

Alan Barnard (1949-2022)

Alan Barnard, FBA, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology of Southern Africa at the University of Edinburgh, passed away, leaving an immense void among all who knew him and his work. His knowledge, kindness, and understanding were gifts to all who worked with him.

A native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Alan studied during the period of dramatic social changes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, encountering traditional American “four-field” anthropology at George Washington University in Washington DC, USA (BA, 1971). He continued his studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada (MA, 1972). However, it was social anthropology that became his focus, first with the research among the Khoisan, starting in 1974, and completed under the supervision of Adam Kuper at the University College London (PhD, 1976). Alan’s interest first in kinship, and then in other aspects of social organization, led him to regional comparisons, and he made important contribution to “the great Kalahari debate.” Alan taught at the University of Edinburgh from 1978 until his retirement in 2015. During this period, he also served in various capacities at the department, always supporting emerging scholars. He was also a leading voice who supported the formation of the History of Anthropology Network. His publications – as well as his tenure as an editor with the Cambridge University Press – made the results of his research widely accessible and deservedly influential.

Alan’s interest in the history and theory of anthropology drew from his multidisciplinary training (which included archaeology and linguistics), but also made him open for exploring different questions. He bravely explored the ways in which social anthropology can help one understand human origins – this aspect of research was also extended to language. What was the relationship between evolutionary impulses and forms of social behavior? And how did the understanding of this relationship shift over time, through history of science? The questions and the lines of research were immensely important and far-reaching, Alan saw that by working together with disciplines as diverse as genetics, molecular biology, and paleontology we can dramatically increase our understanding of the history of our species and its relative success. Malian writer and ethnologist Amadou Hampâté Bâ famously said 1960 at UNESCO that “In Africa, when an old man dies, it’s a library burning.” Alan was not an old man by contemporary standards, but the void that he leaves behind is truly immense.

Just as he was an amazing person and scholar, someone who clearly formulated the key question of anthropology: what is it that makes us human?

Aleksandar Bošković