
My First Meeting with Henri Claessen

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In January 1978 I received a letter from Henri Claessen of Leiden University. This was a (preliminary) invitation to a conference on *The Study of the State* (New Delhi, 18–20 December 1978). I was asked to propose a topic and for a preliminary thesis of my paper. The letter was sent in the name of both organizers of the conference, the second being Petr Skalník, a Czech then working at Leiden.

The invitation to New Delhi surprised me somewhat. Between 1964 to the 80s I focused my work on the economic history of West Africa, in particular Mali and Songhai, in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. Although already in 1971 I had become interested in the organization of West African states existing in the second half of the 19th century, and the role of the army in creating these states, by 1978 my publications on this topic were still very few. I was however able to relatively quickly propose and prepare a paper titled ‘The Army and the Formation of the States of West Africa in the 19th Century: the Cases of Kenedugu and Samori State.’ During our first meeting in New Delhi I spontaneously asked Henri Claessen how he and Petr Skalník had found me. He replied that I had published an article in 1970 which had interested them, so they had wanted to see me.

This was how our long-lasting cooperation within the frames of The Early State Project began. From that time on, I placed work on early forms of state in pre-colonial Africa at the top of my research agenda, comparing it to early medieval Europe. My participation in this conference gave me insight into the most current problems being discussed in political anthropology. I can without doubt consider Henri Claessen as one of the key researchers who influenced the direction of my work and the course of my research career.

My correspondence from 1978 with then unknown to me Henri Claessen concerned not only academic matters, but also matters involved with planning the organization of the conference. In April 1978 I received a confirmation accepting my paper and additional, important, information on the rules of presenting texts as well as on leading discussions. Before the conference each author had to distrib-

ute their (as concise as possible) paper to the remaining participants. At the time the paper had to be written on a typewriter, then multiplied by old style photocopying and the copies distributed by post. Sending a copy of a paper to roughly thirty people from various countries, in an era before computers became widespread, was quite a burden and took time. Even more, in 1978 Poland the creation of thirty copies of a text was subject to state controls. Luckily my text about the Kenedugu and Samori states was not subject to censorship.

During the course of the conference the author of each paper had five minutes to present their thesis. Three minutes were foreseen for each discussant, with the possibility of talking more than once. Summarizing the discussion was the responsibility of the panel chair. I later had many opportunities to see how efficient such an approach to organizing conferences was. I got to know Henri Claessen as the brilliant creator and organizer of an international team of researchers, always friendly with people, and open to a diverse range of approaches towards research as well as to different cultures. The participants invited to the conference in New Delhi as well as to subsequent ones came from around the entire world, from Canada, Mexico and the US, to Western and Eastern Europe, to Russia, India and Australia, and slightly later, from China.

The conference in New Delhi as well as later conferences was only one stage of our work. Already at the start of 1979 Claessen and Skalnik began editing a volume on *The Study of the State*, which was published in 1981. This was a similar pattern in the subsequent conferences. Henri Claessen and several other co-editors on later volumes maintained an uninterrupted and systematic output of work. Without doubt one of the characteristics of both this environment as well as of Claessen himself was the exceptional attitude towards work as something of great value, at both an individual and at a collective level.

The following conferences on the Early State Project took place in Amsterdam (1981), Montreal (1983), Zagreb (1988), and Mexico City (1993). I was not at Montreal or Zagreb but my papers, sent by post, appear in all volumes published after these conferences. I remember in particular my participation at the Amsterdam one, as after the conference itself ended I spent several days in the house of Hans and his wife Iet in Wassenaar, enjoying their hospitality and experiencing a very warm welcome. I had the chance to meet their children. Throughout all years of our scientific cooperation and friendship Claessen and I corresponded in a systematic manner, we touched upon academic matters, we sent each other copies of our work, and we sent each other wishes for Christmas and the New Year. I received my last email from him on 27 December 2021.