

AfricaMuseum Code of Ethics

The AfricaMuseum (AM – Royal Museum for Central Africa) is a federal scientific institute under the authority of the Minister for Science Policy. As a public institution, the AM is particularly vigilant about applying international commitments and legislation aimed at protecting human rights and fighting discriminations based on gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, or skin colour.

The AM and their partners adhere to the Code of Ethics of ICOM, the International Council of Museums, adopted in 2026 (https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Code-de-deontologie_2026_FR-1.pdf). The sections on collaboration with the communities from which the collections originate are a particularly important guideline for the AM.

Given its unique historical and colonial context, the AM pays close attention to the fight against racism and all forms of discrimination. In the past, the AM contributed to the formation of a stereotypical portrayal of Africa, its inhabitants and people of African descent. In our work, both as a museum and as a scientific institution, we now aim to help dismantle this negative portrayal and contribute to a better knowledge and understanding of Africa and people of African origin.

The AfricaMuseum works with many external partners: scientists, artists, civil society, and people from all over the world. This code of ethics applies to all of our partners, including third parties who, for commercial purposes, use the infrastructure of and around the AM. The AM also applies it to its own activities, and to its own staff.

The AM acknowledges its responsibilities to the society in which the consequences of colonialism are visible and felt to this day. This code of ethics sets out how it fulfils this responsibility. It applies to the AM itself, as well as to all third parties that, in one way or another, are involved in scientific activities (and their related communications), exhibitions (permanent or temporary), cultural events, guided tours, educational programs, etc. organized or facilitated by the AM.

This code of ethics also applies to events organized by third parties and for which the role of the AM is limited to providing event spaces or other logistical support. In all cases, European, federal and local legislation must also be complied with.

What is the historical and social context of this code of ethics?

During the colonial periods, Africans and people of African descent were depicted as the negative reflection of white people, and characterized by what they lacked or had in excess: they were deemed racially and culturally inferior, closer to animals than to white men, less intelligent and rational, deprived of history, physically stronger, and oversexualised.

Yet genetics show that human ‘races’ are a myth. Within the AM’s research institute, anthropologists, historians, art historians, musicologists, and linguists investigate colonial racial theories, colonial history, representations of Africans and people of African descent, African history, and the languages and art of Africa. Africans and people of African descent are not fundamentally different from other people. They speak languages, not dialects.

As the cradle of humanity, Africa is where human history began. Centuries before Europeans colonized huge swathes of the African continent in the late 19th century, many Africans lived in organized states and, through trade networks, were in contact with North Africa and Asia, reaching as far as China. Africans had already visited Europe a century before Europeans crossed the equator in Africa in the 15th century.

The AM's goal is to share this knowledge with the public, not only for its scientific value, but also because research has shown that stereotypes and racist representations of Africans and members of African society affect all aspects of their lives: they are faced with prejudice in their daily encounters or when they seek work or housing, and this takes a toll on their psychological well-being.

It is for these reasons that the AM and its partners are pursuing, amongst other things, the following objectives:

- to make its knowledge of Africa more accessible and to draw the public's attention to the history of racism in the context of colonial history;
- to encourage critical thinking and to showcase contemporary and dynamic images of the African continent and of the people who come from it or who share historical, cultural and commemorative ties with it, and the place they occupy in the world;
- restore the value of cultural and natural diversity and foster a better understanding of the global challenges of our time;
- fight stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination against Africans and people of African descent;
- stimulate the competences and institutional development of our scientific and artistic partners in Africa and of African descent or of any other origin, by providing better access to the expertise and collections of the AM;
- encourage co-creation, thereby increasing the visibility of the partners involved;
- through cultural and scientific outreach, deconstruct and replace stereotypical images and representations of Africa, Africans, and people of African descent;
- strengthen synergies between Belgian, African, and international stakeholders in the fields of culture, education, and science communication;
- avoid the instrumentalization or other abusive use of objects, texts, or images created in a colonial context, particularly when they reinforce racist stereotypes and prejudices, and maintain respect for human dignity and integrity in all circumstances;
- where, for compelling scientific reasons, we must revert to the use of colonial terminology and expressions, we must make clear the colonial nature of the description by stating that it 'is not in line with the AM's current vision and values'.

Each person or entity working with the AM, conducting activities facilitated by the institution or carrying out tasks which they have been assigned by the AM, for example as a guide, researcher, or scientific or artistic curator, etc., shall share these objectives and shall refrain from any act or declaration that would compromise the said objectives. Should there be a violation of this code of ethics, the AM reserves the right to immediately terminate the collaboration or contract, request police intervention, and/or lodge a complaint with the courts or other competent authority.

Annex: Specific guidelines for public events organized in the AfricaMuseum and its immediate vicinity

Before organising a public event on the premises of the AM or in the surrounding area, organisers must declare in writing that they agree to this code of ethics, including the aforementioned objectives; that they will refrain from any action or statement that would undermine these objectives; and that they will comply with the guidelines set out below; to ban, both in their communications and in their public relations (including audio or video recordings made during the event by participating organisations and members of the public), any form of stereotyping that could be perceived as offensive by Africans or people of African descent, or by people of any other origin, belief, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc. This includes the following:

- No stereotyped representation of Africans or people of African descent;
- African cultures shall not be reduced to precolonial cultures or represented as traditional, without history, unchanging, isolated, and not influenced by contacts with the world;
- No costumes are allowed, except for actors in theatre performances or for participants in a fashion show;
- In these cases, care should be exercised to ensure that costumes are not used in a manner that is offensive to minorities, Africans, people of African or other foreign descent, (including, in particular, the use of 'blackface');
- that one should refrain from suggesting that the behaviour of Africans, unlike that of other people, is not acquired (cultural) but innate (biological);
- that one should avoid resorting to practices, words and representations that could be interpreted as a form of cultural appropriation;
- these guidelines apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to any form of discrimination or stereotyping towards any other group of people, whether based on origin, beliefs, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc.

The organiser shall clearly state the role played by the AM in the organisation of their event, and neither the museum's name nor its logo, nor the names of its staff members, etc., shall be mentioned without the express authorisation of the AM and the individuals concerned.

Any event of an electoral or political nature is not in line with the AM's vision and mission and will therefore not be authorised.

Organizers are requested to submit all promotional materials related to their public event (including materials published after the event takes place) for approval by the AM.

In case of non-compliance with the provisions of this code of ethics, the museum reserves the right to cancel the event after informing the organizer, or – if it is too late to cancel the event – to distance itself publicly from the said event. To do so, the AM may disclose its communications with the organizer. By signing this code of ethics, the organizer hereby declares that it consents to the potential publication of personal data, such as the names of individuals representing the organization or the signatories of this agreement. Moreover, the organizer cannot hold the AM liable for any financial or reputational damage owing to event cancellation, public distancing, or publication of documents related to the event, whichever is applicable.

During the event, AM management representatives may issue instructions to the organization or demand changes to aspects of the event or its communications that do not adhere to this code of ethics or the commitments made in accordance with it.

The AM can seek compensation from the organizers or its guests for damage, particularly reputational, suffered as a result of their non-compliance with this code of ethics.