

Tribute for Bethwell A. Ogot

Prof Bethwell Allan Ogot took his final bow on 30 January 2025, at the ripe old age of 95. The news of his demise was met with an outpouring of grief and of good will. Many remember this gentleman, always impeccably groomed, confident and oozing wit and candour.

Bethwell Allan Ogot, always clear about the spelling of his name (Bethwell, not Bethuel), was a historian, teacher, professor and a founding genius—genius, because he was the first Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Nairobi between 1970 and 1973.

At what would become the University of Nairobi, early in his teaching career, he founded the Institute of Development Studies, a division of which later evolved into the Institute of African Studies. This was no mean feat as these institutions, conceived and established in 1965, are actually older than the University of Nairobi.

History, to this scholar, who was a co-writer of *Zamani: A Survey of East African History* (edited with J. A. Kieran), among others, was the basis for decolonising and Africanising Kenya's development history, by understanding traditional values, social beliefs and behaviours as a precursor to planning practices in development.

In a career spanning sixty years, Prof Bethwell Allan Ogot served at Kenyatta University and Makerere University, as well as at UNESCO, where he was the President of the International Scientific Committee for the preparation of UNESCO's nine-volume *General History of Africa*. He was also emeritus professor of history at Maseno University, applying his extensive expertise to research and postgraduate studies.

His students, in the institutions that he served, no doubt benefitted from his works: *History of the Southern Luo, Vol. 1: Migration and Settlement, 1500-1900* (2009); *Who, if anyone, owns the past? Reflections on the Meaning of "Public History"* (2010); *Kenyans, who are we: Reflections on the meaning of national*

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identity and nationalism (2012); *History of African Civilizations in the Nile Valley* (2016) and *History of Nairobi 1899-2012: From a railway supply depot to a world-class African metropolis* (2020). This is separate from the collections of materials that

Prof acquired during a tenure of sixty years teaching in different universities. It is no secret that his home is a treasure trove of information and boasts more than 10,000 books collected over the years.

Closer to home, at the University of Nairobi, Bethell Allan Ogot and Madara, his son, researched and published *Fountain of Knowledge: History of the University of Nairobi, 1952-2020*. This seminal volume paved the way for the university's celebration of sixty years, as a technical college that transformed into a world-class university.

The adage is, once a professor, always a professor. The mandate of a professor is to provide foresight and direction in institutions. It was no surprise therefore, when the late President Kibaki introduced the concept of citizen chancellor and Bethwell Allan Ogot was appointed Chancellor of Maseno University, he took up the position with enthusiastic and assured vigour and liveliness. He served the full term in the pursuit of excellence.

As one of the greatest scholars of our history as a nation, Bethwell Allan Ogot's legacy of seminal works and historical treatises exemplify, in the words of Hon. James Orengo, 'a true thinker and intellectual par excellence'.

As we bid farewell to this scholar, eminent citizen, friend, colleague, Mwalimu and father of history in Kenya, we leave him to 'pass to his ancestors of the ages'. Rest in Eternal Peace.

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