

Conference

Beyond Chains and Choices: Legacies of Strong Asymmetrical Dependencies in Africa

December 2-4, 2026

Organizers:

Prof. Dr. Stephan Conermann, Spokesperson and Principal Investigator, Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies, and Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Bonn, Germany

Prof. Dr. Marion Gymnich, Principal investigator, Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies, and Dean of Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Bonn, Germany

Prof. Dr. Chioma Daisy Onyige, Professor of Criminology, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt, and Director, Center for Peace and Security Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

In Collaboration With:

Faculty of Arts, University of Bonn, Germany

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Bonn Centre for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS), University of Bonn, Germany

A three-day multidisciplinary conference, “Beyond Chains and Choices: Legacies of Strong Asymmetrical Dependencies in Africa,” will be held 2–4 December 2026 at the Bonn Centre for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS), University of Bonn, Germany, in collaboration with the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

The conference builds on the landmark workshop held in May 2024 at the University of Port Harcourt on “Contemporary Slavery and Asymmetrical Dependency in Nigeria,” which was situated within the intellectual framework of the BCDSS Cluster of Excellence “Beyond Slavery and Freedom.” This framework moves beyond the rigid binary of slavery versus freedom and instead examines a broad spectrum of strong asymmetrical dependencies that continue to shape societies across time and space.

The conference seeks to deepen scholarly conversations on how historical, institutional, cultural, economic, and political forms of dependency continue to shape African societies. While formal systems of slavery have long been abolished, many African countries continue to experience contemporary regimes of coercion, exploitation, and unequal power relations, including human trafficking, forced labour, domestic servitude, child exploitation, debt bondage, ritual dependency, gendered subordination, and structural economic dependency.

These conditions are sustained through enduring legacies of colonialism, governance failures, poverty, corruption, weak institutions, socio-cultural norms, religious practices, and global inequalities. Together, they generate complex webs of dependency that blur the boundaries between freedom and unfreedom, consent and coercion, agency and domination.

The conference will bring together scholars from the Arts/humanities and Social Sciences to critically examine these dynamics through interdisciplinary theoretical and empirical approaches. It aims to foster collaboration between academics at the University of Port Harcourt, early-career researchers, postgraduate students, and international partners, particularly scholars from the BCDSS.

Suggested Themes Include, but not limited to:

Slavery, servitude, pawnship, and dependency in precolonial African societies

Colonial transformations of labour, coercion, and governance

Postcolonial continuities and reconfigurations of dependency

Contemporary forms of slavery, trafficking, and forced labour

Gendered and generational dimensions of dependency

Cultural, religious, and ritual practices sustaining asymmetrical relations

Political economy, poverty, and structural inequality

Migration, displacement, and dependency regimes

Law, justice, and institutional responses to exploitation

Memory, narrative, and representations of unfreedom in literature, film, theatre, and visual arts

Comparative and cross-regional perspectives on dependency in Africa

Proposals will be reviewed by the conference committee. Selected papers will be considered for publication in a special issue of an academic journal or an edited volume on asymmetrical dependency, slavery, and unfreedom in Africa.

Please submit an abstract (250–300 words) together with author name(s), institutional affiliation, and contact details to: chioma.onyige@uniport.edu.ng

Deadline for submissions: 31 May 2026

The conference will be held in hybrid format (in-person and virtual participation).

The University of Port Harcourt is one of Nigeria's leading federal universities, located in the oil-rich Niger Delta region, a historically significant site for studies of labour, extraction, environment, and dependency.

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