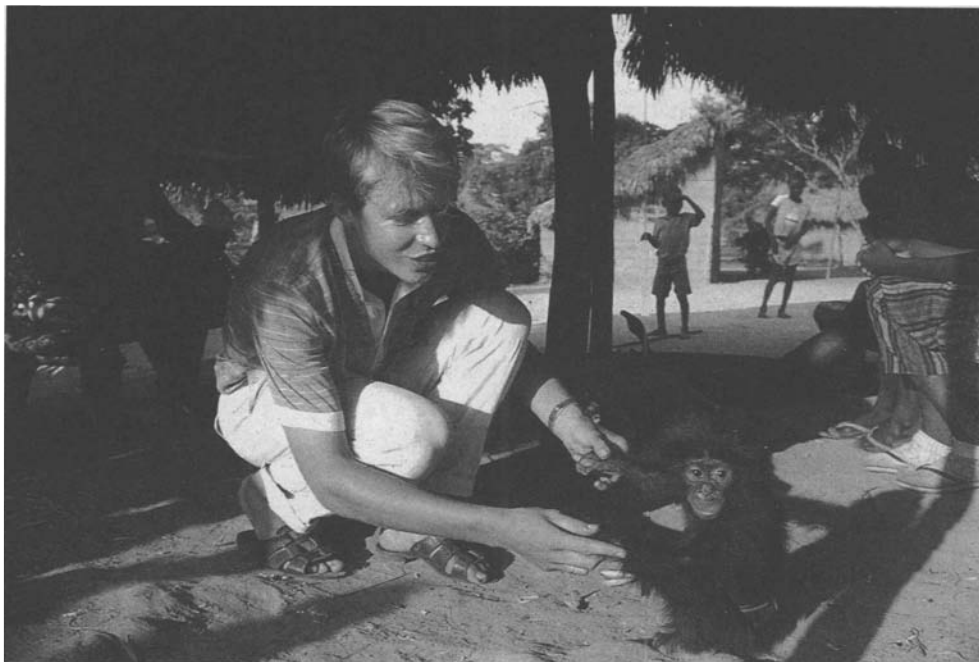


In memoriam Stefan Bekaert (1969-1998)



Stefan Bekaert with an infant bonobo during fieldwork.

This issue of *Archaeological Dialogues* features a paper by the young Belgian anthropologist Stefan Bekaert. It was to become one of his first publications, but it will remain his last too: Stefan died, together with four of his close friends, on a skiing holiday in Cavalese, northern Italy, when an American military plane of the SFOR forces snapped the cable of the gondola he was travelling in. Of the twenty passengers, no one survived the 300 feet fall. Stefan and his friends were part of a group of fifteen travel companions and intimate friends who had known each other for very many years. Stefan Bekaert, or 'Bekie' as his friends used to nickname him, was only 28. A young, very promising and talented anthropologist, intrigued by the issue of intercultural understanding (as his paper shows), he eventually came to be killed by the reckless use of war machinery in a conflict of ethnic aggression.

Stefan was born in Bruges on the 19th of May 1969 and studied Latin and natural sciences at the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwecollege in Assebroek, Bruges. He was noted for his intelligence, but loved for his cartoons. Seemingly effortless, he would depict a person (back then mostly teachers) on paper with a few well-chosen traits - a skill he had taught himself and which made him the best illustrator the school newspaper ever had. It was the very skill which enlivened his ethnographic field notes and the four hundred-odd pages of his doctoral thesis.

He went on to study sociology at the Catholic University of Leuven where he obtained a high grade for his graduation paper on the work and thought of the American ethnomethodologist A.V. Cicourel. Over the years, his interest in social and cultural anthropology increased and after obtaining a master's degree in this field, he decided that this was to be the discipline of his further research. As *aspirant* of the Fund of Scientific Research – Flanders, he undertook fieldwork in the Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaire) where he and his partner Hilde Ghyoot lived with the Sakata for nearly two uninterrupted years in 1994 and 1995. The semantics of traditional medicine were his focus but he kept a keen eye for all cultural expressions from century-old hunting songs to heroic football tales. His fieldnotes and letters back home were always filled with poignant observations, good wit, and honest introspection. For the paper on iron technology reproduced here, he visited three blacksmiths in June 1994. In his fieldnotes there are entries like: '10.10 am "Preparation" over; the smith enters; ± religious moment; I feel like standing up or crossing myself'. His fondness of ethnographic detail (of which the subsequent paper gives some further examples) never obliterated a much wider theoretical interest in social theory and philosophy of language. Empirical rigour and conceptual sophistication were evident sides of the same coin to him. 'My own anthropology really wants to be one of the ordinary, of the everyday,' he wrote in this article, but at the same time he had set himself the immense task of working 'towards a general theory of meaning'.

On October 20 1997, he masterly defended his Ph.D. thesis, entitled *System and Repertoire in Sakata Medicine*, which was very highly-acclaimed by all referees and said to be nothing short of brilliant. His career seemed to be launched: at the Africa Research Centre of the Leuven department of anthropology, he was expanding his work through a research project funded by the European Commission, he had just submitted his proposal for postdoctoral research, and was expected to become a lecturer, reader and eventually professor in Belgium or abroad. Hardly three months after obtaining his doctoral degree, a stop was put to all these prospects.

Besides his academic qualifications, Stefan was talented in many different areas. He was a fine musician who played instruments as varied as the clarinet, the piano, the guitar, and – since his girlfriend Hilde had given him one on the day of his graduation – the saxophone. Together with his band, appropriately called 'Bekie and his Husband', he played jazz, rock, and blues with an increasing amount of afro-influences after he had jammed with musicians in Zaire. Stefan was also a qualified football player, a keen squash player, a genuine pinball wizzard, and an avid skier. He could tell you about owls, rats, buzzards and other aspects of natural history, he could go on at length about the lack of environmental planning in the Flemish countryside and seemed to be interested in just about everything. To see 'Bekie' playing the blues guitar – leaning back on his chair, his feet on the table, his fingers supplely running over the pedal – was always a moving scene. He played the instrument as he practised science, as he drew cartoons, as he played football: effortless and with great enthusiasm. 'Bekie can do anything', his friends commonly said. Yet despite all his capacities and interests, what struck all those who have known him most was his modesty. He acted as if all those talents were not his own merits but something he incidentally happened to possess and which he felt responsible for. It made him a very gentle and warm person who enjoyed the company

of good friends more than the experience of personal success. There was something of a boyish avidity in all he did, and yet also something of a man's wisdom in all he said. Energetic and cheerful as he was, his mood was at the same time mature and as well-balanced as his elegant handwriting. His death is surely a great loss to anthropology and Belgian social science, but even more a personal loss to all who have known him.

In December 1996, Stefan Bekaert gave two papers at the Faculty of Archaeology in Leiden, one of which dealt with the interpretation of Bantu iron smelting technology. It is such a tangible and obvious example, he said, of the multiple levels of meaning associated with human action. Because the paper had a wider relevance beyond its ethnoarchaeological scope, it seemed fit for publication in *Archaeological Dialogues*. Stefan submitted a first version of his text right after his graduation and we were all very keen on it. 'This paper tackles a central problem in the interpretation of all material culture,' one of the editors said. Stefan had laid bare the dichotomy between a structuralist and a phenomenological theory of meaning, while at the same time undermining the polarization and alleged incommensurability between the two. No matter how different their basic assumptions, both theories could be seen in his view as the extremes of a continuous spectrum with on the one hand structuralists seeing meaning as essentially codic and reflective and on the other phenomenologists seeing it as repertorial and tacit. Hence the keywords in the title of his dissertation: 'system' and 'repertoire', which stood for his wish to integrate structuralism with phenomenology, or, put differently, Lévi-Strauss with Schutz. The sexual metaphor underlying iron-smelting practices in Africa which Stefan analysed neatly shows the gradual transition from a repertorial, taken-for-granted, everyday experience to a more explicit, encoded, elaborate system of meaning based on binary oppositions between weak and strong, male and female, bitter and sweet.

We believe that a similar dichotomy permeates the archaeological discussion on the 'meaning' of material culture and, more importantly, that a study on 'the meaning of meaning' such as the one proposed by Stefan Bekaert is quite timely. Hodder's early work (*Symbols*



'The homunculus from Lévi-Strauss runs around with a formal reading grid in his head, the one from Schutz with a file of samples' (cartoon and words from an unpublished paper by Stefan Bekaert).

in Action, Structural and Symbolic Archaeology) contains good examples of the structuralist side of the discussion: meaning here comes about by opposition of the sign to other signifiers, by tearing it apart into fundamental binary oppositions. Meaning was structured, systemic, diacritical, collective and fairly a-historical. In recent years, however, structuralism has been silently abandoned in favour of theories which insist on everyday action, practical understanding, tacit knowledge, embodiment and individual knowledgeability. Meaning has become more flexible, historical, individual, pragmatic, situated, and experiential. Although the name of Schutz has not made such an important archaeological impact like Lévi-Strauss's, ideas similar to the Schutzian brand of phenomenology have been imported into archaeology from structurationist thinkers like Giddens and Bourdieu. The theoretical debate deals no longer with the obsolete and sterile dichotomy between processualism and postprocessualism, but between an earlier and a later phase within postprocessual thought. Stefan Bekaert's paper, therefore, elucidates some of the basic tenets at stake in this debate and shows a way to move beyond.

After our first comments, Stefan agreed to make his paper more archaeological by establishing links between the anthropological and archaeological literature. He worked himself through the essential Hodder, Tilley, Miller and Rowlands, as well as through a pile of ethnoarchaeological publications on iron-smelting in Africa. The deadline for his paper had been set for 15 February 1998 and Stefan worked hard to meet that date.

During the long coach journey to our ski resort in northern Italy, I asked him how his paper was coming along. 'I'm getting on with it,' he said, 'but I still have got a lot to do.' Four days after that conversation, his broken body was found in the wreck of a yellow gondola on a snow-covered slope. The very metals of which the Sakata believe they are brought about by a life-giving process determined Stefan's death when the plane's iron tail cut through the thick steel cable.

The editorial board decided to publish the first version of his article to his honour and to replace the planned discussion by this introduction. But a few days after his funeral, I was in his house in Leuven where Hilde had started unpacking his luggage. 'You might be interested in this,' she said and gave me a bulky file which said *iron smelting*, 'I found it in his suitcase. He must have intended to work on it in Italy.' I looked at it and the first thing I noticed was that apart from my letters to him and a number of articles he still wanted to integrate, it contained an updated version of his paper. Perhaps not as archaeological as he wanted it to be, but somewhere along the way. I asked Hilde for the date. The 15th of February, she said. It was only then, standing there in his living room with his papers on the table and the drums, arrows and spears he had brought back from Africa in the corner that I suddenly became aware of the literal meaning of the word deadline.

David Van Reybrouck