

Bethwell A. Ogot: A Mugumo Has Fallen

It was with deep sorrow and profound sense of loss that I learned of the passing on of Professor Bethwell Allan Ogot. Let it be known to all and sundry that a mighty Mugumo tree has fallen! Beyond the usual platitudes and hyperboles after a hero has fallen, Professor Ogot was a towering intellectual giant, one of Africa's greatest historians and a prolific writer who navigated the spaces and genres of knowledge, from the very local to the most global, with remarkable ease. Like many African students, I read Professor Ogot long before joining the university. His books were part of our readings in high school. But I first met him in 1986, at Kenyatta University, where he taught me as an undergraduate and Master's student. In 1994, while attending a conference of the Kenya Historical Association at Maseno University, by then as a lecturer at Moi University, Prof. Ogot actively lobbied for my appointment as Secretary-General of the Association. His argument was that the future sustainability of the Association would depend on an intergenerational leadership.

Mentoring young scholars was his forte. During many of the evenings that crowned our conferences, I was struck mute by Ogot's great humility and ability to socialise across generations and diversities comfortably despite being a VVIP in the government of the day. He was a great, agile and indefatigable dancer! 'Knowledge is better and enjoyable when socialised', he would quip. I served my chairmanship until I went to the US for further studies in August 1998.

That month, Ogot's great generosity saved my life. When I told him that I had secured the prestigious Fulbright Scholarship to study for my PhD at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Ogot invited me to deliver a fare-thee-well lecture at Maseno University, based on a paper I had earlier prepared for the late Professor Atieno Odhiambo, titled 'In My Mother's House: Tom Mboya and Kikuyu Nationalism, 1952–1969'. After the well-attended lecture, he hosted a lavish farewell dinner and booked me at the 'presidential ensuite' at the university for my last night.

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I retired late after a long and enjoyable 'African night' full of humour, stories and good company. When I finally woke up at 8:00 am on 7 August, I knew I might not make it on time to pick up my passport and visa at

the American Embassy in Nairobi. At Kisumu, I took a Peugeot Wepesi taxi, the fastest plying the route, desperate to reach the Embassy before noon. Two hours into the journey, the radio broke the shocking news that terrorists had bombed the Embassy. I was happy that I had woken up late, and I thanked Ogot.

After a long stay in the US and Europe, and as an emigré in South Africa, I was eager to finally reunite with my mentor. My family and I decided to spend the December 2019 holiday season in Kisumu so that we could take our '*matega*' (finest gifts) to my mentor at his Gem home. To our great surprise—and delight—we were welcomed to Ogot's home by top leaders from the region, led by Governor James Orengo and former Prime Minister Raila Odinga. Ogot gave us a tour of the Taj Mahal he had built for his late wife, Mama Grace Ogot. He also took us to his iconic library where he kept all the books we had brought to him as part of the *matega*. As we perused through the manuscript of his new book *History of Nairobi City, 1899–2000*, we were astounded by his energy and intellectual vigour despite his age. Ogot respected, even relished, Kenya's diversity. '*Thubu*', '*thubu*' (soup, soup), he said merrily in Kikuyu, as he got hold of the rope that tied the goat we had brought to him.

Like the many generations of African intellectuals who Ogot nurtured during his long and rewarding life, I have lost a father, a friend and a great mentor. A guiding intellectual light in Africa has gone out. But his towering legacy lives on. Fare thee well, *Japuonj na*.

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