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Obscure Kingdoms: Tonga. Oman. Nigeria. Swaziland. Java.

OBSCURE
KINGDOMS

EDWARD FOX



Synopsis

In a narrative of five linked chapters, the author describes journeys to five countries with surviving traditions of kingship. In some countries, the king is the ruler of the country; in others, kings remain as a living tradition, without state power but with cultural power and social influence. In Tonga, where he stayed with a Tongan family, his two-month sojourn in the last Polynesian monarchy culminated in an interview with the late king Taufa'ahau Tupou IV. They discussed the king's Bismarckian view of history and politics. In Oman, the quarry was the elegant Sultan Qaboos, creator of the modern Sultanate of Oman. Out of historically unpromising materials, Qaboos created a modern kingdom in his own image, a synthesis of Indian, Persian and Arab elements. In Nigeria, the author was based in Ife, the town in southwestern Nigeria known as the cradle of the Yoruba people; here he tracked down one king after another. There was one in almost every town, each with a profound and ancient historic, cultural and spiritual lineage. He met the two rival kings at the top of the hierarchy of Yoruba rulers, and spent time with both. Joining the motorcade of the Ooni of Ife, he travelled with the ruler and his court and hangers on to Kano, to meet the great traditional ruler of the north, the Emir of Kano. In Swaziland, by contrast, the king is the ruler of the state. Here, King Mswati III was shown at the apex of a hierarchy of magic, the most powerful magician in the realm, able to turn himself into an animal at will. Mswati III assumed the Swazi throne as a teenager, after a long period of court intrigue. Efforts by a British tutor to teach the king the arts and responsibilities of kingship were unsuccessful. The author's quixotic attempts to secure an interview failed miserably. As if to compensate, the author tracked down the man who would have been king if history's course had been different: he found a modest, humble man who ran a butcher shop in the heart of the country and insisted he was the real king. In the last chapter, the author traveled to Yogyakarta, in central Java, Indonesia, to explore Javanese kingship, the cultural model for the modern Indonesian state. In this ancient kingdom, the Sultan of Yogyakarta, Hamengkubuwono X, is now both a traditional ruler and a serving politician; the author's efforts to secure an interview succeeded. The author's aim was to write about traditions of kingship without reference to European examples: to write about these traditions of kingship in their own terms. There is discussion of the traditional literature of kingship: the "mirror for princes" literature in Islamic cultures, for example. The relationship between kingship and religion is a theme that runs through all the chapters. Nevertheless, as he went about these explorations, with all their minute detail about food, music, and everyday life in the countries he visited, and his entertaining anecdote about the daily difficulties and strangenesses he faced, he was a walking target for accusations of a colonialist viewpoint. We all have our crosses to bear. In literary history, the book occupies a place between

(a) the fashion in British and American publishing for travel books, which began in the late 1980s following the success of books like Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia* (this book can be seen as among the last instances of this trend, the last time a publishing company was able to pay an advance for a book of this kind, and the nail in the coffin of that publishing trend) and (b) the appearance of the internet, which makes the author's enthusiasm for interesting facts, which lard the narrative, seem naive, but in which a contemporary reader might find the kind of charm which resides in old obsolete things.

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