THE FIELD MARSHAL OF ZANZIBAR

He took the island in a night. They took it back in five minutes.

A FEATURE FILM · A TRUE STORY · 1963 TO 1964

A Ugandan house painter takes Zanzibar in one night without rifles, then his broadcasts start a massacre he cannot stop, and the politicians he put in power throw him out.

In November 1963 JOHN OKELLO, twenty-six, a migrant labourer from Lango in Uganda, is painting a ceiling in a Stone Town merchant's house while the family below talks about him as if the ladder were empty. Zanzibar has just won its independence under an Arab-led government that took 18 of 31 seats with 46 percent of the vote, and it is taking mainland Africans off its police. Okello, a Christian on a Muslim island and an officer of the paint workers' union, says God showed him the island at the running water at Mtoni.

He swears young men to rules: no alcohol, no women, no cold food. On the night of 11 January 1964 he gives them their orders in the dark: never touch a pregnant woman, never kill the poor, never kill Europeans; the enemy is Arab men of eighteen to fifty-five. At three in the morning they reach the Ziwani police armoury with pangas and tyre levers, and he wrestles a rifle with three bullets in it from a sentry. By dawn the Sultan is at sea. By noon Okello is at the microphone of Radio Zanzibar, naming a government that did not exist that morning, with ABEID KARUME as President, and giving himself a rank that never existed: Field Marshal.

Then the island stops obeying him. His voice on the radio threatens ninety-nine million men and measures "88 times stronger"; his followers break every rule he gave them, and the killing that spreads across the island is his and beyond his reach. Karume thanks him on the air. ABDULRAHMAN BABU reminds him he is not a Zanzibari. The Tanganyika army mutinies the day after he visits its barracks, and every leader in East Africa wants him gone. The radio stops saying his name. He makes the government buy his men's cloves and orders ten thousand prints of his portrait.

On 8 March he flies home with a message sent ahead for his army and the press. Karume and Babu are waiting on the apron with armed guards, and within minutes he is on another plane to Dar es Salaam. There the two Presidents leave in a car with a flag; he is given a Land Rover used for carrying stones. Stripped of his rank and declared unwanted, he tells reporters on a club veranda that he was kicked out because some people felt he carried the seeds of death. He drives home to Uganda and hears the Union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar announced on a shop radio without his name. In September 1973 men in uniform take him from his brother's house in Lango. He shouts his title to a trading centre from the back of the truck. His body has never been found.

FORMAT	Feature · 101 pages · November 1963 to April 1964, with a coda in 1973
GENRE	Historical political thriller in tragic architecture
TERRITORY	Zanzibar (Unguja and Pemba) · Dar es Salaam · Nairobi · Lango, Uganda
LANGUAGE	English
COMPARABLES	Oppenheimer · Conclave · The Battle of Algiers

WHY NOW

The most consequential revolution in modern East African history was led on its first night by a Ugandan labourer, and neither Zanzibar, which celebrates the day as a public holiday, nor Uganda, which forgot him, tells the story with him in it. Sixty years on, the Sultan has died in exile and the men who removed Okello are gone; the film can now show who was thanked, who was named on the radio, and who was given a car with a flag.

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