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VIOLENCE AS RACIAL DISCOURSE IN LATE COLONIAL ZANZIBAR

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I

This paper is drawn from a just-published book on the rise of racial thought in colonial Zanzibar.* Like the Swahili coast generally, Zanzibar has long been viewed as an oasis of racial indeterminacy and multicultural harmony: *visiwa vitulivu*, “the tranquil islands,” as the tourist T-shirts say. To a certain extent that image was a myth, cherished especially by those at the top of the racial order. Colonial administrators liked to portray Arab hegemony as having found general acceptance among the wider population; indeed, many administrators themselves had been recruited from the locally-born Arab elite. Still, the myth was not without a kernel of truth. In some respects, colonial-era authors actually *understated* the nature of Zanzibari cosmopolitanism, portraying the islands as a classic “plural society” where members of separate ethnic “communities” met and interacted only in the marketplace and the political realm.¹ In fact, Zanzibar’s long history of Islam and of absorptive political and performative cultures rendered the boundaries between racial/ethnic categories extremely ambiguous. Despite some significant exceptions, those categories hardly constituted discrete “communities.”

Yet if Zanzibar was not a “plural society,” neither was it a melting-pot. Zanzibaris recognized ethnic difference and spoke about it. And no account of race in Zanzibar can ignore the calamity that closed the colonial period: a rash of violence that culminated in pogroms against the islands’ Arab minorities, first during election riots in June 1961 (the focus of this paper), and later, on a much vaster scale, during the revolution that overthrew the newly independent government in January 1964. Although the violence was not as unprecedented as the myth of *visiwa vitulivu* would suggest, it nevertheless caught most observers, foreign and domestic, by surprise.

My book asks how, over the course of barely two generations, thinking about ethnic difference came to be racialized: that is, how the fluid and porous boundaries for which Swahili culture is famous came to be imagined, by significant numbers of Zanzibaris, as fixed rigidly in descent and in the “blood.”² My general approach is to pose this question as a problem in intellectual history, tracing how racial thought emerged from the interplay of two competing visions of nationalism. The first of these nationalisms appeared between the wars among members of the islands’ elite intelligentsia, most of whom belonged to landholding families that took pride in their descent from the Omani Arabs who had founded the sultanate in the 18th and 19th centuries. (Those families had long married locally and had become thoroughly naturalized. Their first language was Swahili, not Arabic.) Combining locally-inherited concepts with ideas imported from Europe and the Middle East, this intelligentsia crafted a historical vision of Zanzibar as

a beacon of Arab-centered civilization on the shores of a benighted continent. They concentrated their political activities first in the Arab Association and, after 1955, in Zanzibar's first political party, the Zanzibar National Party (ZNP).

The ZNP's nationalist rhetoric had considerable mass appeal, but many were alienated by its implication that those who lacked demonstrable Arab descent were inherently lacking in the qualities of civilization and the ability to become true Muslims. (It must be emphasized that virtually all islanders were Muslim.) Among those who felt most excluded were slave-descendants and the large population of immigrants from the African mainland (mostly Kenya and Tanganyika) who had come to work as labor-tenants or "squatters" on Arab-owned clove- and coconut-estates.³ After the war, activists from the latter groups challenged the intelligentsia's nationalist vision, alleging that it condoned the history of slavery and Arab supremacy. Drawing in part on pan-Africanism, these subaltern intellectuals crafted a nationalist vision of their own, based explicitly on the solidarities of race rather than of civilization. Their main organizational home was the African Association and, from 1957, the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP).

The book's middle chapters trace how a widespread discourse of racial difference arose from conversations and debates among these two sets of nationalist intellectuals (plus their conversations with British educators and administrators). Racialized notions of difference spread most rapidly during the "Time of Politics" from 1957 to 1963, when the nationalist parties competed for the allegiance of the islands' indigenous majority, who considered themselves neither Arabs nor mainlanders. (They often called themselves "Shirazi," an ambiguous label by which they simultaneously claimed both indigeneity and distant Near Eastern ancestry.) The main forum for this competition was a series of election campaigns in which the nature of citizenship was loudly debated, on street corners and in coffee-shops, in terms of an exclusionary nationalism couched in the language of race. During those years civil society became intensely politicized – which meant, given the nature of Zanzibar politics at the time, that it became intensely racialized. Landlords evicted mainlander squatters who refused to support ZNP; ASP activists pressured people to use party cooperatives instead of Arab-owned shops; and each side boycotted buses that did not display its political insignia.⁴

But a focus on political discourse can take us only so far in understanding a situation in which racial polarization culminated in mass violence. Ethnic tension does not inevitably produce violence, even when accompanied, as in Zanzibar, by virulently dehumanizing racial rhetoric.⁵ For most Zanzibaris, the nationalists' notions of racial difference were novel and fairly recondite. How then did they attain such power that they prompted significant numbers of ordinary Zanzibaris to kill their neighbors, or to join crowds that protected those who killed?

In part, this question can be addressed by focusing on how the nationalists' rhetoric of ethnic impurity and exclusion tapped into well-established popular discourses concerning criminality. For decades prior to the Time of Politics, particular ethnic sub-groups had been stigmatized as inherently criminal and therefore marginal to the moral community and not worthy of its full protection. In the 1950s and 1960s,

propagandists on both sides of the political divide made use such stereotypes to present the criminalized sub-groups as representative of larger racial categories. Thus Makonde immigrants from southeast Tanganyika, who were despised for their supposed lack of civilized restraint, were made emblematic of the threat of mainlanders in general: barbarians, thieves, closet Christians, enemies of Islam. Conversely, the so-called Manga Arabs – low-status immigrants from Oman with a reputation for violent criminality – were made emblematic of all Arabs, including the locally-born, Swahili-speaking elite.⁶ Significantly, much of the violence in the early 1960s was prompted by rumors of impending attacks by these criminalized sub-groups, and Wamanga suffered disproportionately as victims of the pogroms.

Still, even a focus on such popular motifs is insufficient to explain the extent of the racial violence; after all, the bogeyman stereotypes had usually taken the form of folk-tales and even jokes. There remains the question of how they gained deadly seriousness at the moment of nationalist mobilization – how they became transformed into something capable of prompting popular racial violence.

One strategy for solving such puzzles is to examine the specific acts of violence themselves for signs of how they served to reproduce particularly violent forms of dehumanizing racial discourse at the level of popular consciousness. At first glance, this strategy may seem counterintuitive: the natural assumption, after all, is that riots and pogroms are the product of ethnic discourse rather than the cause – that such violence is the “surface expression” of deeply rooted exterminationist beliefs.⁷ But such assumptions have been challenged in a rich literature on “communal violence” in South Asia and elsewhere. These authors raise two central objections. First, they observe that far from being spontaneous, most communal riots show evidence of coordination and planning, often by political actors whose interests are served by the riot. Second, what may seem like a single spasm of communal violence often reveals itself, on closer inspection, to have been in fact a disparate series of incidents prompted by a variety of motives that had little if anything to do with communal sentiment, such as theft, class tension, or personal revenge.

To try to explain communal violence as the expression of a single set of underlying communal hatreds, then, is at best chimerical, and at worst serves as a “smokescreen” that obscures the culpability of specific political actors.⁸ Gyanendra Pandey even argues that the “communal riot narrative” originated as a form of “colonial knowledge,” a strategy by which rulers sought to understand and control the wild array of local disputes that threatened stability by reducing them to recurrent expressions of some fundamental, pre-political conflict; given the power of the colonial state (and its post-colonial successors) to allocate resources and shape political discourse, those forms of knowledge were ultimately self-fulfilling.⁹ Critiques like Pandey’s sometimes tend toward an arch-instrumentalism that seems prompted by a determination to exonerate the subaltern crowd of any charge of having been “really” motivated by ethnic hatred; these authors prefer instead to see communal violence as the masked expression of more “rational” struggles for economic or political advantage. But the more measured of this scholarship is indispensable, for it compels us to recognize that the link between

ethnic discourse and popular ethnic violence is not simple or straightforward.¹⁰

Still, even the best of this literature founders on a false dichotomy. In taking pains to determine whether ethnic violence was “spontaneous” or “induced,” many authors reveal an assumption that it is possible to distinguish between discourses that are expressive of the authentic perceptions and experiences of the crowd (and hence liable to result in “spontaneous” bouts of popular violence) and others that are imposed on the crowd or borrowed by it from others.¹¹ Building on that assumption, one would have to conclude that the racial thought that informed Zanzibar’s 1961 election riots was borrowed, not spontaneous. The riots’ immediate cause was a conflict over party politics; a commission of inquiry attributed the main tensions largely to the heated campaign rhetoric of the rival politicians.¹² More to the point, the racial boundaries that delineated the violence had been elaborated largely by nationalist intellectuals, not by the squatters and urban *lumpen* who did most of the killing. This all implies that the latter merely mimicked the racial discourse of intellectuals and activists who prodded them on, and that their true passions were born of other, more immediate experiences, such as class resentment or personal grudges.

But other facts make those conclusions untenable. The crowds’ choice of targets roots their actions unambiguously in a deeply held racial discourse, as do, more pointedly, their non-instrumental or non-utilitarian modes of killing and maiming (*violenza inutile*, in Primo Levi’s phrase). As in other instances, such “stylized” and “expressive” modes did more than simply kill; rather, they were used to dishonor and degrade. They indicate the “moral framework” that informed the killings, and are impossible to reconcile with an image of the crowd espousing borrowed convictions that it wore lightly or insincerely.¹³ Indeed, they were wholly of the crowds’ own invention: although many political propagandists had spread messages of hate, they had never called for mass killing, let alone suggest (to paraphrase José Kagabo) how to go about it.¹⁴

The precise connection between popular violence and elite-generated communal discourse is a central problem in some of the most incisive literature on the subject.¹⁵ A rich sociological literature demonstrates that it is unpersuasive to think of racial identities simply as being handed down by intellectuals and then accepted by others who learn about them in classrooms or political debates. Rather, subalterns reproduce racial identities in daily practice, in processes that make those identities seem rooted in their own personal experience.¹⁶ To understand racial violence, then, one must discover how racial identities become the stuff of *violent subjectivities*: that is, how they come to shape a sense of self based on experiences of violence – real or imagined – that seem to justify counter-violence as revenge or preemption.¹⁷ Such subjectivities differ from the ethnic identities that were (and remain) most common in Zanzibar, where one might feel different from one’s Manga neighbor without wanting to forcibly expel him from the moral community. But by June 1961 for significant numbers of Zanzibaris, and by January 1964 for even more, such a sense of self and otherness had come to the point that it might countenance or justify subjecting one’s neighbor to acts of dehumanizing violence.

The processes that give rise to such a situation cannot be uncovered simply by asking about historical precedent and intellectual context. One must also examine “the moment of violence” itself: “how the killing was done” and how it was talked about afterward.¹⁸ Using mob violence to explain the emergence of violent racial subjectivities ceases to be a conundrum once we embrace the observation, stressed in the South Asian literature, that most riots have a heterogeneity of motives and become “communal” only after the fact, as they are talked about and remembered as such in political discourse.¹⁹ What that literature often overlooks, however, is that communal riot narratives are generated not only by intellectuals and political elites (and certainly not only by colonial officials, as Pandey suggests), but also by non-elites, including direct participants in the events discussed. Furthermore, the discursive formation of the communal mob²⁰ often takes place in the course of the riot itself, not just afterward. In their actions as well as their words, the most powerful voices in the creation of the communal riot narrative are often those of the rioters, eyewitnesses, and victims themselves.

Scholars who study contemporary ethnic violence have demonstrated that the dynamics of the mob can be especially powerful mechanisms by which individual subjectivities are submerged to that of the group. Psychologists have noted that the experience of being in a crowd, especially in situations of heightened emotion like fear or religious devotion, can weaken the individual ego and render individuals more likely than usual to suspend personal judgment and instead model their behavior on that of others around them. Sudhir Kakar emphasizes that in a crowd, personal identity “gets refocused” so that “individuals act in terms of the crowd’s identity”; taking his cue from Natalie Davis, he likens the rampaging mob to participants in the liminal stage of group rituals, in which the individual experiences the “self-transcending” state that V.W. Turner called *communitas*. The shape such a group identity assumes in any given instance – whether it is imbued with hatred of an outgroup or a sense of truly transcendent universalism – depends on a variety of factors, including the informal leadership of particular crowd-members who steer the crowd’s actions in particular directions.²¹

Focusing on the ritualized elements of mob behavior can be useful for comprehending the on-the-spot processes by which riots reproduce racial discourse at the level of personal subjectivity. But we should guard against approaching those processes as if they unfold automatically from something immanent in the mob’s thinking. Davis and Turner, like Turner’s teacher Max Gluckman, saw ritualized violence (as they saw all rites) as enactments of culture, and some scholars have interpreted ethnic violence in similar terms.²² In contrast, a more useful approach focuses on individual participants who possess social and intellectual capital that enables them to shape ritual events in improvised ways.²³ The literature on ethnic violence is filled with such figures. Officials in different settings called them “hooligans,” “rowdies,” “*goondas*,” or “*wahuni*,” terms that evacuate their leadership of any conscious or political element and emphasize instead the primal, essential nature of the violence they directed. Paul Brass coined the more neutral term “riot specialists.”²⁴ Such figures regarded themselves as champions of the oppressed – “the oppressed” being a category which they understood, more often than not, in communal terms.²⁵

Riot specialists, then, might be regarded as a kind of subaltern intellectual: individuals who “elaborated new forms of discourse” at “moments of leadership, moments of organization, and moments of direction.”²⁶ In Zanzibar, as elsewhere, riot specialists often came from the ranks of social criminals, whose skills as entrepreneurs of violence and of extra-legal commerce were admired by the poor and often utilized by them. Those skills became most useful to the poor during times of upheaval – times that opened up opportunities for habitual criminals to act in ways that narrowed the psychological and social chasm that divided them from the more respectable members of the community.²⁷ Social psychologists go further, and suggest that at such times acts of violence can become “the biggest confirmation that one is psychically still alive, a confirmation of one’s very existence.”²⁸ More straightforward in effect, and easier for the historian to document, is how their skills in organizing violence become effective social and discursive tools.

To be sure, a mob can coerce an individual to kill. But even if coerced, participation in a racial killing renders the individual ego vulnerable to intense questioning that can result in identification with the new community of killers. Such questioning is almost ensured by the stylized form of mob violence, which, going beyond simple killing, renders its perpetrators complicit in dramatic transgressions of moral codes that had previously supported ties of community (and humanity) between racial self and racial other, no matter how prevalent the discourse of racial categorization may have already become. In short, the violence of the racial mob, shaped by riot specialists, is itself a discursive act that signals powerful messages about those involved: about the dehumanization of the victims and the transformative force of the killings.²⁹ Participants and eyewitnesses to mob violence, no matter how heterogeneous their motives in killing or watching, encounter powerful incentives to recast their experience in communal terms.

But acts of collective violence also have the potential to forge subjectivities far beyond this relatively limited circle. This occurs when they are related and embellished (and even invented) within circuits of rumor. Tales of massacres are particularly potent in this regard. They are almost always told from the perspective of the victims; indeed, even when circulated among the ethnic category that provided the killers, they depict the latter as the real victims, who killed only to prevent worse outrages by their oppressors. The circulation of such rumors often results in a sense that one’s primary obligations are to a community defined by its need to act violently, either to avenge past acts of violent victimhood or to pre-empt future ones.³⁰ Reports and rumors of racial violence, in other words, often serve to transform racial political ideologies into what seem like reflections of “authentic” experience, which can then make ordinarily peaceful individuals willing to countenance, or even perpetrate, acts of racial vengeance. And to those who suffer or witness them, those acts, in turn, bestow a material “reality” to what had previously been merely the rhetoric of racial victimhood.

II

Working with conventional historical sources, including trial records, it is possible

to reconstruct many of these processes as they played out in the 1961 election riots. The unrest began in Ng'ambo, the popular quarter of Zanzibar Town that was overwhelmingly pro-ASP. On the morning of June 1, watchful crowds queued to vote well before the polls opened, their attitudes shaped not only by the general tone of political discourse that had accompanied the campaign but also by specific party instructions to be on guard against ZNP agents trying to vote illegally. In the earliest incidents, ZNP poll-watchers were assaulted for allegedly trying to "steal votes"; within an hour, known or suspected ZNP members were being expelled from voting queues throughout Ng'ambo and beaten bloody. Soon pickup trucks with gangs of armed "Arab" toughs were cruising through Ng'ambo, shouting abuse, waving swords, and challenging their "African" counterparts with sticks and clubs. Attempts by party leaders to calm the crowds proved fruitless. Fighting in town continued through the day, as mobs on both sides used racial markers to attack "Arabs" or "mainlanders."³¹

At first the crowds' goals may have been to prevent their rivals from voting. But by the end of the day, when the election's outcome was clear (a ZNP alliance, though narrowly losing the popular vote, managed to win a parliamentary majority), calculations of electoral advantage ceased to have any relevance. The most prominent motive was revenge: revenge for the attacks on ZNP voters, and revenge for what ASPers believed was a stolen election. And revenge prompted another motive: fear of retaliation. Soon after the first violence, rumors began to fly that the Arabs were making a concerted effort to kill Africans; the rumors were later intensified by the arrival of vehicles bringing armed ZNP loyalists from the country estates. By mid-day on June 2, Ng'ambo was gripped by fears that the Arabs' Manga retainers were descending on town. Similar rumors reached the countryside, which had remained quiet on election-day, and they evidently had much to do with instigating the first violence there, when three Manga Arabs (one an eight-year-old boy) were killed by an ASP mob. Similar gangs continued to roam the countryside for several days, looting properties owned mostly by Wamanga, assaulting and sometimes killing their owners. Onlookers often described these gangs as mainlanders and squatters, but indigenous islanders were also prominent in many of the cases for which have reliable evidence. While violence in town was largely suppressed by June 4, the killing continued for several more days in the plantation zone, ending only with the deployment of four companies of colonial troops flown in from the mainland. The final death toll totaled 68, only three of whom were identified as "African," and several hundred wounded were treated in hospital. Some 1400 were arrested, 270 in connection with murder.

The geography of the violence in the countryside speaks to the particular wellsprings of racial tension that fed it. Most of the killings took place in the central plantation zone north and east of town, which throughout the years of political mobilization had witnessed intense conflicts over commercial boycotts and partisan-inspired squatter evictions. But few of the victims were estate-owners, who lived mostly in town. Rather, most were Wamanga: small leaseholders and shopkeepers who tended to live isolated from one another, with squatters as virtually their only neighbors. They were especially vulnerable once rumors about the election-day violence revived fears of Wamanga. For rural mobs looking to kill Arabs, Wamanga made convenient victims, highly visible by

dint of their obvious somatic markers (unlike many local-born members of elite “Arab” families) and tainted with their own particular opprobrium.

Contrary to the impression given by later propaganda, reliable eyewitness accounts indicate that the ASP’s control of the mobs was tenuous at best. Each crowd seemed to generate its own leaders. In the countryside, those leaders were often described as members of the “hooligan element,” apparently meaning that they were disreputable-looking young men with no previously known political commitment. Others were local, lower-level activists, most with ties to the ASP Youth League or other militant factions that the party leadership had for some time been struggling to control. In town things looked much the same.³² Though they thought of themselves as ASP loyalists, these crowds were far more responsive to their own informal leaders than to party spokesmen, whom they did not seem to trust. When Abeid Karume, the ASP’s populist leader, appeared with pleas for calm, they listened and made gestures of compliance, but often acted up again as soon as he was gone.³³ A telling incident occurred in town late in the afternoon of June 1, as Karume, escorted by Mervyn Smithyman, tried to disperse a large mob. Smithyman did not recognize any of the crowd’s leaders; they were not regular political activists, he testified, but seemed more of the “hooligan element.” Karume’s pleading proved fruitless (“these people won’t listen to me,” he told Smithyman in frustration), and the crowd refused to move. “I was expecting any moment for them to start a riot on us,” testified Smithyman,

but suddenly one particular leader jumped out in front all in rags and said “Hip Hip,” and everybody said “Hurray”; he said “Hip Hip” again and everybody said “Hurray”, and then he said “Hip Hip, we are all going home,” and they said, “We are all going home.” I am quite convinced if he had said “Hip, Hip, we are all going to attack them,” they would have attacked . . . just like that.

Karume’s relative powerlessness stands out in this incident. “He did not know quite what to do,” recalled Smithyman, “till this leader jumped up and took them away.”³⁴

Smithyman’s tale suggests the ambiguities of the crowds’ relationship to political authority. He interpreted it as an indication of the unthinking “feeling” that motivated such mobs, which “had got to the stage where they were hardly responsible for their actions,” refusing deference to their political champion and responding instead to the impulses of anonymous rabble-rousers. Yet this crowd cannot be described as “spontaneous,” if by that we mean its actions were the result of unreflective impulses immanent to itself: it did not ignore Karume altogether, and Smithyman’s own description indicates that it had a leadership structure, even if that structure seemed improvised on the spot and dominated by unknown leaders “all in rags.” Still, what if we take seriously Smithyman’s sense (apparently shared by Karume) that the crowd might have turned either way at that moment? As we shall see below, there is plentiful evidence that this was a distinct possibility – that had one of the ragged leaders invoked emotionally charged images of Arab depravity some of the crowd might have been induced to defy Karume and indulge in politically counterproductive racial violence.

Scholars are often reluctant to entertain such possibilities, warned away by George Rudé's and E.P. Thompson's classic arguments against depicting crowds as disconnected from all social and political context or motivated by mindless passion. But to observe that some crowds behave inconsistently, or that their violence transgresses "rational" behavior (the latter usually defined as the pursuit of material or political interests), is not to say that they are unthinking or unaware of their common objectives. Veena Das urges us to acknowledge the "painful" fact that racial mobs are usually as disciplined and conscious of fighting for a moral order as are bread rioters demanding food for their children.³⁵ Nor is it always possible to distinguish avenging mobs from organized crowds that gather to engage in (conventionally) "rational" behavior: in the present case, many of the mobs that took to looting and murder began as orderly voting queues, disciplined by party instructions not to allow "vote thieves" to enter the polling-place.³⁶ Below we will examine some of the processes by which crowds of party loyalists, initially mobilized by the aim of prevailing in electoral politics, became transformed into mobs motivated by a desire to reconstitute or purify a transcendent racial community.

Through those processes members of the crowd forged violent racial subjectivities: a sense that they were bound together by a common obligation to exact racial vengeance. In using the word "pogrom" to describe their actions, I intend to emphasize that these were "organized massacres" for the destruction or intimidation of a particular "body or class" – in this case, Arabs.³⁷ Such an emphasis places racial thought back at the center of the crowds' motives, contradicting the instrumentalist position that the killings were prompted by some other kind of subjectivity. At the same time, one should note that the word is usually understood to refer to *organized* massacres: most scholars recognize that pogroms are never the product of spontaneous, unthinking instinct. Yet the present case does not sustain the common assumption that behind every massacre stand state or party officials: contrary to ZNP allegations, there is no evidence that the killings were planned and supervised by the ASP leadership. While neighborhood party structures were indeed significant to the mobilization of many of the mobs, we shall see that the processes by which crowds were induced to direct their energies toward racial violence were premised on the ability of individual crowd members to command the disciplining power of discourse – to command, that is, what Das calls repositories of "organizing images, including rumours, that crowds use to define themselves and their victims."³⁸

If we accept that racial mobs are as purposive in their actions as are more "rational" crowds, then we must also recognize that the aims of such mobs can differ dramatically. The riots' overall casualty figures indicate that no one side had a monopoly on mob violence; the numbers of wounded were evenly divided between "Arabs" and "Africans."³⁹ But the fatalities were one-sided, and that indicates just as clearly that the violence of ASP mobs was of a distinctive quality. This conclusion is highlighted further when we consider the nature of the killings themselves. Donald Horowitz observes that even when ethnic killing falls short of genocide or ethnic cleansing, its discursive nature reveals the exterminationist logic behind it: while eliminating the target population may not be possible, degrading and dehumanizing them "is a good second-

best” and may (and often does) prompt timidity and flight.⁴⁰ ZNP propagandists, for all their reliance on racial categories and their demeaning language toward mainlanders, never envisioned an African-free Zanzibar; indeed, such a vision would have made no sense in the context of their multi-racial (though not non-racial) vision of Zanzibar’s Arab-centered “civilization.” ASP propaganda, in contrast, had often threatened expulsion and extermination. A close examination of individual incidents from the June riots can suggest the intellectual processes by which many ordinary Zanzibaris became convinced of the need to act collectively to get rid of their Arab neighbors.

III

The basic shape of the pogroms can be seen in the first one recorded in the countryside, at Kitope Ndani, in the heart of the plantation zone. The mob at Kitope apparently intended to attack the family of Nassor bin Seif, a middle-aged Mmanga who had been resident in the area for only nine months, leasing a farm and trading in coconuts. Early on the afternoon of June 2, Nassor was visiting on the verandah of his neighbor, Amarsi Hansraji Raja, an Indian shopkeeper who had lived in the village since 1948. Amarsi’s verandah was at the rear of his shop and house, facing Nassor bin Seif’s own compound. Also present were two “other Arabs” (as Nassor put it), Abeid Suweid and Said Nassor, and a man identified as an “African,” Simba Khatibu, who had come to buy oil from Amarsi’s shop and had stopped to chat. Such relaxed social interaction is typical of Zanzibari rural life, especially given the place and time: the local shop just before or after *adhuhuri* prayers. We do not know what was being discussed on the verandah, but likely topics included the previous day’s elections and the disturbances in town.

At around noon or one o’clock, Nassor bin Seif’s eight-year-old son, Seif, came over to summon his father for lunch. Just then three men appeared, carrying clubs and pangas. Those sitting on the verandah were acquainted with the spokesman of the three, Miraji Selem, 25 years old, a squatter and manager of the local ASP cooperative shop and coffee-house. Upon his arrest Miraji identified himself ethnically as Zigua, that is, a mainlander from Tanganyika. But he had probably grown up in Kitope; Amarsi had known him since moving there, when Miraji was a boy of twelve.⁴¹ Significantly, neither Amarsi nor Nassor bin Seif knew Miraji’s patronym. They knew Miraji, then, but less well than one would expect in such a small rural community. This might be taken as an indication of the unusually strained texture of social relations in Kitope, after years of conflict over squatter rights and racial politics.

Miraji announced his intention to transgress all civil ties by refusing to respond properly to Nassor bin Seif’s greeting. Swahili greetings are famously formalized, a central mechanism by which civility is maintained in daily interactions; failure to offer a genial reply is considered the height of rudeness. Nassor evidently used the standard *salama aleikum*, “peace be upon us,” to which Miraji, instead of echoing Nassor with the customary *wa-aleiku salaam*, countered *hakuna salama*, “there is no peace.”⁴² During this encounter, a large crowd surrounded Amarsi’s and Nassor’s houses, which some began to pelt with stones. The coordinated use of stones was ubiquitous during the

June riots and contributed the name by which they are remembered, the *Vita vya Mawe* or “War of Stones.” ASP mobs often heralded their arrival by raining a hail of stones on the roofs and windows of their intended victims, before ransacking the house and inflicting bodily harm. This form of terror had been adapted from the behavior of burglary gangs that had been plaguing the plantation districts for decades, some of whom had taken to posing as radical levelers and pan-Africanist social bandits.⁴³

At a signal from Miraji, the mob attacked, some shouting “kill them! strike them!” as they pursued the men who fled from the verandah. Abeid Suweid and Said Nassor were killed within moments; Nassor bin Seif testified that he saw the latter struck to the ground with a club and surrounded by men who then hacked at him repeatedly with pangas. This accords with the coroner’s report. (As no charges were brought in Abeid’s death, we know nothing of his wounds.) Nassor bin Seif, wounded on the shoulder, fled toward his house. Looking back, he saw his young son prostrate on Amarsi’s verandah, Miraji’s foot planted on his back. Miraji held the boy’s head with one hand, a panga with the other. At that moment Nassor was struck in the belly with an arrow, and he scrambled into his house to get a gun.

Amarsi, meanwhile, had bolted himself in his shop. When the mob broke down the doors and shutters, Amarsi, wounded with a panga-blow, pled for his life, offering the intruders money in exchange. They accepted; Amarsi gave them three hundred shillings. Amarsi then heard the report of a gun, which the wounded Nassor bin Seif had managed to fire through the window of his house, and the intruders dispersed. The entire incident took no more than twenty or twenty-five minutes. Simba Khatibu, who was chased by the mob but not struck, ran off to Mahonda to inform the police, who arrived about an hour later and found the three bodies lying in the compound where they fell. The coroner would report that the eight-year-old Seif was killed by a single slashing blow to the back of the neck.⁴⁴

It is not clear who this mob was, how it had been mobilized, or why it attacked these particular houses. The evidence suggests that most were squatters from the mainland, who were prevalent in the Kitope area.⁴⁵ (In other parts of the island, ASP mobs had a greater mix of indigenous islanders.) The tensions over evictions that had marked the Time of Politics undoubtedly sharpened their resentments. But such attacks cannot be interpreted simply as manifestations of a socioeconomic conflict between landlords and squatter labor. The Kitope mob did not attack Nassor bin Seif because he was a landlord; in fact, he was himself a tenant and had not even been in the neighborhood at the height of the evictions crisis in 1958-59. Most victims in the rural areas, as we have seen, were Wamanga rather than members of landholding families. If squatter subjectivities entered the mob’s motivations at all, they had become subsumed to racialized group subjectivities: in oppressing squatters, Arabs were perceived to be acting as members of a racial category (rather than a socioeconomic one) who had it in for Africans (rather than for laborers). (This perception in fact was more or less accurate: the squatter evictions were sparked not by economics but by racial politics, when ZNP urged landlords to rid their estates of mainlanders, who were assumed to support ASP.) And many perceived Wamanga like Nassor bin Seif as a metonym for

the entire racial category -- a category that in the preceding years had been described and redefined by propagandists on both sides of the political divide.⁴⁶

The Kitope mob was plainly linked to ASP party politics, although the exact nature of the link is difficult to determine. Its political sympathies are clear from the timing of its rampage, which stemmed from an awareness of the political conflict in town the day before, and from the fact that the ASP afterwards became involved in the legal defense of those charged in the murders. Most pointedly, the evidence highlights the role played by Miraji, the local ASP organizer. As in other incidents, the party co-op had served as a staging-post, where an armed crowd had gathered an hour or two before the pogrom. But there is no evidence that the mob was a disciplined party cadre. Rather, what unified its members was their common response to discursive practices that invoked images of favored and reviled racial categories. Whatever other aims may have prompted individuals to join the mob, during the course of the pogrom those aims became subordinated to the common purpose of harming or intimidating Arabs – not simply to seize Arab assets or deprive Arabs of political power, but to dehumanize them and thus purge them from the moral community. The June riots, in other words, were acts of consciously dehumanizing transgression; they were not instrumental, but purposively discursive.

The most straightforward example of discursive violence was the display of blood. Zanzibar's political journalists were already well practiced in using the language of blood to sharpen readers' fears and resentments. The metaphor of "bloodsucking" was common in descriptions of Arab oppression, and ASP journalists used lurid language to accuse their rivals (including those within the party) of plotting bloody massacres.⁴⁷ During the riots this discursive technique took more literal forms, which, given the context, were capable of eliciting more visceral responses.

Beginning on the morning of June 2, observers noted the decapitated bodies of chickens, cats and bushbabies strewn about in major thoroughfares, including the central town market.⁴⁸ (For perhaps obvious reasons, all that remained of the chickens were the heads.) This unnerving spectacle may have had a simple explanation. In the weeks leading up to the riots, politicians on both sides alleged that their opponents were planning to spread panic on election day by smearing themselves with animal blood. The specifics of the allegations varied; the most common claim, made by both sides, was that their opponents planned to use the sight of blood-soaked clothes to feign having been attacked. Although it is difficult to ascertain the veracity of these allegations, there is evidence that riot specialists were not above using such deceptions to incite crowds.⁴⁹

But this relatively prosaic explanation cannot explain why the animal bodies were strewn about in public places. (Indeed, one would expect the perpetrators to have concealed their deception.) British officials, noting that such behavior was common during ethnic clashes in other parts of the world, later interpreted it as an example of the "blood lust" that had overtaken the combatants.⁵⁰ Though it would be mistaken to accept the implication that such acts were signs of atavistic madness, we must

recognize that they could have had the effect, probably intended, of inducing fears of such madness.⁵¹ Writing of similar behavior in Northern Ireland, Allen Feldman notes that substituting animals for human victims, or in anticipation of human victims, can signal profoundly unsettling messages about the impending transgression of all civil ties with one's enemies. By suggesting that certain categories of people can be slaughtered with as little difficulty, moral or physical, as animals, such massacres convey potent threats linked to the dehumanizing logic of racial politics.⁵²

Blood and wounds, then, were not simply rhetorical devices used to spread messages about the victimization of the racial self and the need to seek revenge; they also were used to reinforce the dehumanization of the racial other. This observation applies with particular force to the specifics of the human killings themselves. A common way by which the killers demonstrated an awareness of the discursive power of their acts was the repeated wounding of an already dead body, often by a spear being passed from hand to hand. In part this was simply a method by which riot specialists forced each member of the crowd to complicity in the murder. But the use of a spear, an otherwise unusual implement in Zanzibar, points also to a theatrical aspect. Spears had become metonymic of mainlanders, especially Makonde, who were reputed to be fearsome hunters; spears were also associated with the hunting of wild pigs, a destructive and (in this Muslim society) particularly noxious pest. So this act signaled precise messages about the racial identity of the new community of killers and the dehumanization of their victims.⁵³

An injury that attained a particularly high profile, becoming the stuff of much rumor, propaganda, and fantasy, was the disembowelment of women. The injury appears frequently in the global annals of racial and ethnic violence. It is usually understood to signal an attack on the enemy's ability to reproduce; that is, it is a discursive act shaped by the idiom of descent that underlies all racial thought. (Given a context in which combatants and political actors are assumed to be male, it also signals, like the widespread use of rape, an assault on the enemy's manhood, that is, on his ability to fulfill the masculine function of protecting and controlling his women.)⁵⁴ In Zanzibar it had a particular potency, as it echoed historical narratives in the ASP press about the cruelties of so-called "Arab" slavery. Only weeks before the riots the fiery TANU speaker Bibi Titi Muhammad was in Zanzibar inflaming ASP rallies with tales of how Arab mistresses had disemboweled pregnant slaves out of curiosity and jealousy.⁵⁵

Rumors about such wounds, amplified after the fact by the political press, were no doubt far more common than the wounds themselves.⁵⁶ But the discrepancy only emphasizes their discursive power. The most pointed demonstration of that power, in fact, was a case in which no disembowelment occurred. On June 3 in the Ng'ambo neighborhood of Mwembemimba, a mob stoned and ransacked the home and business of an Arab shopkeeper, killing his pregnant wife. The evidence of the attack's savagery was indisputable, including the brutality with which the woman was murdered: the coroner testified that she was killed by a heavy blow by panga or axe to the base of the neck, which severed the spinal chord. Yet although the coroner found no other wounds, the victim's husband and two teenage sons insisted that they saw her disemboweled

by one of the two men they accused of leading the mob. The husband was particularly adamant, stressing the nature of the wound and his wife's pregnant condition. Given such testimony, the bewildered judge felt compelled to acquit.⁵⁷

The shopkeeper and his sons admitted that the two they accused were the only members of the mob they recognized: both were regular customers, and at least one, Muhammad Chum, was well-known in the neighborhood as an ASP activist and street thug. So they may have felt prompted to level these specific charges by a sense of personal betrayal and/or political hostility. But there remains the puzzling question of why they insisted on the one detail that undermined their credibility. Having had to endure seeing their wife and mother murdered, they may well have sincerely imagined her disembowelment. If so, this would be a remarkable instance of the ability of racial discourse to shape the perceptions of people caught up in racial violence. Alternately, or in addition, their testimony may have been an especially egregious instance of ZNP witness-tampering. Either way, the case points to a peculiarly circular discourse, an instance of what John Comaroff describes as the reciprocal dehumanization characteristic of ethnic thought.⁵⁸ ASP rhetoric about Arabs' inhumanity toward their slaves inspired similar acts against Arab women in revenge, or threats and rumors of such acts; victims of the June mobs imagined those same acts as evidence of the inhumanity of their African attackers.

The intentional killing of children can also be understood as expressive of an assault on the reproduction of the racial other. The statistics do not break down the June casualties by age, so we do not know how common such assaults were. But they were numerous enough to constitute pointed evidence that the pogroms were shaped by racial discourse: no matter what form they took, such murders can have had nothing to do with efforts to loot property or prevent the ZNP from winning power. Like the other acts I've been describing, the killing of children was not the product of blind thoughtlessness but had understood meaning. It was considered the ultimate act of dehumanizing transgression – so much so that even in the most brutal mobs, many thought it beyond the pale. Nassor bin Seif's son Seif, for example, had a younger brother, five-year-old Suleiman, who was seized in the earliest moments of the Kitope pogrom but sustained only minor scrapes. Though Miraji (or whoever killed Seif) was clearly gripped by a profound sense that Arabs, including Arab children, were less than human, those who manhandled little Suleiman, though undoubtedly sharing the same general hatreds, were evidently unable to overcome humanizing inhibitions.

Despite the uncertainties of such dramatic testimony, then, Nassor bin Seif's image of Miraji pausing before he struck Seif has the ring of truth; one wants to believe Miraji was hesitating. In fact, there are at least three documented cases in which mobs paused to debate whether to kill children and decided to spare them. One took place at Mitikawani, in central Zanzibar, where a Manga couple was killed in a classic racial pogrom, shaped by the discourses of dehumanization. After pelting their victims' house with basketfuls of stones that had been carried to the spot, members of the mob broke down the doors and attacked the terrified couple with clubs and pangas. Some then passed a spear from hand to hand, each stabbing the already fallen couple. (Earlier that day, a

neighbor, carrying the spear, had compared the victims to pigs.) All this was done as the couple's four daughters were forced to watch. But when one of the mob called on his comrades to kill the girls too, an argument ensued and they were spared.⁵⁹

It is in this regard that some of the darkest tales from June yield also a few glimmers of light. Among the most revealing was a pogrom that took place on June 3 at the village of Pangení, in the north of the island. We have unusually fine-grained evidence of this incident, and perhaps for that reason it supplies some details that are extraordinarily compelling. As a whole this mob showed itself as determined as any to hunt down Arabs. Its first victim was Ali bin Swed, a Manga immigrant resident at Pangení for only a month, whose wife, Salima binti Abdulla, had given birth the night before to their third child. The mob killed Ali bin Swed in a cassava field behind his house. Some then pursued Salima and her Arab midwife, Amina binti Hemed, who at the first sounds of trouble had hurried the older children (aged three and five) into the house. The mob broke down the doors and windows and ransacked room after room, searching for the women. Three finally burst into the inner room where Salima and Amina had taken refuge. They did not notice the midwife and toddlers, hidden under a bed, but they slashed at Salima with pangas and a spear. One of the intruders then did something remarkable. He placed a bedstead on top of the fallen Salima, placed a large box on top of that, and announced, as Salima later testified, that "they should leave me as I was already dead." The three then left the room. A few moments later Salima heard someone in the hallway recall that there was a second woman. Two men then re-entered the room, dragged Amina from her hiding-place and killed her, again using the spear.⁶⁰

Salima recognized the man who had hidden her as John Alikumbeya, who had once worked for her and her husband, but she offered no explanation of his behavior. One suspects that, looking down at the prostrate Salima, he saw that she was in fact alive, saw the newborn in her arms, and placed the bedstead and box over her to hide both sights from his comrades. But someone in the mob remembered that Salima had been carrying an infant, and out in the hallway an argument ensued over whether they ought to kill it, too. No need, said another (could it have been John Alikumbeya?); now that its parents are dead it would not survive. The exchange is revealing. It suggests a common assumption that the infant ought to die along with its parents, an assumption that could stem only from racial reasoning about the need to exterminate the entire family. But it also suggests that the assumption was not deeply felt – at least, not deeply enough to persuade the killers to overcome their scruples about taking the life of an infant.⁶¹

The disparity between the murder of Seif bin Nassor at Kitope and the sparing of his brother Suleiman and of all three of Salima's children reminds us how misleading it can be to characterize a mob by a single mentality. In the Pangení case, even the mob's murderous vanguard, the handful who stormed into the house hunting for Salima and Amina, were compromised by people whom Philip Gourevitch might call backsliders into moderation (moderation being defined in relative terms, of course).⁶² We must also consider those members of the mobs, perhaps the majority, who merely stoned the

houses of Nassor bin Seif and Ali bin Swed and went on their way. If most of the Kitope mob, for example, were gripped by the same murderous rage as Miraji, why then were Nassor's two wives, like little Suleiman, relatively unscathed?⁶³

There is a danger, when writing of communal riots, of failing to note the significance of a phenomenon more common than murder: the *refusal* to kill. In an essay describing his struggle to find a way to write about what he observed during the anti-Sikh pogroms of 1984, the novelist Amitav Ghosh notes that the story of neighbors turning on one another was not the only or even the most compelling drama. Neighbors – and strangers – also reached across communal divides to protect one another, often at risk to their lives.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, criminal trials and official commissions of inquiry are geared not toward documenting such human goodness, but toward ascertaining guilt (and, for the prosecutors, dramatizing it). Yet stories of Africans protecting their Arab neighbors in June 1961 even find their way into the trial records, if only in the margins. At Pangen, for example, the mob's second target was the home and shop of Ali bin Swed's neighbor, Said Abdulla. After allowing Said's wife, Raya, to leave with her children, they set fire to the house, cutting down the fleeing Said as Raya watched from nearby. But some in the mob then changed their mind and started toward Raya. An African stranger grabbed Raya's hand and rushed her and the children to the wattle-and-thatch "hut" of a certain Binti Juma, an elderly African woman. Salima and her children were already hiding there, as was a prominent local Arab, Rashid Athuman. The refugees remained in the cramped dwelling until morning.

Such behavior required considerable courage – mobs were known to threaten servants or guests for being loyal to "their Arabs" – and its frequency is testimony to the limited depth of dehumanizing discourse in the minds of many or most Zanzibaris.⁶⁵ But its effectiveness was muted by the overall atmosphere in which individuals were intimidated into behaving as members of a racial category. This could be seen in the trial of the ASP activist Muhammad Chum, who, although acquitted of the Mwembemimba murder, was convicted of trying to rob his neighbor at knifepoint on the first day of the riots. His would-be victim was a 22-year old mother of three, who had fled a mob as it broke into her family's small shop and home. After being struck to the ground in a nearby alleyway, she was helped to her feet by a middle-aged stranger who gathered the children and escorted all four back to the courtyard of her house. There they encountered Chum, who, evidently having just helped ransack the house, demanded the young woman give him money. She and her oldest daughter testified that the unarmed stranger defied Chum and browbeat him into leaving.⁶⁶

The evidence against Chum was substantial; in his own testimony, which was otherwise contradictory and wildly improbable, he admitted having been present. But the Samaritan himself, a Shirazi (self-identified indigenous islander) named Sleyum bin Ramadhan, surprisingly denied having seen or spoken to Chum that day. In voting nevertheless to convict, the judges explained that on this point they had chosen not to believe Sleyum, who had not wanted to identify Chum in open court "for reasons best known to himself." Those reasons are not hard to guess. Muhammad Chum was well-known as an ASP enforcer;⁶⁷ at his trial he boasted of his martial skills and his

experience (perhaps feigned) as a professional soldier, which he had put to the party's service on voting day. In the heat of the riot, Sleyum's first impulse had been to ignore racial boundaries and help a stranger in trouble. But upon reflection, he evidently felt it would be prudent to do nothing on the witness stand that might draw attention to himself as the enemy of a party activist and with it the charge of race betrayal.

IV

The significance of stories like Sleyum's and Binti Juma's is not that some Zanzibaris were unaffected by racial discourse. Such people may have existed, but they were undoubtedly less common than others who, though they deemed their neighbors different for belonging to another racial category and perhaps even mistrusted them for it, nevertheless considered them still their neighbors, still members of the same moral (or human) community. In many ways, the greatest tragedy concerned the processes by which such people were compelled into complicity in racial killing despite their better impulses. I have already suggested how every member of a mob could be made complicit by being forced to inflict a wound on an already fallen body. Individuals could also be coerced into joining a mob in the first place. Such complicity could be especially powerful in lending material reality to the discourses of race by providing a powerful psychological incentive for the reluctant killers to accept the logic of exterminationist hatred. The resulting behavior in turn confirmed the belief among the victimized category that "they" are all the same, all killers, none to be trusted.

These and several of the other themes we've been examining are illustrated by one last story from Pangeni, one that captures much of the horror and pathos of the race riot. Its central character was a sickly old man named Juma Ambari, who occupied the position of assistant *sheha*. *Masheha* were minor officials tasked to serve as village-level representatives to the government. Powerful local families usually made sure that the men named to the post lacked prestige and influence; Juma Ambari, in fact, had been born a slave. That background placed him in a particularly delicate position during the Time of Politics: though the Arabs who had sponsored him in his post leaned toward the ZNP, most of Pangeni's population were squatters who supported the ASP and expected an ex-slave like Juma Ambari to do the same.

On the morning of June 3, Juma Ambari spent his time visiting Pangeni's Arab families, with several of whom he enjoyed long-standing ties of patronage and friendship, to warn of a crowd that was gathering outside the local ASP cooperative shop armed with pangas, baskets of stones, and a spear. He urged the Arabs to take steps to defend themselves. Later that day, one of the Arabs he warned, Ali bin Swed, received a different kind of visitor. Mtumwa Hasan was a 27-year old agricultural laborer who had earlier been among the crowd at the ASP co-op. He now angrily demanded wages that he said were owed him for work he had done on the cassava fields behind Ali bin Swed's house. A quarrel ensued, the central issue being the amount of work Mtumwa had performed. Ali bin Swed suggested that Mtumwa fetch Juma Ambari to mediate. When Mtumwa returned with Juma Ambari, the aged *sheha* was clearly rattled. He accompanied Mtumwa and Ali bin Swed into the disputed cassava field, to measure the rows that Mtumwa had cultivated. The argument got loud enough to be heard from their

neighbor's house.

At this moment, the ASP crowd appeared on the main road, its attention drawn by the sounds of the argument. As the mob caught sight of the men arguing in the cassava field – two Africans and one Arab (the latter a Mmanga and therefore readily recognizable as such) – some shouted, “What are you waiting for? Hit him! Kill him!” Juma Ambari, who only hours earlier had warned Ali bin Swed about the impending riot, struck the first blow, with a panga. It is not difficult to imagine what transpired at that moment. Although an ex-slave, Juma knew he was already compromised in the eyes of the mob because of his service as an assistant *sheha* and his friendship with prominent Arabs. He may also have feared that the mob knew of his activities that morning. And with the belligerent Mtumwa standing next to him, he would have felt triply threatened by the shouts of the mob, shouts that challenged him to demonstrate his racial loyalty. Thus, consumed with fear, he struck. (But the feeble old man could not have been physically capable of inflicting the fatal blow, which was so forceful it severed Ali bin Swed's spinal chord.)⁶⁸

This scene does more than simply illustrate how fundamentally decent people could be turned into racial killers.⁶⁹ It also encapsulates some of the broader themes I have been discussing. From up close the argument that culminated in Ali bin Swed's murder looked like a personal, private matter: a dispute about labor and wages and, perhaps, grievances between a patron and his client about gratitude and loyalty. That is probably how the dispute appeared to Ali bin Swed. But from a distance – from the perspective of the crowd moving down the road – it appeared as a conflict rooted in race. Such perceptions were not simply those of the colonial elite, as suggested in some of the literature on South Asia. Few in the crowd could have known anything specific about Ali bin Swed: he was not a landlord,⁷⁰ and he had not been in the area long enough to have developed a reputation for any activities specific to himself. The crowd saw him simply as an Arab shopkeeper who was arguing with two Africans.⁷¹ (They voiced that perception concisely as they pursued Ali bin Swed's neighbor: “Here's one!” they cried.) This pogrom's central tragedy, aside from the suffering of its victims, concerns how the mob's perceptions were transformed into reality at the moment that Juma Ambari, trembling, lifted his panga.

NOTES

Abbreviations used in the notes: AfrKw: *Afrika Kwetu*; F-S: Foster-Sutton Commission transcripts (in the Buxton Papers, Mss.Brit.EMP. s.390, RH); JAH: *Journal of African History*; PRO: Public Records Office (National Archives), Kew; RH: Rhodes House Library, Oxford; ZHCA: Zanzibar High Court Archives; ZNA: Zanzibar National Archives