

*The New York Times*

Sunday, July 16, 1916

## **OTA BENGA, PYGMY, TIRED OF AMERICA**

### **The Strange Little African Finally Ended Life at Lynchburg, Va.**

#### **ONCE AT THE BRONX ZOO**

#### **His American Sponsor Found Him Shrewd and Courageous – Wanted to be Educated**

Ota Benga, the first of the African pygmies to consent to leave his native wilds and the first who ever elected to remain in this country, committed suicide recently at Lynchburg, Va. During his stay in this city he was employed in the Zoological Park in the Bronx. He fed the anthropoid apes. It was this employment that gave rise to the unfounded report that he was being held in the park as one of the exhibits in the monkey cage. The story, though denied, persisted, and Ota became the centre of a discussion in which the public became interested.

Samuel P. Verner, who brought Ota here in 1906, has retold the story of the coming to the United States of his protégé, and paid a tribute to the African as a man of native courage and resource. Ota Benga was from a settlement remote from that of the other pygmies who came here to go to the St. Louis Exposition. They came from the town of King Ndombe at Wismann Falls on the Kasai. All of them except Ota were later returned to their homes and were content to stay there. Of the arrival of Ota, Mr. Verner said:

“When our steamship called at the confluence of the Kasai, where Commandant Loos of the Belgian Army was stationed, he told me of a strange little man in his settlement, who had been found by his soldiers as a captive slave in the hands of the cannibal Baschiele, when he had gone on an expedition to stop one of the tribe’s periodical raids into the interior. The Baschiele nearly always ate their captives, but Ota Benga was rescued and returned to the settlement. Very little could be learned from him regarding his tribe, for his language was different from that of other pygmies. Being an old-timer and knowing the pygmies at Ndombe, I managed to find out from him some facts which were later enlarged upon when Ota could speak a little English. It appears that his tribe was known as the Badi, in contrast with the pygmies at Ndombe, who were of the Batwa tribe. His language differed from theirs to a considerable extent, though there was a great deal in common.

“When I asked him whether he would like to go to America with me, he said he would stay with me for a while in the Kasai country and see how he liked it, provided I would agree to let him remain behind should he so decided before we were due to leave. On these conditions he agreed to go with me further up the river to Wismann Falls, where the Batwa lived.

“When the palavers about the group going to St. Louis were under way Ota Benga urged the natives to go, and it was largely because of his influence that the trip was arranged. I got back to Ndombe and offered to leave Ota at the Belgian station below, but he would not stay. His own country was remote and his people were at war with the Baschiele, who were between them and the white settlements. Ota said that he wanted to go to America, and with some misgivings I permitted him to come along.”

The African pygmy liked this country so well that when the other natives were returned to their own land from St. Louis he decided to remain behind, and absorb the civilization of the white man. Mr. Verner urged him to go back to Africa, but he would not. He said he had left Africa because he did not want to be a slave, and preferred to die in America rather than endure the confinement at which his spirit rebelled. Ota also became ambitious for an education, and after he left the Zoological Park in the Bronx, through the good offices of a New Jersey Baptist association, he was admitted to a Southern school for negroes. After leaving school Ota Benga went into a colored home near where he received his education, and earned his livelihood by working in a tobacco factory. Finally the burden of the white man's civilization became too great for him to bear, and he sent a bullet through his heart.

"I never believed that the sort of education which seems to be the standard today was suited to him, nor did I encourage that educational experiment," said Mr. Verne. "At the same time I was not willing to combat his chance along that line, especially since his other friends sincerely believed it wise. Even had he gone back to Africa he might have fared no better.

"His country is now torn by war made by the white men among themselves, a war far more terrible than any of the pygmies ever waged. Between the impossible conditions of Ota Benga's own land and those which he could not surmount in ours, the homeless pygmy found no abiding place. Can we wonder that he gave up his life as an unsolvable problem?

"I never understood his mental attitude, but he was one of the most determined little fellows that ever breathed. Possibly he was trying to prove all the time that he was not a pygmy, as that term even in Africa always conveys the idea of inferiority. I have never addressed him as one. To me he was very human, a brave, shrewd little man who preferred to match himself against civilization rather than be a slave to the Bachiele."