

Call For Papers

Authoring Human Rights in West Africa and beyond: Expressions of slaveries in Literature (texts) and the Arts (visuals)

-University of Cape Coast, Ghana, January 30 - February 1, 2023-

Who is the subject of human rights? Who speaks on behalf of whose human rights, when, how and why? How do individual stories of abuse contribute to our understanding of human rights and slavery? And how are human rights implemented or implied in literary, cultural discourses and artworks that deal with different forms of slavery and/or forced labor? These questions are central to the proposed conference, focusing mainly but not exclusively on West-Africa.

Contemporary forms of slavery are not fully comparable to most historical forms of slavery before and during colonialism, which were officially institutionalized and circumscribed in legal texts. Nevertheless, slavery as a form of extreme and unwanted exploitation, continues to exist in many heterogenous forms, which is why it makes sense to adopt a plural terminology, employing the term ‘slaveries’. As Laura Murphy has argued, slavery has reemerged “in a wide variety of legitimate workplaces – in agricultural fields, on construction sites, in quarries, in brothels, on the battlefield, in the homes of the wealthy.” (Murphy, “The reemergence...”, 3). And the word “neo-abolitionism” is applied to the fight against these new forms of slavery or forced labor (Okyere, 2022: 31). According to Alessandra Brivio, due to economic inequalities people are kept in “shackles of debt” (Brivio, 2017: 39). This is especially true of women. In the internal slave trade on the Gold Coast, female slavery was more common than male (ibid., 34). Though legal status changed after emancipation, female dependence often continued, sometimes in the form of “female pawnship” (ibid., 32). In contrast to historical forms of slavery, the hallmark of contemporary forms of slavery is their non-inscription in the legal sphere. Indeed, it is precisely their illegal nature, that makes contemporary practices of exploitation disappear from the radar, since they are not legally regulated and documented. During the last four decades, international human rights organizations have paid an extraordinary attention to child labor and other abuse of the rights of children, but as Samuel Okyere has argued, “despite its virtuous ideals and claims to empower children, in practice the international child protection regime can be narrow, ethnocentric and disempowering for many children and their communities (Okyere, 2022: 9).

The question is how do we represent and talk about extreme forms of exploitation in the post-slavery era, or in other words after the legal abolition of historical slavery? Can the real and lived legacies of historical forms of slavery shed light on newer forms of contemporary slavery, ranging from extreme forms of unwanted displacement (human trafficking, migrant prostitution), to extreme forms of labor exploitation (forced labor, migrant and child labor)? What kind of stories can (not) be told (silences) and how do contemporary narratives re-use vocabulary, storylines or tropes from discourses on historical slavery? Do we have images and forms of representations of extreme forms of contemporary exploitation that are comparable to those of slaves in the colonial period? Does the use of the concept of “slavery” for describing real and complex contemporary social dynamics, serve a good cause or does it hinder a proper understanding of such dynamics? What terminology is used and should or could be used otherwise?

In this conference we focus on authorship in its broadest sense and look for contributions that describe how ‘authors’ reflect on human rights discourses and speak to the role of human rights in local contexts of slavery and forced labor in all its heterogenous and varied forms. We wish to focus on how the vocabulary of human rights and cosmopolitanism

is used by African NGOs, legal institutions etc. who work with them, and how this vocabulary is used and/or re-used in literary works, oral culture, artworks, and songs, as well as in the stories and conversation of ordinary people etc. Memories of historical slavery are often expressed in discourses emphasizing social branding, stigmatization, social death, but also abolition, emancipation, freedom and resistance (Patterson 1982). Does the same vocabulary influence our understanding of contemporary coerced labor? What is the relation between a political and a moral understanding of rights in Africa? Is anti-slavery vocabulary congruent and fully overlapping with anti-colonial discourses and/or are discussions about slavery suppressed due to the need for national unity in postcolonial African societies? (Akyeampong, 2001: 1; Keren 2009: 993). And to the extent that novels with contemporary African slave narratives (e.g. Sy 2008; Nazer 2005) or about historical forms of slavery (Yaa Gyasi 2017; Harruna Attah 2018) have experienced an upsurge, what function do these works serve in contemporary contexts?

Human Rights are international and abstract. They are tied to a global agenda, a cosmopolitan ethics and universal values but as Abena Ampofoa has argued, they are “utilized, domesticated, and transformed in local soil.” (4). They are implemented in local contexts and mediated through different cultural, religious, visual, literary and rhetorical discourses. There may be a fruitful dialogue between the two, there might also be a conflict. The aim is to focus on the varied ways in which memories and experiences of slavery have been, and continue to be, *negotiated* in the light of different cultural and historical framings of slavery around the globe (cf. Baggesgaard and Pelckmans 2021: 1).

We invite paper presentations that can open up new understandings of the discursive or pictorial framing of contemporary slavery and human rights, especially in a West African context.

We hope to publish the conference proceedings and envisage providing more details about a potential publishing project closer to the conference date.

Confirmed keynotes

Laura T. Murphy, Professor of Human Rights and Contemporary Slavery at the Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice at Sheffield Hallam University (UK). Laura T. Murphy’s research interests include: forced labour globally, with a particular interest in survivor narratives and first-person testimony, tropes of slavery in West African literature, historical and contemporary slave narratives. Latest publications: *The New Slave Narrative. The Battle over Representations of Contemporary Slavery*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. (Ed.): *Survivors of Slavery: Modern-Day Slave Narratives* (Columbia University Press, 2014), *Metaphor and the Slave Trade in West African Literature* (Ohio University Press, 2012). Together with Reena Dutt, *Freedomville: The Story of a 21st-Century Slave Revolt*. Random House Audio. 2021.

Samuel Okyere, PhD, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, School of Sociology, Politics, and International Studies, University of Bristol, UK. Samuel Okyere’s research interests include the use of sociological, anthropological and policy perspectives in African contexts, the interplay between human and child rights, power, class, ethnicity, (un)freedom, inequality, the legacies of slave trade and colonization under conditions of globalization. Currently Professor Okyere is involved in a five year long European Research Council funded project *Modern Marronage: The Pursuit and Practice of Freedom in the Contemporary World* (ERC ADG 788563). He leads the project's arm in Ghana. Latest publications: Okyere, Samuel and Neil Howard (Eds). *International Child Protection. Towards Politics and Participation*. Palgrave Studies on Children and Development. Palgrave MacMillan, 2022.

Topics of relevance to the conference could be but are not limited to:

- Human rights, slavery and literature/art: genres/aesthetics/tropes/images/rhetorical and narrative form of slavery stories
- The positionality, visual and rhetorical strategies of author(-s) to convey human rights discourses on slavery
- Positionalities of the enslaved, the enslaver and the spectator of slavery and how these are negotiated between local (regional/national) and global levels.
- How do forms of authorship in West Africa reproduce and/or counter global discourses on slavery, aid and human rights?
- (Discursive) uses of the generic concept of slavery vs. the concepts of descent-based slavery, forced labour/servitude/pawned labor/debt prison/ contemporary-modern slavery, etc.
- Representations of individual vs. collective rights in contexts of extreme exploitation
- Ideas about differences between rights of man vs. rights of citizen
- Orality vs. written cultures addressing human rights and slavery
- Relation between rights and dignity, between legal and cultural understanding of forms of freedom, respect and liberty
- The re-use and transformation of the vocabulary, storylines and tropes of historic slavery and abolition in discourses on different forms of contemporary slavery
- The clash or dialogue between local, regional, national and international, cosmopolitan discourses on slavery and human rights
- The functionality of different forms of discourses (politics vs. human rights vs. cultural vs. poetic vs. visual vs. narrative discourses) in relation to slavery & human rights
- Theatricality of humanitarianism (ref. Lili Chouliaraki)
- Colonial and postcolonial contexts for understanding discourses on slavery
- Who is/are the subject(-s) of Human Rights (Jacques Ranciere)
- Slavery as a crime against humanity, systemic and slow violence
- Authoring (types of) slavery and human rights in the widest range of practices, such as the novel, oral histories, folktales, social media, drama, dance, cinema, comics, songs, expressions and children's literature
- Authoring (types of) slavery and human rights in journalistic pieces, newspapers, documentaries, etc.
- Practices of representing (types of) slavery and human rights in NGO websites, in the court system, in politics and in different cultural and legal contexts

Background of the conference

The conference is organized within the framework of a larger research project with the title *Authoring Slavery*, hosted by Aarhus University Denmark (PI. Mads Anders Baggesgaard), <https://cc.au.dk/en/centre-for-the-study-of-the-literatures-and-cultures-of-slavery>. The project is interdisciplinary and consists of scholars from the disciplines of comparative literature, anthropology and history and is co-created by scholars of Aarhus University and two universities in Ghana: Cape Coast University and University of Ghana, Accra. This conference is the 2nd one out of 3 conferences and is organized by a subresearch group focusing specifically on human rights and slavery. The conference is organised as a close collaboration between academics from Denmark and Ghana.

Venue and organization

The conference is kindly hosted by the Centre for African and International Studies, at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. For international participants transport from Accra will be arranged for collectively but only on one specific moment in time and for a fee.

The organizers of the conference are:

Lotte Pelckmans, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Institute for Advanced Migration Studies, Saxo-Institute, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, pelckmans@hum.ku.dk

Emmanuel Saboro, Senior Lecturer, Centre for African and International Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana, esaboro@ucc.edu.gh

Karen-Margrethe Simonsen, Associate Professor of Comparative Literature, Aarhus University, Denmark, litkms@cc.au.dk

Abstracts

Abstract of max. 500 words should be sent to all 3 conference organisers: Emmanuel Saboro (esaboro@ucc.edu.gh), Lotte Pelckmans (pelckmans@hum.ku.dk) and Karen-Margrethe Simonsen (litkms@cc.au.dk), before October 31st 2022.

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