

The Great, Revered Historian that Was Bethwell A. Ogot

Oscar Wilde once wrote, 'Anybody can make history, but only a great man can write it'. These words aptly capture the life and legacy of Prof. Bethwell Allan Ogot (1929–2025), who has departed this world to join the ancestors.

A titan of historical scholarship, Ogot was more than Kenya's preeminent historian; he was a teacher, a researcher and a guardian of Africa's past. He consumed history with a voracious appetite and, in turn, nourished generations with the fruits of his intellectual labour.

Though his mortal journey has ended, his legacy will endure, whispering through the pages of history, echoing in the minds of those he taught and inspired.

I never had the privilege of meeting Prof. Ogot in person, just as I have never met Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Plato or Aristotle. Yet, like those luminaries, his influence has shaped my understanding of the world. In the realm of Kenyan history, his stature is akin to that of Herodotus, the father of history. His groundbreaking contributions to African historiography rescued the discipline from the stranglehold of Eurocentrism, elevating it to a position of scholarly legitimacy.

Alongside other pioneering African historians, he laid the foundation for a new historical consciousness, one that placed Africa at the centre of its own narrative. Across the world, scholars have paid homage to Ogot, who died aged 95, acknowledging his towering contributions to history and his unwavering service to the academy.

On 9 February 2025, Prof Toyin Falola of the University of Texas convened a panel discussion in his honour. The tributes were eloquent, each one a demonstration of his indelible mark in history. The late Prof Ali Mazrui, himself an intellectual titan, once described Ogot as a man with few equals in Kenya's academic annals.

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Impact at KU

As a historian who never had the fortune of sitting in Ogot's classroom, I find myself at a loss, grasping for words to properly eulogise him. Yet in my mind, he remains an academic patriarch, my intellectual grandfather, whose wisdom reached

me through his written works and through the teachings of his former students, now my mentors. This imagined grandfather-grandson bond compels me to pay my humble tribute with grief.

In the many eulogies I have read, one glaring omission stands out: Prof Ogot's profound impact at Kenyatta University (KU), Kenya's second-largest university.

Between 1984 and 1991, KU was his academic home, yet this chapter of his life remains largely unsung. KU, where I am based, has long been a beacon of teacher education and a bastion of historical scholarship. That Ogot chose to grace its halls after serving as the first African head of the History Department at the University of Nairobi speaks volumes. He worked alongside distinguished historians, such as professors Okete Shiroya, William Ochieng, Tiyaambe Zeleza, Henry Mwanzi, Mosonik Arap Korir, Tabitha Kanogo, Eric Aseka, Theodora Ayot and Mildred Ndeda.

Under their stewardship, KU became a crucible for historical thought, producing a new generation of scholars who have since shaped the course of Kenyan and African history, myself included. When I arrived at KU in 1991 as a young undergraduate, Prof. Ogot had already left. Yet his presence lingered in the department's corridors, in the lectures of his former colleagues and in the reminiscences of my high-school teachers, many of whom had studied under him. His name loomed large in our curriculum, just as that of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o did in literature.

Alongside Prof. Gideon Were, Ogot dominated the intellectual landscape of our formative years. Were's *East Africa Through a Thousand Years* (1968) was our bible, shaping our historical imagination. In every history class, we were reminded that Africa's past is not a void, as some European historians claimed, but a rich heritage worthy of study.

UNESCO role

Ogot's legacy at KU was inextricably tied to his pivotal role in UNESCO's *General History of Africa* project. This ambitious endeavour sought to reconstruct Africa's past, from antiquity to the postcolonial era, a monumental task undertaken at a time when literacy rates were low and scholarly resources scarce. Together with esteemed historians like Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Adu Boahen, Jacob Ade Ajayi, Djibril Tamsir Niane, El Fasi, Ivan Hrbek, Gamal Mokhtar and Ali Mazrui, Ogot challenged the prevailing Eurocentric narratives that denied Africa its history.

The project was an act of intellectual defiance, dismantling the racist assertions of scholars such as Charles Seligman, Friedrich Hegel and Hugh Trevor-Roper, who had ostentatiously dismissed Africa as a land without history. Ogot and his colleagues laboured to correct these distortions, proving that Africa's past was not only rich but integral to the broader story of humanity.

At KU, Ogot's methodological model, honed at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), shaped historical inquiry. He championed oral traditions as a legitimate source of African history, inspiring a wave of research on the origins, migrations and settlements of Kenyan communities. His influence was unmistakable in the works of his protégés: William Ochieng on the Abagusii, Godfrey Muriuki on the Agikuyu, Gideon Were on the Abaluyia, Henry Mwanzi on the Kipsigis and H. S. K. Mwaniki on the Embu and Mbeere.

Intellectual debate

Ogot's migrationist thesis faced rigorous challenge from Prof. Henry Mwanzi, a historian trained in Germany, who favoured an evolutionary framework for understanding African societies. Their scholarly divergence, though tense at times, enriched historical debate, birthing new perspectives that continue to shape the field. As Karl Marx observed, conflict often breeds progress.

The intellectual friction between Ogot and Mwanzi ultimately forged a new generation of historians—scholars who now stand as custodians of Kenya's past. Alongside them, professors Tiyaambe Zeleza and Eric Aseka pioneered new methodologies in economic history and political economy, respectively, further broadening the discipline's scope. Ogot's presence at KU was catalytic, igniting research, innovation and original thought.

As we mourn Prof Ogot, we must remember his legacy in the words of professors Toyin Falola and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo, who praised his contributions to African historiography, interdisciplinary scholarship and the university as a sanctuary of intellectual autonomy. Mwalimu Ogot did not merely study history, he made history, he wrote history and he created historians.

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"To tell the story of a past so as to portray an inevitable destiny is, for humankind, a need as universal as tool-making. To that extent, we may say that a human being is, by nature, historicus."

Bethwell A. Ogot

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