THE MOBILITY OF LAW across the Indian Ocean world is a relatively new field of research. Recent studies have greatly added to our knowledge of the cultural mechanisms of law within or beyond imperial and colonial structures in early-modern and the late modern age. The international conference ‘Ocean of Law: Intermixed Legal Systems across the Indian Ocean world, 1550-1950’ that we organized at Leiden University in December of 2015 brought together scholars from different fields and disciplines, interested in the cultural mobility of law.

The three-day conference was generously funded by the Leiden University Institute for History, Leiden University Centre for the Study of Islam and Society (LUCIS), Asian Modernities and Traditions (AMT), Leiden University Fund, and the Cochrane Itinerario. The first day of the conference started with a keynote speech by Prof. Paul Halliday (University of Virginia) who pointed out the importance of the tension between legal formalism and ‘longing for certainty’ on the one hand, and the uses of legal pluralities and the uncertain practice of law on the other. The second keynote speech, delivered by Prof. Engseng Ho (Duke University and National University of Singapore), demonstrated the cross-cultural specificities and hybridity of law in the making of Indian Ocean communities, especially of Islam.

The eight panels spread across three days were chaired by Nira Wickramasinghe (LIAS), Petra Sijpesteijn (LUCIS), Egbert Koops (Leiden Law Faculty), Adriaan Bedner (Van Vollenhoven Institute), Jos Gommans, Manon van der Heijden, Esther Zwinkels, and Alicia Schrikker (all from the Leiden Institute for History). No particular themes were given to the panels, as all papers were closely connected to each other. We only kept a macro- and micro perspective in arranging the panels.

Many of the presentations and resulting conference discussions turned out to focus on the spatialization of law rather than on developments in time. In this spatial context, the papers explored the encounters of legal traditions, which often travelled long distances (by textual genealogies and narrative ‘footprints’) is a recurrent theme in law’s archives as it re-articulated the functions of legal encounters between the Islamic and Christian worlds. Stewart Motha (University of Virginia) who spoke about the possibility of provincializing Grotius in the historiography of international maritime law by looking at the possible unique characteristics of ‘Indian Ocean Law’ and multiple legalities of the Indian Ocean. Nikitas Hatzimihail (University of Cyprus) presented the ways in which hybrid legal traditions of the oceanic rim crossed its boundaries to the Mediterranean world.

In addition to the panels, the conference concluded with a roundtable moderated by Carolien Stolte (Leiden University, Managing Editor of Itinerario). Major themes and issues that had come up both in the keynote speeches and presentations – such as texts and translations, cross-cultural hybridity and pluralistic practices – were discussed once more. In the ensuing discussion, participants responded to the possible unique characteristics of ‘Indian Ocean Law’ with regard to its many cross-cultural and transregional interregenerations of legal systems, as discussed across the presentations. The three-day event was extremely enriching to our knowledge of global legal historiography, especially with regard to the Indian Ocean world. The presentations’ emphasis on spatial mobilities and hybridities of law was substantially supported through the interdisciplinary focus of the conference. We are planning to bring out a special issue of Itinerario as its proceedings.

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