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Robbed o
his soul,
his pride â\200\224
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Nelson Mukhuba may have cared
too much about his art and his
family. Last month, he destroyed
both. HAZEL FRIEDMAN examines
the tragedy.

THE sights and sounds of Nelson. Mukhuba
were intrinsic to the Venda landscape. A
homestead animated by visitors, monumental
drums and wooden figures. The blast of his
kudu horn, accompanied by a ululating chorus.
Then, on February 15, Mukhuba killed his wife
and two daughters, destroyed his home and

â\200\230hanged himself.

His wife Rosina, an assistant nurse at
Tshilidzini Hospital, had arrived home late. In
the violent quarrel that ensued, Mukhuba
knifed her to death. When his eldest daughter,
Thomani, tried to intervene, she too was
stabbed. Neighbours found her body outside
the house, where she had crawled for help.

Mukhuba then set fire to his home, trapping
his youngest daughter inside. He was found
nearby, hanged. The soles of his feet were
charred. At the last minute he had decided not
to die by fire in the house, with his wife,
daughter and lifeâ\200\231s work.

The picture that has been assembled of
Mukhuba, by people who knew and worked
with him, is complex. It evokes a sense of
dynamism that can lead to either immense
creativity, destruction, or both. How can one
reconcile contradictory images of both
flamboyancy and privacy, arrogance and
humility?

He felt threatened by the proliferation of
artistic talent in Venda, afraid his status as

foremost artist would be undermined. Yet he welcomed proteges into his home, and in turn was regarded by the younger generation of artists as their mentor.

'Mukhuba was known to be obsessively jealous of his wife. She was forbidden to talk to men or accept lifts from the clinic where she worked. A member of Mukhuba's Marabi band forfeited an eye when he tried to protect Rosina from one of his violent onslaughts. Yet true to contradictory form, Mukhuba adored her

greatest
artist he
was heard

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another
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and she, in turn, idolised him.

Coupled with his overwhelming ego â\200\224 Mukhuba was recently overheard proclaiming at Beezy Baileyâ\200\231s art exhibition: â\200\234I am. the greatest artist!â\200\235â\200\235 â\200\224 was a vulnerable naivety. David Roussouw, who promoted his work on behalf of the Venda Development Corporation (VDC), recalls: â\200\234Nelsonâ\200\231s dream was to make a fortune and retire with his wife to England. He had never even been there.â\200\235

Mukhuba had also never seen the sea until Neville Trickett, who exhibited his work through the Bozz Art Foundation, took him and his wife to Durbanâ\200\231s North Beach for a â\200\234rebirth ceremonyâ\200\235. He believed the sea was the source of all life.

Legends of salvation through sacrifice are already seeping through the community. At the time of the fire, Mukhubaâ\200\231s home was filled with many of his best works, which he regarded as too precious to sell. Although neighbours tried to retrieve them from the fire: most were destroyed. The few that survived were mainly religious effigies, sculpted from cedar wood. They included a man with a bible in his hand, and a crucifix.

Mukhubaâ\200\231s sources for his imagery were as divergent as his moods. They arose from dreams, visions, newspaper and magazine cuttings. Mammoth, traditional drums stood comfortably next to a giant depiction of Paul Kruger, dop in hand â\200\224 â\200\234The Drunken Boerâ\200\235 (now in the Unisa collection). Reverence for his Venda roots did not blunt his acute, sardonic vision of contemporary life. His music mediated between tradition and township. In the Sixties, he formed Marabi bands called the Zoutpansberg Merry Makers, the Music Men, and Nelson and the Phiri Boy.

But the most vibrant memory of Mukhuba must be of his robust form, greeting visitors with kudu horn blasts, outside his home at Tshakuma. That image has been immortalised in a 1981 Venda Stamp series. It depicts a man, blowing a kudu horn, Standing in front of another Venda landmark, the ancient baobab tree. â\200\234Nelson,â\200\235 says a fellow artist, and friend, â\200\234embodied the rhythm of Venda.â\200\235

Why did Mukhuba kill the very things for which he had lived? It is impossible to define

Mukhuba â\200\224 obsessed by his work the precise cause. It is easier to deduce the implications of that choice. The last months of

his life were dominated by despair. He was convinced that everyone in whom he had believed â\200\224 his wife, people to whom he had entrusted his work â\200\224 had betrayed him,

In 1980, his sculpture depicting the Biblicaâ\200\231 figure, â\200\234Nebuchaznederâ\200\235, was -photographe: for a Venda Stamp series. However, his name was omitted from the Series; instead, the photographer is credited with authorship.

His sculptures used to inhabit the foyer of the Venda Sun. The hotel bar was even named after one of his works â\200\224 a huge wooden crocodile â\200\224 which he loaned to the hotel as a display piece. The arrangement was based on trust, without the security of a written proviso. Unfortunately, the crocodile â\200\224 as well as his foyer pieces â\200\224 were subjected to drunken assaults. Mukhubaâ\200\231s request for financial â\200\234compensation was ignored. Consequently, he removed all his works from the hotel. They were at his home when it was destroyed.

For Mukhuba, the medium was not merely the means. It was imbued with a life-force that

demanded respect. Once, a piece of wood - crumbled in his hands. He was happy, because

he believed it did not want to be carved, and

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that he had freed its spirit. The successful execution of an object implied the blending of his spirit with that of the wood. He therefore needed to have some control over his worksâ\200\231 destination. This may partially explain his increasing suspicion of. organisations that.

promoted his art.

In August 1986, he expressed dissatisfaction over the VDCâ\200\231s management of his work, and planned to sell it directly through Fuba Gallery. Since his death, the VDC has apparently put an embargo on the sale of his remaining work,

Mukhuba also became disillusioned with Bozz, which exhibited his art in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg. A Unisa academic who visited Mukhuba in September recalls:

â\200\234Nelson was upset because a work called _

â\200\230Mediterranean Sea Monsterâ\200\231 had been taken by

Bozz. He had not been paid for it, nor had it~

been returned.â\200\235 In November, David Roussouw collected the remaining pieces from the Market Theatre Gallery, the final venue for the exhibition. When he returned them to

Mukhuba, the artist told him 20 pieces, for

which he had not been paid, were missing. â\200\224
Furthermore, he had not given permission for |

many of his works to be sold..- :

However, Neville Trickett. â\200\224 who, with
John Williams, organised the exhibitions â\200\224
vehemently denies these allegations: â\200\234Every
piece that was to be sold was priced in front of
Nelson. He was paid a deposit up front, and it
was agreed that, taking into account the
commission structures of the galleries, he
would be paid for the works sold.â\200\235
Trickett concedes that there have been delays

in returning some of the works, due to -
transport problems, and that a small sum of
Money is still owed to Mukhubaâ\200\231s estate. But he -

denies that Mukhuba was â\200\234ripped offâ\200\231.
â\200\234We did not profit financially. We have

accurately documented all transactions, and our
records are open to scrutiny,â\200\235 he said.

Whether Mukhuba was a victim of
exploitation or of his own delusions remains:

unresolved. He was obsessed by a sense of
betrayal and powerlessness. In the end, he felt

his spirit had been robbed. Perhaps that is why
he destroyed his world.

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