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Reflections on dermatology: past present and future
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The Ubangi misnomer

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Abstract Lip plates are a form of body modification practiced today by several tribes in Africa and Amazonia. In 1930, the American people were introduced to lip plates in a most spectacular fashion, when the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus brought in 13 Congolese natives to star as the newest attraction in their sideshow. The Congolese women wore huge lip plates, a result of cultural lip piercing with progressive lip stretching by wooden pegs and plates.

The Congolese exhibit was publicized throughout the country as the “Ubangi Savages,” a made-up name selected from an African map, because it had an exotic ring to it. This contribution tells the story of the Ubangi Savages and explains their practice of lip piercing and stretching. It also discusses how tissue expansion has been adapted for use in reconstructive surgery which, along with lip plates, is a way people strive to maintain and enhance the beauty of their bodies, whether for medical or cultural reasons.

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Introduction

During the Spring of 1930, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus brought to the United States a new sideshow exhibit from the French Congo called the “Ubangi Savages” (Figures 1 and 2). The attraction featured 13 tribal natives: eight women and five men.¹ It was the women who became an instant sensation due to their enormous lips, which had been progressively stretched by having wooden plates inserted into them. The circus promoters claimed that the Ubangi women had “mouths and lips as large as those of full grown crocodiles!” (Figure 1). The women’s lower lips, according to the circus’s public relations office, extended to a diameter of over 9 inches.²

The Ubangi savages became famous throughout the country. Stories about them filled the news media. Although the

word “Ubangi” entered the English dictionary,³ the name was made-up, picked out from an African map by a circus press agent, because it sounded exotic¹; hence, the title of this contribution, “The Ubangi misnomer,” which tells the story of these Congolese natives and their spectacular body modification and also discusses the use of tissue expansion in reconstructive surgery.

From today’s perspective, the characterization of the Congolese natives as “savages” would be deemed derogatory and offensive, as would the term “freak show,” which once was an integral part of circus entertainment but declined after 1940. Hopefully, people are now more respectful of persons who, for whatever cultural or medical reason, look different from themselves.

Lip plates

The following are a few highlights of the lip plate body modification:

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Fig. 1 Illinois Lithograph American. *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey: Tribe of Genuine Ubangi Savages*, 1930. Ink on paper, 1 sheet (H): 28 × 42 in. (71.1 × 106.7 cm), ht2001645. Reproduced with permission from The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Tibbals Digital Collection.

- Geography: The custom of lip plates is still maintained by a few tribes in Africa and Amazonia. This tradition, however, is being abandoned by growing numbers of women who



Fig. 2 Extended mouthpiece for pipe smoking woman (Madam Gustika) with special lips who is performing in a circus. New York, 1930. Reproduced with permission from Flickr The Commons, Nationaal Archief/Spaarnestad Photo.

refuse to have their lips pierced in this fashion. Among some Amazonia tribes, it is the young men whose lips are pierced.

- The procedure: Lip plates may be inserted into the upper or lower lip or both. The Ubangi Congolese women had both upper and lower lip plates, with the lower larger than the upper. The procedure for the lower lip plate, as practiced by the Mursi women of Ethiopia, takes place between the ages of 15 to 18. The lower two or four front teeth are excised. The lower lip is incised 1 to 2 cm in length, and a wood peg is inserted. After the wound has healed, the peg is replaced by a slightly larger one. At a diameter of about 4 cm, the first plate is inserted.³
- The plate: Plates are made from either wood or clay. They are typically decorated with ornamental drawings on their surfaces (Figure 3).
- The purpose: For the Mursi women, the lip plates are an expression of their social adulthood and reproductive potential.
- Ear lobe stretching: The Mursi women also practice ear lobe piercing and stretching to accommodate decorative plates. In the United States, ear lobe piercing and stretching has become available in local body piercing and tattoo studios.

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The Ubangi women

The Congolese women were procured by a circus agent who traveled to the Congo and, with promises of wealth, persuaded a chief to allow him to take the 13 tribe members



Fig. 3 Mursi Lip Plate. Ethiopia, January 11, 2014. Rod Waddington. Reproduced with permission from Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic.

abroad. They were first displayed in Europe and then were booked for a US appearance in the Ringling Bros. Circus show. The agent received \$1,500 a week for the exhibit but kept almost all the money for himself. The Congolese natives made what they could by selling postcards at 5 cents each.¹ They were paraded around the circus arena. The men wore loincloths and carried spears, and the women were seen bare-foot, bare-chested, and wearing sacks for skirts. The Congolese natives eventually returned to Africa where, according to one account, they bought a big ranch for themselves and their families.⁴

Tissue expansion in reconstructive surgery

Besides being used for body modification, the technique of tissue expansion now plays an important role in reconstructive surgery, as in breast reconstruction after mastectomy.⁵ A silicon balloon expander is inserted under the skin near the area to be repaired and gradually filled with saline or carbon dioxide, which causes the skin to stretch and grow over time. This

helps to facilitate cosmetic and reconstructive repairs. The mechanism for tissue expansion involves the activation of the mechanotransduction pathways that lead to cell growth and the formation of new cells.⁵

Conclusions

It has been 90 years since the Ubangi Savages, with their enormous plated lips, captured the imagination of the American people and became one of the Ringling Bros. Circus' most spectacular exhibits. For the Congolese natives, the name "Ubangi Savages" was a complete misnomer and, by today's standards, offensive. Although they were exploited by the Circus, the Congolese natives performed their parts with heads held high. Perhaps, today, people can better appreciate those from other cultures and treat them in a more dignified manner.

Tissue expansion has been adapted to reconstructive surgery and is still used for body modification. Lip plates are still seen among several tribes in Africa and Amazonia. Lip plates represent one of the many ways people enhance the beauty of their bodies and celebrate the uniqueness of their cultural heritage.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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