

Tribute to Bethwell A. Ogot

Introduction: The passing of a titan

The passing of Professor Bethwell Allan Ogot represented a profound moment in African intellectual history. His departure was not only a personal loss to those who knew him but also created a significant void for the academic community in Kenya, Africa and the wider world. Bethwell Ogot was more than a historian; he was a guardian of Africa's collective memory, a mentor who nurtured generations of scholars, and a visionary leader who reshaped the discipline by insisting that African history be reclaimed and authored through the agency of African scholars. His life's work dismantled Eurocentric distortions and established African historiography as a discipline capable of standing confidently on its own terms while engaging with global scholarship (Ogot 1967, 1992).

For those of us who had the privilege of interacting with him, his passing was deeply personal. I first learned of his death through Professor Maurice Amutabi, and I received this news with sorrow, a devastating sense of loss, and a profound reflection on his lifetime impact on the African higher education academy. Ogot's influence on my intellectual journey was immense, as I am about to elaborate.

In my 1996 tribute to Professor Gideon Saul Were (Aseka 1996), I emphasised the stature of Ogot, his contemporary, as a foundational figure in the building of an Indigenous East African historiography. Together, Ogot and Were dismantled the colonial fiction and historiography that misrepresented Africa as a continent devoid of history. Their scholarship opened new intellectual frontiers by affirming the significance of precolonial African experiences and challenging Eurocentric frameworks that had long denied Africa historical agency. This reorientation of African histo-

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rical studies was not merely a matter of thematic expansion but a methodological struggle, waged in Kenya at a time when Western scholarship routinely excluded Africa from the historical record and discourse.

Roland Oliver's (1966) reflections had illuminated the magnitude of this challenge. He noted that Africa's past had been neglected not only because of the perceived paucity of evidence but also because of the extraordinary range of skills required to interpret it. Oral traditions, hitherto transmitted across hundreds of languages, demanded careful recovery and analysis, just as archaeological inquiry, beginning with human origins, required technical expertise in reconstructing the past. The adaptation of historical method to contexts lacking conventional documentary sources, and harnessing these other sources, including historical linguistics, called for innovation. In such circumstances, Oliver (1966: iii) rightly observed, collaborative scholarship was indispensable, both in research and in the presentation of historical facts and realities. It was within this demanding intellectual terrain that Ogot and Were advanced a rigorous historiographical project. Their work not only reclaimed Africa's past from deliberate colonial erasure but also established methodological standards that continue to shape the discipline today. In doing so, they inaugurated a decisive break with Eurocentric denials of African historicity and laid the foundations for the institutional growth of African historiography.

In my reflections, I have consistently regarded Ogot as an intellectual pioneer. He advanced a disciplined approach to the study of oral traditions, treating them not as peripheral anecdotes but as legitimate sources of profound historical knowledge creation and its perception. By systematising the collection, verification and interpretation of oral traditions, Ogot shifted the

practice of history in Africa, navigating it away from its dependence on colonial archives and the biased epistemic grounds of colonial written records. This methodological turn was, for me, a profound intellectual breakthrough. It restored African voices to the centre of historical imagination and reconstruction, thereby challenging the ontological and epistemological dominance of Eurocentric narratives. Ogot's scholarship demonstrated that Africa's past could be studied with the same intellectual rigour and precision as any other regions that have been historically studied, even in the absence of extensive written documentation. In this sense, his innovations laid the groundwork for a historiography that affirmed African agency and provided a durable framework for future generations of scholars.

Ogot's encouragement of bold intellectual engagement was evident in 1995, when he welcomed my radical critique of postmodernism and affirmed the necessity of African scholars contesting Western visions in their academic discourses. His warmth and humour, often recalled by Professor Henry Mwanzi with great alacrity, made scholarly exchange both rigorous and enjoyable, reminding us that serious inquiry could co-exist with humanity. Mwanzi himself advanced this spirit of intellectual independence in *A History of the Kipsigis* (Mwanzi 1977), where he challenged the prevailing preoccupation of early East African historians with the spectacle of tribal migrations. He argued that communities such as the Kipsigis were not merely products of migratory movements but were shaped fundamentally by their geography and ecological environment. This perspective marked a significant methodological shift, situating African societies within their material and spatial contexts rather than reducing them to simplistic migration narratives. In this way, Mwanzi's work complemented Ogot's broader project of reclaiming Africa's past, both scholars insisting that African history must be studied on its own terms, with frameworks rooted in African realities rather than colonial constructs.

Ogot's scholarship: Reclaiming Africa's past

Ogot's scholarship was a determined reclamation of Africa's past, achieved through a methodological reorientation that became a pivotal challenge to the profligacy of colonial racist denials of African historicity. He elevated oral traditions to the status of credible historical sources, thereby breaking the dependence on written colonial records and demonstrating that Afri-

ca's unwritten heritage could be studied with scholarly rigour. He also was a supportive voice for emergent scholars who espoused a radical departure from the preoccupation with migratory narratives, such as Professor Elisha Stephen Atieno-Odhiambo, Professor Paul Tiyaambe Zeleza and Professor Eric Masinde Aseka, who variously delved into divergent political economy approaches to the study of these historical realities. Ogot's work provided a framework for reconstructing precolonial African experiences, thereby restoring African voices and agency in providing a richer and more engaging historical discourse. Ogot's innovations directly addressed the challenges of his time, showing that interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to historical reconstruction could overcome them. In this way, his scholarship established African historiography as a disciplined undertaking that was rooted in achieving methodological precision and intellectual independence, and laid the foundation for future generations of historians to continue reclaiming Africa's past (Aseka 1996; Oliver 1966).

In the politics of historical knowledge production, colonialism, as reflected in the works of Stephen Atieno-Odhiambo, Paul Tiyaambe Zeleza and Eric Masinde Aseka, was not only a political and economic system but also a deliberate attempt to control the dynamics of knowledge production and dissemination. Atieno-Odhiambo emphasised how colonial authority in Kenya entrenched domination through administrative structures and economic re-organisation, while simultaneously shaping intellectual discourse to sustain imperial power (Atieno-Odhiambo 1981). His analysis showed that colonialism was as much about defining the terms of African existence as about ruling over African societies.

Paul Tiyaambe Zeleza, another Ogot mentee, extended these reflections by situating colonialism within broader debates about the perfidies of imperialist knowledge production. He demonstrated how colonial historiography and social sciences perpetuated Eurocentric visions of Africa, presenting the continent as ahistorical and dependent (Zeleza 1997). Aseka advanced this critique by highlighting the epistemic dimension of colonialism and arguing that colonialism imposed European categories of thought, silenced African intellectual traditions and monopolised the authority to interpret Africa's past and present. In *Transformational Leadership in East Africa* Aseka (2005) underscored that the colonial archive and institutional frameworks were designed to delegitimise African voices, thereby denying Africans the right to construct

their own historical narratives. This perspective revealed colonialism as a project of intellectual domination, not simply political control. It deliberately undermined African agency, portraying the continent as lacking history and culture, while imposing Eurocentric narratives that justified foreign rule.

Together, Atieno-Odhiambo, Zeleza and Aseka insisted that decolonisation required dismantling both the structures of domination and the epistemological frameworks that sustained them. Their scholarship affirmed that reclaiming Africa's intellectual agency was central to liberation, ensuring that historical and scholarly production reflected African realities rather than colonial constructs. Within this context, Professor Ogot rose to prominence as a pioneer of African-centred historiography, determined to restore Africa's voice and dignity in the historiographical traditions of Africa.

Despite Mwanzi's disquiet about migratory histories, Ogot's early publication, *History of the Southern Luo: Migration and Settlement, 1500–1900* (Ogot 1967), remains a landmark in reconstructing African migration patterns in the peopling of East Africa. In this study, Ogot meticulously traced the movements and settlement patterns of the Luo people, demonstrating the complexity of their political institutions, cultural practices and social organisation. By doing so, he challenged the colonial narrative that depicted African societies as static and ahistorical. Later, his coedited volume *Zamani: A Survey of East African History* (Ogot and Kieran 1968), became a foundational text for students across the continent of Africa, offering a comprehensive survey that placed African experiences at the centre of historical analysis.

Ogot's writings were not simply academic exercises. As a matter of fact, they stood as acts of resistance that affirmed the strength of African voices in shaping historical knowledge production and dissemination. His scholarship challenged colonial misrepresentations and revealed the complexity of African societies in the form of their migrations, settlements and innovations. By insisting on African agency, he transformed the discipline of history, showing that Africa's past could not be explained through Eurocentric categories alone. In placing African perspectives at the centre, he established a historiography that was both rigorous and liberating.

Aseka was to view migration not simply as the movement of people but as a process deeply tied to leadership visions and initiatives, which emanated from the

exigencies and challenges of community formation and demands of sociopolitical transformation. He argued that migration shaped the structures of authority and the evolution of East African societies, influencing how power was organised and contested (Aseka 2005). He was to opine that precolonial migrations were not random movements but processes that created new political communities and their leadership imperatives. These movements shaped clan structures, leadership hierarchies and authentic systems of governance throughout Africa.

Equally important was Ogot's intervention in the form of methodological creativity. Ogot's embrace of creativity in the reconstruction of Africa, integrating Indigenous traditions into historical analysis and countering colonial dismissals of oral traditions, myths and cultural practices. Aseka would consistently emphasise African creativity as a vital force in reclaiming intellectual agency and shaping emergent forms of leadership. For him, creativity is not limited to artistic expression but is a transformative capacity that allows African societies to reinterpret their histories, innovate within their traditions, and resist imposed Eurocentric frameworks (Aseka 2005).

Jan Vansina's framework for using oral traditions offered him a disciplined approach, distinguishing between direct testimony and narratives passed across generations in revealing the facticity of our history. The latter emphasised the need for source criticism, examining narrators' reliability, transmission processes and social contexts, while classifying traditions into genealogies, origin accounts and historical narratives, each of which serves distinct functions (Vansina 1985). Ogot's embrace of these methods profoundly legitimised African voices and expanded the possibilities and horizons of historical inquiry.

Crucially, Vansina enamoured Ogot in his quest to write an alternative history of Africa, advocating for interdisciplinary verification and encouraging historians to corroborate oral traditions with archaeology, historical linguistics and anthropology, to strengthen their historical validity. Vansina noted, however, that oral traditions are dynamic, evolving with each generation, and therefore must be analysed with attention to how political and cultural contexts shape their transmission from one generation to the other. Through these methodological insights, Vansina demonstrated that Africa's unwritten past could be reconstructed with scholarly rigour to challenge unwarranted Eurocentric dismissals of African historicity (Vansina 1985).

Likewise, Ogot insisted that oral sources were not mere folklore but legitimate repositories of fundamental historical knowledge. His approach expanded the methodological horizons of historicising the past, legitimising African epistemologies and demonstrating that history could be reconstructed through multiple lenses. This methodological openness was later reflected in Ogot's editorial leadership of the UNESCO *General History of Africa* project (Ogot 1992), which brought together scholars from across the continent to produce a collective narrative rooted in African perspectives.

Mentorship and radical encouragement

Beyond his publications, Ogot's influence was felt most deeply in his mentorship of a coterie of scholars. He nurtured the first and second generations of Kenyan historians, including the late William Ochieng', Stephen Atieno-Odhiambo, Henry Okello Ayot and Henry Mwanzi, who themselves became pillars of African historiography. To some extent, he mentored a good number of the third generation of scholars, including Paul Tiyaambe Zeleza, Henry Mutoro, Eric Masinde Aseka, the late Theodore Ayot, Mildred Ndeda and Peter Odhiambo Ndege. His mentorship was marked by openness, humour and a refusal to impose dogma. He encouraged his students to venture into controversial terrain, to interrogate entrenched assumptions and to challenge both colonial historiography and its post-colonial successors.

I remember clearly and with fondness how Ogot welcomed my critiques of postmodernist interpretations of African realities during the Historical Association of Kenya (HAK) Conference in 1995, which culminated in a paper entitled 'Postmodernism, a Theory Without Theoretical Rigour'. This paper formed part of a wider intellectual movement at Kenyatta University during the 1980s and 1990s, when African historians worked to place African perspectives at the centre of historical scholarship. Aseka's critique of postmodernism went beyond abstract theory; it was a rallying call for African scholars to reject intellectual dependency and to construct analytical frameworks grounded in Africa's lived experiences.

At that point, the HAK was struggling and efforts were underway to restore its vitality. Ogot had left the History Department at Kenyatta University in the early 1990s, and having earlier provided stability as chair of the HAK, he was central to these revival initiatives. His commitment was evident in moments such as personally financing the Kisumu

conference in 1992, to sustain scholarly exchange. The 1995 revival sought to reposition HAK as a forum for debate, publication and mentorship, re-affirming its role in advancing African-centred historiography.

Ogot's involvement reflected his dedication to building intellectual institutions and defending the coherence of African history against poststructuralist/post-modernist fragmentation. His support for my stance revealed his conviction that scholarship must remain dynamic, while his humour reminded us that intellectual work could be both rigorous and joyful. In this way, Ogot was more than a mentor, he was a cultivator of intellectual courage, enabling scholars to generate new ideas that enriched the discipline of history.

Institutional leadership: Makerere, Nairobi and beyond

Professor Ogot's role as an institutional leader was as influential as his scholarship. At Makerere University, he was part of a vibrant intellectual community that produced some of Africa's most distinguished thinkers. Later, at the University of Nairobi, he played a decisive role in transforming the Department of History into a leading centre of African scholarship. His vision extended beyond the training of graduates as he sought to build institutions that were capable of sustaining Africa's intellectual independence and shaping the continent's future through robust knowledge production.

He consistently emphasised that universities must transcend their function as teaching factories. In his view, they were meant to be centres of research, debate and impactful innovation. His leadership style was inclusive, encouraging collaboration across disciplines and fostering a culture of openness. By creating space for dialogue and interdisciplinary engagement, Ogot ensured that the university environment was dynamic and responsive to Africa's intellectual voices, their critiques and needs. He cautioned against uncritical imitation of Western academic models, urging African institutions to root their scholarship in local realities while engaging with global debates (Ogot 2002).

His later reflections in *The Challenges of History and Leadership in Africa* (Ogot 2002) underscored this vision. In that collection of essays, Ogot articulated the need for African universities to nurture leaders who combined intellectual rigour with a strong sense of social responsibility. He believed that higher education should produce individuals capable of addressing Africa's pressing challenges with creativity, integrity and a sense of

historical consciousness. Through his leadership and writings, Ogot left a lasting imprint on the architecture and institutional landscape of African scholarship, reminding future generations that universities must serve as engines of both knowledge and societal transformation.

Generational impact: A living tradition

Ogot's legacy is best understood through the generations of historians he guided and inspired. His mentorship created a ripple effect, producing scholars who themselves became mentors, ensuring that African historical studies expanded in depth and bounciness. I consider it a privilege to belong to the third generation of historians who were shaped by his pioneering work and intellectual heritage. My own teachers were distinguished students of Ogot, and through them I absorbed his spirit of inquiry, openness and robust engagement. His influence reached far beyond those he taught directly, embedding his ethos into the wider fabric of African historiography.

Ogot's influence has continued to shape successive generations of historians. Through his mentorship, African historiography has become a dynamic tradition, constantly renewed by new voices yet firmly grounded in the values he upheld: intellectual boldness, methodological creativity and loyalty to African scholarly agency. His vision endures across time, carried forward as part of a collective movement of resistance and imagination.

For Ogot, radicalism was never about provocation for its own sake. It reflected his conviction that scholarship must remain a space for fearless debate and open inquiry. He understood that intellectual progress cannot thrive in silence or conformity, and he treated controversy as fertile ground for serious thought. In defending African traditions against colonial erasure, he insisted on their central role in historical reconstruction, while remaining receptive to reinterpretation when new evidence appeared. His essays in *War and Society in Africa* (2001) embody this spirit, exploring conflict, power and transformation with striking candour. Ogot demonstrated that warfare, though destructive, also reshaped African societies politically and culturally. His radical scholarship was therefore defined by rigorous honesty, confronting hard truths while nurturing creativity and resistance across generations.

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