

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 novel at the Monkey House. At first, some people were a little uneasy. It seemed much less a monkey than a man, though a very small, dark one with grotesquely pointed teeth. He wore modern clothing but no shoes. He was propped up on a wooden stand, entertained the crowd by shooting at a target. He displayed skill at aiming with bow, knife, mace, arrows and a spear.

The new resident of the Monkey House was, indeed, a man, a Congolese pygmy named Ota Benga. The next day, Sept. 5, he was paraded through the park in a cage with monkeys as company. The New York Times wrote the next day, "and there could be no doubt that the majority of the joint man-and-monkey exhibition was the most interesting sight at Bronx Park."

In the Ota Benga "exhibit" did not last.

A scandal flared up almost immediately, fueled by the indignation of black citizens like the Rev. James Gordon, superintendent of the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn. "Our race, we think, is deeply wrong without exhibiting one of our with the apes," Gordon said. "We think that was a very wrong thing to do to a human being."

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 meet with the demonstrators to support their cause. He was also outmaneuvered by the zoo's director, William Temple Hornaday, a major figure not only in the zoo's history but also in the history of American conservation, who wrote books, "where the history of the Zoological Park is written, that incident will find 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 resignation. "It was a mistake," said John Calverly, senior vice president for public affairs of the Wildlife Conservation Society, which owns and runs the zoo. "When you reflect on it, you realize that it is a moment in time. You have to look at the time in which it happened, and you're not understood why that 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 chest. Many have signed writers, artists and musicians, and there is even an effort to return his remains from Congo. "This was his life," said Didi Krieger, a Congolese scholar and the film's director. "He wanted to go home."

Journey 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 Verter Bradford and Harvey Blane, he survived a pygmy slaughter carried out by the Force Publique, a Belgian armed force serving Leopold II, the king of Belgium and ruler of what was then called Congo Free State. Among the dead were Ota Benga's wife and children.

The killers told him one day to go to a place called the Bush. He was in the slave market when his deliverance appeared one day in the form of Samuel Philip Verter, an African-obsessed anthropologist and missionary from South Carolina (a grandfather of Bradford, the author). "Verter had been looking for some pygmies and other Africans back to St. Louis for the 'anthropology exhibit' at the 1904 World's Fair. There, they and representatives of other aboriginal peoples, like hair, American Indians and Filipino tribesmen, would be recipients of their traditional dwellings, for the edification of Europeans."

After examining Ota Benga and being particularly pleased by his teeth, which he had filed to sharp points in the manner common among his people, Verter brought him from his captives 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 established on a small reservation in his original way of life, and continued to spend a lot of time with Verter as the anthropologist pursued his interests in Africa. Their friendship grew, and Ota Benga asked Verter to return with him to "the land of the mountains" — the land of the white man. The South Carolinian and the pygmy arrived back in New York in August 1906.

That first step, in Bradford and Blane's account in their book, was the American Museum of Natural History, whose director, Henry Osborn, agreed to store just Verter's cargo of collections, including a couple of chimpanzees, but — temporarily, at least — Ota Benga himself. Verter, who was broke, led for the South to try to raise some money, and the pygmy's residency in the Museum of Natural History began. It was given a place to sleep and seems to have been free to roam the museum.

Before long, though, the African became diffi-



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

cult in control. Among other things, he threw a chair at Florence Christopher, the philanthropist, and almost hit her in the head. Fed up, Hornaday suggested that Verter explore the possibilities at the zoo. Hornaday, the zoo's director, agreed to let Ota Benga stay at the zoo. Ota Benga was, however, 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 Verter's one surviving chimp and bonding as well with an orangutan named Hobbes.

Contrary to common belief, Ota Benga was not simply placed in a cage that served weekend in September and put on display. As Bradford and Blane point out, the process was far subtler. 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 hammock to an empty cage and start spending even more time there. It was his mother's small step to give him a bow and arrow, set up a target and encourage him to start shooting. This was the same that was done at the Monkey House on the first day of the Ota Benga "exhibit."

The next day, word went out. The headline in *The New York Times* read: "Bushman Shows a Cage With the Monkey Apes." Thousands went to see that day to see the new attraction, to watch him carry on as normally as others in his, with his dog the orangutan.

But the black men were quickly confronted with the presence of the Colored Baptist Ministers' Conference, then responsible for exhibiting the Monday afternoon.

To the black ministers and their allies, the exhibit's message was clear: "The African was meant to be an animal, not a man. He was brought to the zoo to show the people in the overwhitening white crowds who found him so entertaining."

South American, and consequently an not one of the apes, but before him human. I think it is a shame that the authorities of this great city should show such a sign at the entrance of the Bronx Park — a negro boy on exhibition in a monkey cage.

Hornaday remained unapologetic, insisting his only intention was to put on "anthropological exhibits." In a letter to the mayor, he defended "my actions in placing in the Zoo a very interesting little African whom the people of New York may see him without appearance of disrespect to him."

The public, of any race, had not yet had its fill of Ota Benga, whose name was now a household word. Though no longer on official display, the African was still present at the Monkey House. On Sunday, Sept. 16, some 40,000 people went to the zoo and every monkey in the Monkey House. The Times reported, the crowds pursued him, "howling, jeering and yelling."

The newspaper reported, "Some of them poked him in the ribs with their fingers, all laughed 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 1906, Gordon, the asylum's superintendent, arranged for the pygmy to move to Lynchburg, in Virginia, where he had already spent a summer at a Baptist seminary.

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 as a housekeeper. He also became friendly with the poet Anne Spencer, who lived in Lynchburg, and through her met African-American leaders W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington.

He was not as absolutely sure with Ota Benga killed himself that afternoon in March 1916. Didi Krieger said, the Congolese who was the pygmy's remains to Congo, agree with the view expressed in the *Washington Post* newspaper report of the time: "For a long time the young negro pined for his African relatives, and grew more homesick as he realized that each day's separation of the question because of the lack of response." "Verter's history of what Ota Benga 'probably succumbed only after the feeling of utter incommunicability overwhelmed his brain little by little.'"

Bradford and Blane's book is one of the most recent to make an attempt to return Ota Benga's remains to Congo, and they say he does not think that is necessary. He says the remains for the time to remember Ota Benga is for the wildlife society to help in its efforts to promote wild places in high honor in a "holy place."

"Congo is a very important area for us, and we've been there a long time," 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 the last word.

In 2003, the Brooklyn-based alternative band Popadandel recorded the song *Ota Benga's Name*, drawing many of the lyrics from a poem that appeared in *The New York Times* on Oct. 10, 1906: "In the land of the mountains, in the woods of the forest, we have placed him in high honor in a holy place."

It has also been adapted by the Ota Benga Alliance for Peace, Healing and Dignity in Congo and by a Houston-based collective of African-American artists called Ota Benga Home and Associates. This spring he was the subject of a three-day conference in Lynchburg that included lectures, readings and an environmental service. Didi Krieger and others at that 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 needs a page at www.ota.com," she said. "The 'About Me' section quotes the newspaper headline but the Monkey House, including the final phrase, 'Tabulated each afternoon during September.'"



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