

5-4-2001

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"In Brightest Africa": Naturalistic Constructions of Africa in the American Museum of Natural History, 1910-1936

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On May 19, 1936, a group of people gathered at the base of the Roosevelt Memorial Statue on the steps of the American Museum of Natural History (hereafter AMNH) in New York City. They awaited the dedication of the Akeley Memorial Hall of African Mammals, an event the Museum had promised since the death of naturalist Carl Akeley in 1926. A rumor that Africa was "coming" to America had circulated the city for weeks. Many spectators awaited confirmation of their knowledge of the so-called "Dark Continent," gleaned from the pages of H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* and Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan series, and viewed through the lenses of Cherry Kearton's wildlife films.¹ Previously unknown and unseen animals waited to be viewed on the other side of the Roosevelt Rotunda.

Beyond the rotunda, a museum staff member opened the doors and escorted some 2,000 guests to the African Hall. They entered a "vast room of black and grey marble, dimly illuminated from overhead by a light like dusk in the jungle" (*Time Magazine*, June 1, 1936: 52). Looming in the shadows of the room was a herd of elephants; seven females facing the entrance, and a bull facing the opposite direction in a stance of protection. Fifteen dioramas depicting various scenes of

animal life surrounded the herd, illuminated by light, bright like sunshine (*New York Times* 1936; *New Yorker* 1936).

Against the backdrop of beating "tom-toms," African paintings, and sculptures of African people, wildlife posed in its "natural" environment. "In the damp uplands of the Belgian Congo a glowering male gorilla beats his breast, while the female leans placidly against a tree, watching her baby eat wild celery" (*Time* 1936: 52). Nearby "[o]n the plains of the Tanganyika a group of mottled, sinister wild dogs" watches a herd of zebras and poses for attack (*Time* 1936: 52). "A superb black-maned male" lion rests on the plains as well. "A pair of Bongo antelopes" push through a bamboo jungle and a forest hog "heaves up from its bed among ferns and orchids" (*Time* 1936: 52). *The New York Times* hailed the dioramas for "their artistic beauty, dramatic realism, and scientific accuracy" (1936: 5), and because they had accomplished the impossible. They had brought Africa to Central Park.

Visitors claimed to have been transported to Africa as they viewed the carefully crafted dioramas of African wildlife. Combined with music, lighting, sculptures, and paintings, the habitat groups seemed to work magic on their viewers. "One [could] almost hear the drip of water from recent rains" (*New York Times*, 1936: 5), smell the smoke from the volcanoes of Kivu, and feel the winds sweeping across the Serengeti Plains. African Hall was an illusion *almost* strong enough to make one forget the tales of a Dark Continent with impenetrable jungles, wild beasts, and "savagely" men.

The opening of the Akeley African Hall symbolized the triumph of a vision of Africa almost twenty-five years in its conception. Led by Carl Akeley, naturalists at the AMNH dreamed of "Brightest Africa" (C. Akeley 1924), epitomized in an exhibit that would capture the true essence of the continent and dispel myths of steaming jungles, ferocious beasts, and primitive savages. For them, the Hall was the culmination of years of expedition, research, and discovery in the "Dark Continent," supported by scholarly publication, radio broadcast, and cinematic production. African Hall was scientific proof that "Deepest Darkest Africa" was nothing more than the figment of two imaginations fused; those of Henry Morgan Stanley, a reporter in search of an elusive governor, and Joseph Conrad, a former soldier reminiscing about the realities of colonialism.

Wild Beasts, Savage Men, and Impenetrable Jungles

Fifteen years before the opening of the African Hall, Carl Akeley wrote a letter to his wife, Mary, in which he lamented "that horrible darkest Africa the public has accepted" (C. Akeley, 3 February 1921). The tone of the missive is one of annoyance, if not outright disgust. This was neither the first time, nor the last, that Akeley would express his disenchantment with what he saw as the public's willing acceptance of false images of Africa. In his book *In Brightest Africa*, Akeley commented that he hoped African Hall would "tell that story" of "jungle peace...so convincingly that the traditions of jungle horrors and impenetrable forests may be obliterated" (1924: 254).

In the letter to his wife, Akeley challenged one of the most influential texts on the image of Africa: Henry Morgan Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* (1890), which had introduced the Western world to an Africa filled with strange tribes and exotic landscapes. Contributing to the existing plethora of travel narratives on Africa, Stanley's book enjoyed acclaim in the Victorian Era (Murray 1993: 140). Of particular fascination for Stanley was the "primeval forest," specifically the forests of Central Africa (1890: 67).

It is in Stanley's description of the Central African forest where many of the tropes associated with "Darkest Africa" emerge. Stanley draws his audience into a world of "venom, fury, voracity, and activity" (1890: 70). The forest is the site of a Darwinian struggle between man and nature, where "death from wounds, sickness, decay, hereditary disease and old age, and various accidents [thin] the forest, removing the unfit, the weakly, the unadaptable, as among humanity" (1890: 71). Stanley wrote that in all forests, except the primeval forest, "wild men" render nature "prostrate." Yet it is the forest where "there are few places penetrable...without infinite labour" (1890: 72) that Stanley romanticizes as a place of resplendent horror.

Stanley narrates the darkness of the "ruthless forest" where trees do battle with the elements in a "Berseker rage":

The lightning darts here and there with splendour of light and scathing flame, the thunder explodes with deafening crashes, reverberating with terrible sounds among the

army of woods, the black clouds roll over and darken the prospect; and as a cloud becomes involved within cloud, in the shifting of pale light, we have a last view of the wild war, we are stunned by the fury of the tempest, and the royal rage of the forest, when down comes the deluge of tropical rain—which in a short time extinguishes the white heat wrath of the elements, and soothes to stillness the noble anger of the woods (Stanley, 1890: 76).

Stanley's description of the African jungle, however romantic in its language, nevertheless depicted a place whose barely suppressed danger emanated from its darkness and impenetrability. Akeley found this portrait of a ruthless forest filled with venomous flora and insects, savage men, and dangerous animals, incredible. To counter this mythic Africa, he designed the African Hall.

The Akeleys reinforced their commitment to challenging the myth of "darkest Africa" by deliberately selecting titles for their African travel books that suggested an opposite vision of the continent. Mary Jobe Akeley titled her book on the Congo expedition *Congo Eden* ([1950] 1961), in much the same way that Akeley called his account of the East African expedition *In Brightest Africa* (1920). Clearly, the Akeleys saw Africa as neither "hellish" nor "dark."

The Akeleys, as well as other AMNH naturalists, reserved their most scathing critiques for the American film industry, whose portrayals of Africa were sensationalistic and ahistorical. Together with filmmakers Osa and Martin Johnson, the Akeleys launched a campaign against the famous "Snow Films" of the 1920s. The AMNH contracted the Johnsons to film wildlife in East Africa as part of its African Hall project (Imperato and Imperato, 1992: 91), to make "scientifically true motion picture records of the primitive tribes of Africa and its rapidly disappearing wildlife" (AMNH 1923).

H. A. Snow and his son Sydney produced *Hunting Big Game in Africa with Gun and Camera* (1922), and other films under the auspices of the African Expedition Corporation (Munden 1971). These films depicted African wildlife, featuring original footage and horrifying hunting scenes. In his endorsement of the Martin Johnson African Expedition (1921-23), Carl Akeley claimed that "[t]he Snow films were

largely faked and in addition were entirely misleading from the standpoint of truth and fearfully brutal from the standpoint of the sportsman" (C. Akeley, 22 January 1924). His criticism was well received, particularly since rumor had it that Snow's hunting scenes were staged on Hollywood lots.

Echoing Akeley's critique of the Snow films, Martin Johnson denounced other films besides Snow's. In a report of the National Better Business Bureau, "Film Americaine 'Ubangi'" [sic], he called the film *Ubangi* a "mockery." Supposedly a cinematic portrayal of a Belgian expedition into the jungles of the Congo, *Ubangi* contained scenes of African wildlife and natives outside of "their real geographic situation" ("Film Americaine 'Ubangi'"). Many of the animals photographed were not native to the Congo. Moreover, the featured Meru people were depicted as living in the western region, when in reality the group was eastern in origin. These types of historical inaccuracies disturbed naturalists like Johnson.

The naturalists' critique of cinematic representations of Africa was symptomatic of a larger body of criticism of popular and public images of the continent. The AMNH's naturalists argued that not just film, but literature, radio and museum exhibits as well, had seduced the public with the myth of "Darkest Africa." More importantly, they appropriated those same media to present and disseminate their own vision of the continent.

AMNH naturalists understood that the success of the African Hall depended on more than its ability to challenge old myths. It required the captivation of the public imagination and an arousal of the public mind, without sacrificing the scientific validity of the exhibits. Thus, the Hall's creators had to engage in a curious dialectic. They had to employ both popular and scientific discourses on Africa by taking on the popular roles of storyteller, hunter, and explorer, while maintaining their scientific reputations as naturalists and conservationists.

As storytellers, the Hall's creators recounted experiences in the wilds of Africa. These scenes were recreated in numerous articles, radio talks, and films produced by the AMNH, as well as memoirs published by the naturalists themselves. Perhaps the most sensational safari episode was Carl Akeley's almost fatal encounter with an elephant on

Mount Kenya. Although this mission was on behalf of the Field Museum in Chicago, the story became part of the lore of safari and expedition associated with Akeley wherever he traveled, and it became a favorite among Akeley's New York colleagues (C. and M. Akeley 1930: 8-13, 15).

As explorers and hunters, Akeley and his fellow naturalists brought back trophies from Africa to create dioramas as symbols of their conquest over nature. (Akeley's bulls were part of "The Charge," the centerpiece of the African Hall, and "The Fighting Bulls" at the Field Museum.) However, at the same time that AMNH naturalists shot game with gun and camera, they warned the world of the inevitable depletion of game in Africa. This conservationist role was manifest in the cooperation of Akeley and the AMNH with the Belgian government to create Parc National Albert (Department of the Interior 1924).

The multidimensional persona of the naturalist—explorer, hunter, scientist, and conservationist—emerging from the written word, film, and radio alone could not create a "bright Africa" for the American public. If all that was required to achieve this feat were crafty narratives and moving and still pictures, how would the AMNH's naturalists differ from the Snows and Haggards of the world? How could their work eclipse those fictitious images of Africa? The practices of natural history, which included taxidermy, diorama, and museum display, offered a vehicle for distinguishing "darkest" from "brightest" Africa.

Carl Akeley and the Aesthetics of Natural History

Carl Akeley's approach to creating his hall was a product of late nineteenth and early twentieth century practice in the discipline of natural history. Natural history during this period was overwhelmingly concerned with display and the dissemination of natural historical knowledge to a wider public—a public beyond the traditional elite consumers of museum culture. Developments in lithography and photography, advancements in taxidermy, and the evolution of habitat diorama techniques helped to make natural history aesthetically pleasing to public consumers, primarily through museum exhibits (Jenkins 1978: 73; 85; Wonders 1993: 23-140; Dance 1978: 87; 191-196).

The evolution of the habitat diorama technique and its adoption by museums enhanced the illusionistic presentation of natural history. By giving scientific legitimacy to the new "artistic" display of zoological specimens, through the vehicles of taxidermy and landscape painting, naturalists hoped to challenge the dominant exhibition philosophy of the period. Coined by Louis Daguerre—inventor of the daguerreotype—and taken from the Greek words, *dia* and *horama*, diorama literally meant "through what is seen" or "through sight." Dioramas were designed to capture "through sight" the natural environment of specimens, as well as to suggest "movement without motion" (Wonders 1993: 12; 24).

Taxidermy was the most important element in the success of a habitat group/diorama. Although the ultimate goal of the diorama was to place the specimen in its "natural environment," what drew the public's attention was the realism (or lack thereof) of the stuffed animals. Thus, poses were key to the diorama. Capturing the perfect pose of the subject necessitated a trip to the field—a first-hand experience with the natural world. As a result, museum curators insisted on field collection. Field naturalists argued that isolated specimens of flora and fauna mounted by men unfamiliar with the landscape could never make nature "real" for the public (Browne 1884: 312-316; 1896: 381; 397; Ward 1913: 32-33; 40; 70). Akeley argued that this was especially the case for portraying Africa in a "bright" light.

Akeley advocated the mixing of techniques to create the most faithful portrait of wildlife in its natural habitat. He was a proponent of sketching, photographing, and filming animals before "bagging" them. He also suggested that field naturalists make photographs, paintings, or sketches of the various landscapes where the specimens were found, as well as collect rocks, leaves, tree bark, and other portable pieces of the landscape (Osborn 1924: 12-15; Akeley 1924: 1-19). Akeley's diorama technique dated back to his days with the Field Museum, but became most associated with his work for the AMNH. President Osborn wrote in his Annual Report of 1924 that Akeley "invented an entirely new method of mounting... nobly exemplified in his African Elephant Group, far more artistic and lifelike than his previous method" (1924: 12-13). He goes on to say that Akeley's gorilla group afforded "the finest example of Mr. Akeley's new art in mounting and

modeling, especially in the facial expression of these great primates" (*Ibid.*).

Osborn was among the many people who praised Akeley's technique of display for transforming the image of the "Dark Continent." However, Akeley's presentation of "Brightest Africa"—a zoological wonderland authentically preserved in habitat dioramas—did not go uncontested. Could the exhibit include natives and remain "bright"? Would the presentation of African peoples and cultures somehow diminish the brightness of Africa in a natural history exhibit?

Displaying Africa and the Cultures of Natural History

Akeley's position on the displaying of Africans in the hall must be reconciled with two specific trends in viewing natural history in the early twentieth century. The turn of the twentieth century saw an increasing separation of zoology and anthropology within the discipline of natural history. Zoology (the scientific study of animals) became associated with "traditional" natural history. Anthropology (the study of humans with an emphasis on measurement and classification) was viewed as an extension of ethnography/ethnology ("the physical and civil history of foreign and particularly non-Christian peoples") (Bravo, in Jardine, Secord, and Spary, 1996: 338-339). The separation of the two fields into distinct disciplines played a key role in the way in which the AMNH would display Africa.

Tensions between zoologists and incipient anthropologists can be seen in the Congo Expedition (1909-1915) for the African Hall. While the expedition was designed to be principally zoological, naturalist Herbert Lang showed more interest in the Africans he encountered. In his recounting of the expedition for the museum's journal *Natural History Magazine*, Lang wrote extensively about the peoples of the Ituri forest, whom he called "Pygmies" (1919a: 696-713). He took extensive photographs of the Ituri peoples and made plaster casts of their faces, which became the bases for his "Pygmy Group" (1919a: 701-702). In another article, he wrote about the Mangbetu and neighboring peoples (1919b: 527-552).

Lang's departure from the zoological mission of the expedition is significant because it represented the movement

away from a more "traditional" naturalistic picture of Africa that focused on flora and fauna. Although not impervious to the presence of Africans, Akeley made little use for them in his image of Africa. In fact, the hall's opening in 1936 did not feature Lang's group. The hall did, however, include various bronzes of Africans that Akeley had sculpted.

The exclusion of Lang was not the first incidence of zoology eclipsing anthropology in the AMNH's naturalistic representation of Africa. According to a 1911 history of the museum, the Department of Anthropology housed an African collection that dated back to 1902. African acquisitions from 1902 to 1908 included specimens of basketry, weaving, pottery, musical instruments, masks, idols, "fetishes," and woodcarvings (Osborn 1911: 103-104). These items appeared to have disappeared after the hiring of Akeley in 1909. In reality, the emphasis on Africa shifted in the museum from anthropology to zoology. Many of those early ethnographic specimens would not resurface again until the after 1950 when Colin Turnbull visited the Congo in 1951. Turnbull's visit renewed the museum's interest in African ethnography and led to the creation of a permanent exhibit dedicated to the peoples and cultures of Africa (Rexer and Klein 1995).

The inclusion of African objects and cultural profiles of Africans may have broadened the scope of the museum's images of Africa. However, ethnography did not remedy the limited image of Africa that Akeley embraced.

Towards a "Brightest Africa"

The AMNH's image of Africa, while often hailed as new, revolutionary, or progressive (cf. Beauregard 1995; Houston 1986; Imperato 1992; Bodry-Sanders 1991) was in fact an old image reconfigured. Akeley's image of Africa was of an "ageless continent" (M. Akeley 1940: 368). Like most Americans, Akeley chose to see Africa as a timeless, unchanged land—a place where modernity and civilization had not yet triumphed. Africa held within its borders mysterious beasts, exotic flora, and "primitive men"—all the symbols of a past long gone—or so the story went. Thus, to understand the problematic—how an exhibit designed to dispel myths about a "Dark Continent" reinforced those myths—we must

look not only at the content of the hall, but at the institutional context in which the hall was constructed.

"Primitive men" were so much a part of the static image of Africa. Yet Akeley chose not to include images of Africans in any substantial way in his exhibit. Understandably, Akeley was primarily a zoologist. However, his personal identification as a naturalist does not explain why the museum did not propose an adjoining hall that would emphasize African anthropology. The lack of commitment to including Africans in any exhibit seems puzzling—especially in light of the approach the museum took to the North American wing.

In the North American wing of the museum, both a zoological and an anthropological hall were constructed. Franz Boas' hall of Native American peoples and cultures was not at odds with the zoology hall. Both views—of peoples and cultures, and of flora and fauna—were acceptable in presenting the natural history of North America. Why was this not applicable to Africa? First, North America was not understood as an ageless continent, despite the presence of people who had been "naturalized" in the American imagination. The presence of whites in America seems to have rescued the continent from the designation "primitive," by bringing it into a narrative of modernity and civilization—into history. The presence of Europeans in Africa appears not to have had the same effect. Second, the racial ascription placed on Africans, while at times similar to that projected on Native Americans, was unique due to the circumstances under which Westerners encountered Africans.

Europeans' presence in Africa was initially in the context of trade in commodities and humans. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Europeans were in Africa, primarily to extract natural resources back to the mother country, employing African labor. With the exception of the southern African colonies, Europeans generally did not envision colonizing Africa on a permanent basis, unlike British colonization of America. Thus, Africa could never be truly a "white man's country"—"modern" and "civilized" (Pieterse 30-51).

In the case of North America, displaying images of Native American peoples and cultures (i.e., the natural historical past of the continent) bolstered the image of a continent transformed by the presence of Europeans. North America

had a clear historical narrative, which began and ended with the Americans of European descent. The North American Hall served to highlight this contrasting of these "two Americas." The Native Americans depicted were the "noble savages," symbols of the valiant struggle for and conquest of America. Africans, on the other hand, were not seen to be as noble in their struggle for the continent. After all, they had been subject to intercontinental slavery and colonialism, yet somehow they survived. They could not be martyred as a by-gone race in an age of modernity. They were still "savage" and resistant to "civilization."

The decision to view Africa through the lens of natural history predetermined the extent to which Akeley's new image of Africa would challenge the old. The discipline of natural history was caught in a moment when Africa could not escape naturalization—because it was applied to the study of non-Western lands and peoples. In a climate of scientific and popular racism, any naturalistic approach to Africa was fraught with images that echoed that of those associated with "Darkest Africa" and colonialism, which emphasized the "naturalness" of Africa and the "White Man's Burden" to bring order to nature. Describing Africa as "natural" was synonymous with characterizing it as "primitive" or "uncivilized," for in Western thought the mark of civilization is the ability to subdue and conquer nature.

The extent to which Akeley achieved his goal of recasting the public's image of Africa is debatable. What is clear is that in his effort to obliterate the myth of the "Darkest Africa," Akeley created a new image of Africa plagued by many of the same fictions that underlined Stanley's portrait of the continent. Africa remained the home of mysterious flora and fauna, and of "natural" men.

Notes

¹ The novels of H. Rider Haggard were popular in both America and Great Britain. Haggard presented the public with characters who ranged from great white hunters and imperial white men, to "savage" natives. Among his more celebrated novels are *She* and *King Solomon's Mines*. Edgar Rice Burroughs became famous in the early twentieth century for his serial novels, which featured the character "Tarzan." His novel *Tarzan, the Ape*

Man was brought to the big screen as a feature movie, and was one of the top twenty grossing films in 1933. Cherry Kearton was best known for his wildlife films, particularly his documentary of Theodore Roosevelt's hunting trip to Africa.

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Published in *Images of Africa: Stereotypes & Realities*, edited by Daniel M. Mengara, Preface by Molefi Kete Asante. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2001. Pages 195–208.

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