Obituary

In Memoriam Henri J.M. Claessen
Scholar, Teacher, and Organizer (1930–2022)

On 26 July 2022, Henri J.M. (Hans) Claessen, honorary member of the kitlv and eminent scholar, passed away. Henri Claessen was born on 30 November 1930 in Wormerveer, the Netherlands. His parents owned a haberdashery. Henri had a twin brother and no other siblings. After attending a high school in Hoorn, he enrolled at Amsterdam University to study history, social geography, and ethnography and was a student of the famous ethnographer/anthropologist Andre Köbben. During his fieldwork in one of the IJsselmeerpolders, he met his fellow student and future wife Aleida (Iet), with whom he would go on to have four children. After his graduation, he became a teacher at a high school in Wassenaar in the 1960s, while working on his PhD thesis in his spare time.

His scholarly activities took off with his PhD thesis titled Van vorsten en volken (Of princes and people), which he defended at Amsterdam University in 1970 with Andre Köbben as his promoter (Claessen 1970). He wrote the manuscript while having a full-time, demanding job and a family with very young children. In this thesis, he compared the characteristics of five historic societies (Tahiti, Tonga, Dahomey, Buganda, and the Inca Empire) and laid the foundation for his later, larger comparative project to flesh out and augment the ‘early state’ concept. After completion of his doctorate, he was employed by the Department of Anthropology at Leiden University, which remained his academic base throughout his career. Henri Claessen was a dedicated, meticulous scholar.

As an ‘armchair anthropologist’, he combined his passion for accounts of historic travellers and explorers with his growing interest in the theory of socio-political evolution. He brought empirical substance and nuance to discussions on the proverbial ‘slopes and staircases’ of human development pro-
moted by the Neo-Evolutionists. He was particularly inspired by, and critical of, the early works of Marshall Sahlins and Elman Service, the cultural-materialist approach of Marvin Harris, the political anthropological work of Morton Fried, and the ecological analysis of the origins of state by Robert Carneiro (1970).

He specialized in analysing the characteristics of ‘early states’ as transitional phases between chiefdoms and ‘mature’ states. In doing so, Henri had a substantial impact on international research into ‘early states’ from the 1970s to the 2000s. While he made some more elaborate case studies of, among others, the political development of the Merovingians, a comparativist approach was his trademark, looking for differences and similarities in a set of ‘aspects’ of the societies he studied. He had assembled and could reproduce an amazingly geographically broad collection of facts, figures, and anecdotes to emphasize his line of thinking. He built his international reputation with his seminal work,
which bore the simple title *The early state* and which came to be his most cited work (Claessen and Skalník 1978). It was characteristic of many of his later publications: a selection of case studies written by specialists, held together by a theoretical introduction written by Henri himself, building upon the inductive, comparative approach first used in his PhD thesis. Most of these edited volumes were produced with a co-editor but clearly carried Henri’s trademark.

His intellectual growth culminated in the Complex Interaction Model (CIM), a model for describing socio-political changes, which he developed together with Pieter van de Velde (Claessen and Van de Velde 1987). The core idea of the model is that socio-political development is the outcome of the complex interaction between an ideology legitimizing political leaders; an economic basis, without which no political system can be maintained; and what Claessen and Van de Velde called the societal format (population size and distribution of a population in the landscape). Within this general model, more specific ideas could be placed, for instance the role of religious specialists or redistributive mechanisms.

Henri Claessen developed his armchair anthropology at a time when Dutch (and global) anthropology was concerned with feminist studies, decolonization of the discipline, and a critical reflection on fieldwork. These developments did not have a noticeable impact on his work (and he could afford to ignore some of these debates, being by far the most cited scholar of the Leiden Institute of Cultural Anthropology), and in his quiet manner his work was innovative and far ahead of his times. He promoted a multi-disciplinary approach, which is nowadays a prerequisite of most large-grant schemes, and encouraged likeminded scholars in archaeology, history, and other adjacent disciplines to investigate the theoretical traits and implications of their empirical sources to understand historical centralization processes. He was also a trailblazer in international cooperation, another spearhead of today’s large-grant schemes. What was particularly refreshing was that as a Western-European scholar he showed a sincere interest in the work of scholars from ‘behind the Iron Curtain’ during the Cold War.

The 1970s were years of student protest, even in Leiden, from which Henri looked far removed in his appearance, always impeccably dressed in a suit and tie. He was also conservative in his defence of the correct use of standard written Dutch by his students and corrected their texts as if he was an old-fashioned schoolmaster, with a red pencil. Nevertheless, he was innovative in this sense too and open-minded about input from students. He was a talented educator, who had developed his didactic skills as a high-school teacher, which is usually a more challenging role than teaching at a university. He had a gift for reaching out to pupils and students, grabbing and keeping their attention, and push-
ing them to perform as well as they could. Unlike his colleagues he knew most of his—many—students by name, even years after their graduation. He was truly interested in their wellbeing. He also invited *kandidaats* (‘Bachelor’) and *doctoraal* (‘Master’) students to participate in his informal research discussion gatherings on political development and took their input, regardless of academic rank, seriously.

We both have fond memories of his peculiar combination of attachment to conservative forms, cordiality, and generous support for younger scholars. Renée got to know him best as her PhD supervisor, receiving his many handwritten letters containing exhortations and fatherly advice while studying at Cornell University. Freek called Henri by his last name until his eightieth birthday and even after this felt somewhat uncomfortable addressing him by his first name; but he also vividly remembers that *Meneer* Claessen gave him a friendly wink at the opening of his Master’s graduation ceremony. Henri also helped Freek with publishing his first scientific article; he returned the first version of it with generous handwritten suggestions and corrections (in red, of course) in practically every paragraph.

He was also an efficient and successful organizer, first as the head of the Department of Anthropology and later as the dean of the Social Science Faculty at Leiden University. Henri was a beacon of calm amidst heated sit-ins and discussions about the quality of the university staff and the content of their lectures. From the 1980s onwards, he was instrumental in designing a solid organizational structure for the institute, with a strong curriculum and various quality controls. The need for high-quality teaching was dear to the schoolmaster in him. His organizational talent also served him well as the convener of international congresses, seminars, and workshops. In the Netherlands he convened the yearly Vroege Statenclub (Early State Club) meetings, with archaeologists, (pre-)historians, anthropologists, linguists, and sociologists. He enjoyed editing texts, written by himself or by others, resulting in a large number of edited volumes to his name as a result.

From this, it was a small step to become editor of the *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* in the 1990s–2000s. His editorship was less surprising then than it would be today. At the time, the *Bijdragen* still published articles on Oceania, one of Henri’s early scholarly passions. What is possibly his first academic work appeared in the *Bijdragen* (Claessen 1962). Even more importantly, under his editorship the *Bijdragen* devoted the double issue each year (2–3) to anthropological studies of societies anywhere in the world, under the title of *Anthropologica*. With his broad, comparative interest and his extensive experience as an author-editor, Henri Claessen was eminently equipped to be editor of the *Bijdragen*. Partly in recognition of this work and partly because of
his scholarly achievements, he became an honorary member of the Koninklijk

Henri was also invited to serve on the international editorial board of the
journal Social Evolution and History (SEH), published in Moscow. For the Interna-
tional Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Studies (IUAES), he organized
the first IUAES Inter-Congress in 1981 in Amsterdam and served as vice-
president for several terms (1982–1992). The IUAES used to be, and still is, a
truly international organization that brought together scholars from the West,
the communist countries, and the Global South. After his retirement from the
IUAES Board, he was elected an Honorary Lifetime Member.

As was the case with the Early State Club meetings in the Netherlands men-
tioned above, the papers of these various international scientific meetings
were often processed by Henri and his co-editors into substantial, well-edited
volumes, published by renowned houses such as Mouton or Brill. His introduct-
ory or closing chapters looked for synergies in the various contributions to the
volumes in order to sharpen his own theoretical line of reasoning.1 His love
for respectful academic debate is also apparent from the many times he was
invited to discuss the notorious articles ‘with comments and reply’ published in
Current Anthropology. He once even had the honour of being the author of
such an article, presenting the Complex Interaction Model in a concise form
(Claessen et al. 1984).

Over the years, he kept in regular contact with his colleagues, many of whom
became lifelong friends. Henri was a hard worker, but he also appreciated the
pleasures of good company, and good food and drink. He had a large, worldwide
network, corresponding with and visiting colleagues in the USA, Russia, China,
Mexico, India, Sri Lanka, Germany, the Czech Republic, and the UK, among oth-
ers. Many of his colleagues were welcomed to his home in Wassenaar. Henri and
his wife Iet were excellent and warm hosts. During the meetings of the Dutch
Early State Club, the social events were as important as the scientific sessions.
Colleagues in need of help never reached out to him in vain.

After his retirement from Leiden University, he was honoured with two Liber
Amicorum and a knighthood by the Dutch government. He continued pub-
lishing scientific articles on a regular basis and returned to his ‘first love’, teach-
ing, at the Hoger Onderwijs voor Ouderen (HOVO), an organization that lays
on courses for retired people. He was also invited to teach the Anthropology
of Oceania and Pacific at Radboud University Nijmegen. The Centre for Pacific

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1 See, for example, Claessen and Skalník 1981; Claessen and Oosten 1996; and Claessen and
Van de Velde 1991. For a near complete overview of his publications, see Hagesteijn 1994, and
Studies bestowed him with an honorary membership. In his personal life, he and his wife experienced a tragedy in 2010, when their eldest son died unexpectedly at the age of 52. Henri maintained close contact with his (former) assistants until the end of his life. Henri Claessen passed away after a short illness at his home in Wassenaar, on 26 July 2022.

Freek Colombijn and Renée Hagesteijn

References


