

Bethwell A. Ogot and the Restoration of African Pride

This text emanates from 'A Panel Discussion on Bethwell Ogot: Historian and Service to Africa' on 9 February 2025.

The danger of one-sided historical narratives is usually obscured by the ignorance of those whose past events are handed down. When a people's history is rendered, the consumers of the content often do not understand how the narrative interferes with their original sense of identity, because they sometimes cannot connect how the history told about them is linked to how they conceive of themselves and frame their world. Those who relate history always have an intention in mind. At the most innocuous level, they are concerned with telling the coming generations about the deeds of past individuals so that they may understand or become familiar with the activities and accomplishments of their forebears. In other situations, the revelation of history is meant to achieve something else. Historians often use their professional capacity to tell a reconfigured history to influence their audience's minds in a particular way. Africans have been a victim of such revisionism for a long time.

Until the end of the Second World War exposed the fragility of Europe and dismantled its human and technological resources, the imperialists were the handlers of African history. Pursuing an expansionist agenda, they invested heavily in revisionist history, which obscured the events and activities of past generations of Africans, thereby obviating the contributions these individuals had made. This mission was successful for many reasons. For one, Africans of the period who attended Western education centres to acquire knowledge did not have the instruments to challenge the dominant narratives, which made them incapable of validating or invalidating the foundations of the revisionism that plagued their educational ecosystem. But the end of the Second World War marked a new beginning, as the influx of now-enlightened Africans who had the means and commitment to challenge the

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establishment set the ground for the repudiation of hegemonic narratives. Thus entered learned Africans, one of them being Professor Bethwell Ogot.

One of the immediate tasks of such individuals was to challenge the crucibles of Western

historical narratives about Africans, which had caused severe damage to the psychology of the African person. Africans who had consumed revisionist history in Western schools before this time had doubted their true identity and the genuineness of their human nature. Low self-esteem was the result for most.

The pioneers of African history in modern times aimed to restore African dignity, and Professor Ogot was among the first of them. How people see themselves matters in the grand scheme. Before Ogot's profound scholarship emerged, Africans had viewed themselves through a European lens, and the refraction was not palatable. However, as this scholar developed his work in the East African region, he redefined how Africans saw themselves. He made sure to establish that, contrary to the mistaken Western assumptions, Africans were indeed incapable of facilitating their intellectual growth.

The history of Africa confirms that its people have enjoyed tremendous success and that they have a past they can draw from as inspiration for creative development, initiatives and inventions that would rival others. One of the most immediate results of this revelation was that Africans began to understand that they were not that different from the Europeans who had a chokehold on the African political and economic systems. More than this, Ogot's teachings changed the way Africans saw themselves.

To become this committed and emboldened to chart a new course for the African people, Professor Ogot had to be extremely determined. Initially, his intellectual expertise was in mathematics and philosophy. However, he realised he had a different spark within

himself. He became interested in professional history and wanted to acquire methodological competence as a thoroughbred historian. Clearly, he eventually accomplished this desire, but it did not come without its challenges. For historians of his age, the conventional source of acceptable academic history was different; it lionised only European standards of extracting information from the past. But Ogot became fixated on something transcendental for coming generations. He wanted the world to understand that the history of Africans, which it had made strenuous attempts to obliterate, was enduring and even more resilient than it could have imagined. He understood that once Africans devised the appropriate mechanisms to extract their history, it would be possible to repudiate hegemonic narratives and highlight the outstanding contributions that Africans have made to human progress.

The mechanism that Ogot introduced was the oral archive as a means of retrieving information. This generated heated controversy in public intellectualism; numerous European scholars challenged the idea that the content of human history could be drawn from oral sources. Ogot considered this objection ironic and strange. He believed, for instance, that the history of everyone and everything in the universe is handed down through orality, that people who committed collective actions in their society transferred them to the generations that succeeded them. Before people discovered writing as a medium for capturing information, they documented events in oral archives, or memory, which they could access at any time. That people worldwide were unfamiliar with a scribal system does not invalidate their sources of information.

Ogot challenged the establishment, situating Africa on the global map through the telling of its history, retrieved from people who had committed the actions of the past to memory. The establishment stood against it; they did not want such a proposition to see the light of the day. But Ogot was undaunted and made it known that information about Africans was preserved in the minds of their people, who were considered existentially valuable for their civilisation.

In any case, Professor Ogot left a deep footprint that others may follow in their quest to advance their general intellectual aspirations. He was known to be fair and transparent, a man of confidence and honour. Ogot channelled his intellectual energy into a powerful instrument that he used to negotiate better and more productive ways for Africans of his generation and those who followed. Although he was not alone in making efforts to reestablish African history in an appropriate context, he provided the pioneering guide for East African intellectual identity. He collaborated with others across regions to ensure that Africans began a better approach to their development and intellectual emancipation. He touched several lives positively, and people today have borne witness to the immeasurable greatness that he brought to their lives by challenging colonial ideals targeted at the exploitation, extermination and eradication of African historical legacies. In that stead, his writings exonerate Africans from all the outrageous calamities that Eurocentric narratives have brought them.

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*"Nobody, finally, can claim to own any part of the past,
let alone fence out competitors."*

Bethwell A. Ogot

*Reflecting on rigorous historical method, human sympathy,
and the universal right to study any history*