

New Year's Reception 2021 | Voltaire Prize Laudation

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Writing and giving a laudation is a pleasure, because it is a pleasure to find award-worthy achievements, to rejoice and honor them publicly. Here and now, however, it is a very special pleasure to have written and to deliver such a laudation, because we can not only be pleased that a woman has prevailed against all kinds of resistance, more precisely: discrimination and persecution, very precisely: a Woman of Color (WOC) in the very German scientific community in this country. To an even greater degree, we can look forward to an awardee from whom we can all learn something. Who am I talking about? Ms. Elisabeth Kaneza, who receives the “Voltaire Prize for Tolerance, International Understanding and Respect for Difference” this year. With this award, which is kindly financed by the Friede Springer Foundation, the University of Potsdam has been honoring a scholar every year since 2017 who advocates the freedom of research and teaching as well as the right to freedom of expression. This year's awardee *Elisabeth Kaneza* fled to Germany with her family from the hell of the genocide in Rwanda at the age of six and is currently working on a doctorate on the subject of “racial discrimination”, which is set at the border between law and political science. As befits someone who researches public law topics, Ms. Kaneza defines the subject of her doctorate very precisely: “Race does not express that there are biological 'human races', but that ... people and groups ... who, because of these characteristics, experienced unequal treatment” are being discriminated against. This is one of the reasons why, incidentally, this year's awardee also votes against the currently hotly debated deletion of the term “race” from the Basic Law, speaks confidently of “black people” and calls for a non-discriminatory “Black life” (with a capitalized first letter) “in white-dominated societies”. It should go without saying, she argues, that researchers of color should be consulted when it comes to questions on how to deal with the term “race” today. And when asked in this way, her very clear argument is: “Because legal protection against discrimination presupposes that it is ascertainable. Whether or not it is legally ascertainable depends in turn on whether the law recognizes the relevant criterion of discrimination.”

Of course, when I talk about the life and work of Elisabeth Kaneza so far, I could ask whether she herself was led to do research on discrimination through the discrimination that a young woman from Rwanda experiences in Germany. But with a positive answer, the deep problem of how much has been neglected in the last 70 years after the mothers and fathers of the Basic Law launched it at the constitutional convention in Herrenchiemsee becomes apparent – it was neglected, in any case, to adapt the constitutional reality, which is in principle regulated by the constitutional text, to the fundamental rights norm. It is obvious that we still need the work of those affected by discrimination and racism in order to be able to remember this serious omission. It would be better to use the discrimination that Ms. Kaneza experienced – for example in the North Rhine-Westphalian school system, more precisely: in Aachen – as an opportunity to examine the reality of the noble norms of the prohibition of discrimination in everyday life in our Berlin-Brandenburg education system. In her dissertation, Ms. Kaneza uses interviews to examine everyday experiences as well as the legal reality of, for example, police laws. After all, relevant institutions such as the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency, political parties and foundations have long since started to use Ms. Kaneza's expertise. The University of Potsdam deserves a special mention, as it will be supported by this year's Voltaire Prize winner over the next two years – as part of a process under the motto “creating diversity” – in carrying out the diversity audit of the Stifterverband. Hopefully, it will be one consequence of the Voltaire Prize that even more people can benefit from this expertise. A first step towards this would be, for example, to follow Elisabeth Kaneza's highly informative Twitter account, at least a first step for those who use this medium.

In any case, I am impressed by how much Elisabeth Kaneza has not only thought about discrimination and raised her voice against it since school, but also has taken on the responsibility of raising

awareness and changing the behavior of other people who are not immediately pushed towards the topic because of their own biography and therefore like to overlook everyday disadvantages. At the same time, it is important to her to strengthen those who are still victims of discrimination – it's called "Empowerment" in English, "strengthening" is what my parents would have called it. Ms. Kaneza started with this kind of commitment at an early age: She not only worked as a class and student body representative in school, but also worked as a youth leader in educational institutions and as a coach in intercultural and integration projects during her studies in Maastricht and Berlin. In 2013, she founded the Kaneza Initiative with the aim of actively shaping social change and making a contribution to the promotion of human rights and diversity. Three years later, the initiative finally became a non-profit organization: the Kaneza Foundation for Dialogue and Empowerment e. V. It is hardly a coincidence that this association promotes human rights training for women of African origin, but also corresponding trainings for education professionals with a traditional German educational biography and, above all, empowerment such as education for young people. I know few doctoral candidates who initiated and institutionalized such an initiative at such a young age.

The jury, which suggested Elisabeth Kaneza for the Voltaire Prize, is not alone: Elisabeth Kaneza has already received several awards for her commitment, including awards from the Robert Bosch Foundation and the German Integration Foundation. She has also been selected several times as a Senior Fellow of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and, in this context, volunteered to coordinate the UN Decade for People of African Descent. Why should she also be awarded the Voltaire Prize then? The Kaneza Foundation's homepage has a wonderful section about the three values to which this foundation is particularly committed: human rights, equal opportunities and diversity. This section reads: "We believe that respect for human rights, equal opportunities and the recognition of diversity are important prerequisites for the strengthening of our democracy. It is only when we see diversity as an enrichment that we can fully exploit the immense potential that everyone brings to the table in the process of shaping our society. We see intercultural dialogue as an important guarantee for social cohesion."

If one wanted to draw a parallel between these values, for which Elisabeth Kaneza stands, and Voltaire, who was also concerned with the basic rights of all and the specific rights of every individual, there would, of course, not only be analogies but also differences; anything else would be rather surprising for a contemporary of Frederick the Great, who died 243 years ago. No matter how Voltaire's utterances are to be interpreted – the Potsdam Award named after him honors respect for difference. Ms. Kaneza has not only documented this respect in abundance, she also teaches it to other people through her academic work as well as through her civic engagement. For this reason alone, she is a worthy recipient of the Voltaire Prize.