

In the early 1960's Karonga was a very different place than the present 'uranium' town. The editor reminisces.



The Indian Juggler

In 1961 at the age of 21, I was posted to Karonga, a small town on the shores of Lake Nyasa. It was the most northerly and remote Boma in the country. It was noteworthy as the site of the decisive battle with the last of the Arab slavers, executed by the British in 1896, and of a battle during World War 1 between German and British troops. Little had changed in the intervening years. The Government offices were still the same colonial ruins by the giant baobab tree which had taken a machine gun emplacement at that battle. Roads were unpaved, rivers crossed by drifts or skeletal wooden bridges. During periods of persistent rains the town would be cut off for weeks from road or by lake - a small grass airstrip was its only concession to the twentieth century.

There was no electricity and no telephone. Communication was by the Police radio or the Cape to Cairo telegraph line, a Cecil Rhodes legacy which had served the army during World War 1.

We were some 25 miles south of the Songwe river which formed the border with Tanganyika. There was neither bridge nor ford to join the neighbouring nations. Those who braved the waters were expected to report to the nearest Police station. That meant us.

An urgent message from Immigr-

tion Headquarters in Salisbury came over the radio: "Indian juggler on board the Ilala. Interview and ascertain immigrant status." The MV Ilala was at anchor at Kambwe, a sheltered bay several miles to the north across the North Rukuru River.

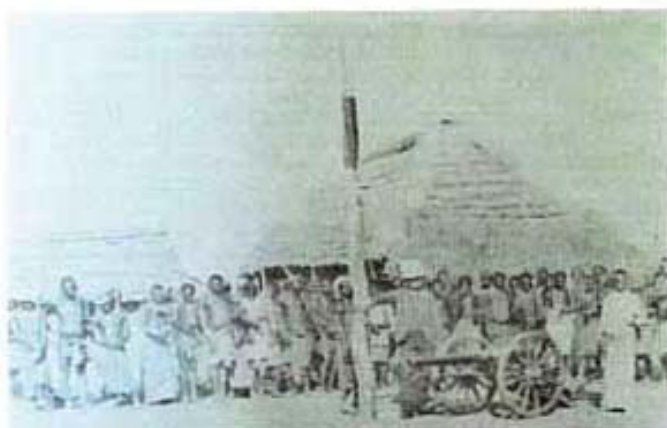
It was the height of the rains. The not inconsiderable Rukuru, without bridge or drift, was running high with a force that would have swept our Land Rover away. Being a dutiful person not given to quibbling about the reasonableness or importance of orders, I borrowed a bicycle and set off to visit the Nysaland Merchant Marine.

In bare feet with shorts hiked high and bicycle aloft, I crossed the river without difficulty. I arrived at Kambwe Lagoon in good order and entrusted the bicycle to the care of a nearby villager. The ship's boat, answering to my shout, came to take me on board. The Engineer, happy for fresh company, welcomed me. It was soon established that there was no Indian juggler on board. My officer companion invited me to join him in his cabin for a few Tusker Beers. A few soon became many. Before we knew it night was upon us and I was invited to dine with the officers and passengers in what passed as a First



Miozi at Karonga

ALC Stockade,
Karonga



1961: Baobab
World War I gun
emplacement; the
Post Office and
Police Station (in
background).



Stores at Karonga
1962



Rukuru River
Crossing 1961,
Track to Kambwe
meets the Lake
left of centre.



Class Dining Room.

In charge was Captain Kemp, a stickler for form. He could not have been grander had he been in charge of the Queen Mary. He sat resplendent in his immaculately starched, high collared, tropical white uniform. I sat damp, dirty and bedraggled in my shirt sleeves and shorts.

My stomach was in revolt. It was finding it hard to withstand the assault of the dinner's solids. Litres of fine Tanganyika Tusker beer were already wreaking havoc on a system not well tuned to that beverage. For fear of an embarrassing accident, I bid my hosts a hungry and hasty goodnight.

With unsteady step, I made my way over the side to the ship's boat and into the night to regain the precious bike. It was moonless and dark. In my befuddled state I was unable to engage the dynamo. The ride back was to be perilously unlit. The road to the river had been neglected during the rains. The wayward grass had turned it into nothing better than a village track. Eyes, brains and limbs could not unscramble the alcohol distorted signals but perseverance overcame intoxication. After a few tumbles, the river crossing was gained.

The opposite bank was hidden in the darkness. The river had risen considerably during the day. Emboldened by the potent brew, I waded in. Chest deep in the water and bicycle held high, I set off into the soaking blackness. The river had scoured its sandy bed. I fell into numerous gullies, forced to sink, sightless, in the turbid depths to retrieve my fallen steed.

I arrived downstream from the road. The banks, heavily grown with plantains, were high and steep. Using the bike held overhead as a battering ram, I created enough space to throw it clear. With some difficulty, I hauled myself up to safety battling tangled vegetation in a blind effort to find the road.

Mission accomplished! I could have been lost for ever to an unknown end, swept into the Lake; just another log in the raft of rotting banana plants lining the lake's edge in time of flood; a morsel of meat for any passing crocodile. But I am here to tell the tale – alive, well, older, wiser and, more importantly, a model of sobriety.