

SUNDAYREADER

SCANDAL AT THE ZOO / One hundred years ago, a Congolese pygmy was put on 'exhibit' with the apes at the Bronx Zoo. The uproar that followed, and his tragic death in 1916, was not the end of his story

The pygmy in the cage

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When New Yorkers went to the Bronx Zoo on Sunday, Sept. 4, 1906, they were treated to something never seen at the Monkey House.

At first, some people were a little what you might call "shocked" — he seemed much less a monkey than a man, though a very small, dark one with strangely pointed teeth. He wore modern clothing but no shoes. He was produced with howling and screaming and the crowd by shouting at a target. The display fell in with the crowd's taste, making faces and making noise.

The new resident of the Monkey House was, indeed, a man. A Congolese pygmy named Ota Benga. The next day, a sign was posted that gave Ota Benga's height as 4 feet 11 inches, his weight as 110 pounds and his age as 23. The sign read: "Ota Benga, a native of the Congo, was brought to the Zoo by the American Museum of Natural History." Visitors to the Monkey House that second day got even better than Ota Benga and his companion. They were shown a pair of chimpanzees and a pair of orangutans, both of which were playing tricks on each other. The crowd loved it.

To enhance the jungle effect, a person was put in the cage and began to beat a drum around it. The crowd laughed as the pygmy sat next to a pair of crows that he had been given.

Newspapers added to the excitement of the night. The next day, the New York Times reported that the pygmy was in a cage with monkeys as companions. "There could be no doubt that the majority of the joint man-and-monkey exhibition was the most interesting sight in Bronx Park."

A scandal flared up almost immediately, fueled by the indignation of black citizens like the Rev. James London, superintendent of the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn. "You see, we think it degrading enough without exhibiting one of us with the apes," Gordon said. "We think we are worthy of being considered human beings, with souls."

One hundred years later, the Ota Benga episode remains a perfect illustration of the racism that pervaded New York at the time. More George McGovern, for example, refused to see the exhibition or to support their cause. But for his part, he was organized by the zoo director, William Temple Hornaday, a major figure not only in the zoo's history but also in the history of American conservation, who never wavered. "When the history of the Zoological Park is written, this incident will form its most striking passage."

The Bronx Zoo, which opened in 1899, was a young institution during the Ota Benga scandal. Those at the zoo today look back at the episode with a mixture of regret and nostalgia. "It was a mistake," said John Caldwell, senior vice-president for public affairs of the Wildlife Conservation Society, which owns and runs the zoo. "When you reflect on it, you realize it was a moment in time. You have to look at the time in which it happened, and realize to understand why this would occur."

That understanding may deepen with a recent spike in interest in Ota Benga, who died in 1916 when he shot himself in the heart. Many have spread writers, artists and musicians, and there is even an effort to bring his remains home to Congo. In Lynchburg, Va., where he spent the last six years of his life, and where they lie today.

"This was his wish," said Ota Benga's son, a Congolese involved in the identification campaign. "He wanted to go home."

Journal from the bush to the Bronx Zoo

Ota Benga had already lived an eventful life by the time he reached the Bronx. According to the 1972 book *Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo*, by Philip Verrier Bredford and Harvey Blume, he survived a pygmy raid carried out by the Force Publique, a Belgian army unit, in the Congo. He was then sold to a Belgian trader named Leopold II, the king of Belgium and ruler of what was then called Congo-Kinshasa. Among the dead was Ota Benga's wife and two children.

The seller told him one story to a well-known Baschile. He was in the slave market when his deliverance appeared one day in the form of Samuel Phillips Verrier, an Africa-oriented anthropologist and missionary from South Carolina (and a grandfather of Bradford, the author).

"Verrier had been hired to take some pygmies and other Africans back to St. Louis for the 'anthropology exhibit' at the 1904 World's Fair. Then, they and representatives of other ideological groups, like Irish, American Indians and Filipino rebels, would be in evidence of their traditional dwellings, for the celebration of progress."

After examining Ota Benga and being particularly pleased by his work, which had been found in sharp points in the manner common among his people, Verrier brought him from his capture and, along with several other pygmies and a few other Africans, took him to St. Louis. When the day was over, he took them all back to Africa as promised.

Ota Benga was made to make a painful transition to his original way of life, and continued to spend a lot of time with Verrier as the anthropologist pursued his interests in Africa. Their friendship grew, and Ota Benga asked Verrier to return with him to "the land of the message" — the land of the white man. The South Carolina and the pygmy arrived back in New York in August 1906.

The first stop, in Bradford and Blume's account, was at the American Museum of Natural History, where director, Harrison Henshaw, agreed to show just Verrier's cargo of collections, including a couple of chimpanzees, but — temporarily at least — Ota Benga himself. Verrier, who was broke, left for the South to try to raise some money, and the pygmy's residency in the Museum of Natural History began. He was given a place to sleep and seems to have been free to visit the museum.

Before long, though, the African became dis-



Ota Benga, a Congolese pygmy, posed at the Bronx Zoo in 1906.

comfortable. Among other things, he threw a chair at George Gagerman, the photographer, and almost hit her in the head. Fed up, Hornaday suggested that Verrier explore the possibilities at the zoo. Hornaday, the zoo's director, agreed to let Ota Benga live in the zoo. Ota Benga was, however, not a pygmy but a Congolese.

Ota Benga was free to wander the zoo as he pleased. Sometimes he helped the animal keepers with their jobs. In fact, Hornaday described the African as being "employed" by the zoo, though there is no record he was ever paid. He spent a lot of time at the Monkey House, caring for Verrier's one surviving chimpanzee and holding as well with an orangutan named Hobbes.

Contrary to common belief, Ota Benga was not simply placed in a cage that second weekend in September and put on display. As Bradford and Blume point out, the process was far more subtle. Since he was already spending much time inside the Monkey House, where he was free to come and go, it was but a small step to encourage him to bring his human-like appearance and start spending even more time there. It was a subtle but not a small step to encourage him to bring his human-like appearance and start spending even more time there. It was a subtle but not a small step to encourage him to bring his human-like appearance and start spending even more time there.

But he did not come quickly. Confronted with the presence of the Colored Baptist Ministers' Conference, Hornaday suspended the exhibit the Monday afternoon.

To be an African minister and their allies, the exhibit's message was clear: The African was meant to be an African, not a person who was being used as a curiosity to be shown to the people in the overwhitening white crowds who found him so entertaining.

anthropological, and consequently an act over-looked of the apes, and before him human. I think it is a shame that the authorities of this great city should allow such a sight as that witnessed at the Bronx Park — a negro on exhibition in a menagerie cage.

Hornaday remained unapologetic, insisting his only intention was to put on an "ethnological exhibit." To a letter to the mayor, he defended "my action in placing Dr. Verrier's very interesting little African where the people of New York may see him without acceptance or discount to him."

The public, at any rate, had no use for it. In the fall of Ota Benga, whose name was now a household word. Though no longer on official display, the African was still living at the zoo and pending that with his grown friends in the Monkey House. On Sunday, Sept. 10, some 40,000 people went to the zoo and over 100,000 people went that day. The Times reported, the crowds pursued him, "howling, jeering and yelling." The newspaper reported, "some of them poked him in the ribs, others tripped him up, all laughing at him."

Ninety years after his death,

his own page at MySpace

Toward the end of September, arrangements were made for Ota Benga to live at the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum. Eventually he was sent to the asylum's facility in eastern Long Island. Then, in January 1910, Gordon, the asylum's superintendent, arranged for the pygmy to move to Lynchburg, in Virginia, where he had already spent a summer as a Baptist missionary.

In Lynchburg, Ota Benga had his teeth capped and became known as Ota Benga. He spent a lot of time in the woods, hunting with bow and arrow, and gathering plants. He did odd jobs and worked in a tobacco factory. He also became friendly with the poet, Anne Spencer, who lived in Lynchburg, and through her met other African-American leaders: W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington.

No one can be absolutely sure why Ota Benga left himself that afternoon in March 1916. Dilemma was said, the Congolese who wants to return the pygmy's remains to Congo, agrees with the view expressed in a New York Times report of the time. "For a long time the young negro pined for his African homeland, and grew more restless as he realized that such a return was out of the question because of the lack of money."

"Verrier himself wrote that Ota Benga 'probably succumbed only after the feeling of utter unsustainability overwhelmed his brave little heart.'"

Bradford and Blume would like to see the zoo erect a statue or some other memorial to Ota Benga, but Caldwell of the Wildlife Conservation Society says he does not think that is necessary. He agrees the best way for the zoo to remember Ota Benga is for the wildlife society to help in efforts to return his remains.

"Congo is a very important area for us, and we've been working hard on that project," he said. "The way we memorialize the Ota Benga experience by making sure that the place where Ota Benga came from remains a place where his people can continue to live."

After 100 years, Ota Benga seems to be having a renaissance. In 2003, the Brooklyn-based alternative band Pop Culture Monkey released a song, Ota Benga, New, drawing many of the lyrics from a poem that appeared in The New York Times on Sept. 19, 1906: "To this land of freedom progress, in this wilderness of a man's cage."

His name has also been adopted by the Ota Benga Alliance for Peace, Healing and Dignity in Congo and by a Human Rights Collective of African-American artists called Ota Benga House and Associates. This spring he was the subject of a three-day conference in Lynchburg that included lectures, readings and an ornamental service. Ota Benga and others at the conference are hoping to have an even bigger one next year, with Congolese pygmies in attendance.

To make the return of Ota Benga complete, he has been named as a new member of the "Most Me" section of the magazine that hangs briefly at the Monkey House, including the final page. "Tablaid each afternoon during September."

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The New York Times wrote in an editorial: "Not being particularly vehement or contented with the exhibition of an African pygmy in the Bronx Zoo, the people of the Zoological Park are not quite so concerned as the emotion which other men of color have shown. Still, the show is not nearly a pleasant one, and we do wonder that the Trustees did not foresee and avoid the scandalous now shown in his direction."

The editorial added, "As for Ota Benga himself, he is probably enjoying himself as well as he could anywhere in this country, and it is absurd to make moans over the alleged humiliation and degradation he is suffering."

A host of Ota Benga is on display at the Museum of Natural History in New York.