



The Bacharia Dr. Chris Mason

Askaris, the indigenous soldiers who formed part of the German Protection Force (*Schutztruppe*) for German colonies in Africa, are well known to students of military history. Their uniforms and organization are well documented. Far less well known are the indigenous sailors from German East Africa (and to a lesser extent, other German colonies including Kamerun), known as Bacharia. Photographs of Bacharia are much rarer than photographs of Askaris. Clearly there were far fewer of them. There were many thousands of Askaris, formed into companies and stationed all over German East Africa as well as smaller contingents in Kamerun and Togo. In addition there were at least a thousand Askari police in German East Africa, who wore very similar uniforms as their military brothers-in-arms, but whose duties were solely of a law-enforcement nature. (When WWI began, all police Askaris were incorporated into the *Schutztruppe* as well.) There may have only been a few hundred Bacharia serving initially in German ports, likely as oarsmen and stevedores for the many longboats going back and forth from German ships anchored in the harbors at Tanga and Dar es Salam. Period photographs, however, also document their incorporation into the crews of German naval vessels as well. Some photographs show them going about the duties of enlisted sailors on board naval vessels in working uniforms identical to those of German crewmen, consisting of a white t-shirt type jersey and knee-length white shorts. When armed, they carried the same rifles as Askari soldiers.



This photograph, labeled "Askari und Bacharia," shows a German NCO with a mixed squad of indigenous soldiers from the land and naval forces in German East Africa.

In one photograph, a Bacharia is seen working in the rigging behind a German naval officer, obviously not something he would be doing on a German warship if not going about his assigned duties. In other photographs, Bacharia are seen wearing the dress uniform of the Imperial German Navy, the white “sailor suit” with flap collar and *Tellermütze* or sailor’s cap in groups with white German crewmen. One period photo shows a boy of perhaps 10, whose name was Moritz, in the full uniform of a Ship’s Boy. It was not unusual for boys to be part of a European ship’s crew prior to World War I, usually one or two per vessel, and they were typically assigned the duties of orderlies while they “learned the ropes” of a ship at sea. So while some indigenous sailors and lascars were civilian port workers under German supervision who manned the small boats in busy harbor ports, others were clearly fully integrated into the crews of German warships operating in African waters.



Left: A shirtless Bacharia works in the rigging in East African waters.

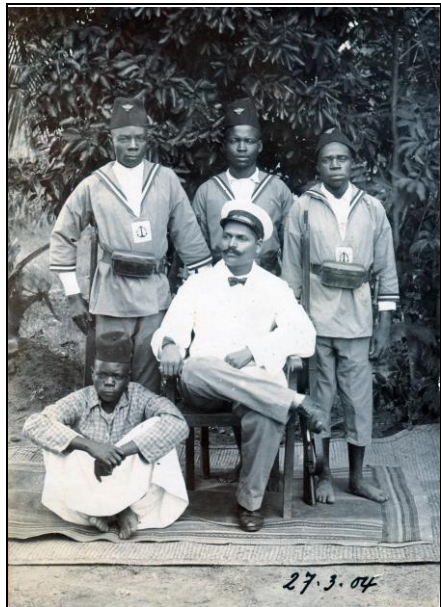
Right: Bacharia muster on deck on an unidentified vessel in Dar es Salam.

The capital ships assigned to the *Halb-Flotille* or “half flotilla” for German East Africa typically remained on station for years, until such time as they needed refitting or overhaul. Once a floating drydock was available in Dar es Salam, even major overhauls could be accomplished on station. Rather than lose the availability of the ship itself on station when the crews’ tours of duty came to an end by sending both the ship *and* the crew back to Germany, new crews were sent to German East Africa and other duty stations (and former crews returned home to Germany) aboard ships under contract to the German government, usually the government mail steamers or *Reichspostdämpfers*. Transit time to Germany from the east coast of Africa to the German ports on the Baltic was several weeks in each direction. Thus keeping the ships assigned to the *Halb-Flotille* on station and rotating crewmen in and out as required was much more efficient than sending the ships home to Germany to get new crews.



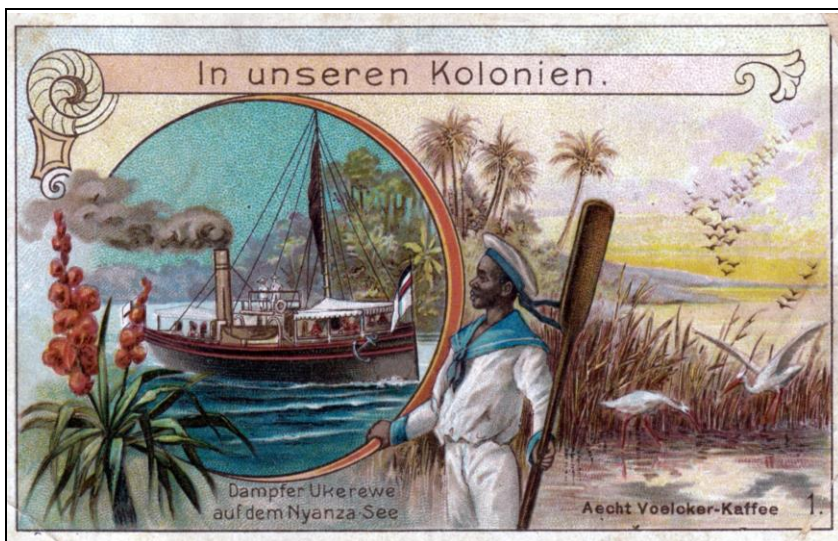
Bacharia aboard the SMS Moewe in port in Dar es Salam. The crewmen are identified by name on the reverse.

This policy also allowed for indigenous sailors to work among the permanent crews of the ships in the *Halb-Flotille* without them having to make a transit away from African waters. A typical tour of duty for a sailor assigned to the colonial fleet was two years away from Germany. Inevitably, ships crews suffered losses from shipboard accidents, drowning, tropical diseases such as malaria, dysentery and Beri Beri, and occasionally from skirmishes while serving in landing parties sent ashore in support of the civil authorities. Life in the tropics took a toll on Europeans in all colonies, and sailors were no more immune than men and women living on land. Since German naval personnel policy was to rotate entire crews on station, individual replacements for such losses were not sent out from Germany, and such attrition in the crews very likely gave rise to opportunities for local men familiar with life on the water to fill the gaps until such time as the German crews rotated home again. New German crews were at or near full strength when they arrived in the colonies to take over their vessels, so work as a Bacharia on German naval vessels may have been temporary, for the duration of the current crew's presence on station.



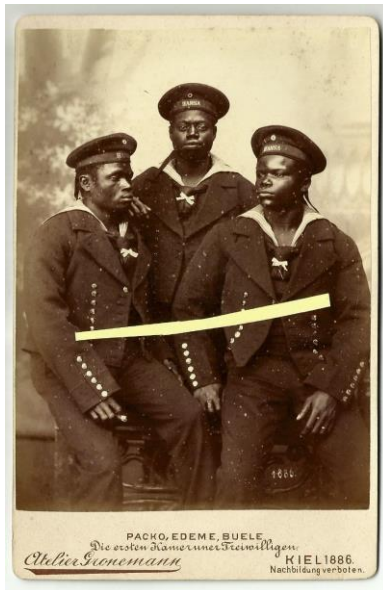
Left: Three Zoll Verein Bacharia in Dar es Salam armed with rifles in 1904. Note the Askari-style eagles on their fezzes. Right: A period painting of a Zoll Verein Bacharia helpfully showing the sailor style tunic was khaki in color.

Another category of Bacharia includes indigenous men working for the Zoll Verein (the German Customs Union) in a variety of waterborne roles. Their uniforms were expressly nautical in design, closely resembling those of enlisted sailors. They appear to have been a khaki color similar to that of Askaris and Askari police. Some of them were armed with Mauser rifles. They served as guards on Zoll Verein facilities at Dar Es Salam, Tanga, Bagamoyo, Pangani and other ports as well as oarsmen and crewman of the small craft operated in the harbors by the Zoll Verein for ship to shore movement. As headdress, they wore a typical red fez of the region.



Above: A group of Imperial German Navy sailors accompanying a hunting party in German East Africa, including, on the right, three Bacharia. Note the rank chevron on the sleeve of the sailor on the far right. Below: A period advertising card depicts a Bacharia crewman of the steamer *Ukerewe* on Lake Nyasa, circa 1900.

At least a few Bacharia from the German colonies in Africa found their way into the Imperial German Navy in home waters. A photograph taken in Kiel in 1886 shows three African sailors in the crew of the *SMS Herta*, which was deployed almost entirely with the East Asia Squadron and did not serve in African waters. They may have transferred to the *Herta* when the ship to which they were originally assigned was detached from the *Halb-Flotille* and returned to Germany for overhaul (or was assigned to another duty station). It may be that most Bacharia preferred to remain close enough to their villages and families to go home occasionally. Although it is documented that at least two Askaris went to Germany after World War I, although not within the structure of the *Reichswehr*, the author has not seen any photographs of Black crewman on German naval vessels after World War I.



Three crewmen of the *SMS Hansa* in winter dress uniform taken in Kiel in 1886. The *Hansa* spent virtually all of her service in the East Asia Squadron and was never a part of naval operations in the African colonies. How these three men came to be a part of her crew is a mystery.



In the back row of this photograph, taken at Rio del Rey, Kamerun, stands a Bacharia in Imperial German Navy uniform.



A Bacharia in Kamerun wears the Imperial German Navy uniform with the white *Tellermütze* and the cap tally of *Station Rio del Rey*.