

# “A termite’s work”

## Rereading the Pan-African dimension of Joseph Murumbi’s heritage gestures

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### Abstract

Through an evocation of the career of Joseph Murumbi (1911-1990), Kenyan anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist activist, politician and collector, this article aims to highlight the pan-African dimension of his patrimonial choices during the crucial period of decolonization (1950-1970). In so doing, it highlights their epistemic and political significance, as well as their topicality in the context of debates on the restitution and reappropriation of African heritage, or on the production of knowledge in/about Africa.

### Keywords

Kenya, decolonization, transnational history, collections, knowledge production

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## Introduction

This article defends the idea that reflecting on an African research agenda commensurate with the challenges of the future requires crossing different temporalities and engaging in a critical dialogue with fruitful experiences that come to us from the past. The rich political, intellectual and cultural history of Pan-Africanism, its "vagabond history" (Boukari-Yabara, 2014, p. 5) with its "grafts and lineages" (Fila-Bakabadio, 2022), lends itself to this and engages us. The fragmentary story recounted in this article is that of Joseph Murumbi (1911-1990), a Kenyan independence activist and politician who straddled several worlds - Africa, Asia, Europe - and several political, intellectual and cultural internationalist networks throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Secretary General of the first national political organization, the Kenya African Union (KAU), in 1952 (at a time when Jomo Kenyatta was imprisoned by the colonial authorities following the Mau Mau insurrection and the introduction of a state of emergency), an anti-imperialist activist with pan-African contacts in London during the 1950s, Murumbi was also briefly a statesman (first Minister of Foreign Affairs, then Vice-President of independent Kenya) between 1963 and 1966 when he resigned and left the political scene for good.

Through the evocation of Joseph Murumbi's career, this article aims to highlight the pan-African dimension of his gestures and heritage choices during the crucial period of decolonization in the 1950s and 1970s, in order to underscore their epistemic and, by extension, political significance. Indeed, his actions raise fundamentally political questions that are still relevant today. They relate to the production of knowledge (and in particular to the writing of African history: who writes it, for whom and from what sources and archives?) and to the decolonization of African studies, still massively produced outside the continent<sup>1</sup>, or to the reappropriation of African heritage, which the Sarr-Savoy report (2018) on the restitution of African heritage has powerfully brought back to the forefront of the international scene. Since the publication of this report, art historian Bénédicte Savoy has unearthed the beginnings of an African debate on restitutions that has been underway since the 1960s (and particularly between the 1970s and 1980s), highlighting a dense network of European and African actors on a transnational scale (Savoy, 2022). Research into the historicity of this debate continues to grow, and this article aims to make its own contribution. Finally, the topicality of Murumbi's choices can also be read in the light of the renewed interest in the field of research but also of contemporary arts<sup>2</sup>, for the cultural archives of Pan-Africanism (Malaquais et al., 2015; Malaquais & Vincent, 2019; Chimurenga, 2019; Pugh, 2022).

## Methodological affinities

As part of the Panafest Archive project which aimed to document and think together about four major Pan-African festivals of the 1960s and 1970s by examining their

1 See, for example, Pailey (2016).

2 See, for example, the projects of Franco-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira around the archives of the first Pan-African cultural festival in Algiers (1969): *Standing Here Wondering Which Way to Go* (2019).

respective relationships and discontinuities<sup>3</sup>, researchers Dominique Malaquais and Cédric Vincent took a particular interest in the actors left in the shadows ("advisors, consultants, patrons, diplomats, 'little hands' [...]") of these major events (Malaquais et al., 2015, p. 216). Following this methodological proposal, we find in the little-known figure of Joseph Murumbi - whose legacy today oscillates in his country between shadow and light - a formidable gateway to grasping the behind-the-scenes work of the internationalist struggles for independence, including on the cultural and patrimonial level. By deciphering his extensive archives, as well as the interviews he gave in the late 1970s for a biography never published during his lifetime, a dense network of actors and voices emerges, exchanging points of view, confidential notes, press extracts, snippets of intimacy and friendship which, taken together, make it possible to think, imagine and even feel (see below) the work of emancipation in progress.

In order to grasp, in all its complexity, the work of active solidarities between Africa and Asia in the 1950s and 1960s, the authors-of the manifesto "Networks of Decolonization in Asia and Africa" (2018) also defend the need to go beyond the single scale of interstate diplomacy of political elites' large gatherings, to trace the trajectories and *lived* experiences of individuals (artists, activists, trade unionists, etc.), including those who, far from the capitals, operate in small landlocked towns.

This approach, which requires work to be carried out using archives other than the institutional ones, is in line with that of Malaquais and Vincent who, with their research team, produced new archives of the Pan-African festivals studied. In a similar vein, the British historians of the "Another World? East Africa and the Global 1960s<sup>4</sup>" project draw on "the life histories of individuals whose work and thought constituted the cross-border connections in which we are interested" (Milford et al., 2021, p. 402) in order to study the multiple links but also disjunctions at work in the period of decolonization from the 1940s to the 1970s in that part of the world. By following these methodological approaches, this article makes it possible to grasp—in one and the same movement, the joint effort of Joseph Murumbi's political and cultural work in that historic moment of decolonisations and internationalist struggles for independence.

When one considers the topography of Pan-Africanist archives - scattered, fragmented and multi-centric, in the image of the multiple intellectual and political centers that their history has linked and produced - Nairobi doesn't immediately spring to mind. Yet the thousands of documents gathered by Joseph Murumbi from his activism in the 1950s provide a formidable source for grasping the ramification of a major network of players involved on four continents, including on the pan-African side. A host of personalities, some of whom left their mark on the history of Kenya, Africa or the black world, emerge from these personal documents: correspondence, booklets, programs, business cards, speeches, liaison bulletins and invitation cards. These documents sometimes point to iconic dates and events such as the All African People's Conference (AAPC) whose first session was held in Accra from December 8 to 13, 1958. During his years in London, Murumbi had rubbed shoulders with the Head of Committee of this first conference, George Padmore (1903-1959), then African Affairs advisor to Prime Minister Kwame

3 The webdocumentary produced as part of this research project is now hosted by the Cape Town-based Pan-African platform Chimurenga: <https://panafest.org.za/>.

4 See the project website: <https://globaleastafrica.org/>.

Nkrumah<sup>5</sup>. In his address “Pan-Africanism from 1919 to 1958”, W.E.B. Du Bois placed that event in the tradition of the five previous Pan-African Conferences (1900, 1919, 1920, 1923, 1945)<sup>6</sup>. Among the documents in this file is the banner “Free Jomo Kenyatta” which was unfurled on December 10, 1958 by members of the Kenyan delegation (including Joseph Murumbi) at the AAPC, and which I myself was able to unfurl silently, sixty years later, on the consultation table of the National Archives.

Attempting to write this multipolar and multiscalar history of black transnational emancipation here in its cultural aspect and based on Joseph Murumbi's collection, requires considering the emotion aroused by the handling of these historical documents resonating with the immense hopes these events raised for the future history of the continent and its diasporas; hopes that clash today with the memories and histories of the period of post-independence crises. As such, like Arlette Farge (1989) or like Mathias Danbolt (2011) who pleads for taking into account the performativity of historical and archival work in the writing of history, this article aims to interweave these multiple, emotionally-charged temporalities and restore them in the work of writing<sup>7</sup>.

## Who is Joseph Murumbi?

Joseph Murumbi was born in Eldama Ravine (Kenya) in 1911 to a father from a family from Goa - a former Portuguese trading post in India - who had arrived in East Africa in 1897, and a Maasai mother whose father had been a fierce opponent of the British presence (Thurston, 1979a, p. 18). In 1917, Joseph Murumbi was sent by his father to India to attend Jesuit schools in Bangalore, then Bellary, in southern India. It was during these years in India that he experienced what “race” and “caste” meant, which he categorically rejected: “This was,” he says, “the beginning of my political conscience.” (Thurston, 1979a, p. 21).

On his return to Kenya in 1931, in order to acquire a plot of land in Maasai country, he decided to take his mother's name (Murumbi, whereas his father's name was Zuzarte) knowing that this choice would mean the loss of the rights enjoyed by the Asian community in relation to Africans in the political and social hierarchy of colonial Kenya, which was politically and spatially segregated and subject to the color bar policy.

After spending more than ten years in Somalia (1941-1952), mainly during the British military administration (1941-1949), he returned to Nairobi at a time when he sensed the tide turning: “people were now more conscious of their rights [...] whereas when I left [A/N: 1941] that wasn't in their minds. People were more organized. [...]. They wanted a legislature in their hands, at least the majority [...], the elimination of the color bar, more money spent on education, agriculture, more land, and such things [...].” (Thurston et al., 2015, pp. 27-28).

Involved somewhat “by accident” in the struggle for Kenyan independence, Joseph Murumbi was appointed acting secretary of the KAU in October 1952 when the

5 In the posthumous biography *A Path not Taken* (Thurston et al., 2015), Murumbi introduces George Padmore as “another friend of mine to whom I could always turn when I was in despair”. (p. 76).

6 National Archives of Kenya, MAC/CON/181/1 “All African People's Conference - Meeting held at Accra, Dec. 1958”. It should be noted that this speech was read at the conference by his wife, Shirley Graham, as W.E.B. Du Bois was denied a passport by the U.S. administration.

7 This research approach is rooted in a social science turn on the question of emotions. See, for example, the work of the journal *Sensibilités* published by Anamosa.

organization's entire board was imprisoned by the British authorities (Thurston, 1979b, p. 26). He became a key member of Jomo Kenyatta's defense team in the political trial brought against him by the colonial authorities who accused him of being the mastermind of the Mau Mau uprising. According to Murumbi, it was Kenyatta<sup>8</sup> himself who suggested that he go abroad to alert public opinion to the "dirty war" being waged by the British government in Kenya.

In 1953, Murumbi embarked on a journey that took him first to India where he met several times with Jawaharlal Nehru who supported the nationalist cause economically: his government had already financed the participation of lawyer Diwan Chaman Lall, a parliamentarian and pioneer of the trade union movement in India in Kenyatta's trans-racial/imperial defense team<sup>9</sup>. Under surveillance by the British authorities, Murumbi stayed in India for four months before moving on to Egypt and then Great Britain. Murumbi's archives show that in India, he also pleaded the cause of Goa, then under Portuguese domination. This convergence of struggles against British and Portuguese imperialism can also be seen in his friend and political mentor: the indefatigable Kenyan freedom fighter Pio Gama Pinto (1927-1965) who also campaigned for the liberation of Portuguese colonies in Africa, notably Mozambique. Pio Gama Pinto also sent him news of the political violence in Kenya, which Murumbi relayed in his many lectures across the country to raise awareness among the British public.

However, that stay in England which was intended to be just one stage in his international tour - the program included a tour of West Africa and the United States - ultimately turned into a nine-year exile, the KAU having been banned in June 1953 by the colonial authorities. He arrived in London in September 1953 but did not leave again until 1962 when independence was negotiated at the Lancaster Conferences, after a bitter and bloody struggle.

During those conferences behind the scenes, Murumbi put all his organizational talent at the service of the nationalist cause, as well as the networks developed during his exile in England, where he worked successively for the Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF) as general secretary (1954-1957), then at the Moroccan embassy in London.

The MCF was founded in 1954 by Labour MP Fenner Brockway as a successor to the British branch of Congress of Peoples Against Imperialism (COPAI) created in 1948. Historian Hakim Adi (2012, p. 281) writes that " Murumbi was probably the first African refugee to lead a major British political organisation. The MCF had over 1,000 individual members and 3 million affiliated ones". From his years at the MCF, Joseph Murumbi would later say:

It gave me a lot of scope, not only to help my own country, but also to get a more general idea of the [anti]-colonial struggle worldwide. We also put out a lot of pamphlets on various colonial issues.

Then we formed local committees in London which dealt with the problems of the colonial world. On these committees were M. Ps who had a particular interest in an area, together with a number of students in London. We met regularly in the House of Commons in the Committee Room below the Chamber, and I always think that we were like little termites burrowing into the structure of

<sup>8</sup> He was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment with hard labor.

<sup>9</sup> On Kenyatta's defense team (comprising Dennis Pritt, a reputedly communist member of the British Parliament and the only white lawyer in the group, Chaman Lall, Dudley Thompson from Jamaica, H.O. Davies from Nigeria and two local lawyers of Indian origin: Achhroo-Kapila and Fitz de Souza), which transcended and defied the color bar in force in Kenya, see Lonsdale (2004, pp. 183-185).



the colonial edifice. These committees briefed the M.P.s concerned, who in turn raised questions in the House of Commons. This became a very effective weapon against colonial misrule. (Thurston, 1979b, p. 28).

Researchers Ismay Milford and Gerard McCann who recently stressed how "Murumbi's work confirms the inseparability of internationalism and nationalism in 1950s Africa", point out that he was "a primary organiser of the second AAPC [N/A: All-African Peoples Conference] in Tunis, January 1960." (Milford & McCann, 2022, pp. 113, 126) and that, at the same time, George Padmore invited him to come and work in Accra at the Bureau of African Affairs<sup>10</sup>. A few years earlier, in his article "Behind Mau Mau" published in 1953 in *Phylon* magazine (founded by W.E.B. Du Bois in Atlanta in 1940), George Padmore cited Murumbi's actions with the Colonial Office in his uncompromising indictment of Kenya's brutal colonial system based on racial segregation, expropriation of (the best) land and exploitation of black labor for the benefit of the settlers. It is fair to assume that much of the information on which Padmore builds his argument comes from Murumbi as KAU representative in London: charged with building alliances and publicizing the violence of British repression of the Mau Mau insurgency, he has first-hand information that reaches him through his network of anti-colonial activists.

## "Africa's greatest collector"?

It was again in London that Joseph Murumbi made his first acquisition of an African object in a small store in Camden Town: a carved ivory tusk, presumably from the Congo which a junk dealer sold to him for around two pounds, saying, "I'd rather sell it to you, because you're from Africa, and it should go back to Africa." (Thurston et al., 2015, p. 268). "Back to Africa", return (of the object) to Africa: we're somewhere here between a form of pan-Africanism and a form of restitution tangled up...

From this first purchase, between the late 1950s and early 1960s, and over a period of around twenty years, Murumbi acquired a significant number of works of art (notably by East and West African artists such as Ugandan artist Francis Nnaggenda, born in 1936, and Nigerian artist Bruce Onobrakpeya, born in 1932) and so-called ethnographic objects from the African continent<sup>11</sup>. A 1981 UNESCO survey estimated the collection at "about 6500 volumes of Africana and a large number of papers, in addition to the collection of African art, of which there are 1100 items: about 400 Kenyan ethnographic objects; about 500 ethnographic objects and carvings from other parts of Africa, including many items from West and Central Africa; about 100 modern paintings, drawings, water colours, prints and photographs, mostly from Kenya and other parts of Africa; a few pieces of modern sculpture, mostly East African; the rest are an assortment of Middle Eastern, Indian and European objects" (Trone, 1981, p. 1). Strange paradox: while articles in the Kenyan press about Joseph Murumbi frequently refer to him as Africa's greatest collector (Ndungu, 2013), his collection is virtually unknown outside Kenya. While historically the study of African art has been conducted mainly from European or North American collections, this research follows in the wake of other research on African art collections based in Africa (Spiesse, 2012;

10 Murumbi himself recounts this project in his posthumous biography (Thurston et al., 2015, pp. 76-77). The available archives do not allow us to understand why this project never came to fruition.

11 Work remains to be done on a detailed study of their nature, chronology and provenance.

Bondaz, 2015, 2019). As Sylvester Ogbachie (2012, pp. 11-12) writes in his study of Nigerian banker Femi Akinsanya's collection in Lagos: "The study of African art is conducted primarily in the West, where debates about the authenticity and value of African art are built around a small number of objects that circulate in a closed system of museums, art dealers, private collections and auction houses. [...] Studies of African art therefore overlook Africans' attachment to their own artistic traditions, and fail to take into account the existence of African collectors of African art." [Author's translation]. However, even if the pan-African feature of the collections studied is often emphasized by their holders (as is the dimension of cultural safeguarding which brings them closer to Murumbi's conceptions), they focus more generally on the Nigerian or West African space. Whereas, in the cases analyzed by Bondaz (2015), the "ethnicity dimension<sup>12</sup>" remains very present where it is totally absent from the project of Murumbi, who, as to his identity, affirmed: "I belong to no tribe, I am and have always been a Kenyan. My job as a politician was to serve Kenya and the people, I hope history will respect me because I am an honest man." (Patel, undated).

Thus, one of the major interests of studying this collection lies in the fact that Murumbi's pan-African heritage project - whose scope goes far beyond the Kenyan space - is tied to his political project and vice versa, so that there is a real continuum between the two spheres, heritage and politics. In an unpublished typescript entitled "African Art by Joseph Murumbi" largely devoted to the work of Nigerian artist Ben Enwonwu (1917-1994), Murumbi writes:

[...] As an African, I believe, we must continue to maintain this clarity of expression even through its apparent fetish significance may bewilder the European and our African 'moderns'. [...] We in Africa too must realize that we can also make a contribution - to the wealth of artistic development so necessary in the world today. Our arts must be an expression of ourselves, our character and our soul. [...] It might be that I am biased so far as Ben Enwonwu is concerned. His [sic] a sculptor, a line in which he particularly excels, I find he captures the true spirit of Africa. Although having spent some time at the Slade<sup>13</sup> he has not lost the subtle, brutal and clear approach to African expression. [...] He should be given a place of honour now and allowed to work and spread his influence among the young artists of Nigeria today. He has a heritage and a tradition which could be passed on to coming generation. [...] I come to East Africa, Kenya to be precise [sic], but I feel Ben belongs to us in the East as much as he belongs to the West of Africa. He belongs to all Africa and it is a pity to see him waste his efforts on something or someone who does not appreciate his worth. It will be a pity of while Ben is appreciated in Europe he is not appreciated by his own people.

Working on Joseph Murumbi's career thus requires us to think together and link his political, artistic (here tinged with primitivism) and heritage orientations, all of which have an internationalist/Pan-African scope. Just listen to his introduction, entitled "Strands of Pan Africanism", delivered at the Conference on Africa (of which he was chairman) held on July 2-3, 1960 at the New College, Oxford:

In the case of African nationalism that has been stimulated recently to such an extent<sup>14</sup>, we must remember that we need something more positive behind this

12 "[...] Collectors very often take a more specific interest in works that are attributed to the ethnic group to which they belong, so that we almost systematically observe an ethnic core space within their collections." [ Author's translation].

13 Slade School of Fine Art, a London art school established in 1871, where many artists from colonial territories were trained. See the Transnational Slade project: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade/research/slade-archive-project/transnational-slade/>.

14 Murumbi refers to the All African People's Conference mentioned above.

nationalism and this is what I hope will come out in these discussions. Because nationalism, to my mind, pure nationalism, is not an end in itself. [...] I believe that it is not necessary for us in Africa to try and develop an ideology, or to borrow an ideology, or to copy an ideology from Europe. It needs African who would get together and plan together about this problem and try to create an ideology that is typically African, an ideology that has its roots in Africa. [...] We can find that ideology because that ideology is part of the life or is the basis of the life of our people. Some of us who are educated, for instance, seems to forget our own background. [...] And are we to lose some of the other things that are connected with our way of life, or own culture, for instance, African arts, African music? And today it is some these Europeans who are trying to preserve African art and you find Europeans have gone out to Africa and tried to record as much as possible of African music before it is lost. And these are things which I think not only African governments but also Pan African bodies in Africa which are trying to educate their people should preserve. [...] particularly those countries which are independent today and have the power to make detailed studies of these problems, for instance we have very few African anthropologists<sup>15</sup>.

While the circumstances of the meeting (in London?) between Joseph Murumbi and Ben Enwonwu remain to be clarified, the rest of his text on African art indicates that the two often exchanged views on these issues. Ben Enwonwu's 1956 article, "Problems of the artist today", published in *Présence africaine* following his participation in the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists<sup>16</sup>, raises similar questions: not only about the search for new aesthetics for African artists in a political and social context of major transformation but also about the question of preserving African art in situ (a task which, as we have seen, Murumbi assigned to pan-African bodies and newly independent states). For his part, Enwonwu (1956, p. 176) puts it this way:

And while Europe can be proud to possess some of the very best sculptures from Africa among museums and private collectors, Africa can only be given the poorest examples of English Art particularly, and the second-rate of the other works of art from Europe. The preservation of the old art in certain regions of Africa is, of course, being carried out particularly in Nigeria, but it is strange, — strange because I'd like to put this point to you, — that those in supreme authority for the preservation of what is left of African Art, as well as what can be bought or brought back home, are not the Africans whose ancestors created the sculptures, but Europeans, whose predecessors were responsible for the disappearance of numberless African art works from their country of origin<sup>17</sup> [...].

The rest of the article highlights the critical question of knowledge production and the authority of expertise around African arts, another topic that he shared with Murumbi who, a few years later (1973), would affirm that "African heritage is our responsibility". In another interview published in 1977, referring to a work he had acquired by the Kenyan artist Elkana Ongesa, Murumbi asserts: "Not a single African besides myself has bought his work. If we do not find the means to patronize our own artists, art will continue to leave Africa.<sup>18</sup>". Murumbi had a broad conception of "heritage" - contemporary works of art, books, archives - and,

15 National Archives of Kenya, MAC/KEN/77/1 "Kenya, Prominent Personalities. Murumbi, Joseph Anthony Zuzarte, 1911 - U.K. Meetings - Conference on Africa, July 1960".

16 Organized by *Présence africaine* at the Sorbonne from September 19 to 22, 1956.

17 Enwonwu seems to be referring here to Kenneth Murray, the man behind the National Museum of Nigeria in Lagos (opened in 1957) who, from the 1940s onwards, "acquired pieces from all over the country to establish this collection in the capital, Lagos", including buying them back on the international market (Bodenstein, 2019, pp. 231-232). [Author's translation]

18 "Outsiders still the main art lovers", *Kenya News export*, August 1977.



at a time of decolonization and pan-Africanism, he linked it to issues of writing history and the need to pass it on to future generations. If this triple collection (of art and artefacts, archives and library) is to be considered together, it should also be seen in relation to his "attention towards basic education within Kenya and the question of the translatability of pedagogical practices across cultures and continents" that researchers Milford and McCann (2022, p. 128) have recently highlighted.

After Kenya's independence in 1963, Murumbi became Minister of Foreign Affairs, a position he said would help him build up his collection (Thurston et al., 2015, p. 274). Then, for just a few months, he was appointed Vice-President by Jomo Kenyatta, who had meanwhile become the first President of independent Kenya (1964-1978), before retiring from political life for good at the end of 1966. It was in this capacity that he was instrumental in setting up the National Archives of Kenya (1966), although he felt that this mission should have been accomplished at independence: "We must preserve most of our documentation, otherwise it will all leave the country." [tda] (Thurston et al., 2015, p. 308).

He is referring here to the archives relating to the Mau Mau, archives moved and destroyed by the British before independence (Elkins, 2015). Although he claimed health reasons for leaving the political scene, the reality was quite different: his friend Pio Gama Pinto had been assassinated a few months earlier (on February 24, 1965), the first political assassination of the post-independence era investigated.

## The future of the collection

An exhibition of the Murumbi collection, "Art africain d'hier et d'aujourd'hui - Collection Murumbi", was presented at the Maison française in Nairobi from November 1 to 15, 1976, on the occasion of the nineteenth Unesco's General Conference held for the first time in Africa (October 26 to November 30, 1976<sup>19</sup>) thus assuming a very special significance. In the words of the institution's Director General, Amadou Mahtar M'Bow (1974-1987), "the event marked for Africa an important step towards a more equitable sharing of responsibilities within the international community" (M'Bow, 1976, p. 2) [Author's translation]. In the journal *Présence africaine*, Pathé Diagne (1977, p. 159) describes the political context in which this first General Conference in Africa was held:

Under the pressure of a global crisis rooted in the successes of the anti-imperialist movement, new international forces are emerging and asserting themselves, and there is a need for a project of new order or equilibrium. Events in Vietnam and Asia, in Palestine and the Middle East, in Angola, and in the struggles against colonial hegemony and apartheid in Southern and South Africa, have shifted the balance of power. [...] The international institution [N/A: the United Nations and Unesco] is being called upon to transform, adapt or disappear, depending on the prevailing forces. It cannot continue, as it has done until now, to be a management apparatus ensuring the interests and the sole perspective of a few nations in a world of economic, social, cultural and political contestation. [Author's translation].

While the main issue debated at that General Conference was that of information control, the subject of restitutions was also discussed, and no doubt owed a

19 Archives nationales du Kenya, dossier MAC/KEN/98/3 " Kenya. Personnalités éminentes. Murumbi, Joseph Anthony Zuzarte, 1911, Expositions - partie II ".

great deal to the political context described earlier by Diagne, leading in fine to Resolution 4.128 and the mandate given to M'Bow to take all necessary measures with a view to the establishment, by the General Conference at its twentieth session, of an intergovernmental committee entrusted with the task of seeking ways and means of facilitating bilateral negotiations for the restitution or return of cultural property to the countries having lost them as a result of colonial or foreign occupation [...]" (Unesco, 1976, p. 48).

That same year, 1976, the collection, archives and his house in Muthaiga were sold to the Kenyan state, Murumbi refusing any offers from abroad. He explained his choice: "Africa has already been denuded of much of its most precious art. He points to a bronze armoured soldier standing on guard on the veranda. 'That's a copy of the Benin bronze from West Africa. The originals are all in Europe. 'Even the ivory mask which was the symbol of Festac (the Pan-African arts festival held in Lagos) was not on display during the festival. It was in Britain<sup>20</sup>'" The year in which this article was published, 1977, coincided with the year in which Festac, the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, was held in Lagos. The story of the power struggle between Nigeria and Great Britain over the loan of the Queen Idia pendant, kept at the British Museum and chosen as the festival's emblem, leading in fine (following the British museum's refusal) to the on-site manufacture of a copy that would be multiplied ad infinitum on all the festival's media, has been brilliantly studied by Dominique Malaquais and Cédric Vincent (2019, pp. 53-56).

The fact that Murumbi mentions the case of the "Festac Mask" testifies both to its popularity and to his own connection to these transnational and pan-African debates.

It seems that for a time, during the negotiations for the sale of the collection, Murumbi was reluctant to relocate it out of Kenya to the East African region: "With regard to my library, I have made a promise that it will not leave Kenya, I am, however, after discussing the matter with President Nyerere in Dar-es-Salaam, of the opinion that perhaps it might be a good idea for the library to go to a Centre of African Studies, supported by the community, rather than it being used in any particular East African country. The reason for this is that I believe that we should have in East Africa, a centre for African studies, to where students not only from East Africa, but from all parts of the world, could find a place in which there is a concentration of literature and papers on Africa available for study.<sup>21</sup> [...]"

The ensemble, finally sold to the Kenyan state, is to form the basis of a future center for African studies. As we have seen, the gradual build-up of the art collection was conceived as a means of resisting the unidirectional flow of objects from Africa to the North (what the "Manifeste culturel d'Alger" described as a "hemorrhage" in 1969, p. 121). In the same way, Murumbi sought to reverse the trend that leads researchers on the continent to expatriate in order to gain access to the sources they need to write their own history. If joint studies by African and European students are important, explains Murumbi in an interview given in the 1970s, "it is time for Kenyans to write their own history" (Thurston et al., 2015, p. 312). The question remains central today: Chao Tayiana Maina (2021, p. 34), one of the African voices in the restitution debate<sup>22</sup>, puts it this way: "As an historian of

20 "Outsiders still the main art lovers", *Kenya News export*, August 1977.

21 National Archives of Kenya, MAC/KEN/99.3 "Proposed sale for the Murumbi Africana collection, 1970, 1974".

22 See, for example, his "Open Restitution Africa" project: <https://openrestitution.africa/>.

contemporary Kenya born under the guise of an independent state, I am forced to contend with the constant visibility of this [N/A: colonial] history, in its ever 'presentness', surrounding me and informing my life whilst still being resigned to the invisibility of the archive."

What is remarkable about Murumbi's project is that his art collection, itself pan-African, his archives and his library were to form the heart of the center for African studies. Sadly, the dream of a pan-African center never materialized as his Muthaiga house was razed to the ground and the property on which it was built became the subject of land speculation. It was finally thanks to the efforts of Alan Donovan<sup>23</sup> and funding from the Ford Foundation that the Murumbi Gallery was opened in December 2006 at the National Archives of Kenya, some thirty years after the purchase of the collection by the Kenyan state which had lain abandoned in the institution's basement.

## Conclusion

Deeply rooted in its time, the political project of this public collection linked the reappropriation of African arts and heritage to the production of knowledge in Africa. If the way in which this collection is exhibited today bears some questions<sup>24</sup>, its powerful political project, with its potential to germinate new knowledge, remains more relevant than ever. Joseph Murumbi once used the metaphor of the termite to describe the militant work he and his comrades carried out in the 1950s, gnawing away at the very foundations of the empire to bring about its collapse. Borrowing this metaphor, I propose to reimagine the collection he built over the course of his rich trajectory through the image of the termite mound - a "biogenic structure of widely varying shapes, sizes and structures, creating a favorable habitat for many other living organisms<sup>25</sup>" - in order to place it back in the sphere of the living, the "reprendre" (Mudimbe, 1994) and the future, for, as Murumbi himself puts it: "The whole purpose of this operation is to build up a collection as a legacy, a heritage for future generations (Thurston et al., 2015, p. 321).

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<sup>23</sup> An American designer with whom Murumbi had set up a commercial gallery, African Heritage, in Nairobi in 1973.

<sup>24</sup> Among other things, it raises the question of the extent to which it challenges Western museum schemes and the classification system based on the logic of ethnicity that the ethnographic museum has inherited from its history.

<sup>25</sup> From the "Termitière" Wikipedia page, accessed February 10, 2023. Aware of the limitations of this single reference, I am looking for more specific references.

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