

# CONTROLLED CHAOS: WHY THE REVOLUTION IN ZANZIBAR WAS NOT GENOCIDE

BY  
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The tropical islands off the coast of Tanzania known as Zanzibar invite curiosity and tourism to a scenic paradise. It is difficult to imagine that there were fields of bodies speckling the island less than fifty years ago. Death and violence came with the call to revolution in what was arguably the fastest revolution in the twentieth century, which in nine hours removed the Arab governed state left in power after decolonization in Zanzibar on 12 January 1964.<sup>1</sup> That night, a clandestine group of about a thousand Zanzibaris lead by John Okello, a mysterious, intelligent, and charismatic Ugandan, attacked and killed or drove away law enforcement in the police and the prison headquarters.<sup>2</sup> They targeted all of the cabinet ministers, including Prime Minister Mohammed Shamte, Minister of Education Ali Muhsin, and Minister of Finance Juma Aley. Among the general population, the revolutionaries targeted Arabs and in some cases, Chinese middleclass Asians. Okello wrote in his book, *Revolution in Zanzibar*, that he was only interested in removing the government for the sake of misrepresented groups on the island and that it was coincidental that the group in power was Arab.<sup>3</sup> However, he fails to mention the longstanding ethnic and social differences between the Arab and black African groups that set the stage for a revolution based on revenge. These ethnic tensions culminated into a mass killing spree that spread across the island in which about 5,000 people are estimated to have died.<sup>4</sup> Although the term genocide instantly comes to mind, it is important to take into consideration legal definitions of the word genocide in deciding whether or not a mass

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<sup>1</sup> John Okello, *Revolution in Zanzibar* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Publishing House, 1967), 162.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 28, 141.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 160-161.

<sup>4</sup> Don Peterson, *Revolution in Zanzibar: An American's Cold War Tale* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2002), 107.

killing was genocide or not. To say that what happened in Zanzibar in 1964 was genocide is not accurate.<sup>5</sup> Othello's lack of political control and support, coupled with no intent to annihilate the Arab culture supports the classification of the revolution in Zanzibar as a mass killing meant to bring embarrassment and shame on the Arab population rather than a genocide with the purpose of extermination.

Zanzibar, when referenced as a state, is composed of two islands, Unguja and Pemba. They are about fifty kilometers off the coast of mainland Tanzania, while Zanzibar can also refer to just the island Unguja. The two islands have two major ethnic groups, the Arabs and the black Africans. Unguja and Pemba's population in the early nineteen sixties had a total of about 320,000 people, of which 50,000 were Arabs.<sup>6</sup> Although they were a minority compared to the Africans on the islands, the Arabs exerted political, social, and economic dominance over the majority ethnic group. The roots of Arab control stem from the system of slavery that existed on the island for over a millennium. The ancestors of the Arabs in 1964 were the slave merchants and owners of the ancestors of many of the black Africans living in Zanzibar. Tensions existed between the two ethnic groups before 1890 as Zanzibar was made a protectorate under the British, who showed political preference towards the Arabs. When the British withdrew and granted Zanzibar independence, they left the Arab minority in charge of the island.<sup>7</sup> Before the revolution, the Arabs passed unjust laws such as one that allowed the government to censor anything that challenged it in order to discourage uprisings from radical political groups. To the Afro Shirazi Party (ASP), which was mainly composed of black Africans, building peace with the Arab government grew increasingly hopeless. Little did the Arabs know that it would only take the strike of a match from one person to set Zanzibar on fire – a match which was lit by John Okello.

Okello was the individual who fanned the flames of African resentment of Arabs in Zanzibar. He was an unknown figure when he emerged on the political stage during the revolution. He grew up in Uganda, and before coming to Zanzibar, lived on Pemba, where he was introduced to the tension between Arabs and Africans. After receiving little and insufficient support from fellow black Africans on Pemba for any type of uprising, Okello journeyed to Zanzibar, where he began to gather followers for his revolution. Using religious fervor, charisma, his ability to speak Kiswahili, and a "puritan" level of discipline to inspire his followers, he managed to gather a force of about one thousand men to start a rebellion

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<sup>5</sup> Peterson, 64-65.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 9-11.

against the Arabs.<sup>8</sup> Okello's army was composed of young Zanzibaris from the ASP Youth Wing. Okello had the most influence on the unemployed and a high number of black African policemen who had been fired by the Arab government to create an Arab police force a few months before the revolution due to a growing lack of trust in black Africans.<sup>9</sup> His followers abided by his "10 commandments," a set of rules which dictated how to act and behave to a minute level, including an injunction to not eat cold food and to not kill or cause any harm to the marginal white population on the island.<sup>10</sup> It was with this band of politically disenfranchised groups that Okello began his revolution on the night of 12 January 1964, in what is now Stone Town on Zanzibar.

Most killings occurred on the first two days of the revolution. On the first day, the revolutionaries under Okello focused on destroying any organized resistance from the Arabs, whereas they shifted focus on the second day to clearing and burning rural settlements owned by the Arabs. After the initial nine hours of fighting, black Africans across the island joined in the slaughter. Okello's control of the radio tower made the news of the revolution easily accessible. The film *Africa Addio* captures scenes of the killing sites in Zanzibar and bodies lying across fields.<sup>11</sup> The film was filmed by an Italian crew in a time when the capability of African nations to govern themselves without European control was coming into question. The film portrays Africa as primitive and bestial. The killings in Zanzibar are actually a minute part of the film which covers big game hunting, elephants being taunted by helicopters, the war in Angola, and exotic African traditions.<sup>12</sup> An article written by Sandra Lockwood claims this to be "concrete proof of the genocide," but the film at most can allude to genocide; it cannot stand alone in proving genocide.<sup>13</sup>

According to the legal definition of genocide as described by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1948, in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide:

genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, such as: (a) killing members of a group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to the members of the group; (c) deliberately

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<sup>8</sup> Okello, 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Petterson, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Okello, 124-125.

<sup>11</sup> Gualtierro Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi, *Africa Addio* (Italy: Angelo Rizzoli, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Jacopetti.

<sup>13</sup> Sandra Lockwood, "Nightmare in Paradise: the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution and Genocide," in *Hushed Voices: Unacknowledged Atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Heribert Adam, ed. (Great Britain: Berkshire Academic Press Limited, 2011), 23.

inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Many of these things did happen in the Zanzibar revolution. The revolutionaries targeted an ethnic group, killing about 10% of its population, while perpetuating violent crimes such as rape and torture that promoted the partial destruction of the group and inflicted mental harm to members of the group.<sup>14</sup> The main point of contention with the definition lies with the intent of the leaders of the murderers. John Okello did not intend to have his band of revolutionaries commit genocide. He, in fact, had very little control over the island population of black Africans, who were motivated by years of political suppression.

The presence or lack of group control is an important factor in the determination of whether a genocide has occurred. Genocide has been historically used as a policy of the state. There are individuals who carefully plan and orchestrate genocide to accomplish many of the desired effects of genocide. There is evidence to suggest that John Okello did not have full control of his group in the revolution, and he most definitely did not have full control of the island when he launched the revolution. Lockwood describes how the atrocious actions committed on Arabs in Zanzibar cause her to believe it was genocide.<sup>15</sup> Graphic reports that reached the United States of people hacked to death with machetes, dead men having “their genitals stuffed into their mouths,” and the raping of Arab and Asian women are grave and abhorrent, but they do not necessarily prove that it was a genocide.<sup>16</sup> Instead, Okello quickly lost control of the course of the revolution, and the killings grew chaotic and unrestrained.

While Okello’s biographical book does not admit to his loss of control, other sources confirm the descent into chaos of the revolution. Okello had put out a list of rules of engagement which his men were to follow, one of them being to not harm Europeans or Asians because they were not the source of political injustice in Zanzibar.<sup>17</sup> This rule was made to prevent any foreign intervention from the United States and Great Britain. Okello’s forces were most organized at the start of the revolution. Don Petterson’s first encounter with revolutionaries was surprisingly the most pleasant one, as they peacefully allowed him and his family to drive by

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<sup>14</sup> Petterson, 107.

<sup>15</sup> Lockwood, 24-25.

<sup>16</sup> Petterson, 64-65, 68.

<sup>17</sup> Okello, 127.

unharm<sup>18</sup>. Their later encounters with the revolutionaries were, however, much more confrontational. Initially, Okello may have had better control of his revolutionary army, but discipline in the army quickly deteriorated, especially among those who were not his original followers and were not specifically trained by him, as exemplified by their blatant disregard for his rules and commandments.

The overwhelming violence in Zanzibar was not entirely planned by Okello and it may have become too dangerous for him to have even tried to stop it. The local reaction to the initial violence was reflexive. Okello lost control of the revolution because something else was driving people to carry out the killings on the Arabs. The ethnic and social tensions that had existed for hundreds of years between slaves and slave owners motivated the Africans to commit gruesome crimes on the Arab populace, and not even Okello could have halted it if he had wanted to.<sup>19</sup> Genocide has normally been directed by the leaders of groups, and Okello did not have full control over the Zanzibaris who committed killings. Killing became a collective action with more in common with an emotion than an organized thought.

Though Okello served as the catalyst to the mass killings in Zanzibar, after a certain point, he was not capable of stopping the violence because of the sheer momentum of the revolution. All he could do was maintain the semblance of control, which he did very well until the ASP leaders came back to the island. There is not enough evidence to support that Okello attempted to destroy the entire Arab population in Zanzibar. Even if this had been the case, Okello's rule was cut short by the ASP leaders, who were concerned with legitimizing themselves in the eyes of the international community. He was exiled from Zanzibar by the ASP and has since been given a marginal role in the history of the revolution, a grievance the "unwelcomed hero" made known at the start of his book.<sup>20</sup> From the perspective of the ASP leaders, Okello was too unstable, unpredictable, and terrifying to keep in the new regime.

Intent is the second component in the analysis to determine whether the Zanzibar revolution was genocide. The Genocide Convention explains that there must be an intent by the aggressors to destroy a group as a whole or in part. The revolution consisted of a spontaneous mob with no organized effort to destroy Arabs or their culture. It was a release of pent up anger and hatred towards the Arab groups that caught them off guard because of a mix of low regard and traditional contempt for the black African population.<sup>21</sup> It

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<sup>18</sup> Petterson, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Abdul Sheriff, "Race and Class in the Politics of Zanzibar," *Africa Spectrum* 36, No. 3 (2001): 313.

<sup>20</sup> Okello, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Petterson, 41.

is important to keep in mind that Asians were also victimized because of their monopolies of middle class jobs on the island (though there is less information on the extent of persecution they received). The revolution was not an African “tribal” conflict between black Africans and Arabs, but a longstanding one between outsiders (Arabs) who were inhibiting the development of insiders (Africans) on the island. A reason for Westerners not being targeted could be because they were very marginal groups in Zanzibar, who had diplomatic type jobs unrelated to the important clove plantations and farming. There appears to be no systematic intent by Okello or the ASP to eradicate the Arab population the island; rather, the humiliation of the population appears to be the objective by the end of the revolution.

There are events that happened later in the Zanzibar revolution that show how humiliation was a key component to the mass killing. Petterson mentions how Okello went to Pemba on January 23 after the revolution.<sup>22</sup> He wanted to make sure that the Arabs there did not threaten the Africans. While in Pemba, Okello and his men continued their perpetuation of violence against Arabs and Asians; they conducted public executions, looted homes, raped women, and shaved men’s heads and beards as a form of humiliation.<sup>23</sup> This brings a completely different aspect to the revolution than just being a slaughter, for if the intent really was to kill the Arabs, it would have been done so in Pemba on a similar scale to Unguja. Okello was not just trying to strike fear and kill Arabs; he was trying to humiliate and shame them. It is difficult to cause that type of psychological damage if the entire enemy population is dead. There is clear evidence of this attempt to inflict psychological damage with the mutilation of male genitals and the raping of women, both of which are symbolic and literal ways of taking away Arab manhood. Further, the intent of the ASP as a political group shifted the focus of the revolution from one on Arab retribution to building of the state. Okello’s work and weak connection to the ASP were factors that excluded him from the rebuilding process.

Abeid Amani Karume, the leader of the ASP, did not know until after the start of the revolution when the newly self christened Field Marshall Okello named him president of the People’s Republic of Zanzibar.<sup>24</sup> Okello’s actions shocked Karume and the other party leaders, but they gladly took advantage of the opportunity. Okello mentions in his book that he had no intentions of taking control of the island for himself.<sup>25</sup> The mystery behind Okello as a phantom figure with really very little known

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<sup>22</sup> Petterson, 121-122.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 121-122.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>25</sup> Okello, 161.

about him aside from people who have met him and what is written in his autobiography has brought many to believe his revolution was a conspiracy and that he was not acting on his own accord. The fluidity and quietness of his removal from Zanzibar's government so soon after it was established may be used as evidence to support this. Michael F. Lofchie, a political scientist whose focus lies in political economic reform in Africa, wanted to provide an answer to this question. Lofchie concludes that "Okello was simply the first victim of a complex power struggle within the Revolutionary Council."<sup>26</sup> While Okello was out of the island making visits to the East African Nations, Karume was converting loyalties from Okello to him, which was simple to do considering he had been a celebrated figure by the mainlanders before Okello had arrived on the island. When Okello arrived back to Zanzibar, he found that his men were dispersed and was immediately led back onto an airplane at gunpoint and flown to Dar es Salaam.<sup>27</sup> He was effectively removed from his own revolution and was last reported being seen in Uganda.

Genocide is a complex and meticulously planned crime with the intent of destroying in whole or in part a targeted group. The lack of a strong organization to the revolutionary army and the lack of evidence to support a clear intent to destroy the Arab population provide evidence against the mass killing that occurred in Zanzibar being labeled as genocide. There are many aspects of what happened in the revolution that are similar to genocide, and it very well could have turned into one. Many people went unpunished for the slayings committed during the revolution, and it is with weak hope that one can assume that forgiveness for those crimes has been rendered by the victims and their present day generation.

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<sup>26</sup> Michael F. Lofchie, "Was Okello's Revolution a Conspiracy?" *Transition* No. 33 (1967): 42.

<sup>27</sup> Lofchie, 42.

