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THE EARLY YEARS OF THE MOMBASA CLUB: A HOME AWAY FROM HOME FOR EUROPEAN- CHRISTIANS¹

P.J.L. FRANKL

I

The word “club” as employed in “Mombasa Club” derives from the late eighteenth century and signifies “an association of people formed mainly for social purposes and having premises, providing meals, temporary accommodation, etc., for the use of members.” The early nineteenth century saw a spate of new London clubs such as the Travellers in 1819 (for gentlemen who had traveled abroad), and in 1824 both the Athenaeum (the most intellectually elite of all the London clubs), and the Oriental (founded by officers in the service of the East India Company who were not eligible for the military clubs of Pall Mall). One purpose of these clubs was to give gentlemen living space from which their womenfolk were excluded. The expansion of a new British empire, from the beginning of Queen Victoria’s long reign, saw the establishment of “English” clubs in Asia (especially in the Indian subcontinent) and in Africa (especially from Cape Town to Cairo).² A major purpose of these “English” clubs abroad was to give members living space from which natives were excluded. The Mombasa Club, dating from the end of Queen Victoria’s reign, fits into this pattern.

When Edward Rodwell compiled his history of The Mombasa Club (1988) it was thought that no club rules had survived from the Victorian or Edwardian era. Since then “Mombasa Club: Rules and Regulations,” which cannot be later than 1903, have been spotted in the British Library’s branch at Colindale.³ These Rules and Regula-

¹“European-Christians” is a translation of the Swahili *waZungu*.

²Allen 1975: ch. 9 (“The Club”).

³A typescript headed “Mombasa Club Rules” was given to Edward Rodwell in the 1990s; although undated, it cannot be earlier than 1929.

tions, reproduced below, help one to form a fuller picture of the lifestyle enjoyed by the ruling caste at a time when Mombasa was still the capital of the East Africa Protectorate.⁴ Unlike many other clubs of this sort, ladies were, almost from the beginning, welcome at the Mombasa Club, at any rate during the hours of daylight and, on special occasions, after dusk, but without being entitled to vote.

The British Library's newspaper library at Colindale is a treasure trove, a fact widely recognized by students of history, As far as East Africa's newspapers are concerned some of the British Library's holdings are rare, even unique. For example, the material published in July 1903 and reproduced below, was an exciting discovery—not even the Mombasa Club archives possessed a copy. Why a local newspaper should have published the Mombasa Club's rules and regulations is a question which, perhaps, can no longer be answered. Suffice it to say that the paper of the three relevant issues of the *East Africa & Uganda Mail* is now so fragile that it is impossible to turn over a page without damage being caused. The decision was taken, therefore, not to make further deliveries of this parcel of the newspaper to readers until such time as money might become available to microfilm the bundle. That could be many years hence, if ever. A recent article has made it all too clear that from now on nothing can be taken for granted at the British Library's impoverished newspaper library.⁵

II

THE MOMBASA CLUB⁶ Rules and Regulations⁷

1—The club⁸ shall be called the “MOMBASA CLUB.”⁹

⁴The British transferred their capital from Mombasa to Nairobi in 1907. The headquarters of the railway had already been moved to Nairobi in 1899.

⁵H.R. Woudhuysen, “Vandals of Colindale: Why the British Library is Discarding Newspapers,” *Times Literary Supplement*, (18 August 2000), 14-15.

⁶“The Mombasa Club was founded in August 1896 (a year and a month after the imposition of a British protectorate), and in the early part of the following year was moved from temporary premises in the main street [Ndia K' uu] to an excellent site on the sea front” (*Handbook* 1906:172). At this time there were many small long-established towns along the entire length of the Swahili coast; urban settlements in the interior such as Nairobi, Nakuru, and Port Florence did not yet exist.

⁷“There must have been rules and regulations but such lists have not survived” (Rodwell 1988:13).

⁸“The Mombasa Club was the centre of all social life on the island” (Foran 1936:223).

⁹“The building . . . was neither an imposing nor luxurious Club-house, and has

2—The following are eligible as members:

All English subjects resident in East Africa;¹⁰ but gentlemen of foreign nationalities¹¹ are eligible to become members and enjoy the privileges of the club,¹² with the exception of that of voting at any meeting, or eligible for the committee.¹³

3—The committee may make such bye-laws as may from time to time be desirable for the admission of honorary members for ten days, without payment of entrance fee or subscription. After the lapse of ten days the committee have power to elect any such stranger to be a temporary member, for a period not exceeding three months on payment of the full monthly subscription.

Honorary and temporary members shall take no part in the affairs of the club, nor shall they have the privilege of introducing guests.

The committee shall have power to make exceptions to the rule in special cases according to their discretion.

4—The club shall be managed by a committee of seven members, one of whom shall be Honorary Secretary¹⁴—three to form a quorum. The Senior Resident Civil Officer in the Government Service, the Senior Resident Military Officer, and the Senior Resident Officer of the Uganda Railway shall always be members of the committee,¹⁵

changed but little in general appearance during the past three decades” (Foran 1936:224).

¹⁰“Among the European officials no man holding what was deemed a subordinate post could become a member: a salary of £250 a year upwards being the acid test of eligibility” (Foran 1936:224).

¹¹Foreign nationalities: by 1914 Mombasa had seven foreign consulates—Austro-Hungary, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal (Karstadt 1914:115).

¹²In 1896, the year of the Club’s foundation, there were 101 Europeans resident in Mombasa, of whom 24 were Protectorate officials and their families, while 39 were Railway officials with their families, and twenty were missionaries (Church of England and Roman Catholic); ten were employees of English business firms, and two employees of German firms; there were four Greek contractors, two Greek hotelkeepers (Central Hotel), two Rumanian hotelkeepers (Africa Hotel); four Europeans had the indignity of being listed as miscellaneous. Goanese and Eurasians were listed separately (Hardinge 1898:8).

¹³Although Rule 2 is not explicit, Jewish gentlemen were deemed ineligible for membership of the Mombasa Club until the early 1960s. A revised Rule 2, probably dating from the early 1930s, reads: “All ladies and gentlemen of European nationality or American of European extraction shall be eligible as members; lady members shall not be entitled to vote.”

¹⁴A full-time secretary was first appointed in 1919.

¹⁵In 1903, and in general, precedence was a matter of great importance to the British. Hardinge established an official order of precedence in the East Africa Protectorate in 1897: H.M.’s Commissioner was at the top of the pyramid, the Officer Commanding Troops third, while the Chief Engineer of the Uganda Railway was sixth—he had slipped to eighth place by 1902 (Hardinge; *Official Gazette*).

and one of them shall always be Chairman.¹⁶ The other four members shall be elected at the Annual General Meeting; all vacancies that may occur during the year to be filled by a general ballot of the resident members.

A House Committee and Wine Committee¹⁷ of not less than three members of the general committee, or seven other members as the general committee may invite, shall meet whenever necessary.

5–The Annual General Meeting shall be held in January of each year for the election of the committee, and such other business as may be laid before it.

No other business, except that of which notice has been given, shall be discussed.

6–A special general meeting shall be called at any time by the committee, or on a requisition made to the secretary in writing and signed by at least ten members. The subject of the meeting must also be stated, and no other subject can be discussed at such meeting.

No less than seven days notice must be given of the special general meeting.

7–Election to the club shall be by the committee of the club.¹⁸

8–In the case of a candidate being blackballed he cannot be put up again for election for three months.

9–Candidates for election may use the club, but until they are elected their proposers and seconders are responsible for any debts they may incur.

10–Members may introduce visitors to the club, provided their stay in Mombasa is limited to ten days, but no member shall introduce a resident who is a non-member of the club.

¹⁶The first known chairman of the Mombasa Club, for the years 1898 and 1899, was a Scotsman, Clifford Henry Craufurd CMG (1859-1900), after whom a street in Mombasa's Old Town was named. He joined the Imperial British East Africa Company on 1 September 1888. Perhaps his main claim to fame (or to infamy, depending on one's point of view) was that in December 1890, he "pacified" the Swahili Sultanate of Witu, with the assistance of 150 troops and a Maxim gun. In 1896/97 and again for part of 1899 he was Acting Commissioner of the East Africa Protectorate. Obituary in *The Times*, 1 June 1900, 9.

¹⁷The prohibition of wine and spirits (according to three of the four *madbhabs*) is one of the distinctive marks of the Muslim world of which Mombasa and the Swahili coast form a part; for several decades the Mombasa Club was the only place in the Old Town where alcoholic drinks were obtainable, and for several decades the Club had no Muslim members. For many European-Christians "drink was unquestionably a major factor in life in the tropics" (Allen 1979:60).

¹⁸A subsequent rule, possibly dating from the early 1930s, states: "The committee shall have power to invite the Governor of the Colony and Protectorate and staff and any distinguished stranger temporarily residing in the Protectorate to become honorary members of the Club."

11—Proposers and seconders of honorary and temporary members shall be responsible for all debts incurred by them to the club.

12—The entrance fee for all resident and country members shall be fifty rupees,¹⁹ payable one half on election, and the balance within three months.

13—The monthly subscriptions, payable in advance, shall be:

Resident members: Rs 10 per month²⁰

Naval members: Rs 2 per week

Naval members, gun-room rank: Re 1 per week

Country members: Rs 10 per month²¹

14—Club bills shall be paid within 15 days of presentation. In the event of a member's account remaining unpaid for one month his name shall, after warning from the Honorary Secretary, be posted in the club, and in default of payment within 14 days thereafter he shall cease to be a member of the club.

15—The committee have power to suspend the above rule (No 14) in such cases as they may deem fit.

16—Members are responsible for settling their accounts with the club before leaving Mombasa.

17—All money shall be paid to the Honorary Secretary or to such person as he may direct and his receipt shall be considered good.

18—No notice of any kind shall be posted up in the club room except by authority of the Honorary Secretary.

19—Members shall have the right to vote by written proxy at a general meeting on any specific question.

20—No repeal, variation nor addition to any standing rule of the club shall be made unless carried by a majority of the members at a general meeting and agreed to by the Proprietor²² Notice of any proposed alteration must be sent in writing to the Honorary Secretary ten days previous to its coming before a general meeting, and it must be posted in the club for seven days previous to the date of the meeting.

21—In case of any infraction of the Rules and Regulations of the club, and if the conduct of any member, in or out of the club, be un-

¹⁹15 rupees were equivalent to £1 (*Handbook* 1906:172); the Indian rupee was replaced by the East African shilling in the early 1920s.

²⁰Rs 11 per month (Playne 1908/09:96).

²¹Rs 11 per month by 1906 (*Handbook* 1906: 172).

²²The proprietor: the first proprietor was Messrs Boustead, Ridley & Co (with houses in London, Colombo, Zanzibar, and Mombasa, the Mombasa branch having been established in 1892). That company went into liquidation on 30 March 1901, and from 13 January 1902 was succeeded by Boustead Brothers of Zanzibar and Mombasa. John Melville Boustead was one of two partners (*Gazette* 13 October 1901, 5; & 15 January 1902, 5).

worthy of the character of a gentleman, the committee shall take cognizance of and report to the general meeting, convened for the purpose, the circumstances of the case; and pending the decision of the general meeting, the committee shall have power to prohibit such member from making use of the club. If in the opinion of two thirds of the members present, at such general meeting, the offended party has merited expulsion, he shall cease to be a member of the club forthwith and cease to have any claim thereon.

22—All complaints to be made in writing to the Honorary Secretary.

23—Members shall not find fault with servants, but complaints against them may be made in writing to the Honorary Secretary.

24—No members shall engage for private service any servant of the club on condition of his leaving the club.

25—Accidental breakages or damages of any kind done to the club property shall be paid for by the members causing the same at cost price. But any member causing wilful damage to the club property shall be charged at a rate to be decided by the committee, not exceeding three times the cost of repairs.

26—The committee may make and amend bye-laws as they may deem advisable for the interior economy of the club.

27—The members and the Proprietor are bound to accept the decision of the committee as final on all questions.

28—All communications between members and the Proprietor must be made through the committee.

29—Ladies introduced by members may make use of the club premises,²³ exclusive of the billiard room and card rooms,²⁴ up to six o'clock p.m.²⁵

30—The members of the club are bound to support the Proprietor for a period of five years from the 8th of May 1897.²⁶ Members may resign but cannot form another club in or near Mombasa.

²³“A special feature of this distant oasis of civilisation [“The British Club at Mombasa”] is the fact that the ladies of the town participate most actively in the many pleasures of its existence’ (*Gazette* 5 June 1901, 2).

²⁴Early in 1903 a new reading room was added, and the billiard room enlarged so as to contain three tables (*Handbook* 1906:172). There is no mention of a library, but there was one, for on 14 August 1900 (the day after the annual Mombasa Aquatic Sports), a dance was held at the Club, commencing at 10 p.m. and was kept up, with an interval for supper, for many hours, “the library being most tastefully decorated with flags.” (*Gazette* 22 August 1900, 5).

²⁵“Every evening at seven o'clock a native servant went round the premises sounding a deep-toned gong vigorously to signify that all women must vacate the Club forthwith” (Foran 1936:224).

²⁶The significance of this date is not absolutely certain. However, since the

31—No liability rests with the members beyond the amount of their unpaid bills due to the Proprietor.

**BYE-LAWS
MADE BY THE COMMITTEE
under rule 26**

1—No visitor is allowed to tender payment for anything he may be served with in the club.

2—No natives, except servants of the club, or servants of the members, shall be admitted into the club.²⁷ All servants attending in the public rooms to be properly dressed.

3—The servants of members when on the club premises must obey any order given by the Club Steward or the Honorary Secretary.

4—No drinks will be served unless the order is accompanied with a chit.

5—Gambling is strictly prohibited on the club premises.

6—A club whist book shall be kept, and no money shall be collected from members of the club for any card game other than whist.

7—The club whist points shall be 8 annas.²⁸

8—The authorised charge per member is two annas a sitting for which a chit should be signed.

9—Thursday is guest night at the club, and ladies may be invited to dinner by members on that evening.

10—Ladies may be invited on any other evening with the concurrence of the Honorary Secretary.

11—Evening dress is not imperative except on guest nights.

12—Members or members with their guests staying in the club premises after 1 a.m. will be charged Rs 2 each. The club shall be finally closed at 2 a.m., and the stewards are authorized by the committee to extinguish the lights at that hour.

13—Should no member be using the club at midnight the stewards shall be permitted to close the premises.

14—Luncheons. Members desirous of lunching at the club should

Mombasa Club moved from Ndia K'uu "in the early part" of 1897, it may be that Saturday 8 May 1897 was the first day of the lease of the new premises beside the fort—premises which the club has occupied for more than a hundred years.

²⁷Until this bye-law was repealed, it seems that the only "natives" elected as (Honorary) Members of the Mombasa Club were: Aga Khan III (1877-1957) and Sir 'Ali bin Salim al-BuSa'idi (1870s-1940). Both gentlemen were well-known anglophiles, and exceedingly wealthy.

²⁸There were 16 annas to the rupee. In 1910 the cent replaced the anna, a rupee having 100 cents.

give notice to the Club Steward on the previous day. Failing such notice no guarantee can be given that luncheon will be supplied.

15–Dinner.²⁹ Members desirous of dining at the club must give notice on the previous day. Any members who wish to dine without having given such notice may do so, if it can be arranged, at an extra charge of Re 1 each, but any member on giving notice to the steward before 7 p.m. shall be supplied with dinner. This will not be the ordinary club dinner, but will be known as a scratch dinner. The charge will be Rs 3.

16–Any member who subscribes to a dinner, or any entertainment, shall pay whether he attends or not.

17–No gentleman who has been proposed as a temporary member shall be allowed to enter the club, save as a visitor in company with a member, before he has obtained the necessary card of temporary membership from the Honorary Secretary.

18–Any stranger invited by a member to become an honorary member may use the club on his name being entered by the proposer in the book for that purpose.

19–The Proprietor shall not propose or second candidates for election.

20–Residents in the East Africa Protectorate³⁰ may only be elected honorary or temporary members once a year.

21–Dogs or other animals are not allowed on the club premises. Any member bringing a dog into the club and neglecting to tie it up will be liable to a fine of Rs 2.

22–All communications should be addressed to the Honorary Secretary, except those referring to the payment of bills, which should be addressed to the Proprietor.

All cheques should be made out in the name of the Proprietor Mombasa Club.³¹

²⁹On special occasions there were special dinners. For example, on the 81st birthday of Queen Victoria (24 May 1900) there was a dinner to which forty-eight sat down, followed by a concert, and on 21 November 1901 Sir Charles Eliot gave a dinner at the Club for Mr A. S. Rogers on the occasion of his appointment as Prime Minister of the government of His Highness the Sultan of Zanzibar. In a later version of the rules, dating perhaps from the early 1930s, it is laid down that “the committee shall have power to allow luncheons, dinners, dances, balls, festivals, carnivals and other functions to be held in the Club . . .”

³⁰The imposition of a protectorate was proclaimed in Mombasa by Arthur Hardinge on 1 July 1895 (PRO FO/107/36). The East Africa Protectorate came to an end at midnight on 31 December 1920 when jurisdiction over this portion of the white man’s burden was transferred from the Foreign Office to the Colonial Office.

³¹The National Bank of India (Head Office: 47 Threadneedle Street, EC) was the

23—The following are the reciprocal arrangements with the Zanzibar Club.³²

24—Any member of the club may, twice a year, become an honorary member of the other club for a period of ten days from the date of his arrival in the place of his temporary residence, and shall have the option of remaining such for a period not exceeding three consecutive months upon payment of a monthly subscription of Rs 10, or for a week or part of a week Rs 2-8.

Regulations for use of bed-rooms³³

1—Bed-rooms may be retained in advance by members on application to the Club Steward, who shall enter all such applications with the hour and date of their receipt in a book kept for that purpose.

2—Any member who has occupied a bed-room for ten days, and any honorary or temporary member who has occupied a bed-room for seven days may be requested to vacate the room at 24 hours notice should it be required for another member.

3—Should a bed-room be retained for a member on his application on an appointed date, and not used by him on that date, the room shall be retained for him for 24 hours only in the event of it being required for another member; and the member who originally retained the room shall be liable to be charged therefor for one day.

4—The charges for the use of a bed-room shall be as follows:-

A day: Rs 3.

A week: Rs 15.

For a longer period than a week Rs 2 for each day after the first seven days.

5—Such charges shall include the use of bed and bed-rooms with

only bank in Mombasa from August 1896 (when the Mombasa Club was established) until Tuesday 3 January 1911, when the Standard Bank of South Africa (Head Office: 10 Clement's Lane, EC) opened its doors in Ndia K'uu).

³²The English Club in Zanzibar was founded in 1888. "Although even the most junior members of the administration were accepted automatically, club membership was only open to the most senior members of the commercial and trading firms" (Allen 1979:60). A postcard dated 1903, now displayed in Zanzibar's luxurious Serena Inn (opened in 1997) reads: "les Anglais savent partout s'installer avec luxe et confort, à Zanzibar comme ailleurs." In a subsequent version of the rules (not earlier than 1929) no explicit mention is made of the Zanzibar Club, but "all members of the Nairobi Club on the 31 January 1903 shall be members of the Mombasa Club," This reflects the enormous growth of the European settlement in Nairobi in the previous two decades and the consequent demise of Zanzibar as the capital and chief emporium of "our East African Empire."

³³"Seven bedrooms"

bed linen, water and outside service without any extra charge whatsoever.

Published in three consecutive issues of
East Africa & Uganda Mail
Mombasa, East Africa Protectorate
July 1903

III

At the end of Queen Victoria's reign, Mombasa was an overwhelmingly Islamic town and wholly within the dominions of the BuSa'idi Sultan, whose red flag flew daily from the ramparts of the Portuguese-built fort next door.³⁴ It is understandable that when making the original rules and regulations of the Mombasa Club such facts were deemed irrelevant by the rule-makers, since their prime purpose was to establish a home from home for the European-Christians at the top end of the social scale, to the exclusion of all others. In the early 1960s the British Government was compelled to relinquish their administration of both the colony (the interior) and the protectorate (the coast), and so began a more inclusive era in the life of the Mombasa Club.

The long-term future of the Mombasa Club cannot, of course, be predicted (it may not be totally irrelevant, perhaps, to note that in Zanzibar the English Club was unable to survive the bloody revolution of 1964, vanishing virtually overnight after an existence of some 75 years). Suffice it to say that in the Indian subcontinent, where circumstances are, admittedly, quite different, a surprising number of "English" clubs continue to flourish.

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³⁴Hardinge 1898:8.

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