

Tribute to Bethwell A. Ogot

Some lives are so full, so luminous, that even in passing their glow remains, illuminating the paths of those they touched. Professor Bethwell A. Ogot was such a life—a giant in African historiography, a scholar of extraordinary depth and breadth, a public intellectual of rare conviction, and above all, a mentor whose wisdom and generosity shaped countless lives, including mine.

I first met Professor Ogot in 1976 when he was an external examiner at the University of Malawi. We used to joke that he was the one who ‘gave’ me my first-class degree. It was the beginning of an extraordinary journey of mentorship and friendship that spanned nearly five decades. Later, our paths crossed again when we taught together at Kenyatta University College, later Kenyatta University, from 1984 to 1989. I remember fondly how, every week, he would take me to lunch at the Safari Park Hotel, where we would discuss my work, my ideas, my aspirations. Those lunches were not just meals; they were masterclasses in scholarship and intellectual engagement.

When I moved to the United States, our connection remained unbroken. I recall Professor Ogot’s visit to State College, Pennsylvania, where his son, Madara, and I were both teaching at the Pennsylvania State University. It was my honour to host him in my home, a small gesture of gratitude for all he had done for me over the years. In 2008, when I became President of the U.S. African Studies Association, he graced our annual meeting in Chicago with a magisterial M. K. O. Abiola Lecture—an unforgettable testament to his enduring influence on global Africanist scholarship. And in 2019, when I was back in Kenya as Vice Chancellor of USIU-Africa, I had the privilege of visiting him in Yala to celebrate his ninetieth birthday. It was a moment of reflection and gratitude, a recognition of a towering intellectual and personal legacy.

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Professor Ogot was one of Africa’s greatest historians of the twentieth century, a scholar who reshaped the discipline and rescued the history and humanity of African peoples from the distortions, fabrications and silences of Eurocentrism.

He was a principal architect of

the monumental UNESCO *General History of Africa*, the unrivalled historiographical achievement of the twentieth century, editing one of its volumes. He was the intellectual godfather of East African and Kenyan historiographies, producing pioneering scholarship and nurturing generations of scholars across the continent and beyond. His commitment to knowledge transcended the academy—he was a public intellectual in the truest sense, a scholar-statesman who led key national institutions and served on international scholarly bodies, always seeking to advance the dignity and agency of African peoples.

To be in Professor Ogot’s presence was to bask in intellectual glory. He was a man of vast erudition, a historian who dabbled effortlessly in multiple disciplines, a mentor who took pride in the successes of those he guided. His life was not just lived; it was deeply consequential.

Thank you, Professor Ogot, for your scholarship, your mentorship, your unwavering belief in the power of history and scholarship to illuminate, liberate and inspire. Thank you for shaping my journey from that young graduate in Malawi to the scholar I became. I will forever be grateful for the nearly fifty years of wisdom and friendship you shared with me.

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