

**The Object of Human Display:**  
**Indigenous Participation in the 1931 International Colonial Exposition in Paris**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	3
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: CONTEXTUALIZING 1931 .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: EXPECTING EXCEPTIONALITY .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: COMPETING VISIONS AND MIXED MESSAGES .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: SURVEILLANCE, CONTROL, AND REVOLT.....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>67</b>
IMAGES .....	70
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	73

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## INTRODUCTION

Standing at the western edge of the Bois de Vincennes, a park in the south-east of Paris, it is difficult to imagine that less than one hundred years ago towering architectural constructions dominated the landscape. The peaceful greenery, the placid lake, and the presence of walkers, joggers, and picnicking families, all create a picture of normalcy and natural serenity. There are, perhaps, two things in this beautiful image that suggest something else was there before. The first is the towering façade of the Palais de la Porte Dorée, with its massive rectangular columns and stone frescoes that cover the building's exterior.<sup>1</sup> The second is a small stone plaque, set into the grass just along the primary path into the park. The plaque reads:

May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1931, the International Colonial Exposition of the Overseas Countries opened its doors after more than a thousand days of work. It is the largest colonial exposition that France has known. Lasting several months and occupying more than 110 hectares, French and foreign colonial pavilions, diverse reconstructions together with the exhibition of many hundreds of “native participants” invited the public to a “Tour of the world in a day.” This immense propaganda served to legitimate colonization. November 15, 1931, the exposition came to an end after 33 million tickets of entry were sold. The Palais de la Porte Dorée that housed the permanent museum of the colonies is today the principal vestige of this peak period of colonial expansion.<sup>2</sup>

This innocuous description of such a large-scale and influential event seems demonstrative of how France remembers its colonial past. There is no open expression of remorse, regret, or condemnation for an event that, apparently, hosted “many hundreds of ‘native participants,’” and “served to legitimate colonization.” However, it is notable that the plaque uses the phrase, “figurants indigènes” to describe the native participants from the colonies. The French dictionary definition of figurant is “A person, group, or country that acts only as a presence, without playing any real role.”<sup>3</sup> The term “indigène” was used by French colonial leaders to denote

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<sup>1</sup> See Image 1

<sup>2</sup> See Image 2. All translations from French in this essay are my own, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Larousse, “Définitions : figurant.”

colonized populations and today many consider it derogatory, preferring the term “autochtone” to connote indigeneity.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the use of the phrase “figurants indigènes” does imply that the presence of native populations at the Exposition was diminutive and offensive. This subtle admission of a troubling aspect of France’s colonial past invites exploration of what native display at the 1931 Exposition actually entailed and what the indigenous presence at this event meant in the larger context of French colonial history.

### *The Topic*

This thesis examines the display of indigenous peoples at the 1931 International Colonial Exposition in Paris from the perspective of Exposition leaders, visitors and press, and the native participants themselves. It seeks to situate this practice of native display in the larger context of French history, particularly as relating to the politics of colonization, anthropology, and immigration. It aims to determine why leaders of the Exposition decided to display indigenous peoples, how these displays related to preceding indigenous exhibitions, and whether native participation in the 1931 Exposition can be understood as unique.

Although Exposition leaders aspired to create exceptional displays of indigenous performers in accordance with a cohesive, associationist vision of French colonialism, they were unable to make this vision a reality. Indigenous performance at the Exposition represented a wide variety of colonial theories and racial stereotypes, a result of the diffuse nature of the Exposition’s administration and the dominance of pre-existing ideologies in the public psyche. Although there were certain improvements in the treatment they experienced, indigenous participants had similar experiences to native participants of prior expositions due to the administration’s use of surveillance and social and moral controls.

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<sup>4</sup> Bellier, “L’anthropologie, l’indigène et Les Peuples Autochtones”; Gergaud, “De l’usage des termes ‘indigène’ et ‘autochtone.’”

The forms of display at historical, large-scale, colonial expositions have lasting ramifications on our world today. In France, physical artifacts, photographs, and costumes from the 1931 Exposition are currently on display in several different Parisian museums.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the recent renovation of the Palais de la Porte Dorée and its housing of the new Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration have sparked a resurgence in academic study of the 1931 Exposition. In 2011, the Musée du Quai Branly hosted an exhibition entitled: "Exhibitions, The Invention of the Savage" that focused on the public display of human beings during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>6</sup> The effort to understand how colonialism influenced and continues to influence the way nations and people see one another is a complicated yet necessary endeavor.

### *Overview of the Essay*

Chapter One examines the decision to host an international colonial exposition in 1931 in Paris, surveying the history of large-scale expositions and the political and practical reasons for choosing the year of 1931. Additionally, it explores the history of human displays and their relation to large-scale expositions, arguing that the popularity of the display of colonized peoples among the French public illuminate the decision to replicate these constructions at the Exposition. Chapter Two studies ideological bases of the chief Exposition leaders in order to understand their aspirations for indigenous display at the Exposition. Through analysis of their public statements and private correspondence, this chapter argues that Exposition leaders wished to use indigenous displays both to increase revenue and to advance the colonial policy of associationism. In order to impart this ideological vision, Exposition leaders used new methods

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<sup>5</sup> These museums include the Musée du Quai Branly, the Musée de l'Homme, and the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration.

<sup>6</sup> Blanchard et al., *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales* ; Musée du Quai Branly, "L'Autre, de la science à la fiction."

to control and oversee indigenous performers and performances. Chapter Three considers how the aspiration to impart a unified vision of French colonialism was diluted and contradicted throughout the Exposition. After analyzing the evidence of these competing visions, this chapter contends that the diffusion of administrative leadership at the Exposition as well as contemporaneous pervasive, opposing ideological views explain the ambiguous messages expressed by the General Commission of the Exposition and echoed by both the press and visitors. Chapter Four analyzes government surveillance of the indigenous participants at the Exposition in order to understand how they experienced the ideological aspirations of the Exposition leadership. The chapter examines various methods of control the Exposition administered in order to ensure native performers reflected the Exposition's ideological grounding, while highlighting the ways different native individuals circumvented these efforts. Although living conditions, moral standards, and contractual protections were higher for native performers at the 1931 Exposition than ever before, these standards were only maintained through restriction of personal agency and political rights, thereby reflecting the dehumanizing and paternalistic human displays of the past.

### *Historiography and Method*

Scholarship of the 1931 Exposition is rich and varied. Over the past twenty years, there has been a resurgence of popular and academic interest in the 1931 Exposition and its ramifications on the world today. Due to the multitude of subject matters displayed at the Exposition, this scholarship extends into several different academic fields including, but not limited to, art history, architectural history, anthropology, ethnography, museology, colonial studies, metropolitan studies, and French cultural history. This thesis situates itself within the realms of history and anthropology, in order to analyze the intellectual, cultural and political

intent of the display of indigenous peoples at the Exposition in contrast to the ways visitors and indigenous participants themselves perceived of their presentation and treatment.

The display of indigenous peoples at the Exposition is considered and studied in a variety of ways by different scholars. Consequently, this thesis relies upon several different veins of scholarship in order to develop a nuanced understanding of this human display.

One branch of scholarship claims that native displays at the Exposition were strongly related to prior ethnographic exhibitions and constituted a “human zoo” construction. Pascal Blanchard is a primary proponent of this theory, which he has propagated through the development of the “Exhibitions, The Invention of the Savage” exhibit at the Musée du Quai Branly and through the writing and editing of *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*.<sup>7</sup> However, other scholars such as Luis Sánchez-Gómez have criticized the equating of several different types of human exhibition, arguing that the term “human zoo” holds little academic value when used in this way.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, this thesis avoids describing the display of indigenous peoples at the 1931 Exposition as a “human zoo,” and uses the more general terms of “display,” “performance,” and “participation,” in order to explore what these constructions meant in the Exposition’s specific context.

While researching how the aspirations of leaders like Lyautey were actually reflected in the human displays at the 1931 Exposition, I found one scholar asking similar questions. Benoit de L’Estoile is a French academic of social sciences, who has written extensive genealogies of French anthropology relating to the Colonial Exposition, the Museum of Man in Paris, and the Museum of the Quai Branly in Paris, as well as analyses of French anthropology as it pertained

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<sup>7</sup> Blanchard et al., *Exhibitions*; Blanchard et al., *Human Zoos*.

<sup>8</sup> Sánchez-Gómez, “Human Zoos or Ethnic Shows?” 21.



to the politics of the French empire.<sup>9</sup> His book, *Le Gout des Autres*, explored the development of the Musée du Quai Branly to analyze the purpose of anthropological museums today and the messages they seek to impart. In this book, he devoted a chapter to examining the 1931 Exposition as a “colonial ritual” that sought to stage an “ordering” of the colonial world, even as it demonstrated the multiplicity in the way the Empire saw the colonial “other.”<sup>10</sup> Like L’Estoile, I seek to analyze the different forms of meaning propagated at the 1931 Exposition, however we rely on slightly different source materials, as he focuses more heavily on the ideological, anthropological messages of the Exposition and I analyze the lived experiences of native participants.

Holding a similar understanding of the diverse nature of ideologies expressed at the 1931 Exposition, Patricia Morton is an architectural scholar who analyzed the implications of the Exposition’s incorporation of innumerable artistic styles. In her book *Hybrid Modernities*, she argues that the architecture of the Exposition was unable to provide a coherent hierarchy of colonial power and instead promoted a confusing amalgam of messages of French metropolitan superiority, the individuality of each colony, and the general unity of “La plus grande France.”<sup>11</sup> I draw upon several of her insights throughout this thesis and draw similar conclusions in regard to the reasons for the hybridity of the Exposition.

In order to analyze the political context of the Exposition, this thesis relies on the works of French political historians such as Raymond Betts and Edward Berenson. Betts’ book,

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<sup>9</sup> Benoit de L’Estoile’s works include: L’Estoile, “From the Colonial Exhibition to the Museum of Man. An Alternative Genealogy of French Anthropology\*,”; De L’Estoile, “Science de l’homme et «domination rationnelle» savoir ethnologique et politique indigène en Afrique coloniale française” ; De L’Estoile, “The Past as It Lives Now” ; de L’Estoile, Neiburg, and Sigaud, *Empires, Nations, and Natives* ; L’Estoile, *Le Gout Des Autres*.

<sup>10</sup> L’Estoile, *Le Gout Des Autres*, 37-43.

<sup>11</sup> Morton, *Hybrid Modernities*.

*Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914*, provides a cohesive explanation of the history and evolution of assimilation and association theories in the French political sphere.<sup>12</sup> Edward Berenson's, *Heroes of Empire*, analyzes several important French colonial figures, including Hubert Lyautey, providing a convincing explanation for the development and influence of Lyautey's colonial and political ideologies.<sup>13</sup>

In order to understand anthropological and ethnographic history in France, I relied upon the works of Martin Staum, Alice Conklin, and Fatimah Rony. Martin Staum's *Nature and Nurture in French Social Sciences, 1859-1914 and Beyond* analyzes the ideological debates among anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers, and other social scientists on subjects such as evolution, human nature, and the meaning of race at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Alice Conklin's *In the Museum of Man* provides a cogent analysis of the interlockings of politics and the fields of anthropology and ethnography in France during the interwar period.<sup>15</sup> Fatimah Rony's *The Third Eye* analyzes ethnographic films at the turn of the twentieth century in order to understand how these films were constructing a colonial and racialized "other" as well as new ways of "seeing" this subject.<sup>16</sup> Each of these scholars illuminate the ways anthropology and ethnography were influenced by and influencing the perception of French colonization as well as the governing practices of empire.

In order to study the experiences of colonized native individuals in mainland France during the interwar period, I relied on the work of Lauren Janes and the anthology publication, *1931: Les étrangers au temps de l'Exposition coloniale. Janes' Colonial Food in Interwar Paris*

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<sup>12</sup> Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914*.

<sup>13</sup> Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*.

<sup>14</sup> Staum, *Nature and Nurture in French Social Sciences, 1859-1914 and Beyond*.

<sup>15</sup> Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*.

<sup>16</sup> Rony, *The Third Eye*.

examines colonial food, the practice of eating, and their place in French culture. In particular, she includes a chapter on the experience of indigenous performers at the 1931 Exposition in relation to food, including an analysis of their roles as cooks, waitstaff and restaurant performers.<sup>17</sup> The anthology *1931* was developed for the opening of the Musée Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration as an effort to understand the experiences and status of immigrants in metropolitan France in 1931.<sup>18</sup>

This essay relies upon mixture of primary source materials relating to the Exposition. I collected the majority of these materials in the Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer (ANOM), the main French archives relating to its colonial history. Sources that I studied at ANOM consist of letters amongst the administrative leaders at the Exposition, notes from meetings among these leaders, intelligence documents relating to the surveillance of indigenous participants, and other official government documents. In Paris, I visited several of the Specialized Municipal Libraries (Bibliothèques Municipales Spécialisées) as well as the archives of the Musée du Quai Branly, which hosts many of the materials originally held in the library of the Exposition's Permanent Museum. At these libraries, I found several official guides of the Exposition, a collection of the Information Bulletins published by the General Commission, and newspaper articles published at the time of the Exposition. Additionally, the Exposition administration publicly published a seven-tome report on its entire operation, which I used to learn about the operating realities of the Exposition and the public opinions of its organizers.

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<sup>17</sup> Janes, *Colonial Food in Interwar Paris*.

<sup>18</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931. Les étrangers au temps de l'Exposition coloniale*.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Contextualizing 1931: Large-Scale Expositions, Colonial Politics, and Indigenous Performance in France

To walk around the 1931 International Colonial Exposition in Paris was to “tour the world in a single day,” promised Exposition posters.<sup>19</sup> From a full-size reconstruction of the temple of Angkor Wat, to Moroccan and Tunisian Souks (marketplaces), to a replica of Mount Vernon, this illusion was extensive and meticulously planned. The world, or more aptly, the worlds of “La plus grande France” and other international colonial powers were analyzed, synthesized, and displayed in a manner that was attractive and approachable.<sup>20</sup> Visitors were encouraged to feel disconnected from Parisian life and to overwhelm their senses with the food, entertainment, art, history, scientific knowledge, music, wares, manufactured goods, animals, aquatic creatures, and, finally, human beings on display as they traversed throughout the Exposition. The display of human beings was a particularly vital component of the Exposition as it added a sense of veracity and “reality” to the entire project.

Despite these excitements and entertainments, however, the 1931 Exposition was not unique. Enormous expositions were popular around the world and had existed for more than one hundred years prior. Taking this history into account, why did the French government sponsor the creation of such an exposition? Furthermore, considering the tumultuous political realities of the interwar period in France and the contentious status of its colonies, why were indigenous performers still regarded as vital components of the Exposition’s success? With these questions

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<sup>19</sup> See Image 4.

<sup>20</sup> “La plus grande France,” literally translates to “The largest France,” and was a popular term of the era that referred to the French empire, inclusive of France itself and its overseas territories. Exposition organizers capitalized on this term in order to indicate the essential relationship between France and its colonies. [Girardet, “L’apothéose de la « plus grande France ».”]

in mind, this chapter will explore the historical and political context of the Exposition and the reasoning behind its realization.

### *The Exposition*

Throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, large scale expositions were a popular means for cities and nations to present evidence of their own grandeur alongside representations of other parts of the world.<sup>21</sup> France, like the majority of European nations, hosted several of these expositions, some of the most notable being the 1889 Exposition Universelle et Internationale in Paris, for which the Eiffel tower was created, the 1900 Exposition Internationale in Paris which hosted roughly fifty-million visitors, and the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in Paris, for which the Trocadero complex across from the Eiffel tower was created. Although the names of each exposition sound the same, the labeling of an exposition as “universelle,” “internationale,” or “coloniale” manifested slight differences between the expositions and their focuses. Furthermore, the various translations of these labels held different connotations in each national context.<sup>22</sup> In France, “universelle” connoted the broad range of themes the exposition would attempt to address, rather than merely agricultural displays or fine arts. “Internationale” referred to the participation of other nation states, indicating that nations other than France had constructed displays for the exposition.<sup>23</sup> “Coloniale” expositions, as the term suggests, concentrated on the display of colonial holdings and the relationship of colonies to the metropole. As the 1931 Exposition in Paris was both “Coloniale” and “Internationale,” it presented displays on the

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<sup>21</sup> Demeulenaere-Douyère and Neuschwander, *Exotiques expositions*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Schroeder-Gudehus and Rasmussen, *Les fastes du progrès*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Schroeder-Gudehus and Rasmussen, *Les fastes du progrès*, 9.

French colonies alongside international contributions from other Allied nations relating to their own colonial holdings.

The 1931 Exposition in Paris was not the first colonial exposition held in the Bois de Vincennes. The 1907 Exposition Coloniale took place in the Jardin Colonial of Nogent-sur-Marne, a suburb southeast of Paris on the opposite side of the Bois de Vincennes. Although this earlier exposition attracted only about one million visitors, in contrast to the eight million who attended in 1931, it still represented a significant effort and was comprised of several pavilions with material goods imported from France's colonies.<sup>24</sup> 1907's smaller scale, location in the Parisian suburbs, and more limited cultural impact has lessened its durability in French colonial memory. Yet, physical remains of this exposition remain in the Bois de Vincennes today and there are continued debates amongst historians, artists, and politicians alike regarding what should be done with these remnants.<sup>25</sup>

Since a colonial exposition had taken place just outside of Paris only twenty-four years prior, one might question the impetus for an even larger colonial exposition in 1931. Within the report published by the organizers of the 1931 Exposition, it is explained that prior expositions such as 1878, 1889 and 1900 had revealed the public's interest in all things foreign. It states, "The crowds of spectators never wearied of admiring the recreations of African and Asian cities. Why not transport, another time, in a larger setting, this vision of the Orient and the Far East in the middle of Paris?"<sup>26</sup> Beyond the desire to capitalize on the public's appreciation of the "exotic" East, Exposition organizers perceived the French colonial empire in 1910 to be at its

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<sup>24</sup> Caulcutt, "Paris's Forgotten Human Zoo;" Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, 1931. *Les étrangers au temps de l'Exposition coloniale*, 13; Guyane, "Journal Officiel de La Guyane Française," 105.

<sup>25</sup> Caulcutt, "Paris's Forgotten Human Zoo."

<sup>26</sup> Olivier, *Exposition coloniale internationale de Paris 1931. tome I, Conception et organisation*, XII.

zenith. Consequently, they saw a need to inform the general public about the importance and success of the empire and the future of colonization.

The professed goal of the Exposition expanded beyond merely “artificially reconstituting, with architectural pastiches and parades of figures, an exotic ambiance, but to place under the eyes of visitors an impressive summary of the results of colonization, of its present realities, and of its future.”<sup>27</sup> This elevated goal of supporting French colonialism sustained plans for the Exposition despite the onset of World War I. Initial planning for the Exposition took place between 1912-1913 and there had been a heated competition between the cities of Marseille and Paris as to which would host the Exposition. The agreed-upon compromise planned to allow Marseille to have a National Colonial Exposition in 1916 and Paris to host an International Colonial Exposition in 1920.<sup>28</sup> However, the beginning of the first World War in 1914 forced planning for both expositions to be delayed. Ultimately, the Marseille exposition occurred in 1922 while the Parisian Exposition was held in 1931.

Due to the extended timeframe of development, the Exposition experienced several changes in leadership between the time of its conception and its execution. For example, the first General Commissioner of the exposition was Gabriel Angoulvant, who served from May 5, 1920 until July 17, 1927, when Maréchal Hubert Lyautey took over and served throughout the Exposition’s operation. Angoulvant was known, prior to the Exposition, for having served as a colonial administrator, most prominently as governor of the federation of L’Afrique-Équatoriale Française (AEF, French Equatorial Africa) beginning in 1908.<sup>29</sup> Under his leadership, the commission entrusted with planning the Exposition was slow to develop a budget. The xposition

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<sup>27</sup> Olivier, *Tome I : Conception et organisation*, XII.

<sup>28</sup> Olivier, *Tome I : Conception et organisation*, XII.

<sup>29</sup> Olivier, *Tome I : Conception et organisation*, 21.

in Marseille had used significant federal and colonial resources, leaving few funds for further investment in another colonial exposition only a few years later. These budgeting difficulties and Angoulvant's weak leadership delayed significant development on the Exposition until the late 1920s, which pushed the opening date to 1931.<sup>30</sup> Maréchal Lyautey was a significant driving force behind the Exposition's organization. Lyautey was another colonial administrator, well-known for his work in Morocco, Madagascar and Indochina.<sup>31</sup> It was only after his ascendancy to General Commissioner that a budget was finally agreed upon for the Exposition and that other colonial empires, such as the Netherlands and the United States, solidified their agreements to participate in the Exposition. With the new leadership, there seems to have begun a renewed commitment to the Exposition and a powerful push to develop solidified plans.<sup>32</sup>

During the six-month operation of the 1931 Exposition, from May to October, organizers estimated that roughly eight-million visitors attended.<sup>33</sup> It was considered a grand success on all counts, particularly for operating without deficit and for successfully convincing large numbers of citizens of the grandeur and importance of the French Empire.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the legacy of the Exposition extended long after its closure. The extension of line 8 of the Parisian metro still operates today, several pavilions remain standing whether in the Bois de Vincennes or in other parts of France, and the permanent museum building today is host to the Musée National de l'histoire de l'immigration.

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<sup>30</sup> Olivier, *Tome I : Conception et organisation*, 33.

<sup>31</sup> Morton, *Hybrid Modernities*, 73.

<sup>32</sup> Olivier, *Tome I : Conception et organisation*, 74.

<sup>33</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Olivier, *Tome I : Conception et organisation*, V; Algeron, "L'Exposition coloniale de 1931 : mythe républicain ou mythe impérial ?"



## *France in 1931*

French colonialism was not a new phenomenon in 1931. Beginning in the sixteenth and continuing throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, France established trading posts and built colonies in North America, the Caribbean, South America and Africa. After the 1789 French revolution, the remains of these original colonies were classified as “ancien,” or ancient, due to their relationship to the “Ancien Régime,” the old French monarchy.<sup>35</sup> Over the course of the nineteenth century, the tumultuous political reality in France impeded but did not halt the spread of its empire. France’s “Second Colonial Empire” began in 1830 with the conquest of Algeria, soon followed by expansion into Southeast Asia, Northern Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, and the Pacific Islands. This second wave of expansion concluded at the end of World War One with France’s acquisition of mandate power over Syria, Lebanon, Togo, and Cameroon.<sup>36</sup> The colonies of the Second French Colonial Empire were frequently referred to as “Nouvelles,” or new, and were granted different legal statuses than the ancient colonies.<sup>37</sup> While building a “new” French empire and solidifying the remnants of the “ancient” one, the French government faced the consistent difficulty of convincing the French public that they should both care about the Empire and support the government’s desire to expand it. Particularly with the dawn of the Third Republic and its reliance upon a parliamentary system, the French government was held responsive to the political desires of the French people.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, politicians who believed in the necessity of preserving and expanding the French Colonial Empire continually had to convince the general public to agree with and vote in favor of this vision.

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<sup>35</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 33.

<sup>36</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 33.

<sup>38</sup> The “Third Republic” refers to the system of governance in France between 1870-1940.

The interwar period in France placed new pressures on politicians who wished to maintain the French Empire due to shifting immigration policies and the growing spread of communism. Labor deficits led to an increase in foreign immigration into France both during and after World War One, lasting throughout the 1920s and 30s. By 1931, there were approximately 2,890,000 foreigners living in France, comprising 7% of the general population, more than two times the number present in 1901.<sup>39</sup> Of those 2.8 million foreigners, roughly 150,000 were from France's colonies and they were almost exclusively male.<sup>40</sup> This increase of foreigners living in the metropole proved a challenge for the French government due to political, social, and cultural tensions that grew between these immigrant communities and other French citizens. Particularly after the global economic crisis of 1929 and the rise of unemployment that followed, incidents involving xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism became more common, particularly in major cities like Paris.<sup>41</sup> These tensions birthed new political groups and new media publications as immigrant communities banded together to advocate for their needs and to push back against rampant discrimination. Communist and socialist parties emerged both inside and outside these immigrant communities in France as the influence of the Russian Revolution and the new Soviet Union spread throughout the world. The anti-imperialist and anti-colonial messages projected by these movements gained significant traction amid these new immigrant political organizations in France, particularly those with ties to the French colonies. This growing politicization of immigrant communities alongside the increased prevalence of communism served as the groundwork for nascent decolonization movements in France that grew more prevalent as time went on.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 80-82.

These decolonization movements were furthered solidified due to the increased presence of immigrants from the French colonies. During World War One, immigration from the colonies accelerated in a manner never before seen.<sup>43</sup> These immigrants filled vacant factory positions and fought in colonial military units under the French flag. Despite the vital role these immigrants played in the war, the French government immediately tried to repatriate large numbers of them at its conclusion.<sup>44</sup> During these years, the legal status of individuals living in the French colonies and their rights to emigrate to France were drastically altered. With the increased use of identification cards, travel documents, and bureaucratic regulations, the French government made it extremely difficult for colonial natives to travel to mainland France. Moreover, the legal status of “indigène” in France remained extremely contentious as there were distinctions made between natives of “anciens” and “nouvelles” colonies. For example, during this period, natives of North African colonies were no longer considered legally French, they were “subjects and protégés of North Africa.”<sup>45</sup> As it tried to make immigration more difficult for colonial natives, the French government increased its surveillance and tracking mechanisms over colonial populations already inside metropolitan France. This surveillance is reflective of the xenophobic sentiments in France at the time, but also growing fears within the French government of the possibility of political unrest led by immigrant groups both inside the metropole and back in the colonies.<sup>46</sup>

Although many French politicians perceived the French Empire as being at its apogee in the early twentieth century, growing political insecurities of the interwar period threatened this vision and underscored the necessity of the 1931 Exposition. Despite the gains of the French

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<sup>43</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 33.

<sup>44</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 35.

<sup>46</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 34.

Empire during the nineteenth century and at the conclusion of World War One, the French Empire saw itself as having fallen behind other European Empires, particularly Great Britain. Colonies were seen by many governments of the era as the ultimate sign of cultural, political and economic dominance; thus, a perceived lack of colonies was a threat to a nation's global status. Expositions were one way a nation could declare its grandeur to the rest of the world, particularly as an expression of the extent of its empire. It is therefore logical that France wished to have such a grand exposition when it perceived its Empire to be at its zenith. However, it seems that this reasoning shifted slightly after World War One. With the rise of foreign immigration and the immigrant political organizing in mainland France, the government had grown increasingly concerned about its ability to control, suppress, and surveil these individuals.<sup>47</sup> Politicians like Lyautey and Marcel Olivier, who were convinced of the necessity of maintaining the French Empire, saw the 1931 Exposition as the solution to these growing political tensions and as a means of reestablishing the French colonial cultural and political hierarchy within metropolitan France. Such a publicized event would have the ability to promote a coherent image of the French Empire in order to quell any political sentiments that suggested France or its colonies could exist without one another.

### *Indigenous Participation*

As was typical for earlier expositions, the 1931 Exposition approved and occasionally sponsored the recruitment, transportation, and boarding of indigenous performers and artisans from France's colonies to ensure their participation in the Exposition. Once these workers arrived at the Exposition, the ways they were allowed to perform, work, and live differed greatly. Several areas were constructed to fulfill the purpose of "staging indigenous life," creating a sort

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<sup>47</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 33-35.

of living image or diorama of “reality” within the colonies. These constructions took the form of villages in the pavilions of French West Africa, Madagascar, and Tonkin, and open marketplaces where artisans would create and sell their wares in the Moroccan and Tunisian pavilions.<sup>48</sup> Other types of display included dance and music performances by various indigenous “troupes,” as was exemplified by the performance of Kanak dancers in the New Caledonia pavilion.<sup>49</sup> There was even a dance hall at the Exposition where visitors could partner and dance with native dancers, capitalizing and expanding upon the sexualized and exoticized stereotypes of indigenous women.<sup>50</sup> Many scholars have argued that these sorts of human displays are evidence that the entire exposition functioned as a sort of human zoo.<sup>51</sup> However, the term “human zoo” remains without a universal definition and carries with it a long history of human exhibition, encompassing a large variety of displays.

The popular emergence of “human zoos” as a cultural phenomenon occurred in the nineteenth century, although it is important to note that the display and exhibition of human beings has occurred throughout history.<sup>52</sup> Human zoos developed alongside the popularization of zoological gardens in the nineteenth century as these animal displays became available to the general public rather than limited to elite populations.<sup>53</sup> These gardens were a response to the public’s increased interest in other parts of the world, particularly as colonial expansion introduced “new” foreign spaces. It is not surprising that entertainers and academics alike soon capitalized on this public curiosity by expanding the focus of these zoos beyond plants and animals to human beings.

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<sup>48</sup> Blanchard et al., *Human Zoos*, 373 ; Morton, *Hybrid Modernities*, 25, 40, 48.

<sup>49</sup> Morton, *Hybrid Modernities*, 28.

<sup>50</sup> Morton, *Hybrid Modernities*, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Blanchard et al., *Human Zoos*, 369.

<sup>52</sup> Blanchard et al., *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales*, 9.

<sup>53</sup> Blanchard et al., *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales*, 10-11.

Before humans were displayed in zoos however, they were displayed in exhibitions as the subjects of scientific inquiry. Exhibitions such as the one involving the Venus Hottentot, an African Khoikhoi woman, Saartjie Baartman, who was considered an attraction due to her steatopygia or large buttocks, took place throughout Europe in the nineteenth century. These exhibitions were frequently considered ethnographic as they sought to reveal or affirm racial scientific thought of the day involving the hierarchies of human races.<sup>54</sup> As these exhibitions occurred in Europe, a similar yet divergent phenomenon was emerging in the United States. Beginning in 1941, PT Barnum began to popularize Freak Shows and other circus-like atmospheres that put human beings with “abnormal” traits as well as members of various indigenous communities on display throughout the United States.<sup>55</sup> By the second half of the nineteenth century, this type of exhibition had given rise to the new model of “human zoos” in which entire indigenous villages were reconstructed and communities of indigenous individuals were assembled to be displayed. Carl Hagenbeck is considered the first to have organized a group of this kind when he created a display in Hambourg in 1874, which displayed six Sámi people from the so-called Lapp lands alongside thirty reindeer.<sup>56</sup> This exhibition was so popular that Hagenbeck soon developed other such displays and then exported them to other countries in Europe, referring to them as “anthropozoologic exhibitions.”<sup>57</sup>

The popularity of Hagenbeck’s “anthropozoologic exhibitions” represented the beginning of a new capitalist industry for the display of indigenous populations, and other organizations quickly followed his lead. Traveling indigenous troupes soon performed not only at large scale

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<sup>54</sup> Blanchard et al., *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales*, 14-15.

<sup>55</sup> Blanchard et al., *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> Blanchard et al., *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales*, 16.

<sup>57</sup> Blanchard et al., *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales*, 16.

universal expositions but also at local fairs and regional events.<sup>58</sup> These exhibitions became incredibly popular in France, particularly in the form of reconstructed native villages, which were present in the 1878, 1889, and 1900 Universal Expositions in Paris as well as at the 1895 Ethnographic Exposition on the Champs de Mars, right in front of the Eiffel Tower.<sup>59</sup> It is important to note that although these village constructions and popularized indigenous troupe performances were accepted modes of entertainment, many anthropologists, ethnographers, and other scientists considered these displays to possess scientific value. As Fatimah Rony reveals in her book, *The Third Eye*, academics like French physician Félix-Louis Regnault would observe these exhibitions for the purpose of collecting anthropological and physical information about the indigenous performers.<sup>60</sup> Regnault in particular used a chronophotographe camera to photograph performers in the 1895 Ethnographic Exposition of Occidental Africa in Paris in order to collect evidence of their physical movements or, as he termed it, their “savage locomotion.”<sup>61</sup> He intended to use this information as positivist ethnographic evidence of racial differences between Europeans and indigenous populations.<sup>62</sup>

Regnault was not alone in this sort of observation and analysis of indigenous populations within these exhibition spaces. Although there was greater skepticism of this evidence in the twentieth century, the majority of French anthropologists and ethnographers did not venture into colonial spaces to conduct their own research until the interwar period.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, many anthropologists relished the opportunity to conduct research upon living subjects in ethnographic expositions, as opposed to relying upon the descriptions, photographs, and drawings of French

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<sup>58</sup> Blanchard et al., *Human Zoos*, 106.

<sup>59</sup> Blanchard et al., *Human Zoos*, 105 ; Rony, *The Third Eye*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Rony, *The Third Eye*, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Rony, *The Third Eye*, 23.

<sup>62</sup> Rony, *The Third Eye*, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Blanchard et al., *Human Zoos*, 16-17 ; Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 3.

explorers and colonists in order to formulate their theories.<sup>64</sup> Despite the growing acceptance of fieldwork as the professional standard during the interwar period, the practice of collecting data from native peoples at expositions was still practiced at the 1931 Exposition. Anthropologists at the Fifteenth International Congress of Anthropology in September 1931 specifically left afternoon sessions of the conference free to allow for the conducting of fieldwork at the Exposition.<sup>65</sup> The report from this congress describes, “Specialists were brought in for the visits who exposed the relevance of the documents for our field of study. Numerous measurements were taken from natives; enquiries conducted with them provided particularly useful explanations.”<sup>66</sup> Not only did anthropologists use the physical objects on display as evidentiary documents for their studies, but they also took physical measurements and oral interviews from indigenous performers. However, the limits upon fieldwork conducted at the 1931 Exposition were much more stringent than at prior expositions. Under the leadership of Lyautey, the Exposition forbid the type of prolonged and all-encompassing anthropological studies done by physical anthropologists at expositions in the past.<sup>67</sup> Henri Vallois, the editor of the leading French anthropological journal at the time, complained about this state of affairs, lamenting the lost opportunity to complete in-depth studies of indigenous peoples in ‘faithful’ reconstructions of their natural habitats.<sup>68</sup>

Considering this historical context, the popularity of exhibitions of indigenous peoples and the standard of incorporating these exhibitions into large-scale expositions, it is understandable that leaders maintained this tradition at the 1931 Exposition. Particularly when

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<sup>64</sup> Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 3.

<sup>65</sup> L’Estoile, “From the Colonial Exhibition to the Museum of Man. An Alternative Genealogy of French Anthropology\*,” 349.

<sup>66</sup> L’Estoile, “From the Colonial Exhibition...”, 349. Translation done by Benoît L’Estoile.

<sup>67</sup> L’Estoile, *Le Goût Des Autres*, 61.

<sup>68</sup> L’Estoile, “From the Colonial Exhibition...”, 346.



one considers that the exhibition of native individuals attracted both large-scale popular audiences and serious academics, excluding these displays would have run the risk of diminishing Exposition crowds. Organizers likely saw the inclusion of indigenous display as the fulfillment of public expectation for the Exposition and another means of bringing the “reality” of the colonies to metropolitan French citizens.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Expecting Exceptionality: Administrative Imaginings of Indigenous Performance at the 1931 Exposition

One prominent poster for the Exposition depicts a cartoon-like image of four individuals. These characters are superimposed in front of illustrations of the Palais of the Metropolitan Section on the left and the reconstruction of the Temple of Angkor-Wat on the right.<sup>69</sup> These four individuals appear to be cartoon approximations of four different “races” living in French colonies. The top individual wears a turban, has light brown skin and a dark mustache; he is likely a representation of North African populations. The individual on the left has red skin and wears a necklace of what appear to be shells; he is likely a representation of either Native American populations or natives of the Pacific Islands. The individual on the right has black skin, so dark his features can’t be seen, and wears a gold necklace; he is likely an approximation of a West or Central African native. The bottom figure has yellowish-brown skin, wears a *nón lá* or leaf hat, and seems to represent an Indochinese native. It is striking that a poster stating: “Tour the World in A Day,” uses these four approximations of colonized populations to represent the world visitors will encounter at the Exposition. Moreover, this poster is not unique. Many of the posters created by the Exposition’s General Commission depicted indigenous peoples in order to entice visitors to come to the Exposition. It is apparent that the promise of seeing indigenous individuals dressed in their “traditional” regalia was a selling point, one of which Exposition leaders were aware and willing to use to their advantage.

#### *Overview*

This chapter will explore the intentions and aspirations of the top Exposition leaders in relation to the exhibition of indigenous peoples. It is clear from the native presence on posters

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<sup>69</sup> See Image 4.

that leaders wanted to capitalize on this long-standing tradition of human display. However, to what extent did these aspirations reflect a divergence from the goals of native display in prior expositions? This chapter will examine first the leading political ideologies in France and how they were upheld by Exposition leaders before arguing that the leaders saw indigenous display as a means of increasing profits and presenting a coherent vision of the French colonial agenda.

### *The Leadership*

The 1931 Exposition was directed by a large internal organization entitled “The General Commission” under the department of the Ministry of the Colonies. The General Commissioner sat the helm of this administration and oversaw the organization of the entire Exposition.<sup>70</sup> This role was notably held by Maréchal Hubert Lyautey, one of the major colonial administrators of the era.<sup>71</sup> As General Commissioner, Lyautey not only performed administrative duties, but also played a public role as the government’s face of the Exposition. The Exposition’s General Commission also relied on France’s preexisting colonial administration for organizational support. For example, the Governor General of each of French colony oversaw the development of his colony’s pavilion at the Exposition.<sup>72</sup> As leading representatives of France’s colonies, each Governor had his own political vision to impart to the French metropolitan public at the Exposition. Together, Lyautey and the Governor Generals represented the topmost level of leadership at the Exposition and, accordingly, this chapter will analyze their combined ambition in relation to indigenous display.

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<sup>70</sup> Olivier, *Tome I : Conception et organisation*, 140-141.

<sup>71</sup> Hodeir and Pierre, *L'Exposition Coloniale de 1931*, 25.

<sup>72</sup> Olivier, *Tome I : Conception et organisation*, 77-78.

### *The Administration's Political Context*

The opinions of these leaders cannot be understood without understanding the colonial politics at the time. First and foremost, it is important to analyze the shift from reliance on assimilation theory to a policy of association. Throughout the nineteenth century, assimilation theory was the driving ideological force behind the French Empire. The theory maintained that colonized peoples and societies should be governed as equal members of a centralized French Empire.<sup>73</sup> What this entailed, however, was the destruction of any prior forms of governance or cultural difference in favor of rebuilding and remaking the colonies in the image of France.<sup>74</sup> It bears repeating that the majority of French metropolitan citizens were uninvested in the colonies and that self-conscious study of France's colonial efforts was limited at best.<sup>75</sup> However, during the 1890s, this indifference tinged with animosity towards colonization shifted. The historian Richard Betts attributes this shift to the combined influence of the newfound peace with Russia, granting mainland France military security and neutralizing arguments that colonial military campaigns diminished the safety of continental France, and the pacification of rural, isolationist proponents with a 1900 finance law that stopped direct aid to the colonies.<sup>76</sup> These developments temporarily quieted political opponents to colonialism and allowed pro-colonial politicians like Gabriel Hanotaux and Eugène Etienne to gain positions of authority.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, the establishment of French colonial societies, such as the Committee of French Africa in 1890, and the growing frequency and popularity of International and National Colonial Congresses solidified relationships between individuals invested in the continuation of the French Empire.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 22-23.

<sup>74</sup> Morton, *Hybrid Modernities*, 184-185; Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 30.

<sup>75</sup> Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914*, 3-4.

<sup>76</sup> Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 4-5.

<sup>77</sup> Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 5 and 8.

<sup>78</sup> Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 5.

These events and groups also increased the knowledge French citizens held in relation to the colonies. These changes led to ideological and academic debates over the merits of assimilation theory and a growing belief that such a rigid, inflexible system of governance was insufficient for such a large, diverse empire.

Association theory became the answer to these dissatisfactions and represented the formation of newfound partnerships between academia and French colonial leadership. Although not clearly or universally defined, association theory was generally understood to be founded on two basic tenants: the utilization of empirical study to understand native groups and colonized regions, and the use of this knowledge to ensure the cooperation of these native groups while constructing systems of colonial governance.<sup>79</sup> These practices were heavily influenced by the study of other European empires, specifically the Dutch and the British, and their success in maintaining peace within their colonies as well as in making their colonies profitable. Both the Dutch and the British enacted more flexible colonial policies that differed from colony to colony and relied upon the maintenance of native institutions and governing structures.<sup>80</sup> At the turn of the century, as France sought to improve its own colonial policy in order to compete on the world stage, French politicians took these comparisons seriously and incorporated their findings into colonial policy. Furthermore, the growing popularity and influence of various scientific fields had their own influence on evolving French colonial theory.

Scientific fields such as anthropology, psychology, sociology and ethnography changed rapidly throughout the nineteenth century. As Darwinian evolution was dissected, challenged, and expanded upon throughout Europe, French scholars continued to rely heavily on the theories

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<sup>79</sup> Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 106.

<sup>80</sup> Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 36-57.

of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.<sup>81</sup> Specifically, French scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries debated the ways geography, society, culture, and heredity impacted the ways “races” and individuals evolved over time.<sup>82</sup> It was soon accepted by many scholars that fundamental equality among human races did not exist and that different races were at different stages of an established evolutionary hierarchy. It goes without saying that colonized populations were much lower on this evolutionary ladder than European populations, and there were serious debates about whether evolutionary progression was possible for these “lower races.”<sup>83</sup> Numerous scholars, such as philosopher and social psychologist Alfred Fouillée, theorized that though improvement was possible through education and intermarriage, both processes were slow and possibly completely ineffective.<sup>84</sup> The growing popularity of these racial theories served to undermine the aging policy of assimilation. Prominent academics, including Ferdinand de Saussure and Gustave Le Bon, used these scientific theories to denounce assimilation because of its faulty basis on the assumption of natural equality between races. They instead believed that it was impossible to govern native populations as if they were the same as metropolitan French citizens because they were socially, culturally, and, possibly, biologically, different.<sup>85</sup> Although there was no consensus amongst scientists regarding racial theories or what they entailed for colonized populations, collectively, these theories convinced many French imperialist leaders that association policy, with its putative “respect” for the differences of colonized indigenous peoples, was the only way forward.

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<sup>81</sup> The most popular of Lamarck’s ideas was the inheritance of acquired characteristics. This theory maintained that organisms adapted in response to their physical environments and then passed on these developed characteristics to their offspring. [Staum, *Nature and Nurture*, 7; Jordanova, *Lamarck*, 80-81 and 109-113.]

<sup>82</sup> Staum, *Nature and Nurture*, 7.

<sup>83</sup> Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 63-64.

<sup>84</sup> Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 62-64.

<sup>85</sup> Staum, *Nature and Nurture*, 156; Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 71.

### *The Politics of Lyautey*

Hubert Lyautey was a vital leader of the French Colonial Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His reputation as a “pacific conqueror” gained him respect in mainland France particularly as he solidified and improved French rule in Morocco.<sup>86</sup> However, his theory of colonization originally developed during his time serving under General Joseph Gallieni in Indochina and Madagascar in the late 1890s. There, Lyautey came to believe that the French military should take part not only in colonial conquest, but also in the continued occupation, development and governing of the colony. Lyautey believed that “pacification” could only be achieved through “progressive occupation,” which consisted less of “military operations” than the creation of “a functioning organization.”<sup>87</sup> This organization would protect and serve the needs of these colonized populations while simultaneously promoting the hegemonic economic agenda of the French Empire. Moreover, whenever possible, Lyautey advocated for the creation of partnerships with preexisting ruling groups in colonized spaces. In his own words, “‘Instead of abolishing the traditional systems, make use of them: Rule with the mandarin and not against him....Offend no tradition, change no custom, remind ourselves that in all human society there is a ruling class, born to rule, without which nothing can be done, and a class to be ruled.’”<sup>88</sup> This statement is reflective of Lyautey’s personal support of royalist politics in France and how these beliefs translated into his support of “natural” ruling groups in the colonies. Moreover, this statement reveals Lyautey’s rejection of assimilationist policies and counter effort to “offend no tradition, change no custom.” Accordingly, as Resident General of Morocco from 1912-1925, Lyautey enacted policies to protect and maintain Moroccan society

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<sup>86</sup> Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*, 229.

<sup>87</sup> Lyautey, *Du Rôle Colonial de l’armée*, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Lyautey to his sister, 16 November 1894, quoted in Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*, 230.

and culture through the segregation of natives and colonials as well as through the maintenance of local cities and traditional ways of life.<sup>89</sup>

To interrogate his reputation as such a “pacific conqueror,” it is important to understand that Lyautey was not a pacifist. As a military leader in both Madagascar and Morocco, he demonstrated a willingness to use extreme violence when indigenous populations were unwilling to work with French colonial authorities. He seems to have perceived this violence as a necessary evil in order to serve the “best interests” of colonized populations.<sup>90</sup> In the words of the historian Edward Berenson, “In [Lyautey’s] mind, military efforts served merely to punctuate a larger peaceful conquest, the fighting and bloodshed viewed as regrettable, if necessary, efforts to make ‘today’s adversary into the collaborator of tomorrow.’”<sup>91</sup> Violence was merely a part of the moral and political obligation Lyautey assumed as a colonial leader. Despite this reality, Lyautey was able to maintain a refined, peaceful reputation in French society. There was a growing disdain amongst the metropolitan French electorate for bloody, violent colonial conquest, accompanied by the increasing sense that more “peaceful” forms of colonialism would demonstrate France’s superior “civility” to some of its more aggressive European neighbors.<sup>92</sup> Lyautey was seen across the political spectrum as a genteel representation of this civilized form of colonization.<sup>93</sup> Up until the late 1930s, Lyautey was admired by all but the far-left French political elite, and it was thus unsurprising that the Ministry of the Colonies chose him as leader for the 1931 Exposition.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Morton, *Hybrid Modernities*, 189.

<sup>90</sup> Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*, 236.

<sup>91</sup> Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*, 245.

<sup>92</sup> Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*, 249.

<sup>93</sup> Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*, 249.

<sup>94</sup> Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*, 269.



### *The Logic of Including Indigenous Performers*

Two distinct and at times competing goals shaped the Exposition leadership's decision to host indigenous troupes. The first was the pursuit of profitability. The Exposition was an extremely expensive venture and organizers understood from the popularity of prior indigenous performances that the promise of seeing exotic, foreign peoples would ensure large crowds. The second aspiration was to produce an exposition that reflected the leaders' vision for the French colonial future. More specifically, this meant replicating the policy of association and its emphasis upon the protection of indigenous difference as a means of increasing colonial economic prosperity. Together, these two motivating factors shaped the decision to allow indigenous performers at the 1931 Exposition.

Exposition leaders understood the economic benefits of displaying indigenous peoples, and, despite reservations regarding the nature of the displays, they exploited this opportunity for profit. Exposition organizers had noted the popularity of indigenous displays at prior expositions and saw 1931 as an opportunity to more fully capitalize, and literally profit, from this public interest.<sup>95</sup> Such an effort to use these displays as a means of increasing the Exposition's popularity is obvious from the propaganda created for the Exposition. Numerous handouts, flyers, and posters created to distribute before and during the Exposition depict cartoon images of native peoples, emphasizing what visitors would find at the Exposition.<sup>96</sup> This motivation is even more obvious in the correspondence of various Governor Generals and their reasoning for approving the participation of their native subjects. The following example stems from a complex situation that unfolded between the Governor General of New Caledonia and his grant of approval to the *Fédération Française des Anciens Coloniaux* (FFAC) to recruit and display an

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<sup>95</sup> Olivier, *Tome I : Conception et organisation*, XII.

<sup>96</sup> See Appendix Image 1 & 2 as examples of this practice.

indigenous troupe at the 1931 Exposition.<sup>97</sup> The Governor General of New Caledonia wrote to the Minister of the Colonies on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1931 to give a full account of the ways he and the performers themselves had been misled and why he had accepted the offer in the first place. The Governor describes how the FFAC offer “constituted, for our section at the Exposition, the means of providing an attraction that could largely contribute to its success, without any cost to the local budget.”<sup>98</sup> With this statement, it is clear that the Governor saw the display of indigenous populations as a positive source of “attraction” that could increase the numbers of visitors to the New Caledonia pavilion. Moreover, it is apparent that there were perceived benefits to allowing an outside, private organization to recruit, manage, and transport the native troupe, namely that the government would not need to bear the cost.

Exposition leaders were also clear in their intention to use indigenous display as a means of promoting a unified colonial political vision, heavily grounded in association theory, of native peoples as productive and valued members of La Plus Grande France. One of the most public events at which Lyautey proclaimed his vision was the inaugural ceremony for the entire Exposition on May 6, 1931. In his speech, he states:

The lesson that I would like to see emerge above all from this international Exposition, is a great lesson of union. Union between the races, these races which

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<sup>97</sup> The experience of the native Kanak troupe from New Caledonia in 1931 at the Jardin d’Acclimatation is an infamous part of French colonial history. The FFAC that recruited this troupe made a contractual agreement with the Governor General that the natives would be brought to Paris for the 1931 Exposition so that they might present dance and artistic displays. The FFAC incentivized this project by promising to cover the cost of this venture and to ensure the wellbeing of the natives. Despite these promises, the Kanaks were brought to the Jardin d’Acclimatation, an entertainment park with frequent ethnological exhibitions, in Paris where they were displayed in a faux-African village construction and advertised as being cannibals. The poor conditions and maltreatment of these natives led to a public outcry in the summer of 1931. This situation has been well documented by scholars like Catherine Hodeir and was popularized in Didier Daeninckx’s novel, *Cannibale*. [Hodeir, “1931 : Des Kanak Au Jardin d’Acclimatation ;” Daeninckx, *Cannibale*.]

<sup>98</sup> Le Gouverneur de la Nouvelle-Calédonie et Dépendances to Le Ministre des Colonies, “Analyse: Recrutement d’indigènes Calédoniens pour l’Exposition,” October 9, 1931.

it is truly not suitable to hierarchize into superior and inferior races, but to regard them as 'different' while learning to adapt to that which differentiates them.<sup>99</sup>

The expressed desire for the appreciation of difference and “union” in spite of these differences is demonstrative of Lyautey’s own support of the politics of association at the time. He is propagating the idea that racial or cultural hierarchy is an unacceptable manner of understanding or seeing colonized populations. Moreover, Lyautey himself states that the appreciation of these differences and the governance of the colonies are “above all, a politics of respect.”<sup>100</sup> Lyautey emphasizes here the necessity of regarding indigenous peoples respectfully, as opposed to exotic objects of entertainment.

### *The Expectation of Exceptionality*

Exposition leaders consistently expressed a desire to display indigenous peoples in a new, evolved, and more civilized manner than the modes of display used in earlier exhibitions. What did leaders imagine this difference to entail? It seems that there were two central tenets to this desire. First, leaders placed limitations on the types of performances allowed to take place within the Exposition walls. These limitations were meant to ensure that visitors viewed the natives as human, productive, and improved by colonization. Furthermore, these limitations were intended to prove to the French public that the French Empire was more morally grounded and economically focused than ever before. Second, increased government oversight and direct involvement to ensure the proper treatment of these indigenous individuals was meant to demonstrate that the Exposition leadership saw the natives as performers and laborers as opposed to specimens or animals. Leaders expressed these two claims upon exceptionality both publicly and privately as a justification for and explanation of indigenous display at the Exposition.

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<sup>99</sup> Olivier, *Rapport Général : Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris 1931 - Tome IV.1, Vie de L'Exposition*, 376.

<sup>100</sup> Olivier, *Rapport Général : Tome IV.1*, 376.

Although there were no strict written criteria for the types of indigenous performers and performances at the Exposition, internal correspondence between Exposition leaders reveals how their political ideologies informed the types of display they wanted to create. The first example of this logic is found in letters between Marcel Olivier, Lyautey's right hand man and the Secretary General of the Exposition, and the Minister of the Colonies, Paul Reynaud. In a letter sent on August 29, 1931, Olivier responded to the request of the FFAC that their troupes, including the aforementioned Kanaks as well as the "Femmes à plateaux" and a group of "Pygmies," be allowed to perform in the 1931 Exposition.<sup>101</sup> The Secretary explained that he was providing the position of the General Commission, which was led by Lyautey himself, in regard to the FFAC request. Olivier stated, on the subject of the women of the plateau and the pygmies, "In agreement with the Ministry of the Colonies and the Conseil Supérieur de l'Exposition, the Commisariat General had responded that it would not authorize under any pretext the exhibition, in the perimeter of the Exposition, of indigenous monstrosities."<sup>102</sup> The utter rejection of the display of any "indigenous monstrosities" represents a clear distinction that the Exposition administration made between the types of indigenous performers it allowed within the Exposition. This distinction seems to have been tied to a certain appearance that Exposition leaders wished indigenous performers to have. When one considers the ideology of association at

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<sup>101</sup> The "Femmes à plateaux" were a troupe of indigenous individuals from French Equatorial Africa (AEF) with bodily modifications such as lip plates and stretched ears. The individuals were from the Sara people of the region that is now part of modern-day Chad. Like the Kanaks, the "Femmes à plateaux" were recruited by the FFAC after receiving limited permission from Governor General of the AEF, Raphaël Antonetti. The FFAC proceeded to ignore these limitations and to display the troupe in several locations across Europe, including Switzerland, Germany, and the Jardin d'Acclimatation in Paris. Due to the public outrage sparked in response to the shocking nature of the natives' bodily modifications, the government soon held FFAC to account. Part of this oversight included pressuring the FFAC to work with the administration of the 1931 Exposition in order to display several of their indigenous troupes at the Exposition. ["Les 'Négresses à Plateaux.'"; Le Directeur des Affaires Économiques, "Note Pour Le Ministre. "]

<sup>102</sup> "Secrétariat Général à Monsieur Le Ministre Des Colonies (Direction Des Affaires Économiques)."

play, it seems likely that leaders believed that certain “differences” crossed the line from being cultural, and thus worthy of conserving, to being morally objectionable in the eyes of French society.

Governor General of the AEF, Raphaël Antonetti, confirmed this theory in his agreement to let the FFAC recruit a troupe of “femmes à plateaux” under the condition that they were to be brought to France for the sole purpose of being medically examined. Antonetti specified that this would be a medical examination for the purpose of gathering a surgeon’s opinion on “the possibility of removing the effects of these mutilations,” in reference to the body modifications of the indigenous individuals.<sup>103</sup> It seems that Exposition leaders were united in the opinion that the protection and appreciation of cultural differences extended only as far as they could be understood and admired by French society. Consequently, indigenous performers at the Exposition were only reflective of differences the leaders thought would be acceptable, and not grossly entertaining, to European visitors.

Furthermore, the decisions made in regard to which indigenous individuals were allowed to perform at the Exposition seem to have been directly related to their economic and artistic capacity. In the same letter from Olivier to the FFAC, he stated:

Concerning the Kanaks, who are natives coming to exercise their art at the Exposition (as do those of the Indochinese and AOF sections) it [the General Commission] could only see benefits to this new attraction being installed in the sector devoted to the Oceania Section by the Commissioner of this section and under his exclusive responsibility.<sup>104</sup>

Here, the General Commission clarified that one of the distinctions being made between “monstrous” indigenous peoples and acceptable populations was in relation to their ability to produce “art.” It appears that, in order to prove civility, natives had to demonstrate the capacity

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<sup>103</sup> “Le Gouverneur Général de l’AEF, Commandeur de La Legion d’Honneur, à Monsieur Le Sous-Secrétaire d’État Aux Colonies.”

<sup>104</sup> “Secrétariat Général à Monsieur Le Ministre Des Colonies (Direction Des Affaires Économiques).”

to create artwork, or something useful or beautiful in the eyes of Europeans. To the Exposition organizers, it was apparently insufficient for native populations to be considered an attraction in and of themselves, rather it was necessary for them to possess a trade or skill that made them more “useful” to the Exposition and, consequently, to the empire. This distinction mimics the tenets of the policy of association in that, once more, French colonial leaders accepted cultural differences and cooperated with native populations insofar as they benefited the colony’s economic profitability and could make the French colonial project look successful. Exposition leaders wanted to maintain an image of indigenous populations as benefiting from “la mission civilatrice,” and also as productive subjects of the empire.

Exposition and colonial leaders alike seemed much more concerned with the treatment and oversight of native performers than in prior Expositions, attempting to treat them as contractual performers rather than living specimens. This reality is apparent in the letters of several Governor Generals and their requests of the FFAC. For example, despite allowing the recruitment and display of native New Caledonians, the Governor General of New Caledonia expressed reservations regarding the management and treatment of this indigenous troupe. He “insisted, at the same time, on the importance that the Federation watch over, with all particular attention to avoiding all contact of our natives with the bad elements of the Capital and to surround them with the best care.”<sup>105</sup> Although he framed this impulse as paternalistic care for the wellbeing of the natives, it was also a political concern, as became apparent with the public outrage expressed by the future maltreatment of this same troupe. This same protective concern was apparent in the Governor of the AEF’s specific requests that the “Femmes à Plateaux” not be displayed publicly and only medically examined.

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<sup>105</sup> Le Gouverneur de la Nouvelle-Calédonie to Le Ministre des Colonies, “Analyse: Recrutement d’indigènes,” October 9, 1931.

At the Exposition itself, the concern for the care of indigenous performers is apparent in the restriction of scientists and visitors from twenty-four-hour access to the natives. Unlike in prior expositions, indigenous performers in the 1931 Exposition did not actually live in the villages constructed for reenactments of native life.<sup>106</sup> Consequently, visitors could not observe all aspects of the private lives of the performers. Moreover, the administration did not allow academics prolonged access to the natives to conduct long-term scientific studies, as they had at the 1889 Exposition.<sup>107</sup> Although these academics were allowed to take measurements and conduct oral interviews with performers, these were not in-depth ethnographic studies.<sup>108</sup> These restrictions placed to limit public and academic access to the private lives of native performers represented a shift in attitude from perceiving indigenous peoples as near animals to limited acknowledgement of their right to privacy and humane treatment.

### *Conclusion*

According to the private correspondence and public speeches of Exposition leaders, the use of indigenous display was a product of economic concerns and the aspiration to advance a particular ideological vision of French colonialism. This ideological vision was based on the colonial policy of association and shifting scientific racial theories that influenced how colonial leaders saw and led indigenous populations. Consequently, the indigenous displays constructed for the 1931 Exposition were meant, in the eyes of the administration, to contradict the notion that indigenous peoples were indiscriminately “savage,” and to demonstrate that certain populations had valuable cultures and skills.<sup>109</sup> Leaders believed that indigenous displays would be an effective way to promote this new colonial vision and convince the France metropolitan

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<sup>106</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, 1931. *Les étrangers au temps...*, 38.

<sup>107</sup> L’Estoile, *Le Goût Des Autres*, 61.

<sup>108</sup> L’Estoile, “From the Colonial Exhibition...”, 349.

<sup>109</sup> Sánchez-Gómez, “Human Zoos or Ethnic Shows?”, 13-15.

population that La Plus Grande France was worth continuing. Was this ideological vision and imagining of indigenous performance different from those of prior expositions? In a limited manner, it seems that there were substantive differences in how Exposition leaders sought to oversee indigenous performers and the displays they constructed. There were deliberate efforts to control the visitors' perceptions of these performers and to see them not as "monstrosities" but rather as artistic and economic producers. The administration further tried to ensure that the treatment of indigenous individuals was morally beneficial and above reproach. Consequently, it seems fair to say that the intentions of the Exposition leadership were divergent from those of prior expositions.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Competing Visions and Mixed Messages: The Administration's Inability to Control Visitor Perception of Indigenous Performers

A year before the start of the Exposition, the General Commission began to distribute a weekly Information Bulletin to news media organizations in order to further public anticipation for the Exposition. All articles within the bulletins were free for republication, thus encouraging further spread of the Exposition's own written propaganda.<sup>110</sup> As this was an official publication of the General Commission, it was meant to reflect the values of the Exposition.

The sixth issue of the Bulletin held an article entitled "Authentic Cannibals," which described a "Pahouin Village" that would be on display at the Exposition.<sup>111</sup> The article told readers "to go to see the Pahouin village in the AEF Section. You will not regret the trip." It justified this advice by noting that the Pahouins were not like other "black people" because of their racial features and historic roots; the geographer Louis Vivien de Saint-Martin had called them "the 'white' race of Africa."<sup>112</sup> Secondly, the article related a brief history of the Pahouin people, describing how they migrated and took over three quarters of "Gabonais" land, "incorporating' the first inhabitants" of this region by "eating them!"<sup>113</sup> Despite this disquieting history, the article assured visitors that they could "approach ... [the Pahouin people] without fear, they won't eat anyone!"<sup>114</sup> The article conflictingly illustrates Pahouin participants as both cannibalistic and less-black than other African peoples. This contradictory presentation

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<sup>110</sup> "Bulletin D'Informations : No. 3."

<sup>111</sup> "Bulletin d'Informations : No. 6," 6.

The "Pahouin" people are also known as the Fang or Fān and are a Central African ethnic group. ["Fang."]

<sup>112</sup> "Bulletin d'Informations : No. 6," 6.

<sup>113</sup> "Bulletin d'Informations : No. 6," 6.

<sup>114</sup> "Bulletin d'Informations : No. 6," 7.

encourages visitors to be grotesquely fascinated with this troupe and to visit the Exposition in order to see how this “white” black race compares to their own. With such an introduction, it is nearly impossible to imagine Exposition visitors being able to see these indigenous performers as their equals.

### *Overview*

The presence of such an inflammatory article in an official publication of the Exposition stands in sharp contrast to the aspirations of the Exposition leaders. Although they did seek to use indigenous display as a means of attracting visitors, the leaders also maintained the importance of imparting a perception of these natives as civilized laborers, worthy of respect. These contradictions prompt two questions: what were the actual messages regarding native display being sent to Exposition visitors? And, why did these messages contradict the aspirations of the Exposition’s top leaders?

Throughout the Exposition, a wide range of theories and opinions were expressed to the public, particularly in relation to the display and understanding of indigenous participants. This chapter will attempt to reveal first how these ideological differences were manifested at the Exposition, from how indigenous displays were marketed to visitors to how native performances and museum exhibits were constructed. Subsequently, it will examine some of the public response to the Exposition in order to see these conflicting messages were received. Finally, this chapter will explore why the Exposition promoted such a wide variety of ideologies through its indigenous displays. In short, the chapter will explore how the Exposition came to life for its visitors, and how their experiences differed from the expressed ideals of the administration.

### *The Marketing of Indigenous Display*

As a method of public promotion, the General Commission published a significant amount of propaganda before and during the Exposition. Even though this propaganda was produced by the Exposition's own administration, there were discrepancies in the ideological and political expressions of these publications. As displayed above, the Information Bulletin published by the Press Service under the Cabinet of the Exposition's General Commission occasionally included articles that described indigenous performers in dehumanizing and exoticizing manners.

Beyond the article about the "cannibal" Pahouin village, an article describing the Djenné Sudanese village demonstrated an impulse to blur the lines between a constructed performance and the reality of indigenous life.<sup>115</sup> The article reported that a "veritable native village of Occidental Africa is currently being constructed in the Bois de Vincennes." First, the use of the word "veritable" implies that this village is equivalent to reality, that it is the authentic thing itself. The article persisted in this characterization and later noted, "this illusion will become a living reality while circulating in the narrow alleys of the native town where an army of artisans will work."<sup>116</sup> While clarifying that the village and experience of being in Africa is an "illusion," the article maintained that, somehow, the combination of the reconstruction and the native individuals would make the space a "living reality." Although these descriptions are not equivalent to an inflammatory description of cannibalism, they still manage to dehumanize the indigenous individuals. By suggesting that the village constructions at the Exposition would be equivalent to actual native villages, the article undermines the status of natives as performers. Instead, these descriptions implied that the displays of indigenous peoples at the Exposition

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<sup>115</sup> "Bulletin d'Informations : No. 6," 3.

<sup>116</sup> "Bulletin d'Informations : No. 6," 4.

would be exactly like ethnographic displays of the past and bely any distinction Exposition leaders thought they had made.

Distinct from the propaganda created by the Exposition administration were the publications created by outside sources but distributed by the General Commission as official documents of the Exposition. André Demaison's guidebook was one such publication that served as the official guidebook of the Exposition. It was published and distributed for the purpose of guiding visitors through the large park, providing factual information about each colony alongside restaurant recommendations, descriptions of goods sold, and advertisements for major colonial companies. The author, André Demaison, was a prolific writer on topics related to French colonialism, particularly well known for his novel of 1929, *The Book of Beasts That We Call Savage*, which won the *Grand prix du roman de l'Académie française*.<sup>117</sup>

Demaison's guidebook stands as an interesting representation of colonial ideological tensions as his own descriptions and assurances to visitors propped contradictory understandings of the role of indigenous peoples at the Exposition. In the introduction to the guide, a section entitled "Address to the Visitor," Demaison described:

"Monsieur Marechal Lyautey, and with him, the Governor General Olivier and all their collaborators, ... as a man of good taste. There are no such bamboulas, belly dances, bazaar displays, which discredited many other colonial fairs; but reconstructions of tropical life with all its real charm and color."<sup>118</sup>

Demaison wished to convince visitors that this Exposition was different than the ones prior to it, as though it was in better "taste." Moreover, the examples Demaison provided grant insight into the displays the Exposition supposedly wanted to avoid: "bamboulas" referred to a type of drum and dance that originated in Africa but developed such a negative connotation in France that

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<sup>117</sup> "Le Livre Des Betes Q'On Appelle Sauvages | European Literature."

<sup>118</sup> Demaison, *Exposition coloniale internationale*, 18.

today the word is considered an ethnic slur; “belly dances” referred to a style of dance originated in Egypt and viewed by European colonizers as representing the sexual exoticism of “Oriental” women; “bazaar displays” suggested that imitations of these commercial markets were perhaps cheap or overly dramatized for the sake of an unsuspecting audience.<sup>119</sup> Demaison paints all of these dances and commercial endeavors as used by fairs in the past to generate audiences, suggesting that each example was cheap, inauthentic or “distasteful.” By contrast, he considered this Exposition to be a “real” “reconstruction of tropical life,” as though there was something inherently valuable in authenticity. Moreover, these claims to authenticity blurred the lines between the “reconstruction” and reality, prompting visitors to see reconstructed native villages, markets, or dance performances as reflective of their “real” lives. In this way, Demaison subverted the perception that natives at the Exposition were “performers” and imagined that they were, in fact, living their “real” native lives for the metropolitan public to see.

Despite assurances that the Exposition avoided exoticized and sexualized stereotypes of native individuals, Demaison’s guide and the Information Bulletin both revealed that the exact opposite was true in the Guadeloupe pavilion. In January 1931, an article in the Information Bulletin claimed that the Commissaire of the Guadeloupe pavilion ran a beauty contest for the purpose of recruiting the “most charming personnel” to work in the Guadeloupe pavilion.<sup>120</sup> Both the effort of this Commissioner and the article itself clearly relied on erotic and aesthetic fascination with native women to attract larger audiences. These same descriptions were then echoed by Demaison in his section on the Guadeloupe pavilion, in which he wrote:

Approach the counters where creole women speak sweetly, smile affably and amused, clothed in the local fashion and head covered with a coiffée de madras, you will be served chocolate, remarkable coffee, liqueurs and rum of their island,

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<sup>119</sup> “Bamboula;” “Belly Dance: History and Origins.”

<sup>120</sup> “Bulletin D’Informations : No. 9,” 8.

and their bananas that are to American bananas what a Bordeaux is to a California wine.<sup>121</sup>

In this description, it is clear that the native women he described were an attraction, just like the food he suggested visitors consume. The way he portrayed the women, from their “affable and amused” smiles to their sweet voices and the clothes they wore, established them not only as approachable, but also sexualized beings. Furthermore, Demaison’s mention of these women’s “creole” identity spoke to his racialized perception of them. The word “creole” in French denotes a person of mixed-racial parentage. Assuming Demaison did not ask each and every woman about their parentage, it seems that he based this impression on the color of their skin, denoting that the women did not have very dark skin. The fact that he chose to use this descriptor to encourage visitors to visit this pavilion and be served by these women, suggests that he believed the creole status, or lighter skin, of these women would make them more appealing to visitors.

### *Constructed Displays*

Each individual section of the Exposition displayed indigenous performers differently. Some of the most prominent means of exhibition included open marketplaces recreated to look like those found in the colonies complete with indigenous performers selling their wares, such as those in the sections of Indochina, Tunisia, and Morocco.<sup>122</sup> Other popular displays included Malagasy boatmen providing boat rides on Lake Daumesnil, indigenous waitstaff working at themed exotic restaurants inside the Exposition, and theater and dance performances by indigenous troupes at the Théâtre des Colonies.<sup>123</sup> Each type of exhibition placed indigenous performers under the gazes of visitors to the Exposition as either artists or laborers, more frequently a mélange of the two. The fact that this labor, creative or not, was occurring at an

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<sup>121</sup> Demaison, *Guide Officiel*, 52. A coiffée de madras is a type of traditional, colorful, cloth hair covering.

<sup>122</sup> Janes, *Colonial Food in Interwar Paris*, 143; Olivier, *Rapport Général : Tome V.1*, 715-716.

<sup>123</sup> Hodeir and Pierre, *L'Exposition Coloniale de 1931*, 89.

exposition where the majority of the visitors were either European or American automatically created a racial hierarchy reminiscent of the one present in the colonies. It was impossible for visitors to view these indigenous performers as equals when the natives were constantly laboring for their benefit. This hierarchical difference served to create distance between indigenous individuals and the European visitors, further entrenching colonial conceptions of the native “other.” Thus, despite the fact that there were no physical barriers to interactions with indigenous performers at the Exposition, symbolic and cultural barriers were deeply established.

### *The Museum*

Such colonial conceptions of the native “other” were further explored in the Permanent Museum of the Colonies constructed for the Exposition. Although exhibits in this museum were meant to present a coherent portrait of “La Plus Grande France,” the actual exhibits promoted an amalgamation of conflicting theories of colonization and indigenous racial status.<sup>124</sup> In particular, the anthropological exhibit within the Synthesis Section represented outdated scientific theories that were rejected by most colonial scholars of the time, including Lyautey himself. This particular exhibit was constructed by Dr. Georges Papillault, a member of the old guard of French anthropology and sociology. Despite contrary more modern research, Dr. Papillault continued to purport that physical characteristics were evidence of the evolutionary hierarchy of races and, for much of his career, that different races were of different species.<sup>125</sup> At the time of the 1931 Exposition, Dr. Papillault was discredited by many of his contemporaries for upholding fictitious scientific theories. Despite these faults, Dr. Papillault was granted the

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<sup>124</sup> The General Report of the Exposition stated that the museum was meant to “bring out, alive and palpable, the very image of the ‘empire,’” and to rectify the “fragmentary” nature of the Exposition and its numerous pavilions by developing a singular narrative of French colonization, its past, present, and future. [Olivier, *Rapport Général : Tome V.1*, 9.]

<sup>125</sup> Staum, *Nature and Nurture*, 179.

right to construct the primary anthropological exhibit at the Exposition in which he presented detailed descriptions of the “aptitudes and value of the colonized races.”<sup>126</sup> More specifically, Dr. Papillault conveyed the “four laws” of his racial theory, in which he expressly ranked racial groups and their ability to be “assimilated” into the French race, concluding that “in all cases, a slow interbreeding with the French can drive assimilation.”<sup>127</sup> However, Dr. Papillault was careful to note that “interbreeding generates the elevation of the level of a slightly evolved population and the lowering of an evolved population.”<sup>128</sup> In other words, in Papillault’s view, it was not necessarily desirable for France to promote “interbreeding” because it might endanger their own superior racial status.

This type of racial anthropological theorizing was closely related to the politics of assimilation. Since race was equated with culture, racial intermixing was seen as a means of more fully assimilating, or eliminating the cultures of, colonized peoples. Consequently, these theories directly conflicted with the values expressed by Lyautey and many other Exposition leaders who upheld the value of racial and cultural differences and forewent the radical desire to dilute or evolutionarily alter these native populations.

### *Press and Visitor Reactions*

Despite the Exposition’s administrative efforts to encourage the respectful and humane perception of indigenous performers, the press undermined this vision through its perpetuation of sexualized, exotic, and hierarchical racial stereotypes. In the official program of the Exposition, there was a note that read: “A piece of advice: facing all the foreign or native performance, do not laugh at things or people that you do not understand at first. The mocking laughter of certain

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<sup>126</sup> Olivier, *Rapport Général : Tome V.I, Sections Coloniales*, 52.

<sup>127</sup> Hodeir and Pierre, *L’Exposition Coloniale de 1931*, 97.

<sup>128</sup> Hodeir and Pierre, *L’Exposition Coloniale de 1931*, 97.



Frenchmen has made us more enemies abroad than cruel defeats or onerous treaties.”<sup>129</sup> It is remarkable that the Exposition administration attempted to shape the perception of indigenous performers and to encourage visitors not to see them as a source of contemptible entertainment. Moreover, the statement argued that contempt for colonized peoples was a significant factor in France’s troubled colonial governance; this claim upheld the associationist vision of a French colonial future as based upon the respect of colonized peoples. Despite these instructions, representatives of the press and visitors alike frequently either openly mocked native performers or appreciated only how they fulfilled previously established racial stereotypes.

Such biased press representation is apparent in writing published by Georges Devaise for the *Gringoire* publication. Echoing Demaison’s descriptions of native women dancing in the Guadeloupe pavilion, Devaise illustrated an image of his experience in the Guadeloupe pavilion:

Three tall girls who were sitting on the edge of the stage rise without haste. Two of them are black. The third, who has the most beautiful eyes in the world, is a creole. Hands resting on the stomach, they move in little strokes, a movement of the hips, incessant and slow, that makes one think of the oscillations of a moored boat on a calm water.<sup>130</sup>

This vivid and erotic image of native women dancing reiterated Demaison’s impression of native female servers in terms of their beauty and the extent to which they were able to please visitors. Moreover, Devaise echoed Demaison in the racial distinctions he drew between Guadeloupe women, suggesting that “creole” women were more beautiful than their darker skinned counterparts. Together, these descriptions reveal how visitors were encouraged to perceive indigenous participants in the Guadeloupe pavilion as existing within a racial hierarchy of beauty and catering to their physical and aesthetic desires. Despite the physical closeness of visitors and

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<sup>129</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, 1931. *Les étrangers...*, 27.

<sup>130</sup> Hodeir and Pierre, *L’Exposition Coloniale de 1931*, 90.

these indigenous women, an invisible wall remained between their actions, placing the visitor in the role of the voyeur and establishing native performers as objects in the Exposition's displays.

### *Explaining Conflicting Messages*

These examples of mixed messaging reveal that the administration did not promote a clear vision of colonized peoples or indigenous participants at the Exposition. What remains to be explained, however, is why this was the case. First, this section will explore the impact of the diffusion of leadership in the Exposition administration. Second, as scholars such as Benoît L'Estoile have argued, even if the top level of leadership at the Exposition had a uniform theory of colonialism, the wide range of opinions and theories of colonization among the rest of French political leaders and the general population of the era made the presentation of ideological coherence unattainable.

The Exposition was considered, above all, a governmental organization, made to follow laws of the French Congress and function under the direct oversight of the Ministry of the Colonies. However, the development and presentation of such an enormous exposition required an incredible amount of labor and individual initiative from the parties involved. In order to balance the competing interests of oversight and creative liberties, a complex structure of administration developed. First and foremost, the leader of the Exposition was the General Commissioner, who was considered the director of all things concerning the "preparation, the realization, the exploitation, and the liquidation" of the Exposition. The General Commissioner acted under the direct authority of the Ministry of the Colonies and represented the entire Exposition to the international community.<sup>131</sup> Under the Commissioner, there were four main administrative divisions: a cabinet, a general secretarial administration, four directorates, and

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<sup>131</sup> Olivier, *Rapport Général : Tome I*, 140-141.

annexed services. It was under this fourth section, of annexed services, that Commissioners, appointed to lead the development of each separate section, operated. This structure entailed that each Commissioner, although ultimately under the control of Lyautey and the Ministry of the Colonies, had extensive creative control over his pavilion. This diffusion of responsibility was necessary for the expedient development of the Exposition; however, it made the promotion of a unified vision of French colonization nearly impossible.

Despite the power and dominance of the policy of association as supported by Lyautey and his peers, other, divergent theories of colonialism existed at the time and, perhaps due to the diffusion of administrative control, these ideologies were reflected in several parts of the Exposition. In his book, *Le Goût des Autres*, Benoît l'Estoile formulated a useful tri-partite division of these theories in order to “give sense to the ‘native’ presence at the Colonial Exposition.”<sup>132</sup> The first theory was evolutionism, the idea that natives were savages before colonization and that it was only through the process of colonization that they progressed. Evolutionism is grounded in scientific racial theories that claimed the existence of racial hierarchy, as though there were certain “races” that were more evolutionary advanced than others.<sup>133</sup> The application of evolutionism at the Exposition entailed depicting indigenous populations as having developed out of their savage state due to the benign influence of French colonialism. Evolutionism led to an emphasis upon the temporal separation between the periods before, during and after colonialism, in order to clearly proclaim the success of the French civilizing mission.

The second theory was differentialism, the belief in racial diversity rather than racial hierarchy. Differentialists believed that the cultural, artistic, and political differences of native

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<sup>132</sup> L'Estoile, *Le Goût Des Autres*, 41.

<sup>133</sup> L'Estoile, *Le Goût Des Autres*, 41.

populations were to be protected and acknowledged during the colonial project.<sup>134</sup> Lyautey himself falls into this category of thinking, as both he and Marcel Olivier sought to promote colonial governance that responded to anthropological and ethnographic knowledge of native populations and attempted to preserve, to a certain extent, these cultural differences.<sup>135</sup> However, as was apparent in the exclusion of “indigenous monstrosities” from the Exposition, the protection and appreciation of cultural differences extended only to the ‘crucial’ or morally acceptable parts of indigenous cultural identity.<sup>136</sup>

The third theory was primitivism, which was connected to the artistic and intellectual discourses of the era that sought to appreciate “primitive art.”<sup>137</sup> During the interwar period, there was a growing movement of scholars and artists who sought to promote and value the aesthetic and academic value of art made by native individuals. This movement can be considered a reversal of the evolutionist discourse that sought to see natives and evidence of their primitivism as “savage,” and instead valued these differences as representations of a primordial world that colonial indigenous populations had, and continued, to occupy.<sup>138</sup> This primitivist impulse to value the exotic and “other” character of indigenous peoples while continuing to see them as stuck in an ancient temporality is clearly apparent in aforementioned examples of propaganda and indigenous display at the Exposition. Although this theory relates to associationism and differentialism, the refusal to think of native populations as modern or evolving establishes primitivism as its own theory.

### *Conclusion*

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<sup>134</sup> L’Estoile, *Le Goût Des Autres*, 42.

<sup>135</sup> L’Estoile, *Le Goût Des Autres*, 42.

<sup>136</sup> L’Estoile, *Le Goût Des Autres*, 43.

<sup>137</sup> L’Estoile, *Le Goût Des Autres*, 43.

<sup>138</sup> L’Estoile, *Le Goût Des Autres*, 43.

Although this chapter does not seek to argue that these three theories are all-encompassing of the ideologies expressed by administrators and visitors alike at the Exposition, it does maintain that the leadership's failure to recognize and reconcile these divergent theories left the ideological basis of the Exposition unresolved. While Lyautey and the Governor Generals worked to protect and promote their own understandings of French colonialism and the status of colonial native populations, there is ample evidence of conflicting ideologies represented at the Exposition, within the propaganda, the native displays, and the Permanent Museum. These underscore how the political beliefs of individual administrative actors gained traction and influenced visitors' perceptions of indigenous performers.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Surveillance, Control, and Revolt: The Experience of Indigenous Performers at the Exposition

French government documentation of the Exposition is extensive and all-encompassing. From detailed breakdowns of the administrative budget to lists of every individual who loaned art to the Exposition, it seems as though every single aspect of the Exposition was written down, analyzed and published. Taking this exhaustive reporting account, it is not altogether surprising that careful attention to detail extended well beyond the public aspects of the Exposition and into the private lives of Exposition visitors and indigenous performers. Throughout the operation of the Exposition, the French government had numerous intelligence officers paying close attention to sentiment amongst native performers, noting when and why there were disturbances, and tracking their interactions with outside visitors. This surveillance was particularly prevalent when it came to the monitoring of expat Indochinese Communist Party members and their contact with indigenous performers.

After the success of the Russian Revolution, the international influence of communism expanded dramatically, due in large part to the radicalization of university students around the world. This movement of radicalization had consequential effects in France, particularly for expat communities who had lived under French colonialism, as communism was seen as providing a groundwork for anti-colonial movements and a space for imagining a new world order.<sup>139</sup> In the late 1920s and early 1930s, communism became a popular political ideology for Indochinese expats in France due to increased colonial violence in Indochina and the popularity of Indochinese revolutionary movements.<sup>140</sup> Consequently, it was no surprise that Indochinese

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<sup>139</sup> Blévis, Lafont-Couturier, and Snoep, *1931*, 80-82.

<sup>140</sup> Morton, *Hybrid Modernities*, 92-93.

communists in Paris had strong negative reactions to the planning and execution of the 1931 International Colonial Exposition.

### *Overview*

In the eyes of leaders like Lyautey, the 1931 Exposition was a means of both selling a particular colonial vision to the metropolitan public and suppressing dissident political opinions. Reminiscent of his governance practices throughout the French colonies, Lyautey's respect and protection of indigenous difference only extended to natives that agreed to cooperate with the colonial administration. In the colonies, protests by native peoples were met with extreme violence; in the metropole, the dissent of colonial immigrants was met with arrest and, oftentimes, repatriation to the colonies. This chapter will explore what government surveillance documents reveal not only about the experience of native performers at the Exposition, but also about the experience of colonial immigrants already living in mainland France. Ultimately, this chapter argues that although leaders claimed the Exposition was representative of new, moral, and peaceful colonial governance practices, expressions of governmental control over native participants were reminiscent of the realities of prior expositions and bely the claim of exceptionality. For indigenous participants, government practices of control manifested in extensive surveillance, threats of repatriation, moral regulations, and restriction of movement all under the guise of paternalistic care.

### *Surveillance of Indochinese Communists*

The first intelligence report regarding Indochinese communists meeting to discuss the Exposition was submitted on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1931 by "Guillaume," one of the intelligence officers on this subject.<sup>141</sup> In the report, he described the formation of the "Committee of the fight against

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<sup>141</sup> Guillaume, "Réunion Du Jeudi 2 Avril 1931 Du 'Comité de La Lutte Contre l'Exposition Coloniale.'"

the Colonial Exposition” and various speeches party members gave. The first speaker, Nguyen Van Tao, stated:

Before the opening of the Colonial Exposition, it is important to know why French imperialism organized this international exposition. French Imperialism wants to make known to all that it is a power of 100 million inhabitants. In times of peace it dispossesses the 60 million natives who people its colonies and in times of war its poor are the victims of bullets.”<sup>142</sup>

This opening reveals the group’s objections to the Exposition as a representation of the power and splendor of the French Colonial Empire. Van Tao believed this claim was hypocritical, as the French government treated its colonized populations as expendable except when it needed to project an image of militaristic and economic strength to the rest of world. Moreover, Nguyen Van Tao positioned the Exposition as an affront to the USSR because it promoted a capitalist agenda. Such an affront demanded a response from communists in order “to make seen that the USSR is the motherland of all the proletariats of the world and that it has loyal and active children in all countries.”<sup>143</sup> This rhetoric of devotion to the USSR and the International Communist Party pervades each demonstration and protest of the Exposition by the Indochinese Communists. It is clear that the desire to destroy colonialism was secondary, or at least equivalent, to furthering the communist agenda.

Although there were no large-scale plans of demonstration expressed at that first meeting, over the days and months that followed, the intelligence reports depicted the expanding ambitions of these political actors. Their distribution of pamphlets, cartoons, stickers, and news articles expanded rapidly and traveled beyond Paris, through “Indochinese circles of the departments and principally in the university cities.”<sup>144</sup> Although the French intelligence

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<sup>142</sup> Guillaume, “Réunion Du Jeudi 2 Avril 1931.”

<sup>143</sup> # Guillaume, “Réunion Du Jeudi 2 Avril 1931.”

<sup>144</sup> Ministère des Colonies: Contrôle et Assistance des Indigènes, “Indochinois et Exposition Coloniale.”



community kept tabs on these developments, they seemed either unable or unwilling to stop them entirely. Soon enough, Indochinese communists infiltrated the Exposition and distributed information. A “Note” published by the Board of Political Affairs, Control Service, Assistance in France of French Colonial Natives stated that “the members of the “Fight Committee” of Paris decided to intensify the anti-French propaganda near the Indochinese artisans, musicians, and infantrymen of the Colonial Exposition.”<sup>145</sup> This report reveals that there was a concerted effort on the behalf of the expat Indochinese communists to target and convince Indochinese Exposition participants to join their subversive efforts. At this point in time, it is clear that the government focus remained on the surveillance of the Indochinese communists themselves rather than the indigenous performers at the Exposition. However, this intensive monitoring of Indochinese communists soon extended to indigenous performers as lines of communication developed between them.

#### *Surveillance of Indigenous Participants: Questions of Treatment*

On May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1931, “Guillaume,” reported that certain communists who had visited the Exposition,

...had an interview with a Tonkinese woman named Thi Khan, an embroidery seller. She is said to be the author of pamphlets and newspaper articles in ‘quoc nhu’ printed in Hanoi. Thi Khan, pushed by Cao Van Chanh [a communist], would have asked to be repatriated to her country of origin, giving reasons that she had been treated like a prisoner since her arrival in Vincennes.<sup>146</sup>

Later, in the same report, Guillaume similarly notes that another communist encouraged a different female artist in the troupe “Cai Luong” to ask to be repatriated to the colony. It is difficult to know how convincing these conversations were to the indigenous performers or

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<sup>145</sup> Direction des Affaires Politiques: Service de Contrôle et d’Assistance en France des Indigènes des Colonies Françaises, “Note - May 18, 1931.”

<sup>146</sup> Guillaume, “A.S. de l’Exposition Coloniale.”

whether they actually had genuine concerns with their treatment at the Exposition. For instance, it is ambiguous whether Thi Khan herself felt that she “had been treated like a prisoner” during her stay at the Exposition or whether the communists merely wanted her to say that she felt this way. In their effort to undermine the Exposition, it is understandable that the Indochinese communists sought to embarrass the French government with negative press regarding the treatment of indigenous performers; however, these efforts make it all the more difficult to know whether the performers genuinely felt maltreated. In this report, Guillaume placed the Indochinese communists as the more active agents, attempting to convince performers to act in accordance with their views. He seemed to rule out the possibility that the communists were merely empowering or affirming sentiments already circulating throughout indigenous performer communities. However, it is likely that performers like Thi Khan, who was already known to be an anti-colonial activist in Hanoi, already had negative impressions of the French government and had legitimate critiques of the Exposition.

The likelihood that native performers had legitimate frustrations with the Exposition administration increases according to information reported by “Desire” on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1931. In the report, the agent explained “The discontentment that the Annamites of the Colonial Exposition express for the food and the bedding seems to be calming”.<sup>147</sup> Although this report stated that conditions for the performers were growing more acceptable to them, this implies that these conditions had not been acceptable at one point. This expression of “discontentment” confirms the idea that indigenous performers had their own qualms with the Exposition and were not simply regurgitating the words of Indochinese Communists.

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<sup>147</sup> Desire, “Note #118 - June 6, 1931.”

However, several other surveillance documents further complicate this subject, mentioning indigenous performers expressed contentment at the Exposition and further efforts by Indochinese Communists to encourage natives to subvert the Exposition. In a report published by “Joe” on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1931, he described visiting the Malagasy village of the Exposition in the evening two days prior. He stated that he “was able to speak for a few moments with a Malagasy artisan named RAVELOARISOA; she is satisfied with the regime of the Colonial Exposition.”<sup>148</sup> Although this was by no means an in-depth interview, it seems that “Raveloarisoa” expressed a positive impression of the Exposition and her treatment as an artisan. This evidence suggests that the experience and treatment of different troupes at the Exposition, particularly those from different colonies, were disparate and that the maltreatment of one did not equal that of another. It is difficult to determine these differences from these intelligence documents however, because the majority deal with Indochinese native groups who had the most exposure to outside communist groups. It also seems that the intelligence agents were more likely to attribute the anti-French sentiments of Indochinese native participants to the negative influence of outside Indochinese immigrants. Such an impulse is clear a report made by “Desire” on June 6, 1931, in which he stated that “the Annamites Nguyen Van Thon and Vu Man, cooks at the Colonial Exposition, have been pushed by the communists to refuse to cook claiming that they don’t want to be servants to their compatriots.”<sup>149</sup> Although it is true that not wanting to “be servants to [one’s] compatriots” is very communist logic, it is notable that this intelligence agent once more denied the agency of the two “Annamites” and instead attributed their decision to quit to the influence of Indochinese Communists. It is probable that these cooks believed that they were being seen as subservient to Exposition visitors and disliked this sense of degradation.

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<sup>148</sup> Joe, “Note #137 - 17 Juillet 1931.”

<sup>149</sup> Desire, “Note #121 - June 6, 1931.”

### *Restriction of Movement*

Beyond expressions of general dissatisfaction or maltreatment, the intelligence reports contain several descriptions of native frustration with the prohibition to leave the Exposition. In one of Desire's reports, he stated:

These same natives say that the Government before their embarkment promised them happiness and, since their arrival in Paris, it camps them at the Exposition and refuses them even the permission to go out in the city. They will leave from France without having seen anything.<sup>150</sup>

These restrictions of movement undermined the Exposition's claim that the performers were respected individuals merely demonstrating their artistic "culture" for visitors. By prohibiting, or even discouraging, the travel of indigenous performers beyond the boundaries of the Exposition, the administration asserted that the performers were a part of the Exposition itself, as if they were caged animals in a zoo or statues unable to move on their own. This restriction undermined the notion that indigenous performers were agents of their own lives or "tourists" of France, because they were unable to "see" France as they had been contractually promised. This report displays how certain performers had understood their own involvement in the Exposition, as an opportunity to become a tourist and see metropolitan France. This conception turns the notion of "visitor" on its head, illustrating how indigenous performers were themselves "visitors" to the Exposition, seeing and interacting with French metropolitan citizens, just as they were being seen by the French visitors. Exposition leaders clearly did not understand or respect this duality. They had recruited indigenous performers to display to French visitors, not the other way around, and were thus unwilling to allow indigenous performers to "visit" and view Paris.

### *Moral Regulations*

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<sup>150</sup> Desire, "Note #118 - June 6, 1931."

Related to the restriction of movement, the Exposition administration imposed strict moral and political regulations upon the indigenous performers and threatened repatriation if they failed to comply. In a report published by “Desire” on June 6<sup>th</sup>, he provided a list of uncooperative individuals and stated that each had been reported “as having a bad spirit and standing out for their anti-French remarks.”<sup>151</sup> At the end of the report, Desire addressed two particularly transgressive workers named Do Thi Y and Nguyen Thi Khang.

This last woman frequents the Indochinese communists of Paris and went many times to the restaurant on the rue St. Martin No. 22. Both have notorious misconduct and are considered two ‘public girls’ [prostitutes]; they leave the Exposition secretly with transient white or Annamite lovers.<sup>152</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Exposition administrators were determined to maintain a positive view of French colonialism; therefore, any “anti-French” activities were under close surveillance and were grounds for removal from the Exposition. However, they were not concerned merely with communist activities, but also with the sexual interactions of indigenous performers and visitors. Moreover, the clarification that these visitors included both “white and Annamite lovers” emphasized the transgressive nature of sexual relations across racial boundaries. Since intelligence reporters considered this notable information, it is clear that Exposition and governmental leadership wanted to curtail sexual relationships between performers and visitors. In spite of the fact that the sexuality of indigenous women was used to entice visitors and increase the overall enjoyability of the pavilions, as described previously in terms of the Guadeloupe pavilion, the moment that sexuality moved beyond fantasy into reality Exposition leaders considered it forbidden. However, the fact that these relationships and clandestine

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<sup>151</sup> Desire, “Note #120 - June 6, 1931.”

<sup>152</sup> Desire, “Note #120 - June 6, 1931.”

meetings took place demonstrates once more the agency of the performers and the ways they circumvented the strict rules placed upon them.

The imposition of similar moral “protection” was demonstrated in the restriction of public access to indigenous villages of the Exposition after dark. Joe’s report on July 17<sup>th</sup>, he described his attempts to meet with “some Malagasy people” at the Exposition, however, “the hour was so late that I could not enter like I hoped into the Malagasy village.”<sup>153</sup> Despite the fact that the Exposition remained open most evenings for performances, water shows, and the like, it seems that the indigenous villages did not maintain these hours. At least for a limited amount of time, outside visitors were restricted from entering indigenous villages at the Exposition. This separation was meant to limit sexual and personal interactions between the native participants and the visitors, and thus maintain the moral protection of the indigenous individuals. The French government had a vested interest in the moral values of its colonized populations as they were seen as a reflection of the civility of the metropole. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the Exposition administration took such an aggressive stance to “protect” the moral character of its indigenous performers.

### *The Threat of Repatriation*

In order to implement the restrictions on native performers and to maintain strict control over the actions of colonial immigrants inside and outside the Exposition walls, the French government wielded the threat of repatriation. Throughout the intelligence reports regarding the Exposition, there are described instances of the forced repatriation of native participants for a variety of violations. A note made by the Management of Political Affairs of the Control and Assistance Service in France for Natives from French Colonies stated, “At the order of M.

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<sup>153</sup> Joe, “Note #137 - 17 Juillet 1931.”

Guesde, the General Commissioner of Indochina at the Exposition, three Indochinese men and two Indochinese women were repatriated to Indochina for revolutionary plans.”<sup>154</sup> Although this report does not explain what these revolutionary plans entailed, it was likely related to the activities of Indochinese Communists and their critiques of the Exposition. The power of the General Commissioners to repatriate the indigenous performers of their sections reveals the precarious nature of participating in the Exposition as a native person. Unlike French citizens, French colonial natives had almost no legal rights, particularly in the metropole. Consequently, they were at the full mercy of colonial administrators who could decide to repatriate them with very little notice.

The insecure status of indigenous participants at the Exposition was further emphasized in reports describing the firing of an Indochinese restaurant worker and the repatriation of the two aforementioned supposed “prostitutes,” Nguyen Thi Kang and Do Thi Y. Both reports were written by Desire and published on June 15<sup>th</sup>. The first described how the Commissioner General of Indochina at the Exposition fired “Mme. Soai Van Hoa who maintained the cloakroom” of an “Annamite restaurant.”<sup>155</sup> The report further detailed that another indigenous worker at the Exposition,

...was seen by M. Guesde [the Commissioner General] to ask him for explanations on the subject of this firing. The Commissioner General responded to him that he was not occupying himself with these questions of detail and that if he wanted to be informed, he had only to speak with the police.<sup>156</sup>

The unexplained nature of this firing underscores the bureaucratic powerlessness of indigenous participants in the Exposition. Commissioners did not have to provide explanations for firing and

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<sup>154</sup> Direction des Affaires Politiques : Service du Contrôle d’Assistance en France des Indigènes des Colonies Françaises, “Note #122.”

<sup>155</sup> Desire, “Note #125 - June 15, 1931.”

<sup>156</sup> Desire, “Note #125 - June 15, 1931.”

eventually repatriating native individuals. The second report described the circumstances surrounding the repatriations of “Nguyen Thi Khang and Do Thi Y” as well as two other Indochinese food workers at the Exposition. Desire stated:

Nguyen Thi Khang and Do Thi Y had come to France as pastry chefs. The Administration had provided them with a small shop, but they were never there and we noticed that they were engaging in prostitution in the walls of the Exposition; sometimes they left clandestinely and on various occasions Nguyen Thi Khang has met with Annamite or European men late in the night.<sup>157</sup>

It is notable that Desire stated that the women were not fulfilling the labor role that they had been assigned. The claim that they were lazy or neglecting their other work is unsubstantiated, seeing as that was never mentioned in prior reports. Desire later even admitted, “In reality, these four Annamites were known for having a bad attitude. In order to avoid complications, the General Commissioner of Indochina gave as a reason for their repatriation that the work for which they had come to France was of no use.”<sup>158</sup> The broad and unexplained nature of “having a bad attitude” emphasizes the wide range of transgressions that could lead to repatriation. In the minds of Exposition administrators, expressing even the slightest of critiques of France or challenging the strict moral and behavioral codes of the Exposition were large enough threats to result in repatriation.

### *Conclusion*

These surveillance reports reveal a wide range of realities for indigenous performers at the Exposition. There was not one shared experience among all native participants, and their situations differed depending on their pavilion and occupation. Despite these differences, however, all the indigenous participants experienced intense administrative surveillance and restrictions placed upon their personal agency. Consistent with expositions and ethnographic

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<sup>157</sup> Desire, “Note #126 - June 15, 1931.”

<sup>158</sup> Desire, “Note #126 - June 15, 1931.”



displays of the past, indigenous participants were not allowed to leave the grounds of the Exposition or travel freely, as they were monitored and guarded by military personnel at all times. These restrictions mimicked aspects of the “human zoo” construct as native performers were unable to act as “visitors” and instead were restricted to being on display. This reality demonstrates how French colonial leaders of the era, despite supposedly respecting the “equality” and “differences” of colonized peoples, were at loath to allow lines between the visitor and the performer to blur.

However, it is also clear that the indigenous performers did not always adhere to these restrictions and frequently snuck out of the Exposition, thereby circumventing efforts to constrain their personal agency. Similarly, despite administrative efforts to maintain certain moral standards amongst the native participants and to restrict their ability to express controversial political opinions, this did not stop many performers from challenging these constraints. In spite of the constant threat of repatriation, many native participants challenged their status as objects of display, pushed the Exposition leadership to maintain high quality living conditions, and used this trip to the metropole as a time to establish themselves in a wider network of political agitators and anti-colonial revolutionaries.

It is equally clear from these intelligence documents that the Exposition administration and the French government were feeling newfound pressures to mitigate any possible public backlash to the treatment and display of indigenous performers. The intense level of surveillance of these native participants reveals a high level of anxiety among the upper echelons of French colonial leadership. These leaders seemed overly willing to repatriate participants at the slightest hint of revolt or public rejection of the Exposition’s moral standards. They also seemed more invested in maintaining the contractual agreements relating to the native performers than they

had in the past. With public scandals involving the display of the “Négresses à Plateaux” and the Kanaks in the Jardin d’Acclimatation in 1930 and 1931 respectively, the Exposition administration was hyper aware of the enormous public backlash that could occur if unsavory treatment or morally questionable behavior was publicized. Despite these fears, however, it is also apparent that exploitation, maltreatment, and the disregard of contractual stipulations continued to take place for native performers at the Exposition. The reality of indigenous performers’ experiences at the Exposition differed from the vision of its administration, and both met and challenged preexisting racial and cultural conventions.

## CONCLUSION

The aspirations of Exposition leaders to display indigenous peoples as representative of the politics of association had mixed results. In certain respects, it does seem as though the administrators of the Exposition were successful in promoting their political vision; for example, in their ability to keep indigenous troupes like the “*femmes à plateaux*” out of the Exposition because they thought it would negatively impact visitors’ perceptions of the French colonial project. However, administrators were unable to stop Commissioners, lower levels of leadership and contracted private actors from creating indigenous exhibitions that were exoticized, sexualized and “othered.” The leadership did little to counter the message of racial inferiority and hierarchy these exhibitions promoted. Moreover, the Exposition leadership’s own efforts to achieve their vision, namely using methods of surveillance, undermined their own political agenda by sustaining similar power imbalances and racist moral standards.

These failures highlight a central paradox of the ideological desires of the Exposition’s leadership. Colonialism, in the context of European imperialism, is a system and structure of inequality which is reinforced with notions of cultural and racial superiority. Thus, no matter how much the leadership claimed to want to show natives as respected, artistic producers on equal footing with European citizens, just as systems of power of the day made such realities impossible to exist in the colonies, the Exposition was unable to make this aspirational vision occur in its faux-reconstruction of reality.

There were, however, unintended consequences of the indigenous display that served to aid the political agendas and personal desires of certain indigenous individuals. For example, the Exposition unintentionally served as a method of immigration and politicization for colonized peoples. As immigration policies of the day made it nearly impossible for individuals from the

colonies to emigrate to mainland France, the opportunity for an all-expenses-paid trip to the metropole was exceptional. It just seems clear that the Exposition leaders did not understand or anticipate the ways colonial immigrant populations in France would mobilize to meet and form relationships with the indigenous performers. Although the French government was able to surveil these individuals, they seemed unable to stop these exchanges entirely. Even when the leaders sought to disallow almost all expressions of personal agency and power by the native performers, they still managed to sneak out and circumvent these restrictions. Moreover, other government documents reveal that certain indigenous performers had the opportunity to remain in France long after the Exposition closed. Some individuals negotiated new contracts with private management groups in order to keep “performing” and thus able to remain in the metropole. In a very limited way, certain indigenous individuals were able to use their positions at the Exposition to their personal advantage.

Many scholars of the 1931 Exposition underscore the fact that French historical texts rarely discuss this colonial exposition and the ways it influenced French politics and culture.<sup>159</sup> From the almost hidden plaque at the entrance to the Bois de Vincennes to the very minimal amount of information provided about the Exposition in today’s Musée National de l’Histoire de l’Immigration, this characterization seems accurate. The France of today seems to have difficulty with admitting or discussing its colonial past. Of course, this is not an isolated phenomenon, many former colonial powers fail to face or to alleviate the long-term effects of colonialism in the world. However, there are political organizations in France that have made particularly forceful efforts to rewrite and to erase the violent and abhorrent history of French colonial governance. In 2005, these organizations were able to pass law no. 2005-158 which read, “The

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<sup>159</sup> Morton, *Hybrid Modernities*, 8.

scholarly programs will recognize in particular the positive role of the French foreign presence; notably in North Africa.”<sup>160</sup> Although this law was eventually declared inconsistent with legal regulations at the behest of President Jacques Chirac, it is revealing that it was able to pass in the first place. Moreover, the questions of immigration status, citizenship and nationality are persistent and debated even today as France struggles to discover what an inclusive national identity means.

No matter how distant the world of colonization feels, it was not that long ago. In fact, the 1931 Exposition was not even the last instance of human display in Europe. At the 1958 World’s Fair in Belgium there was a display of natives from the Congo in an outdoor enclosure to be watched by visitors.<sup>161</sup> It is all too apparent that the political, social, and cultural effects of colonialism are deeply ingrained in Western society and in how it sees the rest of the world. Although human exhibition is no longer the norm, questions of spectatorship, exploitation, and “othering” remain relevant today. It is up to modern scholars to continue these conversations and to examine the vestiges of colonialism, whether they be grand museums or innocuous plaques on the ground, that surround us.

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<sup>160</sup> Loi n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés.

<sup>161</sup> Boffey, “Belgium Comes to Terms with ‘Human Zoos’ of Its Colonial Past.”

## IMAGES



Image 1 : The Palais de la Porte Dorée<sup>162</sup>



Image 2: Plaque in the Bois de Vincennes. Photo is my own.

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<sup>162</sup> *Picture of Entrance to Musée de l'histoire de l'immigration.*



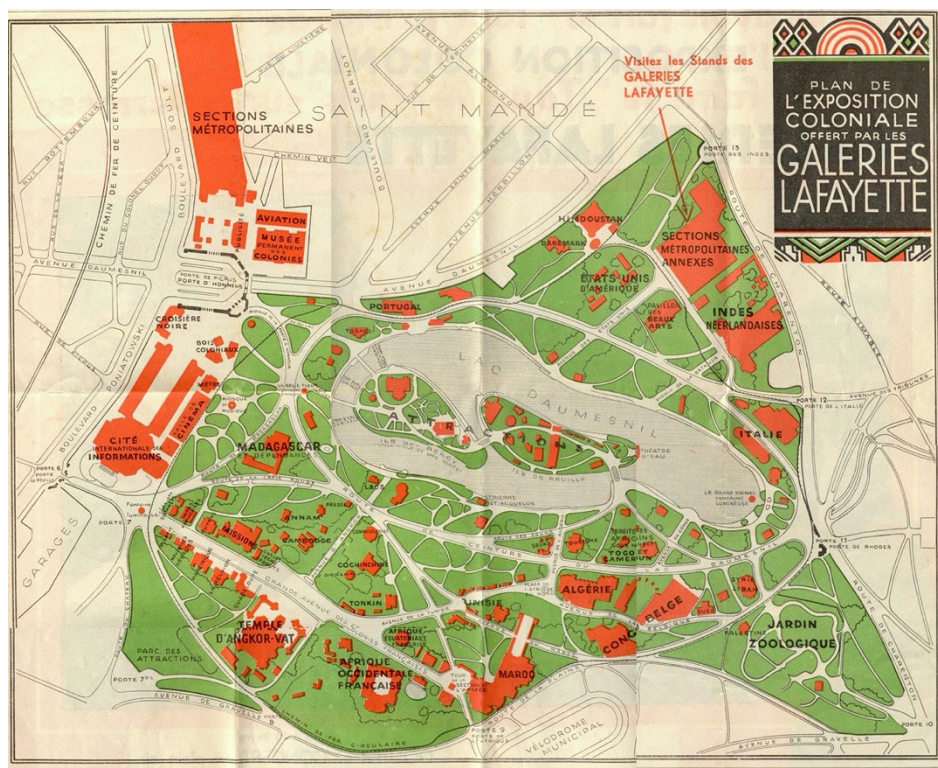


Image 3: Map of the Exposition<sup>163</sup>



Image 4: Poster for the Colonial Exposition<sup>164</sup>

<sup>163</sup> Plan de L'Exposition Coloniale Offert Par Les Galeries Lafayette.

<sup>164</sup> Desmeures, Poster of the Colonial Exposition.



Image 5: Flyer for the Exposition<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> "Flyer for the Colonial Exposition."



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