

Museum am Rothenbaum

Rothenbaumchaussee 64 | 20148 Hamburg Germany | markk-hamburg.de

Pippi's Papa and a Totally True Story from the Pacific

An exhibition for children and adults

From September 6, 2024 until the end of 2025

The exhibition "Pippi's Dad" provides insights into German colonial history in the Pacific, prepared for children and adults. The starting point is the life story of the Swedish seafarer Carl Pettersson (1875-1937) and his family on the islands in the Bismarck Archipelago in what is now Papua New Guinea. The story of Pettersson bears striking similarities to the well-known literary figure of Efraim Longstocking, who rules as king over "Taka-Tuka-Land" and can provide his daughter, who lives in Sweden, with an endless supply of gold coins. The historical figure of the Swedish sailor Carl Pettersson, who lived on the Tabar Islands in the Bismarck Archipelago after a shipwreck, started a family with his Pacific wife Singdo, established coconut plantations and later successfully mined for gold.

It remains unclear whether Astrid Lindgren was aware of the story of Carl Pettersson, which was widely reported in the Swedish media during his lifetime in the 1930s, and whether it could have served as a source of inspiration for her. She herself never commented on this. In the early 2000s, a Swedish research project by journalist Joakim Langer and anthropologist Hélena Regius, which resulted in a non-fiction book called "Pippi & the King", drew attention to the parallels between Efraim and Pettersson and embarked on a journey to the descendants of the Swedish sailor and his wife living in the Pacific. It was only through the project that the Swedish branches of the family got to know their Pacific relatives and held a Malagan ceremony together in 2003 to honor their ancestor Singdo. This bridge to the present of the descendants flows into the

Children can discover the contents of the exhibition in a playful and active way - via a room-sized and colorful ramp, which is also equipped with a slide and a tunnel. The design allows people aged 9 and over to interactively explore the story and the various themes. Manu the bird, designed exclusively for the MARKK by illustrator El Boum, accompanies children with his different emotions and comments to reflect on the contents of the exhibition. Interactive play stations also invite children to get to know the colonial connections between Hamburg and the Pacific. As a contribution to the children's book debate, the exhibition also conveys knowledge and different points of view that point to the origins of stereotypical representations and offensive terminology in 20th century children's literature in the colonial era and their continued existence in the present day. Visitors can make up their own minds and, with the help of a message in a bottle at the end of their tour, have the opportunity to send a message with their own ideas.

The exhibition is divided into five chapters. Firstly, Carl Pettersson's biography is presented and located between Sweden and the Bismarck Archipelago or what is now Papua New Guinea and Australia. Pettersson initially worked for the German New Guinea Company and, after a shipwreck, married Singdo, who came from an important family in the Tabar Islands. He established coconut palm plantations on these islands, which today belong to the state of Papua New Guinea, to produce copra and started a family with Singdo, having nine children together.

The exhibition tells of the plantation system, the living conditions of the people affected by it and the trade networks between the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago and Europe, including the city of Hamburg. The interventions of the German colonial power - such as the poll tax levied and the forced migration of able-bodied men and women - had lasting consequences for the social and economic life of the population. The children of Carl Pettersson and Singdo, who, like other descendants of European colonial masters and Pacific women, were separated from local society and educated in German mission schools, were particularly exposed to the circumstances due to the early death of their mother Singdo.

The perspective of these European-Pacific children on the colonial social order presented in the exhibition sheds light on the role of the mission schools as well as on the genesis of the Unserdeutsch community. Children at the mission school in Vunapope on the island of New Britain, among others, developed their own language in their isolated living situation, a conglomerate of Tok-Pisin, today the most widespread lingua franca in Papua New Guinea, and the German language, which had to be spoken in the mission school; they also added playful elements. Today, Unserdeutsch is only spoken by a few people and is considered a language in danger of disappearing. The photo series "Unserdeutsch Faces", which is integrated into the exhibition, portrays the remaining language speakers, whom the artist Juergen Staack visited in Papua New Guinea in 2023. The linguist Craig Volker also reports in a video about Unserdeutsch, which is one of the approximately 850 languages spoken in Papua New Guinea.

Malagan woodcarving - an expression of Oceania's artistic creativity with complex meaning

The art of carving known as malagan plays a central role in the festivals held to bid farewell to the deceased in the north of the island of New Ireland. These are complex works that can take various forms, but always consist of several intertwined motifs: In addition to birds, fish, snakes and pigs, human figures are also present.

The life stories and ownership structures of the clans in New Ireland are inscribed in the malagan. As a result of increased trade and exchange between Europe and the Pacific, Malagan sculptures attracted a great deal of attention among European museums and on the art market from the 1870s onwards. The MARKK also acquired objects via the Hamburg trade networks, which are presented in the exhibition and in whose provenance history the actors of the colonial structures are inscribed.

In preparation for the exhibition, the artist Adam Kaminiel, who comes from the Nalik-speaking region of New Ireland, had a conversation with the curator Jeanette Kokott at MARKK, which is also documented in the catalog. He says: "Malagan is like a vessel. It is a vessel for our clans to transfer the soul of our ancestors to the next world. I believe that Malagan are needed to help our relatives on their journey. I do not carve them to decorate a memorial. I do it because I need to bring them to the next world."

Malagan sculptures are not meant to last forever. After the ceremony, they are either left to decay, burned or sold. In order to keep the Malagan tradition alive, the sculptures have to be recreated again and again.

Carl Pettersson also transferred Malagan carvings to Europe. He got the idea from the Swedish diplomat Birger Mörner, who was a guest of the Pettersson family around 1913 and who, with his adventurously embellished travelogue, later sparked the creation of legends about the plantation owner, who was then dubbed “King Kalle” and “the strong Charley”. Birger Mörner was also fascinated by the ornate malagans and so Pettersson arranged for him to buy a group of objects for the price of a pig, which were then shipped to Sweden and exhibited for the first time in Stockholm in 1917. Pettersson continued to trade with Malagan to help finance the development of the plantations. The exhibition also includes Malagan loans from the National Museums of World Culture in Sweden, which originate from Carl Pettersson’s trade at the time and from the Tabar Islands.

Today’s descendants of Carl Pettersson’s brother traveled from Sweden to the Tabar Islands in 2002 to get in touch with their relatives. After learning that Pettersson’s wife Singdo had never received a Malagan ceremony after her untimely death, they returned in 2003 to attend a ceremony for her with her relatives in New Ireland, which is documented in a video in the exhibition. The so-called Meri Blouses and shell money also play a role as gifts at the family reunion. The shell money can be worn as a jewelry necklace and at the same time establishes a connection to the cultural value system of New Ireland.



Carl Pettersson and his wife Singdo with their children on Tabar (island north of New Ireland), 1918. In the background on the left are the ritually significant Malagan woodcarvings. Photographer: Edgar Ravenswood Waite (1866-1928).

© South Australian Museum, Adelaide.

During Pettersson’s lifetime, there were reports in Sweden about “Strong Charley” or “King Kalle”, which led to the assumption that Astrid Lindgren, who worked as a journalist in Vimmerby in the 1920s, may also have heard about Pettersson’s “adventures”. The parallels have fascinated many people and also lead to the world of sharks: in New Ireland, “Shark Calling” is set in the context of fish hunting and spirituality. It was Pettersson’s eldest daughter Elsa Pettersson (1911-1998) who had a special relationship with sharks, as Elsa’s daughter Maria Chan reported in an interview with the German journalist Rebekka Endler in 2018:

“Grandfather (Carl Pettersson) probably wrote down a lot of interesting things that happened on Tabar so that people in Sweden could read them. Maybe he thought that some of them would never be able to travel that far, so he wanted to share his experiences with them. He always enjoyed telling stories to people

in Sweden. Many German people I met mentioned Pippi Longstocking. At the time, I didn't realize how closely the story was connected to my mother. The way Pippi is described is how my mother was: a strong, lively girl who climbs coconut palms and does all those typical things that make up life here on the island."

The debate about colonial world views in children's books

The exhibition also addresses the current children's book debate about, among other things, colonial world views in 20th century children's literature. Voices of contemporaries of different ages, backgrounds and professions have their say and contribute their personal experiences of reading Pippi. In this way, the exhibition shows that the classification of this emotionally charged and pop-culturally significant figure continues to move many people.

The MARKK curatorial team - Jeanette Kokott, Johanna Wild, Weiqi Wang, Barbara Plankensteiner and Rilando June Lamadjido - was accompanied by an international advisory board and a junior advisory board and supported by the provenance research team.

The exhibition is accompanied by a colorfully designed catalog geared towards children and young people, which offers a playful approach to the themes through stickers, puzzles and coloring pages, and is also suitable for giving adults a captivating reading experience, as the contents of the exhibition are deepened with detailed photographs of the works of art, exciting interviews and short essays.

Katalog: Pippis Papa and a Totally True Story from the Pacific, edited by Jeanette Kokott and Johanna Wild, Hamburg 2024. 23 €. ISBN: 978-3-944193-29-8.

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Poster motive Pippis Papa: Design Rocket & Wink, © MARKK

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