

From: Norbert Finzsch [<mailto:Norbert.Finzsch@uni-koeln.de>]

I am a German scholar of African American History and member of H-Net Afro-Am. Today I would like to direct your attention to something that is going on in Germany which, in my opinion, requires the consideration of the international scholarly community. It is with utmost indignation that the African German community has taken notice of the plans to open an "African Village" within the zoo of Augsburg, Germany. The opening of this exhibit is scheduled for July 9 - July 12, 2005. "Artisans, silversmiths, basket makers and traditional hairdressers are situated in an unique African steppe landscape" according to the leaflets handed out by the organizers of the show. The conveners obviously are oblivious of the fact that exhibits like the one planned in Augsburg are organized within the German tradition of racist "ethnographic shows" (Völkerschauen). A letter of reply by Ms. Barbara Jantschke, PhD, from the Augsburg Zoo, directed to an African Swiss citizen underlines the intention, to put Africans on display in the zoo within "an atmosphere of exotism".

It is obvious that the conveners do not understand the historical implications of their project. Even in Germany the impact of colonialism and racism on African societies are nowadays debated in public. The way Africans and African Americans in Germany are perceived and discussed, the way they are present on billboards and in TV ads prove that the colonialist and racist gaze is still very much alive in Germany. This is the direct result of forty years of German colonialism and twelve years of National Socialism. People of color are still seen as exotic objects (of desire), as basically dehumanized entities within the realm of animals. This also explains why a zoo has been selected as site for the exhibit. It is necessary to remind the organizers that in the history of "ethnographic shows" African and German African individuals were used as object for anthropometric tests and ethnological investigations of highly questionable scientific benefit. Many of the artists who performed in these shows in the 1920s and 1930s died from malnutrition and as a consequence of bad living conditions. The Nazis employed a policy of eugenic control, resulting in forced operations to limit the biological reproduction of African Germans or in downright incarceration in concentration camps. Survivors of this policy had to gain a living as performers in exotic shows. The Augsburg exhibit thus fails to acknowledge the political and social history of persecution in Nazi Germany. The African German community and concerned individuals like myself call to your attention the need to protest against the opening of the exhibit in the Augsburg Zoo. Please direct your personalized letters of protest to Frau Dr. Barbara Jantschke (Director Zoo Augsburg) at barbara.jantschke@zoo-augsburg.de.

Thank you

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