

Adelbert von Chamisso, *A Voyage of Discovery, into the South Sea and Beering's Straits* (1821)

Abstract

Born in France to an aristocratic family that fled the French Revolution, Adelbert von Chamisso (1781–1838) was educated in Prussia and made his career there, first as an army officer and then as a botanist. One important professional step was his engagement as a naturalist on board a Russian expedition to the Pacific and the Bering Strait. The goal of the expedition, which was led by the Baltic German Russian subject Otto von Kotzebue, was to find a northern passage between the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans. Chamisso is best remembered today as the author of the classic adventure-fable *Peter Schlemihl's Miraculous Story* [*Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*], about a man who loses his shadow in a pact with the devil and ends up traveling the world in a pair of seven-league boots. The story, which took up the theme of scientific exploration, was published in 1814, the year before Chamisso's voyage with Kotzebue, and thus represented the wish rather than the experience.

In the following passages, excerpted from Chamisso's *A Voyage of Discovery, into the South Sea and Beering's Straits* [*Entdeckungsreise in die Süd-See und nach der Berings-Straße*], he relates his encounters with the inhabitants of the Radak Islands in the Marshall Islands, including [Kadu](#), who was originally from Ulea in the Caroline Islands far to the West. Kadu would become his "friend and companion" on the voyage to the North Pacific and would give much valuable information on the language, culture, and geography of Micronesia before being returned to the Radak group to superintend the transplantation of various European and non-European food plants and animals to the islands. The passages give insight into European attitudes towards indigenous peoples and empire in the early nineteenth-century Pacific World, while attesting to the complex trajectories and exchanges of German and other actors across political borders, continents, and oceans.

Please note: the following excerpts come from an 1821 translation and include terminology that would not be used in a present-day text. The term "natives," for example, would be better translated as "local population."

Source

[...]

As we are now going to communicate the information respecting the islanders and people of this province in particular, derived from our own experience, and the information we have collected, this seems to be the place to give an account of the new authorities that we have to adduce.

These are the communications of our friend and companion Kadu, and those of D. Luis de Torres of Guahon, which are a supplement to Cantova's letter and chart.

It was at the beginning of the year 1817, in the extreme east of this province, in the group of Otdia and Kawen, o the island-chain of Radack, that we formed an acquaintance, and confirmed our friendship, with the amiable people who inhabit it. When we were afterwards sailing to the group of Aur, of the same chain of islands, the natives came in their boats to meet us. As soon as we had cast anchor, and they came on board, a man stepped out from among them, who was distinguished from the others in many respects. He was not regularly tattooed like the Radackers, but wore indistinct figures of fish and birds,

singly and in rows, round the knee, on the arms and on the shoulders. He was of a more compact make, and of a lighter colour, and had more curly hair than they. He addressed us in a language that was quite different from that of Radack, and sounded entirely foreign to us, and we were equally unsuccessful in making him understand the language of the Sandwich Islands. He made us comprehend that he intended to remain in our ship, and to accompany us in all our future voyages. His request was readily complied with. From that hour he remained on board our ship, and only once, at Aur, went on shore, with permission, and remained with us, a faithful companion, treated like the officers, beloved by every one, till our return to Radack, when, suddenly changing his intention, he resolved to settle there, to become an inhabitant, and to be a distributor of our gifts to our poor friends. Nobody could be more thoroughly sensible of the humane object of our mission than he was.

Kadu, a native of the island-group of Ulea, to the south of Guahon, not of noble birth, but a confidant of his king, Toua, who employed him to carry his commissions to the other islands, had on former voyages become acquainted with the chain of islands with which Ulea trades, from the Pelew islands in the west to Setoan in the east. He was on his last voyage from Ulea to Feis, with two of his countrymen and a chief from Eap, who was returning to his native place, when storms drove the boat from her course. The mariners, if we may credit their very uncertain reckoning, drifted about in the open sea for eight months. Their scanty stock of provisions lasted them three months; for five months they lived without fresh water, merely on the fish they caught. To alleviate their thirst, Kadu dived into the depth of the ocean, and brought up in a cocoa shell cooler water, which, according to their opinion, was likewise less salt[y]. The north-east monsoon at length blew them on the group of Aur, of the Radack chain, where they fancied themselves west of Ulea. Kadu had received information from an old man in Eap of Radack and Ralick; some mariners from Eap are said to have been once cast upon Radack on the group of Aur, from whence they found their way back, by way of Nugor and Ulea, to Eap. The names of Radack and Ralick were also known to a native of Lamureck, whom we met with at Guahon. Boats from Ulea and the surrounding islands are frequently cast upon the eastern island chains, and there are still living on the group of Arno, of the Radack chain, five natives of Lamureck, whom a similar fate brought there in the same manner.

The chiefs of Radack protected the strangers against the rapacity of their people, whose avarice was excited by the iron which they possessed. The more noble sentiments are always to be found among the chiefs.

The inhabitants of Ulea, who live in greater prosperity and have a more extensive trade than the Radackers, are in many respects superior to them. Kadu enjoyed a certain consideration at Radack. When we visited these islands, he might have arrived there about four years before. He had two wives at Aur, and had a daughter by one of them, who was just beginning to speak.

Our appearance caused terror and consternation at Aur, where no information had yet been received respecting us. The experienced Kadu, who was at that time on a distant island of the group, was immediately sent for, and they desired his advice how they should treat the mighty strangers, whom they were inclined to consider as wicked cannibals.

Kadu had learnt much of the Europeans without ever having seen one of their ships. He encouraged his friends, warned them against theft, and accompanied them to our ship with the firm resolution to remain with us, hoping through us to see his dear native country again, as a European ship had once been at Ulea at a time when he was absent.

One of his countrymen, and companion in misfortune, who was with him, tried in vain to dissuade him from his purpose, and his other friends, equally in vain, assailed him with anxious representations: he was immovable.

[...]

We are the first Europeans who have landed at Radack and become acquainted with these amiable people. From principle and from inclination, from real sincere love, we endeavoured to neglect nothing that we could do for this people. On our first visit we put our friends in Otdia in possession of hogs, goats, and tame fowls: yams were planted, and melons and watermelons had sprung up, and throve well. On our return, after a few months, we found the place of the garden in the island of Otdia waste and desolate; not even a foreign weed remained to testify our good intention. The hogs had died of thirst, the fowls were not to be found; Prince Lamary had carried the goats to Aur, and had also transplanted there, from the island of Otdia, the yams, which alone had escaped the hostile rats. The old chief, Laergasz, had discovered some yams planted by us on an island under his dominion. He found this root well-tasted, and, after he had eaten it, carefully replanted the leaves. This process, which is observed in the cultivation of the taro, had deceived his expectations.

The proper object of our second visit was to be beneficial to our friends. We brought them goats, hogs, dogs, cats, tame fowls, potatoes from the Sandwich Islands (*Ipomoea tuberosa*, Lour. Coch.), the melon, the water-melon, gourds of different kinds, those of which the fruit is used for valuable vessels, and others of which the fruit is eaten; the sugar-cane, the grape, the pine-apple, the apple-tree of the Sandwich islands (not an *Eugenia*), the tea-root (*Dracaena terminalis*), the lemon-tree, and the seeds of several useful plants on the Sandwich islands; the *Aleurites triloba*, the nuts of which are used as tapers, and produce oil and stuff for dyeing; two of the shrubs, the bast of which serves to manufacture stuffs, &c.

We have carefully sowed the seeds which our friend Kadu has undertaken to attend to.

May Kadu proceed in his fine vocation with wisdom and energy! May he succeed in effecting what, without him, could not be hoped! May his good heart produce the good which he wishes! May he, the benefactor of an amiable people, establish its prosperity, conduct it peaceably and liberally to a better situation and soon induce it to renounce a law revolting to nature, which was founded only in necessity!

We must confess that our friend stands alone exposed to the envy of his equals, the avidity and power of his princes, and the treasures which our love has heaped upon him, may gather the tempest over his head. But our apprehension can go still farther: the real treasure in iron, which we lavished with pleasure upon Radack, may kindle a destructive war between the south and the north of this chain, between it and Ralick, and blood be the fruit of our liberality.

The poor and dangerous reefs of Radack have nothing to attract the Europeans, and we congratulate our simple friends on remaining in their obscurity. The amiableness of their manners, the charming modesty which adorns them, are blossoms of nature, which are not derived from any abstract idea of virtue. They would show themselves equally docile to our vices; and, as the victims of our passions, would draw down upon them our contempt.

[...]

Source of English translation: *A Voyage of Discovery, into the South Sea and Beering's Straits, for the Purpose of Exploring a North-East Passage, Undertaken in the Years 1815–1818, at the Expense of His Highness the Chancellor of the Empire, Count Romanzoff, in the Ship Rurick, under the Command of the Lieutenant in the Russian Imperial Navy, Otto von Kotzebue*. In three volumes. Vol. III. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1821, pp. 96–99, 174–76. Available online at HathiTrust: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiuo.ark:/13960/t1sf2v98p&view=1up&seq=9>

Source of original German text: *Entdeckungs-Reise in die Süd-See und nach der Berings-Straße zur Erforschung einer nordöstlichen Durchfahrt*. Unternommen in den Jahren 1815, 1816, 1817 und 1818, auf Kosten Sr. Erlaucht des Herrn Reichs-Kanzlers Grafen Rumanzoff auf dem Schiffe Rurick unter dem Befehle des Lieutenants der Russisch-Kaiserlichen Marine Otto von Kotzebue. Dritter Band. Mit dreizehn Kupfern und einer Landkarte. Enthält die Bemerkungen und Ansichten von dem Naturforscher der Expedition, Adelbert v. Chamisso, nebst Beiträgen von andern Gelehrten. Weimar: Gebrüder Hoffmann, 1821, pp. 86–88, 119–20. Available online at: <http://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?PPN341175544>

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