



REFUGEE LAW PROJECT

“A Centre for Justice & Forced Migrants”

SCHOOL OF LAW, MAKERERE UNIVERSITY



Conflict, Transitional Justice & Governance

Bring Their Remains Back!

The Reburial of Lt. Gen. Bazilio Olara Okello

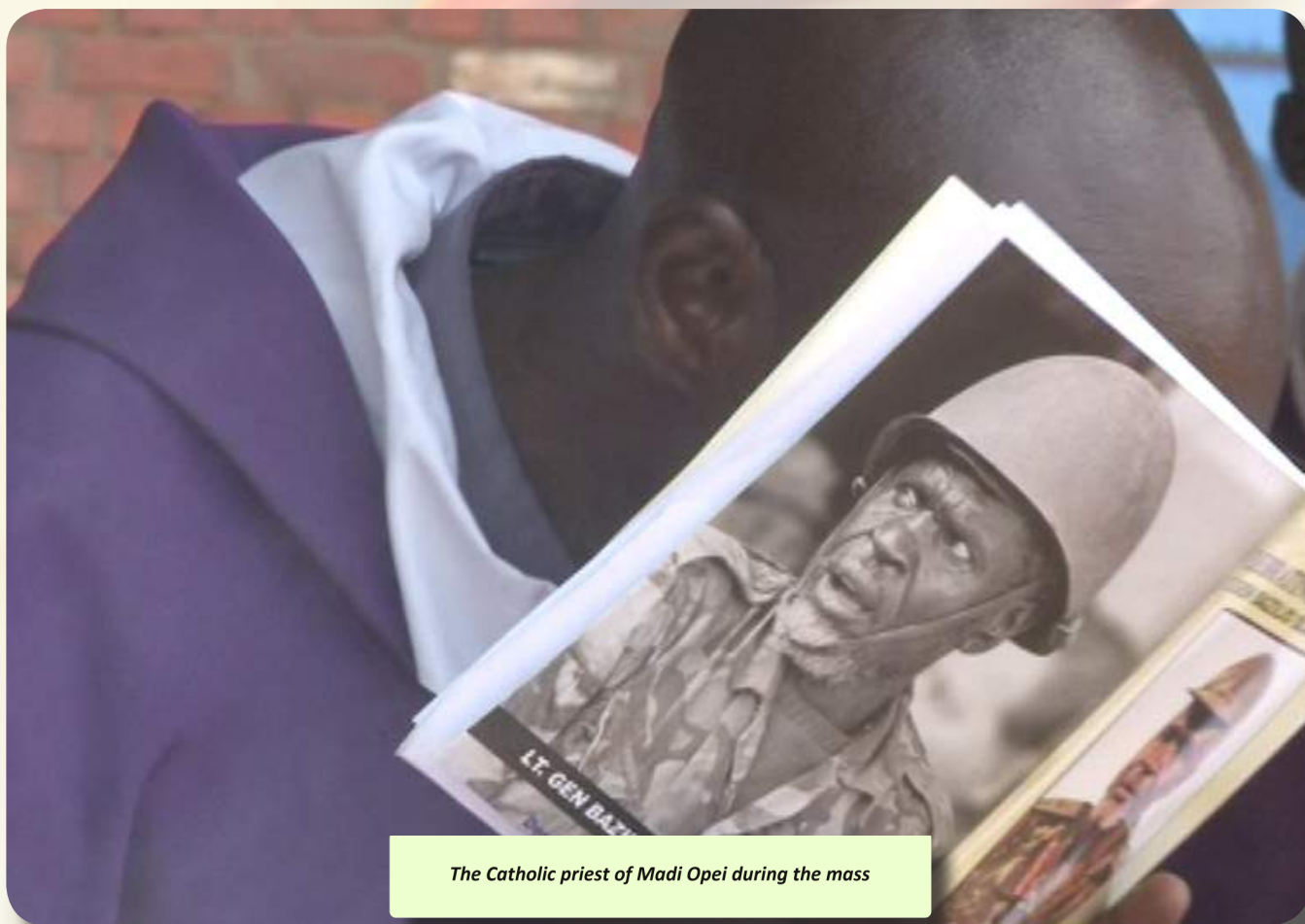
Introduction and background

The National Memory and Peace Documentation Center (NMPDC) on February 14th 2015 documented a historic event: the body of Lt. General Bazilio Olara Okello, a former National Liberation Army commander and a key player in Uganda's immediate post-independence political and military scene, was flown back to Uganda and re-buried in his ancestral home of Madi Opei, Lamwo District, Northern Uganda. Some consider him a hero, others regard him as a villain; either way, the return of his remains some fifteen years after his death in exile in Khartoum in 1990 is highly significant; it has been described as a positive sign that Uganda is coming to terms with its past and beginning to foster national reconciliation.

Life of Gen. Bazilio Olara Okello

Bazilio, son of Rwot (Chief) Langoya Rwonomoi of Poyamo Clan was an astute soldier and a very able army commander. He was born in Madi Opei, Lamwo (then Kitgum Chua) district in 1928. His mother, Lalweny Aleda, was from the Obere clan of Agoro. Bazilio was the third born and only boy amongst his siblings.

Bazilio joined the Kings African Rifles (KAR) in 1949 at the age of 21 years, and was trained at their East African training wing in Nakuru, Kenya. In 1952, Bazilio was sent for an instructor's course at the 4th KAR division HQs at Nanyuki Airfield Camp where he became a full-time instructor. He was later deployed in infantry in 1954 during the Mau Mau



The Catholic priest of Madi Opei during the mass

uprising. Subsequently, he was posted to Jinja (the only Ugandan battalion at that time) as an instructor to the “A” Company of the 4KAR battalion. Between 1952 and 1958, Bazilio represented the 4KAR boxing team in the inter-army sports competition against the 3KAR, 5KAR, 6KAR (Single squadron).

On the 3rd October 1962, Bazilio left Nairobi to return to Uganda. Two days later, he was appointed PT sergeant under the command of afande Yokana Omoya and posted to Kasese (on the Uganda-Congo border) to quell the conflict between Bakonjo of Rwenzori and the Batoro.

At Independence in 1963 the Ugandan contingent of the KAR (Uganda Rifles) became the Uganda Army (UA). Bazilio was posted to Moroto as part of the contingent that established the 2nd Battalion under the command of Lt. Shaban Opolot. In 1965 as a result of the Congo crisis, Bazilio’s “B” Company was transferred from Moroto to Arua; he was then promoted to the rank of Warrant Officer Class Two (WOII) and posted to “C” Company as Company Sergeant Major. In 1967 under the command of Captain Ebita, Bazilio was promoted to a full Lieutenant and appointed Platoon commander, “C” company. Following the promotion, Bazilio, together with others who were previously SNCOs, were taken

for the command course conducted by training officer Captain Barnabas Kili in Kampala.

He returned to Moroto in May 1968 together with others including Ozoo, Jabuloni Okee, Laban Okello and Gereson Okello, who had also been promoted to the rank of captain. Bazilio was appointed commander of “B” Company under Battalion Commander Lt Col Adiryano Oyok in Moroto, where he remained until the 1971 Coup d’état by Idi Amin that overthrew the Milton Obote 1 UPC regime.

Unlike other Acholi and Lango officers, Bazilio narrowly escaped being captured and killed by Amin’s henchmen by smartly sneaking off to Madi Opei, Agoro and then Owiny Ki Bul in Sudan. At Owiny Ki Bul he set up a camp where he started training other Ugandans escaping from Amin’s reign of terror with assistance from the Sudan government. However, following the peace agreement between Anyanya guerillas and President Jaafer Nimeiry in 1972, the Ugandan exiles were ordered out of Sudan.

They were transported from equatorial province of Khartoum and taken by rail to Port Sudan where they boarded a cargo ship sailing from Alexander towards Tanzania. Conditions were unhygienic, and they were

A Step Towards National Reconciliation: The Reburial of Lt. Gen. Bazilio Olara Okello

helpless as they watched a significant number of their colleagues dying of treatable diseases.

They were finally permitted to disembark at



Post cards bearing a photo of President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni and the late Bazilio Olara Okello

Tanga in August 1972 and were driven direct to Musoma where a group of Ugandans had assembled with the intention of invading Uganda. Obote hurriedly took Bazilio and the others to the frontline. In this poorly planned invasion more than 800 men were lost while attempting to reach Masaka and Mbarara.

Following the botched invasion of 1972, the Tanzanian government gave them an empty stretch of land in Tabora Region where they faced the difficult task of setting up a refugee camp from scratch. Given the determination of men from Owiny Ki Bul, nothing was impossible.

Bazilio as the camp commandant, together with Tito Apodo, his deputy, and Jack Langoya, another seasoned officer, developed Kigwa camp into a township without any assistance from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). By sheer hard work, the over 1000 former soldiers, nearly all Acholi, persistently tilled the land for a livelihood and started growing tobacco as a cash crop which they sold to the Wanyamwezi, the local community and the people from Tabora Township and surrounding areas.

Milton Obote, Tito Okello, David Oyite Ojok and Yoweri Museveni remained in Dar-es-Salaam; throughout the years of Kigwa existence, none of the political leaders ever paid a visit to "their soldiers" in the camp. On the contrary, Milton Obote vehemently resisted Bazilio's efforts to bring over his soldiers' wives and children for the purposes of family re-union in Tanzania.

By the time they left in 1979, Kigwa had developed almost to the size of Tabora town. These refugees in their peaceful farming community had by then become widely admired by the Tanzanians. When they were finally leaving for Uganda, Bazilio demonstrated clear humanitarian leadership by ordering that all homes in the camp should be left intact for the local communities to inherit. His own well-constructed semi-permanent house was left for the needy locals as their peaceful life of farming was terminated by Amin's invasion of Tanzania's Kagera salient in November 1978.

1978 Naval Disaster on Lake Victoria

Bazilio's military leadership was soon required when a decision was made to make a quick response to Amin's invasion. He rapidly moved



Acholi parliamentarians lay their wreath

three companies from Kigwa to Musoma where they established a training camp with Ugandans from Kenya and other Tanzanian towns. The training started well but was soon dogged by controversies, which led to the temporary withdrawal of the troops

from Kigwa. They subsequently returned to Musoma in small groups.

Disaster struck as they were advancing through Lake Victoria to attack Entebbe and Kampala when one ship suddenly sank, causing the death of all the more than 300 men – mostly Acholi – who were on board with arms from Kigwa and Tabora. This disaster, the causes of which remain silenced and unresolved, greatly upset Bazilio and he remained extremely bitter about the loss of so many sons of Uganda. He felt personally responsible for them, as the men had been under his direct command while in Kigwa Camp.

Nonetheless, he took courage and went to Dar-es-Salaam for discussion with Col. Tito Okello Lutwa and Major Peter Oboma, which led to an alternative plan

1985 Military Junta Coup d'état

After the liberation war, Captain Bazilio was decorated Lieutenant Colonel and appointed as the commanding officer of the 15th Battalion, with its headquarters in Makindye, Kampala. He remained frustrated, however, about the lack of accountability within the fledging UNLA and the politicians' indifference towards dependents of soldiers who had died in action during the liberation war. He was subsequently, labeled a rebel sympathizer and transferred to Gulu. To date, no special honor has been accorded the more than 300 men who died on Lake Victoria and other victims of Amin's war. This and other longstanding complaints by Bazilio, including arbitrary dismissals and "disappearances" of arrested army personnel, underpinned the grievances which later resulted in a mutiny by a section of UNLA



Gen Tito Okello Lutwa (left) with his army commander Bazilio Olara Okello (right). 1985

to attack Amin by land. The Kikosi Maalum under the overall command of Col. Tito Okello Lutwa, assisted by Col. David Oyite Ojok, Major Peter Obomam, Captain Bazilio Olara Okello, Lt Zed Maruru and others entered Uganda through the Mutukula border, fought, liberated Masaka and moved on to capture Kampala, marking the final fall of Idi Amin's regime on April, 1979.

military top brass and the overthrow of Milton Obote II UPC regime on July 27, 1985.

In 1985, UNLA troops under Bazilio's command staged a coup d'état against Milton Obote's government and seized power. For two days (27th and 28th July) Bazilio was in charge of the country and de facto head of state. On 29th July, he handed over power to Gen. Tito Okello Lutwa out of respect



Service men pay their last respect

for his seniority, and a military council was established. Bazilio Olara Okello was then promoted from the rank of Brigadier to Lieutenant General and named Chief of Defence Forces. He thus commanded the army until Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army seized power on 26 January 1986.

Bazilio Olara-Okello fled into exile



Lowering of the Casket bearing the remains of the late Bazilio Olara Okello

in Sudan, where he lived until he suddenly died of unknown causes in Omdurman hospital in Khartoum on 9th January 1990. He is survived by two wives, nineteen children and thirty one grand-children. On 14th February 2015, he was decently reburied at his ancestral home in Madi Opei with a 16-gun salute.

Dr. Obonyo Henry, a retired medical Doctor and former Minister of Health in Milton Obote II regime, narrated this account. He was also a close friend of Lt. Gen Bazilio Olara Okello.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

PT	-	Physical Training
SNCO	-	Senior Non-Commissioned Officers
UNLA	-	Uganda National Liberation Army
UPC	-	Uganda People's Congress

About Refugee Law Project: a Centre for Justice and Forced Migrants

The Refugee Law Project (RLP) is a Community Outreach Project of the School of Law, Makerere University. It seeks to ensure fundamental human rights for all forced migrants and their hosts. RLP envisions a country that treats all people within its borders with the same standards of respect and social justice.

About the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC)

The NMPDC is a memory and conflict/peace documentation initiative of the Refugee Law Project and the Kitgum District Local Government. The NMPDC collects, organizes, preserves, and communicates memories of peace and conflict-related events. For more information visit www.refugeelawproject.org/nmpdc

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