

Editorial

Bethwell A. Ogot:

The Man, His Fellow Travellers and His Commitment to an Idea

To tell the story of a past so as to portray an inevitable destiny is, for humankind, a need as universal as toolmaking. To that extent, we may say that a human being is, by nature, historicus.¹

This issue of the *CODESRIA Bulletin* is dedicated to the memory of Prof. Bethwell Allan Ogot, his commitment to the idea of the authenticity of African history, and indeed ‘the African in history’, as the above quote aptly suggests. In this commitment, Prof. Ogot was accompanied by fellow travellers, colleagues whose corpus of work laid the foundation for reworlding the world from an African standpoint by centring its history and intellectual traditions.² That is the reason why a tribute to Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, Prof. B. A. Ogot’s fellow traveller has been republished in this issue. The scholarship of Prof. Ogot and of his generation contributed enormously to building institutions and nurturing knowledge ecosystems through which subsequent generations of African historians—and indeed, social scientists—have come to blossom.

In search of a recommitment to Prof. Ogot’s ideals, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in partnership with the Department of History, Archaeology and Political Studies at Kenyatta University (HAPS-KU) has convened a conference in Kisumu City in his honour. Titled *The Indelible Footprints of B. A. Ogot on the Sands of Time³: History, Method and Knowledge Production in Africa*, the conference, which takes place from 21 to 23 September 2026, aims to memorialise his work and reflect on the future of the discipline, not just in Kenya but in Africa as a whole. It is self-evident why we chose to dedicate a conference in honour of Prof. Ogot, but there is no harm in reiterating the reason.

Born in 1929 in Gem, in what is today Siaya County in Kenya, Prof. Bethwell Allan Ogot (1929–30 January 2025) lived an illustrious life, becoming an accomplished pioneering academic and renowned

intellectual. When he passed away on 30 January 2025, he was one of Africa’s most celebrated historians, with numerous accolades to his name. That more than a year and a half has passed since his interment at Yala with no African institution formally crowning his achievements with a memorial conference has been a glaring omission that CODESRIA and HAPS-KU now seek to fill.

Prof. Ogot was nurtured and matured in the same tradition that gave us some of Africa’s most innovative thinkers. He was a fellow traveller with illustrious historians like the late Joseph Ki-Zerbo from Burkina Faso, Jacob Ade Ajayi from Nigeria, A. Hampate Ba of Mali and Adu Boahen from Ghana. Beyond this small circle of Africa’s founding historians are many other luminaries, among them Bernard Magubane and Archie Mafeje. These two are particularly relevant because their interventions changed how we looked at the notion of ‘tribe’ or the question of ‘social change’ in anthropology.⁴ Vansina adroitly sketches out the vibrant debate in ‘the roaring sixties’ among Africanists in the US and Europe to find reliable sources that met the threshold for legitimising non-written sources.⁵ But in Africa this agenda was coupled with an even more immediate demand, the overall struggle to establish institutions and facilitate the teaching of African history as a discipline that gave value to our humanity. This was the consuming preoccupation of those we describe here as fellow travellers with whom Prof. Ogot ‘broke bread’, to reiterate the title of one of Archie Mafeje’s articles. There were others, perhaps too many to mention here, with whom Ogot broke bread in less cordial ways: his former colleague at the University of Nairobi, Okot p’Bitek, whom he thought too frivolous, or, later, Yoweri Museveni, whom he considered the perfect reincarnation of the Greek youth Narkissos, from whom the word narcissism draws its meaning.

Within this group, Prof. Ogot distinguished himself not just as a leading historian seeking to reconstruct African history based on sources that his own teachers and mentors doubted could be legitimate, but, when the time came, as the leader of the team. For all of them, their work and collective intellectual commitments intervened in the hostile and often racist debate that questioned whether Africa had a history, or in contexts filled with Eurocentric concepts that rendered African historical agency an appendage of European history. It was not just a context or debate about history, it was an environment that doubted the humanity of Africans and reduced them to, at best, sub-human status.

The standard measure of what qualified as history was always imported from European history, while any contradictions that challenged this measure were erased for the purpose of establishing the assumption that Africa had no history. Above all, the debate hived off portions of African territory and reassigned them to cartographies that were dubiously invented based on the assumption that there was a contraption named sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, any traces of achievement by African civilisations were likewise co-opted and transferred to non-African identities. Not only did such a reassignment constitute a colonising project before formal colonialism but it also set the agenda for the work that pioneering African historians like K. O. Dike had to undertake to rescue the continent's history.

Prof. Ogot, working independently of the Belgian historian Jan Vansina, found and adopted a unique and innovative way of addressing the Eurocentric and racist dismissal of Africans and their history. The basic argument on which this dismissal was based was the lack of written documents. Documents, as E. H. Carr had previously characterized nineteenth century fetishism of facts, were "the Ark of the Covenant in the temple of facts."⁶ It was assumed that documents did not just establish that an event occurred, they also indicated when it occurred, thus enabling the establishment of chronology. Ogot instead referred to oral traditions as sources of history. It is a no-brainer that oral traditions were an alternative source of history, because so much written history has an oral pedigree before it is documented. To elevate written sources into the only form that a historian can reference as a source is to dismiss the oral pedigree that give way to documentation. Documents, for Ogot, were not the ark of the Covenant in the temple of facts. By expanding the range of admissible sources, Ogot and his fellow travellers forced a change in thinking, to the extent that an agreement emerged that not only were oral

sources legitimate but that 'at least [they] were fully the responsibility of historians'.⁷ Although Ogot's work on the Southern Luo was only published only in 1967, Vansina confirms that the results of Ogot's work were already known in 1961.⁸

Through this approach, Ogot and his fellow travellers transformed the discipline. They challenged colonial historiography while establishing African-centred approaches to writing history. His pioneering work demonstrated that Africa possessed rich historical traditions long before the advent of European colonialism, which contributed significantly to the decolonisation of historical knowledge. While the agenda of decoloniality had yet to acquire this vocabulary, his extensive scholarship did what the vocabulary has only more recently caught up with. While his entry point was to reconstruct the history of the Southern Luo, his emphasis on the possibilities offered by oral traditions as sources of history, and his reflections on the experience of nationalism and state formation, led to the emergence of an African historiography that remains influential in universities across the world. His numerous publications, too many to dare a full citation here, and the broad breadth of thematic issues covered, continue to shape contemporary historical research and teaching globally.

Beyond scholarship, Ogot provided support to the Kenyan nationalist struggles, served with distinction as a university administrator, contributed as a public intellectual and advocated for African cultural heritage. His debate with the late Prof. Ali Mazrui on reparations, published in the pages of local Kenyan newspapers in and around August 2005, captured the imagination of the reading public. At the policy level, Ogot's persuasion was nationalist in orientation. He was less enamoured by the radical Marxist politics of the time and, in the words of a keen observer, appeared 'stand-offish', almost overtly looking down on radical 'progressive upstarts'. When colleagues and former students characterised him as a petty bourgeois academic, a label he grudgingly accepted, he nevertheless wondered why they found it necessary to minimise him as 'petty' instead of simply as 'bourgeois'. That such criticism of Prof. Ogot came from his students and colleagues and that his response was this humorous, is a demonstration of the mentor he was to generations of historians and leaders in academic institutions. He laid the intellectual foundations for the growth of professional historical studies in Kenya, in East Africa and across the African continent. He was the founder and President

of the Historical Association of Kenya (HAK)—a platform that convened historians in Kenya and the region. The HAK led publishing initiatives and ran, for a period, the *Kenya Historical Review*, in which groundbreaking work on African history was published. By the time he retired as head of the HAK, his footprints on the story of the reconstruction of Kenyan history had become indelible.

Prof. B. A. Ogot's imprint on CODESRIA was indirect. This was unlike Joseph Ki-Zerbo or Ali Mazrui, who became life members of CODESRIA at the 30th Anniversary celebrations in 2003 and published in the Council's platforms several times. Instead, Prof. Ogot's influence within the community of scholarship in CODESRIA was felt through his role as President of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa—a role he accepted following the groundbreaking support extended to the community of African historians under the leadership of Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow (1921–2024), the first African Director-General of UNESCO. We republish Amy Niang's tribute to Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow in this issue to provide context.

To begin with, the agenda and vision of the historians associated with the UNESCO project also influenced the shape of CODESRIA's own agenda. Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, for instance, remained a strong pillar for CODESRIA and spoke at the 13th Triennial CODESRIA General Assembly in Rabat, Morocco in 2011; Joseph Ki-Zerbo was a life member of the Council and published extensively with CODESRIA. Many other historians associated with the General History of Africa project also played a key role in the Association of African Historians, whose scientific publication, *Afrika Zamani*, CODESRIA supported until 2020, when it was formally returned to the association. As President of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a *General History of Africa*, a magnificent series of books that represent the best of African historical thinking, Ogot presided over the publication of volumes that brought together and were edited by contributors who affirmed the existence of a vibrant community of scholarship in Africa. The UNESCO project, which initially published eight volumes, has recently launched three more volumes under the leadership of, and with the participation of scholars associated with, the Council.

So much has been accomplished in the service and work of Prof. Ogot and his fellow travellers. The outstanding challenge for the current generation is to redouble its efforts and consolidate the institutions

through which Africa's knowledge project needs to be anchored. This is precisely because old challenges that had been settled are re-emerging in new ways. Revisionist claims regarding the benefits of colonialism and value of empire abound; knowledge institutions that Prof. Ogot and his generation helped build are either functionally struggling or have collapsed; universities across the continent operate under stress, and are unable to provide the kind of infrastructure capable of prosecuting Africa's case in a world that is quietly embracing parochial nationalisms. The emergence and adoption of AI, while potentially enabling the globalisation of African knowledges, comes with new marginalising tendencies that, if not intellectually confronted, may exploit, erase and ultimately extinguish Africa's historical legacies by reintroducing new Eurocentric narratives. This generation needs to amplify its efforts to restore Africa's intellectual agency against the distortions emerging from postcolonial historiography.

Notes

1. B. A. Ogot, 2005, *History as Destiny and History as Knowledge: Being Reflections on the Problems of Historicity and Historiography*, Kisumu: Anyange Press, p. 8.
2. The notion of 'Fellow-travellers' is borrowed from the title of Archie Mafeje, 1995, 'Theory of Democracy and the African Discourse: Breaking Bread with my Fellow-travellers,' in Chole, E. and Ibrahim, J. eds, *Democratisation Processes in Africa: Problems and Prospects*, Dakar: CODESRIA Book Series.
3. This theme draws, in part, from B. A. Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, Kisumu: Anyange Press, 2003.
4. See Bernard Magubane, 1971, 'A Critical Look at Indices Used in the Study of Social Change in Colonial Africa,' in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 12, no. 4/5, pp. 419-445 and Archie Mafeje, 1971, 'The Ideology of 'Tribalism' in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 9, Issue 2, pp. 253 – 261.
5. See chapter 6 of Jan Vansina, 1994, *Living with Africa*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
6. E. H. Carr, 1969, *What is History?* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 15.
7. See Jan Vansina, 1994, *Living with Africa*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, p. 127.
8. See Ogot, 1967, *History of the Southern Luo, Vol. 1: Migration and Settlement, 1500-1900*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House. See the citation from Jan Vansina, 1994, *Living with Africa*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, p. 277.

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