Dear Mrs. Muinjangle,
dear Mr. Haukambe,
dear Mrs. Ortman,
dear Mrs. Mchome,
dear international guests,
ladies and gentlemen,

it is a great honor for me to welcome you all here today in the name of the State of Berlin. We are here in Müllerstraße in the neighborhood of Wedding. It is a very special place, in which the history of German colonialism is still deeply inscribed. A lot of you have been advocating for many years to finally rename the streets in the so-called African Neighborhood – only a few hundred meters walk from here – which still honour the colonial perpetrators Peters, Lüderitz and Nachtigal.

I would like to take this opportunity to especially thank you – the descendants of the victims of German colonialism from Namibia and Tanzania – that despite this still existing trivialization of the German colonial period, you have come here to the land of the former colonial oppressors to fight against this injustice. I herewith express my greatest recognition and respect.

Berlin is the place where, within just a few months during the years 1884 and 1885, the European states, together with the U.S. and the Ottoman Empire, arbitrarily divided the African continent into colonies. From the German Imperial Capital the rule over and the many crimes against the German colonies were organized. And it was also from Berlin where between 1904 and 1908 the inhuman war of extermination against the Herero and Nama in back then so-called "German South-West Africa" was commanded. The fact that this genocide – for this cannot be called anything else
– has not yet found its way into the general German commemorative culture is unacceptable. As the former capital of the German Empire, Berlin has a very special responsibility. It is now time to face this issue and to take the necessary steps.

As Senator for Culture and Europe, however, I am only equipped with limited resources. The renaming of streets, for example, is in the hands and responsibility of the Berlin districts. Nevertheless, I am strongly supporting the currently ongoing search process for new names, which are supposed to mainly honor resistance fighters of the former colonies. Even though this process has not been completely free of conflicts so far, I am confident that the district is on the right track here and that we will soon be able to celebrate renaming festivals on the streets of Wedding.

Our main tasks on the Berlin-level lie primarily in developing – together with the civil society, the descendants of the victims, the Federal level and the districts of Berlin – a viable concept for a vivid commemorative culture of German colonialism and its far reaching consequences. I have been Senator for Culture of Berlin for less than a year now. It is our declared aim to put this issue on the agenda during the current legislative period of five years.

However, it is very important for me to emphasize that this cannot be a self-contained process. The consequences of German colonialism endure up until now. They are perceptible every day. Colonial thinking is still present in racist patterns of thought and structural discrimination against black people in Germany.

The title of today’s event clearly points out the thematic focus of the upcoming two conference days. Not only since this summer, the Humboldt Forum has been criticized for not discussing the colonial origins of many artworks and for not taking the subject matter seriously enough. And, of course, those responsible will have to deal with these issues before the opening. The origins and the acquisition contexts of the objects to be exhibited must be made transparent, possible returns negotiated with the countries of origin and – especially with regards to human remains – handed over to the respective descendants.

I can comprehend criticism regarding the overall concept of the Humboldt Forum. But as Senator for Culture, I am also a member of the foundation council of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation and therefore I exchange views and discuss with the persons responsible on a regular basis. I feel that the different standpoints are not as
rigid and the professional opinions are not as far apart as it always seems from the outside or through the media.

The huge attention that colonialism has received in the course of the last months – especially due to the enormous commitment of all those present here today – is a great opportunity which we should use. And I am very confident that the people in charge of the Humboldt Forum will not deny doing so. On the contrary, it is in their own interest!

Quite apart from the Humboldt Forum, I am very happy to see a lot of exciting projects dealing with German colonialism popping up in the Berlin cultural scene these days. We can start locally here in Berlin and then increase to the next levels. The district museums already play a leading role in doing so. In the framework of the so-called Reparation Week – which is also coordinated by the organizers of this conference – an exciting exhibition opened yesterday in the district museum of Treptow about the first German colonial exhibition in 1896.

The Berlin Senate for Culture and Europe has set up a small but fine project fund to financially support projects dealing with topics around commemorative culture. With this fund, we were also able to finance an exhibition at the district museum of Tempelhof-Schöneberg which historically and artistically examines its own colonial past. I am very optimistic and I will do everything in my power that we will see many more of these kinds of projects in Berlin in the next years.

I am very happy to be here today and learn as much as possible from your experiences and advise. I would like to thank the organizers for the great program throughout the week and wish all of us an exciting event!