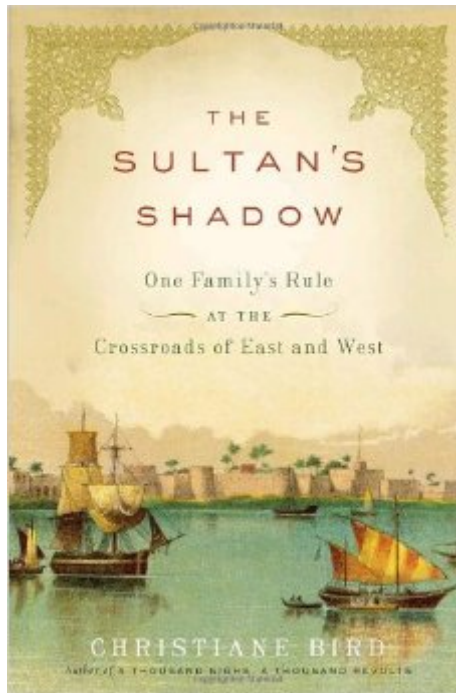


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# The Sultan's Shadow: One Family's Rule At The Crossroads Of East And West



## 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.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 400 pages

Publisher: Random House; 1 edition (June 29, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0345469402

ISBN-13: 978-0345469403

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 1.2 x 9.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (9 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #226,394 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #2 in [Books > History > Middle East > Oman](#) #93 in [Books > History > World > Slavery & Emancipation](#) #210 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Middle East](#)

## Customer Reviews

In *THE SULTAN'S SHADOW*, author Christiane Bird somewhat ambitiously covers a number of

subjects: the country of Oman; the island of Zanzibar; the East African slave trade; the exploration of East Africa by the likes of Livingstone and Stanley; the Al Busaidi sultans of Oman, especially Seyyid Said, who reigned for 50 years; and his daughter Seyyida Salme, whose mother was a Circassian slave and concubine. Bird writes that the seed for the book was planted when she stumbled across "Memoirs of an Arabian Princess", which Seyyida Salme wrote in 1888. Salme was indeed a remarkable person. She did in fact grow up a "princess", one of Seyyid Said's dozens of children. At age 22, after her father's death, she fell in love with a German merchant and eloped with him to Germany, where she had three children before her husband died young in a street-car accident. She spent most of the rest of her 80 years trying to get back in good stead with her family, whom she had scandalized and alienated by her elopement and her conversion from Islam to Christianity. In the 1880s, Otto von Bismarck callously used her as a pawn in Germany's campaign to assemble colonies in East Africa. Author Bird plucks Salme from historical obscurity and does a commendable job in rendering her intellectually and existentially accessible across a broad gulf of time, religion, and culture. But, to me, the book's more interesting figure from history is her father, Seyyid Said. When he assumed tenuous leadership of the Al Busaidi tribe of Oman in the early 1800's, his people were hemmed in and imperiled by many enemies, most notably the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia.

In the introduction, Christiane Bird says that the book was inspired from her reading *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* from Zanzibar. Studying the princess led Bird to the study of Oman (which ruled the island) and of slavery (which was a way of life there and an important export). After the first few chapters which mostly take place in Oman, the focus is on Zanzibar with Princess's story woven throughout. Princess Salme was the daughter of a slave and the Sultan. The slave system of this place and time was much more benign than that of the American plantation system. All the sultan's children were born free and were raised and educated as royals. Their mothers were freed upon the death of the sultan. Salme eloped to Germany and eventually got involved in international diplomacy regarding Zanzibar. While it does not interfere with the quality of the work, I thought the sections on expeditions of Livingstone and Stanley were overly long for their relationship to the story. The Tippu Tip story is also too long, but is germane in that Tippu Tip is part of the Zanzibar story. The "Notes" section shows the large number of sources pulled together to create this book. The "Notes" is more than a list of citations, it has a narrative that often describes the source and its level of objectivity. There is a very good page of maps labeling all the points of referred to in the text. There are no plates. I've read, and tried to read, a number of histories of Middle East countries

and they have not been "user friendly". The problem isn't just the textbook nature of the prose; it is my lack of background.

Christine Bird brings together various fascinating stories centering around Zanzibar and Oman. They say that truth is stranger than fiction. Here that is so. It's 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 mainland 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, *Cypraea 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.

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