Mob justice in Tanzania: a medico-social problem

Paul M. Ng'walali and James N. Kitinya*

Department of Histopathology, Muhimbili University College of Health Sciences, P.O. Box 65002 Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
**Currently at The Department of Pathology, Faculty of Medicine, Uo Limpompo, P.O. Box 632, Polokwane 0699, South Africa*

Abstract

***Objective*:** To investigate the magnitude of mob justice and associated factors.

Background: Mob justice is a social and public health problem that has grown in Tanzania in recent decades that has negative effects on social and health of the country, communities, and families.

***Materials and Methods*:** A four-year autopsy study was conducted at the Department of Pathology, MUCHS. Information on the cases was obtained from police, the relatives, friends and other witnesses if available.

***Results*:** 1249 persons were killed by mobs in Dar es Salaam during the period of 5 years (2000-2004). The alleged offense ranged from a serious crime like theft or murder to a mere violation of local customs or religious beliefs. The mode of the killings were mostly burning (48.11%) and stoning (49.96%). Other modes accounted for only 3.0% of the cases. The pattern of injuries ranged from skull and other skeletal fractures to viscera rupture.

***Conclusion*:** MJ is a social, legal and public health problem in Tanzania that needs immediate attention. Unemployment of youth and perceived economic inequalities should be addressed. As long as the judicial system doesn't work and corruption is not punished, people will continue to organize their own trials and judge their suspects in the street. These must be tackled in order to reduce the growing incidences of mob justice, hence saving life. It must be ensured that criminals do not violate the freedom, dignity and respect of each and every human or member of the society.

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Introduction

Mob justice (MJ) is the practice whereby a mob, usually several dozens or several hundred persons take the law into their hands in order to injure and kill a person accused of wrongdoing. The issue of the victim's quality is usually secondary, since the mob serves as prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner. MJ has been practiced in many societies in the world. In America for instance, in the 1800's blacks were lynched as a punishment after committing acts considered as crime by the white population.[1-3] In a report by the United Nations peace mission in Guatemala, 185 people were killed by mobs between 1996 and 2000, and 450 people suffered serious injuries in lynching attempts.[4] Although MJ has existed in Tanzania for the past few decades, the magnitude and the factors associated with have not been studied. The present study has tried to address these issues.

Materials and Methods

All forensic cases in Dar Es Salaam are referred to our department for examination. A cross-sectional study of consecutive cases of MJ was conducted from January 2000 to December 2004. The personal particulars of the deceased including age, sex, place of residence and occupation were obtained from police forms. Next of kin were interviewed to determine the causes or circumstances of death.

Corresponding author:
Paul M. Ng'walali,
Department of Histopathology,
Muhimbili University College of Health Sciences,
P.O. Box 65002 Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
TEL: +255-748-950358
FAX: +255-22-215-1350
E-mail: pngwalali@muchs.ac.tz

Results

Of the 10,000 forensic autopsies performed at the Department of Pathology during this period, 1249 (12.49%) were MJ cases. The distribution of cases per year is shown in Table 1. Most of the victims were between 15 and 40 yeas (Table 2). Stoning and burning 49.96% and 48.11% respectively were the most prevalent methods of executing MJ (Table 3). The results of reasons for the killings are summarized in Table 4.

Table 1. Distribution of Cases

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Cases	240	220	290	301	198

Table 2. Distribution of the victims by age

Age	No. of cases (%)
< 15	0.1
15 – 40	70.0
40 – 60	27.1
> 60	2.8

Table 3. Methods used in the killing

No. of cases (%)	
Stoning	50.0
Burning	48.1
Slaughtering	0.8
Others	1.1

Table 4. Reasons for the killings

Reason	No. of cases (%)
Robbery	95.3
Religious	0.0
Socio-cultural	1.9
Others	1.9

Discussion

Mob justice is a social public health and legal problem, constituting about 13% of all the forensic autopsy cases performed at the Department of forensic medicine. The youths are the most culprits. While stoning and burning are the most commonly employed modes of killing, robbery is the major reason for the killing.

When the legal system cannot be trusted due either to feeling of social inequalities or corruption, it is not surprising to find that angry and disenfranchised people resort to mob justice when frustrated. Many law enforcers in Tanzania have failed to deliver and people have to live with the fear that they are not well protected. Corruption has affected the police department, the courts and other government agencies. Therefore when a suspected criminal is apprehended and is handed over to the police, many are able to either negotiate their way out using the intricacies of the law or through corruption. This further alienates the public who think that the police and courts are favoring the criminals. The public therefore thinks that it is counterproductive to handover such criminals to the system of justice and therefore take the law into their own hands. Another reason for the apparent increase in crimes such as robbery and stealing is the increasing level of unemployment due to retrenchments. The gap between the rich and the poor is also widening. It can be said therefore, that mob justice is a manifestation of a failing judicial system and unequal economic system that favors those who are already rich. This leads to social groups to develop and dispense out their own system of social justice.

In the present study, the youth group was the most affected (69.96%). This observation could be explained partly by uneven opportunities amongst the rural and the urban societies, causing migration of youth from rural to urban centers.[5] These youth in most cases fail to achieve their goals and dreams such as employment and financial independence and therefore resolve to commit crimes resulting in a high crime rate and more incidences of MJ.

Civil wars have an indirect role in the occurrence of mob justice in Tanzania. Countries affected by civil wars have a high number of illegal arms which can be easily obtained by criminals thereby causing a rise in the number of crimes. The rise in incidence of crime usually overwhelm the law enforcing agencies resulting in the public resorting to take justice in their own hands. The basic administrative structure including the judicial system in the refugee camps is inefficient and this may create a vacuum leading the public to resort to mob justice.

In some societies in the world MJ occurred because of social discrimination. During the 19th century, blacks were lynched as a punishment for committing acts considered criminal by the white population in America.[1-3] The crimes constituted race prejudice, quarreling with whites, and making threats. In certain countries, asylum seekers and refugees are being subjected to incidences of mob violence performed by citizens of the host countries who are either racists or view refugees as exploiters of their resources such as jobs and employment. This is true in most western Europe countries where the natives harass and sometimes beat to death the immigrants from developing world in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe countries seeking for asylum or jobs. Social or racial discrimination was not found as a major contributing factor for MJ in the present study. People who are suspected of practicing witchcraft are occasionally subjected to MJ in some communities in Tanzania, especially old people suspected of being witches. This was also true in some societies in the present day Western Europe.[6] Isolated cases of MJ because of such reasons as adultery are not unusual in Tanzania.

Ethnicity has been a factor for MJ in some societies. In Rwanda for instance, two ethnic groups exist; the Tutsis and Hutu. In 1994 the world had experienced a Rwanda genocide where the Hutu mobs ambushed and slaughtered innocent Tutsis.[7] Conflict in the Balkans was defined in ethnic terms too. The misplacement and killing of the Moslems in Kosovo was a result of inflamed ethnic tensions as a means of legitimizing the rule by the criminal underworld in the Balkans.[8] Religious differences between the Catholics and Protestants has for many years been the source of deaths from both sides in Northern Ireland. While ethnicity was not found as an associated factor for MJ, religious differences accounted for a very small number of MJ cases in Tanzania.

Conclusions

MJ is a social, legal and public health problem in Tanzania, that needs immediate attention. Unemployment of youth and perceived economic inequalities should be addressed. As long as the judicial system doesn't work and corruption is not punished, people will continue to organize their own trials and judge their suspects in the street. These must be tackled in order to reduce the growing incidences of MJ, hence saving life. It must be ensured that criminals do not violate the freedom, dignity and respect of each and every human or member of the society.

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