



Mzee Ali: The Biography of an African Slave-Raider turned Askari and Scout

Bror MacDonell

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‘Mzee’ is the Swahili word for an ‘old timer’, a respected elder. Mzee Ali Kalikilima was born near the present-day town of Tabora in western Tanzania, probably in the 1870s (there is mention of ‘The Doctor’—Dr David Livingstone) to black Muslim parents of noble birth. Aged 14, Mzee Ali led his first slaving safari to the shores of Lake Tanganyika and thence, with his caravan of captured slaves and ivory, through the malaria-, tsetse fly- and lion-infested wilds, to the Arab markets of Dar es Salaam, some 1,200 kilometres away on the Indian Ocean. With the arrival of the German colonizers, Mzee Ali joined the German East African forces as an askari. He worked on the new railway line that was being laid from Dar es Salaam to Dodoma and finally to Mwanza on the shores of Lake Victoria—a monumental feat. With the outbreak of World War I, he found himself attached to the forces of the legendary German commander, General von Lettow-Vorbeck. He saw action at the Battle of Salaita Hill near Mombasa and was with the General to the end, fighting a guerrilla campaign through southern Tanganyika, Portuguese East Africa, Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia and to final surrender. After the war, he joined the British Colonial Service as a game scout. What sets Mzee Ali apart from other African biographies is that it is the first account of East African history told from an Afrocentric perspective.

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