THE WORKSHOP was organised by Nira Wickramasinghe, Professor of Modern South Asian Studies (Leiden University Institute for Area Studies) and Alicia Schrikker, Lecturer in Colonial and Global History (Leiden University) as part of their project ‘Being a slave: Indian Ocean slavery in local context’, and was made possible by a grant received from Leiden Global and was organised in cooperation with the International Institute for Social History (IISH). The conveners of the workshop brought together scholars from different disciplines and areas of interest to discuss and present their research on the experiences and the meaning of being enslaved. They reflected on the lived experience of slavery in areas like India, Indonesia, South Africa, South Asia, and the east coast of Africa. The workshop participants took a variety of sources into account, like court records, petitions and private letters. But also the behaviour of (free) slaves and the display of objects related to slavery were analysed. Attention was also paid to unexplored primary sources such as the archives for the plantations of the Dutch East India Company. “Stories of slave experiences are everywhere, once you look for them”. Alicia Schrikker started the workshop by presenting her experience with the transfer of slaves and experiences of the enslaved can be found in the archives and literature, and in a great variety of genres. The question, however, is how one can find them and write about them. Elaborating on this, Schrikker used a recent biography of an eighteenth century Dutch Governor, who was famous for his scientific drawings of flora and fauna in the different places in Asia where he was stationed. The voluminous biography turned out to be full of stories of enslavement and life in slavery. It is, she said, embarrassing to see just how much material there is on slave life hidden in the literature and in the archives once you look for it. It is time now to place these stories of enslavement at the forefront and analyse and present them to the public. Nira Wickramasinghe continued by arguing that studies on slavery and slaves that have often been written are ignored, they are not published, and they are not studied. But the archives are there, the material is there. The problem is the lack of interest in retrieving and using the archives. The workshop took this as a starting point and it focused on making invisible actors and voices from slavery visible. The workshop aimed to study the experience of being a slave as well as the imaginations and representations of slaves rather than the trade in the enslaved. Over the last decades, historians have mined French, British, Portuguese and Dutch records for quantitative data on the European slave trade in the Indian Ocean. The information that is often missing, is the qualitative data on the experience of being a slave. The international workshop ‘Being a slave: Indian Ocean slavery in local context’ was held at Leiden University on 29 and 30 May 2017 aimed to study the origin and afterlife of enslavement as well as the imaginations and representations of slaves rather than the trade in the enslaved.

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