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The Princess Bride: How did a Zanzibari Princess marry a German merchant -and her library end up in Leiden?

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Citation

Damen, J. (2008). The Princess Bride: How did a Zanzibari Princess marry a German merchant -and her library end up in Leiden? *Rare Book Review*, vol. 35, (June-July), pag. 14-15. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/15054>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



THE PRINCESS BRIDE

How did a Zanzibari princess marry a German merchant – and her library end up in Leiden? Jos Damen investigates

In 1865 the German merchant Rudolph Heinrich Ruete met Princess Salme bint Said ibn Sultan of Zanzibar. She had been having family problems and was trying to get in contact with the European community on the island, which is off the coast of Tanzania. Her meeting with Rudolph Ruete, who was working in Zanzibar for the Hamburg firm Hansing & Co, gave Salme the opportunity to escape: from her family, from her religion and even from her country. Her actions naturally had consequences that she, the 21-year-old daughter of the ruler of Oman and Zanzibar, Sultani Said ibn Sultan Al Bu-Said, and one of his women, the Circassian Jilfidan, could not have foreseen.

HIGH FLYING ADORED

Princess Salme met Rudolph Ruete during the hot summer of 1865 and they were soon seen taking romantic walks together. When one of Salme's 26 brothers, Majid – then Sultan of Zanzibar – learned that Salme was pregnant with the German's child, he planned to have her killed. Before he could act, the princess escaped to Aden on the British vessel *HMS Highflyer* in August 1866, an incident which led to a political row between Zanzibar's rulers and the British government.

On 30 May 1867, Princess Salme was baptised in Aden (part of the Archdeaconry of Bombay), adopted Emily as her new name and married Rudolph Ruete. (Their first son, Heinrich, had died a few weeks earlier aged only four months.) The following day the couple left Aden for Marseille and then Hamburg, where they lived for some years. Rudolph and Emily Ruete had three more children: Antonie (b 1868), Said (later called Rudolph Said-Ruete, b 1869) and Rosalie (b 1870). Unfortunately, Rudolph Ruete died in an accident in Hamburg in August 1870 and Emily Ruete's adventurous life took a new turn.

Emily's son Said wrote a handful of books and in 1929 published the life story of his grandfather, *Said bin Sultan (1791-1856), Ruler of Oman and Zanzibar*, with a foreword by Major General Sir Percy Cox. Intriguingly, the copy of this book in the African Studies Centre's library in Leiden, The Netherlands, carries an ex libris of Rudolph Said-Ruete and a dedication in his handwriting: 'To Baron FM van Asbeck, a token of my esteem and sympathy'. The dedication is dated 'Scheveningen [near The Hague], 7 January 1938'.

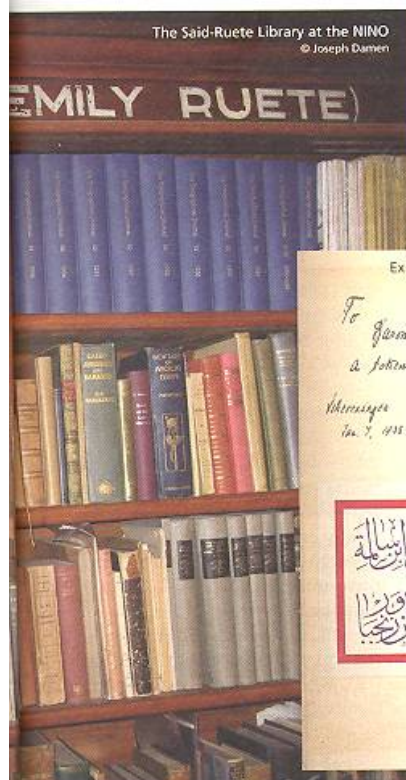
WHY LEIDEN?

Emily Ruete was a friend of the famous Dutch orientalist, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), who was one of the first westerners to visit Mecca and founder of the Eastern Institute at Leiden University (Het Oostersch Instituut).

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FURTHER READING

For more information on the exotic story of the Princess and her library, peruse the following titles:

Sayyida Salme / Emily Ruete: An Arabian Princess between Two Worlds, with an introduction by E van Donzel. Brill, Leiden, 1993

Jaarverslagen 1934-1940, Oostersch Instituut, Leiden
Catalogus Bibliotheca Academiae Lugduno-Batavae, XLII. Leiden, 1938

The Said-Ruete Library itself is impressive and is now housed in the building of the Netherlands Institute for the Near East (NINO) in Leiden and has countless volumes on the geography, history, religion, anthropology and languages of Africa to Arabia. A memorial plaque in the NINO library reads: 'In memory of Emily Ruete (Seyyidah Salme), b August 30, 1844, d February 29, 1924, daughter of Said bin Sultan, ruler of Oman and Zanzibar, this library was founded in 1937 by her children Antonie Brandeis / Rudolph Said-Ruete / Rosalie Troemer in remembrance of the ties of friendship of mother and son with C. Snouck Hurgronje'.

Many people played a part in the amazing lives of Rudolph Said-Ruete and his mother Emily, Princess Salme: sultans and professors, Crown Princess Victoria, the German ruler Von Bismarck, the German Kolonialgesellschaft and the Zionist Movement, not to mention the odd spy. Their lives are sitting on the shelves of a Leiden library waiting to be read.

www.ascleiden.nl www.nino-leiden.nl

Snouck met Emily in Berlin in 1887 and later also befriended her son, Rudolph. Thirteen years after Emily's death in 1924, Rudolph donated her library to Snouck's Eastern Institute. The Said-Ruete Library comprises some 700 books that all carry the same Said-Ruete ex libris as the book in the African Studies Centre's library.

My assumption is that Rudolph came to see the new building in Leiden, and while there in January 1938, on his way from Luzern to his London address, met Professor Frederik Mari Baron van Asbeck, who taught international relations at Leiden University. For many years Said-Ruete had tried to play a role on the international political scene, having his eye on a post at the League of Nations, which had been founded in 1919. Baron van Asbeck had been a member of the Permanent Mandates Commission since 1935, had known Snouck Hurgronje and, therefore, was a good person for Said-Ruete to become acquainted with. On 7 January 1938, Rudolph must have visited Baron van Asbeck's house at Cornelis Jolstraat 62 in Scheveningen, where the family lived from 1933 until 1943 (as 'Mr HJ Baron van Asbeck', FM Baron van Asbeck's son told me in March 2008).

Nine years later, in 1947, Frederik Mari Baron van Asbeck was one of the founders of the African Studies Centre in Leiden – which is why his copy of the Said-Ruete book with its friendly dedication was given to the ASC's library after his death in 1968.



FM Baron van Asbeck



Rudolph Said-Ruete, c1938
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