

Lynchburg, Ota Benga and the Empowerment of the Pygmies

Presentation giving the Historical Overview of the Conference

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The Conference theme honors the life of Ota Benga and his connection with Lynchburg, Virginia. His remarkable life is a metaphor for the exploitation of all vulnerable groups especially the present-day Pygmy populations and their fragile forest habitat in Africa.

You may know the poignant story of Ota Benga. He was born in what is now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo. He was brought to the U.S. in 1904 by the missionary/explorer Samuel Phillips Verner and exhibited at the St. Louis Worlds Fair together with several other Pygmies. Verner took them all back to Africa but Ota Benga stayed with him, helping him gather artifacts and specimens that they brought back to the Museum of Natural History in New York. Mr. Hornaday, director of the Bronx Zoo exhibited him there in a cage with chimpanzees. He was rescued from there by some Black ministers, alumni of the Virginia Baptist Seminary (now the Virginia University of Lynchburg) and taken to an orphanage in New York. Later he asked to be taken to the Seminary in Lynchburg. There, he lived with Seminary President Gregory Willis Hayes and his family. He studied at the college, where he was known as "Otto Bingo". Professor Hayes' son Hunter was especially attached to him and he formed part of a group of young boys that Ota taught how to hunt and fish in the woods of Lynchburg. Ota Benga died in 1916 and is buried in an unmarked grave in Lynchburg.

Many years later, in the spring of 2004, Dr. Dibinga Wa Said, a Congolese national teaching at Harvard University, telephoned me here at the school where Ota Benga studied. He said that he would like to come to Lynchburg and find the grave of Ota Benga so that he could take his bones back to Africa.

I invited Dr. Dibinga to come to Lynchburg. They met with Laura Munson, dedicated preserver of the White Rock cemetery, where rumor has it, Ota Benga may be buried. They then went to the Old City Cemetery and met up with Ted Delaney, curator of the cemetery and Ann van de Graaf, Trustee of VUL. Ted showed documents recording Ota Benga's death but no definitive record of his burial. Dr. Dibinga returned to Boston haunted by the story of Ota Benga. One year later in the spring of 2005 he called Ann van de Graaf out of the blue and asked if she would organize an International Conference on Ota Benga. Ann said that she did not have the resources but invited him down to meet with key people in the area colleges.

Dr. Dibinga came and they made the rounds to talk about the concept, first with Dr. Reavis, of VUL then with Tina Johnson of Randolph Macon Woman's College, then with Dr. Dorothy Akubue-Brice and Dr. Peggy Pittas of Lynchburg College and finally with Dr. Johnathan Green, Dean of Sweet Briar. All were very supportive of the idea but the real excitement came when Pat Price, associate Director of Lynchburg College's Department of Community Development and Social Justice became involved. She had a research paper written by former student Katie Gordon on Ota Benga's life, and in addition to that she was the administrator of the Dolan Fund for Peace and Justice that could be utilized to fund the project!

A committee made up of representatives from the four colleges and Lynchburg citizens was formed and started meeting regularly. Dr. Dibinga as a representative of the African Congress of Pygmies remained a close partner in the planning and execution of the Conference. The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities awarded grants to VUL to help fund two conferences on Ota Benga.

First a very successful Community Conference, marking the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ota Benga's death was organized for the spring of 2005. Dr. Dibinga, Dr. Phillips Bradford, grandson of the missionary/explorer who brought Ota Benga to America, and Carrie McCray, daughter of the widow of Professor Gregory Willis Hayes, who was an infant when Ota Benga lived in her parent's home, were all speakers at the conference.

Now, after two more years of planning, we present this International conference that brings together scholars from all over the country and representatives from the African Congress of the Pygmies from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Conference is sponsored by the Virginia University of Lynchburg, in conjunction with [Lynchburg College](#), [Randolph College](#), Sweet Briar College, the African Congress of the Pygmies, Amazement Square and other Lynchburg area community partners. It is made possible by the Dolan Fund for Peace and Justice Series at Lynchburg College, the [Virginia Foundation for the Humanities](#), the "We the People" initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities and private donors.