

A PATH NOT TAKEN – The Story of Joseph Murumbi

Authors: From interviews by Anne Thurston and others

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Should you land at the international airport in Johannesburg and know no better, you might ask who O.R. Tambo was, after whom it has been renamed. In apartheid South Africa, it was called Jan Smuts airport, in honour of a military and political hero. Now, had Kenya chosen to be similarly inspired, we would be speaking today not of Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta but rather J.Z. Murumbi International Airport. Because, as exiled spokesmen-at-large in the years which led to independence, both Oliver Reginald Tambo and Joseph Zuzarte Murumbi were heroes of their countries' respective liberation struggles. The difference being that, whereas the South African's name has been emblazoned in the global consciousness by an affirmative government decision, the Kenyan's has been allowed to fall into relative obscurity since he died in June, 1990 at the age of 79. The publication of *A Path Not Taken – The Story of Joseph Murumbi* should go some way towards rectifying that historical anomaly.

The book is largely made up of transcripts of recorded conversations between Joseph Murumbi and Dr. Anne Thurston, a researcher and archivist from the UK who lived and worked in Kenya throughout the 1970s. She has since been awarded an OBE for her services to archive administration in Africa. The material gathered was intended for memoirs which were never written. However, it is to our lasting gain that in response to questioning, by turns pointed, by turns subtle, we hear Murumbi speaking to us across the intervening years. He comes across as a man who could have been abrasive on occasion but who, for all that, was capable of great candour and sincerity. He makes it clear that what he most admired in other human beings was a sense of decency: more than once in the conversations, he conveys his positive judgment of certain individuals with the words: '*He was a man for whom we had great respect.*' Or, '*He was a perfect gentleman.*' Or, '*I have the greatest appreciation of the man.*' Or, '*I still think that he was a good man.*'

It must have been this innate attachment to the idea of right conduct which saw Murumbi become progressively disillusioned with life as a politician.

President Jomo Kenyatta appointed him first as Minister for Foreign Affairs and then as Kenya's second vice-president, to succeed Oginga Odinga, after a political fallout. Murumbi resigned from the vice-presidency after a few months. Never given to extreme statements and ever reticent on thorny issues, he does not give a clear reason why he made such an abrupt exit from politics. Part of the explanation might lie in his statement, *'Power never interested me.'* Else he just didn't have the stomach for the gamesmanship and professional fouls, including the outright elimination of a very close friend, the socialist leaning freedom fighter, Pio Gama Pinto. Be that as it may, the amount of revelation that *is* provided in *A Path Not Taken* more than makes up for such lingering gaps in our understanding. Murumbi went on to co-found the African Heritage Pan African Galleries, with the Kenyan-based, American entrepreneur Alan Donovan and it was in this new incarnation that he was to be described as *'Africa's greatest private cultural collector.'*

'Joe' Murumbi was born in 1911 in a part of the Kenya colony which was known as Eldama Ravine. He spent much of his youth as Joseph Zuzarte after his father, Peter, a trader from Goa who came to Kenya in 1898. He took on the surname Murumbi, after his maternal grandfather, having decided, quite rationally, to see himself more as an African than a South Asian. His father sent him to India when he was about seven, where young Joe boarded until he finished high school. Thereafter, he found work in India and then in Somalia before returning to Kenya, where he found himself being sucked more and more into the vortex of the liberation struggle.

So it was that he found himself a useful 'gofer' during the trial of the 'Kapenguria Six,' of whom Jomo Kenyatta was one. It culminated in their detention for an average of 10 years each. In a scenario worthy of the best spy film, Murumbi slipped out of the country to become the roving ambassador and trusted fund raiser of what was then KAU, the Kenya Africa Union. Murumbi first went to India, then to Egypt, followed by Ghana, with England as his last stop, where he lived for 9 years in the run-up to independence in 1963. While in England, he met and fell in love with Sheila Kaine, whom he married according to Maasai custom, once the two of them got back to Kenya. The couple was to have no children but we learn that Murumbi had fathered a son in a much earlier union. It is worth noting that he was already 52 years old when he saw the Kenyan flag being raised for the first time.

For the reader whose interest lies in Kenya's recent history, the scope of the conversations in *A Path Not Taken* can be assessed by the contents' pages which, incidentally, also point to pictures, illustrations and articles within the book.

To give a sample: *Declaration of Emergency; The Kenyatta Trial; The First All African Peoples' Conference; The Lancaster Conference; Land Issues in Kenya; The Possibility of East African Federation at Independence; American versus British Foreign Service; The Press in Kenya; Pio Gama Pinto; The Odinga/Mboya Rivalry and Mzee Jomo Kenyatta.*

Of course, there are those who will be drawn in by the evocations of rare book, art and stamp collections; of his love of animals; of the dreams he had of bequeathing his various properties to prosperity as museums and academic institutions and of the covetous machinations unleashed after his death to ensure that such dreams didn't come true. However, the abiding imprint of *A Path Not Taken* is of the insights that Murumbi gives us about Kenya's history as a new-born nation and the key players involved.

To give one or two examples of startling revelations: Murumbi explains Jomo Kenyatta's attitude to the armed, Mau Mau struggle: '*...and this is something which may damn the Old Man if I say this, but he said to me, "Please go and tell these people to stop fighting. This will take us nowhere."*' Murumbi informs us that at the second Lancaster House conference, the Colonial Secretary, Ian MacLeod declared that Kenya was an African country and, therefore, deserved majority rule, much to the incomprehension of the Africans present: '*.....we ourselves were confused because we never expected independence. We thought there'd be some compromise formula, we would get a majority in the Legislature, leading up to independence eventually, but when, we never knew. So, we (also) approached MacLeod. MacLeod's reaction was, "Do you people want independence or not? If you don't want independence, I'll withdraw what I said." So we said, "No, no."*' In a later conversation, Murumbi allows himself a pithy summary of the political rivals Oginga Odinga and Tom Mboya: '*Odinga generally helped people in need. Mboya used people's needs to serve his own needs.*' When Murumbi is asked what he thinks was Jomo Kenyatta's disservice to Kenya as president, he replies: '*I think promoting tribalism, in a few words, it would be that. In promoting Kikuyu domination, I should say, to a great extent.*'

From the documents provided, we get a glimpse of the elegance of Pio Gama's 'Queen's English' prose in a letter he wrote in March 1961 to Joe Murumbi in London. This is noteworthy because, following his assassination, much of Pinto's correspondence was burned by his own friends, as a precaution against subsequent witch hunts. An early sentence reads: *'I realise that when one is in Kenya, one is liable to become so immersed in its problems as to be oblivious of the bigger problems facing the anti-colonialist forces throughout the world: and by colonialism I imply not merely the political subjugation of a territory but, what may be more important and far reaching in its consequences, the economic subjugation of a territory, sometimes referred to as neo-colonialism.'*

Considering the conversations as a whole, Murumbi displays the contradictions inherent in any human being. Yet he is aware of flaws in his own character. *'I seem to be harsh in some ways but (Sheila) always has a nice way of dealing with people.'* He can be dismissive at times: *'Here you pay people according to the colour of their skin,'* he says he once told a would-be employer, *'and if that's the case, I'm not interested in your job.'* He can get angry enough to bang the door on his boss, none other than the president of the republic. He seems to see nothing wrong in using his influence to have a man retain his job beyond the statutory retirement age just because he was once a freedom fighter. Or, in handling a suitcase full of cash without knowing where the money came from. Or, in being the proud owner of 2065 acres of land. However, those were his days, not ours and the world was a different place. What is undeniable from reading *A Path Not Taken* is that, for all his shortcomings, Joe Murumbi appears to have been a decent man, worthy of respect: a value judgment which would have pleased him, while he lived.

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