
Hans Claessen – My Special Relation with Him 1973–2022

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I met Henri Claessen in Chicago during the 9th ICAES. It was a very hot summer there in 1973 and we were lucky that the world congress was held in the only air-conditioned hotel, the Chicago Hilton. To my shock I realised that another convention, and perhaps bigger, was taking place in the hotel at the same time. The Chicago Hilton is really huge. Henri, and I did not then know that his nickname was Hans, presented his paper ‘The balance of power in primitive states’ in the session called ‘Political anthropology and the state: center/periphery authority processes’. While my paper ‘The dynamics of early state development in the Voltaic area’ was scheduled for the session ‘West African culture dynamics.’ I went to listen to the state session and regretted that my paper was not included into it. Hans came to my session and so we met for the first time. That must have been the first time when he heard the phrase ‘the early state’. The discussion was reproduced in the book from the congress (see Seaton and Claessen 1979: 212–213). After the session, I approached Henri and told him about my paper that it was actually a summary of my PhD dissertation. He included my paper into his edited volume *Political Anthropology* that came out a year later than our *The Early State*. We continued to exchange our views at length on the margins of the congress and found that they not only combine well but also that our characters click. Henri was a handsome man, impeccably dressed, spoke good English and we were on the road to a friendship. He was 15 years older than me, told me that he had a wife and four children and lived in Wassenaar in the Netherlands. Most importantly, we started to talk what we can do together on states. I proposed that we should organise a broad international conference. Hans left with this idea but soon wrote me that perhaps a better solution would be an international volume. I agreed because finding money for a special conference was a utopia for me. A book might be easier to publish. But it would require a lot of work by the editors after we succeeded to per-

suade potential authors, and these should be good and well-known authors from both sides of the Iron Curtain.

I should stress that collaboration between a Dutchman and a Czechoslovak was quite a daring undertaking in the 1970s. Czechoslovakia was under the Soviet occupation after its ‘socialism with human face’ experiment was crushed by Soviet tanks in August 1968. That I managed to attend the Chicago congress was a miracle by itself. An older Slovak colleague had a relative in the Czechoslovak State Bank in Prague and he requested him to approve for me a promise of foreign exchange to the tune of 120 US dollars. That negligible sum was considered enough for an overseas trip! Once I had the bank promise I could apply for an exit permit from the Police, obviously with a recommendation by my employer which at that time was Comenius University at Bratislava, the Slovak capital. Once I was successful with the permit in my passport, I could start arranging the trip to Chicago. I applied for the US visa that was issued after I filled in a form and passed an interview at the US embassy in Prague. As for the trip itself, again I was lucky. Because the Czechoslovak subscriptions for *Current Anthropology* journal were paid in Czechoslovak crowns and deposited in a Czech bank but not exportable, *Current Anthropology* editor Sol Tax, who was also the main organizer of the Chicago congress, released funds in crowns for me to be used for the purchase of a return train ticket from Prague to Paris. Tax agreed with the director of the Mouton Publishers in the Hague that the Publisher advanced money for renting a charter plane that would bring European participants from Paris to Chicago and back. The charter costs were to be recovered by sale of books resulting from the congress. Dozens of volumes eventually appeared but the proceeds were not sufficient to pay for the debt and Mouton was eventually sold to De Gruyter in Berlin.

Our lively correspondence from the years 1973–1976 did not survive the turmoil that followed (see below). (I still have only one letter sent to us by Iet and children on 30 May 1976 thanking Dagmar and me for the gifts Hans brought them from his last visit to Prague.) The process of preparations of *The Early State* volume is described in some detail in the Preface to it (Claessen and Skalník 1978: v–viii). I was lucky that I could briefly visit the Netherlands in March 1975 and Hans and I discussed the details of the process. We met, together and separately, some prospective writers of theoretical and case study chapters. The rest of the prospective authors were approached by letters. We started to draft the introduction and Hans and his wife Iet came to Prague in October 1975 and we worked further on the introduction. Meanwhile Hans successfully applied for a six-month grant for me from the Netherlands Foundation for Pure Scientific Research

(Z.W.O.) to enable our joint work on the volume in the Netherlands. Soon it became clear that my Comenius University employer in Bratislava would not let me go. I was involved in the process of a 'complex evaluation' which was actually a political loyalty check-up. And I was considered politically less reliable that would eventually lead to my dismissal. The dean told me that I could not work anymore in education or public enlightenment, only in museums. I had to make an existential decision to leave my native country.

Let me describe very briefly what followed. I first went to the Balkans in early spring, almost got arrested in Bulgaria, but somewhat managed to get to Belgrade. There I visited the Netherlands embassy and explained to the consul that I was awarded a fellowship but could not apply for Dutch visa in my own country. I filled in visa forms both for myself and for my wife Dagmar, and attached a copy of the nomination letter from Z.W.O. I returned to Prague with insecure feeling. Hans then came over with the support of his Leiden institute to see me in Prague in May 1976 and after a week he returned to the Netherlands with the message for the Dutch Ministry of Justice that after my work in the Netherlands was completed I would not stay in the Netherlands but would go to Sudan where a post was offered to me at the University of Khartoum. Some days later, Hans phoned me telling that 'the books were sent' meaning that I and Dagmar can get our Dutch visa at the Netherlands embassy at Belgrade. I quickly packed my books and brought them in many banana boxes to our house cellar hoping they can be saved by a friend whom we informed about our imminent leaving. We did not inform our families because that could be interpreted as helping in crime of illegal leaving of the country. We managed to reach Belgrade via Bucharest, collected our visa, quickly got also Austrian transit visa, and with the help of a Slovene colleague we crossed in his car the border through the Loiblpass tunnel. Once we were in Klagenfurt I phoned with a 10 Schilling coin to tell Hans that we are landing in Amsterdam the same evening. He just said 'So you made it!' and the coin fell through. We bought our one way air tickets Klagenfurt-Frankfurt-Amsterdam with the money we bought on the black market back in Prague and which Dagmar smuggled wrapped in her tampons. We landed in Amsterdam with 10 US dollars left. Hans and Iet were waiting at the Schiphol airport, I managed to persuade the passport officer that he should let us go even if we have no return tickets. It was 15 June 1976 past 10 pm. and we were in the Netherlands. Hans and Iet brought us with our tiny luggage to their house at Santhorstlaan 87 in Wassenaar, a village adjacent to the Hague. We got our mattresses on the floor of Hans's study and soon fell asleep after four days of a very tense travel through half of Europe. The Claessens' hospitality was ex-

emplary. Iet and Hans introduced us to their four children, Bart, Marijke, Joost, and Matthijs and some of their friends. Our initial communication was in English, in the case of Dagmar only very basic English. I tried to follow Dutch and compare it with German which I knew fairly well. Our first two weeks were used for gradual acquaintance with Wassenaar and surroundings. With the beginning of July the Claessens family was leaving for their annual vacation in Dordogne, in southwestern France. We were entrusted their house. Before leaving Hans arranged a rented flat for us that was located above the confectioner's shop just some 100 meters from the Claessens' house. The rent was to start on 1st August. He also requested that Z.W.O. started paying my fellowship in monthly installments of 1500 Dutch guilders. Early in July an attempted coup in Sudan persuaded us to apply for the asylum in the Netherlands. By the end of July, after few sessions at the local police, we were granted permission to stay in the country as *asielgerechtigten* (with the right of asylum). Once Hans and the family returned we moved to our flat and our daily work together on the book started. Hans was granted a six-months' sabbatical leave from his university. Meanwhile, we applied for a special subsidy from Z.W.O. that would help us to prepare the manuscript for publication and also help the Publisher Mouton to publish our book. It took some time but in August 1977 we wrote to all contributors that 30,000 guilders (at that time equal roughly to 12,000 US dollars) was granted and thus the publication of *The Early State* was secured. But we looked to a future opportunity, the 10th Congress of the IUAES, to be held in New Delhi in December 1978. And we started to organise a special session there that eventually resulted in the next volume, *The Study of the State* (Claessen and Skalník 1981). In between, however, I had to live after the Z.W.O. fellowship ended in December 1976. I managed to find a temporary teaching employment in the English-speaking Institute of Social Studies in the Hague. But this lasted only until the end of June 1977. It was Hans Claessen who informed me that there will be a half-position available in Leiden University's anthropology department from September. He urged me to apply for that job and I did. That summer 1977 was quite dramatic because I was offered a lectureship at Zaria in Nigeria. That was mediated by Jack Goody. I am sure that Hans more or less persuaded his department to open the half-position in Leiden. I was invited for an interview and by the time I was to go to Nigeria I was informed that Leiden offers me the half-position. Also my wife got an offer for a full-time training position in anesthesiology at Groningen University in the north of the Netherlands. So we decided to take up these offers. That meant that we had to move to Groningen from where I would travel to Leiden for two and half days a week. Thus, from autumn 1977 Hans and I were working at the same

department. This lasted until the end of 1981. We went together to New Delhi, organized a three-day symposium mentioned above. Together with Iet Claessen and Olga Skalníková, my mother, we visited Nepal and spent a few days together in the most congenial atmosphere. There, in Kathmandu, in front of the late King Mahendra's statue I suggested Hans that he should study the Nepalese kingship in the field but he did not find it attractive enough. So Hans's career went through without a long-term field experience.

Subsequently, I participated in various meetings on early states organized by Hans in the Netherlands. In the meantime Hans suggested to the IUAES leadership that a new form of gatherings should be introduced under the title inter-congress. That was to be a less grandiose meeting manageable by medium-size countries. Amsterdam was to be the venue of the first IUAES Inter-congress and Hans was appointed the main organizer. Again there was a special three-days meeting on the evolution of sociopolitical organization there. Participants were supposed to prepare their papers in advance and the panel was mostly a place for discussion. That worked well and another early state volume was eventually published by a U.S. Publisher (Claessen, van de Velde and Smith 1985). I could not participate in the editorial work because by the end 1981 my job at Leiden finished due to the application of Dutch state frugal policies. Hans regretted but was not able to keep me in the Netherlands. During the first part of 1982 and early in 1983, I continued my fieldwork in northern Ghana that I financed from my Dutch unemployment benefits. At the same time I was also searching for a new teaching cum research employment. Adam Kuper, who was a member of the Leiden department, suggested that I apply for a vacancy at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. This I did, won the competition and before the end of 1982 I was offered a Senior Lectureship at UCT. This unfortunately meant that the close collaboration between Hans and me was at its end. However, we continued to meet at further IUAES activities such the 11th congress in Canada (the early state session, organized by Hans, took place at the Université de Montréal) in 1983, the 12th congress in Zagreb, Yugoslavia in 1988 and 13th the congress held in Ciudad de México in 1993. Although I participated in all special early state sessions that were organized by Hans, I published only one paper in his edited volumes, the one presented in Mexico (Claessen and van de Velde 1987; Claessen and van de Velde 1991; Claessen and Oosten 1986). However, I organized my own session on in Quebec City in 1983 and managed to publish it separately in the USA (Skalník 1989). I asked Hans to write a foreword which he gladly did. Though he wrote that 'we became separated by thousands of kilometers and – as

will be apparent from the pages that follow – also by divergent views, Skalník is inclined to be rather critical with regard to the past works, and I have continued working in the same direction’ he admitted that *Outwitting the State* is a fascinating volume demonstrating the limitations of state power in a convincing way (Claessen 1989: vii and x). For the last time we attended together an IUAES congress in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1998. By then, Hans was almost 68 and recently retired. Of course, I visited him when I happened to be in the Netherlands and we spoke on phone at least once a year on 30th November, Hans's birthday. We exchanged many e-mails and always kept cordial relations. I admired his academic stamina that reflected itself in publishing at least an article a year in *Social Evolution and History*. The last year of his life he somewhat complained that his ‘holy fire’ tends to disappear, meaning that his working ability is getting weaker. His voluminous work on the early state and sociopolitical evolution will not be forgotten. Memory of his astute personality will remain in my heart. Hans Claessen R.I.P.

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