

**DOMINIKA
CZARNECKA: BLACK
FEMALE BODIES AND
THE „WHITE“ VIEW**

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STAGED OTHERNESS

Ethnic Shows in Central and Eastern Europe
1850–1939

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BLACK FEMALE BODIES AND THE „WHITE“ VIEW

- Anthropological article
- Studies of human exhibitions from the end of the 19th century
- Focus on the Polish territory in the *late partition period*
- Presenting black women in **Warsaw, Cracow** and **Poznan**
- Topics of **savagery, sexualization** and **racialization** of the **Others'** female bodies
- The idea of construing of **the view**



ETHNOGRAPHIC SHOWS

- Living ethnological exhibitions, very popular in late 19th century
- 1880s and 1890s
- Phenomenon of **Otherness** (the spectacle of Otherness)
- Part of the overall boom of multiform varieties of public shows based on live presence of people of non-European origin occurring in late 19th and early 20th century in Europe and US
- New medium of popular culture related to the development of entertainment business
- Ethnographic shows as a **way of entrepreneurship and competition** between their organizers – *“ethnographic enterprise”*
- Construction of distant “words” in European cities as objects for visual consumption of the masses
- Emphasize on **unusuality and bizarreness** as an answer to the public’s desire to be entertained



JARDIN ZOOLOGIQUE D'ACCLIMATATION



Lith. H. SICARD rue Amoyot. 23. Paris.

HOTTENTOTS



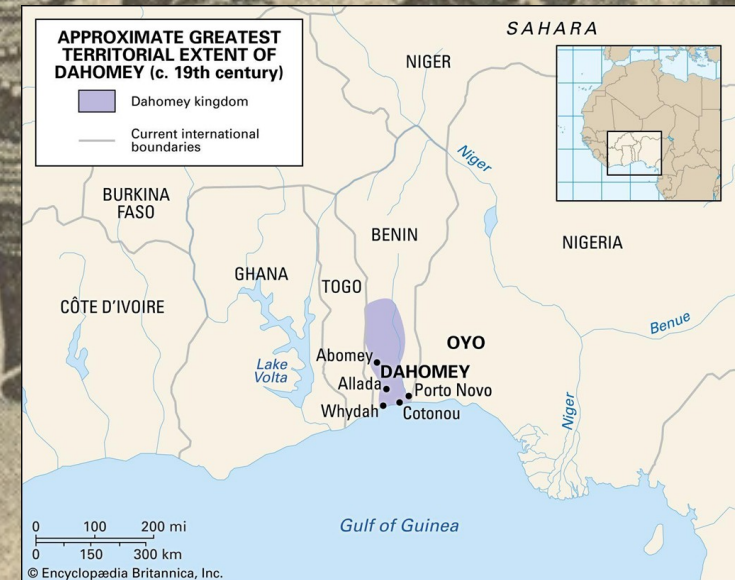
DAHOMY SHOWS

- Popular in 1890s
- Related to the myth of **Amazons of Dahomey**, created by the French colonial troops
- Connected to the **Franco-Dahomean Wars (1890, 1892-1894)**
- Dahomey people exhibited in European (and American) cities during these wars
- African women warriors as a key image of the shows
- Performances including **singing, dancing, drum playing, gymnastics, rifle shooting, fencing or fighting**
- Women equipped with weapons, wearing leather diadems, snug bodices, adorned with cowries
- Education and informative value emphasized as a justification of such shows
- **Entertainment remained a fundamental function**



DAHOMEY SHOWS IN EUROPE

- **Riga** June 1889
- **Warsaw** June-July 1889 (Russian Poland)
- **Lublin** July 1889
- **Poznań** June-July 1892 (Austrian Poland)
- **Cracow** July 1892 (Prussian Poland)
- **Budapest** August 1892
- **Vienna** August 1892, February 1897
- **Prague** September 1892, August 1898
- **Brno** July 1898
- **Breslau** 1898/1899
- **Moscow** April 1901



POLISH SHOWS

- Warsaw (Russia), Cracow (Austria), Poznań (Prussia)
- Research on press commenting the shows (main source of information)
- Dahomey shows reflected in local press through satirical poems (*Amazonki*, *Konferencja z Dohomejczykiem*)
- Prevailing ideas of “savage Africa”, but also sexual undertones with plenty of racial gender stereotypes presented in the press commentaries
- Cracow and Poznań shows were part of a two-year European tour

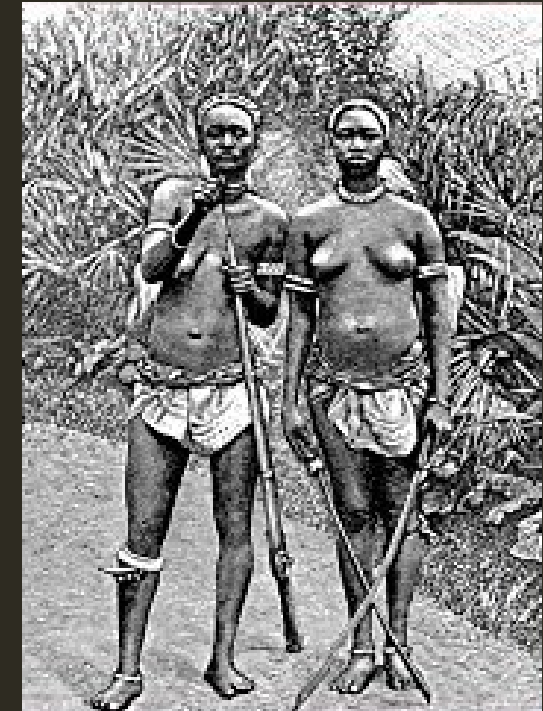
WARSAW (RUSSIAN POLAND)

- June-July 1889
- Area of the summer Circus in the Swiss Valley (*Dolina Szwajcarska*)
- The city hosted several exotic *Others* from different parts of the world (Ashanti people, Arabs, Native Americans, the Sinhalese from Ceylon etc.)
- **Street parades** preceding the shows - a self-advertising strategy



BLACK FEMALE BODIES AND THE “WHITE GAZE”

- Numerous taboos of 19th century concerning **nudity, body exposure, touching and controlling one's body**
- **Contradiction** between the official “chaste and prude” official sphere and an unofficial one, where “debauchery overpowered prudery”
- African women often reduced to the role of mere sexual objects – sexuality was at least a crucial component of the displays of the **Others**
- African women from Dahomey were not considered beautiful, as they belonged to a “degenerated race”
- **Gaze of the black female body was extremely “white” and male centric**





IDEA OF “SAVAGE AFRICA”

- African people considered to be extremely **sensual, sexual, primitive and savage** beings in 1890s Europe
- Connection to the **contemporary moral hierarchy** – self-disciplined Europeans were “on the top of civilization and the sensual-sexual primitives at the bottom”
- Even among “the Others” was a hierarchy: **some exotic groups were considered more “civilized” than others**
- Amazons were **exhibited** to the European audience in manners that evoked fear and fascination via the concept of **savage**
- Aim to demonstrate achievements of **civilizing mission**





THE WORLD IN BOSTON MISSIONARY EXPOSITION.
American Indians and Esquimaux in The Pageant

Noble savage - impersonating positive qualities of the wild men

Ignoble savage - all negative qualities - bestiality, inability to control desire and sexual drive, inclination towards unjustified violence, stupidity, moral inferiority

In the contemporary Polish press Dahomeans were presented as **an example of African tribe** who, despite all the efforts undertaken by Europeans, **resisted civilizing practices**:

*“Their savage nature has not yet been mitigated by the influence of civilization, which is rather unsuitable for this Negro country located on the **Slave coast**”*
(Dahomejczycy, *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 13 July 19, no. 341, p. 27)

Dahomey women portrayed as armed, brave belligerent warriors became **icons of “savage Africa” in the local imagination**

Presented in military uniforms and armed with **rifles** or long swords or sabers in their hands, standing in militaristic poses prepared for a battle or holding a loot proving their victory, casting fierce gazes towards their observers

“...The archers are most slender and youngest, apart from archery they are skilled in dancing. Their legs are tattooed up to their knees, their backs are also covered with tattoos. ... Not only can this female army be called belligerent, but they are also extremely ferocious - committed to their king in body and soul” (Wędrowiec 5 July 1889, no. 27, p. 315)



BEHANZIN
Roi de Dahomey



“Apart from the regular army the king possesses five thousand national guards, consisting of female soldiers. They are recruited among those in the obligatory, two-year military service, which in this strange nation involves 20-year-old girls. ... They are also commanded by women. ... Their uniform consists of a piece of fabric worn like a short skirt, accompanied by a leather armor covering their breasts and trimmed with seashells, which are used as circulating coins in the Dahomey state, and a white cap. Their banners show skulls. One can be impressed by their finely styled curly hair.” (Czas 7 July 1892, p. 3)

- The sexual appeal of Black female bodies was associated not only with exoticism and eroticism, but also with **strength, musculature and warcraft**
- Such elements were undesirable in the context of viewing **white female bodies**



PROCESS OF CONSTRUING VIEWS

- Linked with the contemporary beauty norms behind the physical act of looking
- Racial, gender and sexual inequalities
- Importance of live presence of non-European people – live encounter between the **viewers and the Others being exhibited**
- Visual appeal of the ethnographic included wide range of devices – posters, postcards, leaflets, articles or reports
- Specific act of seeing
- Exhibited body becoming **objectified**
- Press offering a peculiar instruction for **how to look, what to feel and experience** while watching the live shows
- Act of **touching through viewing** based on transposing touch to the sphere of vision

*“The Dahomey marriage is based on trading; they have no idea of love, even maternal love does not exist among them. Thus, the life of Dahomey women is miserable. An average Dahomey man has between two and ten wives, based on wealth, with the king married to between three and four thousand wives!”
(Wędrowiec i5 July 1889, p. 315)*



- The presentation of Dahomey black bodies was aimed to affect the audience not only through emotions, sensual arousal and racial dynamics, but also by **questioning stereotypical female social roles and sexual transgression**
- Observed object becomes entirely submissive to the viewer's gaze – **certain power relation is established and reinforced**
- **Spectacle of foreign corporeality** which was impossible to meet the beauty norms of the **white gaze**
- **Project of modern era** based on the supremacy of **sight over other senses**



Amazone du Roi Behanzin



AMAZONES

BEHANZIN

AMAZONES



GUERRIERS

