

ALAN BARNARD (1949–2022)

For many years, Alan Barnard flew the Namibian flag in front of his country house at Lamancha, in the Scottish Borders near the University of Edinburgh, where he was Professor of the Anthropology of Southern Africa. Between 2007 and 2018, he was honorary consul for the Republic of Namibia in Scotland. In this function, he facilitated all kinds of exchange activities between Namibia and Scotland at the level of schools, the arts and in what one may call ‘everyday bilateral diplomacy’. This is remarkable for several reasons, not least because Alan’s first significant anthropological fieldwork for his PhD was with Nharo in Botswana, and he only moved into research on Namibia after its independence in 1990.

Likewise, Scottish was only his second nationality. He was born in the US (in Baton Rouge, Louisiana), spent his youth in New Jersey and later attended George Washington University in DC for his BA and McMaster University in Ontario for his MA. He only moved to the UK for his PhD in social anthropology, which he completed under the supervision of Adam Kuper at University College London in 1976, where he also taught briefly.

After a short stint at the University of Cape Town, the University of Edinburgh recruited him in 1978, where he worked until his retirement in 2015. He became a Scotsman with verve by conviction. Apart from being honorary consul, he ventured out of the disciplinary ivory tower in other ways. He published for young and non-academic readers (Barnard 1993) and wrote student guides for beginners (Barnard 2000). For many years, he played a significant role in the multidisciplinary Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh and he became elected Fellow of the British Academy in 2010.

Alan was a prolific writer with many interests. His primary scholarly passion, however, was a field often considered a rather classic and arcane domain even within anthropology, namely comparative kinship studies (Barnard & Good 1984). Moreover, his regional expertise was Khoisan languages and culture, which may seem exotic to some. However, he managed to bridge these specialities with publications on topics of general interest, writing prominently on the ‘foraging mode of thought’ (Barnard 2002), the San ‘Bushman’ (Barnard 2007), on human origins (Barnard 2011), on symbolic thought (Barnard 2012) and co-editing *The Routledge encyclopaedia of social and cultural anthropology* (Barnard & Spencer 2004).

For most of the time in Alan’s professional involvement, hunter-gatherer studies were a controversial field: with ideological positions left and right, his work was considered innovative by some and anachronistic by others, while



Fig. 1. Alan Barnard during his PhD research with Nharo in Botswana in the 1970s.

he managed to keep a course that was grounded in both extensive research with San in southern Africa and reflective theory. His book *Hunters and herders of Southern Africa: A comparative ethnography of the Khoisan peoples* (Barnard 1992a) was a comparative analysis of Khoisan groups thoroughly based on Lévi-Strauss’s and Leiden’s structuralist thinking wedded to empirical evidence primarily from Khoisan kinship studies, linguistics, religion and settlement patterns. That did not go down entirely well with Isaac Schapera, who had written the first definitive comparative work on these groups in the 1930s, as one of us (TW) found out when visiting him just after Alan’s *Hunters and herders* had come out. Schapera considered the book wayward with its focus on a comparative analysis of kinship systems.

Much worse were accusations by so-called revisionists seeking to eliminate hunter-gatherer and Bushman studies. However, Alan maintained personal friendships with researchers on both sides of the argument. He steered clear of personal vendettas and tried to distil something productive from an essentially destructive debate, for instance in his bibliographical essay *The Kalahari debate* (Barnard 1992b). He saw the ‘big Kalahari debate’ as consisting of several minor debates, some of which, for instance in the field of linguistics, stimulated valuable rethinking. At the same time, in other cases the baby was thrown out with the bathwater when hunter-gatherer lifeways were considered as conditioned by marginalization, domination by outsiders and poverty.

Alan continued long-term exchanges with many San people in southern Africa. In this light, he maintained that their ethnic identity and mode of subsistence were as substantive as anyone else’s in the region. He even, right to his latest publications, defended the use of the label ‘Bushman’ because he knew many people in Botswana and Namibia who preferred this self-designation to substitutes like San and Barsawa that were later accepted by governments and NGOs.

Alan was a significant promoter of international research exchanges and a moderating voice in heated debates. Being calm and co-operative, he generously shared his work, book

drafts and ideas with juniors and peers. He was also an active reviewer of Japanese San research, relatively unknown in Europe and the US for a long time, and developed personal friendships with colleagues outside the Anglo-American bubble more generally.

One of us (AT) met Alan for the first time during his visit to Japan in 2002 when Jiro Tanaka was hosting his stay at Kyoto University. Here Alan was introduced to the late Katsuyoshi Fukui, the local doyen of anthropology. After a working lunch with Fukui and having shared four bottles of wine as part of Japanese hospitality, he could still give a well-structured and vivid lecture about the persistence of hunter-gatherer modes of thought in Khoisan societies with particular reference to Kropotkin’s classic theory of mutual aid.

Alan was a professor in the literal sense of the word, ready to ‘profess’ and stand up for his position in an amicable and gentle but persistent manner. He kept his interest in kinship studies when many fellow anthropologists had deserted this field. Similarly, he maintained and extended his work on evolution when this had become outright dangerous in some quarters of social and cultural anthropology. In the Kalahari Basin area project, which started in the 2000s, he collaborated with an interdisciplinary research group which included molecular anthropologists and theoretical linguists (Barnard & Boden 2014). The purpose was to promote the systematic documentation, comparison and historical analysis of San kinship systems, but ultimately also to discuss broader questions regarding the population history of the non-Bantu speaking people in southern Africa. Alan has had a lasting influence on these research fields. Colleagues and students in Khoisan studies and comparative hunter-gatherer researchers will miss him. His wife, Joy, who often accompanied him on his travels, survives him.

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