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Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

MS 739

The Papers of Phyllis Mary Kaberry, 1934-1936

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COLLECTION SUMMARY

Creator:	Kaberry, Phyllis Mary, 1910-1977
Title:	Papers of Phyllis Mary Kaberry, 1934-1936
Collection no:	MS 739
Date range:	1934-1936
Extent:	0.34mt (2 boxes)
Repository:	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY STATEMENT

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Deceased persons

Users of this finding aid should be aware that, in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, seeing images of deceased persons in photographs, film and books, or hearing them in sound and visual recordings may cause sadness and/or distress, including offending strongly held cultural prohibitions.

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ACCESS TO COLLECTION

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Preferred citation

Items from this collection should be cited as The Papers of Phyllis Mary Kaberry, 1934-1936, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, MS 739, Series [insert number], Item or Folder [insert number].

For example: MS 739/1/2 - Forrest River Mission, 30 May - 4 July, 1934.

COLLECTION OVERVIEW

Scope and contents note

These papers include field notebooks, genealogies and miscellaneous typescripts created by Phyllis Kaberry during fieldwork and research as part of her doctoral thesis on Aboriginal women in the Kimberley, 1934-1936. The writings of Kaberry provide rich insights into women's ritual life, such as the *jarada* and *yirbindji* women only ceremonies. Kaberry also documented Kimberley women's interests in land. Kaberry's writings detail sustained intrinsic religious ties to land in accordance with a set of beliefs and practices generally and publicly known as 'The Dreaming' (or *Ngarrangarri*, translated by Kaberry as 'The Time Long Past') (Toussaint, 1994, 1999, 2002). The genealogies document patrilineal and matrilineal

lines of descent, and show women as traditional owners of land and sites on the basis of succession, totemic affiliation, and residence (Kaberry 1939/2004; Toussaint 1994, 1999, 2002).

Provenance

This collection was received by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in February 1975.

Material separated from the collection

Photographic material separated from this collection can be found at:

Kaberry.P01.BW – Ceremonial dancing and body decoration in the Kimberley region

Kaberry.P02.BW – Rock Paintings in the Kimberleys

Some of the photographs have been restricted.¹

Related material

For a complete list of works by Phyllis Kaberry, held by the Library, and for other related material consult [Mura®](#), the AIATSIS catalogue.

For access to Audiovisual material contact AIATSIS [Collections](#).

Additional collections relating to Phyllis Kaberry can be found in the following collections:

UCL Ethnography Collection - UCL Ethnography Collection holds seven objects which were given or are related to Kaberry's Kimberley field work and almost 50 lantern slides showing reproductions of field work photographs used for teaching.

University of Sydney archives

London School of Economics archives

Important: Before clicking on the links to the catalogue entries please read our [sensitivity message](#).

CONTROLLED ACCESS HEADINGS

Argyle Downs (WA East Kimberley SE52-02)

Baulu Wah / Violet Valley (WA East Kimberley SE52-05)

Bayulu / Gogo (WA West Kimberley SE51-12)

Beagle Bay (WA West Kimberley SE51-02)

Forrest River (WA East Kimberley SD52-09, SD52-10, SD52-14)

¹ In April 2011, women from Gooniyandi and Walmajarri visited AIATSIS and viewed the images. The women said that the photographs in Kaberry.P01.BW and Kaberry.P02.BW were difficult to identify as being from a specific location or group. The women said that it is likely that the images were taken in East Kimberley locations between 1933-1935.

MS 739 Papers of Phyllis Mary Kaberry, 1934-1936

Ivanhoe Crossing / Plain (WA East Kimberley SD52-14)

Kaberry, Phyllis M. (Phyllis Mary), 1910-1977

Kundat Djaru / Gordon Downs (WA East Kimberley SE52-10)

Laverton (SE WA Goldfields SH51-02)

Miriwun (WA East Kimberley SE52-02)

Moola Bulla (WA East Kimberley SE52-09)

Nyulnyul / Nyul people (K13) (WA SE51-02)

Oombulgurri (WA Forrest East Kimberley SD52-10)

Ord River / Lake Argyle (WA East Kimberley SE52-02, SD52-14)

Wangkatjungka / Christmas Creek (WA West Kimberley SE51-12)

Wungu / Flora Valley (WA East Kimberley SE52-10)

Miriwoong / Miriwoong people (K29) (WA SD52-14)

Nyulnyul / Nyul people (K13) (WA SE51-02)

Malngin people (K30) (WA SE52-06)

Miriwoong / Miriwoong people (K29) (WA SD52-14)

Lunga people (K20) (WA SE52-06)

Wawula people (A29) (WA SG51-05)

Waneiga Warlpiri people (C15) (NT SF52-04)

Archivists note

This finding aid was revised in August 2020 to meet contemporary archival description standards. This collection has been digitised. For preservation reasons, please contact CollectionEnquiry@aiatsis.gov.au to consult the digital version.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Phyllis Mary Kaberry (1910-1977), social anthropologist, was born on 17 September 1910 in San Francisco, United States of America. Kaberry was the first female anthropologist to conduct systematic field research in Aboriginal Australia; and the first to work from the vantage point of women.

The eldest of three children of English-born parents Lewis Kaberry, architect, and his wife Hettie Emily, née Coggins. Phyllis studied Social Anthropology at University College, London. About 1913 the family moved to New Zealand, then to Newcastle, New South Wales, and in 1914 to Sydney, settling at Manly.

Kaberry enrolled as a student in anthropology at The University of Sydney. The University of Sydney was the first university in Australia to teach anthropology; the academic home to anthropologists such as A.P. Elkin, Raymond Firth, Ian Hogbin, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, and Camilla Wedgwood. Kaberry studied under Professor A.P. Elkin, a firm believer that female anthropologists were able to give a unique and beneficial perspective of women in various societies – a subject neglected during this time.

After completing a Master's degree in anthropology, Kaberry received a grant from the Australian National Research Council (ANRC) to conduct research within Australia. After a brief stint in WA's Goldfields, her advisor, Professor A.P. Elkin, suggested she studied Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Elkin advocated for the humane treatment and preservation of Aboriginal people – his views driven by his awareness of poor living conditions, maltreatment, and the gradual erasing of their traditional beliefs and values.

In 1934 Kaberry travelled to North West Australia and began her first field research on the social status of Aboriginal, without excluding women's relationships with men. During the 1930s it was the state, rather than the people themselves, that was consulted prior to anthropological research taking place. Kaberry sought permission from the Commissioner of Native Affairs to conduct fieldwork among Indigenous Australians (Toussaint 2002). From 1935-1946 Kaberry spent thirteen months undertaking fieldwork, as part of her Doctoral thesis on Aboriginal women in the Kimberley. Kaberry followed the daily activities of Aborigines living along the Forrest and Lyne rivers, and in the Southern Kimberley district of Western Australia. Whilst in the area she made enduring friendships with (Dame) Mary and Elizabeth Durack. AIATSIS holds correspondence between Phyllis Kaberry and Mary Durack, see MS 5121. Kaberry also wrote a selection of poems inspired by her Kimberley experiences, one of which can be found in the AIATSIS collection, see pMS 5988. Kaberry's findings were published in *Oceania* (1934-36).

Similar to what many anthropologists face in the field, Kaberry dealt with challenging conditions, all of which she embraced. Conducting research with people on cattle stations and at local missions, she experienced language barriers and constant resettlement due to seasonal migrations, resulting in a fairly mobile lifestyle. Adopting a participant observation methodology, Kaberry shifted between multiple groups of people, and became deeply involved with women's daily lifestyles. Often requiring a translator, Kaberry chose the most outspoken woman of each group to assist with translation as well as a way of enticing other women to speak about private aspects of Aboriginal female life. Much of her work was dependent on the two distinct seasons of Northern Australia. During the dry season, Kaberry resided at pastoral stations and missions collecting genealogies by interviewing women from various camps. Kaberry questioned the accuracy of her research of Aboriginal tradition during the dry season. This was because she perceived that people's lifestyle had been altered by European contact. Kaberry witnessed several traditional ceremonies and customs during the wet seasons and focussed her studies on kinship, religion, the economic and social organisation of women, as well as the influence of European contact.

Kaberry highlighted the religious, cultural and economic life of women when it was rare to do so; she challenged the view that Aboriginal religion could be classified into strict 'sacred' and 'profane' divisions', and she emphasized the importance of applied anthropology and the need to reciprocate with the people among whom she worked (Toussaint 1994, 1999, 2002).

Kaberry learned several languages and was given an Aboriginal personal name, that of *Nadjeri*, and placed into a subsection or 'skin group' (Toussaint 1994, 1999, 2002).

After returning from the field to London, Kaberry enrolled in the London School of Economics after winning a scholarship. In 1938, she received her PhD in anthropology, and one year later published *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane*. This book had an impact on women's studies in the field of anthropology. At the time of publication, anthropology was widely male-dominated, and her book received much criticism for suggesting that women were equal to that of men and possessed their own value of sacredness. Women at this time were seen as "domesticated cows" and erotic beings thought to have little influence in cultural development, devoid of a sacred life with their institutions defined as inferior to those of males.² Although Kaberry's mentor, A.P. Elkin, was interested in obtaining information on the lives of women in native societies, even Kaberry's mentor, A.P. Elkin, exhibited views that agreed with the common belief of women's inferiority. *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane* disputed these ideas.

Kaberry responded "It was with the object of making a more specific study of the position of women in an aboriginal [sic] community, that at the suggestion of Professor Elkin, I carried out research in North-West Australia [...] 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 organisation require of her, and at the same time exercising a certain freedom of choice in matters affecting her own interests and desires [...] Nevertheless they possess totems, have spiritual affiliations with the sacred past, and perform their own sacred rites from which the men are excluded [...] 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."³

Kaberry recorded sacred ceremonies amongst women and exhibited the integral part they play within society. Her book was one of three focusing on the Aborigines of Australia by anthropologists during the 1930s, as well as one of few that described native women worldwide.⁴ Kaberry's work set the scene for future women's studies, a field that was strongly neglected until women's movements later in the century.

From September 1936 Kaberry worked in Professor Bronislaw Malinowski's Department at the London School of Economics (Ph.D., 1938). Awarded a Sterling Fellowship, Kaberry went to Yale University to present lectures on her research in Australia and Melanesia. Kaberry and Malinowski shared an interest in culture contact and its consequences. Both agreed to write a book together on the subject, however Malinowski died before it was

² Marcus, Julie, ed. (1993). *First in their Field: Women and Australian Anthropology*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press.

³ Kaberry, Phyllis M. (1939/2004). *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane*. London: Routledge, pp. xix –xxii.

⁴ Toussaint, Sandy (1999). *Phyllis Kaberry and Me*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, p. xxv.

finished. With his notes in hand, Kaberry completed the project in 1945, titled *The Dynamics of Cultural Change*. Kaberry had much admiration for Malinowski, and later dedicated *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane* to him.

A request from the Colonial Social Science Research Council to undertake research in the Bamenda region of Cameroon signalled a change in Kaberry's anthropological research and life. The Council questioned the low development and malnutrition in this colonised region and requested Kaberry's anthropological services. Funded by the British government, Kaberry travelled to Bamenda, living among the Nso'. Here, she formed close relationships with those that she worked with. The Nso' highly valued her friendship and the issues she helped to resolve within their community. In 1946, the loss of land was becoming a reality to the Nso' due to colonial policies. Kaberry voiced her concerns to the British, in which the problem was eventually resolved. Relieved and grateful, the Nso' made Kaberry a Queen Mother – a title Kaberry cherished greatly.⁵

Kaberry spent close to a total of forty-six months in Bamenda between 1945 and 1963 partly in collaboration with Sally Chilver. In 1952 she wrote *Women of the Grasslands*, describing the economic position of Nso' women. This publication did not receive as much criticism as her former book, but was another important movement towards a feminist approach in the field of anthropology.

For the latter part of her academic career, Kaberry taught at University College London as a lecturer and later as a reader. Former students found her kind, helpful and comforting after other teachers had torn strips off them. Phyllis Kaberry died one year after her retirement on 31 October 1977 in her Camden flat and was cremated. Informed of Kaberry's death, the Nso' community she had worked with throughout the years performed a mourning ceremony in her honour, and ten years later founded the Kaberry Research Centre within their region. At Oxford University, the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research on Women hosts a memorial lecture every three years, honouring her contributions to women's studies.

Phyllis Mary Kaberry was a pioneer for the study of women in the field of anthropology. For her to overcome the constant criticisms of her work was a battle within academia. Her passion and dedication towards erasing the misconceptions of the value of women within different societies has benefited the future of the anthropological field of study. Kaberry recognised women's significant contributions within their communities, proving that they are not confined to the shadow of men. Her work has influenced future generations of anthropologists, including Sandy Toussaint of the University of Western Australia, the author of *Phyllis Kaberry and Me*.

References

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⁵ Toussaint, Sandy (1999). *Phyllis Kaberry and Me: Anthropology, History and Aboriginal Australia*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press.

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SERIES DESCRIPTION

Series 1. Field notebooks, 1934-1936

Sixteen manuscript field notebooks created by Kaberry describing kinship, religion, economics, local organisation, culture and contact. Subjects are colour-coded and all field notebooks are indexed. Additional cross references appear in item 16. Notebooks describe fieldwork at Noonkanbah, Forrest River Mission, Ivanhoe, Nil: gum, Argyle, Beagle Bay Mission, Laverton, Moola Bulla, Violet Valley, Gogo Station, Christmas Creek, Ord River, Flora Valley and Gordon Downs.

MS 739/1/1	Noonkanbah, 6-21 March, 1934.
MS 739/1/2	Forrest River Mission, 30 May - 4 July, 1934.
MS 739/1/3	Forrest River Mission, 5 July - 19 August, 1934
MS 739/1/4	Ivanhoe, Nil:gum, Argyle, 5-23 October, 1934.
MS 739/1/5	Beagle Bay Mission, 7-22 November, 1934, Laverton, 10-21 May, 1935.
MS 739/1/6	Moola Bulla, 12 June - 9 July, 1935.
MS 739/1/7	Moola Bulla, 8 July - 15 September, 1935.
MS 739/1/8	Moola Bulla, 8 July - 15 September, 1935.
MS 739/1/9	Violet Valley, 16 October - 17 November, 1935, Violet Valley, 20 - 28 November, 1935.

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- MS 739/1/10 Moola Bulla, 4 December, 1935, 13 August, 1936.
MS 739/1/11 Gogo Station, 18 December - 25 January, 1936.
MS 739/1/12 Christmas Creek, 27 January - 23 March, 1936.
MS 739/1/13 Ord River, 24 March - 1 April, 1936, Flora Valley, 20 - 28 April, 1936.
MS 739/1/14 Gordon Downs, 28 April - 3 May, 1936.
MS 739/1/15 Gordon Downs, 3-5 May, 1936.
MS 739/1/16 Cross-references relating to subjects in field notebooks 1-15.

Series 2. Genealogies and Miscellaneous Typescripts

Genealogical charts from numerous Missions and stations throughout the Kimberley region.

- MS 739/2/1 Genealogical charts – Yeidji Forrest River Mission.
MS 739/2/2 Genealogical charts - Yeidji Forrest River Mission. Miriwun – Ivanhoe, Argyle, Nyul-nyul – Beagle Bay.
MS739/2/3 Genealogical charts – Kunian, Wlmeri, Punaba – Gogo Station.
MS739/2/4 Genealogical charts – Malngin and Miriwun.
MS739/2/5 Genealogical charts – Lunga – Moola Bulla.
MS739/2/6 Genealogical charts – Lunga – Moola Bulla.
MS739/2/7 Genealogical charts – Wula, Lunga – Bedford, Violet Valley.
MS739/2/8 Genealogical charts – Malngin.
MS739/2/9 Genealogical charts - Nyigina, Mangala – Noonkanbah.
MS739/2/10 Genealogical charts - Diaru (or Nyinin), Ngadji (or Waneiga) – Flora Valley, Gordon Downs.
MS739/2/11 Genealogical charts – Punaba, Nyigina- Jubilee.
MS739/2/12 Genealogical charts – Wolmeri, Yulberadja – Christmas Creek.
MS739/2/13 Miscellaneous genealogies and notes:
Subsections and totems for various tribes including Wolmeri, Kunian.
Punaba kinship terms.
Genealogical charts including Kunian, Wula, Miriwun, Wolmeri, Waneiga, Ngadji, Djaru-Nyinin, Malngin, Mangala, Punaba, Nyigina.
Genealogies and word list.
Subsections and totems list.
Wungemi moieties and kinship terms.
Genealogical charts.

Miscellaneous Typescripts

The Miscellaneous Typescript material includes correspondence, moiety names and kinship terms, listings of the distribution of dream totems, genealogical charts, a draft article and various sketch maps.

*Note that the numbering below refers to MS 739 (Collection number), 2 (Series number), 14 (Item number), 1-22 (Page numbers 1-22)

- MS 739/2/14/1-22 Letters to Professor A.P. Elkin, 22 June, 1935, 22 March, 1936. Carbon copies, pp.1-22.
- MS 739/2/14/23-29 Lists of subsection and moiety names and kinship terms amongst Lunga, Kidja, Miriwun, Nyinin, Ngadi, Waneiga, Nyigina, Wula, Mangala, Wolmeri, Wungemi, Yulberadja, Kunian, Malngin, Djaru, Punaba, Ngadi, pp.23-29.
- MS 739/2/14/30-33 List showing distribution of dream totems (Gunin) among Lunga and neighbouring tribes, pp.30-33.
- MS 739/2/14/34 Genealogical charts showing order of totem names, pp.34.
- MS 739/2/14/35-53 Notes on the Nyul-nyul tribe of Beagle Bay (draft article), pp.35-53.
- MS 739/2/14/54-63 Sketch maps, including maps of trade routes, distribution of tribes and subsection, section and moiety systems, river systems, tribal boundaries, dreaming tracks, Forrest River Mission sites, Fossil Downs area, Violet Valley area, pp.54-63.

BOX LIST

Series	Folder/Item	Box
1	1-16	1
2	1-14, pp.1-63	2

Finding aid updated by Senior Archivist, September 2020

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