

A Tribute to Bethwell A. Ogot

The passing of Prof. Bethuel Allan Ogot on 30 January 2025 caught many by surprise, although at 95 he was at a ripe age. He had defied age and had remained the longest-serving emeritus professor in Kenya. He outlived his wife Grace Ogot, who died on 18 March 2015, about ten years earlier, which is rare in Africa. Prof. Ogot still supervised many graduate students at Maseno University where he was professor emeritus, spoke at a couple of events per year, and continued writing. His impressive academic career spanned seven decades.

Prof. Ogot was the chairman of the Historical Association of Kenya, and after he left no other chairperson steadied the association the way he did. There are many who would argue that, as a man of means, sometimes he single-handedly paid the association's expenses from his private pocket, the way he did in 1992 at Gulfstream Hotel in Kisumu and other places. This was perhaps more to do with his great dedication to scholarship and interest in mentoring young scholars and serving humanity—we were made aware that Prof. Ogot had paid for our meals and beverages and the entire conference expenses, with some support from Maseno University. That is how big his heart was.

I first met Prof. Ogot in 1986 at the University of Nairobi when I had joined as a first-year student. We were little academic greenhorns, almost empty but equipped with open minds, eyes and ears, curious and keen to absorb any fascinating ideas thrown our way. We were entranced when heavyweight professors on campus entered any room because we had read their works in secondary school and high school and wanted to hear from the horses' mouths, so to speak. Linking their faces to their books was exciting. Older students would point us in their direction, saying, for example, 'That is the famous Prof. B. A. Ogot', and we would all turn to look in their direction despite the whispered order not to look there immediately. They never

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seemed to mind the attention. My classmate Edward Onyango Odiyo would ask politely to shake their hands, telling them that his village of Alego Kaugage had no professor, and he could not pass up such a privilege of shaking the hand of a professor. We

would follow suit because, as the African saying goes, when one cow moos for water, you give it to all and not just the one that mooed. Then there were others, like Prof. Gideon Saulo Were, Prof. E. S Atieno Odhiambo, Prof. Ahmed Idha Salim, Prof. Joseph Nyasani, Prof. Odera Orika, Prof. Chris Wanjala, Prof. William Ochieng, Prof. Daniel Sifuna, Prof. Florida Karani, Prof. Vincent Simiyu, Prof. Simiyu Wandibba, Prof. Henry Mutoro, Prof. Godfrey Muriuki, among others. They all frequented the Senior Common Room in the Gandhi Wing of the University of Nairobi, and we frequently bumped into one of them.

Prof. Ogot was an academic giant and quite progressive in scholarship compared to his politics, which some regarded as conservative. He was an academic goliath with a Solomonic mind and a towering figure in African intellectual discourses, known for his stimulating and wide-ranging contributions to African studies, especially social, cultural, political, economic theories and global affairs. He was astute and very aesthetic in his manner of speech and dress, and nuanced in changing scholarly genres and landscapes, embracing precolonial, colonial, postcolonial and postmodern theories just as easily as he handled modernisation, dependency, underdevelopment, gender, feminist and globalisation theories. He got on board almost any intellectual debate and was able to insert himself in many anachronistic, pedantic and newer discourses with great ease for a scholar of his generation, unlike many of his contemporaries who were circumscribed to their narrow disciplinary specialisations. His interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to research allowed him to intervene and connect to many disciplines.

Style and simplicity were part of Prof. Ogot's modus operandi. He had gravitas in his immaculate clothing as much as in his writing and speaking. There was something about him that radiated brightness, intelligence and academic prowess that was unique. He was always reflective and insightful in his comments during seminars in Education Theatre I and II at the University of Nairobi. His comments were friendly, stimulating and deeply intellectual. In many of the seminars, he spoke last and most of us took out our notebooks and pens to write whenever he took the floor because he tended to be encyclopaedic, voicing thoughts that came out as wisdom and historical facts that you did not want to miss because the information was not found in any textbooks.

Prof. Ogot's reminiscences were so gratifying that you wanted him to digress all the time, for each diversion produced rare originality and great insights. I recall the time he talked about his times at Ambira High School, Maseno School as a student and at Alliance High School as a teacher of mathematics. He would remember most of his classmates and where they were and what they did or did not do. We would read about many of them later, in his autobiography, *My Footprints in the Sands of Time* (2006), which I have had the chance to read more than three times. The autobiography reads like a novel and many of the things he mentions in it he had shared in informal meetings around the fire, such as at the Gulfstream Hotel in Kisumu in 1992, the Kericho Tea Hotel in 1993, at Baraton University in 1994 and Egerton University in 1995. He could engage us with stories from the past, until long after 1 am, and we would still be glued to our seats, wanting to hear more.

The interlocutor or discussant in many meetings with Prof. Ogot was his former student Prof. William Robert Ochieng, who would prompt or remind him to tell us his stories. He would urge his mentor to tell us about Ambira Primary, Maseno Secondary School, Makerere University, Alliance High School, Royal Technical College, University College Nairobi, St. Andrews University, University of Nairobi, and more. He readily responded and would share deep information and facts, including how he met his wife Grace Ogot and how ethnicity caused him to miss out on becoming the first Vice Chancellor of the University of Nairobi. He, David Wasawo and Simion Ominde were the only three Kenyan professors at the time, but an academic nymph, Dr Josephat Karanja, was plucked from his diplomatic posting in London and appointed Vice Chancellor.

Prof. Ogot's stories were fascinating because they were well articulated and always informed by facts. He was a master storyteller who looked into your eyes to see the effects of your absorption. He always left you laughing and able to remember the stories many years later because of the manner in which he told them. One day in Kisumu, during one of the Historical Association of Kenya conferences, he told us the story of the President of Liberia, William Tubman. Under William Tubman, Liberia became militarily involved in World War II in January 1944, when it declared war on Germany and Japan. At the time, Liberia and Ethiopia were the only independent African countries. President William Tubman had read the news that many countries across the world were declaring war against Germany, Italy and Japan, and he followed suit, without the necessary military capability to respond in the event that these powers took on Liberia.

Of course, Tubman did not believe that any major power could take his declaration of war seriously. However, Germany did, and Adolf Hitler quickly arranged for a military flotilla to invade Liberia and teach the African country a lesson. Prof. Ogot told us that as the news of the arrival of the German flotilla arrived in Monrovia, President William Tubman asked the church bells to be sounded, and people thronged churches to pray against the invaders. Tubman ascended the pulpit of the main church in Monrovia and asked the clergy to step aside and allow him to pray in church for the first time, while his diplomats cabled Britain, France and the United States for assistance. Tubman prayed as follows: 'God, the last time there was calamity in the world, you sent your only son Jesus Christ to come and save the world. But this time Lord, come down yourself'. This sent us into great and prolonged laughter.

Prof. Ogot is regarded as the father of the study of the history of Kenya, just as Prof. Simion Ominde is regarded the father of the study of geography in Kenya, Prof. Filemona F. Indire the father of the study of education in Kenya, and Prof. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o the father of the study of literature in Kenya. Prof. Ogot was therefore part of the first generation of pioneer African scholars at African universities.

He is perhaps the most successful historian that Kenya has ever produced; many of his works have become classics in Kenyan and African studies at home and abroad. His seminal work, *History of the Southern Luo* (1967), remains the most comprehensive, making him the leading authority in the history of the Luo of Kenya. It was he who introduced the Joka-Jok, Jok-Owiny

and Jok-Omolo to African academic audiences. The work relied mainly on oral sources and mapped more than 1,000 years of the history of the Lwo and Luo. It inspired many studies to use a similar approach, as in *A History of the Abaluhia of Western Kenya* (1967), by Gideon Saulo Were, *A History of the Kikuyu 1500–1900* (1974), by Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kipsigis* (1977), by Henry Mwanzi, and *The Living History of the Embu and Mbeere to 1906* (1973), by Henry Stanley Kabeca Mwaniki, among others. His towering example produced a unique genre in African history used by African scholars elsewhere, such as *A Political History of the Pare of Tanzania, c. 1500–1900* (1969), by Isaria N. Kimambo.

Prof. Ogot's works also inspired a new stream of African scholars, such as Uganda's Grace Stuart Ibingira and Tanzania's Anselim Baluda Itandala, Ghanaian historian Albert Kwadwo Adu Boahen and Nigerian historian Emmanuel Ayankannui Ayandele, who were his contemporaries. He had great admiration for Prof. Kenneth Onwuka Dike, who was a Nigerian historian and the first Nigerian Vice Chancellor of Nigeria's premier college, the University of Ibadan. He literally dragged us into lectures by visiting speakers on campus, such as those by E. A. Ayandele, Adu Boahen, A. B. Itandala, Chinua Achebe, Ali Mazrui and Cyprian Ekwensi, whenever they were in Kenya. He never missed these lectures, and he would be there in the front row, taking notes like a student in class, meaning that he never stopped learning, unlike some undergraduates in our midst who regarded themselves as very important and too knowledgeable to take notes.

As young scholars, we looked up to Prof. B. A. Ogot for intellectual affirmation. I recall that in 1992 I presented a paper titled 'Mau Mau in Western Kenya' at the conference on 'Mau Mau, 40 years later', in Kisumu. My paper raised eyebrows. I had come across archival material on correspondence between government officials discussing elements in western Kenya who were regarded as sympathetic to the Mau Mau. Two of them were people known to me, and so I had proceeded to have conversations with them and their relatives. In fact, it turned out that the information about Harrison Ngota being a Mau Mau detainee at Mageta Island was conveyed to our village in Ebunagwe by my own father, Jackan Nyamanga, who worked as a prison officer on Mageta Island Prison at a time when everyone believed that Harrison Ngota had died.

In my talk I mentioned how freedom fighters such as Harrison Ngota, who was from Vihiga and worked as a driver for a European school, and Abednego Mukalo,

who worked as a clerk in the civil service but quietly supported the Mau Mau, were arrested and detained. After my presentation, my discussant, a lecturer at Maseno University, tried to throw flak at my presentation, terming it a personal family story that had nothing to do with the Mau Mau. But I was delighted when Prof. Ogot stood up and told the upstart lecturer that history was built from such micro stories which fed into the meta narratives of the bigger picture. He encouraged such stories, which gave me licence to continue my love for micro histories as part of social history. From that point onwards, the great historian affirmed many of my presentations and I owe him huge gratitude for making me a good historian.

On 17 November 2001, I was in Houston, Texas, attending the forty-fourth Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, when Prof. B. A. Ogot delivered the Bashorun M. K. O. Abiola Distinguished Lecture, attended by thousands of delegates. As he spoke, one could tell that he was in his true element, moving carefully from one topic to another, with great dexterity and the academic nimbleness for which he was famous. The award to present a lecture at the ASA Annual Meeting is given to a senior African scholar, and this was one of the highest points in Prof. Ogot's career. The trip is usually fully funded. So Prof. Ogot showed up with his wife, the Hon. Grace Ogot, who was always supportive and beside him despite her busy political career as MP for Gem from 1985 and Kenya's first female assistant minister. She was Assistant Minister for Culture, Sports and Social Services.

In Houston, another great Kenyan historian, E. S. Atieno Odhiambo, who was seated next to me, whispered to me and Prof. Osaak Olumullah that without Prof. B. A. Ogot, Kenyan and African history would never have been presented to the world in the manner in which it had. Odhiambo attributed this success to the creative mind of Prof. B. A. Ogot and his great desire to liberate African history from the colonial archives, structures and forms. Many white scholars were not yet reconciled to the fact that oral sources were reliable instruments in reconstructing African history. During dinner, there were three prominent white historians who were still in doubt about the centrality of oral sources in history.

As the conference ended, and we departed to the University of Illinois, where I was studying for my doctorate under a Fulbright Scholarship, my colleagues expressed their fascination with Prof. B. A. Ogot's intense and deep knowledge. I was quick to share with them that it was from such a great intellectual tradition

that I had been brought up and nurtured at the University of Nairobi, which enabled me to graduate ahead of my class. After Prof. Ogot's lecture, the African Studies Association started the Bethwell A. Ogot Book Prize, which recognises the best book on East African studies published in the previous calendar year.

Prof. Ogot was one of the most prolific writers in Kenya and Africa. He published over fifty books, the most famous of which is *History of the Southern Luo: Volume I, Migration and Settlement, 1500–1900* published in 1967, which launched his academic career towards professorship. His critics, like Prof. Ali Mazrui, teased him about volume II of his book, which was apparently never published but which he made comments about from time to time. Ogot often said that the book was complete and only awaited release, and that it covered Luos in the diaspora in their various 'Kisumu Ndogos' and elsewhere. Until the book comes out, we shall never know what it contains. We can only speculate. It is possible that the book has a chapter of Barack Obama in the State House in the United States of America, among other narratives.

As early as 1964, Prof. Ogot edited the book titled, *East Africa, Past and Present* (1964). Two years later, he co-wrote with F. B. Welbourn, *A Place to Feel at Home: A Study of Two Independent Churches in Western Kenya*. My Master's thesis presented at the University of Nairobi, and my article on 'Drums, Flags, Uniforms, Ranks and Religious Independency: Reflections on Independent Churches in Western Kenya', drew a lot of inspiration from this book. In 1968, Prof. Ogot, together with J. A. Kieran, edited *Zamani: A Survey of East African History*, which has been widely cited. Other books include his edited collection, *Building on the Indigenous: Selected Essays 1981–1998* (1999); *The Challenges of History and Leadership in Africa: The Essays of Bethwell Allan Ogot*, edited by Toyin Falola and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo (2002); and *History as Destiny and History as Knowledge: Being Reflections on the Problems of Historicity and Historiography*, published in 2005.

Ogot's *My Footprints in the Sands of Time: An Autobiography* is perhaps one of the best autobiographies I have read by a Kenyan scholar, besides that of Ben Kipkorir titled *Descent from Cherangany Hills: Memoirs of a Reluctant Academic* (2009). In some ways, the autobiography reads like volume II of the *History of the Southern Luo* because in it he continues the narrative and description of how Luo clans settled around

the Lake Region even after independence. The book provides the reader the opportunity to come face to face with Prof. Ogot's writing prowess as a true scholar with a pen. It is a great treatise on the social history of a pioneer scholar, which brings to light some of the challenges that young Ogot encountered while growing up in rural Kenya and some of those he had to overcome to become the great scholar that he was. It exposes the reader to many genres that traverse Prof. Ogot's academic journey and versatility. My own autobiography titled *My Walk Through Valleys and Hills of Life* was largely inspired by Prof. Ogot's account of his life.

Another book Prof. Ogot wrote, *Liberty or Death: Southern Sudan's March to Independence* (2010), confronts the dilemma of African states, the oppositional binaries and tensions they face as soon as they become independent. The Salva Kirr vs Riak Machar binary, which becomes a Dinka and Nuer issue, is mapped in a trajectory similar to that of Jomo Kenyatta and Oginga Odinga at Kenya's independence, making it a fascinating read. Prof. Ogot also wrote *Who, if Anyone Owns the Past? Reflections on the Meaning of 'Public History'*. I admired the relationship between Prof. Ogot and his student, Prof. William Robert Ochieng. The two enjoyed a close friendship and working relationship and co-edited many books, such as *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940–93* (1995) which has become one of the best books on understanding the origins of some of the tensions in the history of Kenya, such as the land question. To be sure, the UNESCO *General History of Africa*, on which he worked, is one of his greatest contributions to scholarship and new knowledge. The series is one of his greatest legacies, placing African history on the world stage and cementing the role of oral sources in the creation of history.

Prof. B. A. Ogot was a great family man. While I served as Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic and Students' Affairs at Kisii University, his son, Prof. Madara Michael Ogot, served in a similar capacity at Maseno University. Grace Ogot, the wife of Prof. Ogot, was the first female author published in Eastern Africa. We will miss Prof. Ogot's mentorship and pioneer spirit. May God rest his soul in eternal peace.

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