

The Unraveling of John Okello

ANN LEE GRIMSTAD OMONDI

I find that sometimes the most relevant insights, information, and leads in research come from unexpected circumstances and opportunities. I have been preparing to conduct my dissertation research on the Zanzibar Revolution, but I had not yet found the specific focus of my inquiry. This summer I was teaching undergraduates about conflict and reconciliation through an SIT Study Abroad program called Peace and Conflict Studies in the Lake Victoria Basin, when I unexpectedly ran into my dissertation topic. The two conflicts we were teaching about were the situation in Northern Uganda and the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda.

During the preparation for an educational excursion to former camps for “internally-displaced persons” (IDPs) outside of Lira, Uganda, I was discussing the Ugandan rebel leader Joseph Kony, with the Vice Chairman (a local government official) of Lira District. I made a comparison between the rhetoric of Kony and that of ‘Field Marshall’ John Okello, the leader of the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution. The Vice Chairman informed me that Field Marshall Okello was actually born in a village some 25 km from Lira. He also offered to connect me with an elder

from the area whom I could interview. I spoke with two other people in the following days who were willing to give me more information on the life and death of John Okello, and take me to his birthplace. Since I was only in Lira for a few days of work, I knew that I did not have time to investigate these leads this year, but that indeed, I would have to return for research to follow up on this information.

In 1964, there had been much speculation by journalists, politicians, and government intelligence operatives about the identity and background of

the revolutionary leader John Okello. However, once the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar firming its own footing without him and he was declared *persona non grata* in Zanzibar, Tanganyika, and Kenya, the speculation seemed to die down. Okello, with the help of at least one writer, authored his own account of his life and role in the revolution, which many scholars seem to take almost at face value. Although this non-Zanzibari, primary-school educated, painter-mason-builder led a revolution that, in only a matter of hours, was able to overthrow a constitutional monarchy set up by the British, Okello’s life and role in Zanzibar has not to date been thoroughly investigated.

When I reached Zanzibar in July for pre-dissertation research, I interviewed several people who were on the islands at the time of the revolution and I was able to undertake some initial consultation of relevant documents in the National Archives. The questions that will guide me in my next steps of dissertation research are: How did this man accomplish what he seems to have accomplished? Why was there so much speculation and so many contradictory stories about him? And how are those two paths of inquiry linked?

Ann Lee Grimstad Omondi is a doctoral student in the Department of History.

