

Jinja loses historic copper chimney

JINJA

By George Bitu

The towering chimney atop Kilembe Hill in Jinja town could be spotted miles away.

From the Iganga side, it was visible on the urban skyline at Wandago village, 15km away. It could also be seen from almost a similar distance near Mbiko town when approaching from the Kampala direction.

During Jinja's industrial past, smoke billowing out of the vent informed travellers that they were getting to the land of industries. However, that is no more after the structure was demolished recently.

How it was constructed

After the discovery of copper deposits at Kilembe, Kasese district in western Uganda over 60 years ago, Kilembe Mines Limited (KML) set up a copper smelting plant in Jinja. By then, hydroelectric power from Owen Falls Dam, vital in smelting the ore, had just been commissioned in 1954.

Ibrahim Tepe, a manager at DRB Mining, which took over the copper smelting plant in 2008, explains that toxic gases are produced when the ore is burnt in a furnace, hence the need for a safe vent to take them away.

"Furnace gases include low concentrations of sulphur



A DRB miner stands in the now demolished anti-pollution chimney in Jinja. Photos by George Bitu

dioxide and the colourless hydrogen sulphide that smells like rotten eggs. They are harmful to humans and other animals on contact with tissues," Tepe warns.

He says the long pipe ensures that the greatest percentage of the poisonous gas is kept far away from living organisms.

According to the World Health Organisation report of 2014 on wastes, the effects of breathing in large amounts of hydrogen sulphide include eye irritation, poor memory, dizziness, bronchial constriction in asthmatic persons and headache. However, exposure to over

700mg per square metre leads to imminent death due to respiratory failure.

Chimney crushed

From a distance, it appeared like it was a metallic pipe. The reality is it was a masterpiece construction of high temperature-resistant marble bricks. There was ample space in the vent for a human being to fit in. At the lower section, one could spot a tiny hole up marking the outlet of a dark tunnel blackened by fumes.

Tepe says at a height greater than that of the tallest communication masts in Jinja, it posed a threat to aviation, especially as it had no warning signal lights.

"Its days of existence were numbered as it had been relegated to a symbolic structure of our past. The dismantling process

was done bit-by-bit until all the bricks had been pulled down," he narrates.

BETWEEN THE LINES

During Jinja's industrial past, smoke billowing out of the vent informed travellers that they were getting to the land of industries. However, that is no more after the elevated structure was demolished recently.

He reveals that DRB Mining company had been utilising the abandoned ore on site that was left over when the plant closed in 1979.

"We got workers on site to get the ore into modern furnaces imported from Germany. The product was much finer and wastes better managed given

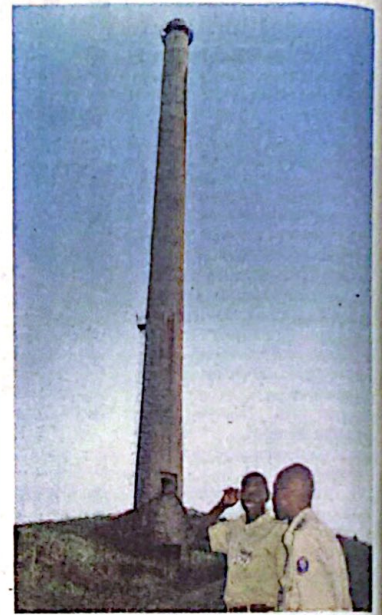
that contemporary gadgets were in use," he asserts.

Moses Maganda, the district environment officer, says he did not know that Jinja had a vent that saved locals from toxic gases in the past.

"I am a new person here and not aware at all. Maybe you contact the municipal authorities, they could be of help to you," Maganda said.

Francis Byabagambi, the municipal town clerk, equally asked for more time so as to provide conclusive information about how and when the chimney was pulled down.

"I am not even aware whether it is public or private land now. But in the meantime, you could get in touch with Ernest Nabihamba, the municipal environment officer to tell you what you want to establish," Byabagambi said. Nabihamba could not be reached by press time.



The towering 'pipe' that is no more



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WHAT NEIGHBOURS SAY ABOUT DEMOLITION OF THE CHIMNEY IN JINJA



Jamira Nabirye, resident of Namulesa village
I could easily tell the direction of Jinja town from Namulesa because of that tall chimney. Of late I cannot do it since the structure is no more.



Edward Mujunju, resident of Mafubira trading centre
Such old structures remind us of our history. Let us preserve them instead of destroying them and replacing them with inferior structures.



Moses Nsaja, resident of Njeru
There is a lot of land grabbing in Jinja town nowadays. I hope that chimney was not destroyed to allow takeover of public land through unscrupulous means.



Ruth Isota, resident of Bugembe town
When I go to other countries such as Kenya, I become jealous as to how they preserve their past. In Mombasa, for example, they have the old town intact which is not the case here as we throw away our history.