

---

## **Henri J. M. Claessen: The Teacher, Scholar, Organiser and Friend – Personal Thoughts on His Passing**

---

**Renee Hagesteijn**

Henri (Hans) Claessen started his career as a teacher in geography, ethnography and history. He was a talented teacher, in the 1960s at a high school in Wassenaar and from the 1970s at the department of Anthropology of Leiden University. He had a gift for reaching out to the pupils and students, to grab and keep their attention and to push them to perform as best 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. I started my studies at Leiden University in 1974, and must confess that I mainly graduated at the end of my MA track thanks to the interesting classes, encouragement, advice and pedagogical skills of Hans Claessen. He fascinated me with his knowledge of patterns of change in history. To my luck, when I applied for a job as his student-assistant I was hired.

Henri Claessen was a dedicated, meticulous scholar. As an ‘arm-chair anthropologist’, he combined his passion for accounts of historic travelers and explorers with his growing interest in the theory of social evolution. He brought empirical substance and nuance to the discussions on the proverbial ‘slopes and staircases’ of the ‘Evolutionists’. He specialised in analysing the characteristics of ‘Early States’, as transitional phases between chiefdoms and ‘mature’ states. In doing so, Hans had a substantial impact on international Early State research from the 1970s into the 2000s. A comparativist approach was his trade mark, 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 anecdotal

notes to underline his line of thinking. He was ahead of his times in promoting a multi-disciplinary approach of historical centralization processes and encouraged likeminded scholars to investigate the traits and aspects of their empirical sources. As his assistant I was allowed to develop and execute a PhD project on Early States in continental Southeast Asia, modestly contributing to his advancement in thinking. During the years of my PhD project he was the best mentor one could wish for, as he combined constructive criticism with useful new leads. In the later years of his career he also experimented with an alternative model for describing political/sociological changes: the Complex Interaction Model (CIM).

He was an efficient and successful organiser, not only as the head of the department of Anthropology in Leiden and later the Dean of the Social Science Faculty, but also as convener of international congresses, seminars and workshops. In the Netherlands he convened the yearly 'Early State Club' meetings, with archeologists, (pre-) historians, anthropologists, linguists, sociologists. He enjoyed editing texts, written by himself or by others. For instance, in the 1990's – 2000s he was the editor of the Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia (BKI) of KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies. He was also invited to serve on the international editing board of the Journal Social Evolution and History (SEH), published in Moscow. For the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Studies (IUAES) he organized the first IUAES Intercongress, in 1981 in Amsterdam and served as Vice President for several terms (1982–1992). The papers of the various scientific meetings were often processed by Hans and co-editors into substantial, well edited volumes, to be published by renowned houses such as Mouton or Brill. Renowned are his introductory or closing chapters in which he looked for synergies in the various contributions to the volumes in order to sharpen his own theoretical line of reasoning. I learned much from Hans as an organiser and networker, skills that came to use in my own career at the National Research Council of the Netherlands and spin off activities.

Over the years, he kept regular contact with his colleagues, of whom many became his lifelong friends. Hans was a hard worker, but also appreciated the pleasures of good company, good food and drinks. He had a large worldwide network, also in places that were not so obvious in the times of the so-called 'Iron Curtain'. He correspond-

ed and visited with colleagues the USA, Russia, China, Mexico, India, Sri Lanka, Germany, Check Republic, UK, *etc.* Many of his colleagues were welcome at his home in Wassenaar. Hans 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. With his (former) assistants he kept close contact until the end of his life. I had the honour of being one of these assistants. I was allowed to partake in his national and international scientific network sessions and editing activities. Hans was a fantastic advisor, even in the later years when my career diverted from executive research into research management.

*August 21, 2022*



