

The Human Zoo: Science's Dirty Secret



In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scientists were so fascinated by race that thousands of indigenous people from all over the world were put on display in human zoos in pseudo-scientific demonstrations of 'racial difference'. What was the context of this disturbing phenomenon, and who were the individuals involved?

Pygmies and indigenous people today

Ota Benga was a member of the Mbuti pygmies who, like all indigenous people today are struggling to hold on to their ancient ways of life.

To modern day 'race' scientists - including population geneticists and biological anthropologists - people like the Mbuti are highly valuable and their genetic lineage is one of the most ancient of any group alive today. It is now widely accepted that non-Africans are descended from a single group who left 50-70,000 years ago, but the origins of Africans themselves remain much less clear. Did this adventurous group also spread out across Africa, or did it represent just one of many different African populations with even deeper roots? These are important questions, and the answers are most likely to be found by studying current populations like the Mbuti, the San Bushmen and others.

Indigenous cultural practices help anthropologists understand an ancient way of life that all our ancestors practised but that has become extinct in many parts of the world. These peoples hold a key to the history of all of us and as such their status in the world of science couldn't be more different to the old colonial notions of ethnographic fairs.

Find out more

In 2007 the United Nations adopted The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. 144 states including Great Britain and Ireland, voted in favour while Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States voted against it.

Find out more about Indigenous People by visiting the United Nations Forum on Indigenous People:
<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/history.html>

The history of human zoos

Human zoos were 19th and 20th century public exhibits of people - mostly non-Europeans. Africans, Asians, Indigenous people and many others were often caged and displayed in a makeshift 'natural habitat'. These human displays were very popular and shown at world fairs where they drew Europeans and Americans in their tens of millions - from Paris to Hamburg, London to New York, Moscow to Barcelona.

This curiosity regarding indigenous races had a history at least as long as colonialism and Columbus brought indigenous Americans from his voyages in the New World to the Spanish court in 1493. Human zoos and exhibitions of exotic populations became common in the 1870s in the midst of the New Imperialism period. They could be found in many places including Hamburg, Antwerp, Barcelona, London, Milan, New York, and Warsaw, and hundreds of thousands of people visited these exhibitions.

Some notable European exhibitions...

■ In 1874, Carl Hagenbeck, a German merchant in wild animals and entrepreneur of many European zoos, decided to exhibit Samoan and Sami people (Laplanders) as 'purely natural' populations. In 1876, he sent a collaborator to the Egyptian Sudan to bring back some wild beasts and Nubian people. The Nubian exhibit was very successful in Europe and toured Paris, London, and Berlin. He also dispatched an agent to Labrador to secure a number of 'Esquimaux' (Inuit) from the settlement of Hopedale; these Inuit were exhibited in his Hamburg Tierpark.

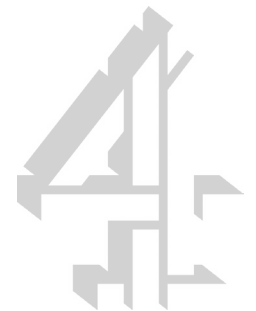
■ Geoffroy de Saint-Hilaire, director of the Jardin d'acclimatation, decided in 1877 to organize two ethnological spectacles that presented Nubians and Inuit. That year, the audience of the Jardin d'acclimatation doubled to one million. Between 1877 and 1912, approximately thirty ethnological exhibitions were presented at the Jardin zoologique d'acclimatation.

■ Native people of Suriname were displayed in the International Colonial and Export Exhibition in Amsterdam held behind the Rijksmuseum in 1883.

■ Both the 1878 and the 1889 Parisian World Fairs presented a Negro Village (village nègre). Visited by 28 million people, the 1889 World Fair displayed 400 indigenous people as the major attraction.

■ The 1900 World Fair presented the famous diorama living in Madagascar, while the Colonial Exhibitions in Marseilles (1906 and 1922) and in Paris (1907 and 1931) also displayed human beings in cages, often nude or semi-nude.

■ The 1931 exhibition in Paris was so successful that 34 million people attended it in six months, while a smaller counter-exhibition entitled The Truth on the Colonies, organized by the Communist Party, attracted very few visitors.



Some of the people displayed

- One of the first modern public human exhibitions was PT Barnum's exhibition of Joice Heth on February 25, 1835. Joice Heth (c.1756–February 19, 1836) was an African American slave. In 1835 toward the end of her life, blind and almost completely paralysed (she could talk, and had some ability to move her right arm), she was purchased by PT Barnum. He began his career as a showman by exhibiting her, claiming she was the 160-year-old nurse of George Washington. She died the next year; in all probability no more than 80 years old.
- The Chinese Siamese twins Chang and Eng Bunker.
- Saartjie Baartman of the Namaqua, referred to as 'the Hottentot Venus', who was displayed in London until her death in 1815.
- During the 1850s, Maximo and Bartola, two microcephalic children from Central America, were exhibited in the US and Europe under the names 'Aztec Children' and 'Aztec Lilliputians'.

The story of Ota Benga

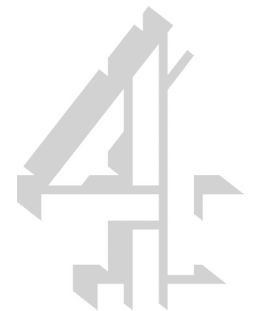
In 1904, Ota Benga was brought to the United States by the missionary and explorer Samuel Phillips Verner. Verner had been hired by the St. Louis World's Fair to bring back pygmies for one of their ethnographic exhibits.

Verner's story is recounted by his grandson Phillips Verner Bradford in the book 'Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo'. According to this account, Verner purchased Ota Benga from African slave traders - his wife and children had been killed in a massacre. Verner brought Benga, seven other pygmies and a young Congolese man to St Louis where they proved to be one of the most popular attractions at the fair. The crowds gawked, jeered and at one point threw mud pies at the human exhibit.

From St Louis, the group travelled to New Orleans just in time for Mardi Gras, and finally back to Africa. Benga - expressing a desire to learn to read - asked Verner to take him with him when the explorer returned home.

Verner and Ota Benga arrived in New York in August 1906. Verner, looking for a place for Benga to live, finally brought him to the Bronx Zoo, where, at first, he walked the grounds and helped the workers. But in early September, it was decided to move Benga's hammock into an orang utan's cage, where he was encouraged to play with the orang utan and weave caps out of straw and to shoot his bow and arrow. The zoo was encouraged by prominent eugenicist and head of the New York Zoological Society Madison Grant and a sign soon read:

The African Pigmy, 'Ota Benga.'
Age, 23 years. Height, 4 feet 11 inches. Weight, 103 pounds.
Brought from the Kasai River, Congo Free State,
South Central Africa, by Dr. Samuel P. Verner.
Exhibited each afternoon during September.



Outrage

Renowned clergyman Reverend Dr Robert Stuart MacArthur of the Calvary Baptist Church in New York was outraged and was quoted in The New York Times on Sept. 10, 1906 as saying, *'The person responsible for this exhibition degrades himself as much as he does the African. Instead of making a beast of this little fellow, he should be put in school for the development of such powers as God gave to him. It is too bad that there is not some society like the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. We send our missionaries to Africa to Christianise the people, and then we bring one here to brutalise him.'*

African American church leaders also expressed outrage. *'Our race, we think, is depressed enough without exhibiting one of us with the apes,'* wrote one such minister, James H. Gordon to the mayor of New York. *'We think we are worthy of being considered human beings, with souls.'* Gordon was to become Ota Benga's guardian after the zoo ultimately bowed to public pressure and had Benga removed.

Ota Benga after Bronx Zoo

Ota Benga came under the guardianship of Gordon, who placed him in the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum, a church-sponsored orphanage. In January 1910, Gordon arranged for Benga's relocation to Lynchburg, Virginia. His teeth, which he had filed to points in the Congo, were capped and he was dressed in American-style clothes. His English improved and he eventually began working at a Lynchburg tobacco factory. Despite his small size, he proved a valuable employee because he could climb up the poles to get the tobacco leaves without having to use a ladder. His fellow workers called him 'Bingo' and he would tell his life story in exchange for sandwiches and root beer. He began to plan a return to Africa but when the First World War broke out, a return to the Congo became impossible, and he became depressed.

On March 20, 1916, at the age of 32, Ota Benga built a ceremonial fire, chipped off the caps on his teeth and shot himself in the heart with a stolen pistol. The death certificate listed his name as 'Otto Bingo'.



Find out more

There are many websites dedicated to the memory of Ota Benga including the Ota Benga Association who state that they honour him in respect of *'cultural diversity as a source of strength'*.