

Ida Pfeiffer, *A Lady's Second Journey Round the World* (1855)

Abstract

The Austrian explorer and travel writer [Ida Pfeiffer](#), née Reyer (1797–1858), was born and married in Vienna. She enjoyed a better-than-usual education and dreamed of seeing distant lands. In 1846, having already published travel accounts of her journeys to the Near East and Scandinavia, Pfeiffer set out on a demanding voyage to circumnavigate the globe. She returned in 1848 and published *A Woman's Journey Round the World* [*Eine Frauenfahrt um die Welt*] in 1850. The following year, Pfeiffer set off on a second trip around the world, returning in 1854. While her first voyage still had elements of what one could consider leisure or educational travel to established destinations, the second trip more closely resembled a scientific expedition, whose goal was to penetrate lesser-known regions in pursuit of geographic and ethnographic knowledge and scientific collecting, above all on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra in the Dutch East Indies. The following passages, taken from the *A Lady's Second Journey Round the World* [*Meine zweite Weltreise*], recount Pfeiffer's observations and interactions with people of other races or ethnicities, and describe her thoughts on how she is viewed by others. These passages provide the basis for an interesting comparison with the excerpt describing Pfeiffer's previous voyage to Brazil. The present passages also offer much to consider in terms of the role of gender and how images of masculinity and femininity played out in Pfeiffer's depiction of herself as a traveler and explorer who was also a woman.

Source

[...]

Mr. Lee, like Captain Brooke, endeavoured to dissuade me from my plan of entering into the interior of the country. Information had reached him from those areas, he said, that a tribal chief had recently been killed there, and that, in consequence, the whole district was involved in war. I was determined to go as far as I could, however, notwithstanding this kind solicitude for my safety, and I embarked accordingly on the 22nd of *January* upon the *Luppa*, with the intention of going upstream as far as the *Schämel* mountains. I had with me the servant given me by Captain Brooke, eight Malay boatmen, and Mr. Lee's cook, whom he was good enough to send with me as steersman, and who was of the greatest use, as he spoke some words of English, as well as the language of the country.

On leaving the fort, we entered immediately the territory of the free Dyaks, and, indeed, of some who are considered particularly fierce. Early in the afternoon we arrived at one of their settlements, and I decided to pass the night there; and, as I always made it a practice to do, approached them with the utmost kindness and cordiality, shook hands with both men and women, sat down in the midst of them, took the children on my lap, and so forth. After this, I set off on a ramble into the forest, in which, I need hardly say, I was accompanied by the whole troop of natives, with all their children.

They wanted to see where I was going, what I wanted with the butterflies, &c., what was the use of the box in which I preserved them, and which I always carried with me; in short, they contemplated my doings with full as much curiosity as I did theirs.

At first they laughed at me when they saw how eagerly I chased after every butterfly or fly, but I had no sooner made them understand that these insects were useful in the preparation of medicines than the

laughers became diligent assistants in the search; it was necessary to give them an explanation they could grasp. I have them to thank for many valuable specimens. That savages should laugh at things of this kind was of course to be expected; yet I encountered the same ignorant ridicule in several of the so-called civilized European colonies, and even in the United States of America. Sometimes those ladies and gentlemen carried their merriment so far that I could not help asking whether any of them had ever seen a museum; and if they had, whether they supposed the insects had needed to be caught, or had betaken themselves there of their own accord, out of zeal for science.

With the evening twilight we returned from our ramble, and I found a place prepared for me, spread with nice clean mats. The people sat down near me, but they did not touch a thing belonging to me. They even showed so much respect for my property as to leave the place when I left it, and I was able to leave all my things lying about without the least fear. When I was eating, they also moved a little further away in order not to disturb me. They usually gave me a kind of curry of chicken and rice, —the latter, alas! Strongly flavoured with rancid cocoa-nut oil; but, as I had tasted nothing whatever the whole day, hunger compelled me to eat some of it, though I was obliged to stop my nostrils and get through the meal as fast as I possibly could.

The Dyaks stayed up late in the evening, but at eleven o'clock their fires were extinguished, and then thick darkness surrounded me. I was quite alone with them, cut off from all human help, among these enthusiastic head collectors; but I did not feel at all afraid, for I knew that Rajah Brooke's name had reached this far, and that I could rest in safety under the shelter of the esteem and respect it inspired.

January 23rd. Nothing particular occurred during the day. We passed several Dyak settlements in the morning without the slightest disturbance, and in the afternoon again visited one of the tribes. Here things did not look very comfortable just now, for the tribe had only returned from a battle two days earlier and had brought with them a head, which was hung up, along with two others nearly dry, over the fireplace and close to my bed. This was because the place nearest these valued trophies is the place of honour, and always to be offered to a distinguished guest; so my refusing it was out of the question. My situation, however, became a very painful one. The wind rushing through the hut rattled the dry skulls continually one against another, and the vapour and stench from the fresh head was suffocating, and from time to time driven by the wind right into my face. The people, too, appeared to be in a strangely excited state, and, long after the fires had been put out, kept moving about my bed in the dark. Sleep was impossible, and by degrees I got into a perfect fever of terror; I could not remain lying down, and yet I did not dare to leave my bed. I sat up, therefore, and remained sitting, and expecting, I own, every moment to feel the knife at my throat, until at length the morning dawned, and I sank back completely exhausted on my couch.

Travelling in Borneo is a very slow operation. In the lovely early mornings it is impossible to induce the boatmen to set off, for they insist on first cooking their rice, and for this they take as much time as a cook among us would to prepare a grand dinner. Once they have set off, they are continually laying down their oars, now to prepare siri, and then to make straw cigars and smoke them; so that on an average more than half of the people are never at work. I do not think I ever had my patience more severely tried than during this journey; and the Malay attendant whom Captain Brooke had given me, and who he thought would be of the greatest service to me, was the most intolerable of all. His behaviour would probably have been very different to a master from what it was to a woman, whom he considered entirely dependent on him.

His business was to act as my personal attendant, and at the same time to keep the other people to their duty, and get them off betimes in the morning. But he did nothing of the kind. The men might dawdle till twelve o'clock if they liked, and for his part he remained quietly in his bed, or, if he got up, loitered about smoking and gossiping, and getting himself waited upon, instead of waiting upon me. If I told him to do anything he made me no answer, or even turned his back upon me, so that when I could not do without

assistance I was obliged to ask that of the boatmen.

The scenery of the country we were passing through now became more lovely with every stroke of the oar. The morasses had disappeared, and were succeeded by luxuriant rice-plantations, with smiling hills in the background. Among the trees there were some glorious specimens,—some with trunks a hundred and forty feet high,—others spreading out their mighty branches, and hanging their leaves down into the water, so as to form deliciously cool leafy bowers. Large hives of the wild bee were often hanging on lofty slender stems with very few branches; but to reach hives of this kind and rob them of their honey, the natives make a kind of ladder of bamboo, which is fastened to the trunk of the tree at every two feet, stands about six inches from it, and is carried to a height of eighty feet.

This day we again stopped at a Dyak settlement; but I had scarcely lain down to rest than I heard a sort of loud clapping noise, given very regularly, and in a sort of measured time. I got up, and went towards the place whence the sound proceeded, and there lay a man stretched out quite motionless on the ground, and half-a-dozen young men stood round him slapping his body with all their strength with open hands. I thought the man was dead, and was wondering what might be the meaning of this singular ceremony with his body, when all at once up jumped the dead body amidst the loud laughter of the operators. The game I suppose was over; and I was afterwards informed that exercises of the kind are considered very useful for strengthening the body and rendering it supple.

January 25th. More and more beautiful views are continually presenting themselves. The hills are multiplying and becoming higher and higher. The peak that just now came into sight cannot be less than 3000 feet high. The scenery reminds me of that of Brazil. Here, too, are vast impenetrable primeval forests, with overwhelming masses of luxuriant vegetation, and here, as well as there, but little cleared land and but few inhabited places. The chief difference is that Borneo is intersected by countless numbers of small streams or rivulets, whilst Brazil has scarcely any water but the vast floods of her mighty rivers. What might this island become were it peopled by industrious, peaceful, and truly civilised nations.^[1] Unfortunately this is very far from being the case. The population is scanty, and more intent on war and mutual destruction than on any kind of productive labour; and for white settlers the climate is a great obstacle.

One peculiarity of Borneo is the brown colour of its rivers. Some travellers maintain that this resulted from their banks being lined with thick woods, and that the masses of leaves falling into the waters dye them this colour. But I cannot admit this explanation, for in the island of Ceram, which I subsequently visited, where the banks of the streams are quite as thickly covered with wood, the waters are as clear as crystal.

Alexander von Humboldt remarked upon this dark colour in the rivers of America, and adds, also, that no crocodiles or fish live in water thus dyed. But in Borneo this is not the case, for both caymans (a kind of crocodile) and fish are found in them in abundance.

In the evening I was again surrounded by a swarm of Dyaks, and was conversing with them as well as I could by means of my Malay interpreter. I asked them whether they believed in a Great Spirit, and whether they had any idols or priests? As well as I could understand their answer, they believe in nothing of the kind, and have no priests or idols whatever. It is possible nevertheless that I may have made some mistake with respect to their answers to my first inquiry; for, as to the last, I certainly think I have seen idols among them. If they have no other objects of reverence, however, they have at all events plenty of earthly superiors; for there is not a tribe of a dozen families that does not have a chief, rejoicing in the high sounding title of Rajah. I was often reminded by this frequency of titles of Hungary and Poland, where everybody who is not a serf is a nobleman.

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NOTES

[1] * Borneo is the largest island in the world (of course not including Australia, which is a continent). It has a surface of 260,000 square miles; and its present population consists of 950,000 Dyaks, 200,000 Malays, 54,000 Chinese. Its chief exports are rattan, rice, sago, cocoa-nuts, and dye-stuffs.

Source: Ida Pfeiffer, *A Lady's Second Journey Round the World: From London to the Cape of Good Hope, Borneo, Java, Sumatra, Celebes, Ceram, The Moluccas, etc. California, Panama, Peru, Ecuador, and the United States*. In two volumes. Vol. I. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855, pp. 88–97.

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