



KONINKLIJK MUSEUM
VOOR MIDDEN-AFRIKA
MUSÉE ROYAL
DE L'AFRIQUE CENTRALE

**TOWARDS THE RENEWAL AND THE RENOVATION OF THE
ROYAL MUSEUM FOR CENTRAL AFRICA**

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE AFRICA-ATLANTA 2014 CONFERENCE
"AFRICA BEYOND AFRICA. THE FUTURE OF CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH"
ATLANTA, MAY 16, 2014

**GUIDO GRYSEELS
DIRECTOR GENERAL**

THE RENOVATION OF THE ROYAL MUSEUM FOR CENTRAL AFRICA AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR ITS RESEARCH

Preamble

The Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren, Belgium, is a federal scientific institute and an important reference institute on Central Africa. It is sometimes referred to as one of the last colonial museums in Europe, and is currently being renovated. This paper provides an overview of the various steps taken in its transformation process into a modern and dynamic museum on contemporary Africa, while remaining a *lieu de mémoire* and a meeting place for those with an interest in Central Africa. This has involved a major shift in vision and a move towards dialogue and transparency in the institute, which is at the same time a museum, a research institute and a centre for information dissemination and raising public awareness on Africa. In this process, close collaboration with the African diaspora and well-focused sensitisation activities play a major role.

1. History

The Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) was founded in 1898 at the initiative of King Leopold II as the 'Musée du Congo'. It originated from a very successful temporary exhibition (more than 1.2 million visitors) organized at his initiative and presented in 1897 as the Colonial Section of the Brussels World Fair.

The exhibition's aims were as much propagandist as they were commercial: Belgians were to be convinced of the economic potential of the Congo and of the good to be done in 'civilizing' and developing this region. The effect of the exhibition, which displayed the most investment-attracting export products surrounded by an array of ethnographic objects and animals prepared by taxidermists, in addition to reconstituted Congolese villages, with real Congolese villagers on site in the surrounding park area, was that scientific interest in the region was greatly aroused. It was thus

that the dual function of the museum was established: an exhibition and research institute, one of the many legacies that have remained relevant until today.¹

As research interest increased, the collections grew rapidly. Soon it became clear that the exhibition halls would be too small for the collections and research. Consequently King Leopold II decided to construct a new building to house them. Construction work started in 1904 and the new museum, the *Musée du Congo Belge*, opened in 1910. It is located amidst beautiful landscaped French gardens. In 1908, Congo formally became a Belgian colony. The RMCA was put under the auspices of the Ministry of Colonies and served as a promotional tool for Belgian colonial activities. The rapidly growing collections served as a basis for multidisciplinary scientific research. In 1960, Congo became independent and the museum changed its name to 'The Royal Museum for Central Africa'.

While the RMCA since the nineties has regularly organized temporary exhibits on contemporary themes, the permanent exhibition of the museum has remained mostly unchanged from the late fifties until today. As a result, the permanent exhibition of the RMCA is often referred to as reflecting the colonial view the Belgians had of Central Africa before 1960, the year of the independence of the RD Congo and many other African countries. Since 2002, the RMCA has launched an ambitious project of renovation to transform the former colonial museum into a museum on contemporary Africa, that disposes of modern facilities. An initial 'intention plan' was developed in 2003 and further developed into technically detailed programs that were approved by the Federal Government in 2006. Architectural plans were prepared subsequently, including a major master plan for the entire site. Construction work will be conducted from 2013 to 2016. The renovated museum will open to the public in 2017. The renovation entails major changes in the infrastructure and facilities of the museum, in its museography and in the contents of its exhibitions and displays (Photo 1).

¹ GRYSSELS G., LANDRY G. & CLAESSENS K., *Integrating the Past: Transformation and Renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa*, Tervuren, in *European Review*, Vol. 13, n° 4, 637-647, (2005).

2. RMCA today²

The Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), established in 1898, is a Belgian Federal Scientific Institute and operates under the auspices of the Federal Ministry for Scientific Policy. Its mission is to serve as a world centre in research and knowledge dissemination on past and present societies and natural environments in Africa, in particular Central Africa, to foster – in the public at large and the scientific community – a better understanding of this area and greater interest in it; and, through partnerships, to contribute substantially to its sustainable development. It has a triple function as a museum, as a research institute, and as a centre for the dissemination of information and for raising public awareness about Africa. The RMCA's principal activities are in the fields of collection management, research and scientific services, the dissemination of knowledge and the organisation of exhibitions, promoting awareness, and the strengthening of national institutions in Africa. Its collections, exhibitions, archives, data bases and scientific expertise are internationally renowned. Less than 1% of its collections are on display in the museum, the remainder are carefully conserved in its reserves.

The RMCA's research is multidisciplinary and covers both the human and natural sciences. Its major scientific disciplines are cultural anthropology, history, earth sciences and biology. In the field of anthropology its major domains are ethnography, linguistics, ethnomusicology and archaeology. In the field of Earth Sciences, its domains are geology, natural risks, geodynamics and environmental variability. Historical research covers both the colonial and contemporary history of Central Africa. In biology, the taxonomy of zoological specimens and wood biology are the major themes. The RMCA also hosts scientific support services such as a library and 12 specialized documentation centres, on-line information services and 9 laboratories.

The RMCA has approximately 300 staff members of whom 90 are scientists at Ph.D. level. RMCA scientists participate in a large number of national and international scientific networks. The RMCA

² GRYSEELS G., *The renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa*, Paper presented at the 2013 International Colloquium *Positioning Academic heritage. Challenges for Universities, museums and society in the 21st Century*, Ghent, 18-20 November 2013

works in close collaboration with universities and other scientific institutes, government agencies and museums in well over 20 African countries.

Over the years the RMCA has gained an international reputation in its different research domains.

It houses the largest collections in the world with respect to Central Africa, with among others 150.000 ethnographic objects, 10 million zoological specimens, 3 km of historical and geological archives, 56.000 tropical wood samples and 15.000 minerals, 1 million photographs and 3.000 films.

Its vast, extremely rich collections are currently being digitalized and are gradually becoming more easily accessible through websites.

The RMCA is a public sector institute. About 60% of its funding is provided by the Federal Belgian government, the remainder from competitive research grants, own income and European Union grants for research activities. The RMCA is active in development cooperation and has partnerships in 22 African countries. The RMCA also contributes every year to the training on average of 150 students and scientists, most of whom are Africans or of African origin.

The RMCA has public-oriented services on education and culture, museology, publications and communication.

Every year the museum welcomes an average of 180.000 visitors to its exhibitions. It also hosts between 30.000 and 40.000 children who participate in workshops or other educational activities. For the majority of Belgian children, their first encounter with Africa is through a school or family visit to the museum. It is very important that a positive and constructive view of Africa is provided during this first encounter. For this purpose, a wide range of activities is organized for all ages from 4 to 17, with a broad variety of themes such as music, agriculture, ethnography, history etc. Special workshops are offered to the blind or visually impaired and to children with a handicap. Cultural events are frequently organized, usually in collaboration with the African diaspora.

3. Process of transformation

The RMCA has a triple function as a museum, as a research institute, and as a centre for the dissemination of information and for raising public awareness about Africa. It was the clear intention to maintain and reemphasize its unique combination of disciplines, expertise, collections, partnerships in its vision for the future, so as to give the RMCA the potential to become *the* reference institute for past and present societies and cultures and natural environments in Africa, and Central Africa in particular.

Since 2001, important steps have been taken, to transform the museum from a colonial instrument into a modern reference institute and Africa-museum. This has included the participatory development of a mission statement, the development of a set of institutional policies and a new logo.

3.1. Strategic Plan

In 2001 the RMCA developed a Strategic Plan to determine its vision for the future, its priorities and strategies and an action plan. Through a participatory process it developed a mission statement formulated in the following terms:

The Museum is a world centre in research and knowledge dissemination on past and present societies and natural environments in Africa, and in particular Central Africa, to foster – in the public at large and the scientific community – a better understanding and interest in this area and, through partnerships, to substantially contribute to its sustainable development.”

This mission statement has major implications:

“World Centre of Research”	implies high quality research
“Knowledge dissemination”	implies easy access to collections, archives and databases
“Past and present societies”	implies close collaboration with African communities and the diaspora

“Partnerships”	implies strategic alliances, networks, and collaborative projects
“Sustainable development”	implies strengthening the institutions’s capacities and relevant research activities

3.2. Renovation of the Museum

The renovation of the RMCA implies, as already discussed, a reform of the institute and a renovation of its museum. The museum requires renovation to transform its colonial nature into a modern museum with a focus on contemporary Africa, to improve its museology and to modernise its infrastructure so as to allow for meeting rooms, multi-purpose air-conditioned galleries, a shop and a restaurant.

The objective is that the museum become a dynamic museum equipped with all modern facilities. It will encourage interdisciplinary knowledge of people, cultures, societies, history and natural resources in Africa as well as the sustainable development of the region.

The museum aims to raise its average numbers of visitors from 160 000 to 220 000 annually.

3.3. A new role for colonial museums in a multicultural society

In a post-colonial museum the heritage and collections in its care are considered as shared with their countries of origin. This implies the involvement of Africans in museum activities through partnerships.

The renovation process implies a redefinition of the role of the museum in a multicultural society. It is defined in the following terms:

- The RMCA remains the most important *lieu de mémoire* of the Belgian colonial past
- The RMCA must become a window opening on to contemporary Africa and its history
- The RMCA must become a meeting place for Belgians and members of the ‘source communities’ whose heritage is held in the RMCA

One of the RMCA's aims is to encourage the general public to take a greater interest in Africa and in the diversity of its people, societies, cultures and environments. In doing so, the Museum plays a unique role in combating racism and cultural intolerance.

The Museum is also a meeting place where people can share experiences, where intercultural dialogue is promoted, where children of various cultural origins can find the tools to construct their particular identity and where people in general are stimulated to come to terms with the past and become responsible civilians in a globalized world.

In order to fully take on the responsibilities of the museum in relation to society and become a forum for dialogue, a place of contact between peoples and cultures and especially for African communities to voice themselves, several initiatives have been undertaken. A working group was set up with representatives of many of the African associations in Belgium. After an initial phase of dialogue, this group developed into a smaller advisory committee that goes by the name of 'COMRAF'³, whose nominated representatives meet regularly with representatives of the public service and research sections of the museum.

In this same spirit of dialogue, educational programmes are continuously developed in close collaboration with partners from Belgium's African communities. What has become an annual 'Africa<>Tervuren' event aims at bringing African communities into the museum and raising awareness about Africa in the public at large.

3.4. Revisiting our origin in a series of exhibitions: 'Exit Congo', The Memory of Congo. The colonial era', 'Congo: Nature and Culture' and 'Independence'

The RMCA is today still seen as one of the most powerful symbols of the colonial past of Belgium. The architecture of the building and many of the displays in the permanent exhibition rooms continue to evoke its colonial past. The museum is still often associated with the Belgian view of colonial Africa from before 1960, when DR Congo gained its independence.

³ COMRAF = Comité de concertation MRAC – associations africaines

In order for its transformation into a modern and dynamic museum for Africa to be achieved, it was necessary to first deal with the museum's own history as a colonial institution. This meant organizing a series of exhibitions on the origin of RMCA's collections, on Belgium's colonial past and on the Congo.

3.4.1. Exit Congo (2000-2001)

The first exhibition in the context of the renovation of the museum was 'Exit Congo', which told the story of the origin of the RMCA's ethnographic collections. Many items were contributed by missionaries, administrators, or military and scientific collection missions. The exhibition also confronted historic collections with contemporary art by both Congolese and Belgian artists. It told the story of the repatriation of nearly 120 objects from the museum to the Institut National des Musées du Congo (IMNC) in Kinshasa, during the seventies.

3.4.2. Congo: Nature and Culture

To further fulfil the sustainable development aspect of the mission statement, the RMCA accepted an invitation from UNESCO and its World Heritage Centre to organize an exhibition on the natural and cultural diversity of the Democratic Republic of Congo and on the relationship between humans and their natural environment in Congo. The exhibition coincided with an international donor conference organised at UNESCO in 2004 for the preservation of national parks in the DRC. The exhibition, 'Congo: Nature and Culture' gave the museum the opportunity to conduct a 'trial run' of sorts, on interdisciplinary research and exhibitions. After Paris the exhibition was installed in the RMCA for a year. It is currently on display at the Museum of Lubumbashi, DRC, and the National Museum of Congo in Kinshasa, where it also provides the basis for educational activities.

3.4.3. Memory of Congo. The colonial era (2005)

The exhibition 'The memory of Congo' took place from February to October 2005 and was an enormous success. More than 140.000 people visited the exhibition which was accompanied by a large number of other activities such as debates, seminars, film projections and special educational activities for both adults and young people. An academic conference on colonial violence was also organised. Most importantly, the exhibition stimulated widespread attention and debates within Belgian society, with hundreds of press articles and media broadcasts. During the period of the exhibition no single day went by without a radio or television program, or a newspaper article highlighting one issue or other relating to Congo's colonial past and Belgium's role in it. The impact of the exhibition was very profound. It led to a process of soul-searching and reflection within society. This was very remarkable, especially if one realizes that most Belgians grew up with a very favourable image of the Belgian colonization of Congo.

The exhibition also illustrated the different perceptions of Belgians and Africans. While Belgians focused their critical reflection on the colonial violence at the end of the 19th century in association with rubber production, Congolese or Belgians of Congolese origin could not understand why the public gave so much attention to these historical events while so little was done to stop the violence suffered today by RDC citizens of war that continues to be fought, especially in Eastern Congo.

In the wake of the exhibition, the museum's history and art galleries were profoundly renovated and modernised.

3.4.4. Independence

2010, the 50th anniversary of the independence of DR Congo, saw the organization of the exhibition 'Independence. Congolese stories about 50 years of Independence'. The exhibition provided information about the independence of Congo, using information provided by Congolese. With close to 60 000 visitors, the exhibition was a major success.

3.5. The role of the diaspora

Throughout the renovation process and discussions on how the renovated museum will exhibit its collections, a continuous dialogue has been conducted with the African diaspora through the COMRAF mechanism (Photo 2). The RMCA has also coordinated the efforts of the READ-ME project (Réseau européen des Associations de Diaspora et Musées d'Ethnographie) aimed at a closer association of diasporas with ethnographical museums through projects, colloquia and joint exhibitions.

RMCA has also pursued a major research program on the African diaspora, particularly with respect to social identity, social capital and social memory of the colonial period.

3.6. Towards a new reference exhibition

In developing a new exhibition that considers African heritage as a heritage shared with the source communities, the RMCA⁴ considers the following elements as drivers of change:

Colonial museums

- Contrast between European 'civilization' and African 'primitiveness'
- Juxtaposition of timeless nature and culture
- Emphasis on specimens and objects
- Colonial societies presented as if colonization never took place
- Organization of ethnographic objects on the

Post-colonial museums

- A principled insistence African cultures and an age-long history of cultural influence
- Africa has a long, dynamic history
- (African) men and women are to be placed at the centre
- The inclusion of 'popular' cultures created as a result of colonization
- Ethnographic objects tell the story of

⁴ Based on a personal communication by Bambi Ceuppens (Anthropologist RMCA), and subsequent discussions with museum staff and COMRAF.

basis of material and esthetic criteria	their history, origin, use and meaning
- Africans represented by Europeans	- Africans represent themselves

4. Renovation Plan

4.1. Architectural plans

A renovated museum is needed not only for reasons of content, but also of museography (the use of multimedia) and infrastructure (modern facilities such as conference rooms, multifunctional auditoria,...).

The museum first developed a general plan which was subsequently refined in a detailed analysis of needs.

The museum building is a protected monument and a balance needs to be found between its historical value and perspective and modern infrastructural needs.

However, the renovation of the museum building has to be seen as part of a broader holistic plan that includes the renovation of the entire RMCA site with its 7 buildings and a 4 hectare park.

The formal proposal for the renovation of the museum site and building was approved by the Belgian federal government in 2006. The contract was assigned to a consortium led by architect Stéphane Beel. In a first step, Beel provided a master plan for the entire site, based on the centralisation of its functions.

The second step involved the development of detailed architectural plans for the renovated museum. A new building was planned to house reception facilities, a shop, a restaurant/cafeteria and meeting facilities. This new building was to be connected with the museum building through an underground gallery. This gallery was to include a multifunctional space as well as air-conditioned temporary exhibition spaces

4.2. The new reference exhibition

For the new permanent exhibition in the renovated museum the following guidelines have been developed:

- People are at the center
- The permanent exhibition concentrates on Central-Africa, with extension to other regions of Africa, where relevant
- The permanent exhibition is based on the museum's own collections and expertise
- The permanent exhibition starts with the present and goes back in time
- Interdisciplinary approaches are deployed where these constitute added value
- The continuous participation of the African community

In the old permanent exhibition, the galleries were primarily organized by discipline. The new permanent exhibit will have 4 major themes: The Society of Central Africa, Landscapes and Biodiversity, Resources, finally Arts, Expressions and Representations. The new permanent exhibition will be developed from a contemporary and thematic perspective and with a focus on Central Africa.

The total cost of the renovation program is around 75 million Euros, mostly funded by the Belgian Federal Government.

5. Prospective dates

Renovation work started on October 16, 2013 and is expected to be finalized by the end of 2016. About 6 months will then be needed to install the new permanent exhibition. It is expected that the new renovated museum will open its doors mid 2017.

While the museum remains closed, the RMCA's public-oriented activities will continue to function through rented exhibition spaces in Brussels and collaborative international agreements with other museums worldwide. Research and collection-management activities will continue in the other buildings at the RMCA in Tervuren.

The museum will become a 'pop-up' museum, appearing with its collections, exhibitions and activities at other locations, both in Belgium and abroad.

6. Implications for research

Scientific research at RMCA is multidisciplinary in the human, earth and biological sciences. It focuses on Africa and particularly Central Africa, and is often linked to the material and immaterial heritage in the RMCA collections and archives and to its historical expertise.

While the RMCA works closely with universities in nearly all of its research projects, its portfolio of activities is different in nature from that of universities, through the link with collections and its long-term nature.

The RMCA's research departments are organised in the following divisions:

Cultural Anthropology and History

- Archives and collection management
- Culture and Society
- History and Politics
- Heritage studies

Earth Sciences

- Surface environment and collection management
- Geodynamics and mineral resources
- Natural hazards
- Promines

Biology

- Wood biology
- Biological collection and data management
- Invertebrates
- Vertebrates

The research activities are of both an applied and fundamental nature. More information on our research activities can be found in the RMCA Annual Report⁵.

In recent years, shifts in focus have taken place in the direction taken by research. Some of these are:

- Rather than focussing on Africa as a region, the strategy is now also to look at the influence of Africa outside the continent. For example, what is the role of the African diaspora, how have African cultures influenced cultures elsewhere in Europe and in the USA, what has been the impact of African music and religious traditions on cultures elsewhere.

Current RMCA research activities looking at the influence of Africa on the rest of the world include:

- Linguistics / music
- African Diaspora
- The history of the Slave Trade, including epidemiology
- Material Cultures Africa / North and South Africa
- Geological characteristics Africa / Brazil
- Biodiversity Congo Basin / Amazon
- Greater attention to contemporary art of African artists and to contemporary cultures (e.g. *cultures populaires*)
- Artist-in-Residence programmes
- More emphasis on contemporary history and politics, as well as governmental issues
- In biological research, molecular biology approaches have become increasingly important
- In remote sensing, new technologies such as radar interferometry allow for more targeted work in the development of early warning systems for natural risks
- Greater focus on sustainability and interdisciplinary aspects of research

⁵ Annual Report of the Royal Museum for Central Africa 2013, Tervuren, 2014

- Greater social relevance
- More intense collaboration through networks with Natural History and Ethnographical Museums

Overall, the policy and social relevance of research projects have become more important in setting research priorities.

7. Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of the most important steps the museum has taken in its transformation process from a colonial museum to an internationally recognized reference centre for Central Africa.

Over the coming years the RMCA will renovate its facilities, museography and permanent exhibition, strengthen its role in society by stimulating intercultural dialogue, promoting a positive image of multicultural societies and intensifying its collaboration with source communities. The number of visitors is expected to increase to an average of 220.000 a year. New publics will be attracted through targeting efforts. A much wider range of cultural and educational activities and of scientific services will be offered.

All this will consolidate the museum's reputation as a curator of world heritage and a leading scientific and information dissemination institute on Central Africa. It will also enhance its reputation as the world reference centre of knowledge on Central Africa.

The museum will have changed from a colonial museum into a 21th-century institution. It will become a meeting place where people share experiences, where intercultural dialogue is promoted, where children of mixed cultural origins can find the tools to construct their own identity and where people in general are stimulated to come to terms with the past and become responsible citizens in a globalized world.

References:

GRYSEELS G., LANDRY G. & CLAESSENS K. (2005). "Integrating the Past: Transformation and Renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren", in *European Review*, Vol. 13, n° 4, 637-647.

GRYSEELS G. (2013). "The renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa", paper presented at the 2013 International Colloquium Positioning Academic heritage. Challenges for Universities, museums and society in the 21st Century, Ghent, 18-20 November 2013.

Annual Report of the Royal Museum for Central Africa 2013, Tervuren, 2014