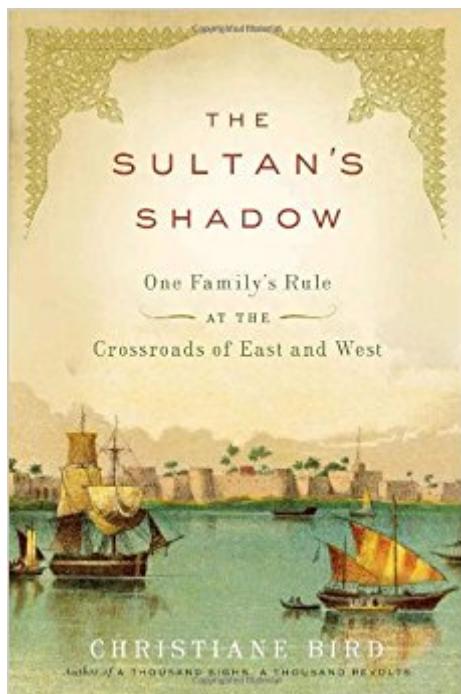


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The Sultan's Shadow: One Family's Rule At The Crossroads Of East And West



Synopsis

A story virtually unknown in the West, about two of the Middle East's most remarkable figures—Oman's Sultan Said and his rebellious daughter Princess Salme—comes to life in this narrative. From their capital on the sultry African island of Zanzibar, Sultan Said and his descendants were shadowed and all but shattered by the rise and fall of the nineteenth-century East African slave trade. As shrewd, liberal, and enlightened a prince as Arabia has ever produced. That's how explorer Richard Burton described Seyyid Said Al bin Sultan Busaid, who came to power in Oman in 1804 when he was fifteen years old. During his half-century reign, Said ruled with uncanny contradiction: as a believer in a tolerant Islam who gained power through bloodshed and perfidy, and as an open-minded, intellectually curious man who established relations with the West while building a vast commercial empire on the backs of tens of thousands of slaves. His daughter Salme, born to a concubine in a Zanzibar harem, scandalized her family and people by eloping to Europe with a German businessman in 1866, converting to Christianity, and writing the first-known autobiography of an Arab woman. Christiane Bird paints a stunning portrait of violent family feuds, international intrigues, and charismatic characters—from Sultan Said and Princess Salme to the wildly wealthy slave trader Tippu Tip and the indefatigable British antislavery crusader Dr. David Livingstone. The Sultan's Shadow is a brilliantly researched and irresistibly readable foray into the stark brutality and decadent beauty of a vanished world.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Bird brilliantly tells of the 19th-century rise and fall of an Omani ruling family, its role in the enormous Indian Ocean slave trade and, unwittingly, through the Princess Salme, the Christianization and colonization of east Africa by Germany. Oman's Sultan Seyyid Said Al Busaidi was generous with his own people but cruel and ruthless with his enemies, He built alliances with the British as he built a lucrative slave trade in his capital of Zanzibar. After Said's death, his favorite daughter, Salme, an independent woman who flatly refused to obey the mores of her day, eloped with a German businessman who soon died in a fluke accident. Bismarck used Salme and her family to gain a foothold in the slave trade; by the time of Salme's death in 1924, her Omani ruling family's fortunes had declined, German power had risen, and the slave trade in Zanzibar had been abolished. Drawing on Salme's autobiography and letters, journalist Bird (Neither East nor West: One Woman's Journey Through the Islamic Republic of Iran) presents a first-rate cultural and political history that opens a window onto this little-known corner of modern history. Maps. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the trans-Atlantic slave trade had declined dramatically. At the same time, however, the eastern Africa-Indian Ocean slave trade had increased. At the center of this trade was the island of Zanzibar. The island and the adjacent mainland coast were controlled by the ancient principality of Omani, located at the tip of the Arabian peninsula. Bird, a former travel writer for The New York Daily News, supplies a wonderful account of this slave trade and the remarkable Omani family that controlled it. This is a broad-ranging saga filled with fascinating but not necessarily admirable characters. Some, including David Livingstone and Henry Stanley are familiar to Westerners; others, such as the master slaver Tippu Tibb, are interesting characters but at the same time repellent rogues. The most important and enigmatic is the Sultan Said, who gained power in 1804 at the age of 15 and instituted a series of surprisingly liberal reforms and practiced a tolerant form of Islam, receptive to outside influence. Yet he presided over a brutal, bloody slave empire that enriched his family and kingdom. --Jay Freeman

Christine Bird brings together various fascinating stories centering around Zanzibar and Oman. They say that truth is stranger than fiction. Here that is so. Its an easy historical read and she is well capable about weaving it all together.I did find some errors which annoyed me - the editor should have picked them up. for example: on page 34 she gets the directions of the monsoon back to front. On page 133 she says"prior to Zanzibar's revolution of 1963-1964, when African Nationalists overthrew the island's foreigner-dominated government". Wrong - The Revolution was actually in

January 1964 and the government was made up of Zanzibaris - mainly of Arabic and Shirazi descent. Her whole book has been explaining how the Arabs of the Gulf and Persians had travelled and settled on the East African coast from centuries past. Perhaps as long ago as 700AD and maybe before any mainlanders settled there. The Zanzibari Arabs that led that government of 1963 had a longer history in Zanzibar than the many mainlander African that settled there after the clove boom after 1850 and into the 1900s. And another fact that is worth mentioning: on page 221 Bird talks about the Shells used in the trade with West Africa. A German firm called O'Swald. Those shells were money cowries, Cyprae Moneta, and they were used as currency in the slave trade. An important fact as it further shows the complicity of the Western nations in the slave trade of Africa. The Sultans of Zanzibar were treated very badly in the Scramble for Africa. The story of the German, Carl Peters and his terrible grabbing of land in Tanganyika is not widely known. Bismarck supported Peters and he went on to treat the locals shamefully and that led to the Maji Maji Rebellion when thousands and thousands of Africans were killed by German stormtroopers. The Sultans (Barghash) relied on the British who traded them off with the Germans. Sadly the Zanzibar Government in the 1960's also relied on the support of the British who had framed and designed their independence of 1963. Yet when they asked for military help on the 12 January 1964, a mere month after independence, the British refused aid. Thousands of innocent Zanzibaris died and it plunged Zanzibar into decades of mis-government. Its a sad history.

Christiane Bird indicates the book was inspired from reading Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar. Inspired but not completely based upon the princess's life, the book rambles over the history of Oman, Zanzibar, slavery and East Africa. Although her writing was informative and interesting it did not seem to have a cohesive vision on what it was trying to educate the reader. The book exposes some truths most westerners may not be familiar with such as the linkage between Oman and Zanzibar, the large role arabs played in the east african slave trade, the role of england in abolishing the slave trade, how "civilized" the arabs were, the friction between different sects of islam including how many muslims feel about the extreme fundamentalist moslems out of Saudi. It is slightly apologetic about slavery in general emphasizing how much better slaves were treated in muslim countries, even emphasizing that slaves could own slaves. But some slave was always on the bottom and she mentions but glosses over the fact that 9 out of 10 slaves captured in africa died before even making it to the slave markets in zanzibar. She also depicts the princess as being unfairly treated; although it was well understood that the penalty for converting from islam at the time was death and instead she was graciously allowed to leave the country with her foreign lover

and her personal fortune. The writer expands to book length by adding lengthy side stories on Dr. Livingston, slave trader Tippu Tip, and the founding of Oman. Some local anecdotes are included as fact such as the sultan living to be 120 years old, electric lights being introduced to the harbor only a year after Edison invented them....The biggest pluses for this book is it exposes a culture that westerners know very little about and it is well written. The biggest negative is it does not seem to have one cohesive theme the reader could focus upon and it paints a rosy picture of this culture from the privileged royalty and wealthy slave trader viewpoint.

Great read. This work is not really history, a historical novel, or a novel. It is story-telling based on a limited number of sources, some of which are suspect. However, as long as you read with a skeptical outlook, this is a fun work that reveals much of Oman, Zanzibar, East Africa exploration by Europeans, and much on the perspectives of Princess Salme.

Great information on a time and place not well known to me until....I recently picked up Trade Wind by M.M.Kaye at a used book store and came to find the same information in this fifty year old novel that is in this non-fiction account of the same time, Of course the novel has a fictional romance not in Bird's book but the Princess Salme and her exploits are the same.

Very well written and well researched book of a part of the world my schooling ignored. Four more words required.

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