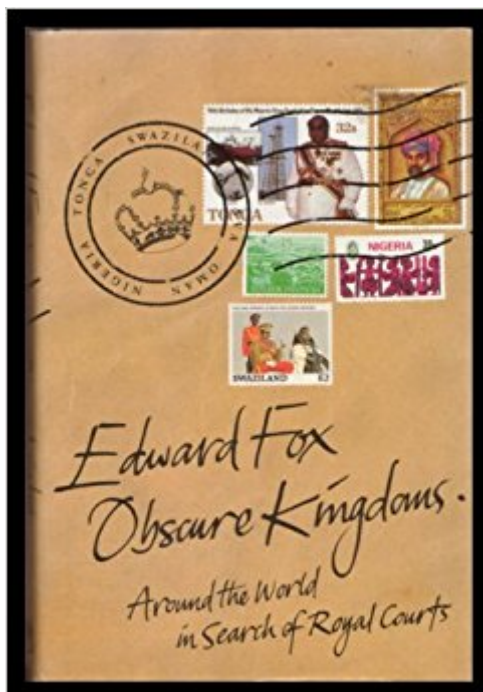


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Obscure Kingdoms



Synopsis

Kings occupy a strange hinterland between men and gods. This is one reason why it is so distressing when they behave badly. In order to discover just what makes them special, Edward Fox travelled to five obscure kingdoms - Tonga, Oman, Nigeria, Swaziland and Java - to meet the hereditary rulers. A traveller with an eye for the peculiar, the supernatural and the ceremonial, Edward Fox met with varying degrees of success, learning that one of the secrets of kingship is distance and inaccessibility. Part travel book, part observations and part commentary on kingship and its traditions, this book also explores political power, the human self, God, the cosmos and, in the book's only footnote, the meaning of life.

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Customer Reviews

As a small person (4'10"), I have always had a fondness for small countries. As a geographer, I enjoy knowing about places most people have never heard of. And as a veteran armchair traveller... Well, this book could hardly miss with me. Edward Fox sets out to explore the mysteries of royalty by visiting a half-dozen small, non-European kingdoms and attempting to meet their respective kings, with varying success. Dressed in his official king-meeting costume of a blue Brooks Brothers suit and tie, Fox meets with royal responses that cover the spectrum: casual affability in Tonga, fierce hostility in Swaziland, democratic divinity on Java. Meeting King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV of Tonga was a snap. Fox simply made an appointment for an interview. He could also observe the King on His Majesty's daily royal bicycle ride cum motorcade. On the other hand, he spent weeks chasing after Sultan Qaboos of Oman as the King made tours and military inspections up and down

his nation. Finally Fox gave up hope of an interview, contenting himself with a bow and a limp handshake in a receiving line. Fox met a fair number of Yourba kings, of whom there are roughly 700 in all of Nigeria. Having lost their temporal power to the central government, they are primarily leaders of traditional Yourba religion. Yet kings are usually chosen on the basis of wealth and professional background, not for their knowledge of and belief in these traditions. The Ataoja of Oshogbo was a well-educated, devout Muslim, and thus found himself caught in a serious spiritual dilemma. Besides his own religious duties, his daughter was required by tradition to be high priestess of Oshun, the Yourba Venus, and preside at the goddess's annual festival. Another Royal Annoyance was an Austrian sculptress and sincere devotee of the Yourba gods who, during her 40-year residence in Oshogbo has made the town the cultural capital of Yourba, turned Oshun's grove into a sculpture garden, and erected (if you'll pardon the expression) an ithyphallic statue on the palace grounds. Not the sort of decoration a pious Muslim usually wants to see in his front yard. A monarch's lot is not a happy one! Swaziland turned out to be downright hostile. On his request for an interview, Fox was told, "I have just been in England. I didn't see the Queen Mother. Do you think I could have seen the Queen Mother just like that?" The author's only sight of King Mswati II was at the performance of a long, boring public ritual ("Take your hands out of your pockets and stand still!" he was scolded after about two hours). But he did manage to meet Maja II, king of the Mamba clan, whose ancestor was given royal title and dignity by Mswati II's ancestor in 1819. Most Swazis don't know he exists, and the Mamba kingship is omitted from all official Swazi histories. Fox met Maja II at His Anonymouse Majesty's butcher shop, where they had a chat and a smoke, and Fox took a photo of the King posing beside his pickup truck. Fox's last royal pilgrimage was to the island of Java and Hamengkubuwono X, Sultan of Yogyakarta, whose kingship has become entirely spiritual. As a disciple hoping to be accepted by a guru, Fox knew his quest would require patience. He moved into a hotel where no one spoke English, took no tourist excursions, bought no souvenirs, and settled down to read "War and Peace" while waiting for his contacts to turn something up. Step by step, contact by contact, Fox closed in on his goal: a highly formal interview, with interpreter, in which the Sultan was as democratic as he could manage. He wasn't exactly Maja II with his pickup, but he went so far as to acknowledge and show interest in Fox's gift, which is more than the cycling Taufa'ahau of Tonga did. Our last glimpse of Hamengkubuwono X is of His Majesty enthusiastically playing soccer in the rain, and afterward handing out gifts of soccer balls and jerseys to his subjects and fellow-players.

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