

# The First of its Kind: A Cultural History of the Village Nègre

- Lauren Cross, Lauren Seitz, and Shannon Walter, *Ball State University*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1889, all eyes were on the city of Paris as it unveiled attractions that would be a part of that year's World's Fair. Among its exhibitions were a nearly fifteen hundred foot-long *Galerie de Machines*; exhibits from Europe, the Americas, and French colonies; and, of course, the Eiffel Tower, unveiled in

commemoration of the centennial celebration of the French Revolution (Ibach). One of the Fair's largest exhibits, however, is one that is rarely discussed, and it represents the dark era of colonialism in world history: the Village Nègre.

The Village Nègre, or Negro Village, was a large colonial exhibit which displayed over four hundred indigenous people from a host of French colonies. Opening on May 5, 1889, the Village Nègre was one of the Fair's most popular exhibitions, drawing over twenty eight million spectators in the almost six months it was open. The exhibit's popularity stemmed from its uniqueness as the first of its kind—that is, an ethnological exhibit that showcased more than just a small group of individuals. The likes of it had never been seen in Europe or America (Dos Santos and Lewino). Throughout this paper, we will argue that the Village Nègre was used to draw a line between the “civilized” and the “savage,” while it also served as a form of propaganda for colonialism and the establishment of European dominance in the world.

The large size of the Village made it impossible for it to be in the middle of the Fair; rather, the Village was found on the *Esplanade des*

## Abstract

The Village Nègre, one of the largest exhibits in the 1889 World's Fair, was home to over four hundred indigenous people from various French colonies. Throughout this paper, the authors discuss how the Village Nègre was used by the French to draw a line between the “civilized” and the “savage.” The Village also served as a form of colonialist propaganda while further establishing European dominance.

Invalides, a short walk from the Eiffel Tower, around which the majority of the Fair was based (Zeitoun). Though called the Village Nègre, the exhibit was actually comprised of six smaller “villages” in which people ate, slept, and worked. Although the nationalities of every person exhibited are unknown, experts are certain that the exhibit displayed Arabs, Kanaks (who are the indigenous Melanesian people of New Caledonia in the Southwest Pacific), the Gabonese, Congolese, Javanese (from Java, Indonesia), and Senegalese, all of whom were from areas that had been colonized by France. The exhibition, however, was not completely authentic; for example, one of the smaller villages that was named the Pahouin Village did not even contain Pahouin people—they were put in a different area (Dos Santos and Lewino).

Life in the Village included not only performing daily tasks, such as cleaning, eating, and creating art—which was then sold as “authentic” to make a profit—but also giving several theatrical performances. Women danced while naked, and men played drums and staged fights, which were extremely popular with spectators. Some even performed tribal “rituals,” although experts cannot confirm whether these rituals were actually representative of cultures presented in the Village (Bancel, Blanchard, and Lemaire). Given the disregard by French officials for the differences between each culture, it is doubtful that these rituals were grounded in any real cultural customs. This disregard demonstrates that the exhibit really was intended to display France’s dominance of the “savage” parts of the world.

As they watched these rituals, spectators were fascinated by the people in the Village Nègre. Fairgoers were able to watch exhibited people go about their daily lives, which supposedly gave a glimpse of what was believed to be the true culture of these “savages.” Visitors to the Village were encouraged to touch the people on display and get up close and personal in order to more fully understand different cultures. In addition to common folks, scientists from all over the world visited the Fair in order to observe and study the people exhibited while they carried out their daily tasks (Zeitoun).

Science was one of the main motivations for bringing colonized people to Paris to be put on display. Because the Village Nègre was one of the earliest large-scale ethnographic exhibits, people were fascinated with learning about the cultures that the people represented—scientists used the study of these people to form a so-called “race biology,” which aimed to prove “the congenital inferiority of races with ‘depressed or squeezed

skulls” (Zeitoun). In other words, the scientific study of ethnographic exhibits, such as the Village Nègre, permitted scientists to develop the scientific racism that was accepted and supported by public opinion.

It was not only the scientists that promoted racism in the Village. Ordinary visitors also used the exhibit to form their own opinions on where the “savages” fit on the scale of race. Historian Pascal Blanchard and anthropologist Gilles Boëtsch explain that there is a direct link between the human exhibits and the general public’s prejudices:

the shows of anthropological zoology were the essential vehicles of the passage of scientific racism to vulgar colonial racism... for their visitors, seeing populations of people behind bars, real or symbolic, sufficed to explain a hierarchy. They quickly understood where the power was found. (226)

The way in which these subjects were exhibited communicated to the predominantly white audience that Europeans were the ones in power and that they should look down on different races. These opinions were cemented in the minds of spectators as they visited the Village Nègre.

The Village Nègre was just one exhibit in a long list of ethnological exhibitions that influenced the larger field of anthropology, which was becoming extremely important at the height of colonialism. While the Village Nègre was undoubtedly the largest zoo of its kind, human zoos were not new to Europe; similar exhibits were common in large cities, including Hamburg, Barcelona, London, and Milan. All of these exhibits shared the common goal of fitting colonized peoples into categories carefully constructed by those responsible for the human zoos. The most important goal of these anthropological exhibitions was attempting to draw the line between “civilized” and “savage.”

Though the Village was promoted as an “authentic” representation of life in “savage” lands, its decorations, costumes, and accessories created caricatures and stereotypes of the people and cultures in the human zoo (Dos Santos and Lewino). Therefore, when scholars look back on this exhibit for study, it brings up the issue of cultural appropriation. White Europeans, while “repulsed” by the indigenous people, were simultaneously fascinated by the unknown cultures from whence they came. Dean MacCannell writes that tourists, such as those who visited the Village Nègre, “are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even to get in with the natives” (592).

MacCannell further states, “Touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences” (597).

Unfortunately, however, the tourists of the World’s Fair did not take the time to actually learn about these cultures and instead imposed a culture upon the human exhibits. In fact, according to MacCannell, they followed the steps of staged authenticity, as the exhibition was “totally set up in advance for touristic visitation” (597). Fair organizers did not actually care about an authentic representation of cultures but rather focused on staging the exhibit so that it would make visitors get the feeling of authenticity. The people within the Village Nègre performed the culture that Europeans thought they *should* perform.

The Village Nègre was one of the main attractions of the Fair, and, while it was intended to dazzle spectators with new and unknown cultures, the French government had other motives. The Village also acted as propaganda for French colonialism: “The power of exhibits of ‘the other’ created a strong political context and an historic movement of expansion on an unprecedented scale” (Bancel, Blanchard, and Lemaire 16). Each of the four hundred people in the Village came from one of France’s many colonies. As European colonialism was at its height at the end of the nineteenth century, France needed a way to show its own people, as well as the world, its colonial prowess and power. Not only could the French show that they had a great deal of land, but they also were able to exhibit the people who came from those lands—they used the Village Nègre to justify their takeover of Northern Africa and parts of Asia by showing the public these “uncultured” and “uncivilized” “savages.”

Not only were the French showing their power, but the exhibit also encouraged other nations to pursue colonialist conquests. The portrayal of the people in the exhibit as savages created the sense of an urgent need to continue colonization in order to help these people become cultured like their European and American saviors. These “savages” became novelties to their viewers, and they were viewed as uncultured but also delightfully simple creatures. The notion of the “noble savage”—“a mythic conception of people belonging to non-European cultures as having innate natural simplicity and virtue uncorrupted by European civilization” (“Noble Savage”)—emerged as early as the previous century, and it was one that a great deal of colonizers used to justify their actions. In the colonizers’ eyes,

it was up to European nations—those who were truly civilized—to help those from other cultures learn how to fit in to their society.

One of the earliest ethnographic human exhibits on a large scale, the Village Nègre was visited by an enormous amount of people during its time at the 1889 World's Fair, people who were thus forced not only to compare themselves to the culture of the savages but also to contemplate their roles as the “civilized ones.” This exhibit encouraged cultural appropriation and continued colonialism that failed to attempt to understand the cultures which Europeans and Americans were taking advantage of. Though over a century has passed since the end of the exhibit, the dark connotations of the Village Nègre, in which we were unable and unwilling to learn from the cultures of others, continues to linger throughout society.

## **CULTURAL ANALYSIS**

The display of these human beings in their “savage” habitats served as a way to prove how advanced European cultures were in comparison to their seemingly uncivilized counterparts. But what strategies were used in order to display them in an entertaining fashion? In order to persuade the audience to believe these indigenous people were, in fact, uncivilized, the organizers of the World's Fair disguised themselves as anthropologists and presented these displays in so-called “authentic” settings. While an observer of this tactic may feel appalled, the organizers of the fair felt more credible by telling the public that they were anthropologists who displayed these cultures rather than people whose goals were centered on fiscal prosperity.

These displays presented the impression of savagery in exotic nations, and, by juxtaposing the middle-class fair-goers alongside “savage” individuals, the fair organizers were able to emphasize contrast between “civilization and barbarity” as well as “progress and primitivism” (Munro 81). By doing so, the so-called “savages” who represented their respective cultures “accentuated” the colonial power of European nations over those deemed more uncivilized. This gave a false depiction of those who were exhibited. While they may have used handcrafted tools in their normal lives, they were not completely incompetent, as the mock anthropologists deemed them to be. As a result of the inaccurate depictions of the indigenous people put on display, the visitors returned to their “normal” lives in their “civilized” communities under the impression that these

people lived in a barbaric and crude manner.

Fair visitors treated the products of these barbaric displays as trophies and souvenirs. The organizers who acted as anthropologists arranged false artifacts around the displays in order to reenact their own vision of the world, and they also explained national histories to suit their political purposes through the use of imposed narrative structures (Munro 81). While these artifacts seemed natural to the viewers, many were fictitious depictions of the real artifacts used in their home cultures. Yet viewers were given the impression that they could purchase original artifacts from “uncivilized” cultures.

Human exhibitions largely led to the creation of national museums not only in European countries but in the United States as well. For example, a similar American display occurred shortly after the 1889 World’s Fair in Paris. At the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, over one thousand different people from at least ten different countries were put on display (Allen). The ethnographic items left behind from these human displays found homes in spectacles within many of the new museums, in which they served to falsely portray the life and cultures of those who were exhibited (Munro 81). The problem of false representation lingers today, since these artifacts are still being exhibited in museums. Not only can people still see the deceptive relics, but they can also still observe the larger political issues underlying these displays.

While audiences could compare their own progress to the barbarity portrayed within such human displays, they also gained a greater sense of their relationship to their own countries. Even though the people visiting these exhibits may not have possessed a physical or even mental relationship with one another, the exhibits created an imaginary bond by increasing the spectators’ national identity (Munro 82). By accentuating the differences between these “savage” peoples and their viewing counterparts, the organizers were able to emphasize the colonial power of European nations over “uncivilized” colonies (Munro 84). The viewers were given the impression that their own countries possessed a greater hold over their international properties than “savages” did.

While giving the viewers a chance to witness their own nation’s hold over other countries certainly was a result of the fair, the human exhibits also prompted other realizations. In these displays, a bridge formed

between entertainment and conceptions of race based on Social Darwinism (Munro 81). Viewers already felt their entitlement magnified by witnessing the false, but seemingly accurate, depictions of other cultures. The exhibits inadvertently unveiled the visions of the elite. They thus brought white privilege to the forefront—all at the expense of the humanity of those from colonized cultures.

As the World Fair's popularity increased, so did the prestige of the government of France. This occurred because the Village Nègre was grounded in assumptions about the correct social order and the distribution of power within society (Munro 86). Such exhibits made the middle class more aware of how they themselves were perceived in relation to their own societal values. Witnessing the seemingly accurate depiction of other cultures could make spectators more conscious of how they themselves were depicted within society.

Spectators trusted the view of other cultures that they were given by the World's Fair, in part because of its aid in boosting the French economy, which was struggling before the World's Fair began. Millions of people constructed and found employment within the World's Fair, while volunteers also spread the word to relatives and friends, resulting in heightened popularity for the fair (Munro 81). Because of the fair's popularity, increased job openings allowed those who had been struggling to find work to prosper at the expense of those who remained locked behind bars in human displays.

The French World's Fair was not unique in presenting a human zoo; other countries hosted smaller fairs in which they also displayed human exhibits. Countries such as Australia, Brazil, Guatemala, Indonesia, Jamaica, New Zealand, and South Africa created human exhibitions but did so in ways to suit their own economic needs (Munro 87). While France presented their exhibits in ways that showed their dominance over their international colonies, other countries, some the same ones featured in the Paris displays, imitated European exhibits in ways that matched their own political, economic, social, and cultural needs.

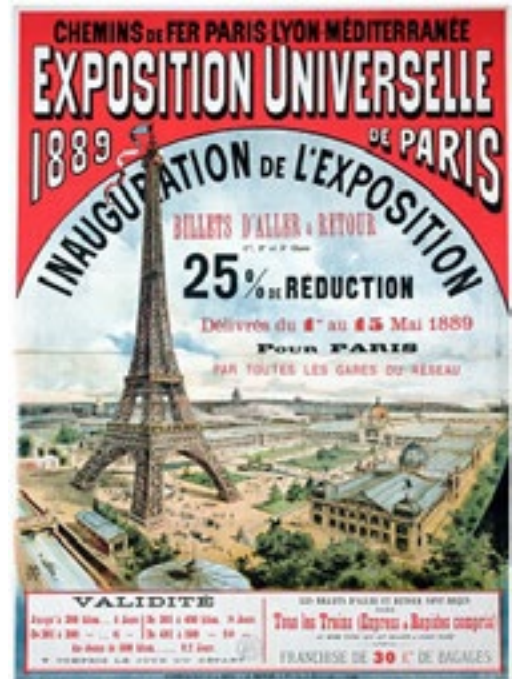
The Village Nègre explicitly encompassed aspects of colonialism in its exhibits. This allowed fairgoers to leave with the impression that France provided a great deal of help to those who lived in different sectors of the world, when, in reality, the French were colonizing them. The exploitation

of the indigenous people at the 1889 Paris World's Fair illustrated France's need for both economic expansion and a sense of entitlement over the "barbaric savages" on display.

## ARTIFACTS

### Exposition Poster:

This is a poster that was used to advertise the Parisian World's Fair in 1889. It does a good job of painting Paris in a positive light, with bright colors and a well-executed design, while also communicating important information like ticket prices, times, etc. On the main part of the poster, it reads, "World Exposition 1889 of Paris: Opening of the Exposition." This relates to our argument in that it shows the importance France placed on this exposition. It gives you a great mental image of the Parisian streets covered in these posters, advertising this outstanding and monumental event, and allows you to place yourself in that time and feel more a part of that culture. We would also argue that this poster is displaying the exposition as an important cultural event, and, while in many ways it was, the human exhibition that occurred at this exhibition was cruel and inhumane towards all the human beings that were exhibited. The French strove to emphasize growth in technology (i.e., the Eiffel Tower); the Village Nègre added to the sense of cultural superiority that came along with that growth.



### Map of Villages:

This map, much like the exposition poster, allows you to become more acquainted with the actual World's Fair that took place in Paris. You can actually see where each exhibition was placed and how a good chunk of the exposition was arranged. We believe that this map lets you place yourself into the fair and



get a good sense of what it was like to be walking around and witnessing a human zoo firsthand. While it is impossible to fully understand what transpired at this World's Fair, this map gives you a better idea of the exposition itself. This relates to our argument in that it shows how much time and effort went into putting this World Exposition together, as is to be expected. But more specifically, it shows how much time went into exhibiting the human beings that were on display in The Village Nègre. This map is a good example of the manner in which these large quantities of people were exposed for the world to see, touch, and gawk at.

The Village Nègre included:

The Algerian Palace, The Tunisian Palace, Senegalese Village; Loango (now Congo) Village, Pahouin (central Africa) Village, Tonkin (now Vietnam) Village, Indonesian Village, Indian Village; buildings for Annam and Tonkin (now Vietnam), Madagascar, Guadeloupe, French Guinea, and Kanak (now Malaysia); the Pagoda of Tonkin gods, Anatomy Theater, and multiple bazaars, boutiques, and restaurants.

*New York Times* article, “**Scientific Religion**”:

This newspaper article from the year of the Parisian World's Fair discusses St. George Mivart, Ph. D.'s opposition to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Mivart does not completely oppose Darwin's theory; he adds “certain details which might be used as the basis for important differences from the results otherwise drawn from Darwin's presentment of the question.” Specifically, he adds the idea of religion and “Divine Energy” to Darwin's theory. This article correlates well with our argument by showing the importance of Charles Darwin even to those scholars still holding firm beliefs in regards to their religious values. By making the statement that “the reconciliation of evolution and religion has been undertaken by many besides Dr. Mivart, but few have written with such fullness and gone into the question to a like depth,” this article emphasizes the importance and influence of Darwin's writing on the society at this time. This could explain the inherent curiosity about the people believed to be more “primitive” than the citizens of Paris at this point in time. We believe this to properly illustrate the allure of human beings who seemed close to the “missing link” side of Darwin's theories to those attending the exhibition.

*New York Times* article, “Paris and the Great Show”:

This newspaper article discusses the economic unrest that was occurring in Paris around the time that the World’s Fair was taking place. While France was in the middle of a financial crisis, the headline still read, “A Cheerful Welcome in Spite of the Unrest.” The article goes on to discuss the great lengths that the Parisian government is willing to go to in order to make the summer of 1889 (beginning of the World Expo.) be a “happy” summer by stating, “It must also be thoroughly understood that, in spite of money losses and political apprehension, strangers will not frown on the smiling and welcoming face of their Parisienne hostess. The sun will shine and music will play.” This relates to the argument that is threaded throughout our cultural history project because it gives a great tidbit of background information that helps place our research about the 1889 World’s Fair and what was happening in Paris at the time that this exposition was taking place. This article supports our claims that the Village Nègre was partially an offensive and exploitative way to generate capital for the Parisian economy that was faltering at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> All articles written in French were translated by Lauren Seitz