

DYING BREED OF EARLY EAST AFRICAN TRADERS

By Edward Rodwell

OVER the last decade we have watched the East African colonial merchant princes fold their tents quietly and go. Before they did so many merged and kept an identity. Those which dealt in coffee and merchandise were mostly washed away in the rising tide of independence. Those that remain find the going difficult as agency after agency is passed to African distributors.

One of the last companies to succumb to national aspirations is what used to be known as Smith Mackenzie and Company (the "Ltd". was added in 1936). Of late the greater part of the shareholding has been secured by a local consortium.

In one way it is a pity that the Company could not have kept its identity in the hands of those who have guided its destinies for the past 98 years. In 1977 the company would have celebrated its centenary. Under the masthead of Mackenzie (Kenya) Ltd. the celebration may still be honoured.

When I first came to Kenya Smith Mackenzie and Co. was an empire that stretched from the Coast to the Lake. With headquarters at Mombasa

the company had offices and agencies throughout Zanzibar, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. These were the days when all the Uganda and much of the Tanzania buying and selling as well as imports and exports were handled by Mombasa companies of which Smith Mackenzie was the most influential.

Smithmacks knew the country from Mombasa to the Lake because it was their foot caravans that travelled the road before the Uganda Railway was built. It was the Company's porters who carried the s.s. William Mackinnon in broken-down headloads from Mombasa to Port Victoria, fighting their way through the Nandi country. The company also contracted to supply food and trade goods to Imperial British East Africa Company's staging posts along the same road.

But ten years before this time in 1886, Smith Mackenzie and Company were commissioned to act as agents to H.M. Stanley in connection with the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition. The company recruited and fitted out 620 Zanzibari porters who with Stanley sailed in the B.I.

ship Madura, the destination being Matadi near the mouth of the Congo River. From here the caravan was to march to the Equatorial Province of Egypt, relieve Emin Pasha and complete the crossing of Africa from West to East by marching on to Bagamoyo in Tanzania. The ledger showing the roster of porters still remains in the Company archives.

Usually at the end of a safari of any length leaders and porters take a noggin or two. Emin Pasha must have taken two. He fell from the bedroom window of a house at Bagamoyo and almost broke his neck. A man who witnessed this feat was a partner of Smith Mackenzie and Company. His granddaughter, Mrs. Desmond Cockell (nee Nicol) lives in Nairobi, married to a Smith Mackenzie executive.

But how did Mr. Smith meet Mr. Mackenzie? In 1872 Sultan Barghash of Zanzibar was anxious to develop the trade of his dominions, which included the Zanzibar islands and mainland to the Lake. The Sultan approached the British India Steamship Co. and encouraged the shipping line to start a regular service from Bombay to Zanzibar with transshipment facilities at Aden. The B.I. commissioned a Capt. H.A. Frazer as their first agent; together with an assistant named Archibald Smith. Two years later Frazer died. In 1875, just a century ago Mr. E.N. Mackenzie arrived at Zanzibar from Mackinnon Mackenzie of Calcutta. Smith and Mackenzie joined forces.

It was now evident that the East African coast would become of commercial and political importance following the spate of explorers who had probed