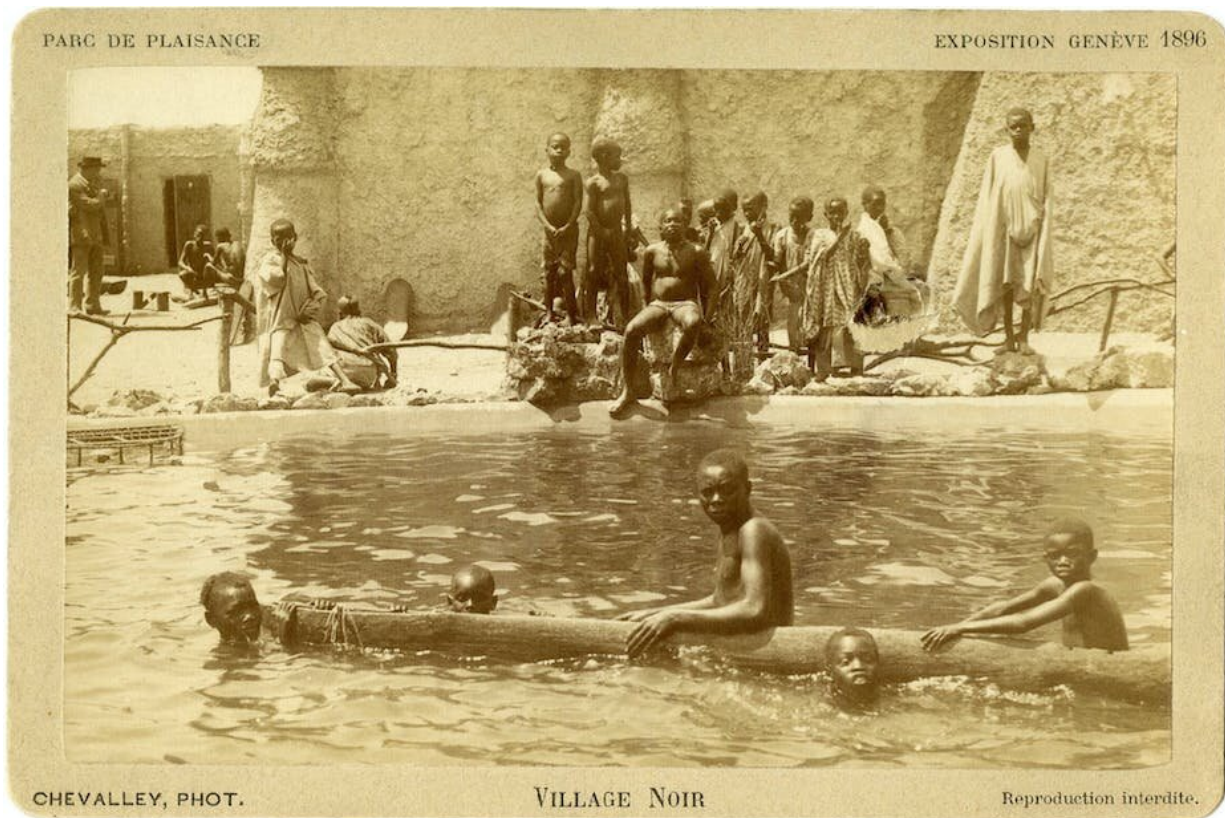


# Dehumanization, animalization: Inside the terrible world of Swiss human zoos

June 23 2023, by Letizia Gaja Pinoja



Genève, exposition Nationale, le “Village Noir” dans le parc de Plaisance.  
Credit: [Antoine Elie Chevalle, photographe](#)

After a stay in Leukerbad, [James Baldwin affirmed](#):

"From all available evidence, no [black man](#) had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came. I was told before arriving that I would probably be a 'sight' for the village; I took this to mean that people of my complexion were rarely seen in Switzerland and also that city people are always something of a 'sight' outside of the city. It did not occur to me—possibly because I am an American—that there could be people anywhere who had never seen a N\_\_\_o."

Baldwin's odd realization does not hold the historical evidence, though. Fifty years before the American writer set foot in the Alps, about [two third of the Swiss population](#) visited the "Village noir" in Geneva. How is it possible that, half a century later, the exhibition of 200 African people that two million people visited has fallen into oblivion? How likely is it that none of them came from the region of Leukerbad? But most importantly, what was this "Village noir"?

## **A 'Black village' in the heart of the Alps**

Today, Geneva is considered one of the capitals of human rights. Back in 1896, during the Swiss Second National Exhibition, it hosted a human zoo. There are very few visible references to it, except for one street called after its corresponding "white" exhibition, the ["Village Suisse"](#). However, several researchers' archival work helped unearth the history of the first Swiss "Village noir".

Inhabited by more than 200 individuals from Senegal, the village was situated a few streets from the city's central square, the Plaine de Plainpalais. For six months, paying visitors observed these "actors" living their lives. Their religious ceremonies were advertised as public events. Tourists could take pictures with the African troupe and walk around their dwellings.

These encounters were far from being a sideshow, triggering multiple

opinions. On the one hand, critical voices emerged in the press. This "missionary" point of view [asked](#) for respect for the "native" people and their dignity while attacking the behaviors of the allegedly civilized visitors. As Davide Rodogno of the Geneva Graduate Institute [stated](#), the general system of human zoos was not questioned, and the racial hierarchy was accepted as truth.

On the other hand, racist groups were vociferous. According to them, Senegalese individuals had "free time" to move around the city. This triggered their fear of a "Black invasion". Does it ring a bell to today's Swiss political campaigns? Indeed, the racist discourse that spread from the Parc de Plaisance is still largely among us. Why? The answer lies in the country's past.

### **From freak shows to human zoos**

Far from being a Swiss peculiarity, human zoos were spread around the West. Human exhibitions were a form of entertainment invented in the early 19th century in Great Britain. Turned into a [film](#) in 2010, one of the most famous shows was Sara Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus".

Because of her unconventional body shape, she was brought to Europe from South Africa to participate in an exhibition. Such ["freak shows"](#) spread around Europe and North America, and included people considered different because of their unusual physical appearance, including dwarfism and albinism.

Things changed in the late 19th century, when shows became part of national and colonial exhibitions. The first ethnic exhibition of Nubians occurred in 1877 in Paris, when the term human zoo appears to have been used for the first time. The concept seems an oxymoron, though it reveals the violence of these exhibitions.

Geneva Graduate Institute's Mohamed Mahmoud Mohamedou suggests that human zoos were common entertainment in the second half of the 19th century. For the ticket-buying public, the experience was comparable to a visit to a regular zoo; it was about observing "[exotic animals](#)". As it often happens with animals, organizers re-created the subjects' "natural habitat" with mud huts, typical clothes, and rituals.

The setting was constructed to perform authenticity. On the one hand, the civilisational discourse justifying colonial expansion and domination exaggerated the living representation and [exhibition](#) of the "savage" in need of enlightenment. On the other hand, the alleged brutality of the "native" was displayed through the mise-en-scène of their "primitive life".

These exhibitions did not present savagery; they [invented a specific kind](#), which prepared the ground and fuelled further expansions and the ruling of "barbarian" and "uncivilized" societies.

Without minimizing the system's inherent violence, but to prove its performativity, [Lionel Gauthier](#) explains that the "natives" were paid "actors".

They staged various ceremonies and activities to entertain Western visitors. All activities were meant to nourish Westerners' enthusiasm for the exotic: they eroticised Black women's bodies, dehumanized Black men, and "proved" their animalistic strength, for instance, by organizing boxing matches between Western champions and African hosts.

## **Two faces of the same racist coin**

It was at this time that racism entered the game. The turn of the century was among the highest points of scientific racism. This was when the pseudo-scientific attempts to create a superior race thrived within

Western anthropology and biology academic departments. For eugenicists, human zoos provided 'samples' for racist theories. During the Geneva National Exposition of 1896, Emile Yung gave a [conference](#) where he presented 15 people from the "Village noir".

He compared their skin color and skull size to those of a Genevan. This process aimed to demonstrate how the size of the skull affected the level of civilization and mental capacities. These ideas were [spread among schoolteachers](#) and helped crystallize and expand racist stereotypes.

Indeed, human zoos were breeding grounds for racist stereotypes. Visitors were presented with an invented representation of Africa that deliberately debased and denigrated Africans. Moreover, as Patricia Purtschert of the University of Bern [suggests](#), evolutionism and racist human-development theories at the core of the exhibitions had clear educational goals. Thus, scientific racism developed within academia went hand in hand with popular racism: human zoos were places where these two faces of the same coin met.

## **Tackling the legacies of human zoos**

Human exhibitions were the result of Western colonial thinking—says Patrick Minder—in which the Genevan "Village noir" fits perfectly. Hence, note [Mohamedou and Rodogno](#), the Swiss Confederation has never been immune to colonialism and racism. The setting up of a human zoo at the center of Geneva served to spread and reinforce the superiority of the West, the right to expand and dominate, and racism, which many among Swiss cultural, political, economic, and academic elites shared. Indeed, Swiss scientists were [active in shaping colonial mentalities](#). Despite not possessing colonies, the country was in fact as involved in colonialism and racism as the rest of the West.

Unlike other countries, Switzerland did not stop its human exhibitions



during the interwar period. Until the 1960s, the national circus Knie presented the "[Völkerschauen](#)". It included the display of Eskimos, Catholic Indians, "mysterious Egyptians" or people with albinism. According to Purtschert, this is [symptomatic of the lack of a decolonisation process in Switzerland](#). By self-representing itself as a colonial outsider, Switzerland has never come to terms with its colonial mentality, racist representations and discourses.

Against this backdrop, talking about human zoos in Switzerland should not only be of interest to historians. It is a crucial step to allow Swiss society to become aware of its past. Most importantly, it engenders a broader reflection on the legacies of colonialism today. If we keep silent on human zoos, we cannot see [how visiting a "typical" Maasai village echoes the old colonial habits of the mise en scène of rural, primitive life](#)

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The inability to face part of the past also perpetuates racist patterns. Only by acknowledging a shared European colonial history, ruled by the dictum of Whiteness, will Switzerland be ready to face its still-too-present, yet slightly invisible, issues of racism. Otherwise, the absence of such a reflection will continue, recalling Baldwin's words, the self-entitled Swiss's "luxury of looking on me as a stranger".

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