

The Owada Chair Conference at the University of Tokyo, 20th – 23rd of March, 2023.

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The Owada Chair for International Law and Geopolitics, named after Professor Hisashi Owada, is a shared rotating chair between Leiden University and the University of Tokyo since 2021, with annual proceedings alternating between Leiden and Tokyo. For this year's proceedings held in Tokyo, I was chosen as one of the three PhD candidates representing Leiden University with a delegation including four professors and the Rector Magnificus of the university. The events commenced with a reception hosted by the Ambassador of the Netherlands in Tokyo, with the alumni of Leiden University in Tokyo also being invited. The interactions with Leiden University alumni, as well as with PhD students from the University of Tokyo formed an integral part of this visit. The academic and cultural exchange led to discussions which were not only trans-disciplinary, but also cross-continental and cross-cultural in nature.

Considering the interdisciplinarity of this conference, the topics discussed and the sessions throughout the four days of the conference were of immense interest to me as a young scholar currently reading international history, but with previous training in international human rights law. Professor Hisashi Owada during his address also highlighted this conflict between International Relations and Legal disciplines in terms of how they view the international community and inter-state interactions. It is the normative framework of international law and the realities of international relations which are often in disagreement with each other.

The theme for this year's Owada Chair proceedings was 'memory and reconciliation'. Many interpretations of the word were discussed during the course of the week, where the Japanese word for reconciliation – 'Wakai', was brought up by Professor Owada, as the word itself means the softening of a situation for an amicable outcome between parties. Professor Kawakita, on the other hand, mentioned that the Hebrew and German use of the word 'reconciliation' meant atonement, which has rather religious connotations. She also introduced the German idea of 'reconciliation with oneself' which is one of the more important steps for 'reconciliation' in some cultures.

Professor Atsuka Kawakita delivered her keynote address on 'emotions, memory and reconciliation'. She used the case study of how Germany has dealt with its nationalist socialist past of the Nazi regime, and the long shadow of the nationalist socialist period. Her address dealt with the role that the past plays in society and how the society collectively deals with its past. She asked these pertinent questions in her address by merging them with international law and foreign policy perspectives. She claimed that memory and reconciliation cannot be dealt with properly through traditional approaches in the discipline, and also without acknowledging the nuances and complexities involved in delving into this subject.

"Memory is past made present", she quoted Terdiman to emphasise the differences between historical sciences and the culture of remembrance. A series of events that happened in the past versus the perception of said events in individual or collective memory, and their role in identity formation based on various political, social, economic, cultural, ethnic, religious and aesthetic interests. Here the importance of 'multiperspectivity' comes into play.

The professors from Leiden University, Dr. Vineet Thakur and Professor Larissa van den Herik, during their addresses, presented cases from South Africa and Indonesia respectively.

Dr. Thakur discussed the truth commission in South Africa and pushed forward the argument that reparations, psychological healing and closure should be the outcomes of reconciliation. Conversely, while discussing Dutch war crimes in Indonesia during the years 1945-1949, Professor van den Herik highlighted the role of political sensibilities, and its translation into the legal language as well as the importance of state responsibility as a stepping stone towards reconciliation.

With a slightly different perspective on state responsibility, Professor Akihiko Tanaka spoke about Japanese post-war reparations to Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and North and South Korea in connection with the atrocities committed by the Japanese military during its colonial rule. Here the idea of restorative and transitional justice was introduced as he also discussed the issue of Korean comfort women in Japan. This connected well with my own presentation on transitional justice as an important component of reconciliation. Within this panel discussion, the selected PhD students from Leiden University and the University of Tokyo came together to discuss different interdisciplinary ideas of reconciliation and what constitutes as an elemental component for the panellists.

The sessions were concluded on the 23rd of March, 2023, with Professor Owada highlighting that according to his definition, 'truth, contrition, reparations and justice' essentially form the fundamental aspects of reconciliation as all these elements complement each other. Some important take-aways from this conference were not just about the various definitions and processes of reconciliation, legal and moral responsibility, and the various forms of attaining justice, but also the concept of memory and truth telling within and as a society, in its many forms, as means of overcoming grief, healing and attaining closure.