

Family Tribute

When Prof. Bethwell Allan Ogot wrote his autobiography, *My Footprints in the Sands of Time*, he asked himself a fundamental question: What had he to offer and to whom? He concluded that his experience had been confined almost entirely to the academic community, mainly in education and social sciences, specifically history. At the same time, the circumstances of his life had exposed him to a wide variety of cultural and political settings.

Bethwell Ogot was born on 3 August 1929, in Gem, Siaya County, to Paulo and Rhoda Awino Opiche. He was the third child, after the late Abigael Agina and the late Lorna Stella Auma, and was followed by the late Professor Jasper Antippa Okelo. He first attended Luanda School, founded by his father in 1920. In 1939, his mother died, completely changing his attitude to life. He and his brother, who was then barely a month old, were taken in and looked after by their elder sister, Abigael, for two years. In 1943, he continued his education at Ambira School, where his classmates included Isaac Omolo Okero, a former cabinet minister and MP for Gem.

Joining Maseno School in 1946, Bethwell found himself in a remarkable class, which included five future cabinet ministers—Isaac Omolo Okero, William Odongo Omamo, Burudi Nabwera, Samuel Onyango Ayodo and Joseph Odero Jowi—and two future professors at the University of Nairobi, Thomas R. Odhiambo and Erastus Muga. After Maseno, he joined Makerere College (today Makerere University) in 1950, graduating in 1953 with a Diploma in Education, specialising in mathematics and history. His first posting was to Alliance High School in January 1954 to teach mathematics.

Ogot enrolled at the University of St Andrew's in October 1955, on a Kenya Government Bursary, for a general degree, with mathematics as his main subject. In his third year, he changed his academic focus from mathematics to history. He extended his stay at

Madara Ogot*

University of Nairobi,
Kenya

St Andrews by one year to complete a combined MA Honours Degree in Philosophy and History, graduating in 1959. In October of the same year, Ogot married Grace Emily Akinyi Nyanduga. He immediately took up the post of Tutorial Fellow in the Department of History at Makerere College.

Together, they had four children—David, Milton, Madara and Grace; three daughters-in-law—Eileen, Sally and Atieno; one son-in-law, Peter Baridi; ten grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

In 1960, when not buried in his academic work, Ogot consulted for Kenyan leaders at the Lancaster House Constitution Conference, especially Tom Mboya. In 1964, he joined the History Department of University College Nairobi (today University of Nairobi), becoming chair of the department and promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1965, rising to full Professor and Department Head in 1966 and Dean of the Faculty of Arts in 1967. In 1970, University College Nairobi became the University of Nairobi. The Senate elected Prof. Ogot as its first (and last elected) Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, a position he served in until 1973.

Prof. Ogot was instrumental in forming the Kenya Historical Association in 1966, was elected its first president, and was re-elected annually until 1986. The association's main aim was to advance the study and teaching of history and, in so doing, to increase public interest and awareness in all aspects of the subject.

Presidents Kenyatta, Nyerere and Obote appointed Prof. Ogot as the East African Institute of Social and Cultural Affairs Secretary-General in 1965. Headquartered in Nairobi, the institute founded the East African Publishing House to promote African authorship, with Prof. Ogot as chair. It also established the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation to publish school textbooks, with Ogot as its first Secretary.

There was discussion in 1967 among Luo leaders about establishing a formidable, unified Luo football team from the two existing clubs, Luo Union and Luo

Sports Club. Five prominent Luos—Prof. Ogot, Tom Mboya, Samuel Ayan, Joab Omino and Zach Ramogo—were tasked with coming up with a new name. Gor Mahia Football Club, named after the legendary Luo leader and warrior, was unveiled on 17 February 1968, and won the Kenya National Football League in the same year. Prof. Ogot later also served as chair of the club in the 1970s. During his tenure, he was officially invited by Manchester United for a weeklong visit to the club, in return for which he remained a die-hard Man U fan to the very end.

Prof. Ogot served various organisations, including as a member of the East African Examinations Council (1967–1974) and the National Commission for UNESCO (1968–1980), on the Executive Council of the British Institute in Eastern Africa (1969–1978), as a Trustee of the National Museums of Kenya (1969–1977), and as a Member of the East African Legislative Assembly (1974–1977).

In 1983, Prof. Ogot shifted his academic base to Kenyatta University. For the next two decades, he also served as the Chairman of the Board of three strategic state corporations: Kenya Posts and Telecommunications Corporation (1983–1986), Kenya Railways Corporation (1986–1988) and the National Oil Corporation (1988–2001).

At the international level, Prof. Ogot was appointed to the UNESCO International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of the General History of Africa, in 1971. The committee had been eight years in the making, starting with the approval of the project by the Organisation of African Unity in 1963 and approval by UNESCO in 1964. The committee had thirty-nine members from around the world. Over the next twenty years, they completed the eight volumes of the *General History of Africa*. Prof. Ogot served as their president from 1977 to 1985.

Prof. Ogot was elected to the Executive Board of UNESCO (1987–1991) and was its Vice President from 1989 to 1991. In 1991, he was elected President of the UNESCO General Conference, the highest decision-making organ of UNESCO, a post he held until 1993, when he was awarded the UNESCO Gold Medal for Service, its highest award. During his term as president, Prof. Ogot notes in his autobiography, this was his closest encounter with world power. ‘I interacted and discussed international problems on equal terms with Queens, Presidents, Foreign Ministers, Ministers of Education, Ambassadors and Directors-General and Secretaries-General of international organisations.’

In 1991, Prof. Ogot joined Maseno University College (elevated to a full-fledged university in 2000), where he founded and directed the Institute of Research and Post-Graduate Studies until 2003. During this period, he oversaw the construction of the new institute’s library building, which was soon stocked with over 12,000 volumes, many of which had to be moved to the main library due to lack of space. His time at Maseno inspired him to revisit his first love, the history of the River-Lake Nilotes, or, to use a term he coined, the ‘Jii-speaking Peoples’, who include: the Luo of Kenya; the Acholi, Padhola, Paluo, Alur, Langi and Kumam of Uganda; the Alur of Eastern Congo; and the Naath, Pari, Jieng and Collo of South Sudan. In 1996, he published *The Jii-Speaking Peoples of Eastern Africa*, where he compressed and updated the history he had first published in 1967, *The History of the Southern Luo*, with more emphasis on economic change. In the new book, he challenged the myths that in East Africa change resulted from external trade and that East African societies were divided into two compartments of ‘nomadic pastoralists’, stereotyped as conservative or warlike, and ‘sedentary agriculturalists’, deemed docile and receptive to change. Instead, he demonstrated the paramountcy of internal developments as determinants of social and economic change, and the integration of crop farming and animal husbandry, among many East African communities, including the Jii-speaking people.

Prof. Ogot became the first scholar from East and Central Africa to win the distinguished Africanist Award by the African Studies Association based in the United States, awarded to scholars worldwide who have contributed immensely to African studies. He received his award at the association’s annual meeting in Houston, Texas, in 2001. In their citation, the association stated:

while fostering, supporting, and encouraging scholarship of individuals across the world through his critical commitment to several significant institutions and organisations, Allan Ogot has remained a scholar of exceptional productivity, authoring hundreds of articles and books covering an extraordinary range of topics, most of them original contributions, virtually all of them stimulating to and challenging of young scholars.

In 2003, Prof. Ogot became Emeritus Professor of History of Maseno, a position he held until his passing in 2025. He immediately embarked on the task of writing the 912-page *History of the Luo-Speaking Peoples of Eastern Africa*, who are today concentrated in Southern Sudan, along the White Nile, the Bahr-el-Ghazal and

adjacent wetlands; North-West Uganda and adjacent areas between Lake Onekbonyo, the Victoria Nile and Lake Kyoga; South Eastern Ethiopia; and in Kenya and Tanzania around Lake Victoria. Published in 2009, the book has become the go-to reference on Jii-speakers. In 2007, the European Business Assembly of Oxford, which brings together European University Rectors and Vice Chancellors, business and industrial leaders, diplomats and civil and religious leaders, awarded him the prestigious International Socrates Award for his personal contribution to the intellectual development of modern society, at a colourful ceremony in London.

President Kibaki appointed Prof. Ogot Chancellor of Moi University from 2003 to 2013. During this period, he oversaw the formation of several university colleges, which were later upgraded to full-fledged universities: Chepkoilel, Garissa, Kabianga, Maasai Mara, Masinde Muliro, and Rongo.

Kenya's recent history in the context of the development histories of African towns and cities has been largely ignored. After concluding his chancellorship,

Prof. Ogot took up this challenge. He published *The History of Nairobi, 1899–2012* in 2020, *Mvita: The History of Mombasa 12th Century–2012* in 2023, and was finalising *The History of Kisumu 1901–2012*, a revised and expanded version of his earlier Kisumu history text.

An avid academic and writer, Prof. Ogot published 43 books and over 100 articles in refereed journals. His last two booklets, *Dholuo-English Dictionary* and *Odera Akang'o*, were published in 2025, when he was 95. He holds honorary Doctor of Letters degrees from Kenyatta, Moi, Maseno, Kabianga and Maasai Mara universities.

* **Professor Madara Ogot** is the Chief Executive Officer of the UbuntuNet Alliance for Research and Education Networks. He is also an author, and a Professor of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Nairobi, Kenya.

