

# How Murumbi's heritage was stolen

**R**ecently, while writing a portrait-sketch of one of our illustrious freedom fighters, I was reduced to tears. Mr Joseph Murumbi dedicated his life and donated his considerable art wealth to Kenya, his motherland. Yet his grave is untended and his art collection, which he bequeathed to Kenya, lies stockpiled in boxes in the Kenya National Archives building.

In 1952, when the Mau Mau Emergency was proclaimed, Mr Murumbi was the Kenya African Union's secretary-general. To avoid arrest and detention, KAU leaders instructed him to leave Kenya and continue the struggle from abroad.

For the next nine years, Mr Murumbi (with Mr Mbiyu Koinange) represented KAU in India, Egypt and Britain and built strong pan-African links.

On his return to Kenya, he set about preparing for the country's first General Election as Kanu's national treasurer and organising secretary.

He himself was elected to Parliament to represent Nairobi South and his rise in Government was meteoric. From serving as Kenyatta's personal secretary, in 1963 he was appointed Minister of State in the President's Office. In 1964 he was the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and in May, 1966, became Vice-President.

Six months later, Mr Murumbi resigned from his post, retired from politics and faded out of the limelight. Perhaps we shall never know the reason for this abrupt about-turn. He did admit that since the assassination of his close friend, Pio Gama Pinto, he had "lost enthusiasm for politics".

And yet he did not turn away from duty to his motherland. "I believe one can serve one's country in commerce as well as in politics," he declared.

And this he did. On his travels abroad he tracked down and retrieved the artefacts and material culture that had been stolen from Kenya and Africa. And he did so entirely at his own expense.

With his impeccable taste and with support from his beloved wife, Sheila, he brought together one of the finest collections of Africana in the world, the best of its kind in Africa. He housed these centuries-old treasures in a beautiful villa he had bought and renovated at Muthaiga, Nairobi.

Mr Murumbi's collection acquired legendary status and attracted prospective buyers from Europe and the United States. But he was not interested in selling anything to them. He initiated the Public Archives Act and, after lengthy negotiations, in 1976 sold his collection, house and grounds to the Government for a fraction of the sum he would have earned from the foreign

buyers.

The ownership of the entire project was passed on to the National Archives, and almost immediately work began to convert the house into the Pan African Research and Study Centre. The owners of two adjoining plots agreed to sell them to expand the centre. Unesco pledged technical and financial support. Archivists began organising and classifying the artefacts and cataloguing the books, other publications and documents.

## A blanket of silence

The Kenya National Archives predicted the centre would open to the public not later than June, 1980. But it was not to be. A blanket of silence descended on the project. The beautiful villa was demolished, the adjoining plots sold, and the splendid indigenous trees felled. Only many years later, with the onset of multi-partyism, did the truth come to light.

The *Nation* reported thus: "Our investigations have revealed that the former Kenya National Archives plot number LR No 214/405 has subsequently been subdivided into three plots of 0.704 acres each whose new numbers are LR No 209/11274 (allocated to M/s Soneth Limited of P.O. Box 47700, Nairobi), LR No 209/11275 (allocated to Gideon Moi of P.O. Box 30510, Nairobi) and LR No 209/11276 (allocated to Leonard Kipkirui arap Sawe of P.O. Box 2037, Nakuru)."

Mr Sawe was then the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs and National Heritage. The directors of Soneth Limited, registered on June 20, 1989, were the Commissioner of Lands, Mr Wilson Gacanja, and his wife, Mrs Elizabeth Gitiri.

Mr Darius Mbela, then Minister of Lands and Housing, claimed the site was unsuitable because of its distance from the city centre.

The *Nation* report asked how property bought and transferred to the National Archives could revert to the Commissioner of Lands. A plot, which in 1990 was estimated to have a market value of more than Sh10 million, was sold for Sh234,000!

Clearly, the law of the jungle prevailed because certain individuals were "untouchable". In the process, Kenya lost a golden opportunity to become a world-renowned centre for the study and exposure of the enormous wealth and diversity of Africa's pre-colonial heritage.

Meanwhile, this priceless collection is stockpiled in boxes in the basement of the National Archives with a small portion presented to the public in a most uninteresting display.

Murumbi died on June 22, 1990, aged 79. He was buried in City Park next to his great friend, Pinto. Today this man, who served Kenya in such exemplary fashion, lies forgotten in an overgrown grave.

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