

IN A MOOD OF BEAUTIFUL TRANQUILITY AND  
NOSTALGIA, IN OUR PRE-CHRISTMAS COAST CAUSERIE,

EDWARD RODWELL LOOKS AT . . .

# A day of enchantment



PRIVATE KARAMA — 61 years ago he stood between Capt. Kenneth Rodwell and Major Wavell and pumped bullets at the advancing Schutztruppe.

DECEMBER SUNSHINE turned the makuti roof of the guesthouse into yellow brass; the knobby baobab shone pewterlike with a touch of silver. The lawnpath, brushed ochre, wound through gold and magenta bougainvillea. Six geese dotted the lawn, beaks dipping in broken rhythm at grass roots.

This, I thought, is as colourful a day as the Lord hath made. There was such brightness that beyond the mangroves rising above the cliffedge I could see redroofed whitewashed houses clear and unshimmering on the far creekbank.

Air and sky were as quiet as a faded blue eiderdown; muted sounds floated from the byred milch goats; sussurrus of gossip from crouching men as spearpoints of milk met froth in shiny pails.

A paddled canoe, black and shadowless, moved upstream against low ebb; a skein of whimbrel wingtipped the water, pinion downbeats eddied and sparkled marking the passage of the flight. The canoe's bow ripple meandered ashore and was lost on the yellow sand and coral rock-fall.

The fishbuyer pedalled heavily, cycle tyres sinking into ruts of the sandy track. Narrow pants clung to his legs; white shirt; Lamu cap with worn figurements. He wore a wristwatch which with a cycle are a fishbuyer's tools of trade. Anxious about his business, the buyer preferred night and early morning catches to those of a long day's trawl when fish have lain in the slop of a sunheated bilge.

## Dropped anchor

The canoe eased into the shallows; the bow paddler climbed outboard, carried the rockcoral anchor a few paces forward of the bows, gauged the length of rope necessary against the receding tide, dropped the anchor, made fast the rope.

From amidships the fisherman hoisted a kikapu over the gunwale, walked slowly across the beach, set down the basket.

At the top of the grassy bank the buyer leaned his cycle against a sapling, clambered stifflegged down the slope. With professional diffidence he stood silent and contemplative. Then taking one handle of the basket he tipped out the coral head prowlers dappling the golden sand with silver.

The buyer looked toward the canoe where the second man having pulled a tattered vest over his shoulders lifted a black runner, dropped the fish into the shallows. A grouper and parrot fish followed. As it is bad cess to lift fish by the tail dour palm fronds were rove through gills and mouths.

The fishermen's faces were etched with tiredness. From the previous nightfall at the time of *jua laaga miti* when the sun said *Revoir* to the trees until *jogoo la tatu* the morning's third cockcrow, the canoe had floated at anchor in the *milango* reefbreak off Mtwapa.

In the starlight weighted lines, filaments of gold in the phosphorescent water, had bent and tautened with the boatroll. Dawn painted the seascape brickred and pearlgrey; tide ebb lowered the sea's depth and heightened the swell against the reefedge. Sudsy water now leapt high and snowwhite in a booming tumbling sparkling ballet floodlit by the rising sun.

The fishbuyer weighed the catch by eye: extracted two pound notes from an old leather wallet.

The older fisherman was small and wiry. He watched without interest a passing launch, all fibre glass and chromium. The heartbeat of its inboard-outboard raising the swell that rocked the canoe. The old man walked up the beach, gathered the small fish into the basket, placed the parrot and grouper on top. The buyer added a ten shilling note to the others and held the money fanwise between finger and thumb.

"Hamsini" he said, "Pesa mkononi".

It seemed that the fishermen were not interested in fifty shillings for the long night's work. The old man lifted the basket; his companion picked up the runner by the palm string. In silence they walked along the cliff path. Disappointed, the buyer returned the notes to the wallet, climbed the grassy slope, mounted his machine and pedalled back along the track toward Shimo la Tewa where other boats would have catches for sale by the old ferry ramp.

Cumulus was now banking to the south, the morning zephyr "umande" moved gently from the western hills to the sea. The fishermen crossed the lawn to the guesthouse step.

"Shikamoo," Private Karama, I greeted the old man with the time-honoured salute to one of his age. His face cracked into a smile. He lowered the basket. "Marahaba," he said. I never meet this man but I remember the day in 1914 when Private Karama of the Arab Rifles stood between Captain Kenneth Rodwell and Major Wavell somewhere on the south coast beyond Msambweni and pumped bullets from rifles at the advancing German "Schutztruppe". When a ricochet glanced off a rifle and into Wavell's stomach Private Karama ran for a towel and with it staunched the bloodflow. Wavell lived, to die the following year during the battle of Mwele.

The black runner was weighed and Olivia placed two pound notes into Karama's cupped hands. His companion lifted the basket to his shoulder. Karama grinned again as he tucked the money into his waistband.

The fishermen walked slowly and with dignity along the drive, their bare feet treading out the scuffed hoof marks of the seven ponies that earlier like highspirited schoolboys had galloped from the boma . . . on their way to the dry grass growing at the forest edge.