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When we think of Germany, we do not think of a princess from Zanzibar who lived, married and raised her children here. Who was this princess, and what did she bring to this country and why is she not taught in schools? Is it because of the history of the German colonial power which misused her situation, or was it that she was conveniently forgotten or ignored? Many questions remain open and for some, she is the princess from Africa, from East Africa, and for others, she remains a unique woman who came to Germany and had to sort out her life in a new, hostile and strange world where she was seen as the exotic, the other, and not as the woman who came of her own choice to marry and live with Heinrich Rudolph Ruete, her husband. Her life became dedicated to the education and rearing of her children, so in her memoirs, we learn about a mother struggling from privilege, impoverished by both her family and the German states views on widows. More about this later.

If you happen to walk around Uhlenhorst-Hamburg, you'll find a brief entry written about her at the square named after her. If you don't know about Emily Ruete, you may just pass it by and not see the relevance of what foreign women artists today encounter in Germany. It is not so different. So, even though her book has been often reprinted in German, it has often been forgotten, including the French and English reprints that came out during her lifetime. The fact that she lived here, plays and musicals were written about her, books about Zanzibar as an exotic colony that got traded by Germany, to the British were spun, and none of this is to be seen in the square that was recently named after her in Uhlenhorst-Hamburg. It is close to a playground on the Wandse.

Additionally, if you ask most German youth attending lower and upper schools if they have heard about her in their history classes, they shrug and say no. They are not told her story and few go to the Ohlsdorf cemetery to find her grave on the Ruete family plot. The curiosity comes and goes. Her father had a large harem and his children were multiracial which is still normal in Arab cultures. Her mother had been Circassian, and she grew up well-educated with her many brothers and sisters. As a sultan with a Syrian background, her father had the power to rule Oman, Zanzibar. In her memoirs, she has tried to bring that life to us—where the well-off people of Zanzibar had self-confidence, believed that they were civilized and did not have to look up to Europe for culture. When her husband met her, he was her neighbour and had come from Hamburg, Germany to trade cloves and purchase them for Europe and Persia. Cloves had made Zanzibar quite wealthy, and it was viewed as a paradise for Germans and British people as well.

From time to time, there has been renewed interest in Emily/Sayyida Salme's story, and her choice to come to Hamburg and give up being the daughter of a sultan occurred when she became involved with a German merchant and became pregnant. Her family had wanted her to marry a prince of their choosing and her choice banished her from ever returning to Zanzibar. Even though she was to inherit from her mother, her brother vetoed this and refused to meet her in England to resolve their differences and inheritance. Her choice for love and being pregnant, severed her ties from her previous life. So, with a heavy heart, in 1887, she chose to follow Rudolph Heinrich Ruete, who became her husband. They married in Aden where her firstborn son was born. Unfortunately, this son died en route to Germany on the train. Once she came to Germany, she was simply viewed as the wife of a well-known merchant but was not regarded as an important person. Her value as a person changed for the worse in Germany who viewed her as foreign, exotic, suspect and not an individual with merit, worth and education. It must be noted that Rudolph could not help her in her cultural transition and that somehow the sacrifice for love was not acknowledged by the high-society, in Hamburg, who could not fathom that she gave up her privileged life in Zanzibar to follow her German merchant husband when she was four months pregnant. So that she could marry Rudolph, she became a Christian and assumed the name of Emily Ruete. In this religious ambiguity as well as her Oman-Zanzibar background, many people have not known how to place her and this remains a dilemma.

When I became curious about her, I walked around Uhlenhorst, which is incidentally the neighbourhood where her husband died. While walking through this district to find the square, I asked young students in this area which is full of art schools and colleges, if they knew who she was and what her contribution to Hamburg is. They shrugged and said that they had never heard about her, nor had they known that this brown woman in Hamburg who was a force to be reckoned with had navigated the systems she came from as well as this one here in Germany. These well-informed students added that they had not heard about other foreigners or Germans of different backgrounds, and definitely not women of colour, who were writers and teachers. Some said that they were surprised and thought that German men marrying foreign women was a modern phenomenon. This was very telling and sad to hear. I hope that by offering a glimpse of Emily Ruete/ Sayyida Salme Said, Princess of Zanzibar, she will be remembered for her love of humanity and her desire to bring all people together. She wrote her autobiography, which was published as, "*Memoiren einer arabischen Prinzessin*" (Memoirs of an Arabian Princess), to make us aware that all immigrants enrich German society and should have their rights protected by the law, particularly women, inclusive of inheritance issues. This is evident in certain online presentations as well as in her memoir where her talents as a great storyteller can be appreciated.

Although it was an open secret that she had this affair, the consequences of leaving her religion and her land, placed her on bad terms with her nation. Her brothers who became sultans did not answer her letters over the years. When she left Zanzibar for love and expected that her lover would look after her, she left with the openness for newness and possibility that Heinrich, her now-husband had promised, even though it took him 9 months to arrive in Aden where she quickly was converted to Christianity, they hastily married, and the family set off for Germany by train. Sadly, her newborn son died en-route to Hamburg and she did not know how to deal with this loss. She did not understand how she could find comfort in the new religion that her husband had not prepared her for. Nothing in her life prepared her for life as the wife of a merchant in Hamburg. Her husband changed once they arrived in Germany where she was treated as if she were an exotic attraction, and not as a person. Even though her German was broken, she tried to engage with her surroundings which she soon afterwards gave up as people stared and smiled at her. Heinrich did not understand her frustrations enough to give her the aid she needed in living in a new world where a brown-skinned woman, was not usually seen as being the wife of a man who lived on the Alster, in a mansion. She had expected more equality from Christians and found Germans not practising this religion that she, herself, could not understand, which is why she later wrote that she was neither Christian nor Muslim, as Christianity was not explained to her.

When Salma Sayeeda/Emily arrived in Germany, she came alone with Her husband, Heinrich, as her baby had died. The family of her husband was distant and did little to make her feel comfortable in her new country. There was talk that she must be fat or have black feet that could not walk well like Chinese women. She was confronted with this annoying, nonsensical rubbish and she became quite irritated as to how she was treated. She was not used to such rudeness, even though the upper-class in Hamburg thought that they treated her well. I can well imagine her story and it is not so different than today. I would have loved to have had her as a friend to discuss our difference and view of this country as interactive observers. The people she encountered could not comprehend that even though she was from the far-off continent of Africa, that this princess was as royal as any European royalty. She was a writer, a feminist, and an activist who was very involved with the rights of German women, foreigners and poor people. After her husband died, she went from being well-off to having officials who prevented her from having her inheritance, thus impoverishing her and her children. She ended up impoverished, due to loss of inheritance, both in her homeland and in Germany.

So, I am on the quest to know who was Sayyida Salme Said, princess of Zanzibar and how did she become Emily Ruete and how did she become a citizen of Hamburg? What was it like to have brown skin and have lived in luxury where you were looked up to and respected, to come to a country where was seen as an outsider who was to be treated with suspicion? Was she an exotic anomaly or was she a force to be reckoned with? As a writer, she was an artist, as a woman who lost her status in Germany when her husband died in an accident, she became a resourceful woman.

Even though she mastered German, she had to support her family by teaching Arabic and Swahili after the death of her husband from a streetcar accident in Hamburg-Uhlenhorst. As her inheritance in both Hamburg and Zanzibar were withheld, she became the bread-winner of her family and was forced to look for more affordable areas in Germany to raise her three remaining children who were born one after the other, so she went to look for work for temporarily in Dresden, Berlin, Rudolphstadt and Cologne. This status and income for foreign language teachers continues today, and more often for women. Free-lance teachers are not legally given the status to look after their families as employed people are. She was able to use her talents and skills resourcefully, as she had an excellent education to raise her children, to write and find creative means to support them.

She finally settled in Berlin as she wanted to live in a more cosmopolitan area. I have learned much about her life by viewing the documentary with her great-great-granddaughter, Andrea Stumpf, a lawyer and a mother who has done a lot of research on her ancestress, Salma Sayeeda/Emily, who she is proud to discuss.

Due to her continual financial issues, as well as her inheritance in both Germany and Zanzibar being withheld from her, she emigrated from Germany in 1888 with her daughters Antonie Thawka Ruete (born in 1868) and her younger daughter, Rosalie Guza Ruete (born in 1870), to join her son Rudolph, (born in 1869), in Beirut. Her son Rudolph had become a German official at the consulate there and was able to accommodate his mother and sisters. Earlier, in an attempt to get her inheritance and reconcile with her family, she had travelled to London to meet her brother Bargash, who had become the sultan of Zanzibar. He simply refused to grant her an audience. Bargash was in London for an official state meeting but he refused all contact with his sister and was completely against giving her, her inheritance. When she had fled Zanzibar, she lost her inheritance, which had been hers from her parents, so she was completely without means due to the death of her husband and her choice to emigrate. Later on, in 1922, her nephew Khalifa Ben Bargash, who was the son of her half-sister granted her a small pension. It seems that although the British had been influential in her flight from her homeland, they lost all interest when Helgoland was swapped for Zanzibar. The Bismarck even used this issue nineteen years later to obtain the interior lands in East Africa bypassing previous agreements with the sultan of Zanzibar and his supporters.

Emily Ruete/Sayyida Salma, whose religious ambivalence was pronounced, died in Jena, in 1924 and was buried in Hamburg in the Ruete family plot where she is honoured in the Garden of Women in 2007, at the Ohlsdorf cemetery on plot U27. There, a plaque was placed where she was finally honoured in 2007 for the European Year of Equal Rights for All. Magnificently, it stated that her life story should remind us that all immigrants should not be discriminated against. In her life, this was often what she had to deal with, as well as her daughters.

Most of her letters are housed in Leyden, in Holland at that university as her son donated them there due to some interest in Arabic culture in East Africa. In her last years, she lived with the parents of her son-in-law in Jena. I am curious as to how her life was there and how she was treated. It is noted that her daughter, Rosalie divorced her husband, so there may have been a strain.

Even though she was buried on the Ruete family plot, U27, she became viewed as a prominent person in the Ohlsdorf cemetery in 2007. Curiously, in some books about German women, she is mentioned but they stray from dealing with her story. This is probably why she initially published her story and told it as she saw and experienced life, in Zanzibar, Germany, Beirut and East Germany.

Her book, published in 1886, called “Memoiren einer arabischen Prinzessin.”, “Memories of an Arabian Princess“, was her attempt to make the public aware of different types of foreign women living in Hamburg. She wanted the world to know about life in her country of birth and the way that a well-received girl-child born in 1845 developed with love and attention in Zanzibar, as a thinker and writer.

In 1886, a Berlin publisher brought out her book, which was soon afterwards made available in English. As she needed to support herself and to tell her story from her perspective, she hoped that other foreigners in Hamburg would gain respect and understanding once her book was made available in English, French and German. Because of who she was, she learned to speak and write German fluently when she was an adult and her parents in law insisted that she speak fluently. She was under great pressure to adapt to the culture of Hamburg and support groups at that time did not exist. Salma Sayeeda/Emily had to deal with the consequences that marrying a foreigner and a non-Muslim, as well as converting to Christianity brought her which breached her life as an Arab princess from Zanzibar from that of other Muslims in Germany. Yesterday, I spoke with some Lebanese Arab Christian women who fondly told her story to me that they learned about in school in Beirut and Tripoli. It would have been great for people growing up in Germany where she spent most of her life to have known about her as a role model. For Emily/Sayeeda, it was vital that she actively advocates for other people of colour, here in Germany, so she wanted to tell her story to encourage others to know about diversity in Hamburg, and Germany. Her own experience in Germany was the motivation that she had to advocate for foreigners, in particular foreign women and their rights, should they lose their spouse to death or divorce. Unfortunately, her book of memoirs did not get much attention due to historical issues, and it went out of print. Colonial Germany and the rest of the colonies did not want to hear her story as it jarred with how women of colour were presented. Her book confronted these myths and so it was comfortably forgotten.

To conclude, if you read her book, you will note that she was neither completely Christian nor Muslim, which is revealed in the online documentary on youtube, where her descendants speak in German about her life and quote from her memoirs which were published in two volumes by a Berlin firm in 1886. As she came from a privileged background her book is the first known book written in German by an Arabian Muslim woman in the history of Europe. Her literary contribution was reprinted after her death, but once again fell into obscurity. In the documentary with her great-grandchildren and others who spoke about her contributions, there is speculation as to why there was not enough attention given to her book or her life. Emily/Sayyida and her book were both treated as if she were merely an oddity, without perceiving her achievements as a teacher and a writer who had to support her children and herself at a time when most women in Germany were not allowed to work.

Posthumously, she was discussed from time to time, but has often forgotten or purposely “ignored” Her interest in double consciousness which Du Bois spoke about was uncomfortable for the colonial powers who only wanted to use her to get access to East Africa or trade it off at the Congo conference. Perhaps the historical discrepancy is due to the fact that it seems as if when these memoirs appeared, Germany’s colonial ambitions were strong and British East Africa which was a protectorate including Zanzibar was still being “negotiated.” Helgoland was traded for Zanzibar. Is this a case of trading paradise for stormy weather, it is up to you to decide.

Source material:

- Ruete, Emily. *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar* (p. 5). Stone Town Press. Kindle Edition.
- Film and Discussion about Emily Ruete, (Sayyida Salme Said Princess of Zanzibar) von GITA HASHEMI
- Passages II: Inhabiting the North, 1h 26m, 2015, in English. This is a work by Gita Hashemi, with Sarah Abu-Sharar, Zainab Amdahy, Salma Al-Atassi, Claude Awad, Azar Masoumi and Nicole Tanguay. This is a collaborative performance video that shows women with varied backgrounds in Germany which takes a deep look at food, gender, heritage and colonialism, regarding the life of Emily Ruete, who married and followed the German merchant Rudolph Heinrich Ruete to Germany. In this exploration, she evolves into a force of brilliancy.
- Wikipedia, German and English, Emily Ruete
- Emily Ruete in 1886 the book, the Autobiography, „Memoiren einer arabischen Prinzessin“; *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*. In the year her work was published, it was republished four times due to massive interest. Briefly, during that time many contemporary magazines published full reports about her which often ran into exaggerated reports. This may be because her work, her memoir was the first published autobiography by an Arabian woman to be published in the Western world.
- In 1887, the first anonymous translation from German into English appeared, with the original title in English, „Memoirs of an Arabian Princess“ which appeared in two volumes. *Le Cour Grandmaison*. [1
- In 19891, memoirs of Emily Ruetes were published by the ethnologist and Islam Specialist, Annegret Nippa as a reworked piece on her life and contributions under the title „Life in the Sultan’s palace which was reprinted 2011.
- In 1993 her work was re-translated and re-published with the title „An Arabian Princess Between Two Worlds“ by the Dutch Islamist Emeri Johannes van Donzel (1925–2017, who was able to get a lot of material and letters as well as pictures from her son, Heinrich Rudolph Ruete, at the Oosters Institute, in Leiden, Netherlands
- In 1999 the diplomat and historian, Heinz Schneppen published her letters in German about and to people in her home country through the Philo Publishers. It is called „Emily Ruete: Letters Home.“
- Additionally, there are two short texts which deal with her return home to Zanzibar in 1888 which details more memoirs and the traditions of Syrians as well as items from her estate
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X286PV5XKk0&t=1156s>, The Princess of Zanzibar, with her great-great granddaughter, Andrea Stumpf

Musical about her life by

- Georgia Charlotte Hoppe: *Project Salme – a poetic, musical approach to her life*. . Der Klavierauszug hat 108 Seiten incl. eines achtseitigen Librettos mit Regievorschlägen. Verlag Edition Meisel & Co (2017), ISMN 979-0-50072-614-2 (Suche im DNB-Portal).

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