

**BOOK REVIEW:
WOOD. L. M. 2020. ARCHIPELAGO OF JUSTICE, YALE
UNIVERSITY PRESS. PP 264**

TCA Achintya

Ph.D. Scholar;

University of Virginia, U.S.A

Email: tca.achintya@gmail.com

Historians of global and transnational trends have often grappled with questions of language and metaphor. As they work to move beyond the limitations of the constraints of the nation-state construct, the question of what set of ideas best conveys the complex tangle of relationships and influences remains one that vexes writers. A linked question is the problem of describing the ideas in language that is easy to apprehend. What metaphor or imagery best captures the system that the historian is attempting to describe?

Archipelago of Justice offers up the ways in which Laurie M. Wood engages with these issues, providing a legal history of French imperial holdings across the long 18th century in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Wood examines the trajectories of subjects and colonial magistrates to highlight the ways in which France's possessions were bound together in a truly global framework that spanned both the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean (p. 6). The book goes on to argue that this global framework was bound together by a legal network, one that is the focus of her work. These regional law courts, known as *conseils*, stretched from the peripheries of France itself, all the way across the French holdings from Canada, down to the Caribbean and across to the Indian Ocean with their possessions in the Mascarenes and India (p. 3).

Wood's description and explanation of this network hinges upon her characterization of the *Conseils* as legal *entrepôts*, drawing on metaphors and language associated with networks of trade to highlight a global network of law. This network was staffed by, what she calls a, *themistocracy* of "mobile legal experts whose careers shaped, and ultimately braided Atlantic and Indian Ocean legal cultures together" (p. 6-7). In framing the global character of France's *Ancien Régime* empire, she builds on the work of scholars such as William Beik and Julie Hardwick, seeking to orient the focus of French legal history away from the "continental nation-state enterprise"

by demonstrating the “simultaneous emergence of state institutions” in overseas territories (p. 9). This further allows her to chart the feedback loop between new and old territories, while drawing attention to law and space together to explore the ways in which legal authority might be deployed (pp. 10-11). Wood acknowledges herself that she draws on the globally oriented scholarship of British imperial scholars, especially South Asianists, who have “long noted the connections between the British Atlantic and Indian Ocean during the long eighteenth century”. *Archipelago of Justice* aims to expand that discussion into the francophone sphere, which has for the most part, according to her, been slower to recognize these reverberations.

Each of her chapters breaks down the mechanics of this legal culture across the French empire. Her first one focuses on the local, social and geographic configurations and the intimate circulations of actors operating within the framework, “reinforcing institutional commonalities among legal *entrepôts*” (p. 58). In examining the personal networks of these elite actors, and the multifarious roles performed by the local officials beneath the elite legal experts, the groundwork is laid for the dissemination and conservation of an empire wide legal framework. Her second chapter dives deeper into the role of *Conseils* and the central position they occupied in colonial societies. The rituals of law common across wide regions, and the construction of sub-regional judicial structures flowing out of legal *entrepôts* were the mechanisms by which *conseils* “facilitated the feedback loops between colonial and metropolitan subjects.”

Having established the significance of these institutions and networks, the latter half of her work traces the ways in which distance and local pressures came to operate as the Empire was bound together by a tightening of its imperial connections, and as administrators and magistrates worked to resolve evolving tensions and localized concerns as the *Conseils* and the “full cast of legal personnel across the long eighteenth century” changed over time. The consolidation of the network accompanied a growing web of conflicts as well as regional clashes gave way to the significantly more global Seven Years’ War of the late 18th century, prompting changes to the postures of actors in relation to the metropole. Wood also highlights the need to maintain scholarly focus towards the regional dimension during this transition to a more overtly global phase of imperial connection (pp.168-169).

As she argues in her conclusion, “France’s global constellation of law courts” connected its disparate colonial spaces into a “coherent whole.” Wood seeks to push back against legal histories which have envisioned the Indian and Atlantic Oceans as separate “legal regions” or “regional regulatory spheres,” arguing instead for understandings based on

more consolidated global networks and connections. (pp. 175-176).

Through her study of France's Ancien Régime empire, Wood paints a complex picture of legal networks that draws both on the binaries of a World System's approach of Metropole and colonial peripheries as well as more layered imaginations. Her descriptions of the legal networks for instance evoke an imagery of web-like constructions that historians such as Alison Games describes in *The Web of Empire*. Woods is particularly convincing in describing the *conseils* as *entrepôts*, describing their nodal functions in her own web of laws and networks and the lines of influence running along them. One question that does remain however is in the messy interstices of Global History and Imperial History. While Wood undoubtedly describes a genuinely trans-regional system of connections, what is less clear is whether this archipelago of justice is a global network or simply an imperial one. How does one move beyond the limitations of the imperial model in conceptualizing global legal connections? Is such a move even possible? Wood's work aims to describe a global legal history but ultimately leaves open these questions, and the nuanced problem of whether a global history beyond imperial histories is even possible.

Archipelago of Justice does however largely achieve what it sets out to do. As a text on global and legal histories, it should speak to the complex ways in which legal networks are embedded and negotiated across vast spaces. The ways in which France's civil law was disseminated through the institutions of the *conseils* offers valuable insight into the mechanics of France's legal empire. To a reader normally situated in the British Empire when exploring these topics, a survey of their traditional enemies makes for a refreshing change in perspective.

Reviewer Bionote: *TCA Achintya is a doctoral candidate at the University of Virginia. He specializes in the legal history of the British Empire, focusing on legal practitioners in British South Asia. His doctoral research traces the rise of Indian legal actors in British India over the course of the 19th century, looking at the ways in which Indians broke British exclusion over the legal system. Through the prism of the people who inhabited the legal systems of the Empire, his work tries to better understand what it meant to belong to, move across, and practice law in the British Empire over the 19th century.*