations that failed to understand or appreciate the fullness of Aboriginal women's lives. The nature of women's relationships with other women and men as kin, and women's broader religious involvements, were also commonly misunderstood or silenced. That women's knowledge and ritual experience was often restricted to a women-only domain, added to partial representations of Aboriginal societies which, over time, became embedded in the ethnographic record.

While Catherine Berndt's 1950 *Women's Changing Ceremonies in Northern Australia* provided valuable observations on betrothal and marriage, it also showed women's engagement with religious ritual, female ownership of particular ceremonies and matrilineal transmission of rights to perform in those ceremonies, and the importance of fertility rites and "love magic". Like Kaberry before her, Berndt did not obscure Aboriginal men and men's relationships to women. She did, however, point out that "the part played by Aboriginal women was not, in the past, accorded sufficient emphasis, being overshadowed (in the eyes of, perhaps, prejudiced male observers) by the more obvious and spectacular role of men" (1950, p. 24). Some years later, Jane Goodale (1971) writing about the Tiwi of Bathurst and Melville Islands, examined the significance of women's ritual as well as women's role in marriage arrangements. Despite finding areas of male-female equivalence in matters such as initiation, Goodale concluded that Tiwi society accorded a priority to the interests of men, especially in a ritual arena.

There have been many other depictions of Australian Aboriginal women's life and women's relationships with men since Kaberry's time. An assemblage of inquiries

generated by feminists and other scholars focused on issues of representation, resulted in a clear need to correct an ethnographic bias which had privileged men's experiences and perspectives (without paying specific and contextual attention to women's).

Diane Bell's research, first published in 1983 with the evocative title *Daughters of the Dreaming*, is sometimes regarded as the most significant work on Aboriginal women and gender after Kaberry. Bell, transparent about being influenced by feminist thought and practice, focused primarily on the ritual life of Kaytej and Warlpiri women on government settlements in Central Australia. From extensive periods of fieldwork, Bell concluded that Aboriginal women, like Aboriginal men, held a "sacred trust" to reinforce and consolidate dreaming associations and affiliations with land and sites.<sup>7</sup>

Later works include Povinelli's (1993) "cultural economy" approach to a study focused mostly on Belyuen women at Cox Peninsula in the Northern Territory, and Victoria Burbank's (1994) research, also located at a coastal community in the Northern Territory, on female aggression.

Throughout the 1990s, in part since the introduction of the 1993 Native Title Act, discussed below, there has been a marked increase in documentation of women's cultural heritage and rights and interests in land and sites (Brock 2001).<sup>8</sup> It is also evident, over half a century since Kaberry's ethnography found public expression, that, *exceptis excipiendis*, ethnographic accounts have more readily acknowledged and embraced the centrality of gender and sexuality in representations and interpretations of cultural life.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Kaberry's original study remains the most comprehensive.

### Phyllis Kaberry

Originally from Yorkshire, England, Phyllis Kaberry's family migrated to Australia via America—where Kaberry was born in 1910—when she was an infant. Kaberry attended school in New South Wales and went on to study and achieve a Master of Arts (with Honours) in Anthropology at Sydney University.

The idea of concentrating on women appears to have been encouraged by A.P. Elkin, then a well-known anthropologist in Australia. Elkin had worked among Kimberley groups in northern Australia in the 1920s. He wrote that prior to Kaberry's fieldwork, there had been "hardly any contribution made to our knowledge on the life of Aboriginal women" (Elkin in Kaberry 1939, p. xix). An exception noted by Elkin was Ursula McConnel's reports on Aboriginal groups in Cape York Peninsula, Queensland.

Phyllis Kaberry was fresh from university and only twenty-four years of age when she commenced her Kimberley research. Despite her youthfulness and lack of field experience, she appears to have combined enthusiasm with a rigorous research approach. Close examination of her original fieldnotes, maps and genealogies reveal that she was meticulous with respect to the recording of ethnographic data, and keenly aware of the inevitability of contradiction and ambiguity in the usually complex and lengthy process of undertaking fieldwork.<sup>10</sup>

After working in the Kimberley between 1934 to 1936, Kaberry's research interests turned to Papua New Guinea. Working among the Abelam, with funding support from an Australian Research Fellowship, she studied social organisation and cultural exchange

(Kaberry 1941).

Kaberry is best known for her extensive research among the Nso' in the Cameroons, West Africa, where she undertook varied periods of field research for almost thirty years commencing in 1945 (e.g. Kaberry 1952; Kaberry and Chilver 1960). While an assessment of her publications reveals that she regularly worked with Nso' women, as with her Australian scholarship, such a perspective did not occur without reference to Nso' men.

Kaberry became a lecturer in anthropology at University College London in 1949, where she stayed until her retirement in 1976. She died suddenly when she was sixty-seven, a year after retiring from University College London (Layton 1978). A memorial service was held at the University Church of Christ the King in London, and a Nso' mourning ceremony (*diiy kpu*) was later performed in her honour in Africa.<sup>11</sup>

Kaberry's research record and publications on Africa, and to a lesser degree on Papua New Guinea, reflect an experienced, thoughtful and knowledgeable researcher. Yet Kaberry's Australian ethnography—representing her first excursion into the field and the subject of her doctorate—retains a definitive quality. Australian anthropology would be somewhat diminished without Kaberry's efforts. It is plain that the stories, beliefs and practices of Kaberry's Kimberley informants continue to live on and have meaning for their descendants, and that this would have occurred without Kaberry's ethnography. Many years on, however, her detailed cross-cultural interpretation and visual images of Aboriginal life have allowed a "different" audience to have access to some of her findings. In such a process, the potential for a deepened understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups inevitably expands.

### **This book**

The republication of Kaberry's Australian ethnography signals an exciting shift, not only with regard to recognition of her scholarship, but also in recognition of the Aboriginal women and men with whom she worked so many decades ago.

*Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane* has slowly but increasingly become a classic text in Australian anthropology. As noted above, however, anthropological work conducted at around the same time from the vantage point of men still often tends to overshadow Kaberry's contribution. Where Kaberry's material has found its contemporary niche is for the rich insights it conveys about women's ritual life, including the *jarada* and *yawulu* women-only ceremonies, and women's relationships with men, such as the joint activity necessary for the maintenance of economic exchange and trading. While in accordance with present-day etiquette some of Kaberry's commentary has not been reproduced in its original form, what remains significant is that seventy years ago a distinct category of women-only "secret" ritual was identified.

Extensive documentation on women's interests in land, and how those interests helped to explain indigenous land tenure laws, was also recorded by Kaberry. Unconcerned with European notions of status, Kaberry clearly showed that women, just like men, sustained intrinsic religious affiliations to the landscape in accordance with a set of beliefs and practices defined by and embedded in Aboriginal religion and law.

Kaberry's ethnography presented a critique of assumptions made by Malinowski, Roheim, Warner and others that women were excluded from the religious life.<sup>12</sup> Arguing a case for gender complementarity and cooperation where women's power was often equivalent to men's, Kaberry showed that men, just like women, were betrothed in accordance with customary laws; women, just like men, were involved in conflict resolution and ceremonies surrounding death and grieving; women, just like men, were knowledgeable about, and sustained rights and responsibilities within, the Dreaming.

Fieldnotes and published analyses revealing that mythological accounts relating how mythic heroes had created the landscape and all it contained—water, plant, bird, insect and animal life, rock shelters, spinifex, and so on—were not gender-bound are also embodied in Kaberry's legacy. In the anthropology of Aboriginal Australia, Kaberry was clearly the first to *engender* her methodology and, as a result, her ethnographic interpretations.

In circumstances where male initiation was commonly defined as the central premise from which all social and ritual activity followed, and from which women were thought to be entirely excluded, Kaberry's research responded to two central inquiries: what is the relationship between women, men, religion and culture? What were women doing while they were excluded from the domains of all male activity?

Kaberry's research not only made available data which required a rethinking of binary oppositions on how gender relations were constituted, she also presented evidence which disturbed the view that Aboriginal religion could be analysed as a set of beliefs and practices neatly divided into distinct secular and profane divisions. Why, she asked, would Aboriginal women be excluded from religious experience, explanations, responsibilities and entitlements? Rejecting the rigidity of Durkheim's (1915) thesis, she argued that "every-day" or so-called profane activity merged into, and was dependent on, religious activity. Using complementary descriptive labels such as "betrothed daughters" and "initiated sons", Kaberry reported that while the involvement of men was sometimes more demanding and "spectacular", it was evident that women had a range of active responsibilities in diverse religious spheres.

Kaberry's findings also addressed the cultural context of different forms of power, such as delayed or immediate expressions of power, in a way that illuminated women's agency and the pivotal nature of kin-based relationships. Such relationships emphasised a loyalty to loved ones and to kin. Kaberry also showed women as traditional owners of land and sites on the basis of succession, totemic affiliation and residence.

Since the Australian High Court found in favour of indigenous plaintiffs in the 1992 case known as *Mabo & Others vs The State of Queensland (No. 2)*, Kaberry's research has exemplified the benefits of anthropological work over an interlude of time.<sup>13</sup> Her 1930s material has been retrieved and deployed in several Kimberley native title claims, especially the Mirriuwung Gajerrong and Ngurrura claims, to provide a contextual threshold on how rights in land existed in the past and continue to have meaning and customary law authority in the present. Unsurprisingly in a field of inquiry where evidence of the complexity and frailty of human cultures is often identified, the data left by Kaberry was not always conclusive. It nonetheless provides substantial comparative material beneficial to the claims process. In other parts of Aboriginal Australia where mediation and litigation often require scholarly assessment of the archival record, an

absence of the sort of material left by Kaberry has sometimes limited the veracity and aspirations of a claimant group.

*Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane* as a 1930s Australian ethnography was unique: researched and written by a female anthropologist in a remote part of northern Australia, it described daily and cosmological life via the experience of women, whilst also acknowledging women's vital and all-encompassing relationships with men. *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane* also presented evidence of women's affiliations to land and water, a rich ceremonial life, and examples of women's power and authority, including betrothal arrangements and funeral rites.

That Kaberry challenged binary oppositions about gender and religion also signifies the value of her scholarship. The republication of her book recognises Kaberry's rich anthropological legacy as much as it recognises that Aboriginal women, just like Aboriginal men, were and are both sacred and profane.

Sandy Toussaint  
2003

### Notes

- 1 See, for example, Elkin's cautious observations on Kaberry's findings in his "Introduction" to her book, and Kaberry's own notes on Bronislaw Malinowski's response in her "Foreword".
- 2 Kaberry's thesis, which she dedicated to Malinowski, was submitted in 1938 at the London School of Economics. The original copy is held at Senate House, University of London.
- 3 Aboriginal religion and customary law are described by a variety of language names and terms throughout Aboriginal Australia, including in contemporary public settings as 'The Dreaming' or, in the Kimberley, as *Ngarrangarni* or *Jumangkarni*.
- 4 Aboriginal women and men are increasingly writing their own languages, sometimes in conjunction with linguists. As a result, the spelling of language names and words has sometimes changed. Kaberry's spelling of Wolmeri, Kunian, Djaru, Punaba, Nyigina, Miriwunn and Kadjeroen are now recorded as Walmajarri, Gooniyandi, Jaru, Bunaba, Nyikina, Mirriuwung and Gajerrong, for example. Kaberry's original spelling is left as recorded.
- 5 Following consultations with senior Aboriginal women, several sections of Kaberry's original book have not been reproduced (see also Toussaint 1999). A difficult and complex matter to judge, ultimately guidance on representation of sensitive cultural material belongs with the descendants of the original custodians. That Kaberry identified categories of restricted women's knowledge is, however, a key observation.
- 6 Kaberry's publications and reports are now increasingly used in university courses, literature searches, heritage surveys, ethnographic reinterpretations, and land and native title claims. But her findings still attract controversy among some anthropologists agitated by her analysis of women and religion. Maddock (2001), for instance, claims that Kaberry misunderstood the word "sacred".

- 7 Mixed responses to Bell's ethnography include the view that while she made good use of ethnographic data, her analyses obscured women's relationships to men and the intricacies of kinship (e.g. Berndt 1986; Hamilton 1986; Merlan 1986). In the 1993 republication of *Daughters of the Dreaming*, Bell claimed that reviewers outside Australia were less critical of her approach and findings.
- 8 Within the scope of this Preface, I am unable to consider comprehensively the relevant literature in this field. This brief overview is by no means conclusive. Gale (1970), Merlan (1988) and the chapters in Brock (2001) provide useful accounts on women and gender, and Marcus's (1993) edited collection presents material on women who have conducted research in Aboriginal Australia, including a chapter by Christine Cheater on Phyllis Kaberry.
- 9 Myers (1986), Rose (1992), Trigger (1992) and Merlan (1998) provide examples of a more inclusive approach, but see also Bell (1998) where a case is argued for a more gender-specific interpretation with respect, say, to the Hindmarsh Island Case in South Australia.
- 10 Soon after Kaberry's death in London in 1977, all of her Australian material was lodged with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra.
- 11 Elsewhere (1999, 2002) I provide a fuller account of Kaberry's life, including further biographic and ethnographic references. I also make the point, however, that while it is crucial to investigate the relationship between biography and ethnography, auto/biographic accounts will always remain a mixture of "fact", "fiction" and interpretation.
- 12 Unlike Warner, Malinowski did not conduct field research in Australia, but his androcentric approach toward Aboriginal women also carried academic weight following the publication of *The Family among the Australian Aborigines* in 1913. Kaberry considers Malinowski's discussion in her book, noting that she disagreed with his analysis.
- 13 The High Court's Mabo Decision overturned the legal fiction of *terra nullius* and introduced native title at common law into Australia. Through the implementation of the 1993 Native Title Act, and establishment of the National Native Title Tribunal, some indigenous groups have now become entitled to lodge claims for land in accordance with the Act's requirements. Chapters in Toussaint (2003) provide extensive coverage of Australian native title claims and issues

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## FOREWORD

Until recently, aboriginal woman has occupied rather an obscure place in Australian anthropology; and in popular imagination, at least, she has too often been lost to view beneath the burdens imposed upon her by her menfolk. There has been little attempt to analyse the extent to which she participates in religion, the nature and importance of her contribution to the tribal economy. It was with the object of making a more specific study of the position of women in an aboriginal community that, at the suggestion of Professor Elkin, I carried out research in North-West Australia, both in 1934 and in 1935 to 1936. In its original form my material was presented as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the London School of Economics in 1938; but since then it has been revised and abridged, and the title changed to one that sums up my attempt to portray aboriginal woman as she really is—a complex social personality, having her own prerogatives, duties, problems, beliefs, rituals, and point of view; making the adjustments that the social, local, and totemic organization require of her, and at the same time exercising a certain freedom of choice in matters affecting her own interests and desires.

This book lays no claim to finality, as apart from my main object I had also to make a survey of the totemism, local organization and kinship systems of North, East, and Central Kimberley. In 1934, as the holder of a research grant from the Australian National Research Council, I went to Forrest River for four months, and later visited the Miriwun tribe in East Kimberley, and also the Nyul-Nyul at Beagle Bay Mission. In May, 1935, under a fellowship, I returned to the Kimberleys, and spent six months altogether with the Lunga tribe, three months with Wolmeri, and shorter periods with the Djaru, Miriwun, Malngin, Wula, Kunian, Punaba, and Nyigina.

With the exception of those living on the missions, most of the natives in this region are concentrated about the station homesteads, and are employed in stockwork, gardening, and domestic duties. They wear European clothes and receive rations of flour, tea, beef, and tobacco. It is only during the “wet” season, when work slackens off between September and March, that they go “walkabout” in the bush to hold their intertribal meetings for initiation and mourning ceremonies. During the winter I had perforce to remain at the homesteads, collecting genealogies, accounts of local organization, totemism, and rites, observing life in the camp, and witnessing a few ceremonies.

However, from September to December I attended intertribal meetings in the North Lunga territory, where I had opportunities of seeing corroborees, and accompanying the men and women on their hunting and foraging expeditions. From December to March I was present at similar assemblies of the Wolmeri, Kunian, Punaba, and Nyigina natives in the Fitzroy River and Christmas Creek districts. As a result of my movements from one tribe to another, I had no time to master the languages. But the natives have been in contact with the whites for over forty years; they are remarkably fluent in a pidgin-English which differs from that current in New Guinea, and approximates much more closely to spoken English. I, of course, learnt phrases, acquired large vocabularies, and

used native terms wherever possible. I was also able to keep some check on native conversations and the answers of informants. I did not pay the natives, though from time to time I made gifts of food, axes, knives, and other articles. When I witnessed ceremonies, I distributed flour, tea, and a few presents to the chief participants and headmen.

All told, there are probably about 6,000 natives in the Kimberley Division, though the annual report quotes a figure of over 7,000. I roughly estimated that there were from 600 to 800 Lunga (or Kidja), who are one of the largest tribes. They are living at Moola Bulla, Bedford, Alice Downs, Violet Valley, and Turkey Creek. The Djaru (or Nyinin) and the Wolmeri have also about the same population; the former extend to the south-west of Halls Creek and east to Gordon Downs; the latter originally occupied a belt of territory south of the Fitzroy River from Kalyeeda and Cherrabun Stations east to Sturt Creek and Billiluna. A few of their numbers are also to be found at Go Go and Noonkanbah. The others—the Miriwun, Malngin, Kunian, and Punaba—are smaller tribes and have smaller territories. For a distribution of these tribes see the accompanying map.<sup>1</sup> As I did not visit all the stations within the tribal boundaries, I had no means of collecting complete demographic details.

Despite the fact that I was a nomadic fieldworker, my material possesses a certain unity of content, because the tribes of the Kimberleys are similar in temperament and remarkably homogeneous in culture. Those of East and Central Kimberley have subsections, the same type of prescribed marriage and kinship obligations. The Forrest River and Wula natives have patrilineal moieties, and the Nyigina and Nyul-Nyul have sections. There are a few variations in mythology, details of ceremonial life, the rules governing descent of totems, and the manufacture of certain implements and weapons. But the women play much the same rôle in tribal economy, and exercise similar rights in marriage and social life. I have therefore been able to formulate generalizations which are valid for all these tribes. Furthermore, they probably have an even wider sphere of application. Research elsewhere has revealed that in profane activities the women enjoy a large measure of independence and make an important contribution to the economy. It is to be hoped that my own data will give a new emphasis to such factors, and that in future they will be more closely analysed in relation to the social status of women. On the other hand, my contention that aboriginal woman is not only profane but also sacred, may create some controversy; and some may assert that it is only in North-West Australia that the women participate to any marked extent in religion. Further research may prove this assumption correct, but it is not sufficient to say that elsewhere the women are excluded from the sacred ritual of the men. In the Kimberleys there is also a striking ritual differentiation between the sexes, and the women are forbidden to witness *tsurunga*, cult-totem, and initiation ceremonies on pain of death. Nevertheless they possess totems, have spiritual affiliations with the sacred past, and perform their own sacred rites from which the men are excluded. Evidence of similar phenomena is not lacking from other parts of the continent, particularly from Central Australia; but there has been little attempt to define their place in the religion of the tribes. Until a systematic study of women's

<sup>1</sup> I have to thank Mr. Clifford Chard of Sydney for drawing the map.

ceremonies and attitudes has been made, we have no grounds for assuming on the data now available, that the men represent the sacred element in the community and the women the profane element.

This book offers no new theory of culture; for the moment I am substantially in agreement with that formulated by Professor Malinowski and others of his school. I have correlated my material as far as possible with the rest of Australian ethnology, and have drawn attention to the theoretical implications of my own data. My main object has been to put on record a detailed description of the life of the women, to suggest avenues for future research, and to indicate some of the problems that await the attention of the fieldworker who can spend a year or longer with one tribe and learn the language. Until this has been done, it is impossible to take up the wider theoretical issues as to why, for instance, the ceremonial life of the men is more complex and richer artistically than that of the women.

The women are the focus of attention throughout this book, but I have not achieved this at the expense of limiting myself to an account of specifically feminine pursuits. If my theme is women, it is one that has involved a contrast and comparison of their activities with those of the men, with due recognition of the co-operation that exists between the sexes, the beliefs they share in common, and the laws to which they both conform. The women have been seen in relation to their environment and to tribal culture in all its aspects.

To my many friends among the Aborigines I owe a debt of gratitude for the privilege of witnessing their secret ceremonies, for the help, patience, and tolerance they invariably extended to me. This book will in some measure repay that debt, if it removes some of the misconceptions of which they, as an alien race, have unhappily been the victims: if it arouses some interest in their problems, and creates some appreciation of them as individuals and personalities, possessing their own values and a culture adapted to their way of life.

I am deeply grateful to the Australian National Research Council for the assistance I received from its officers, and for the research grants and fellowship which enabled me to carry out fieldwork in North-West Australia, and to write up my material later. Professor A.P.Elkin, himself an authority on Australian kinship and totemism, directed my research and gave me the benefit of his previous experience in the Kimberleys and the use of his unpublished field-notes. His criticism, encouragement, and his confidence in me were a constant stimulus while I was in the field; and his sense of justice and unflinching generosity have tided me over many difficulties. I count it a privilege to have been associated with him in my work.

My thanks are due to Mr. A.O.Neville, Chief Commissioner for Native Affairs in West Australia, for permission to work among the natives, and for the interest he displayed in my research. As most of the aborigines whom I studied were living on the sheep and cattle stations, I was particularly dependent on the goodwill and help of the European residents. With the spontaneity and kindness that is so typical of the north-west, they made me welcome at their homesteads, provided transport, and assisted me in every possible way. Where there is scarcely one individual who did not render me a service, it is invidious to mention names; but I should like to thank some for the hospitality they extended to me over many weeks, and for the very pleasant memories I have of my visit

to the Kimberleys. Among these are the Rev. Frank Bush and Mrs. Lawrence of Forrest River Mission, the Rt. Rev. Monsignor Raible of Beagle Bay Mission, Mr. M.P. Durack of Argyle, Mr. R. Durack and the Misses Mary and Elizabeth Durack of Ivanhoe, Mr. and Mrs. A.T. Woodland of Moola Bulla, Mr. J. Bennett, head-stockman of Moola Bulla, Mr. T. Crooks of Wyndham who assisted me with my photography, Mr. and Mrs. G. Smith of Bedford, Mr. and Mrs. E. Millard of Go Go, Mr. A. Millard of Christmas Creek, Mr. A. Seaton of Brooking Creek, Mr. and Mrs. Henwood of Noonkanbah, Mr. M. Downing of Gordon Downs, Mr. and Mrs. H. McBeath of Violet Valley, and the managers of Flora Valley and Quanbun Stations.

Anthropology is a many-sided science. When the anthropologist has completed his or her fieldwork, there is still the problem of creating order out of the chaos in the notebooks, of disentangling contradictions, of presenting a culture as a living reality and of abstracting principles that have a general sociological relevance. It is impossible within the compass of an introduction to trace the spiritual ancestry of a book in the making, but in the process of writing up my material I was particularly fortunate to be able to attend the seminars of two anthropologists, Professor Malinowski and Dr. Raymond Firth, whose writings and fieldwork have considerably moulded my own approach to anthropology, and proved a constant source of stimulus. I am sincerely grateful to Dr. Firth, who supervised my thesis, for his provocative and penetrating criticism of my manuscript in its factual and theoretical aspects. I should also like to thank Professor Radcliffe-Brown, Dr. Audrey Richards, Professor Elkin, and Dr. Margaret Mead.

I can only express inadequately the value I attach to my many discussions with my friend, Dr. Margot Hentze, the historian. Her appreciation of other cultures, her understanding of, and sensitiveness to the point of view of other nationalities, her honesty of thought and impartiality in handling facts, the qualities of imagination and style in her own writings, have been a source of inspiration to me in a subject that is so closely related to history.

I have dedicated this book to Professor Malinowski in acknowledgment of my debt to him as an anthropologist, as one who, without sacrificing scientific objectivity and integrity to fact, has been able to approach the study of culture and civilization with the imagination and sensitiveness of an artist.

P.M.K.

KALABU,  
NEW GUINEA.  
*May, 1939.*



## INTRODUCTION

From the earliest days of the settlement of Australia there have been men of various interests who have recorded information about the Aborigines. The first of these was Judge-Advocate Collins who arrived with the first fleet. Explorers, particularly George Grey and J.Eyre, devoted special sections of their published reports to descriptions of Aboriginal life and manners. Many missionaries have written articles and books on the same subject, though their best contributions have been linguistic. Amongst these workers, we think chiefly of L.E.Threlkeld, C.W. Schürmann, George Taplin, W.Ridley, Otto Siebert, H. Kempe, D.McKillop, T.T.Webb, J.N.Hey, John Mathew, E.Worms, and above all Pastor Strehlow and J.R.B. Love. Then there have been compilers and editors, especially John Fraser (*An Australian Language*), G.Taplin (*The Folklore, Manners, Customs and Languages of the South Australian Aborigines*), J.E.Woods (*The Native Tribes of South Australia*), J.Brough-Smyth (*The Aborigines of Victoria*), and Curr (*The Australian Race*), who have brought together and edited the manuscripts of all types of people who had some experience of Aborigines. R.H.Mathews and A.W.Howitt bridge the gulf between compilers and independent workers, for they not only gathered much information from residents in various parts of the continent, but used the material thus collected in an endeavour to understand the principles inherent in Aboriginal social and ceremonial life; further, in pursuance of this object they both did original fieldwork. Just before their main studies were published in the first decade of this century, Spencer and Gillen's classic *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* appeared; this opened the eyes of the anthropological world to the vital and complex totemic and ceremonial aspect of Aboriginal life. Further contributions of the same kind were made by these authors in *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* and in Professor Spencer's *Native Tribes of the Northern Territory*, while Pastor Strehlow published a little later his records of the mythology, ceremonials and various customs of the Aranda and Loritja of Central Australia. Mrs. Parker placed on record her knowledge of the Aborigines of the region of New South Wales where she lived—*The Euahlayi Tribe*, and Mrs. Daisy Bates has given us useful data gained in long experience of a life of service amongst the Aborigines. Finally, Dr. W.E.Roth recorded much information regarding the Aborigines of Central-Western and North Queensland, much of it, unfortunately, in an epitomized dry-as-dust form of presentation.

Thus did the literature on the Aborigines grow in volume and with the work of Spencer, Roth, Howitt, Mathews, and Strehlow, in value. Howitt, with the help of Lorimer Fison, had drawn attention to the interesting form of social organization found in Eastern Australia, which consists of moieties and sections (then termed marriage classes); Spencer did the same for the Northern Territory, and R.H. Mathews published many papers on sections and subsections and worked out the relation of these to marriage with certain kinds of second cousin. His work, however, distributed through various learned Journals, was, and is, not very well known. It was left to A.R.Radcliffe-Brown (since