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Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence

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Statement on Achille Mbembe and the Debate over Anti-Semitism

The Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth seeks to work toward the re-configuration of African Studies. This agenda requires us to take a position in the current debate about Achille Mbembe, a leading intellectual on the African continent. The recent demand by some public officials in Germany to withdraw the invitation to Mbembe to hold a keynote at the *Ruhr-triennale* festival in August 2020 on account of purportedly anti-Semitic statements sparked off a public discussion that has partly overshot the mark.

The board members of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence and the Institute of African Studies at the University of Bayreuth endorse the declaration issued by the African Studies Association in Germany (*Vereinigung für Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland, VAD*) on May 14, 2020 (see <https://vad-ev.de/vad-stellungnahme-zu-den-vorwuerfen-gegen-achille-mbembe/>), especially the plea to keep the debate focused on the issues. Beyond the question of how one might assess the accusation of anti-Semitism, we observe with growing concern how the debate tends to obscure Mbembe's crucial contribution to the analysis of the postcolonial world.

The current discussion underscores the pertinence of Mbembes argument about powerful agents and mechanisms forcing human beings into a "black condition" (*condition nègre*). The fact that these mechanisms are at work not only in colonial Africa, but all over the world, and that they usually rest on the same patterns and premises—not least the disparagement and even the dehumanization of the Other—should give those in privileged positions plenty food for thought, whether in Germany or elsewhere. Perhaps the urge to protect privilege can help explain the attempt to denounce Mbembe, being one of those who uncover these mechanisms. Some people may wish to recline in their arm-chairs when Mbembe appears to be discredited—as if we were released from our responsibility to grapple with the "black condition" once he has been exposed as an ostensible anti-Semite.

It is not our intention to express a blanket endorsement of Mbembe's positions. It is a matter of course that they may and need to be the subject of intellectual disagreement. Yet, we share the concern that underlies his critique of postcolonial power relations, and we will continue to promote research on these issues, without invalidating decolonial perspectives in the name of alleged anti-Semitism.

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