

From the Belgian Congo to the Bronx Zoo

All Things Considered, September 8, 2006 · On Sept. 8, a hundred years ago, the Bronx Zoo in New York unveiled a new exhibit that would attract legions of visitors -- and spark a furor.



In 1906, the Bronx Zoo put Ota Benga, a Congolese pygmy, on display in a cage in its Monkey House. Protests by a group of African-American ministers soon put an end to the exhibit. Wildlife Conservation Society

Inside a cage, in the zoo's Monkey House, was a man named Ota Benga. He was 22 years old, a member of the Batwa people, pygmies who lived in what was then the Belgian Congo.

Ota Benga first came to the United States in 1904. The St. Louis World's Fair had hired Samuel Phillips Verner, an American explorer and missionary, to bring African pygmies to the exposition.

After the World's Fair, Verner, as promised, took the Africans back to their country. But Ota Benga found that he didn't fit in at "home" anymore -- all the members of his particular tribe had been annihilated during his time away -- and he asked Verner to take him back to the United States.

That's when Ota Benga ended up at the Bronx Zoo. It's estimated that 40,000 visitors a day came to see him.

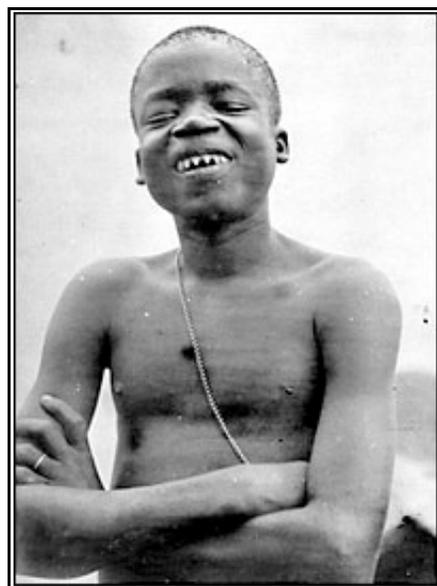
At the same time, a group of African-American ministers mounted a vigorous protest.

From an article in *The New York Times* on Sept. 10, 1906:

"The person responsible for this exhibition degrades himself as much as he does the African," said Rev. Dr. R. MacArthur of Calvary Baptist Church. "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 Christianize the people, and then we bring one here to brutalize him."

The Bronx Zoo soon ended the exhibit, and the ministers' group moved Ota Benga to the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn. He stayed there for a short time before being relocated to Lynchburg, Va., where various families housed him and tried to help him live a normal life.

Ota Benga lived in Lynchburg until March 1916, when he borrowed a gun from one of his host families, went to the woods on the edge of the town, and shot himself.



Jessie Tarbox Beals

Ota Benga was among a group of pygmies brought to the United States to be displayed at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. St. Louis Public Library

Carrie Allen McCray, now 92, knew Ota Benga when she was a little girl in Lynchburg; for a time, he lived with her family. Phillips Verner Bradford is the grandson of the explorer who brought Ota Benga to America. They recount the story of the African pygmy's life -- and death -- in America.

Joe Richman of Radio Diaries produced this story. The editors were Ben Shapiro and Deborah George.

The Scandal at the Zoo
Mitch Keller, Journalist, *The New York Times*
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When New Yorkers went to the Bronx Zoo on Saturday, Sept. 8, 1906, they were treated to something novel at the Monkey House.

At first, some people weren't sure what it was. It - he - 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 proficient with bow and arrow, and entertained the crowd by shooting at a target. He displayed skill at weaving with twine, made amusing faces and drank soda.

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 (1.5 meters) his weight as 103 pounds (46.7 kilograms) and his age as 23. The sign concluded, "Exhibited each afternoon during September."

Visitors to the Monkey House that second day got an even better show. Ota Benga and an orangutan frolicked together, hugging and wrestling and playing tricks on each other. The crowd loved it. To enhance the jungle effect, a parrot was put in the cage and bones had been strewn around it. The crowd laughed as the pygmy sat staring at a pair of canvas shoes he had been given. "Few expressed audible objection to the sight of a human being in a cage with monkeys as companions," The New York Times wrote the next day, "and there could be no doubt that to the majority the joint man-and-monkey exhibition was the most interesting sight in Bronx Park."

But the Ota Benga "exhibit" did not last. A scandal flared up almost immediately, fueled by the indignation of black clergymen like the Reverend James Gordon, superintendent of the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn. "Our race, we think, is depressed 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. Mayor George McClellan, for example, refused to meet with the clergymen or to support their cause. For this he was congratulated 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 to him, "When the history of the Zoological Park is written, this incident will form its most amusing 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 Calvelli, 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 was a moment in time. You have to look at the time in which it happened, and you try to understand why this would occur."

That understanding may deepen with a recent spike in interest in Ota Benga, who died in March 1916 when he shot himself in the heart. His story has inspired writers, artists and musicians, and there is even

an effort to exhume his remains from a cemetery in Lynchburg, Virginia, where he spent the last six years of his life, and return them to Congo.

"This was his wish," said Dibinga wa Said, a Congolese involved in the exhumation campaign. "He wanted to go home."

From the Bush to the Bronx

Ota Benga had already lived an eventful life by the time he arrived in the Bronx. According to the 1992 book "Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo," by Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume, he was a survivor of a pygmy slaughter carried out by the Force Publique, a vicious armed force in service to Leopold II, the king of Belgium and the ruler of what was then called Congo Free State. Among the dead were Ota Benga's wife and two children.

The killers sold him into slavery to a tribe called the Baschilele. He was in the slave market when his deliverance appeared one day in the form of Samuel Phillips Verner, 30, an Africa-obsessed explorer, anthropologist and missionary from South Carolina (and a grandfather of Bradford, the author).

Mr. Verner had been hired to take some pygmies and other Africans back to St. Louis for the extensive "anthropology exhibit" at the 1904 World's Fair. There, for the edification of American fairgoers, they and representatives of other aboriginal peoples, like Eskimos, American Indians and Filipino tribesmen, would live in replicas of their traditional dwellings and villages.

After examining Ota Benga and being particularly pleased by his teeth, which had been filed to sharp points in the manner common among his people, Verner bought him from his captors and, along with several other pygmies and a few other Africans, took him to St. Louis. When the fair was over, he took them all back to Africa as promised.

Ota Benga was unable to make a successful transition to his original way of life, and continued to spend a lot of time with Verner as the anthropologist pursued his interests in Africa, which included the collection of artifacts and animal specimens. Their friendship grew, and Ota Benga asked Verner to return with him to "the land of the muzungu" - the land of the white man. The blond South Carolinian and the pygmy arrived back in New York in August 1906.

Their first stop, as Bradford and Blume recount in their book, was the American Museum of Natural History, whose director, Hermon Bumpus, agreed to store not just Verner's cargo of collectibles, including a couple of chimpanzees, but - temporarily, at least - Ota Benga himself. Mr. Verner, 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 roam the museum. Mr. Bumpus bought him a white duck suit.

Before long, though, the African became difficult to control. Among other things, he threw a chair at Florence Guggenheim, the philanthropist, and almost hit her in the head. Fed up, Mr. Bumpus suggested that Verner explore the possibilities at the zoo. Hornaday, the zoo's director, was receptive, agreeing to lodge not just Verner's animals but Ota Benga, too. Toward the end of August, the defining chapter in the pygmy's strange life had begun.

Degradation and Darwin

Ota Benga was free to wander the zoo as he pleased. Sometimes he helped the animal keepers with their jobs. He spent a lot of time at the Monkey House, caring for Verner's one surviving chimp and bonding as well with an orangutan named Dohong.

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 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 hang his hammock in an empty cage and start spending even more time there. It was but another small step to give him his bow and arrows, set up a target and encourage him to start shooting. This was the scene that zoogoers found at the Monkey House on the first day of the Ota Benga "exhibit."

The next day, word was out. The headline in The New York Times read: "Bushman Shares a Cage With Bronx Park Apes." Thousands went to the zoo that day to see the new attraction, to watch him carry on so amusingly, often arm in arm, with Dohong the orangutan.

But the end came quickly. Confronted with the protests of the Colored Baptist Ministers' Conference, Mr. Hornaday suspended the exhibit that Monday afternoon.

To the black ministers and their allies, the message of the exhibit was clear: The African was meant to be seen as falling somewhere on the evolutionary scale between the apes with which he was housed and the people in the overwhelmingly white crowds, who found him so entertaining.

"The person responsible for this exhibition," said the Rev. R. S. MacAuthur, a white man who was pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church, "degrades himself as much as he does the African. Instead of making a beast of this little fellow, we should be putting him in school for the development of such powers as God gave him."

It was not just racism that offended the clergymen. As Christians, they did not believe in Darwin, and the Ota Benga exhibit, as Mr. Gordon of the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum said, "evidently aims to be a demonstration of Darwin's theory of evolution."

"The Darwinian Theory is absolutely opposed to Christianity, and to public demonstration in its favor should not be permitted." Mr. Gordon said.

As for the press, The Evening Post reported that Ota Benga, according to the zoo's keepers, "has a great influence with the beasts – even with the larger kind, including the orang-outang with whom he plays as though one of them, rolling around the follow of the café in wild wrestling matches and chattering to them in his won guttural tongue, which they seem to understand."

The New York Times wrote in an editorial: "Not feeling particularly vehement excitement ourselves over the exhibition of an African 'pigmy' in the Primate House of the Zoological Park, we do not quite understand all the emotion which others are expressing in the matter. Still, the show is not exactly a pleasant one, and we do wonder that the Director did not foresee and avoid the scoldings now aimed in his direction." The editorial added, "As for Benga himself, he is probably enjoying himself as well as he

could anywhere in this country, and it is absurd to make moan over the imagined humiliation and degradation he is suffering.”

The New York Globe printed a letter from a reading that said” “I lived in the south several years, and consequently am not overly fond of the negro., but believe him human. I think it is a great shame that the authorities of this great city should allow such a sight as that witnessed at the Bronx Park- a negro boy on exhibition in a monkey cage.”

And The New York Daily Tribune, evincing little interest in facts, wrote of Ota Benga’s past: “His first wife excited the hunger of the rest of the tribe, and one day when Ota returned from hunting, he learned that she had passed quietly away just before luncheon and that there was not so much as a sparerib for him.”

Hornaday remained unapologetic, insisting that his only intention was to put on an "ethnological exhibit." In a letter to the mayor, he defended "my action in placing Dr. Verner's very interesting little African where the people of New York may see him without annoyance or discomfort to him." In another letter, he said that he and Madison Grant, the secretary of the New York Zoological Society—who 10 years later would publish the racial list track “The Passing of the Great Race—considered it “imperative that the society should not even seem to be dictated to” by the black clergyman.

The public, at any rate, had not yet had its fill of Ota Benga, whose name was now a household one. Though no longer on official display, the African was still living at the zoo and spending time with his primate friends in the Monkey House. On Sunday, Sept. 16, 40,000 people went to the zoo, and everywhere Ota Benga 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 laughed at him."

Suicide and 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, Mr. Gordon arranged for the pygmy to move to Lynchburg, where he had already spent a semester at Baptist seminary.

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

No one can be absolutely sure why Ota Benga killed himself that afternoon in March 1916. Dibinga wa Said, the Congolese who wants to return the pygmy's remains to Congo, agrees with the view expressed in a Lynchburg newspaper report of the time: "For a long time the young negro pined for his African relations, and grew morose when he realized that such a trip was out of the question because of the lack of resources." Verner himself wrote that Ota Benga "probably succumbed only after the feeling of utter inassimilability overwhelmed his brave little heart."

Dr. Bradford, the author, would like to see the zoo erect a statue or some other sort of memorial to Ota Benga, but Mr. Calvelli of the Wildlife Conservation Society says he does not think that is necessary. He argues that the best way for the zoo to remember Ota Benga is for the wildlife society to continue its efforts to preserve wild places in Congo.

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

After a hundred years, Ota Benga seems to be having the last word. His name has been adopted by the Ota Benga Alliance for Peace, Healing and Dignity in Congo, and by a Houston-based collective African-American artists called Otabenga Jones Associates. This spring he was the subject of a three-day conference in Lynchburg that included lectures, readings, and an ecumenical service. Dr. Dibinga and other participants in that conference are hoping to have an even bigger one next year, with Congolese pygmies in attendance.

In 2001, "Ode to Ota Benga," a "historical lecture with piano improvisations by the performer and composer, Lester Allyson, Knibbs, was presented at the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance. In 2003, the Brooklyn-based alternative band Piñatoland recorded that the song "Ota Benga's Name," drawing many of the lyrics from a poem that appeared in the New York Times on Sept. 19th, 1906: "In this land of foremost progress/ In this wisdoms ripest age/We have placed him in a high honor in a Monkey's cage."

To make the return of Ota Benga complete, he even has a page at WWW.myspace.com. The "About Me" section quotes the sign that hung briefly at the Monkey House, including its final phase, "Exhibited each afternoon during September."

Ota Benga's Life in Africa, Capture, and Journey to America
Phillips V. Bradford, Sc.D., Professor and Author

Abstract

This is a putative history of a friendship between an African native and an eccentric American explorer who both seemed to have needs and ambitions that propelled them into a tragic odyssey of exploration during the early 20th century. Ota Benga was a native of a tribe of African forest people known as the Bachichiri living along the Kasai River in the Congo Free State. The explorer, Samuel Phillips Verner, the grandfather of the present author and speaker, had procured Ota Benga from bondage and took him with other African natives to participate in the exhibition of native peoples at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. This history covers their experiences at the World's Fair, subsequent explorations in America and Africa, and return to New York City in 1906, where Ota Benga became the "Pygmy in the Zoo" serving as a demonstration of human evolution through his role as a representative of a tribe of native Africans who were regarded as a "missing link". Unfortunately, no one can truly examine the thoughts and feelings of Ota Benga, since he left no account of his own and all that can be ascertained must be distilled from Verner's accounts and those of news reporters and a few others who participated in, and shaped his odyssey.

Background on Verner.

Samuel Phillips Verner was variously an ill-prepared missionary, an experienced Carolina woodsman and explorer in central Africa, and a would-be entrepreneur and empire-builder. As a scion of a well-connected southern family, whose fortunes and ambitions were struggling to recover from the devastation of the American Civil War, Verner was the eldest of his siblings, all of whom were raised in a family that had high expectations for their success.

Verner was challenged to understand the nature of African-Americans by his parents. His father, John Samuel Verner, the Solicitor General of South Carolina during the restoration period, was an avowed racist who had little regard for the abilities of African-Americans in local government and wanted to wrest the control of local government from the Yankee "carpet baggers" who had been in control. Verner's mother, on the other hand, was of a mind that felt that African-Americans could indeed be a source of strength for reconstruction and that the strongest priority should be given to extending education to African-Americans so that they could fully participate in the growth of the new South. In her view, all people would benefit from their inclusion in the reconstruction of the South. The discussions around the Verner dinner table in Columbia, South Carolina, were filled with debate about the comparative inherent intellect of African descent people, and doubtlessly young Verner was motivated to find the truth of the matter.

After scoring the highest academic achievement, perhaps in its the entire history, at the College of South Carolina, Verner felt a calling to resolve the racist questions that his parents posed. During and after college he began to study everything from the Holy Bible to Charles Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" and "The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex" where he read that if there were to be found any transitional species of hominid between the great apes and

humans, it would surely be found in Africa, where all humans are believed to have originated. Verner became obsessed with the idea of pursuing anthropology by exploring in what was then known as the “dark continent”.

But, how would Verner obtain the funds and wherewithal to explore the great “dark continent” ? He felt he had the wherewithal to meet the physical challenges, since he was raised as an outdoorsman in the Carolina back-country, with a deep knowledge of the wild mountain streams and survival skills to live off of the rugged landscape. He was very capable at fishing and hunting, and finding his way through the thick undergrowth of the Smoky Mountain area. While on his way to Africa, he prepared himself in London. He had the common sense to meet with Dr. Patrick Manson, whom he described as “The most experienced and widely reputed specialist on tropical diseases in the world”¹, who instructed him on the use of mosquito netting to avoid insect bites. This knowledge, incidentally, Verner passed on to Dr. Walter Reed in his work in the Panama Canal Zone in later years. Verner attributed his longevity largely to the knowledge he gained from Dr. Manson.

The funding for his early African explorations came from the Southern Presbyterian Church, but he needed to be recognized as a legitimate ordained cleric to take advantage of this opportunity. Verner seized an opportunity to gain such recognition by enrolling in a theological school in Alabama that was owned by his uncle, whereupon he passed an exam and was ordained and graduated in three days. His graduation photo shows him with Rev. Phipps, his classmate who graduated with him after three years of study. Rev. Phipps was also attracted to go to Africa as a missionary for the church, and I am of the firm belief that Verner never had any serious intent to do missionary work, but needed the support of the church to pay his fare. Ultimately, Verner’s record of his first trip to Africa and work there during 1896-1899 was recorded in his extensive 500 page volume, “*Pioneering in Central Africa*”, which was published by the Presbyterian Committee on Publication in Richmond, 1901. This volume barely mentions any traditional missionary work, but rather is a collection of adventure stories and descriptions of native cultures. It helped establish Verner as a noted anthropologist and explorer, but must have been a disappointment to the Presbyterian authorities in that his missionary work as reported in this tome was minimal, whereas it seemed apparent that he was more interested in the cultural and scientific study of the African people.

Verner’s reputation as an African explorer was probably at its maximum in 1901-1903. He was among the founders of the American Anthropological Society, and as a result of his acknowledged expertise in African affairs in 1903, he was hired by the St. Louis Exposition to “acquire” certain African natives of the pygmy variety to be participants in the anthropology exhibit at the 1904 World’s Fair.

The story of Verner’s involvement with the St. Louis World’s Fair is well covered in the book which I wrote together with Harvey Blume in 1992, “*Ota Benga - The Pygmy in the Zoo*”, published by St. Martin’s Press². Our book focuses on Ota Benga, whom Verner did not meet until 1903 on his second African trip. A more complete discussion of Verner’s explorations and the collections that he amassed in his own name and others’ names for various museums in the

¹ “*Pioneering in Central Africa*”, page 10, by S. P. Verner, Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1901

² A limited number of copies of the paperback edition of “*Ota Benga - The Pygmy in the Zoo*”, may be purchased at this conference, and it can also be obtained from the web site <http://www.otabenga.com> maintained by the author.

United States and Europe, may be found in an unpublished article that was written by Dr. Gordon D. Gibson of the Smithsonian Institution³. A copy of Gibson's article has been provided to the leadership of this conference, and has also been posted on the internet site for Ota Benga. It should be noted that the material covered in the Gibson article does not include any mention of Ota Benga because it covers the time before Verner met Ota Benga.

Verner meets Ota Benga.

Verner had signed up with the St. Louis Exposition as an agent to go to Africa and procure pygmies for the anthropology exhibit at the World's Fair. There was a formal contract that specified what was expected of Verner and what he would be paid. Also, the provisions that would be provided to Verner were spelled out in detail. These provisions included an allowance for "gift" items that might be needed to help persuade tribal chieftains to allow people under their rule permissions to accept offers to go to the Exposition.

During his excursion into the Congo, his riverboat had an engine failure that required nearly three weeks for the delivery of parts to repair it. During this time the passengers were warned not to wander far from the safety of the boat because there might be dangerous animals in the area, and Verner stated that they were warned of the presence of "cannibals" living nearby. This delay had caused the press in St. Louis to speculate on whether Verner was ambushed and eaten by cannibals, and therefore would not be able to deliver on his contract. Verner insisted on using this time to explore in the area, despite the threat of cannibals, and after consulting with a Belgian official who knew the area made a call on a native village where Ota Benga, along with other natives were being held as hostages. There had been a war over some delivery of ivory, which resulted in the destruction of Ota's tribe and their homes. Ota's wife and children had been captured and possibly murdered along with all the natives in his village by natives loyal to the dreaded Force Publique, which was the enforcement arm of King Leopold in the Congo. The exact circumstances of the dispute that led to the massacre of Ota's village and family are not known, but it probably arose from a failure to deliver some promised quota of elephant tusks. Pygmies were often suspected of hiding their stores of elephant tusks so the tusks would not be confiscated by other tribesmen or agents of King Leopold.

There are many renditions of how they met, some with overtones of sensationalism and others with greatly exaggerated claims of bravado or abuse. Perhaps the most truthful report is that of the New York Zoological Society⁴ which stated as follows:

"In 1904 he was found by Mr. Verner on one of the southern tributaries of the Congo, a captive in the hands of a tribe of cannibalistic savages known as the Baschilde. The exact locality was the confluence of the Kasai and Sankmir Rivers, Upper Congo. Knowing that this tribe sometimes sacrifices their slaves, and sometimes eats them, Mr. Verner, prompted solely by the instincts of humanity ransomed Ota Benga and attempted to convey him back to his own country."

³ "*Samuel Phillips Verner in the Kasai*", by Gordon D. Gibson, Curator of African Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. An unpublished article originally intended for publication in *Natural History*, the magazine of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

⁴ *Zoological Society Bulletin*, No. 23, October 1906, pages 301 & 302, published by the New York Zoological Society. This article, entitled "An African Pigmy" described Ota Benga as being "employed" in the Zoological Park.

As a respected scientific journal published by the Zoo, the bulletin in which this description was offered was prepared by experts who would likely have consulted with Verner and Verner would have likely given a truthful account, although Verner was known to have embellished the truth in many of his interviews with the popular press.

After being freed from his captors, Ota Benga accompanied Verner on his quest to obtain a group of pygmies to take to the St. Louis World's Fair for exhibition purposes. There is no credible evidence that Ota Benga was not very grateful for being freed from his captors and the two men formed a long-lasting and mutually beneficial friendship that became an odyssey of exploration, adventure, and learning.

Ota Benga, the Explorer.

Ota Benga was an experienced elephant hunter and expert in the making of hammocks and nets for trapping game. With Verner as his guide, Ota Benga began his own exploration of the world through which they traveled. Ota may have been especially instrumental in persuading other Africans to join them in their trip to St. Louis and he would have known where some of the more venturesome pygmies could be found. Verner exposed Ota Benga to some of the accoutrements of modern western civilization, such as the Edison phonograph, steamboats, pocket watches, photography, guns, and electricity. Once in America, they would have seen balloons, automobiles, railroads, and a few airplanes, especially at the World's Fair.

Ota did not keep any written journal of his experiences. Aside from press accounts of his travels, the only records of their adventures were kept by Verner, and many of them have been lost. Ota and Verner always journeyed together in America. Verner knew enough of Ota's language to converse with him and translate for him. They arrived in New Orleans in the early summer of 1904, but Verner had contracted a malarial seizure and could not follow through with a planned visit and reception with the Mayor. The Africans were placed on a train to St. Louis by an Exposition official, who came to greet them and escort them to the World's Fair grounds. Verner wrote that the Exposition official was not able to communicate with the Africans and acted coldly and rudely towards them. Verner concluded that he would have to commit most of his time to the Africans' needs while they were in America and after his recovery from the seizure, he went to the Fair and began to try and make many corrections in their accommodations and accompanied them in sight-seeing and presentations. After the Fair had ended in the fall of 1904, Ota and Verner traveled by rail to Washington D.C., Baltimore, and to Verner's family home in western North Carolina while awaiting the return trip to Africa via New Orleans, Havana, and Tenerife. Some of the Africans became ill in New Orleans during the Mardi Gras of 1905 but Ota Benga was able to enjoy the celebrations and participate in the liberties afforded by the occasion. All of the Africans returned safely to the African homelands. Some of their illnesses were successfully treated while in Havana. Verner took great pride in the fact that he was able to return all of the Africans safely and in good health, for unfortunately, that was not the case for some of the natives of the Philippines, South American Indians, and the Zulus from South Africa. In fact some of the Zulu never returned, and found themselves among the homeless poor of St. Louis.

Once in Africa, Ota and Verner began a series of explorations there, where now, Ota was the guide and translator. They made many presentations to local natives about the wonders of the western world and even set up a local fair where Verner was exhibited on a make-shift southern style veranda, smoking a corn-cob pipe, wearing a straw hat while listening to the music of

Johann Strauss, Jr. and John Philip Sousa on an Edison phonograph. During this period in 1905, Verner became acquainted with Frederick Starr and Leo Frobenius, well-known anthropologists, with whom he shared his amenities at Camp Washington. Camp Washington, named for Booker T. Washington, was a training camp for Africans to learn manual arts and crafts using western technologies to prepare them for work in the Belgian industries.

Many of the items in the collections of African artifacts now displayed in museums around the world attributed to Starr and Frobenius, were actually purchased from Verner and Ota Benga, who had originally collected them.

Some of the adventures of Ota Benga and Verner were recalled by Verner in a series of articles that he wrote for the Brevard (NC) Daily News during the 1930s. Ota Benga learned, from Verner, how to use gunpowder as an explosive to kill a meddlesome crocodile that had eaten Ota's pet dog. Verner had learned, from Ota, how to fend off a leopard, and how to safely avoid encounters with biting ants in the forests of the Congo. Their explorations also resulted in the discovery of an important diamond mine and other natural resources.

Many of these stories published in the Brevard Daily News, such as those entitled: "The Enchanted Hippo", "The Wild Boar", "The Buffalo Bullfight", "Canning the Crocodile", and "Attack by the Lupumbo" seemed so fantastic that many thought they were pure fiction, but Verner insisted that they were true, and Ota Benga was often a principal character.

Ota Benga remarried a woman of the Twa tribe during this adventuresome period, but after she was bitten by a poisonous snake and died, the Batwa never fully accepted him into their tribe. The snake bite was considered as some kind of omen of evil-doing, which had the effect of disenfranchising Ota Benga once again from his origins.

Verner and Ota had amassed a large collection of African cultural artifacts and mineralogical samples, and botanical and biological specimens (including many live animals), intended for American and European museums. As Verner was packing up to return to America, Ota insisted that he should be allowed to come along, since he perceived that he no longer had a future in Africa. So, along with a boat-load of more than 50 crates and barrels of collectibles, Verner and Ota crossed the Atlantic once again, this time destined for New York City.

Once in New York, the American Museum of Natural History, which Verner thought would be interested in his artifacts, declined any interest, preferring to acquire American Indian items, and Verner became insolvent. In a vain attempt to borrow from his family in the Carolinas, Verner left Ota Benga in the custody of Herman Bumpus, Director of the Museum, while Verner traveled south to learn that his unappreciative family had no interest in funding his African adventures. Bumpus seized an opportunity to employ Ota Benga in his fund-raising efforts, where he was both at times encouraged, and at other times discouraged, from performing various "antics" to amuse the museum's wealthy patrons. Ota Benga lived at the museum in an apartment that the museum provided, on its premises, for distinguished guests.

Bumpus, frustrated with his inability to control Ota's antics, and unable to communicate with Ota except through Verner's transliterated letters, found a way to dispatch his responsibility by inviting Dr. William Hornaday to consider "employing" Ota Benga at the Bronx Zoo. Hornaday saw an opportunity to present Ota Benga as an exhibition of Darwin's Theory of Evolution by suggesting that Ota was one of a tribe of pygmies that might be regarded as a "missing link" in the pathway of evolution from anthropoid apes to humans. So Ota Benga became the "Pygmy in the Zoo".

Although Ota, at times, seemed to enjoy his role as an exhibition celebrity, he was also taunted by ill-mannered visitors and could become frustrated to the point of violence at times. He once speared a visitor in his leg with a well placed arrow from his bow, and fought with caretakers who did not want him to shed his clothing entirely. Although he was given many liberties to roam about the zoo grounds, sporting a fine white linen suit, and actually spent the nights in an apartment at the zoo which was intended for distinguished visitors, the staged scenes in the primate cage were what captivated the public and the press' image of him.

When Verner returned to New York, he had to find a job to restore his fiscal integrity, so he brandished a letter of reference from a cabinet secretary in Washington to get a job as a ticket clerk in the Wall Street IRT Subway Station, which had just been opened for operation in 1906. By this time, an effort had been mounted by various well-meaning individuals to "rescue" Ota Benga from the zoo, deny Verner, Bumpus or Hornaday any role as Ota's custodian, and Ota's odyssey took a different turn. He became a resident of the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn.

Despite some press reports to the contrary, Verner was denied any opportunity to visit with Ota Benga and was prevented from seeing him ever again. Verner met with New York capitalists and returned to Africa as the head of the American Congo Company, wishing that Ota Benga could be at his side. The American Congo Company had a license from King Leopold to develop American industrial interests in the Congo, which lasted until the Belgian Parliament removed Leopold's authority in 1908, and the American Congo Company was dissolved. Verner, again seeking employment, took a job as a health officer in the Panama Canal Zone.

Ota's experience at the Asylum and later at the Virginia Seminary are the subject of other presentations at this symposium, and so I will leave Ota's subsequent odyssey in their hands.

Ota Benga as an entertainer.

While it seems to be popular today for people to study Ota Benga's life as a victim of repression and racism, he did have a life. One of his talents was that of an entertainer. He could demonstrate and play the *molimo*, a native instrument that was used in ceremonies to celebrate a successful elephant kill. He brought his molimo to the World's Fair and enjoyed dancing to the piano music of Scott Joplin on St. Louis Plaza. He was also a lead performer in frequent skits that were intended to illustrate the life of his fellow Africans.

While celebrating his success in killing the "Madame" crocodile that ate his pet dog, under the mantle of the crocodile's severed head, Ota Benga performed a dance so alluring that Verner claimed he did not have the language skill to describe it. To quote Verner on Ota Benga's "Crocodile Dance":⁵

"There is no use trying to describe it -- how often have I wished that O'Henry, or Mark Twain, or Dumas could have stood in my shoes sometimes to leave behind a really immortal record of what used to pass under my eyes."

⁵ *The Crocodile Dance*, part of a series of articles published by the Brevard (NC) Daily News during the 1930s based on the adventures of S. P. Verner while exploring with Ota Benga in the Congo forests.

S. P. Verner

Verner also exploited an opportunity to go on lecture tours about Africa with Ota Benga. Their agent for arranging such tours was previously an agent for P.T. Barnum, and the manner in which these tours were conducted was closer to what might have been regarded as a “freak show” than an academic learning exercise. Verner may have delivered the lectures but Ota was the star of the show, with his antics. Part of what many see as “antics” in the behavior of the forest people may be, in fact, a cultural tendency to communicate with the art of “attention getting” through certain behaviors that are closer to entertainment, than disruptive social acts.

Another aspect of entertainment that Ota Benga enjoyed was demonstrating the art of weaving, particularly in making hats. On a few occasions, Ota would be wearing only a hat of his own design, and nothing else, much to the amusement of visitors. He was skilled at the art of the “cats cradle” where complex woven patterns were produced in strings of yarn with clever manipulations of his fingers. He also could make his own bow and arrows and enjoyed demonstrating them to audiences in St. Louis and New York.

Ota Benga as a Diplomat and Statesman.

Ota Benga as an icon of racism, Barnumism, and Darwinism, was also keen to grasp an opportunity to use his talents to represent the needs and aspirations of his native people. At St. Louis, he was engaged in acting out a series of skits depicting the methods by which his tribe was being treated. He showed how people were murdered and he presented pleas for help from Americans to save his people from further degradation. Unfortunately, few of the Fair officials and visitors were interested in such pleas. They only wanted to have some fun seeing Ota Benga and his fellow Africans throw mud balls at the American Indians and other natives, climb trees, act like monkeys, and mimic their observers. Verner did provide Ota with some private audiences among prominent people who were concerned about human atrocities in the Congo, such as Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, and Kermit Roosevelt. Ota’s principal strengths as a statesman and diplomat were best seen in his negotiations with other African natives where he played a leadership role in facilitating cooperation and organizing various gatherings.

Summation:

Since Ota Benga cannot speak for himself, it is misleading and possibly dangerous for any of us to put words in his mouth. We cannot see inside his head. However, a careful reading of the press clippings and study of the characters and tenor of the times in which he lived, shows me that he was a complex character. He was not *just* a victim of racism, Barnumism, and Darwinism. He was a multi-dimensional character who could make choices and could be influential. In his passing, we can all learn that we need to try harder, when offering our best intentions, to avoid unintended consequences that we could later regret.

Phillips Verner Bradford, Sc.D.

OTA'S EPIC
Stories for My Brothers
Carrie Allen McCray, Author and Poet

Narrative Poem about Ota Benga, the Gentle *Pygmy*
From the Congo Forest Who was Brought
to America and Exhibited in the Bronx Zoo
In a Cage with an Ape

A Presentation for the International
Conference in Lynchburg Virginia
October 2007

FOREWORD

This narrative poem is a tribute to Ota Benga, the strong, yet gentle man from the deep Congo Forest. Ota was brought over here to America first in 1904 and again in 1906 by Samuel Phillips Verner, Presbyterian Minister from America, who served as missionary to the Congo. This was during the frenzied time of anthropologists trying to prove the darker races a lower form of man.

In 1904, many other persons of the darker races from around the world were brought over and exhibited in the St. Louis World's Fair Anthropology Unit: *Eskimo natives from Alaska, the Ainu from Japan, natives from the Philippines, Indian tribes from America, Zulus, Balubas and "Pygmies" from Africa.*¹

In 1906, Ota was brought back over here by Verner, who falling on hard times, left him in the Museum of Natural History with the unscrupulous director, Bumpus, who exhibited him. Ota, a strong proud man, reacted to this so Bumpus contacted Verner, whom Ota called "Fwela" (leader) to come get him. Ota was then placed by Verner with Hornaday, Director of the Bronx ZOO, who placed him in a cage with an ape and exhibited him.

His story was in all the newspapers and African-American ministers and others across the nation protested. My mother's first husband, Professor Gregory Willis Hayes, was one of those protesters. Professor Hayes was president of Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia and was also chairman of the National Black Baptist Education Committee. Professor Hayes offered Ota his home as a place to live and an opportunity for education in the lower school of the seminary, just across the road from the Hayes home.

Professor Hayes and his wife, Mary, were members of the early Pan-African movement, having been encouraged by Chilembwe, who earlier attended the seminary. Later Chilembwe led his country to freedom from British rule². Professor Hayes was a strong man, committed to freedom. Born a slave, after freedom he went on to graduate from Oberlin College with honors and to be the first African-American speaker at graduation there. The town newspaper compared his speaking ability to that of Frederick Douglas.³

I have a personal interest in the story of Ota Benga, brave and proud man from the Congo, as he lived in our home, not in the home of Anne Spencer, my mother's dearest friend and one of the Harlem Renaissance poets. Her son, Chauncey, misled the authors of *Ota Benga, the Pygmy in the Zoo.*⁴ This, even after my brother, Hunter Hayes, gave them the truth. Chauncey's story was

unfortunate because it went around the world as truth; and my mother not even mentioned in Bradford and Blum's book.

Ota lived in the Hayes home only six months when Professor Hayes. Ota's sponsor, became seriously ill and died. Ota had to be returned to the orphanage in Brooklyn. However, in 1910, he asked to return to Lynchburg, and Mary Hayes, now Mary Hayes Allen, and her sons were happy for Ota's return to the home. Mary Hayes had married my father, a lawyer, William Patterson Allen. Of that union three girls, were born-Rosemary, I and then Dollie. The house was now bulging with people and lots of activity.

Ota was a teacher to the boys: taught them at an early age how to make hunting spears, how to hunt, and how to fish as he was taught to do by his father. He was also teacher to our mother and to the Harlem Renaissance poets and writers, such as Dubois and James Weldon Johnson who visited Anne Spencer and the Hayes home. They too, were interested and joined the Pan-African movement; a movement uniting those persons of African descent from around the world.

Fwela returned Ota to his Forest, but brought him back over here again. Fwela deserted him and Ota ended up exhibited in a cage with an ape in the Bronx Park Zoo. Protests were loud and wide. My mother's first husband, Professor Hayes (ex-slave who had known abuses), offered Ota a home with him in Lynchburg, Virginia, and schooling at the seminary across the road where Hayes was President. One of the poems is an account of that. Ota never expressed it, but he naturally longed for his home in the Forest. I have never understood why the persons of Lynchburg, Virginia could not find a way to send Ota to his beloved Forest in the Congo.

When Professor Hayes died, Ota returned to the Orphanage, and in 1910 Ota requested a return to the Hayes home in Virginia. By this time, Mary Hayes was now Mars Hayes Allen having married my father, William Allen, lawyer. Ota settled in, but in his soul, longed to return to his Forest home. The boys last time in the woods with Ota, he sang a very sorrowful song. His stories speak of this. He sings a soulful song, "I Belong in Forest." Then Ota went into the woods alone singing a song he had heard the Chapel choir at Virginia Seminary sing:

*I believe I'll go back home,
Lordy, won't you help me.*

Ota ended up saying, "I'll find a way." He does a fire dance, which I learned from an African student at the University of South Carolina, that in some African cultures, was a preparation for death. In the dark of night, Ota went into a shed and shot himself. My brother Hunter remembered this well, and when telling me the story, tears were in his eyes as Ota was like a father to him.

I'm not certain Rosemary, Dolly and I remember too much about Ota; we were so young. However, both Rosemary and I seem to have vague visions of him. Our brother, Hunter, who just died in 2003, through the years told us many stories about Ota whom we called "Otto," the name that came down in a letter from the orphanage. Hunter said of Ota, "He was like a father to me, my friend, my teacher, my hero, who knew more about the meaning of humanity than the missionary who brought him over here." And indeed he did; his people of the Congo Forest were pacifists, equalitarians, and environmentalists. We could learn much from them. There is such beauty in the culture of the early deep African Congo Forest People we want to know more about them. Perhaps their music will take us there. They sang through their day's work and when celebrating at night. The beginning poem speaks to this lovely culture where music every day was so much a part of their lives.

PRELUDE
(The Early Deep African Congo Forest)
Music of the Forest
1. Morning

The early Deep Congo Forest People
awaken singing, dancing,

welcoming a new day, their Forest
a rugged, but peaceful home,

wrapping itself around them softly,
their lives, harmonious.

In the trees, a choir of birds
join them, singing.

Cheer-weet, cheer-weet, cheer-weet:
elephants in the distance

stomp dancing through the Forest,
trumpeting their own *cool*.

A gazelle, startled, jetés over a log,
then dances off into the brush

while monkeys chide her with their
oo-oo; ah-ah; oo-oo; ah-ah;

as the peace-loving Congo Forest
People go about their work

filling their days with song – the
custom brought over the waters

in the bosoms of slaves to the rice and
cotton fields of South Carolina;

pickin' cotton and singin', plantin' rice and
singin', singin' way into the night;

celebratin' life - threads comin' over
the waters from their

homeland, took us a long time
to tie the threads together.

2. Night

In Ota's Forest, night, a festive time;
members of his camp sitting
around a communal campfire in the
center of their circled huts,
sharing almost everything, softening
the harshness of life in Forest;
the men weaving stories of the hunt –
singing:

*Elephant, elephant, here we come-
Spear in hand, silent our drum.*

Ota's father (the hunter), his friend Moko
(the elephant), they dance.

As hunter slays elephant, loud cheers
from camp-singing

*Elephant hunter, take your bow,
Elephant hunter, take your bow.*⁶

On stage, Ota's father proudly
makes sweeping bows;
members of camp cheering the
prowess of a great hunter.

A chorus of mothers sitting outside
their huts, rocking their
babies, singing a lullaby accompanied
by the soft clicking sound of

nbengo sticks-

*My sweet baby, go to sleep,
go to sleep, my baby.
Yah, yah; yah, yah, yah.
When you wake,
we'll have sweets.
Go to sleep, my baby.*⁷

At evening's end, an elder tells
stories of their ancestors,
heirlooms passed down from
generation to generation.
Palm wine poured on the ground -
libation to their ancestors.

*Father of my father's father,
we sing a song for you;*

*Praise Forest for food,
praise Forest for huts,
praise Forest for clothes,
praise Forest for love,
praise Forest for life.*

CHAPTER II

OTA'S EARLY LIFE

1. Life in the Congo Forest

Ota born in 1883 in the deep, deep
Congo Forest,
where men hunt big elephant, big antelope -
providing food for families;

where fathers teach sons early how to fish
how to hunt;

where in the hot Forest thick trees cool
the breeze;

where they shut out the world for years-the
Forest a safe cocoon for them:

Where beautiful flowers grow -hazy blue
lobelia, rose-colored bougainvillea,

sometimes worn in women's hair.
sometimes just to smile on passim!:

Where the Forest People dance for Forest.
sing for Forest, their giver of life.

Ota and his people get up and dance
around the fire,
faster, faster, faster, praising
Forest for its gifts.

2. Fathers of the Congo

3.

(Ota telling Hayes Boys about Fathers)

Like big tree teach little tree to grow,
like big bird teach little bird to

fly, like big cheetah teach little cheetah
to run, Fathers teach us everything

about Forest. Fathers, they wise, they know
everything. Hush. Hush, listen to Forest.

When I young boy, real young boy, Father
teach me to fish, to hunt. When I here

before, I teach Gregory. He sitting next
to me like he my son. He's only

six then, but he do good. I say shave wood
'til tip real sharp; we makin' arrow.

I show him how to hold a knife so he don't
cut himself - he do good. Together

we make arrow and we make a short spear
We hunt with spear. We share arrow

so sharp, don't need no arrowhead like here
In my home, all Fathers sit around fire

with their sons. We sing, laugh, have a good
time and our sons learning all the

time. Fathers. they wise, say Forest talk
to you. Hush, hush, listen to Forest.

After finishing his story or his Forest home,
Ota sings a song to his Forest.

*Forest, Forest, giver of life,
I'm born to you, I'm part of you.
Forest, Forest, give of food,
of clothes, of home,
I bow to you*

Red Rubber

Throughout the time Ota was in the home with my brothers, he taught them how to respect and to get along with people as was true of his beautiful culture for thousands of years or until the invasion of their Deep Forest for rubber after the invention of the automobile. This was a period of horror for the gentle "Pygmies" as evidenced in the next poem "Red Rubber," as Edward Dene Morel called it because of the deaths of so many gentle men of the Congo Forest; the automobile producers throughout the world demanding rubber - killing the Forest People not working fast enough for rubber.

I. Storm Warning

(1890)

There is a horror story that needs to be
told to understand what happened

to the peaceful life in the Congo Forest –
the story of⁸ **RED RUBBER!**

High winds gusting through Congo Forest –
rubber, rubber, rubber for the booming

automobile industry; rubber that in 1890,
John Dunlop, veterinary surgeon in

Ireland, working on his young son's tricycle,
discovered would give smoother rides⁹.

This just about the time of the automobile,
and with it the horrors in the

Congo, collecting *rubber, rubber, rubber*,
all sanctioned by Leopold, II

of Belgium, ruler of the Congo Free State.
Rubber, rubber, rubber!

Rubber, Edward Dene Morel, shipping clerk,
called "Red Rubber." Sent into the

Congo forest, he witnessed the killing of
slow rubber workers. He saw

cut-off hands of workers rebelling against
their treatment. He saw blood of

Congo workers on vines around rubber
trees. He learned they received

no money for their work -
called it "slavery."

The Anthropologists

Another period of disruption in the peaceful Congo Forest was the coming of the anthropologists going round the world gathering people they considered the "lower forms of man." They gathered Eskimos from Alaska, Igorots from the Philippines, the Ainu from Japan, Indian tribes from North and South America, Zulus, Balubas and "Pygmies" from Africa. Samuel Philips Verner, American missionary in Africa, found Ota Benga the "Pygmy" from the Congo. Ota Benga was intelligent, kind and had superior human qualities that the missionary, Verner, did not possess. Ota was brought by Verner to America to be exhibited as a "lower form of man" in the 1904 World's Fair as were all of the others mentioned above.

My poem is the story of what happened to Ota Benga, the intelligent, kind and loving person who ended up in the home of my mother's first husband, Professor Hayes after he and others got him out of the monkey cage in the zoo. The anthropologists of the day, were asking such questions as: "Were dark-skinned people capable of discerning the color blue?" My answer to that is in the next poem, "Blues Man Answers the Anthropologists."

Dr R S. Woodworth, Professor Starr
and other early, anthropologists
focused on the following question:
*Were dark-skinned people capable
Of discerning the color blue?*¹¹

BLUES MAN ANSWERS THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Man, we know blues, from azure of a
clear blue sky to indigo of the
darkest night.

Taken from the silver blue of the Kasai
and Congo, crossed the deep blue
in hulls of slave ships; we know the blues, Man.

Worked hard laboring cobalt blue,
danced, laughed and made love
in the midnight blue,

wrote the blues, sang the blues,
played the blues, lived the blues, so
ask another question, Man,

'cause I thought you already knew
we know the blues,
all hues of the blues, Man

¹ From *Ota Benga, The Pygmy in the Zoo* by Bradford and Blume.

TIES TO THE MOTHERLAND

STRINGS III

VIRGINIA

(A Little Background Music)

It was not surprising that Professor Hayes
(My mothers first husband)
offered Ota a home and education

in Lynchburg, Virginia. He had great
respect for Africans, encouraged

a number of them to attend Virginia
Seminary. Outstanding among them,

John Chilembwe, student from Nyasaland.
How alike they were –

Hayes and Chilembwe - two militant
fighters for equality and justice.

GREGORY WILLIS HAYES

Gregory-Willis Hayes, former slave boy, rose

to graduate with honors from Oberlin college in 1888,
to be the first Black class orator there,
to become President of Virginia Seminary at age twenty-nine,
to wrest the Black-founded school from under the rule of
the white American Baptist Home Mission Society,
to offer his students a strong liberal Arts education,
to join Chilembwe in his Pan-African plan.

JOHN CHILEMBWE

John Chilembwe, former student of Professor Hayes rose
to graduate from Virginia Seminary in 1898,
to later gather people from the African Diaspora,
to organize an African Development Plan,
to involve Professor Hayes in the plan,
to serve as African representative for the Lynchburg branch
at the same time Professor Hayes was President and
Mary Hayes, the treasurer,
to lead the successful revolt against British

Ota in the Hayes' Home

Professor Hayes died shortly after Ota came to the Hayes' home. Professor Hayes' wife spent much time with Ota. My brother, Hunter, speaks affectionately of Ota who became his father figure. Hunter, who, even when he was in his 90's, would tear when speaking of Ota. The following poem is one of many sessions in the woods with Ota where Ota taught them how to fish, and to hunt as he did his own son.

CHAPTER I

NIGHT BIRDS I

Early Evening

Dusk, the chill of autumn in the air, like
night birds, they find their early
evening place in the woods - Ota holding
young Hunter's hand, Wilelbert,
and Gregory close behind. Ota singing
his praise song to Forest:

The Forest is good;

The Forest is good.

The voices of the boys join Ota in singing
along with the sounds of evening -
last who-it, who-it of red birds; the end of
day tolling of college chapel bells.
Man of the Forest, Ota maneuvers dense
passages, picks up Hunter, jumps
over fallen tree limbs; clumsy boys, fish
out of water. They come to a
clearing where it's evident Ota has spent
many evenings. Like ancient fires
of his ancestors, vestiges of old ashes tell
stories, stories of his special times
in the woods alone, trying to find a likeness
of home. *Come, come*, he says, his
smile as broad as the Kasai river, his
command firm yet gentle,
Go gather dry branches for the fire.

The boys obey Ota. Hunter,
with a few branches, asks the story
teller, *That enough, Otto?*

Yah, good, Ota responds patting Hunter
on the head. A big smile from
Hunter. The other boys bring Ota arms full
of branches. Ota smiles, *Good, good.*
Ota builds a fire, singing as he does with
almost every activity; light from

the fire reflecting the Motherland in his
smooth mahogany skin. Gregory,
across from him, seems born of the same
tree. Like a mother hen, Ota keeps
young Hunter close to him, threads of his
land where the care of young
children belongs to all. The boys sit now,
wide-eyed, listening to Ota's
stories as they would do many times.

After Ota finishes his story
of his Forest home, soulfully he
sings a song to his Forest.

*Forest, Forest,
giver of life,
I'm born to you;
I'm part of you.
Forest, Forest,
giver of food,
giver of home.
I bow to you.*

Ota says, *Getting late; we go home now.* They
leave the woods singing with Ota:

*The Forest is good;
The Forest is good.*

All the way back to the house, their old
faithful dog, Buster, following them.
Ota spent many days in the woods with
the boys, but his desire to return
to his Congo Forest was very strong
Ota became very depressed.

One evening the boys saw Ota dancing
around the fire, faster, faster, faster.
They did not know at the time this was a
dance in preparation for death. Ota,
despondent one evening, went into the
woods and shot himself.

When the boys and people from the
college heard of this, there was
great sadness and crying as Ota was
much beloved there.

*Man eats and sleeps
It is the great cold
It is the great cold of the night
It is the dark
-Gabon Pygmy Death Song*

STRINGS VI
The Great Cold
Homegoing
(Triste)

All time has turned to night, the woods empty
now. Night Birds silenced, March air cold.

In the Chapel, the Homecoming service, the choir
is singing the mournful:

*Swing how, sweet chariot
coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot
coming for to carry me home.*

*I looked over Jordan
And what did I see-ee
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.*

Did his spirit hear this and wonder? Mama
spoke of Ota's gentle ways, the love

of the boys for him. how much they learned
of the land of our ancestors, the

blessing it was for them. Two teachers at
the Seminary lower school spoke

of Ota's intelligence, his love of nature,
his giving and loving ways.

The pastor delivering the sermon, spoke also
of his loving and giving ways. His

intelligence, his love of nature, his presence –
a gift to us. The service over,

the boys go up to view their friend one last
time. Then *People Funeral Home*

rolls his body down the aisle,
the pastor reciting:

*In my Father's house are
many mansions. If it were
not so, I would have told you.*

I go to prepare a place for you.

Peoples Funeral Home takes his body for
Burial to the Old Methodist Cemetery

(Now the old City Cemetery). At the grave
site the pastor recites:

*The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want ...⁵⁸*

And they lower Ota into the grave: then
slowly and silently, walk away.

Lamentations

The - Night Birds sing sorrow songs.
Joy - *is* no more, they walk
in - the woods alone, singing,
our - hero has gone away, our
hearts - are sad. No one
has - told us why our nights of fires
ceased; - no more days of the hunt with
our - friend, no more nights of the
dance - with the moon. Our teacher
has - closed his books and
turned - our dance
to
*mourning.**

*Lamentations 5:15; King James

AN EVENING SONG FOR OTA

If I could have gone into some quiet corner of your Forest,
waited for the soft dulcet sound of wagtails,
Would I have found your spirit there, the embers of a
once bright fire still burning?
Would I have sensed a gathering of your ancestors
surrounding you, welcoming you home?
Would I have heard the trumpeting of elephants, or
seen you dancing once again with your moon?
How beloved you were to those who knew you here; to my
brothers. you were the bearer of the wisdom of our ancestors.
We know the pull of the ocean eastward was much stronger
than any bond to the west. You gave us much more
than we could ever give to you.
Good night beloved friend and teacher.
Good night, kind leader of the hunt.
Good night, gentle story teller.
I pray your soul is at peace.
Good night, Ota.