

# STRATEGY OF THE AFRICAMUSEUM 2024-2029

*“Everything passes, except the past” (Luc Huyse)*

*“If you want to go fast, walk alone. If you want to go far, walk together.” (Burkinabe proverb)*

# INTRODUCTION

The AfricaMuseum is publishing its new strategy today. This strategy reflects our internal discussions on the future of the AfricaMuseum as a research institute and museum, and is also the result of external exchanges. I would like to thank all those who contributed to it, the Financial Management Committee and the Scientific Council, the staff and external experts. The debate is far from over and I hope that this document – now made public – will allow us to broaden the exchange and enhance the way the institution operates. While the orientations of the next federal government and its budgetary policy will be an essential element in the discussion, it is important for the Royal Museum for Central Africa to have a compass and define our vision and mission clearly.

Your suggestions and comments are welcome at [feedback@africamuseum.be](mailto:feedback@africamuseum.be).

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# STRATEGY OF THE AFRICAMUSEUM

## 1. What is the vision of the AfricaMuseum?

**As a museum and research centre, the AfricaMuseum is a forum for study and dialogue on societies and the natural environment in Sub-Saharan Africa.**

**The AfricaMuseum is a place of memory and tells the history of the colonial past but also works with and on the Africa of today and tomorrow.**

**The AfricaMuseum is committed to generating interest and promoting social involvement in the challenges of today and tomorrow.**

**The AfricaMuseum does not walk that path alone, instead building sustainable partnerships, in Belgium, in Europe and especially in Africa.**

Africa and Europe are two continents with close geographic and historical ties. A product of that proximity, AfricaMuseum was founded in 1897 at the instigation of Leopold II to promote his colonial enterprise. Its genesis as a colonial project remains evident in both the infrastructure and the institution's structure. The colonial context informed the scientific endeavour underlying the Museum, and while researchers of that period took a scientific approach to their work in biology, earth and human sciences, they were inevitably influenced by prevailing mindsets. Discoveries and insights gleaned in disciplines such as physical anthropology, agronomy, and geology were used to organise the colony's political structure, economy, and society. The museum itself served as a showcase for the Congo Free State and propaganda for the colonial project.

While scientists did cast a critical eye on the colonial past over the course of our existence, the major renovation undertaken between 2013 and 2018 prompted the AfricaMuseum to take a decisive turn towards decolonisation. We wish to keep walking this path in the coming years, and examine history as we turn to the present and future in an open and critical manner. Adjustments continue to be made even after the 2018 reopening, with – amongst others – new installations in the Grand Rotunda and the transfer of the statue depot containing stereotyped images, in a bid to 'unmask' the colonial representations to which the Museum long contributed. Calling attention to racist representations is a central concern of the institution. The 'Let's talk about racism' space, opened in May 2023, is part of this effort, as racist representation was not only encouraged in the colonial era, but remains a reality in Belgium, Europe, and all over the world. One of the AfricaMuseum's ambitions is to address this social challenge and create bridges between the increasingly diverse societies present in Belgium and Europe today. With migration a hotly debated and polarizing topic, the AfricaMuseum can play an important role by providing insights from the African viewpoint and, crucially, raising awareness among young people of diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the notion of global citizenship.

The BELSPO strategic plan as well as the conclusions of the parliamentary commission on Belgium's colonial past, which met with general agreement, also serve as starting points for this strategy.

**In 2024, the institution will begin a new cycle of its scientific cooperation of Africa, and will strive even harder to organise research in a spirit of equal partnership and co-creation.** Scientists are a driving force in examining the colonial past, not only in the human sciences but also in the earth and life sciences. Be it in field research, training, capacity-building of partner institutes, or proper management of the tangible and intangible cultural and natural heritage conserved in Tervuren, work must be done on a participatory and equal basis.

Diversity, inclusion, transparency, inclusive communication, gender equality, scientific integrity and excellence, sustainability, and the delivery of high quality services to the public are **values** paramount to the AfricaMuseum as a federal institution. These universal values are rooted in the principles of human rights, the rule of law, and democracy. It is our privileged position as a scientific institution and museum to play a pioneering role, especially in providing a framework for informed and open social debate. In this context, the institution's code of ethics will be thoroughly reviewed and refined. This code is already in effect, both internally and for all our partners. It also implies that in its internal and recruitment policies, the institution takes a structured and effective approach to gender equality and diversity.

**The mechanisms of change in the AfricaMuseum can be described as decolonisation or decoloniality.** This entails, first and foremost, the continued critical examination of the past – a pursuit which is only legitimate if done together with African partners and diaspora communities. The AfricaMuseum shall take concrete steps towards structured cooperation with African diaspora communities, and generate mutual trust in the shared desire to walk the path of change hand in hand as partners. People from Africa and the diasporas will be increasingly involved in both scientific endeavours and public outreach in more meaningful ways. In taking this participatory approach, we strive for co-creation<sup>1</sup> in the broad sense of the term. AfricaMuseum scientists are already making strides in the area of 'citizen science', where citizens are involved in the fieldwork for various disciplines such as provenance research or parasitology. Although one of the AfricaMuseum's core tasks is to serve as a knowledge centre, it is no longer reduced solely to this role, and its researchers have long abandoned their ivory towers of old.

It should be made clear that the **geographical focus** of the AfricaMuseum is Africa south of the Sahara, owing to the provenance of our collections, but that this focus is informed by a decolonial perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Co-creation is a practice that aims to engage people in the process of designing the various activities offered by the AFRICAMUSEUM as a museum and scientific institution: research projects, training, events, interpretation of objects, visits, exhibitions, educational projects, websites, etc. Participants can be scientists, private citizens ('citizen science') or members of a community group or other organisation. The essential element is that they are not part of the museum staff or its management structure.

Co-creation is thus a rewarding way to deepen understanding and spread knowledge, and to ensure that multiple voices provide different perspectives. It serves as an essential guide to highlighting our research and the collections, and foster collaboration in full confidence with, among others, African people and people of African origin. This approach also provides fertile ground for proactively involving younger people in both the internal operations and communication efforts of the museum. Furthermore, co-creation finds a place in the engagement of guides and volunteers, who become crucial partners in the process of creating and sharing content.

## **2. What is the mission of the AfricaMuseum?**

**The vision of the AfricaMuseum is realised through attentive management of the collections in our care. Through our research, our collaborations and partnerships and with the organisation of exhibitions, events and education we widely share these collections and the knowledge and values they bring.**

**In its relationships with the public, and with youth and the African diaspora in particular, the AfricaMuseum aims to be accessible and inclusive.**

**As a forum for study, education and dialogue, the AfricaMuseum adopts a participatory approach, striving for co-creation.**

**It is the firm belief of the AfricaMuseum that Africa today must be better understood and promoted, as it looks to the future.** How can African populations and diasporas truly connect with their cultural and spiritual heritage, both material and immaterial? How does Africa help inhibit global warming, and how can the continent absorb its consequences? And what exactly are these consequences, as tropical flora and fauna move past their usual confines to other latitudes? What impact does the rush for strategic raw materials have on populations and biodiversity? The aim is to better understand these issues through our research, and it follows that any insights gleaned should be shared with the AfricaMuseum's visitors and the general public.

Congolese and other African partners do not merely expect the AfricaMuseum to cooperate in the **restitution** of cultural goods that were obtained through theft or violence. Belgium, in creating a clear legal basis, is already a pioneer in the matter. In particular, the DR Congo wishes Belgium to go beyond the simple restitution of objects by providing support for the reconstitution of the country's ancestral cultures. The digitisation of the museum's archives partly addresses this need. Our interest in cultural and natural heritage, both material and immaterial, is not limited to the past but extends to the present, exemplified by the dynamic urban cultures of African cities that nourish the Belgian, European, and international cultural scenes.

The AfricaMuseum wishes to uphold its scientific institute's pursuit of excellence. As long as the necessary resources and critical mass of researchers are available, fundamental research will continue, even if its social relevance is not immediately obvious. However, in light of public outreach efforts and the conditions attached to external funding from BELSPO, Belgian development cooperation, and Europe, **AfricaMuseum researchers, with the support of public outreach, shall pursue research of high social relevance. Areas such as colonial history, provenance research, climate, biodiversity, health, food security, safety, and education** are priorities. Given the strategic partnerships in Africa, the AfricaMuseum thus makes a greater contribution to training African scientists and building the capacity of their research institutions and museums.

Although the AfricaMuseum now has a modern museum space, it faces significant challenges regarding the **sustainability of its buildings**. Office spaces and collection reserves and storage areas urgently need to be adapted to meet **current safety and comfort standards**. In this context, available surfaces must be used optimally while taking into account the safety and well-being of staff, visitors, and collections towards which the AfricaMuseum has a certain responsibility. It is also essential to modernise research infrastructure and study possible synergies with other research institutes and universities.

### **3. Specific transversal objectives**

#### **3.1. What we shall do**

- Develop an accessible AfricaMuseum collection in the spirit of 'unity in diversity' that transcends the various scientific disciplines, with an emphasis on centralised management, digitisation, and professionalisation (see Annex 3).
- for scientists, commit to research projects with high societal relevance in areas such as colonial history, climate, biodiversity, health, food security, and safety (applied sciences)
- with a view to an equitable partnership with Africa, keep contributing to training African scientists and building the capacity of their scientific institutions and museums (see Annex 1).
- in its role as a forum and through public outreach, stimulate dialogue and debate around contemporary social issues within the AfricaMuseum's areas of competence
- in its public outreach, use appropriate and inclusive communication for its different activities and initiatives, and thus broaden its reach and expand its audiences (see Annex 2).
- seek out synergies within the institution and with other research institutions to improve services, in a context of limited resources
- promote internal and external communications and interdisciplinarity, which should be the norm for all colleagues
- evaluate and refine the AfricaMuseum code of ethics.<sup>2</sup> This code applies to our internal operations, research activities, public-oriented activities, as well as to all external (legal) persons who are active within or for the institution.
- organise structured collaborations with African diasporas in Belgium, with an emphasis on the invaluable expertise they provide;
- strengthen the AfricaMuseum's national and international networks, with a special focus on the private sector and civil society, by establishing an association of Friends of the AfricaMuseum, amongst others.
- implement a structured and effective gender and diversity policy for recruitment and human resources management. Upstream, the AfricaMuseum organises paid internships and/or fellowships, with priority for candidates of African descent based in the EU or Africa, as a means of lowering barriers to recruitment. Downstream, the AfricaMuseum is working on a more transparent HR policy that encourages initiatives, communication, and personal development. This should lead to the creation of a safe space that fosters the growth of every staff member. This is a priority for personnel, and managers in particular, for the improvement of the well-being and performance of all colleagues.
- develop a buildings policy with an emphasis on sustainability and reduction of the total occupied surface area (see Annex 4).

#### **3.2. How we shall do it**

##### **3.2.1. Better coordination**

- Organise weekly (service) and monthly (department) meetings to allow each colleague to express themselves in a safe space and encourage the emergence of creative ideas.
- Organise quarterly multidisciplinary meetings (with two services) to work in a more transversal manner and stimulate innovation: get to know colleagues better and present a project/activity/collection per meeting, with questions and discussions.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.africamuseum.be/sites/default/files/media/about-us/mission-organisation/doc/Ethische%20code%20AfricaMuseum\\_EN\\_2024.pdf](https://www.africamuseum.be/sites/default/files/media/about-us/mission-organisation/doc/Ethische%20code%20AfricaMuseum_EN_2024.pdf)

- break down walls, both formally (programming committees, clusters) and informally.

### **3.2.2. Better communication**

- Better define and disseminate our core values to create greater well-being. Managers must promote and uphold these values.
- Learn more about colleagues and each other's work and objectives, which implies strengthening internal communication.
- For personnel: infolunches, museum news, informal activities
- in teams/services: regular meetings, team-building activities, informal activities such as coffee breaks.

### **3.2.3. Well-being policy**

- recognise the presence of tensions which must be acknowledged and resolved. To this end, implement a well-being policy plan to reduce internal friction. A 'conviviality committee' has been created to promote well-being and engagement.
- strive for an open and respectful work environment and communication, and conduct constructive meetings
- email hygiene (e.g. via a short training course)
- provide support for managers (coaching, intervision, etc.) to aid them in handling complex situations.

### **3.2.4. Clearer structure**

- Define and communicate institutional procedures in an objective and comprehensive way to promote efficiency and quality.
- Establish organisation charts and clusters in order to define responsibilities and increase motivation.
- Gradually implement performance evaluations for the museum and scientific institute (constructive feedback culture).

### **3.2.5. Innovate**

- Proactively seek funding for innovative projects, with internal and external support in seeking and managing funding from third-party sources.
- Attract young researchers and volunteers (MSc and PhD students, citizen scientists) to launch and conduct innovative projects
- Proactively seek new partnerships with other societal actors (NGOs, schools, civil society, community organisations)
- Adopt inclusive recruitment strategies (e.g. by publishing job openings in African networks) and thereby diversify our workforce.



# ANNEX 1. RESEARCH

## 1.1. INTRODUCTION

A first research strategy with main research themes was produced in 2018 and submitted to the then Director General (G. Gryseels). After five years, a review is considered appropriate given current developments:

- The newly appointed Director-General (B. Ouvry) wants to evaluate the current structuring of the different entities within the museum and develop new strategies for our priority activities, including research.
- The second phase of the Framework Agreement with Belgian Development Cooperation has been initiated and requires an up-to-date reference structure to put the proposed activities in a larger perspective, including our research programme.
- With on the one hand the dwindling number of permanent researchers and support staff, and on the other hand the recruitment of several FED-tWIN researchers, the decreasing research capacity and critical mass of research staff requires revising our research strategy.
- Belgian Science Policy (BELSPO) is currently developing a new funding program for research initiatives (2024–2029 / Policy for Science (P4S) & Science for Policy (S4P)). For this, the Federal Scientific Institutes (FSIs) need to define research priorities grouped in larger research themes.

More generally, BELSPO developed a research strategy for 2022-2024. The strategic objectives defined therein that are of direct relevance to the specific research strategy of the AfricaMuseum are:

- SD1.01: define the research strategies of all entities and integrate them in a common research strategy
- SD1.02: re-enforce the collaboration between FSIs by the development of centres of excellence/expertise emanating from the common research strategy.

RMCA defined one major strategic objective in this regard: the adoption of a transversal research strategy, based on synergetic research, in order to better respond to societal and governmental priorities and strengthening R&I in a general manner. Two sub-objectives were defined in this context:

- Support the federal government's decision on research regarding the provenance of collections and archives obtained in a colonial context.
- Work on the creation or strengthening of centres of excellence based on the themes of the RMCA, and in collaboration with other FSIs.

This requires a more elaborate and intensive interaction with other FSIs on what their research strategies comprise and where we can look for overarching and transversal actions. The previous research strategy already looked at such interactions within the group 'Nature' (i.e., between RMCA and Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences), but was not developed in detail, except for some activities and joint units related to molecular biology and identification services (i.e., JEMU and BopCo-CE).

### **1.1.1. P4S and S4P**

A large proportion of research conducted at the RMCA is, in addition to the anchorage through the priorities mentioned earlier, linked to very specific fields of expertise by its staff. The research activities are a balance between fundamental and applied research (with sometimes one of the two dominating) but in most cases is geared towards activities with a societal relevance. As a result, the RMCA scientific staff is regularly contacted to provide expertise by different policymakers at different levels (regional, national, international). This results in a dual research program: policy for science (P4S) and science for policy (S4P). This duality is recognised by BELSPO with the previous research program (BRAIN) and the propositions for the future program also defining these different approaches.

### **1.1.2. S4C: Science for Cooperation**

Given the nature and geographic scope of the RMCA, as well as the fact that a substantial part of RMCA activities are funded by Belgian Development Cooperation, there is a direct link between the (scientific) activities of the different research units and their relevance for international cooperation and global citizen education. Additional activities funded by other organisations are related to international collaboration with African partners. The strategy and nature of the activities is dependent on the funding source.

Although it is not the intention of financing the research priorities as such through Development Cooperation means, the scientific expertise present in the institution and their outputs can be complemented with the expertise and interests of partners in the South. It also forms the starting point for joint activities with African institutions, and among partners in the South (South–South initiatives).

S4C is, therefore, also seen as a transversal element present throughout the themes and priorities outlined below. The objectives of our cooperation are to facilitate access to research and training programmes for African scientists and to contribute to the strengthening of the institutional capacities of their research organisations. For this effort to be genuinely transformative, we strive to integrate the insights and approach of our counterparts in the South at the earliest stage of defining projects. This means going beyond responding to the needs of our partners, but by working together in a spirit of true partnership and co-creation. The added value of our cooperation is enhanced by the long-term commitment of our institution to our partners. We recognise that transforming scientific institutions and enhancing their capacities demands a long-term relationship, building mutual trust.

### **1.1.3. Critical mass and P4S or S4P**

All the above leaves no option but to question which kind of research should be prioritized or discontinued in the AfricaMuseum.

Currently, the scientific staff of the four departments (cultural anthropology & history, earth sciences, biology, collections) consists of a limited number of permanent (statutory) staff members and a larger group of contractual staff, mainly financed by project funding. The latter are often staff members that have been employed by the AfricaMuseum for a long time (in some cases spanning decades) through a succession of projects, and often employed through contracts of limited duration. Only half of them have an open-ended contract. For most research groups, the number of statutory staff has declined over the years. The demographics of the workforce show that this tendency may continue in the future as between now and the next five years a large proportion (almost one-third) of the statutory staff will retire. Their role and function are essential and indispensable to ensure and maintain an extensive research program at the institutional level. Not only are they often people with very specific expertise, they also take care of the main administrative tasks, and are the driving force for fundraising initiatives through the writing and follow-up of project proposals. In addition, they have other duties and responsibilities (collection management, outreach, activities for the general public, management, networking, etc.). With the dwindling number of statutory staff members, this “core” group is under pressure.

Already, in several cases (especially where statutory staff has retired already or will retire soon), the tasks and responsibilities are taken over by contractual staff even though they do not always have a long-term contract of their own. If no new recruitment of long-term staff members is feasible, this will have huge implications. If its critical mass is too limited, the AfricaMuseum will have to decide whether its focus would be solely on applied research, in support of demand and queries by policy makers. Alternatively we may choose fundamental research to develop and enhance the expertise of the AfricaMuseum in a limited number of fields. Both are feasible but in the second case finding alternative funding will be extremely difficult and the number of scientists and subjects covered will dwindle.

The options then are that:

In the first scenario (S4P), the AfricaMuseum would focus on supporting activities that re-enforce mainly the transversal themes and respond to the specific governmental requests. More specifically, this would be provenance research, the support of existing or newly started centres of excellence/expertise (like climate), the development or support of units that can provide identification services, a centre on mineral resources and/or natural hazard risks.

These activities could be combined with open access to the vast collections and archives through digitisation activities. It could also include activities within the framework of Development Cooperation but then with an emphasis on capacity building, research questions formulated by our South partners and guided by the SDGs, training, and access to the AfricaMuseum collections.

In the second scenario, the P4S option, the AfricaMuseum can focus on research that further strengthens the fields of scientific expertise for which it is currently internationally known and recognised. This would include a thorough analysis of the current strengths and relevance of the fields of expertise within the institution.

Both options are not mutually exclusive and some overlap is possible. But the S4P will require a more flexible mode of working and recruitment depending on the shifting needs of policy support. P4S will allow more long-term planning and maintaining of unique expertise. But obtaining project financing on this basis is extremely difficult and will see our staff and expertise dwindle at a fast pace.

It is essential that the AfricaMuseum and its authorities decide which way forward in the forthcoming *years and take a firm long-term commitment to support the decision*. As this decision will drastically influence the research activities of the researchers in the future, it is important that this decision is made in consultation with those who will be affected. This is not the case for the researchers retiring soon, but very much so for those who have a long career ahead within the institution.

It should be emphasized that the research strategy, as outlined below and developed in dialogue with the different research departments, has been developed under the assumption that sufficient critical mass of long-term employed research staff will be maintained. The coming months and weeks will allow us to understand more clearly where we stand and may force us to make clearer choices than we did in the present document.

## **1.2. STRUCTURE OF THE RESEARCH STRATEGY**

Scientific research is one of the three main pillars of the AfricaMuseum's mission, together with collection management, and its role as a forum for exchange and dialogue. Through its research, the institution aims to contribute to a better understanding, recognition and function of natural environments and societies in Africa south of the Sahara, with a focus on Central Africa, and the influence and impact that these environments and societies have beyond Africa.

The institute holds unique archives and collections of Africa, resulting from the historical connection between Belgium and Central Africa through colonisation, as well as more contemporary ones and collections from other parts of the continent. Scientific research on these collections and archives contributes to the recognition of Africa's role in world history, but also its wealth of ecosystems, its biodiversity and its cultural and natural resources. As climate change and biodiversity loss worsen, Africa's role as a globally important provider of key ecosystem services and nature-based solutions will only increase. It is a major provider of mineral resources that are at the basis of global economic drivers, such as alternative energy sources and e-mobility. Africa is also the only continent with a predicted exponential increase in population size in the forthcoming decades. Increased scientific efforts in and of this continent, in partnership with African researchers, is therefore necessary/paramount (maybe more than anywhere else).

Finally, our colonial history also impacts Belgian society today, with a significant and growing proportion of our population being of African descent. Through its collections and archives, the museum wants to reconnect the past with the present. It strives to facilitate cross-cultural and cross-generational dialogues and develop ideas for a more equitable, inclusive and sustainable future.

### **1.2.1. *Research criteria***

All research activities should comply with our ethical code. In addition, research activities should, as much as possible, fulfil the following three criteria below.

#### **1) Collection-oriented/based**

Research shall be linked to collections both in terms of studying and enriching them and of updating their context and relevance. The term 'collections' comprises both collections of physical objects (specimens, artefacts, archives, samples), but also archives of collected/generated scientific data (geochemical and geophysical data, inventory data, DNA sequences, remote sensing imageries, databases, images, maps, wood trait data...) and immaterial culture (languages, music, field observations...).

#### **2) Partnership with African colleagues**

Research conducted shall have a geographic focus on Africa south of the Sahara. This also implies that it is performed in co-creation with African partners, adopting an inclusive approach by fostering a partnership on equal footing and bidirectional exchange of knowledge and expertise resulting in a mutual benefit for all partners involved. Equal partnership means true collaboration in all steps of the scientific process, starting from project design to project proposal submission, from data collection to analysis, from reporting to publication. Projects in collaboration with partners outside Africa, for example with African diasporas in Belgium or Europe are also included.

#### **3) Societal relevance**

While research can be approached from both a theoretical as well as an applied angle, it shall often have societal relevance. Societal relevance can imply research that supports policies, and/or contributes to better understanding of main societal themes (health, food security, environment, decolonisation, conservation,...) or research that exposes blind spots. In addition, education is a key role for our institute. This can happen at different levels including formal training (e.g. university level), general/institutional training or outreach

activities targeting communities. Finally, one of our core missions includes the translation of our research findings to the wider public through exhibitions, museum talks, and educational activities.

### **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)**

In addition to the above, the strategic plan for development cooperation at the AfricaMuseum (2019–2028) pivots on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (see <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>). Activities within this framework should be linked to the specific Strategic Objectives outlined in the agreement for Development Cooperation. However, given the core activities of the AfricaMuseum, its geographic focus and its role in partnership with African counterparts, the SDGs objectives should also be seen in a wider context and can be a guide for scientific research, irrespective of whether they are linked to activities under the Belgian Development Cooperation framework programme or not.

### **1.2.2. Central research themes**

RMCA's research domains are human and social sciences, biology, and earth sciences. These activities can be grouped in four major themes.

#### **Theme 1: Earth's evolution and diversity**

Study of the evolution of the African continent and its organisms and the resulting geology and geomorphology, the diversity of natural and mineral resources, landscapes, large ecosystems and living organisms. This theme aims at studying events over a longer timescale (i.e., geological or evolutionary), to increase our understanding of the processes that we witness today. It includes research activities related to tectonics, petrology, geomorphology, geochemistry, mineralogy, climate-vegetation interactions, fire history, taxonomy, biodiversity, phylogeny, population genetics, and evolutionary processes. The knowledge thus obtained is a prerequisite to understanding changes that are happening at a shorter timescale, and can contribute to the development of more sustainable practices and solutions for today's challenges.

#### **Theme 2: Environmental change**

This theme deals with the study of environmental changes associated with human activities and natural processes. Several factors influence Afrotropical landscapes, fauna and vegetation and the human populations that inhabit these landscapes. This theme aims at untangling the drivers of change and monitoring their impact in the past, the present and the future. It looks at African tropical ecosystem dynamics, functioning and services, (human-induced) changing climatic conditions, landscape mapping, urbanisation, migration, geochemical cycles, natural hazard risks, disease spread and human-environment interactions, and contributes to prediction of drivers and impact of future environmental change. It also includes research on nature-based solutions to environmental change, and contributes to sustainability and transparency of production, harvest and trade markets of African products and resources, and to better development and implementation of (inter)national regulations.

#### **Theme 3: Impact of heritage, history and environment on society**

The study of African societies and their (im)materiality in the past and in the present, with a focus on local knowledge. This includes three main research axes: the study of African heritage in the care of the AfricaMuseum with related archives; fieldwork in Africa south of the Sahara and among communities of Afro-descendance, considering local knowledge pivotal to gaining a better understanding of the context of this heritage; and thirdly, the museum and colonial history and their impact on Belgian society, including the study of antiblack racism and the presence of African diasporas. This theme includes research activities in anthropology, archaeology, history, linguistics, material culture studies and

musicology. Furthermore, it includes studies on the role and the impact of environmental change on culture and society.

#### **Theme 4: Collections, archives, and digital technologies**

This theme includes research on state-of-the-art material analysis, conservation and high-resolution digitisation of the museum's collection and archives, the development of standards, databases and digital platforms for data management, sharing and collaborative research. This theme also incorporates research where the actual collecting of the object, its manufacturing technique, and its origin take a central role. It includes research on the impact of climate change on collections both in Belgium and in Central African countries, and proposals on how to protect collections against extreme climate changes and develop alternative sustainable and environmentally friendly treatment tools that are more inclusive (locally available and low-cost). Research on audio-visual archives and collections raises issues regarding promotion and conservation in digital spaces and on imbalances in access between North and South. Activities can include analysis of degradation phenomena, development of new conservation treatments or automated processes, the involvement of the larger public in digitisation exercises, data collection and analysis (crowdsourcing and citizen science). It aims to work interdisciplinarily and develop novel practices and techniques, such as X-ray imaging and analysis, robotics, artificial intelligence and machine learning protocols for digitisation of collections. As such it aims to ensure a safe and optimal utilisation, analysis, conservation and preservation of the heritage under the custody of the institution. Well-conserved, correctly identified and well-digitised collections reinforce research themes 1-3.

#### **1.2.3. Setting priorities**

The different themes as outlined above are the starting point for setting priorities. For each of these themes, several research priorities are identified, based on the available expertise within the research pool of the AfricaMuseum. Focused research does not have to be limited to activities within a particular research unit or department, but can and, as a matter of priority, should be overarching with different research units participating in close or loose collaborations. Conversely, proposed research activities should address more than one research priority among the different research themes.

It should be emphasized that the RMCA will have to maintain high flexibility to accommodate particular emerging needs and requests. The scientific competences of the AfricaMuseum should be adaptive and agile. A case in point is the research on provenance of our cultural collections. Less than 10 years ago this was not a major research topic within our institution, but now it is a major initiative with substantial funding provided by the federal government. Similar new trends in scientific topics have been observed e.g. for the integration of data of past and present ecosystem structures and dynamics to predict the future of ecosystem services under climatic changes. Another demonstration is the need for accurate identification of specimens or material for supporting the enforcement of customs regulations implementing international legislation (environment protection, international sanctions...).

The selection of research priorities, therefore, requires a delicate balancing act by setting priorities for the forthcoming years, while maintaining the diverse expertise within the institution as much as our financial means allow.

#### **1.2.4. Transversal research themes & activities**

While the above-mentioned research themes are focused along the lines of activities for the AfricaMuseum, activities can also have a transversal nature between different themes and or disciplines. The themes thus covered are mainly linked to the research strategy as outlined by BELSPO. Activities developed under these transversal research themes are subject to collaboration with other entities and institutions.

Currently, two major transversal themes have been identified by BELSPO to which the RMCA can contribute and play a major role:

- Climate
- Decolonisation

In addition, BELSPO promotes the development of centres of excellence or expertise (CoE) that are transboundary in the sense that they imply collaboration of several Federal Research Institutes. Some of these are currently under development or have been proposed. In addition, synergetic and collaborative research carried out by groups in different Federal Research Institutes have considered different research themes for collaboration:

- Digitisation
- Identification of organisms and tissues in support of Science Policy and enforcement of legislation
- Mineral and natural resources
- Natural hazard risks
- Geochemistry/petrology
- One Health
- Citizen Science
- Materials/Materiality
- Fish and fisheries data
- Biodiversity and Conservation

The transversal themes are not necessarily presented below as an explicit research priority as some are at present not a priority for the AfricaMuseum.

### **1.2.5. Infrastructure & tools**

The AfricaMuseum has an extensive array of research infrastructure and facilities that permit state-of-the-art research in different scientific fields. These facilities can be grouped in different clusters:

- Digitisation and imagery
- Restoration
- Molecular laboratory
- Cartography
- Wood biology infrastructure

A first inventory of available research infrastructure at the Federal Research Institutes, including that of the AfricaMuseum, was made by BELSPO, but requires an update. See: <https://extranet.belspo.be/cadastre/db/cadastre.asp>. In addition, it should be mentioned that the vast collections and archives constitute a major asset, indispensable for scientific research.

## **1.3. THEMES AND PRIORITIES**

### **Theme 1: Earth's evolution and diversity**

Study of the evolution of the African continent and its organisms and the resulting geology and geomorphology, the diversity of natural and mineral resources, large ecosystems and living organisms. This theme aims at studying events over a longer timescale (i.e., geological or evolutionary), to increase our understanding of the processes that we witness today. It includes research activities related to tectonics, petrology, geomorphology, geochemistry, mineralogy, climate-vegetation interactions, fire history, taxonomy, biodiversity, phylogeny, population genetics, and evolutionary processes. and the knowledge that will be obtained is a prerequisite to understand changes that are happening

at a shorter timescale, and can contribute to the development of more sustainable practices and solutions for today's challenges

## **Research priorities**

### *1.1) The influence of geodynamics and changing climate on African landscapes throughout Earth's history*

Landscapes are the result of an interaction between the geological substrate, tectonic processes, and erosion or deposition by surface processes. These processes are themselves in interaction with the climate. Landscapes, therefore, record the effects of these geodynamic and climate processes through time. Many landscapes in Africa are unique due to their very old age, geological substrate, tectonic context, soils and weathering, geomorphological features, and tropical climate characteristics. The study of their evolution over a long timescale is key to understanding paleoclimates, mountain and volcano formation, development of rivers and lakes, karst systems and natural hazards. These in turn, affect and interact with biological processes. It is, therefore, necessary to better understand the past and present state of the Earth system for its sustainable future use by human society.

### *1.2) Geological evolution and mineral resources of Africa*

The knowledge of the geology for most of the African continent is limited in comparison with many other parts of the world. Filling gaps in the current knowledge of the geological evolution of Africa, through geological mapping and sample analysis, is essential to increase our understanding of Earth's evolution in general and in particular of the early Earth. Africa has also significant enrichments in some of the most important metals needed to fuel the green energy transition (e.g. copper, manganese, cobalt, tin, tantalum and lithium). Understanding their distribution and their geological origin are crucial for sustainable resource management and economic development of the African continent. This research priority has local to regional and global implications. Today the rush on mineral resources has major societal consequences and this research will integrate this dimension and strive to do no harm but, on the contrary, contribute to better understanding and positive returns for society of the exploitation of these resources as pointed out also under theme 2.3.

### *1.3) Recognising taxa & populations, their diversity and interrelationships.*

The 'species' is the currency of biodiversity. Correct recognition and delimitation of a taxon, and its relationship to other living organisms are prerequisites for most fundamental and applied research that deal with the living world. These are – thus - cornerstones to address questions on historical and contemporary distributions of species, on interactions between organisms and the environment, including humans, and to describe how macro- and microevolutionary processes shape species diversity. Traditional (morphology, anatomy, microscopy), as well as more recent (genetic, genomic, chemical fingerprinting, artificial intelligence and automated recognition) approaches are used in this research field. These methods will help develop a variety of physical and digital identification tools, and phylogenetic and network reconstructions that will provide further insights into evolutionary relationships and species interactions. They will also allow studying and quantifying the observed (changes in) biodiversity in relation to environmental and anthropogenic changes and the large ecosystems where they are found.

### *1.4) Late-Quaternary evolution of African vegetation.*

Present-day climate change is causing profound alteration of the composition and functioning of African ecosystems and there is much concern about a possible collapse of ecosystems at present or in the near future. Reconstructing the past evolution of African ecosystems can shed light on how they respond to climate change. Late-Quaternary climate has changed considerably, including the transition of the Last Glacial Period (Pleistocene) to the current Interglacial (Holocene), and a persistent late-Holocene drying



trend in Central Africa. This transition induced changes in vegetation, often through changes in fire regime. This research priority aims at untangling Late-Quaternary vegetation shifts and their drivers, including human activities, to better understand and predict present and future responses of central African ecosystems to climate change.

## **Theme 2: Environmental change**

This theme deals with the study of environmental changes associated with human activities and natural processes. Several factors influence Afrotropical landscapes, fauna and vegetation and the human populations that inhabit these landscapes. This theme aims at untangling the drivers of change and monitoring their impact in the past, the present and the future. It looks at African tropical ecosystem dynamics, functioning and services, (human-induced) changing climatic conditions, landscape mapping, urbanisation, migration, geochemical cycles, natural hazard risks, disease spread and human-environment interactions and contributes to prediction of drivers and impact of future environmental change. It also includes research on nature-based solutions to environmental change, and contributes to sustainability and transparency of production, harvest and trade markets of African products and resources, and to a better development and implementation of (inter)national regulations.

### **Research priorities**

#### *2.1) Documenting drivers of environmental change*

Africa is an increasing spotlight area in the context of global climate change. On the one hand, the region might play an increasingly important mitigating role (e.g., high carbon sequestration capacity of tropical forests). On the other hand, Africa might contribute to accelerating climate change (e.g., through deforestation and dieback of trees). Furthermore, large uncertainties on past and future African climate variability persist due to lack of ground-based data, and because climate and vegetation models show opposing (future) trends for most of Africa. Therefore, there is a strong need to further investigate African climate trends, to monitor African carbon dynamics, and to untangle sensitivity and resilience of African ecosystems to climate change. Combining monitoring past and present climate and ecosystem dynamics and synthesizing this information in the next generation of IPCC's Earth System Models, will help to better predict the future of globally important African ecosystem services.

#### *2.2) Documenting impact of environmental change – Natural hazards and land-use change*

The particular geological, geomorphological and climatic conditions of Africa are naturally interacting environmental drivers that play a major role in the occurrence of natural hazards, such as landslides, ground collapses, major soil erosion processes, and (flash) floods. Land-use change through human activities like deforestation, urbanization, mining activities, and agriculture expansion has impacts on these hazards, increasing their frequency and/or intensity and changing their spatial and temporal distribution. These changes are particularly on the rise on the African continent. There is a need to assess these human-influenced natural hazards at spatial and temporal scales that are relevant not only for responding to disaster reduction efforts, but also to untangle the relative impact of climate change and land transformation in the past and the future.

#### *2.3) Documenting impact of environmental change – Societies*

Every landscape can be a source of opportunities, but also a source of problems. In many regions of Africa, the exploitation of minerals and raw materials can have considerable adverse impacts: mining-related soil pollution, water contamination, deforestation, increase of hazards. The mineral rush in Africa is also associated with the global population expansion and increasing international demand. This population pressure is only one piece of the broader demographic challenges faced by Africa that are associated with an unprecedented population growth and internal migrations. Overall, growing and often

vulnerable populations are pushed to live in more hazardous terrain, exposing them to higher risk of hazards from both natural and man-made causes. This research priority aims to assess the multifaceted environmental and socio-economic impacts of mineral resource extraction and exacerbated hazard risk on local communities. Transdisciplinary research, including the study of past extraction of minerals, will be key to better understand the societal context (vulnerability, resilience, governance) of these Earth related issues.

#### *2.4) Documenting impact of environmental change – Biodiversity changes, pests and pathogens*

Climate change, increasing globalization, anthropogenic activities and the complex interplay between these, are causing shifts in and loss of biodiversity. In addition, perturbed ecosystems are especially vulnerable to the introduction of new invasive species. In the case of pests and pathogens, or vectors that transmit diseases, this can lead to new outbreaks, which can affect both human societies and animal populations. Documenting and analysing these biodiversity changes, using field data and (historical) collections is a prerequisite to understand the impact of environmental change on disease dynamics, pest outbreaks and shifts in species composition. There is a strong need to assess the diversity and health status of managed ecosystems and the role these factors play in regulating environmental and climatic processes. An integrative, One Health approach is needed to better understand, and subsequently prevent outbreaks, and minimize detrimental effects on ecosystem services, and food security.

#### *2.5) Improving nature-based solutions to environmental change*

Tropical environments have a vital role in providing essential ecosystem services. These include provisioning services (like products derived from nature), in addition to regulating, supporting and cultural services. They constitute a major source of income for families, especially in rural areas, but also support the living environment and fulfill cultural needs. However, they are under pressure from environmental and anthropogenic activities, and their exploitation is often not sustainable due to the complexity of tropical ecosystems, the lack of information and the lack of appropriate legislation and implementation. This results in over-harvesting, dwindling catches and production, and illegal practices. Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) include improving science-informed conservation of intact ecosystems, restoration of degraded ecosystems, and improving management of exploited ecosystems. The latter includes development of ecologically friendly and sustainable harvest of products (e.g., agroforestry, agroecology), learning from past and current indigenous knowledge and providing information and tools to better inform (inter)national regulations.

### **Theme 3: Impact of heritage and history on societies**

The study of African societies and their (im)materiality in the past and in the present, with a focus on local knowledge. This includes three main research axes: the study of African heritage in the care of the AfricaMuseum with related archives; fieldwork in Africa south of the Sahara and among communities of Afro-descendance, considering local knowledge pivotal to gaining a better understanding of the context of this heritage; and thirdly, the museum and colonial history and their impact on Belgian society, including the study of antiblack racism and the presence of African diasporas. This theme includes research activities in anthropology, archaeology, history, linguistics, material culture studies and musicology. Furthermore, it includes studies on the role and the impact of environmental change on culture and society.

#### **Research priorities**

##### *3.1) Material histories and indigenous knowledge systems*

Current and past material culture and indigenous knowledge systems are key sources in the reconstruction of the African past. Objects, their style and the way that they are produced, reflect material and technical knowledge, but also embody the social, political,

cultural and environmental contexts of the societies that produced them. Combined with other material or immaterial sources, like oral history, languages, music, it offers multivocal knowledge and narratives from Africa on Africa. This approach is set in the long term, without preset chronological framing such as pre-colonial and colonial. It considers that phenomena, objects and knowledge rooted in the present can also allow to investigate the present and the deep past. Through collection and field research, this research priority aims consequently at using past and present material culture and associated knowledge, such as oral history, ethnographic or linguistic inquiries, to suggest new narratives on the African past and investigate, among other things, networks & connectivity, interaction with non-human world, social changes, technologies and materiality.

### *3.2) Understanding societies through their intangible components*

The importance of the intangible in understanding Africa, its cultures and its diasporas is often underestimated or biased by overly directive approaches. The key role of immateriality is the fundamental element that has to be taken into account here. Oral sources, resulting from fieldwork in areas as diverse as linguistics, musicology, anthropology and history, fuel research that enables us to retrace the past and better understand the present of human societies in or from Africa. This kind of approach automatically enhances endogenous knowledge systems by bringing to light a vision of things that is not dictated by our own. Such research can be carried out in synergy with those focusing on material culture.

### *3.3) Migration and spatial mobility*

Human history is the continuously changing outcome of migration of people and their material and immaterial culture, as well as of the exchanges following on encounters. Migration represents an intrinsic and crossing condition of the human presence in the world and of its biosocial construction. It reflects the deep relationship between individual choices and collective norms, be it regarding citizenship and the official representations and rules of the nation-state. This includes internal and transnational paths of migration, in the past and the present.

Migration happened and happens out of, within and into Africa. This research priority concerns various topics such as language, technology, slave trade, transformation and redefinition of identities. Major ecological challenges, access to natural resources, wars, urbanization and global market economies are all triggers and incentives for migration thereby appealing to freedom of circulation, individual planning, lifestyles and epigenetics of health in a continuous renegotiation process of intimacy, values and power.

### *3.4) Imperialisms and colonialisms in Africa*

Since the first half of the 20th century, the AfricaMuseum has been studying colonial history and imperial movements in Central Africa, leveraging its unique resources, including collections, archives, oral history, and affiliations with Central African institutions. This expertise responds to societal, political, and academic expectations. In view of our collections this research is largely concentrated on colonial dynamics in the DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda. It enhances our understanding of historical complexities and informs ongoing discussions. Research topics include European and non-European imperialism, slave trade, enslavement, and colonialism that Africa has witnessed and is facing. These also played a role in the transformation of western society. Imperialism often did not acknowledge Africa's own history and centred on western realizations. African history, however, is now fully recognised as a discipline as such for which oral history in Africa is combined with sources outside Africa. Critical reflections on topics in today's society with regard to the concepts of decolonisation, history of racism or the question of African heritage on and outside the continent, are considered in a global context.

### *3.5) Earth, the natural environment and African societies: past, present and future*

Africa's diverse societies and cultures have co-evolved with the continent's unique natural environments. The nature of the geological substrate, the morphologies of the landscapes,

the nature of the soils and the availability of water, to name but a few, are all natural interrelated factors that are reflected in the past, in the present and in the future of cultures and societies. On the other hand, past human activities have also shaped the environment. Archaeobotanical and archeozoological studies shed a light on these human-environment interactions and use of resources in the past and provide useful information for the present and future. In today's rapidly changing world, Africa faces various challenges, including population growth, urbanisation, land degradation, deforestation, and climate change. The challenge is to understand the complex interplay between culture, society and nature during different time periods in order to address emerging challenges in the face of an uncertain future.

#### **Theme 4: Collections, archives and digital technologies – What stories can they tell us?**

This theme includes research on state-of-the-art material analysis, conservation and high-resolution digitisation of the museum's collection and archives, the development of standards, databases and digital platforms for data management, sharing, and collaborative research. This theme also incorporates research where the actual collection of the object, its manufacturing technique and its origin, take a central role. It includes research on the impact of climate change on the collections both in Belgium and in Central African countries, and proposals on how to protect collections against extreme climate changes and develop alternative sustainable and environmentally friendly treatment tools that are more inclusive (locally available and low cost). Research on audio-visual archives and collections raises issues regarding promotion and conservation in digital spaces and on imbalances in access between North and South. Activities can include analysis of degradation phenomena, development of new conservation treatments or automated processes, the involvement of the larger public in digitisation exercises, data collection and analysis (crowdsourcing and citizen science). It aims to work interdisciplinary and develop novel practices and techniques, such as X-ray imaging and analysis, robotics, artificial intelligence and machine learning protocols for digitisation of collections. As such it aims to ensure a safe and optimal utilisation, analysis, conservation and preservation of the heritage under the custody of the institution. Well-conserved, correctly identified and well-digitised collections reinforce research themes 1-3.

#### **Research priorities**

##### *4.1) Material identification and safeguarding of collections for future generations*

All collections are undergoing physical and/or chemical alteration. The study of materials, manufacturing techniques, chemical and physical characteristics and the alteration mechanisms, alteration products of collections, as well as the study of the interaction of the environment with the collection is crucial for the development of compatible conservation treatments and optimal collections management plans. Many of our museum collections are fragile, often stored in non-climatized locations, deteriorated and the old preservation methods preclude (genetic) analysis. However, analytical tools are key in the study of (historical) collections for understanding the objects materiality, its origin, its toxicity and its preservation needs. Approaches like artificial intelligence together with microscopic and genomic/museomic innovations, organic and inorganic analysis create novel opportunities for collection research. It also provides challenges for the development of current preservation approaches to anticipate new research methodologies in the future.

##### *4.2) Heritage histories*

The study of heritage histories is preferred over provenance research that has become too restrictive and evokes 'ethnographic' collections and 'restitution of objects', disregarding the cultural context. Thus, both material and immaterial heritage should be considered, as the heritage in the care of the AfricaMuseum is far more diverse than the cultural objects which are in focus now in the context of the restitution discussion in Europe. It aims at

reconstructing the history of collections, in combination with the history of science, the history of the AfricaMuseum, African history, the history of colonialism, etc. The outcome can result in the production of audiovisual archives collections, provide information for policy makers and other stakeholders, support the fight against illicit trade objects and materials (e.g. art objects, animal & plant tissues, ores). It offers context in which the tangible and intangible heritage came into the care of the RMCA, and is essential in assessing and understanding the impact of ideologies on past and current narratives.

#### *4.3) Digital Africa through the lens of past and contemporary collections*

The collections of objects and (related meta-) data relating to Africa's present form an unique set of information on a continent where limited field access and scarcity of data remain major limitations for scientific research. This information needs to be made more widely available. The creation of digital catalogues, digitised documents and image libraries (including 2D+, 3D, Rx and multispectral digitisation), are key actions for the preservation, enhancement and dissemination of this information, as well as for the promotion of North-South and South-South research collaboration. Within this research priority, scientific activities focus on the expansion, preservation, recording, digitisation, accessibility and/or valorisation of (AfricaMuseum as well as African partners) collections and archives concerning Africa. This should be further implemented in international networks which would facilitate knowledge and data sharing. In addition to preserving scientific content, the ultimate aim is to strengthen the value of the collections as a hands-on tool, and to make information accessible to a wider audience, particularly for the African communities.

## ANNEX 2. PUBLIC OUTREACH SERVICES

Museums are invited to understand and represent the world around them. They must take societal expectations into account. In August 2022, the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM (International Council of Museums) approved the proposal for a new museum definition:

‘A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.’

This new definition reflects a shift in the last two decades. Like society, museums must adapt to a changing and increasingly diverse world. The current era is marked by social and identitarian debates that are sometimes expressed in a radical manner. Museums, and AfricaMuseum in particular, are in direct contact with such societal developments. The provenance of cultural heritage, restitution, racism and inclusion, climate change, and biodiversity are but some of these contemporary themes. The museum has a duty to contribute to the public’s understanding of these topics, attempt to strengthen connections between individuals and reconcile different sensibilities in society, and play its role as a forum that allows different voices to be heard within the Museum.

In connection with the Strategic Plan of Belgian Science Policy, BELSPO, this note describes the outlines of the AfricaMuseum’s public-oriented activities. As a reminder, the strategic goal for public-oriented services within the BELSPO plan is as follows:

*‘Develop a new inclusive and proactive approach for institutions in relation to the public, aimed at integrating them as stakeholders in both research and the promotion of activities.’*

Given the role of communication and dialogue with the public, the following values are of particular importance to the public outreach services: in line with societal changes and expectations today, contribute to:

- inclusion
- diversity
- transparency,
- scientific integrity,
- communicate our scientific activities to a broad and diverse audience,
- integrate the expertise, experience, and perspective of Africans and persons of African descent by adopting a participatory approach that strives towards co-creation and multiple voices;
- quality of service;
- public trust in our services.

In line with the AfricaMuseum general strategy and the identified values, the following strategic goals have been defined:

- through the public activities of the AfricaMuseum, support dialogue and debate on contemporary social issues that fall within the institution's areas of competence;
- provide better guidance for audiences at different levels of understanding and adoption of our values, range of themes, and collections, and strengthen interaction with our audiences through permanent and temporary exhibitions as well as cultural and educational activities;
- use appropriate and inclusive communication for the different activities and initiatives of the AfricaMuseum, develop marketing capabilities, and thereby increase and expand the AfricaMuseum audience.

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Our values will be translated into strategic objectives:

- S.O. 1. At the very least, maintain the number of visitors to confirm the societal impact and legitimacy of the museum's mission, with particular attention to children and the youth;
- S.O. 2. Diversify and include new audiences for the AfricaMuseum (especially the youth, persons from Africa and of African descent, tourists, the highly cosmopolitan Brussels population);
- S.O. 3. Confirm the role and societal impact of the AfricaMuseum as a forum and partner for local and international collaborations in its museum, educational, and cultural activities, by integrating partners in Africa, and in keeping with the perspective of capacity-building;
- S.O. 4. Inspire creative and participatory processes that showcase contemporary Africa's dynamism and innovation, without forgetting its societal challenges (also in collaboration with scientists and collection and archive managers), and become a sounding board for societal debate on these issues.

**S.O. 1. Maintain the number of visitors to confirm the societal impact and legitimacy of the museum's mission, with particular attention to children and the youth**

The reference exhibition is at the core of the AfricaMuseum's museum-related activities. The AfricaMuseum of today takes a decolonial approach. It is an actor on the historical, contemporary, and global levels. Not only is it a place of memory on the colonial past; it also positions itself as a dynamic platform of exchange and dialogue between cultures and generations. Today it is an important vector for publicizing our scientific work on climate, biodiversity, and the issues surrounding the use of natural resources. A survey of the public in autumn will provide insights on the strong and weak points of the permanent exhibition. The colonial history, resources, and Afropea galleries will probably require adjustments (as clearly confirmed by public surveys). To improve the readability of our messages, it is no doubt necessary to create a visitor circuit, reinforce the professionalism of our guides, and replace/upgrade electronic devices for individual visitors.

The second pillar for presentation is the programming of temporary exhibitions. These:

- increase visibility in order to expand the museum's audience and boost visitor numbers;

- address the expectations of target groups such as youths, African and Afro-descendant people, tourists, the highly cosmopolitan Brussels population, and society as a whole, through various educational themes;
- communicate on the AfricaMuseum collections and scientific research;
- by offering participatory processes, allow exchanges that highlight an innovative and contemporary;
- bear witness to the challenges, dynamism, and resources of Africa past and present;
- respond to current events as a complement to the permanent exhibition;
- show a wider geographic area beyond Central Africa to broaden the geographically limited scope of the permanent exhibition.

Educational and cultural activities constitute a third pillar in support of the reference exhibition and temporary exhibitions. Their goal is to delve deeper into and promote the content and message of the permanent and temporary exhibitions. Target audiences possess the knowledge and skills necessary to actively participate, promote, and contribute to a just and sustainable world. This work is done together with a large number of stakeholders.

**S.O.2. Diversify and include new audiences for the AfricaMuseum (especially the youth, persons from Africa and of African descent, tourists, the highly cosmopolitan Brussels population)**

In line with this objective, temporary exhibitions have the potential to increase the number of visitors and diversify audiences through different themes. In particular, they can refresh the museum's image, serve as a channel for communicating on developments in our scientific research, and opening new perspectives on (gaps in) the collections, including their provenance. While the reference exhibition is a reflection of the institution, temporary exhibitions reinforce the AfricaMuseum's dynamism and openness.

Through partnerships and educational and cultural activities,

- build a narrative of many voices and viewpoints within the institution, with the aim of diversifying the content and aesthetics presented to the public;
- promote a transformative culture (changing mentalities) by highlighting African arts and culture that contribute to social change;
- use the scientific and international cooperation activities of the Museum to nourish its public activities;
- strongly take into account the diversity of the Belgian population as well as the international community that visits the Museum;
- raise awareness in target audiences by organising activities in other Belgian cities (Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, etc.);
- create a safe space for critical debates and engaged practices that question our lifestyles, civic-mindedness, and the (lack of) transnational solidarity;
- raise understanding and awareness in the general public of historical processes, global challenges and sustainability issues – including the fight against racism, colonial history/decolonisation, access to and preservation of African cultural heritage, global environmental challenges, climate change and the exploitation of natural resources.



### **S.O. 3. Reinforce the role of the AfricaMuseum as a forum and partner for local and international collaborations, including capacity-building for partners in Africa**

In this context, the specific objectives to achieve this are as follows:

- strengthen the capacities of Afro-descendant and African artists by facilitating access to the knowledge and collections of the AfricaMuseum, through better planning and coordination with the Collections department and digitisation;
- strengthen and support the visibility, resources and capacities of these actors through co-creation opportunities, within the limits allowed by our financial and human resources;
- support the actions carried out by stakeholders from Africa and African diasporas with a view to introducing new images and (re)formulating narratives concerning Africans and Afro-descendants;
- contribute to deconstructing stereotypes and take a stand against racism and discrimination;
- strengthen synergies between Belgian and international stakeholders, particularly African, working in the culture and art sectors.

### **S.O. 4 Beyond content: the quality of support services**

To achieve the goals of the public outreach services, several levels of support are needed.

- Offer visitors professional, high-quality services prior to (reservations for educational and cultural activities) and during their visit;
- This priority will be aided by reinforced marketing and networking efforts.
- Ensure clear and complete communication of the institution's values and activities;
- Guarantee a professional level of organisation for commercial activities at the conference centre and evening activities in the facilities available for this purpose in the AfricaMuseum building, and ensure follow-up with the concessionaires of the AfricaMuseum shop, restaurant, and Africa Palace;
- Manage publications related to museum activities and use inclusive language in three languages, with particular attention to sensitive vocabulary. Continue publishing books and articles according to the institution's priorities and target audiences. Continue capacity-building efforts in writing skills development, copyright management, and new technologies for publishing and knowledge dissemination, for visitors and trainees in Framework Agreement projects, residencies, or collaborations, in Belgium and in partner countries in Central Africa.

## **ANNEX 3. COLLECTIONS**

### **3.1. PREFACE**

At present, collections are "stovepiped" and managed independently from each other. All have distinct administrative/technical processing systems, fragmented collection management policies if any, collection management plans and an independent Collection Management System (CMS).

Technical (particularly digitisation equipment) and other collection assets should be employed cooperatively rather than independently. The aim is to achieve greater efficiencies and better care of the sub-collections by using one large coordinated collection management system so that our productivity, when people involved in the collections are working together, is greater than would be the sum of their output working separately, as they do today. Such efficiencies might also reduce working and investment costs. By improving efficiency, the impact of the constant decrease of collections managers that we currently face will be mitigated. We anyhow face enormous challenges in ensuring decent care of the collections.

### **3.2. CURRENT CHALLENGES**

- The collections are vast, very diverse and fragmented
- Collections are spread across different buildings
- The buildings are not suitable for housing collections
- The buildings are not energy efficient, not adapted to the impact of severe weather (rain, heat) and located in a forest filled with insects.
- CAPA/CODA, one of the main collection storage buildings, is rented and unfit for collection storage.
- In several cases, staff and visitors have an office in the collections, while there is no barrier between offices, hallways and collections.
- Collections management is not uniform, ranging from non-existent to highly professionalized
- Management of the collections is often crisis management or reactive management and inefficient
- Extreme shortage of staff, some collections receive minimal care
- Digitisation is project- or best effort-based, decentralised and not streamlined. No general guidelines and identified priorities for digitisation.
- The digital accessibility to the collection is limited and scattered across multiple (project) websites
- There is no general acquisition and deaccessioning policy
- Accessibility to the collections is not well-defined
- The use of the collections is diverse depending on the type of collection
- Many collections are toxic or dangerous
- There is limited connection between the values and needs of the collection and the prioritisation of collection care
- Growing demand for exhibitions and loans in Africa and collection care exchange with African colleagues.
- There are no dedicated visitor consultation spaces
- The collections research facilities/consultation spaces and collections are too far apart.

### 3.3. GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

The main goal is the development of a unified and accessible “ **collection**”; creating a unity in the diversity of the different collections by bridging the natural history, geological and cultural collections and their care; and improving digital and physical accessibility to promote more interdisciplinary research and coherence, both internally and towards our collection users and stakeholders. This goal will be achieved through the centralization and reorganisation of collections management activities and the inclusion of modern-day stewardship practices that respect both the environment and cultural diversity, more specifically the cultures (and cultural care practices) that are represented in the collection. The key objectives are:

O1: Facilitate access to the collections

O2: Value assessment and identification of the needs of different sub-collections

O3: Centralized management of the collection (maintaining physical stability of the collection)

O4: Clear and uniform collections policies, procedures and registration

O5: Centralization of digitisation activities

O6: Centralized databases and data management of the collection

O7 Restitution readiness and long-term African loans and exhibitions

#### **O1: Facilitate access to the collections**

Improve visitor service through the development of a centralized front office which is a consultation, library and documentation centre, and that will act as liaison between stakeholders, the collection and the collection documentation. Within this visitor centre, a specific emphasis will be on the assistance of visitors who need extra guidance to navigate all the research tools available in the visitor centre, for example representatives of cultural groups and African stakeholders (south cooperation), artists, etc.

Consolidate all collection-visitor statistics since they are a tool in the identification of societal relevance of sub-collections and will be used to meet O2.

Streamline and facilitate easy digital access to the collections and metadata through the creation of one online hub (in line with O5), with access to all databases and an automated reproduction request system.

#### **O2: Value assessment and identification of the needs of different sub-collections**

Create a clear overview of all the collections and identify the core collections. Define their values: culturally, scientifically, economically and rank their conservation and digitisation needs. Assign each sub-collection to a “keeper”, a content specialist-scientist; and decide on the future of sub-collections for which the museum cannot provide a keeper. A general and transparent acquisition and deaccessioning strategy and policy will be based on this assessment, an estimation of collections needs (space and care) and the research strategies of the different scientific department.

Classify the most challenging collections, identify the risks and create an action plan (including timeline, budget and staff allocation) and handling and safety procedures for these collections in collaboration with building, safety officers and keepers of the collections:

- Ethanol collection
- Radioactive collection
- Toxic collections and collections contaminated with biocides
- Film, video and audiocassettes
- Identification of culturally and ethically sensitive objects
- Firearms/bullets

Evaluate and adapt the accessibility of the collection (online, behind showcase, manipulation) to their function (research, education, exhibition), their fragility, their characteristics and their value.

### **O3: Centralised management of the collection**

The creation of a centralized survey and maintenance plan that is as cost efficient as possible and that eliminates the risk of calamities (fire, water, vandalism and theft) and accelerated aging. This includes: an Integrated Pest Management plan (IPM) per building that houses collections; and one single digital relative humidity, temperature and leak detection system with alarm settings and the continuation of the development of the general emergency preparedness plan. An inter-departmental working group will be established that has quarterly meetings about the state of the collections. This working group includes representatives from the building management services, security, prevention and every research department. Digitisation and automation of the storage management will help relief the heavy workload of collection managers and will avoid expensive calamities with irreparable losses such as mold outbreaks. A plan for systematic location verification and inventorisation of the collection will be developed in tandem with the development of a more controlled access system to the collections to better protect the collection against thefts and losses.

Optimisation of the storage facilities and development of a new masterplan for storage of the collection which takes into account the building masterplan. Consolidation of collections in fewer but larger climate-controlled spaces. Proposition for investment in passive and environmentally friendly climate control: curtains, blinds, insulation, solar panels. More accessible furniture and improved logistic tools all help the collections managers to better survey the collections and to safely manipulate and transport them.

Physical centralisation of the collections, developing 4 large sub-collections managed by collection managers

- 1) cultural collections into one system: ethnographic, historical, archaeological, musical instruments and contemporary art
- 2) Wet and frozen collections
- 3) Dry collections (organic and inorganic)
- 4) Archives and documentation: books, archives, posters, photographs, recordings, multimedia and maps

Proposal for safe storage of collections and proposal for safe storage of challenging collections such as the ethanol collection and radioactive materials. Exploring the possibilities of housing these potentially hazardous collections offsite.

Efforts are required to safeguard the safety of our collections, especially in the event of theft by visitors or by our own employees. The FAIR principle must be one of the most important preventive measures against theft, especially by internal colleagues.

Development of a centralized restoration lab with conservators specialized in the organic materials, taxidermy, inorganic materials, paper (archive), photo and digital media.

#### **O4: Clear and uniform collections policy, collections management plan and procedures and registration**

An institutional Collection Management Policy (CMP) will be developed that will act as the backbone of collections management practices. This CMP will be updated every 5 years as not to lose its relevance with relation to the changing research strategy and museum's core activities, the fast changing social and political climate of decolonisation, restitution, GDPR regulations and the ever growing effects of climate change.

The CMP will address guidelines and procedures for all the activities that involve collections:

- Acquisition policy and the describe different official acquisition methods and procedures. It creates guidelines for acquisition priorities and possible deaccessioning of sub-collections taking into account the results of O2 and the research strategy. The composition of the acquisition committee will be reviewed and updated.
- A research policy for the different collections will be established, including guidelines and procedures for sampling and analysing specimen and policies on correct accreditation of the museum and staff when using collections, data or research output from the .
- Rules and guidelines on photography, filming and recording collections and/or museum staff (both for personal use or publication) including copyright and GDPR procedures.
- Clear inventarisation guidelines, registration guidelines and data management procedures for each collection. This includes the description of the different numbering systems, manuals for application of numbers on specimen and objects. Manuals for the database searches and addition of data in the database. Nomenclature of digital files etc.
- The CMP will describe the different methods of access and consultation. Protocols and safety procedures for physical acces to the different collections, manipulation and internal transportation of the collections for both for permanent staff and for short term researchers that are allowed access to the collections. Specific guidelines for manipulation of culturally sensitive and ethically materials (human remains, sacred objects...) and dangerous or toxic collections.
- The CMP will include a 5-year strategy for the digitisation of the collections based on the results of O2 (Value assessment and identification of the needs of the different sub-collections), the research strategy, the digitisation tools available and the advice of the digitisation service.
- An overview of the legal rules and limits for the digitisation, dissemination and distribution of the digitised collection.
- Lending procedures, both incoming and outgoing, and restrictions, which will reflect real costs, including infrastructure and staff cost.'

#### **O5: Digitisation reorganisation**

An overview of the status quo of the digitisation (defined as the specimen/objects/recordings that have a digital reproduction) of the collection: What has been fully digitised, partially digitised, and what has no digital file in preparation of the digitisation priorities for DIGIT05 (2025). This will be the starting point for a 5-year strategy for the digitisation of the collections based on the results of O2 (Value assessment and identification of the needs of the different sub-collections), the research and exhibition strategies and the reproduction requests from visitors through the visitor centre/front office (O1).

An inventory will be made of the in-house imaging tools and technologies and the audio and video digitisation tools and a 5 year acquisition strategy for digitisation equipment will be developed in close cooperation with Building Management and ICT. The collection digitisation will be categorized by type of digitisation needed, not by type of collection. The scanning procedures and workflow will be organised as in to optimize the use of each scanner and imaging tool:

- -photography
- -2D imaging
- -2D+ and 3D imaging
- sound, audio and video digitisation

## **O6: Centralized databases and data management of the collection**

The different collections management systems need to have a single interface for people who want to consult the collection. The intent is to offer the museum collection users a set of integrated opensource tools/services allowing them to contribute to international infrastructures within the setup of EOSC (European Open Science Cloud). The data needs to be made **FAIR**: findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable. However, not all data can be published and all collection items will undergo a legal check (O4 reinforcement of legal staff) to verify that the published digital file is conform copyright and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and with respect for cultural sensitivities. A complete and transparent database with digital image of all collection items makes collection items less alienable and will help to prevent theft since all items will have a digital record that links them to the AfricaMuseum.

A Multimedia server for the RMCA digitised collections and a uniform backup system and long-term storage platform for all digital files and metadata of the databases using the Long Term Preservation platform provided by BELSPO.

## **O7. Restitution readiness and long-term African loans and exhibitions**

Exploring the feasibility of organising loans and exhibitions in (Central) Africa; their restrictions, fees, procedures, insurance and legal implications.

Further foster regular exchange and educational programs with our African partners about conservation, restoration and collections management within the DGD projects framework.

Initiate exchange projects regarding inventorization and exhibition and loans registration.

## ANNEX 4. BUILDINGS

### 4.1. CONDITION OF PREMISES

The building infrastructure forming the heart of the historic site, which dates back 125 years, requires a critical approach: the buildings are **not sustainable** and three of the five also show extensive signs of **degradation, posing health and safety problems**. The five buildings in question are the Welcome Pavilion, the Museum, the Management Pavilion, the Stanley Pavilion and the Africa Palace. All five buildings are part of the historic site, are State property, and must remain part of the museum complex.

A sixth building, CAPA/CODA, is no longer State property. It has structural defects and is barely functional. It will be abandoned in the medium term, as we currently cover too much office space in relation to our activities.

### 4.2. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

- Pay constant attention to our values, in particular youth, gender, and diversity;
- Prepare a sustainable future (climate, sustainability, accessibility).
- Meet international standards for collection and archive management.
- Provide an attractive and interactive working environment for our scientists, collection managers, public outreach staff, and administrative staff.
- Provide museum visitors with attractive and accessible infrastructure.
- Integrate strategic plans for scientific research, collection and archive management, and public outreach activities.

### 4.3. OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES

- Optimise building accessibility and the social and interpersonal aspects of our site and buildings for our staff.
- Idem for our visitors, with particular attention to the youth, people of African origin, and foreign visitors.
- Optimise current building occupancy and adhere to the following principles for any relocation:
  - physical separation of
    - collection, library, and archive reserves
    - facilities for research, laboratories, consultation rooms, and digitisation
    - spaces for staff and visitors (offices, meeting rooms, workshop rooms, etc.) and adjacent spaces (stockrooms, copy machines, kitchenettes, toilets, shower facilities, etc.)
  - Regrouping of services according to logic and feasibility
  - Shared facilities are grouped together across departments, services, and sections. Multipurpose use is encouraged. Specific reservation tools shall be introduced as needed.
  - Allocation of office space shall take into account federal standards, current procedures for office allocation, and remote work of the individuals concerned. 'New Ways of Working' shall apply when possible, and individual offices are the exception rather than the rule.

- Collections that are not regularly consulted for museum or scientific purposes are not necessarily stored onsite. Pending a BELSPO solution applicable to all FSEs, industrial storage facilities will be considered. First and foremost would be to continue using the storage facilities in Péronnes-lez-Binche for natural history and non-cultural-history collections and archives.
- The installation of solar panels and other structural energy-saving measures are a priority.
- Sites for new installations and investments with a long (>5y) depreciation period shall be selected based on the ownership status of the building (third-party or state property) as well as reusability for future occupation.

#### **4.4. BUILDING MANAGEMENT CALENDAR**

- Short-term:
  - Optimise the use of OTOO office space (currently underutilised).
  - Leave the Stanley Pavilion
  - Relocate personal on the ground floor of the Africa Palace. Upper floors shall be used only for the storage of collections.
- Medium-term:
  - The AfricaMuseum shall leave the CAPA/CODA complex, which will significantly reduce our financial and energy footprint.
  - The Africa Palace must be renovated so that it can house collections and other objects that are essential for our activities. Staff responsible for collection management can be accommodated on the ground floor.
  - The two pavilions must be renovated to allow accommodation of scientific and administrative staff.

The surface area requirements for the three categories (storage, research spaces, and staff and visitor spaces) shall be indicated on a template and submitted to the Federal Buildings Agency. It will serve as a supporting document or basis for various needs analyses and programmes for both BELSPO (e.g. inventory of collections) and the official needs programme of the Federal Buildings Agency.