

PHYLLIS KABERRY 1910–1977

Phyllis Mary Kaberry, for many years Reader in Social Anthropology at University College London and former research fellow of the International African Institute, died at the end of October 1977 at the age of 67. Rather than repeat the biographical details which have already appeared in obituaries in *The Times* (Nov. 18, 1977) and the Royal Anthropological Institute News (RAIN), the editors of *Africa* feel that its readers might wish to share a more personal view of Phyllis as expressed in the following excerpts from Sir Raymond Firth's address at a memorial service held at the University Church of Christ the King, Gordon Square, on February 1, 1978.

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This tribute to Phyllis Kaberry is personal as well as professional. I knew her as an anthropologist, student and colleague, for more than forty years, and also as a friend. But Phyllis's interests were many-sided—in the visual arts, music, poetry, English literature. I can only hope then that what I have to say here may be meaningful to others who have their own very different, equally vivid memories.

First on the anthropological side. Phyllis has for long had an honoured place in her profession. British social anthropology has been fortunate in its women members. I can think at once of half a dozen who have been among the leaders in our discipline—in field research, in teaching and in theoretical contribution—and Phyllis has been one of these. She has led, not by waving a personal banner, in the van, but in her own modest way, by putting forward a range of interesting ideas, backing them up by very solid field research, and encouraging other people to develop them along their own lines. At University College London, with which she was associated for so many years, she will be particularly remembered.

Phyllis's field work was meticulous, and extraordinary for its duration, its diversity and the arduous conditions she cheerfully endured. In the Kimberley district of Western Australia, among the Abelam of northern New Guinea and in the Bamenda division of the Cameroons she spent altogether more than seven years. For most of this time she was in close contact with the people of her study. . . . In Bamenda she was made a Queen Mother by the Fon of Nso, an honour which she had to acknowledge by a gift of 400 loads of firewood—which of course were supplied by her numerous local friends and quasi-kin to whom she reciprocated in usual anthropological fashion.

Many of us know Phyllis's work on kinship, on ritual, on myth, on land tenure, and (with Mrs E. M. Chilver) on political structure and political history. But in particular we recognise her as a pioneer in the anthropological study of women's place in society. I hope you will not think it out of place that a man should comment here upon Phyllis's contributions. But I saw something of her first book in the making, and I have continued to have a high regard for *Aboriginal Women* (the Australian study), and *Women of the Grassfields* (the Cameroons study). On looking through them again recently I have been struck once more by the freshness, originality, modesty, insight and breadth of judgement they show. Phyllis could be very emotional about what she saw as injustice, but she recorded faithfully, often with that flash of humour so typical of her. She obviously enjoyed retailing some

Nso women's opinions on the sexes. As you may recall from her book: 'Woman is an important thing, a thing of God . . . all people come forth from her . . . What are men? . . . Worthless.' Even the men said 'Women are like God, because they bear children.' But she also quoted Council members, all men, who were bemoaning the fact that women were beginning to claim a voice in the selection of husbands for their daughters. 'I asked', wrote Phyllis, 'Why not, if women are like God as you have said?' And the men retorted, 'Yes, a woman is like God, and like God she cannot speak; she must sit silently . . .' and so on . . . In any piece of work by Phyllis one was sure to have good craftsmanship combined with intellectual stimulus and a solid dollop of sound common sense.

She was forward-looking, too. Remark has been made of the foresight Phyllis had, in her Cameroons studies, in between her jokes and prejudices, about the stance of the new intelligentsia there, and the importance of providing them, especially in the University of Yaounde, with a basis for local studies on a modern plan.

Phyllis did not find it hard to identify herself with the interests of people she liked, including the subjects of her study. If she was critical of a friend, there was salt not acid in her judgement. I rather enjoyed Phyllis's scorn of something she disapproved of. It was vigorous, but with a surge of honest indignation, without rancour. Thirty years ago, when she was working on some Malaysian themes, she wrote to me of a certain government White Paper, that it was 'a dirty betrayal of the people and piece of dishonest writing and casuistry on the part of the C[olonial] O[ffice]. Expedience as usual has won the day at the expense of people's rights. Economic development is all very well, but unless it's based on certain principles, takes into account certain human values, it will not give satisfaction or contentment.'

The warmth of her emotional interest in people, her sense of commitment, drove her at times to engage in some practical anthropology. She said anyone who engaged in practical fieldwork was a fool; it was a constant wear on one's emotions. But 'if one puts emotions into cold storage then it means also an absence of a really vital relationship with the people'—and this lack she could not endure. So in 1946 she got involved in problems of destruction of Nso farms by Fulani cattle, and pushed the government to take action. When she returned to Bamenda twelve years later she found old friends most welcoming; she was referred to in terms of respect for venerable women, because she drove the Fulani from the country in 1946. 'Actually I was instrumental in driving out only 4 bad-hats, but 4 have become hordes. Also many of the good things that have happened since are attributed to me: expansion of the market, coffee production, etc. etc. . . . All this is flattering to my vanity.' Then she added with characteristic self-depreciation: 'The only thing is that I shall be expected to do even more than I am supposed to have achieved in the legend; and my next return to Nso may not be so propitious a one as this.' Well—what seems likely to survive is not a legend, but an achievement.

(Extracts from letters of PK to RF: 16.iii.46; 8.ix.46; 16.ii.58)