

Bethwell A. Ogot, 1929–2025: A Pillar of Nationalist Historiography

I went in search of Professor Ogot, as I looked for professors Jacob Ade Ajayi and Adu Boahen. I travelled to Kenya and Ghana to meet these great men, and published their collected essays with Africa World Press. With Atieno Odhiambo, I co-edited *The Challenges of History and Leadership in Africa: The Essays of Bethwell Allan Ogot* (2002). Prof. Ogot and I met several times—in France, the United States, Kenya and Tanzania—and in many unforgettable moments. I respected his elderly status, and I let him do the talking. In Houston, he was hosted by Rice University, and I drove down to have a moment with him. He was a great library, a storehouse of knowledge of immense depth and breath. Never would I be with Professor Maurice Amutabi without us talking about Professor Ogot and members of his generation. He survived them all. They are all gone, but the history of the moment remains with us.

Life's deepest lessons often reveal themselves with time; we grow in knowledge and understanding as we age. One of these enduring truths is the inevitability of endings—no matter how deeply we cherish an idea, an individual or an experience, everything must eventually draw to a close. But instead of worrying ourselves sick over the inevitability of death, we should take a lesson from the deeper philosophy that underpins this inevitable phenomenon: our time in this world is finite, and within that limited span, we must strive to leave a lasting impact. Life continually reminds us that no matter how virtuous or accomplished we are, nature does not grant special exemptions. Mortality is an unyielding constant; we are all subject to its call. It is in this light that we reflect on the passing of Professor Bethwell Ogot, a renowned Kenyan and pioneer historian of Africa, who has now gone to join the ancestors. Looking back on the life of this now fallen iconic figure, it is safe to say that he left irreplaceable marks in the history book.

I commiserate with the African intellectuals who sorely feel the vacuum created by the exit of this outstanding individual in the African intellectual space. I ex-

Toyin Falola*

University of Texas at Austin
USA

tend my deepest sympathies to this body of scholars and thinkers who bear the weight of his absence. Our grief is not merely personal but collective—borne not just of sorrow but of the awareness that the loss of such a major figure leaves a void in our

shared pursuit of knowledge and progress, which will continue to be felt by us the living.

Generally, scholars of African origin born during the heydays of colonialism were destined to make unique contributions—ones that many might not have fully grasped the consequences of. They belonged to a generation that witnessed and endured the systematic dehumanisation of both their identity and intellect. It was a time when they were forced to internalise foreign ideologies that stood in stark contradiction to their Indigenous ways of knowing. As a result, they were exposed to dangerous and detrimental learning content, which in many cases stripped them of the capacity for broad, independent reasoning. This reality or awareness reinforces a critical truth: colonised Africans could not expand their intellectual horizons solely through Western educational frameworks. The colonial system conditioned them to engage with knowledge from a singular, imposed perspective, limiting their ability to conceive ideas beyond that rigid structure.

Professor Ogot was born into this dehumanising reality: when colonisers were actively expanding their reign in Africa, consolidating their imperial status by taking charge of many African countries' political and economic systems. Even when he had no idea that he would be a historian of international stature, he adapted and learned in different ways. Although the Western education system was enforced in the academic environment, those of his time had the opportunity to learn from their parents and absorb knowledge preserved through generations by oral medium. This became the foundation of their clear resolve against external aggressors. Armed with intellectual depth and historical awareness, they stood as the defenders of African identity and autonomy against these external forces that sought to exploit them for material gain.

Professor Ogot was not just a member of an African intellectual family but a revolutionary force. One of the first points of his campaign and advocacy for epistemic democracy was that African knowledge centres and Indigenous epistemologies should not be sacrificed on the altar of epistemic oppression because they were assumed to be inferior. He was an individual who mastered the art of knowledge transfer bequeathed to him through his lineage and other social agencies of socialisation and knowledge exchange. Professor Ogot's reality and background meant that he was not easily swayed by arguments that sought to delegitimise African ways of knowing.

Bethwell Ogot was one of the prominent African historians who amplified African historiography by stating that the universal Western pattern of handing down historical information contradicts and even undermines the histories of the continent. He underscored that the assimilation of Western-derived history poses a very grave danger to the cognitive evolution of the colonised people. If anything, the amplification of European history in Africa and to Africans has the potential to erase all the great things that African forebears have achieved. It cannot be overemphasised that Africans would benefit tremendously if they used their own history to build or develop their younger generations. The projection of African historiography would provide a more nuanced and balanced approach to the history available in Western-based schools. It did not take Ogot and scholars like him long to recognise that the relentless promotion of Western history was not merely an academic preference but a strategic tool for reshaping African minds in ways that served external interests.

After successfully making a case for African historiography, Professor Ogot exposed the underhanded consequences of colonialism and how that experience had contributed to the desecration of the African past and the deceleration of African progress. If anything, Ogot ensured that the adverse problems associated with colonialism were highlighted in such a way that Africans, and potentially citizens of other ex-colonies, could understand the operations of colonial politics and how they could be used in the future. Ogot stressed in many of his works that colonialism was a cancer to African economic development. This conclusion he arrived at following his realisation that the extractive policies imposed on the African people were meant to sabotage the possibility of economic initiatives.

It is well known that when people are deprived of economic power, they often find themselves in a state of disarray, unable to make independent decisions or

shape their destinies within their communities. It cannot be overlooked how the indiscriminate extraction of African natural resources has contributed to reducing Africans' economic opportunities and values, which ordinarily should be under their control. The devastation extended beyond just financial ruin; history has shown that when a people's economic foundations are dismantled, their political systems inevitably become a target—often weakened and manipulated to the point of near irreparability. The colonial erosion of economic autonomy, therefore, was not just an economic setback but a deliberate strategy to undermine Africa's self-determination. In essence, Professor Ogot was excellent at revealing the dangers of imperialism, making a profound mark in the African intellectual community.

No one familiar with Professor Ogot would disagree that he was dedicated and selfless, especially regarding issues that he considered essential. These included African identity and culture, which are a central theme in the writings of this once-in-a-lifetime intellectual. He advocated for a lifestyle for Africans that would principally elevate their original identity. He was a staunch believer in the philosophy that people exist, and will continue to, only when they take the issue of their identity very seriously. Numerous lectures and countless publications credited to this precious mind are available today, in which he projected the fundamentals of the African identity. He consistently argued that promoting this identity would automatically yield Africans the opportunity to make their ideas popular or known in the general scheme of things.

Prof. Ogot's intellectual works revealed African perspectives on general topics. He had a special preference for African culture and made no pretence about getting local practices embraced across the continent. He was not merely an advocate of African heritage—he was a driving force behind its intellectual elevation. In countless ways, he and scholars like him positioned Africa on the global stage, affirming its relevance in the world of ideas and scholarship.

Professor Ogot was a staunch decolonial scholar who promoted the outstanding accomplishments of Africans in the past and the present, to ensure that Africa's legacy was recognised and celebrated. Although other academics prioritised knowledge transfer as a means of intellectual empowerment, Professor Ogot did more than this. He was a mentor to many of us. If anything, he was able to show people ways to navigate the complexities of their



existence and life, equipping them with insights to overcome the towering challenges imposed by history and circumstance.

Across different African countries, a handful of individuals have directly or indirectly benefitted from his mentorship—whether through personal interactions or by engaging with his work and ideas. He can be said to have made a very profound impact in life because he provided opportunities for people to learn, grow and leave their own indelible marks on the world. His life was not merely lived; it was purposefully dedicated to the intellectual and cultural empowerment of an entire continent.

A giant tree has fallen, and we are grieving. History is grieving. African scholarship is grieving. Till we meet again, keep resting in the Luo soil, keep resting, my dear Professor Bethwell Ogot.

* **Professor Toyin Falola** is the Jacob and Frances Sanger Mossiker Chair in the Humanities and a University Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Texas at Austin, specializing in African history.