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An African Cuba? Britain and the Zanzibar Revolution, 1964

Ian Speller

This article examines the response of the British government to the revolution in Zanzibar in January 1964. It demonstrates that, once the safety of British nationals had been assured, British concerns centred upon the possibility that the new regime might become susceptible to communist influence. These fears appeared to be realised as British influence in Zanzibar diminished and the new government welcomed communist aid and advisers. In the aftermath of successful military interventions in support of moderate regimes in Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika, and under pressure from Washington to take decisive action, the British prepared a series of plans for military action in Zanzibar. None of these was enacted and the final plan was scrapped in December. The paper examines the range of factors that undermined British diplomacy and inhibited the government from taking military action in Zanzibar. In doing so it illustrates the complexity of Britain's relationship with postcolonial regimes in East Africa and the difficulties that it faced when trying to exert influence in a region recognised by both London and Washington as a British sphere of influence.

On 10 December 1963 the Sultanate of Zanzibar achieved independence from British rule. One month later, on 12 January 1964, the elected government was overthrown and the Sultan deposed in a violent revolution. This act reversed 200 years of Arab dominance of the political and economic life of Zanzibar and ensured that, contrary to British policy during colonial rule, the islands would be primarily African in nature rather than Arab. The revolution replaced a conservative Arab-dominated regime with one that espoused the principles of African nationalism and radical socialism and that developed close ties with communist bloc countries. As the former colonial power Britain had an interest in events in Zanzibar, not least because of the presence there of numerous British nationals many of whom had worked for the deposed regime. In the absence of any major strategic or economic interest in Zanzibar itself, British concerns centred on the fear that the islands would become susceptible to communist influence and could act as a destabilising influence off the coast of East Africa. There

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was a fear that Zanzibar could become an 'African Cuba', an analogy that was used a number of times by British officials. Apparently unable to check the spread of communist influence through conventional diplomatic means the British developed a variety of plans for military intervention although, in the event, none of these plans was implemented. The British response was conditioned by Cold War thinking but British policy-makers were wary about using military force without appropriate international support.

The revolution in Zanzibar has been somewhat overlooked by historians of British foreign and defence policy. Phillip Darby gives the crisis only a passing mention in his account of British defence policy east of Suez.¹ Jeffrey Pickering makes no reference to the revolution in his study of Britain's withdrawal from the region while Saki Dockrill's one allusion to Zanzibar mistakenly states that British troops were used there to assist in putting down a mutiny in the army.² James Cable refers to the limited evacuations conducted by British and United States ships in January 1964 as an example of 'definitive force' but does not develop Zanzibar as a case study in his work on gunboat diplomacy.³ Accounts that focus specifically on the revolution have concentrated on events in Zanzibar and do not examine British policy in the days and months after the rising.⁴ The numerous histories of British policy in Africa at this time focus their inquiries into East Africa on the mainland states of Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika. Zanzibar receives rather less coverage.⁵

It is evident but not surprising that the British response to the revolution in Zanzibar has received little attention from historians. British concerns in Zanzibar were dwarfed by those in its mainland neighbours, not least due to the presence in the latter of a white settler community that did not exist in Zanzibar. Similarly, the British desire to retain military bases and staging facilities in Kenya provided a strategic interest to their policy there. Such factors were absent in the case of Zanzibar. The British had no significant economic interest in the islands. The revolution and its aftermath did not receive anything like the same attention in Cabinet, Parliament or the newspapers as was gained by the continuing crisis in Southern Rhodesia. Zanzibar was not the most serious challenge facing British policy overseas. Indeed, and in contrast to the mainland where, in 1964, British troops were employed in support of the governments of Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika, the British government was never sufficiently concerned about developments in Zanzibar to order military intervention. Despite this, an examination of the British response to the revolution is instructive in a number of ways. It provides a valuable insight into the range of factors that influenced British policy in postcolonial East Africa. It demonstrates the way in which local and regional considerations influenced British policy. The various plans for military intervention illustrate the constraints and limitations and also the opportunities associated with the use of military force in circumstances short of war at a time when British defence policy was explicitly expeditionary in focus. It also helps to explain why, despite the presence within the region of powerful British forces and despite pressure from Washington to act and an explicit promise of diplomatic support from President Johnson, the British chose not to intervene in Zanzibar.

I

Zanzibar consists of two main islands, Unguja and Pemba, and a number of small adjacent islands. Unguja was larger and more developed than Pemba and became a focus for radical politics in a way that the smaller island did not. The population consisted of a majority African community with sizeable Arab and Asian minorities. The Arab community had dominated the political and economic life of the islands since the eighteenth century. In 1890 the British instituted a protectorate agreement with the ruling Sultan. Although responsible originally only for foreign affairs, the British soon began to dominate political life. In 1896, in a classic example of 'gunboat diplomacy', a pro-British candidate was installed as Sultan after a brief bombardment by the Royal Navy. The *de facto* status of colony was confirmed in 1913 when responsibility for the protectorate was transferred from the Foreign Office to the Colonial Office and a British resident replaced the consul general.⁶ Despite undertaking measures to end the practice of slavery British rule enabled the Arab minority to preserve its dominant political status over the African majority.

However, as with other examples of 'colonialism's founding alliances', such as the relationship with the Buganda kingdom in Uganda, the basis of British rule in Zanzibar provided an unreliable mechanism for long-term stability.⁷ Prior to the 1964 revolution there were roughly 50,000 Arabs resident in Zanzibar compared to 230,000 'mainland' Africans and 'indigenous' Shirazis.⁸ There was also a community of around 20,000 Asians.⁹ Land, wealth and political power remained concentrated in Arab hands, although the Asian community was prominent in business and trade. The fact that serious social-economic discrepancies existed between different ethnic groups led to the race/class division within society becoming the key political issue. In the 1950s the British had considered applying to Zanzibar the same kind of multi-racial 'partnership' ideas then being considered as a means of reconciling the interests of the diverse ethnic groups on the mainland. They were frustrated in this by Arab opposition. Arab nationalists apparently saw no need for such measures.¹⁰ Arab confidence in their ability to maintain a hold on power after independence appeared well-founded. Despite significant historic, economic, cultural and social ties to neighbouring Tanganyika, and in contrast to the experience of most Indian princes in the 1940s or of the Buganda in newly independent Uganda, the Sultan's government was not forced to accept a loss of sovereignty or accession into a larger political unit.¹¹ In the pre-independence elections of July 1963 the Arab-dominated Zanzibar National Party and their allies in the Zanzibar and Pemba People's Party¹² gained a slender majority of seats. The African-dominated Afro-Shirazi Party polled over 54 per cent of the vote but, due to the arrangement of constituencies, gained only thirteen out of the thirty-one seats in the National Assembly. The radical left-wing Umma party, formed just before the election, did not field any candidates.

For many Africans the election results appeared to rule out constitutional means of addressing the existing social, political and economic imbalances within Zanzibar society and stood in contrast to the movement towards Uhuru (freedom) in mainland East Africa. In the aftermath of independence the government exacerbated ill feeling

by initiating legislation designed to limit the activities of the press and opposition groups and to replace existing members of the police and bureaucracy with personnel known to support the party. Notably, African police officers of mainland origin were dismissed. Rather foolishly, the government discharged the policemen but as a cost-cutting measure it did not pay for their immediate repatriation. This left in Zanzibar a group of men with paramilitary training, an intimate knowledge of police procedures and a grievance against the government.¹³ In the short term these measures weakened the police which, in the absence of national armed forces or British troops, was the only security force available to the government. In November 1963 the government sought to bolster its position by requesting a defence agreement with the British to cater for the provision of troops up to battalion strength for internal security duties. The British rejected the demand, noting that it would be inappropriate for British troops to be employed in the maintenance of law and order once authority had been transferred. The Zanzibar government was reassured that in the event of any external aggression there would be 'immediate consultations' to consider what assistance could be provided.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that the British refused this request despite intelligence reports which suggested that there might be disturbances after independence and that there could be an increase in communist activity in Zanzibar. There was recognition which the presence of British troops might inflame African nationalist sentiment and actually undermine rather than support British interests.¹⁵

The revolution began around 3am on 12 January 1964. The exact details of the planning and conduct of the uprising are difficult to discern with any accuracy. The official account of the revolution, published on the first anniversary, claims that the operation was planned and led by the leader of the Afro-Shirazi Party, Abeid Karume.¹⁶ This is almost certainly untrue. Planning seems to have involved radical members of the Afro-Shirazi Youth League in association with a Ugandan called John Okello. While it may be difficult to be precise about the planning of the revolution, the outcome is easier to determine. A group of around 800 ill-armed rebels captured the police stations and armouries on Unguja, before advancing into Zanzibar Town to seize the government buildings and the Sultan's Palace in the Stonetown area. The Sultan and many senior government officials fled the scene and escaped in the Sultan's yacht, the *Seyyid Khalifa*.¹⁷ The revolution was accompanied by violence directed against the Arab community and an unknown number of people were killed or beaten. There were many rapes. Arab and Asian property was attacked. The death toll probably ran into thousands and the majority of victims were Arabs.¹⁸ On the explicit instructions of Okello, Europeans were not attacked.

With the fall of the government a Revolutionary Council was established with Karume as president of the People's Republic of Zanzibar and Pemba and the leader of Umma, Abdulrahman Mohamed Babu, as minister of external affairs. Okello did not try to remain in overall control, contenting himself with the title of field marshal. Neither Karume nor Babu had been directly involved in the activities of 12 January. Karume was taken to the mainland temporarily 'for safe keeping' by Okello's men once violence had broken out. Similarly, Babu was in Dar es Salaam prior to the revolution and was not involved in planning the rising.¹⁹ However, the

presence in Zanzibar immediately after the revolution of Umma supporters trained in Cuba and wearing Cuban combat fatigues and, apparently, some Fidel Castro-style beards gave rise to the erroneous belief that the revolution was a Cuban-style communist take-over. This explanation fitted British and American preconceptions, giving rise to fear that Zanzibar might become 'an African Cuba under communist control'.²⁰

II

British forces in Kenya were informed of the revolution at 4.45am on 12 January and troops and aircraft in Kenya were placed on fifteen-minute standby to be ready to conduct an 'airfield assault'. In the event, military action was not required. The British high commissioner in Zanzibar, Timothy Crosthwait, reported that there were no reports of British nationals being attacked. He did not support the use of British troops on their own and believed that 'Africans should help their brothers'. This was an interesting choice of words given that this was essentially a revolt by Africans against their Arab rulers. The outgoing Zanzibar government had in fact appealed to Kenya and Tanganyika for help, but to no avail. Later that evening British troops held at immediate notice to move were reduced to four hours' notice. It was recognised that the revolutionaries were now in effective control of the island.²¹ The chance to support the government in defeating the revolution had been allowed to pass.

The most obvious and immediate concern for British officials was the safety of the 400 British nationals and numerous other Europeans and Americans currently resident in Zanzibar. Within hours of the outbreak of revolution the United States ambassador had announced his intention to evacuate American nationals from Zanzibar.²² The British approach was rather different. They were concerned that a premature evacuation might destabilise the situation in Zanzibar. Many Europeans held important technical jobs and their departure might undermine economic life and the provision of key public services. The British were also keen to ensure that any evacuation should be conducted with the concurrence of the revolutionary government to minimise the potential for bloodshed.²³ American personnel were evacuated by the destroyer USS *Manley* on 13 January. This was without the prior agreement of the Revolutionary Council and the evacuation was delayed by armed men until the council eventually granted permission for it to proceed. British officials felt that this 'precipitate action' had created much ill-will in Zanzibar.²⁴

The first and most visible British response to the revolution was provided by the Royal Navy. HMS *Owen*, a survey vessel, arrived in the evening of 12 January having been diverted from survey work off the coast of Kenya. It was joined on 15 January by the frigate HMS *Rhyl* and the auxiliary ship RFA *Hebe*. The pacific nature of HMS *Owen* (survey ships did not have any main armament) may have made its presence more acceptable to the revolutionaries. Certainly its complement of boats, necessary for survey work, proved useful for conveying personnel from ship to shore and would have proven vital in any major evacuation. The more warlike nature of HMS *Rhyl* was exacerbated by the fact that 'A' Company of the 1st

Battalion of the Staffordshire Regiment had been embarked due to an inaccurate intelligence report that a 'serious situation' was due to arise in Zanzibar on 15 January.²⁵ Embarkation of the troops had been reported in the Kenyan media and the fact that they were known to be on their way was a cause of some embarrassment to Crosthwait in his dealings with the new government. To make matters worse, by chance *Hebe* had just completed the de-storing of the Royal Navy Armaments Depot at Mombassa and was full of weapons and explosives. Fortunately this fact was kept secret in Zanzibar although, by refusing to be searched, the ship's presence did cause suspicion ashore. There was speculation that the vessel was some form of amphibious ship.²⁶ The original task given to HMS *Owen* had been to protect and, if need be, evacuate British subjects living in Zanzibar. *Owen's* commanding officer, Commander Haslam, had instructions 'not to interfere in any other way'. All three British ships participated in a partial evacuation of personnel on 17 January and the requirement to protect remaining British and European civilians remained a key aspect of British military planning in the months ahead.²⁷

Unguja is only 25 miles (40 km) off the coast of Tanganyika and historically Zanzibar had had close links to the mainland. The accession of an African-dominated government in the islands increased the possibility of co-operation with the other ex-British colonies in East Africa and the governments of Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika displayed an interest in supporting stability in Zanzibar. In response to a request from Karume, President Nyerere of Tanganyika sent 300 Tanganyikan policemen to Zanzibar to help restore order. These men went some way towards strengthening the position of the government there. Unfortunately the political situation on the mainland was soon to deteriorate. On 20 January the Tanganyika Rifles mutinied. The mutiny appears to have been prompted by frustration at the slow pace of the Africanisation of the army and by a demand for better pay. The mutineers may have been encouraged by the success of the 'African' revolution in Zanzibar and the temporary absence of such a large contingent of policemen. This action was followed by similar unrest in both Kenya and Uganda. This threatened to undermine the British position in East Africa which was based upon supporting the moderate regimes to whom they had recently handed over power. The British were thus faced with a crisis in their former East African colonies that extended far beyond Zanzibar.²⁸ Some observers were quick to draw a connection between events in Zanzibar and instability on the mainland.²⁹

Unlike the Zanzibar revolution the East African mutinies directly threatened important British interests and the military response was rapid and effective. HMS *Rhyl*, with its troops still embarked, immediately sailed to Tanganyika to be available to conduct an amphibious landing should the need arise and was replaced off Zanzibar by HMS *Owen* with a company of Gordon Highlanders onboard. Meanwhile, No. 45 Commando, Royal Marines was embarked in the aircraft carrier HMS *Centaur* at Aden and sailed to Tanganyika via Mombassa, joining the destroyer HMS *Cambrian* en route. On 24 January the British received a request for military assistance from President Nyerere and as a result No.45 Commando undertook a helicopter landing at dawn the next day near the main rebel barracks at Colito, outside Dar es Salaam.

Accompanied by a firepower demonstration by the guns of HMS *Cambrian*, the landing was a success and secured the barracks with minimum loss of African lives and no British casualties. Subsequent operations disarmed rather acquiescent mutineers at Tabora and Nachingweya and order was restored throughout the country.³⁰ No.45 Commando was later relieved by No.41 Commando, Royal Marines before these in turn were replaced by Nigerian troops. British forces left the country amid plaudits from the local press and with the grateful thanks of the Tanganyikan government.³¹ The mutiny in Tanganyika sparked similar unrest in the Ugandan and Kenyan armies. Both countries had to seek help from their erstwhile colonial master and British troops from Kenya were used to restore order and disarm the mutineers.

British military intervention in East Africa was effective, but it was also rather embarrassing. President Nyerere convened a special meeting of the Organisation of African Unity to explain his reasons for calling in British troops and to call for African soldiers to replace them.³² The British were very aware of the danger of being seen to interfere in the internal affairs of their former colonies. The landing in Tanganyika occurred only after a direct request by the president and this was also the case in both Uganda and Kenya. London agreed to meet the first request for assistance, from Ugandan Prime Minister Milton Obote, only on condition that he put the request in writing and issued a public broadcast.³³ All parties recognised the value of replacing British forces in Tanganyika with African troops before the favourable reception they had initially received could turn sour. Both No.45 and No.41 Commandos received a warm welcome in that country but the latter noted that opposition to their presence had begun to grow before their departure in April.³⁴ This served to reinforce the government's preference not to maintain British forces in African countries for internal security purposes after independence.³⁵

III

The successful interventions on the East African mainland were followed by a series of plans for British military action in Zanzibar. These were not designed to secure any vital interest in Zanzibar itself. In a brief prepared in February for the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee and approved by Commonwealth Relations Office and Ministry of Defence officials it was noted that British commercial interests in Zanzibar were 'minute' and that Zanzibar was 'not important' by itself. It could, however, 'in communist hands', become a dangerous centre for the smuggling of agents, arms and propaganda into East Africa, an area where direct financial and strategic interests were at stake.³⁶ Thus, while the policy committee advised that 'there were no substantial British interests in Zanzibar itself' there was some concern within government and on the backbenches about the possibility of Zanzibar destabilising its neighbours.³⁷

The activities on the mainland had apparently shown how trouble in one country could spark problems elsewhere. They had also brought to the region a concentration of British military assets including the aircraft carriers HMS *Centaur* and *Victorious*. The new regime in Zanzibar had gained rapid recognition from its mainland neighbours and from a number of communist countries including China, the Soviet

Union and East Germany. Britain, in common with the United States and most Commonwealth countries, withheld such recognition until 23 February.³⁸ This delay was a cause of much embarrassment to Crosthwait and he believed that it was one reason why western influence was so quickly eclipsed by communist interests in Zanzibar. On 20 February he and his staff were expelled from the islands, only returning on 5 March after recognition had been granted.³⁹ The secretary of state for Commonwealth relations, Duncan Sandys, had explained to Parliament that the reasons for this delay were due to the confused situation that existed in Zanzibar and the need to consult first with other Commonwealth countries. In his valedictory despatch, written in July, Crosthwait identified another reason for the delay: the hope that, in the wake of the successful interventions on the mainland, 'events might make possible' similar action in Zanzibar.⁴⁰ Indeed, on 29 January Sandys had requested that he try to think how a 'plausible excuse' could be obtained for intervention.⁴¹

Once the safety of their own citizens had been secured by the evacuation of 15 January, the United States recognised British primacy over Zanzibar. The governments on both sides of the Atlantic saw East Africa as a British sphere of influence. The American ambassador in Dar es Salaam recommended that Washington should urge the British to persuade East African governments to co-operate with them in restoring order in Zanzibar. The State Department sympathised with this position and on 29 January the under-secretary of state, Averill Harriman, sent a cable to the ambassador in London suggesting that the British should extract a request from Karume for military support to shore up his position. American interpretations were conditioned by their Cold War outlook. They feared that instability could lead to a communist take-over, and that this would turn Zanzibar into a base for subversive and insurgency operations against the mainland, somewhat akin to the role that they believed Cuba fulfilled in Latin America.⁴² On 1 February the American ambassador in London informed Sandys that President Johnson had personally agreed that the United States would give public and diplomatic support to any British intervention.⁴³ Four days later the president sent a direct message to the prime minister. He suggested that the time to act had arrived and that only the British government had the 'necessary position and influence in Zanzibar and in the nearby African States'.⁴⁴

The American government had been impressed by the successful British interventions on the mainland in late January. However, as the months passed and as Karume's government appeared to fall increasingly under the spell of Soviet, East German and Chinese advisers, the State Department became a little disillusioned at Britain's failure to take similarly decisive action in the case of Zanzibar. In a message to the British foreign secretary on 30 March the United States secretary of state, Dean Rusk, urged the British to impress on Karume and the mainland governments the dire consequences of a communist take-over in Zanzibar. He concluded the message with the statement that 'we must act without delay with whatever means are necessary to reverse the totally unsatisfactory situation in Zanzibar'.⁴⁵ Johnson reinforced this point in a message to the prime minister the same day. Once again he affirmed that due to 'your history and your resources' Britain had to take the lead in East Africa and that the United States would 'support you in every way possible

in any decision to reverse the present course of events in Zanzibar'.⁴⁶ The British were not being given a blank cheque over Zanzibar, there was no suggestion of American forces participating in any military activity, but they could clearly count on political support from the United States should they decide to intervene.

For some time it was difficult to ascertain exactly who was in charge in Zanzibar. The Afro-Shirazi Party and Umma shared power in the new government, with the leaders of the two parties as president and minister of external affairs respectively. Nevertheless, Okello retained considerable power through the allegiance of a large number of armed irregulars calling themselves the Freedom Military Force. It was unclear to what extent the interests of the government and of Okello coincided. Karume was regarded as something of a moderate socialist and a man with whom the British could do business. Babu was known to hold radical left-wing views and was initially thought to be the 'brain behind the revolt'.⁴⁷ The British sought to work with the government rather than with the field marshal. Okello was an unknown quantity to the British and Americans. He was assessed as being of Ugandan or Kenyan descent and having once worked as a policeman on Pemba. Commander Haslam believed that he had once been a Mau Mau leader, a factor unlikely to make him popular with the former colonial power.⁴⁸ He and many of his supporters were said to have been communist trained, although in fact this was not the case. What was clear was that the existence of hundreds of armed supporters made Okello a power to be reckoned with in Zanzibar. The British were fearful that he might launch another coup to remove Karume and had been particularly concerned when the president left Zanzibar on 16 January to go to Tanganyika to request assistance in restoring order.⁴⁹

Having identified Karume as a moderate the British sought to support him in power, although they recognised that he might not want such assistance. Crosthwait believed that Karume would resent the interference of 'white men in Black affairs'. He also noted that such backing could be counter-productive, drawing an analogy with American interference in Cuba, informing London that:

Karume's appeal in Zanzibar rests upon his Africanism and his freedom of 'colonialist' taint. Any British action to bolster him would at once discredit him and undermine position of moderates who are trying to get his ear. With their Cuban backgrounds, Marxist extremists would at once draw parallels with Bay of Pigs.⁵⁰

Despite these fears some consideration was given to a plan to ask Nyerere to withdraw the Tanganyikan police from Zanzibar, based on the assumption that, given their recent difficulties, neither Kenya nor Uganda would be willing to replace them and thus Karume might be forced to rely on British help.⁵¹ This plan had obvious drawbacks and was not pursued. Other options were investigated. On 30 January the Commanders Committee East Africa issued instructions for a military operation codenamed Parthenon designed to restore law and order in Zanzibar. Parthenon was based on the fear that the Umma party, backed by Okello, was planning to oust moderate members of the government. It went far beyond earlier plans limited to the protection of European lives and catered for the seizure of first Unguja and

then Pemba by parachute troops and helicopter assault. Forces allocated included a maximum of two aircraft carriers, three destroyers, the survey ship *HMS Owen*, thirteen helicopters, twenty-one transport and reconnaissance aircraft, the 2nd Battalion Scots Guards, No.45 Commando, one company from the 2nd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment and a tactical headquarters.⁵² If the operation had gone ahead it would have been the largest British airborne/amphibious operation since Suez in 1956.

Fortunately the expected coup did not occur and the situation in Zanzibar did not deteriorate to the extent feared. Okello's violent conduct and rhetoric, and that of his supporters, threatened and alienated more moderate opinion within the Afro-Shirazi Party. It also removed any chance of his gaining support from the governments of Tanganyika, Kenya or Uganda. He suffered the disadvantage of being a Christian and of speaking with a thick mainland accent, marking him out as something of an outsider in Muslim Zanzibar. He had armed support but little political backing. In the event it proved relatively easy to remove him. By March forces loyal to Karume had disarmed many of his supporters. That month Okello took a trip to the mainland and when he tried to return, on 9 March, he was met by an armed party at the airport and deported first to Tanganyika and then Kenya. His reputation was sufficiently sullied to ensure that he was unwelcome in both of these countries and thus he returned to Uganda, apparently destitute.⁵³ By April it was reported that the Freedom Military Force was in the process of being disarmed by a newly formed People's Liberation Army.⁵⁴

Despite the removal of Okello the British continued to plan for intervention while remaining aware of the political implications of their actions. Intervention beyond that required to protect British lives would be problematic unless it had the support of African leaders. Duncan Sandys visited East Africa in March, meeting both Karume and Babu on 8 March, coming away with the impression that the latter was 'an engaging rogue'.⁵⁵ Officials hoped that the East African governments might be persuaded to request British intervention or even to get Karume to request British intervention to counterbalance the growing communist influence in Zanzibar. On 12 March Sandys told the Cabinet that the governments of Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika had been informed that, should they be 'disposed to appeal to us for help in restoring order' in the event of further disturbances in Zanzibar, Britain would be 'prepared to consider such a request'.⁵⁶ No such request was received. The British thus had the means to intervene but, in the absence of serious disorder, lacked an acceptable pretext.

In a television interview on 20 February the British prime minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, had expressed unease about the number of communist-trained agents in East Africa.⁵⁷ London became increasingly concerned that Zanzibar would fall to a pro-communist coup and feared that it was already coming under the influence of the Sino-Soviet bloc. The arrival of numerous advisers from the Soviet Union, East Germany and China seemed to confirm this.⁵⁸ Operation Parthenon was replaced by Operation Boris and later Operation Finery, each designed to provide for intervention in Zanzibar using a different mix of military forces.⁵⁹ Boris was to be mounted

from Kenya using parachute troops. This was problematic because any intervention in Zanzibar would engender a 'strong adverse reaction' in Kenya. Furthermore, the Kenyan government had insisted that the blanket clearance for movements of British forces in Kenya did not extend to Zanzibar.⁶⁰ On 9 April the Defence Council decided that security could not be preserved in Kenya and thus Zanzibar forces could be alerted to the mounting of any operation. Operation Finery was based upon a helicopter landing by marines from the commando ship HMS *Bulwark*. This new plan did not require bases in Kenya although, as *Bulwark* was required for operations in the Far East, Finery would take fourteen days to mount.⁶¹ In addition to the above, the British continued to plan for 'a life saving operation at 24 hours' notice' to evacuate remaining personnel from Zanzibar without government consent should the need arise.⁶²

IV

In April 1964 Presidents Nyerere and Karume agreed to a constitutional merger of their two countries. This decision, announced on 23 April, created the Republic of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, later renamed the United Republic of Tanzania. Precise reasons for the union are unclear, but Karume apparently sought to reinforce his position in Zanzibar, fearing that Umma and radical elements of the Afro-Shirazi Party would dominate the government and that this could lead to disorder. Similarly Nyerere sought a means to bring stability to Zanzibar and to unite two countries that had close historic links.⁶³ Nyerere became president of the Union and Karume was made one of its two vice-presidents. Even after the union Zanzibar politics remained radical and subject to relatively little control from the mainland.⁶⁴

The British feared that opposition to the union, led by Babu, might lead to civil war between his supporters and those of Karume. In order to back Karume in the event of any fighting the British commanders in Kenya prepared Operation Shed, a plan to airlift a battalion of troops and some scout cars to Unguja. The force would seize the airport and vital points, disarm any opposition, protect British lives and those of Karume and loyal members of his government.⁶⁵ Fortunately, once again, the immediate danger passed without incident and by 29 April ministers had decided that forces devoted to Shed could be relaxed to twenty-four hours' notice and that there was no longer any requirement for Finery.⁶⁶

The British sought to support the union as a means of promoting stability and reducing communist influence. The Commonwealth Relations Office contemplated the pre-emptive deployment of Nigerian troops to Zanzibar to bolster pro-union elements there.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, by May ministers realised that the Nigerian government would not allow their troops to be used in this fashion.⁶⁸ There was no alternative to reliance on British forces. Shed had been based on the assumption that the arrival of British troops in Zanzibar would be unopposed and at Karume's invitation. On 21 May the British chiefs of staff agreed that these assumptions were no longer valid.⁶⁹ In view of the difficulty that union officials had in exerting control in Zanzibar planning was now based upon the idea that military operations might be conducted at the

request of President Nyerere in order to support Tanzanian Police in any clash with Zanzibar security forces. On 9 June the minister of defence, Peter Thorneycroft, reported that current plans were based on the use of a Commando unit from Aden embarked on the aircraft carrier HMS *Centaur* and supported by a follow-on battalion from Kenya. Intelligence reports suggested that Zanzibar security forces outnumbered the Tanzanian Police and that the People's Liberation Army and a Soviet training team were deployed nightly in the vicinity of the airfield. Thorneycroft noted that any intervention would probably both incur and inflict heavy casualties and would be resented by the African majority.⁷⁰

By August the State Department was increasingly worried about a perceived failure of the British to take decisive action. The British ambassador in Washington reported that the Americans were losing confidence in a policy which was seen as 'not only defeatist but complacently so'. He noted that the positive impression gained by the January interventions had now been 'frittered away'.⁷¹ The British position was rather more cautious than the State Department would have wished. It would be British and not American troops who would be called on to undertake any military operation and thus the British and not the American government that would suffer any adverse consequences. The Foreign Office felt that the Americans over-estimated Britain's ability to influence events in East Africa. They, like their American counterparts, saw the value in getting the East African governments to request British intervention but they were rather more conscious of the difficulties in actually achieving this.⁷² The British position was also rather less alarmist than the American one. The Americans tended to view the 'loss' of Zanzibar to communism as being disastrous for the future stability of East and Southern Africa. The latter may have been mentioned in order to awaken Britain to the potential impact of a communist Zanzibar on the increasingly difficult circumstances in Rhodesia. The government was sensitive to such issues and the events in Zanzibar were cited as one reason for treading very carefully over the future of Southern Rhodesia.⁷³ Nevertheless, while sharing some of the American concerns, the British also recognised the difficulties facing communist attempts to infiltrate the region. They feared that a communist take-over in Zanzibar might lead to a hardening of attitudes against communism on the mainland. They also realised that Sino-Soviet rivalry might hinder the development of a united communist front.⁷⁴ Whatever the case, military intervention in Zanzibar was unlikely to be constructive in the long term unless it proved acceptable to local opinion. Unfortunately Britain's position in East Africa was compromised to a degree by the colonial legacy. African leaders could not afford to appear too close to the British for fear of criticism from other African states or from elements within their own countries. This was apparent in the highly politicised issue of British training and defence assistance to Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika, and it was also reflected in Britain's circumspection over Zanzibar.⁷⁵

British military planning was constrained by a variety of factors, both political and military. Only eight years after the debacle at Suez, the British were acutely aware of the need to maintain domestic and international support for any intervention. According to the chiefs of staff, the United States government was aware of and supported British

readiness to intervene but they acknowledged that such action was bound to lead to a 'severely hostile reaction' in some parts of the world. They realised that military action would lead to criticism in the United Nations, and that such criticism could be expected from non-aligned and even some allied countries. In order to limit this, active operations would need to be completed very quickly, preferably within twenty-four hours. The bedrock of the British position was that intervention could be justified only if it was in response to a request by local African leaders. Unfortunately, by June Karume seemed highly unlikely to invite the British to intervene in the case of instability in Zanzibar. Nyerere was expected to turn to the British for help only as a last resort and to prefer to rely on African forces. As such, any request for intervention would probably be issued reluctantly and at the last minute. They also feared that, if intervention did not occur immediately after a request was issued, Nyerere might suffer a crisis of confidence and withdraw the request before military action could be completed.⁷⁶

Given these constraints British forces had to be able to complete operations quickly, effectively and with minimum casualties to all parties. Unfortunately, potential opposition in Zanzibar had grown since January. By June the People's Liberation Army was estimated to be between 500 and 600 strong. It was supported by a small Soviet military mission and equipped with a number of heavy weapons, including light anti-aircraft guns, heavy machine guns, 120-mm mortars and 57-mm anti-tank guns. The loyalty of the army was uncertain but they were considered highly likely to oppose military action by British or mainland forces. The Zanzibar police numbered around 600 and were loyal to Karume. They could be expected to support the army in attempting to repulse a British invasion unless instructed otherwise by Karume. There were also 300 Tanzanian police who would be instructed to help British forces reacting to a request from Nyerere. Although armed with automatic weapons these police were not considered strong enough to be relied upon as a major factor in any assault plan. Crosthwait thought it unlikely that British military intervention would be supported by any of the local population except Asians. The majority of the local African population was loyal to Karume and would be hostile to British intervention if it did not have his public backing. To make matters worse, there were still eighty-seven 'European British' and a further forty 'friendly nationals' living in Zanzibar. In the event of military intervention their lives might be endangered by mob violence or the actions of the Zanzibar security forces.⁷⁷

The quickest means of inserting troops into Zanzibar would be by air. Army forces held the airfield and anti-aircraft guns were moved to the area at night to counter the threat of a night landing. This ruled out a conventional landing by infantry embarked in aircraft. An airborne assault using the parachute battalion currently based in Bahrain was possible but the chiefs of staff ruled this out as 'the least tactically satisfactory method' of conducting the operation. The only suitable drop-zone for the troops was 10 miles southeast of Zanzibar Town and seven miles from the airfield. There would therefore be some delay before key objectives could be taken and British civilians protected. Moreover, the transport aircraft would have to stage through Nairobi, with a high chance that security would be compromised and that

sympathisers on the mainland would provide Zanzibar with forewarning of the assault. Similar problems attended the provision of air cover from airfields in Kenya. The favoured approach was therefore for an amphibious operation utilising landing craft and helicopters from a commando ship and with air cover provided by an aircraft carrier. In addition to headquarters elements, a commando unit and two companies of infantry would provide the assault element, with the remainder of the infantry battalion and supporting elements arriving by air once the airfield had been secured. The necessary forces would come from the Far East and Aden and would not depend on troops or facilities on African soil. This approach was enshrined in the final plan for large-scale intervention, codenamed Giralda.⁷⁸

The use of maritime forces removed the security issue associated with mainland Africa and provided for a more satisfactory approach tactically. In order to disguise British intent it was planned to fly the necessary infantry battalion and tactical headquarters from Aden to the Indian Ocean island of Gan where they could join the commando unit and Royal Navy shipping en route to Zanzibar from the Far East. It would take the whole force eleven to fifteen days to be in position off Zanzibar. Thereafter it could poise out of sight offshore for another fifteen days before the operational efficiency of the embarked troops would begin to deteriorate to an unacceptable level. This posed a problem for the British. If they waited for Nyerere to issue a request for intervention it would take between eleven and fifteen days before an assault could be conducted, providing plenty of time for the president's resolve to weaken. On the other hand, if the maritime force sailed early in order to be in position for rapid intervention there were a finite number of days before the troops would have to be disembarked, with attendant publicity. Thus sailing before a request had been issued was rather risky. Unfortunately for the British, with major commitments in both Aden and the Far East, they did not have sufficient resources to hold a force permanently in theatre and rotate the necessary amphibious ships and troops offshore. Naval planners had advocated just such a capability in 1961 when the strategy paper 'British Strategy in the 1960s' was being discussed, but it had been ruled out on the grounds of cost.⁷⁹

One additional weakness of this approach was that follow-on forces designed to reinforce the initial assault were to come from Kenya or from Aden via Kenya or mainland Tanzania. This movement would occur after the initial assault and so would not prejudice surprise, but it would be vulnerable to changing political circumstances and the movement might be frustrated by sudden political decisions over which the British would have little control. Similar problems had almost unhinged the British reinforcement of Kuwait in 1961.⁸⁰ As any delay in the arrival of follow-on forces would undermine the implementation of the whole operation the plan would require the full co-operation of the Kenyan or Tanzanian authorities. Support from the latter might be expected if British troops had been asked to intervene by President Nyerere, support from the former might be more problematic, particularly after the planned withdrawal of British forces stationed there.

In the event the plan was never tested. By autumn western interests in Zanzibar had been almost eradicated and eastern-bloc influence was paramount. London saw this as

undesirable, but acknowledged that it did not provide a reason to intervene. In October 1964, after nine months of contingency planning and changing readiness states, the government informed the chiefs of staff that President Nyerere was very unlikely to request British military assistance. Therefore Plan Giralda could be regarded as 'in suspense'.⁸¹ The British general election that month brought to power a new Labour administration and plans to intervene in Zanzibar were not resurrected. In December it was finally agreed to scrap Giralda. The government considered informing Nyerere that Britain no longer felt itself bound to consider giving him military support over Zanzibar, but eventually decided not to 'volunteer' the information.⁸² There would be no British military intervention in Zanzibar.

V

The revolution in Zanzibar illustrated some of the difficulties and dilemmas facing Britain as it withdrew from empire. The constitutional structure established prior to independence did not resolve the basic social, political and economic problems facing Zanzibar. African resentment towards the privileged position held by Arabs before independence was exacerbated by the result of the 1963 election and by the subsequent actions of the new government. Prior to independence the British foresaw the potential for unrest in independent Zanzibar and the possibility of an increase in communist activity. They would not, however, agree to the use of British troops for internal security purposes once authority had been transferred. After the event they recognised that the January revolution was an 'expression of African resentment at their continued subjection' rather than an organised communist coup. Any attempt to restore the Sultan's government would have united African opinion against the British and this course of action was not contemplated. Initial concern about the safety of British nationals in Zanzibar was not matched by a belief that the British would be justified in using force to protect the Arab minority in Zanzibar. In the months after the revolution the British were concerned first by the threat to stability posed by Okello and his supporters and then by a fear that the new regime was increasingly susceptible to communist influence. A variety of plans for military intervention were devised but none was enacted. In the absence of serious disorder in Zanzibar, and aware of the difficulty of gaining international approval for any unilateral action, the government were forced to accept that diplomacy had failed and that military intervention was not an option. As a result, in the opinion of the outgoing high commissioner, British influence in Zanzibar was 'virtually eliminated'. British advisers were replaced by those from the communist bloc and of the 130 British officials employed by the Zanzibar government prior to the revolution only one, a dentist, remained by July.⁸³ This was seen as undesirable, but did not directly affect any vital British interest. The British government was less alarmed about the impact of a left-wing regime in Zanzibar than was Washington, and was more cognisant of the potential perils of military intervention. The latter could be effective only if it proved acceptable to African opinion within the islands and on the mainland. The British ability to acknowledge this and to act or, rather, not to act accordingly reflects a degree of realism in their

approach to postcolonial East Africa. It is clear that gunboat diplomacy was rather more difficult in 1964 than it had been in 1896.

Notes

- [1] Darby, *British Defence Policy*, 238.
- [2] Pickering, *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez*; Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, 35.
- [3] Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 57.
- [4] See Clayton, *Zanzibar Revolution*; Lofchie, *Zanzibar*; Peterson, *Revolution in Zanzibar*. Peterson was the US Vice-Consul in Zanzibar at the time of the revolution. Also see Keith Kyle 'Gideon's Voices' and 'How It Happened', *The Spectator*, 7 and 14 Feb. 1964.
- [5] For example, see Low, *Eclipse of Empire*, chs 7 and 9; Lonsdale, 'East Africa'.
- [6] See Lofchie, *Zanzibar*, ch. 1. For a discussion of India's influence on Zanzibar in the nineteenth century, see Blyth, *The Empire of the Raj*, esp. ch. 3.
- [7] Lonsdale, 'East Africa', 531–33.
- [8] Mapuri, *The 1964 Revolution*, 20.
- [9] Peterson, *Revolution in Zanzibar*, 10; Davidson, *Modern Africa*, 146.
- [10] Low, *Eclipse of Empire*, 244.
- [11] For a discussion of such issues within a broad context see Louis, 'The Dissolution of the British Empire'.
- [12] The Zanzibar and Pemba People's Party membership was predominantly African and was particularly strong in Pemba where the African and Arab communities lived in greater harmony than on Unguja.
- [13] Clayton, *Zanzibar Revolution*, ch. 3.
- [14] Telegram from Sir George Mooring (British resident in Zanzibar) to the secretary of state for the colonies, 21 Nov. 1963; telegram from the secretary of state for the colonies to Sir George Mooring, 9 Dec. 1963, CAB 21/5524, The UK National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA).
- [15] For example, see, *Subversive Activity in Zanzibar*, Report by the Joint Intelligence Committee, 29 Aug 1963, JIC (63) 61, CAB 158/49.
- [16] The 'official' version of events was published in *The Nationalist* in Dar es Salaam on 12 Jan. 1965. It is reproduced as an appendix in Okello, *Revolution in Zanzibar*.
- [17] For further details see Clayton, *Zanzibar Revolution*, ch. 3.
- [18] In Feb. 1964 the British High Commissioner estimated that 'not less than 1,000 and possibly considerably more were murdered', *Casualties and Refugees Resulting from Zanzibar Revolution*, DO185/60, TNA. Clayton suggests that 8,000 people were killed whereas Peterson estimates that the death toll among Arabs was around 5,000. The latter figure would represent roughly 10 per cent of the Arab population of Zanzibar. This remains a sensitive issue in Zanzibar, see Mapuri, *The 1964 Revolution*, 1, 2, 55.
- [19] Babu later claimed that Umma intervened at the crucial moment to transform a simple rebellion into a revolutionary insurrection, Mapuri, *The 1964 Revolution*, 2. For the British view on this matter, see JIC (64) 11th meeting, 27 Feb. 1964, CAB 159/40.
- [20] Telegram No.186, Commonwealth Relations Office to the High Commissioner, Dar es Salaam, 25 Jan. 1964, DO 181/51.
- [21] *An Outline History of Events in East Africa during the period 12th to the 26th January*, 64, WO 276/373, TNA.
- [22] *Ibid.*
- [23] *HMS Owen. Diary of Events, 12th–17th January*, 20 Jan. 1964, ADM 1/29063, TNA. Commanding Officer HMS Owen's letter No. 3/1642, 1 Feb. 1964, ADM 1/129063.
- [24] *HMS Owen, Diary of Events, 12th–17th January*.
- [25] *An Outline History of Events in East Africa*.

- [26] Clayton, *Zanzibar Revolution*, 87.
- [27] HMS Owen, *Diary of Events, 12th–17th January*.
- [28] For further details see Stevens, 'A Joint Operation in Tanganyika', 48–55 and ADM 1/29063. Also see Tanzania People's Defence Forces, *Tanganyika Rifles Mutiny*.
- [29] For example, see *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 688, cols 513–14, 534–35 and 975–78.
- [30] Captain Steiner, Report to Flag Officer Middle East, 5 Feb. 1964, ADM 1/29063. 45 *Commando Royal Marines, Preliminary Report on Operations in Tanganyika*, 8 Feb. 1964, ADM 1/29063.
- [31] *Report on the Activities of 41 Commando, Royal Marines, 1st January 1964–10th April 1964*, ADM 202/510.
- [32] Bienen, *Tanzania*, 367.
- [33] *An Outline History of Events in East Africa*.
- [34] *Report on the Activities of 41 Commando, Royal Marines, 1st January 1964–10th April 1964, Annex B*, ADM 202/510.
- [35] DO (64) 4th meeting, item 1, 28 Jan. 1964, CAB 148/1 and DO (64) 13th meeting, item 1, 11 March 1964, CAB 148/1.
- [36] *Pros and Cons of Military Intervention in Zanzibar*, 3 Feb. 1964, CAB 21/5524; DO (64) 9, *The Policy Implications of Developments in East Africa*, 4 Feb. 1964, CAB 148/1.
- [37] DO (64) 17th meeting, 8 April 1964, CAB 148/1; *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 687, cols 37–38 and vol. 688., cols 513–14, 534–35 and 975–78.
- [38] See FO 371/176514, TNA for a discussion of the pros and cons of recognition.
- [39] Both the State Department and the Foreign Office were concerned that the delay in offering recognition had undermined western interests in Zanzibar. The Americans were reported to be 'seriously disturbed' by Crosthwait's handling of the situation while at the Foreign Office in London Sir Geoffrey Harrison complained about the inefficiency of the CRO and about the 'procrastination' of Sandys. For further details see FO 371/176514 and FO 371/ 176601.
- [40] T. L. Crosthwait, *Zanzibar: Mr T.L. Crosthwait's Valedictory Despatch*, 22 July 1964, PREM 11/ 5208, TNA.
- [41] Telegram No.503, CRO to Zanzibar, 29 Jan. 1964, DO 213/130.
- [42] Peterson, *Revolution in Zanzibar*, 126–30.
- [43] *Note of a meeting on Zanzibar*, 1 Feb. 1964, DO 231/130.
- [44] Peterson, *Revolution in Zanzibar*, 130.
- [45] Telegram No. 4487, Foreign Office to Washington, 30 March 1964, CAB 21/5524.
- [46] Telegram No. 4488, Foreign Office to Washington, 30 March 1964, CAB 21/5524.
- [47] HMS Owen. *Diary of Events, 12th–17th January*.
- [48] Ibid.
- [49] HMS Rhyl. *Report of Proceedings*.
- [50] Zanzibar to Commonwealth Secretary, 23 Jan. 1964, DO 213/130.
- [51] DO 213/130. Telegram No.186, CRO to the High Commissioner, Dar es Salaam, 25 Jan. 1964, DO 185/51.
- [52] *Restoration of Law and Order in Zanzibar: Operation Instruction No.1*, 30 Jan. 1964, WO 276/ 372.
- [53] Okello subsequently spent time in prison in both Kenya and Uganda, taking the opportunity to write his own account of the revolution. He was last seen in the company of Idi Amin in 1971, after which he disappeared. Peterson, *Revolution in Zanzibar*, 177.
- [54] *Political Situation in Zanzibar*, 1 Jan. 1964–31 Dec. 1964, DO 185/64.
- [55] *US/UK Relations: Zanzibar*. Notes on visit of Sandys to Zanzibar, March 1964, FO 371/176601.
- [56] CM (64) 18th Conclusions, 12 March 1964, CAB 128/28 pt.2.
- [57] Young, *Sir Alex Douglas-Home*, 198–99.
- [58] CM (64) 21st Conclusions, 9 April 1964, CAB 128/38 pt 2.
- [59] *JPS (MIDEAST) Outline Plan for Intervention in Zanzibar*, 17 April 1964, WO 276/370.

- [60] Cypher No. 277, Nairobi to Dar es Salaam, 3 Feb. 1964, DO 213/130.
- [61] Note from Minister of Defence to Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, 9 June 1964, PREM 11/5208.
- [62] Telegram No.936, CRO to Dar es Salaam, 20 May 1964, DO 185/51.
- [63] The State Department had already concluded that some form of federation might provide a useful means of reducing radicalism in Zanzibar but recognised that they (and the British) could not be seen to be taking the initiative on such an issue. Telegram No. 920, Washington to the Foreign Office, 6 March 1964, CAB 21/5524.
- [64] See Yeager, *Tanzania*, and Davidson, *Modern Africa*, ch. 14.
- [65] *Joint Operations Instruction No. 2/64. Op Shed*, 25 April 1964, WO 276/370.
- [66] *COSMID 147*, 29 April 1964, WO 276/370.
- [67] Nigerian troops were already stationed in mainland Tanzania, having replaced the Royal Marines in the aftermath of the army mutiny in January.
- [68] *Internal Security and the Possibility of Military Intervention in Zanzibar*, DO 185/51.
- [69] COS 182/64, *Operations in East Africa*, 17 June 1964, DEFE 5/152, TNA.
- [70] Note from Minister of Defence to Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, 9 June 1964, PREM 11/5208.
- [71] Note from Denis Greenhill to Sir Geoffrey Harrison, 7 Aug. 1964, FO 371/176524.
- [72] *Ibid.* Sir G. Harrison to D. A. Greenhill, 18 Aug. 1964, FO 371/176524.
- [73] For further details, see PREM 11/5047.
- [74] JIC (64) 57, *Soviet and Chinese Motivations for their Activities in Africa: Report by the Joint Intelligence Committee*, 2 July 1964, CAB 158/53.
- [75] For example, see DO (64) 13th meeting item 1, 11 March 1964, CAB 148/1.
- [76] COS 182/64, Telegram No. 3579, Foreign Office to Washington, 3 July 1964, PREM 11/5208.
- [77] COS 182/64
- [78] COS 60th meeting 1964, 23 Sept. 1964, DEFE 4/175. COS 274/64, *Intervention in Zanzibar*, 9 Oct. 1964, DEFE 5/154.
- [79] For further details, see Speller, 'The Royal Navy', 178–98.
- [80] Speller, 'Naval Diplomacy', 164–80.
- [81] COS 274/64, *Intervention in Zanzibar*, 9 Oct. 1964, DEFE 5/154.
- [82] COS 73rd Meeting 1964, 15 Dec. 1964, DEFE 4/178. Letter from the CRO to the High Commissioner, Dar es Salaam, 31 Dec. 1964, and letter from the High Commissioner, Dar es Salaam to the CRO, 3 Feb. 1965, DO 185/51.
- [83] T. L. Crosthwait, *Zanzibar: Mr T. L. Crosthwait's Valedictory Despatch*, 22 July 1964, PREM 11/5208.

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