

AFRICA REMEMBERED

Gijubhai

Translated by Mamata Pandya

Africa Saambhariyu Author Gijubhai
Shri Daxinamurti Balsahitya *Chaalo Pravaase Granthmala*
(Travel Series)
Editors Gijubhai and Taraben
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Translator's Note

Gijubhai went to East Africa in 1907 primarily to earn a livelihood, but also imbued with a spirit of adventure and discovery. Though it was his first time away from home and country, he quickly turned strangers into friends. During the two years that he spent there, he made the most of the opportunity to travel, see, and experience new places and culture. During his stay in Africa he was actively engaged in literary activities; the friends started a Literature Club where speeches were made, and essays were written—all in English. He also learnt a fair bit of Swahili, the local language. He wrote a number of poems extolling nature under the pen name Vinayak. He wrote interesting and descriptive letters to the family. And spent a lot of quiet time in contemplation. All these were the seeds of what was to later blossom into his philosophy of children and education. His experience of working with Stevenson gave him an insight into the legal profession which helped him in his later work as a Pleader.

It is not clear when he first wrote these pieces about his time in Africa; whether it was while he was there, or much later when he started writing for children. But the descriptions are as vivid as if he were recording them in his diary, and the style quintessentially Gijubhai!

These are some essays from those reminiscences.

MUNGU YA MAISO IYA

I had recently arrived in Africa. I was walking along in my pant and coat with my glasses on. I did not realise that they were talking about me.

I did not know any Swahili, the local language. A couple of people kept muttering "*mungu ya maiso iya*". "*mungu ya maiso iya*".

I ignored this for some days. But then, every day they would come and touch my feet and say "*mungu ya maiso iya.*"

I was perplexed. Were they making fun of me? Were they asking me something? Did they want anything?

I started picking up a few words of Swahili. *Maaji* for water, and *Lete* for bring. But I still did not know what this meant "*mungu ya maiso iya*".

There was a watch repairer. He was from our country; from Rajkot. His name is not important. I asked him "Brother, what does this mean "*mungu ya maiso iya*"?"

He burst into laughter. "That is incredible! You have become a God."

I asked, "But what are they saying?"

My friend innocently bent and touched my feet saying “*mungu ya maiso iya.*” Then he explained. *Mungu* means God. *Maiso* means eyes, and *iya* means four. Four-eyed God.

But four eyes? Two mine and two eyes of my glasses.

Time passed. I made friends with the local people. They would meet and greet me every day with *Mungu*.

And so in Africa I was a four-eyed God.



CHASED BY A KIBOKO

Kiboko means hippo in Swahili. The hippo lives in water, eats grass and gets fat. It has a thick skin.

We lived in Africa. Once we went on a trip. We were resting on the bank of a small river. A couple of hippos were in the water. We could see just their ears above the water.

It was evening and getting dark. One of our friends, Harishankar was fidgety. He started throwing pebbles at the hippos. Generally hippos do not attack humans. But how long could they tolerate being pelted? One hippo got angry. It got out of the water and came after us. Two of us quickly climbed a tree. The other two ran for their lives. And close behind then

ran the hippo. Harishankar was yelling “we are dead, we are dead...”

The hippo eventually turned back. But we did not let Haribhai forget. “So brother. Throw more pebbles will you? The kiboko were not bothering you. They were simply swimming quietly.”



MR BARLOWE

Mr Barlowe’s full name was Abraham Barlowe. We used to call him Abhram Barlowe.

Barlowe and I used to work in the same office—Registrar’s office, under Mr Pailthope. Barlowe was from Manchester, I was from Bhavnagar, and our Manubhai was from Limdi.

Barlowe was old, about 45 years old. His moustache was white and his cheeks were sunken. But he was Barlowe Saheb. He wore leather boots and stamped his feet as he walked.

Barlowe Saheb used to smoke a pipe. We used to say “Barlowe, what is this habit of yours?” He would reply “You want one?”

Ok if he just smoked, but as he sucked there would be bubbles of saliva around his mouth. I would say “Chhat”.

Barlowe would glare at me. After all he was a saheb. But that did not intimidate me.

Our office had work for one person, but there were five employees. Well, that is how government offices work. Our big boss was the Registrar Mr Hamilton. His only job was to put his signature. Next was Mr Pailthop. He would send the papers for the Boss's signature and handle the mail; write articles for newspapers, and study the Swahili language. Barlowe was the third; he would copy the documents. Basically a copy clerk. The fourth was Manibhai. He was also a copy clerk. And the fifth was myself. My job was to make holes in the papers and tie these. That was our office.

When Manibhai went home, I took his place. After all, how many holes need to be made? How many copies need to be made?

When Boss wrote his articles, we slept. Barlowe would say, "My turn first. You keep an eye on Boss."

Barlowe would put his head on the table and take a nap. I would keep watch. Then I would sleep and Barlowe would watch.

Barlowe was very intelligent and very good at his own language. When he wanted to write an application for leave to our Boss, he would ask me to check for any mistakes.

I would say, "do you not even know that much?"

"I used to work in a cotton mill. I have never been to school."

"Then how come you are in this office?"

“I am white-skinned.”

Barlowe’s salary was 10 rupees per month.

We would tell him “Hey Barlowe. The circus in India is really something.”

The dog stands on the elephant.

Barlowe would say “India is great.”

Barley (our name for Barlowe’s wife) was a simple woman. She would say “come I will teach you to make biscuits.”

We would go to Barlowe’s house. Barley would do her best to look after us. I don’t remember if we ever made biscuits, but she was good to us.

Abhram Barlowe was our friend. A good man. I still remember him.



MY FRIENDS

I had many friends in Africa. Literate and illiterate, stupid and clever, louts and upright characters, Hindu and Muslim, as well as Madrasi, Punjabi and Bengali; all kinds of friends.

Friend Dhunichand was Punjabi; I used to talk with him about education, and learn Urdu. I learnt a lot of Urdu! “Allah he!” I

did learn how to read that much. Dhunichand was really cultured, a thinker, and capable.

We started a literature club. We used to read English speeches and essays. We decided to explore English literature.

Socialists were my friends; also theosophists. My friends included those who would carry out rituals after an early morning bath, but also meat eating and alcohol drinking Christians. Ceylonese and Burmese were also my friends, some more, some less.

Harishankar was my friend. A good man; he helped me a lot. He would spend freely for his friends. He had a bad temper, but his heart was pure.

Harakhshankar was another friend. Strong (*pahelvaan*), quiet, serious and a loyal friend. He would never eat alone. Never thought it terms of mine and theirs. Not an ounce of greed. He would never let anyone spend money when he was around. He liked his leisure. He would say "All that reading and writing is your work."

Manibhai was the third friend. A fun-loving (*gulabi*) man. He was the one who found Barlowe's mistakes. An emotional man. Careful with his money; but would say "But why would one not spend for one's friends?"

Kanjibhai was a watch repairer of repute. He knew fluent Swahili. A self-made man. Clever too. When he was smoking his bidi he looked as if he was in deep philosophical contemplation.

Haribhai was a military man: with an impressive military mien and passion. Five hundred times a day he would say 'Damn'.

But good at heart. He would not hesitate to lay down his life for a friend.

Professor Jivo was very fond of me. He was a carpenter, with a craftsman's brain. He looked dignified riding a bicycle and so we gave him the title of Professor.

Paresh was Ceylonese. A rich man's son, who had come out for adventure. He used to work at a jewellers. We were good friends.

Maganlal was a simple man. He would look after me, make my bed, fill up water for me and tend to my needs. Quiet of temperament, and of a religious nature, he had somehow landed up in Africa.

Ratilal was a friend close to my heart. I called him 'Pig'. Pig was always eager to please, even if I needed something in the middle of the night. Many looked after me, but when I had the black fever Pig really looked after me.

Jaichandbhai was emotional, and strong headed. Only Jaichandbhai would have been able to work in Stevenson's office as a stand-in for me for eighteen days; no one else would have been able to do that.

These were only some of my many friends. Today some may have died, some may still be alive. But they are all eternal in my memories.

