
Bethwell A. Ogot: A Tribute to a Sage

In 2019, Prof. Bethwell A. Ogot welcomed me at his home. He had just turned 90. We spoke about his role as editor of the encyclopaedic UNESCO project that produced the invaluable volumes of the *General History of Africa*. He was the last surviving editor then—now, he too has rested. With a knowing smile, he recounted how Jomo Kenyatta offered him a cabinet position in the early 60s, an offer he declined. ‘Even with independence’, he mused, ‘it was important for professors to remain at the university’. Kenyatta, visibly angry, kicked him out of the state house.

When the political demons of the Moi regime forced Prof. Ogot to retreat to his home, he continued his intellectual work in the company of his wife, Grace Ogot, whom he fondly called ‘Mama’. When President Kibaki appointed him Chancellor of Moi University, the call came at dawn. ‘Kijana’, Kibaki said, ‘I’m handing over to you’. With characteristic wit, Prof. Ogot replied: ‘Kijana, are you handing over the presidency?’

He cared about our history and chuckled at how he had once studied mathematics! He even taught Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o mathematics at Alliance Boys. When Ngũgĩ, Taba and Anyumba clamoured for the change of name from the Department of English to the Department

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of Literature at the University of Nairobi, their mission was partly successful because Prof. Ogot had already argued for the intellectual recognition of oral sources in academic work. He was dean of the School of Arts and Social

Sciences, at the time.

Prof. Ogot understood the West so well and interpreted it for us. He was on the same flight with Prof. Ali Mazrui in 1955 as they both left for England to further their studies. In 2008, I sat with them at a conference in Chicago. As they reminisced about their younger days, their laughter confessed their desire for a better country, a prosperous continent and an egalitarian society.

Prof. Bethwell A. Ogot has now rested. He gave the world so much and asked nothing in return. He was a historian who became an archive of history. His mind was vast. He was a warrior of our memory.

Travel well, Prof., rest well.

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