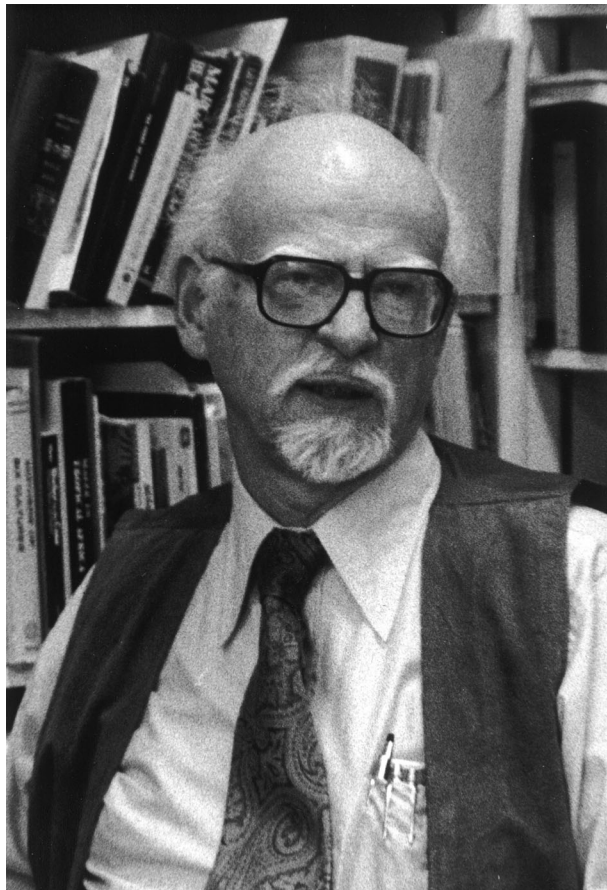


## OBITUARY



Keith Otterbein, circa 2003. (Photo courtesy of Charlotte Otterbein)

### Keith F. Otterbein (1936–2015)

Keith F. Otterbein, professor emeritus of anthropology at the University at Buffalo and former chairman of the Board of Directors of the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), died on June 17, 2015, in Raleigh, North Carolina, not far from his home in Apex, North Carolina. A prolific scholar, he was the author of eight books and numerous articles in major anthropological journals. In addition to his fieldwork among and publications about the Andros and Abaco Islanders in the Bahamas and the Higi of Nigeria, Otterbein was known for his cross-cultural research. He used the Human Relations Area Files and various probability samples to test hypotheses concerning the social correlates of war and violence; these data allowed him to interpret the past and to

explore the origins of war. At Buffalo, he taught his signature undergraduate course on the anthropology of warfare more than 30 times.

Keith Otterbein was born in Warren, Pennsylvania, on May 24, 1936, the elder of two sons of a local physician and a homemaker mother. Shaping his early life were the farming, animals, and hunting associated with rural farm life and small-town America. Awakened to the omnipresence of warfare during World War II, he became fascinated with military history and American Indian warfare. As an undergraduate at Pennsylvania State University, he veered away from these early interests to study archaeology. After receiving his BA in 1958, he continued in graduate work in cultural anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, obtaining his MA in 1960 and then, at the University of Pittsburgh under the direction of George Peter Murdock, his PhD in 1963, with a thesis about the family organization of Andros Island. A central finding of Otterbein's early (and continuing) research on Bahamian and Caribbean family organization was that migratory wage labor played a major role in shaping the family and household (1965).

An anthropological article on warfare that he read in 1961 rekindled Otterbein's interest in warfare and military history. He realized that he could pursue this interest within cultural anthropology, a realization that shaped much of his later scholarship. It also led him to return to the field in 1965 to study tribal warfare among the Higi of the Mandara Mountains in northeastern Nigeria (research that resulted in his 1968 paper "Higi Armed Combat").

After completing his PhD, Otterbein worked briefly in Washington, DC, at SORO (Special Operations Research Organization), where he studied counter-insurgency and civic action. Dissatisfied with his employer, he took a position as assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Kansas in 1964 but moved to the University at Buffalo in 1966 (then the State University of New York at Buffalo). Quickly promoted, becoming a full professor in 1971, he also served as graduate director and supervised numerous dissertations. Along with Raoul Naroll, he created a cross-cultural research program that flourished until Naroll's death in 1985. Otterbein retired from Buffalo in 2006, but he continued to pursue his scholarly passions: research and writing about the Bahamas, warfare, and cross-cultural research.

Otterbein considered his most important work to be his book *How War Began* (2004), which even a generally

critical Jonathan Haas described as “a grand meta-analysis of global literature on early warfare by one of the great scholars of the anthropology of war” (Haas 2009:413). Illustrating his interest in warfare across time, space, and anthropological subfields, Otterbein surveyed the trajectory of warfare and violence from our primate ancestors through Paleolithic hunters and Neolithic farmers to the early states of Mesopotamia, China, Mesoamerica, and the Andes. He argued that warfare should be seen not as originating from personal aggression but, rather, as a social phenomenon in which groups of people respond to both the physical and social worlds around them.

Otterbein disagreed with those who posit that warfare developed only with the origin of the state and was unknown to early humanity. Instead, he proposed that warfare had two separate origins. It first arose early in human prehistory, as different groups of nomadic big-game hunters competed for game with effective weapons. After most big game disappeared (a result of both human actions and climate change), warfare declined and people subsisted on gathering and small-game hunting. The resulting period of more or less peaceful coexistence allowed people to experiment with plants and animals and, in areas with the appropriate natural resources, to domesticate these plants and thereby create settled farm villages. Otterbein contended, moreover, that farming could not have developed under warlike conditions, because people would have required at least a modicum of peace to experiment with the plants around them (see also Otterbein 2011). The second origin of warfare developed out of state formation, as ruling classes consolidated power over others and created military units that could battle similar units within the group and, later, such units from other states. Throughout, he supported his arguments concerning the origin of warfare by creative use of his many cross-cultural studies examining the social correlates of war and violence to interpret and infer relationships from the archaeological and paleontological data. In an earlier study, *The Evolution of War* (1970), for example, he had demonstrated how warfare and political complexity coevolve and how military sophistication could lead to territorial expansion. Two editions of that book followed in 1985 and 1989, the former with a new detailed preface that introduced the subject of unbalanced and balanced alliance systems and the latter with a new appendix that introduced socialization for war as a key topic in warfare studies.

Otterbein’s cross-cultural studies, published in many books and articles, examined such phenomena as feuding, dueling, capital punishment, human sacrifice, internal war, rape, genocide, homicide, and political assassination. Among other conclusions, he found that fraternal interest groups (localized groups of related males created through patrilineal or virilocal residence) are predictors of both feuding and internal war (2005). This is a key to understanding

why certain hunter-gatherer groups have war while others do not: cross culturally, hunting and fishing are related to virilocal residence, which in turn is related to feuding and warfare. Similar insights from cross-cultural research are found throughout his work. Thus, in his book *The Ultimate Coercive Sanction* (1986), he demonstrated that capital punishment is a near universal but that it takes different forms at different levels of sociopolitical complexity. He explored additional examples of organized human killing in *How War Began* (2004), *The Anthropology of War* (2009), and in a collection of previously published articles titled *Feuding and Warfare* (1994). In addition to his cross-cultural studies, Otterbein used historical materials to examine warfare and feuding among the Iroquois and Huron, culminating in work on Iroquois dominance (1979); the Zulu (1964; reprinted in 1967); the Nuer (1995); and feuding groups in eastern Kentucky (2000).

A strong advocate of cross-cultural research, Otterbein served on HRAF’s board of directors from 1978 through 2007. He was an elected member of HRAF’s executive committee from 1982 to 1987 and board chairman from 1987 to 1994. In a series of articles, he described how cross-cultural research should be conducted: it should be deductive (1969), test hypotheses (1990), and utilize a random or probability sample (1976). He continued his advocacy of this kind of research in two editions of his textbook *Comparative Cultural Analysis* (1977 [1972]).

Keith Otterbein met his future wife, Charlotte Swanson, then a graduate student in psychology at Cornell University, at the first NSF Summer Institute of Cross-Cultural Research, held at the University of Pittsburgh in 1964. There they collaborated on a research paper on feuding (Otterbein and Otterbein 1965). After their marriage in 1965, their intellectual collaboration continued in a lifetime of joint scholarly research. In addition to papers published together, they conducted several field trips to the Bahamas (see Otterbein and Otterbein 1977). They had a son, Gere, who died tragically in 2007.

In 2010, the Otterbeins deposited their field materials, diaries, notebooks, and photographs at the Avery Center for African American Research, part of the library system of the College of Charleston, located near their part-time home in Folly Beach, South Carolina. The great similarity that Keith noted between the Andros Islanders and the Gullah people of South Carolina helped prompt their decision to deposit all their field materials at the Avery Center.

Like many colleagues, Keith Otterbein selected the anthropology discipline as a career because it allowed him to encompass his diverse interests under one umbrella. He did so successfully, and he will be remembered for his many significant contributions to anthropology, especially to our understanding of war and violence. It is important to note that in spite of these interests, he was himself deeply opposed to war and to those academic approaches, such as a

focus on warriors, that tend “to glorify war, which [he had no] intention of doing” (2004:8).

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