

The Historian as a Biographer: Remembering Bethwell A. Ogot

In his citation during the African Studies Association Distinguished Africanist Award presentation to Bethwell Ogot in Houston in 2001, renowned Africanist David Cohen said:

I know of no scholar of Africa who has contributed more than he has in the building of new institutional foundations to support the Africanist scholarship and to the continuous generation of lively and challenging scholarship in Africa. (Ogot 2003: 536)

Ogot's autobiography, *My Footprints in the Sands of Time* (2003), unravels this epic journey. Like most African autobiographies, he begins his narrative by situating himself in the history of his community, the Luo. 'My historical roots,' he writes in his opening sentence, 'can be traced back to the settlement of the Luo in the Nyanza province of Kenya' (Ogot 2003: 1). In this sense, the story of this individual becomes the story of the Luo community as it emerges as part of the new nation of Kenya. In other words, while autobiography has been understood as a form of self-writing, a narrative about oneself, what seems to characterise the genre as a form to represent Africa's emergence into modernity is its closeness to the story of the birth of the nation.

Fredrick Jameson's (1986) much-criticised assertion of Third World writing as a national allegory may seem a relevant prism for reading autobiographical texts such as Ogot's. Jameson argues that the story of the Third World private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public Third World culture and society (Jameson 1986). Jameson, however, was concerned more with the novel, which in the nation-building era had to bear the burden of representing 'sweeping social and political projects of building a collective identity', urgent issues 'that loomed large for those writers who sought to provide a cognitive map of the era' (Goyal 2022: 521). Unlike the novelists who, in most cases, represent these situa-

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tions as they unfold and have to grapple with the incoherence of the emerging situations as they construct their fictional worlds, the writers of autobiographies confront the task of reconciling their past experiences into a coherent narrative, navigating the complexities of memory

and identity to construct a cohesive and meaningful account of their lives.

Ogot writes with this kind of awareness in mind, but more so as a historian who interprets his story and turns it into a piece of history. He argues in the prolegomena of his book that in the autobiography '... one is trying to objectify the subjective, to render explicit and visible the multitude of influences to which one has been subjected, and which have helped to shape one's life'. His autobiography then emerges as an academic interpretation of his life and the world that has shaped it, and he sees his life as, to quote Steedman's reading of Goethe, '... an interplay of the self and the world around the self' (Ogot 1992).

Ogot's memoir might as well be termed an academic autobiography, to the extent that the text is conscious of itself as an intellectual project that constructs our access to the past. Academic autobiography, to quote Jaume Aurell as read by Rocia Davis, seeks 'to increase our understanding not only of history but, importantly, of the writing of history' (Davis, 2009: 442), so that in this respect autobiography itself authorises the author as the source of valid information. Historians, argues Aurell, use 'the story of their own intellectual and academic trajectory as the source of historiography' (Aurell 2015: 243). For this reason, he calls such autobiographical writings 'interventional'.

Such perspectives are essential in reading autobiographies of liberation. In the case of Ogot, this is important in the context of the controversial politics of the historiography of not only the Mau Mau but also of Kenya's liberation in general. Although Ogot's autobiography does not directly deal with these debates

and controversies, he writes aware of the embellishments and distortions of history that define earlier autobiographies. His remedy for such hyperbolic accounts of the past is to adopt a systemic presentation of his personal story that turns into a public history of national institutions in Kenya.

This journey begins upon his admission to Makerere College for a Diploma in Education with a subject combination of mathematics and history, ‘a combination that was condemned by my academic advisors as odd or stupid’ (Ogot 2003: 47). He would later abandon mathematics for history, and this autobiography is about his part in the development of African history as a subject of study in East Africa and Africa in general. It is also about his role in building Indigenous institutions, which he saw as a way of restoring an agency to Africans that colonialism had suppressed. He would do this prominently as the editor of the UNESCO General History of Africa project, which he also helped to found.

For Ogot, the need to decolonise African history was justified on the grounds that:

African history was for the most part, seen as the history of Europeans in Africa—a part of the historical progress and development of Western Europe and an appendix of the national history of the metropolis. It was argued at the time that Africa had no history because history begins with writing and thus with the arrival of the Europeans. (Ogot 1992 : 71)

Ogot demonstrates how Western scholarship linked African historiography with the ‘colonial period and its own official historiography, with prejudices, acquired and disseminated as historical knowledge, and with Eurocentric assumptions and arrogant certainty’ (Ogot 2003: 71). Just as literary projects challenged the Western construction of Africa as ‘one long night of savagery’ (Achebe 1974: 59), the challenge to imperial historiographical hegemony was part of the decolonisation process. The General History of Africa project was, according to Casper Andersen, a ‘scholarly undertaking but was at the same time regarded as a frame for the enactment of national and transnational memory political agendas that shifted during the project spanned’ (Andersen 2022: 49). In a sense, ideological factors underpinning the politics of national liberation and nation-building determined the directions of disciplines such as history and literature significantly.

What is interesting is that as early as 1950 Ogot and other students in Makerere were already confronting decolonial issues, even if they did not couch them in contemporary decolonial terms. Questions and complexities of writing African literature in mother tongues, which would preoccupy Ngugi wa Thiong’o and his generation in the late 1970s as part of their decolonisation agenda, were already urgent questions for the Makerere Society of Vernacular Literature, where Ogot was a member and the assistant editor of *African Literature*, the society’s journal. Ogot’s early interest in the history of precolonial Africa was premised on his conviction that, although there were no written records of such pasts, the examination of the validity of traditional sources would be a project worth undertaking as a first step in understanding that past and liberating it from the Africa of Hegel, which lay ‘beyond the day of self-conscious history’ and ‘enveloped in the dark mantle of Night’ (Hegel 1956: 91).

As Ogot explains in his autobiography, he would later be joined by other students of precolonial Africa, like G. S. Were, Ahmed Salim and Godfrey Muriuki, who were interested in countering colonial history in Africa which, to echo Gurinder Bhambra’s reading of Edward Said in a different context, is ‘the product of the West in its actions upon others’ (Bhambra 2014: 116) and which, conceived this way, silences articulation of alternative histories, or as Bhambra puts it, removes ‘the very question of the “other” in History’.

Yet, in relation to the controversial historiography of Kenya’s liberation and the Mau Mau, historians working on precolonial histories did not lack critics. For example, in a rare case of intertextuality, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, in his novel *Petals of Blood* (1977), through Karega, the intellectual character of the novel, refers to four Kenyan historians (Ogot, Muriuki, Were and Ochieng’), whom he then lampoons for being defenders of imperialist historiography. Believing that he will find answers to Kenya’s postcolonial dilemmas among historians, Karega discovers that the knowledge he is looking for cannot be found among them.

... instead of giving him the key he so badly needed, the professors took him to precolonial times and made him wander purposelessly from Egypt, or Ethiopia, or Sudan, only to be checked in his pastoral wanderings by the arrival of Europeans. There, they would make him come to a sudden full stop. To the learned minds of the historians, the history, the history of Kenya before colonialism was one of the wanderlust and pointless warfare between peoples. The learned ones never wanted to confront

the meaning of colonialism and of imperialism. When they touched on it, it was only to describe acts of violent resistance as grisly murders; some even demanded the rehabilitation of those who had sold out to the enemy during the years of struggle. (Thiong'o 1977 : 237)

Without referring to these charges, Ogot alludes to his efforts to deconstruct the very imperialist distortions that Ngugi was accusing him of. In December 1961, invited by the International African Institute in London, he attended an international conference in Dakar, Senegal, which was meant to discuss 'the meaning of African history to contemporary Africans' and the 'legitimate role of "historical imagination"'. He wrote:

... this was the first time African academic historians were meeting other practitioners from all parts of the world at an international conference specifically convened to discuss the history of their continent. For me it was the first time I met other African scholars I was to collaborate with in future such as Jacob Adeniyi Ajayi of Nigeria, Sheikh Anta Diop of Senegal, and Joseph Kizerbo of Burkina Faso. We successfully put up a case against ethno-history that was being championed by anthropologists and some Franco-phone on the basis that Africa had no history that predated the Colonial period except ethno-history. We buried African ethno-history in Dakar, and henceforth, no scholar worth its salt ever again referred to African history as ethno-history. (Ogot 2003 : 115)

As a lecturer at Makerere, he pursued similar decolonial projects, coming together with a small group of scholars who demanded the decolonisation of the history curriculum, to give centrality to research on African history using methods and sources unencumbered by historiography as defined by European historians. This is what Ngugi wa Thiong'o and colleagues would be doing for African literature a decade later, in what has come to be known as the Nairobi revolution—that is, the abolition of the English department and its replacement with the Department of Literature with a heavy Afrocentric focus at the University of Nairobi. In a sense, then, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's categorisation of Ogot as an 'imperialist historian' stems from a disregard for Ogot's alternative perspective, which emphasises the diverse struggles for liberation within Kenyan communities rather than solely foregrounding the conventional narrative of the independence struggle. On this, Ogot notes:

There can be a grand narrative but only if we changed the governing narrative from the struggle for political independence, defined in terms of who took arms

against the colonialists, to the struggle for liberty, justice and equality. Such a narrative would speak to contests and conflicts over power and how such contests reflected the long struggle among various groups for liberty. (Ogot 2003: 157)

In fact, in 1971, Bethwell Ogot, then President of the Historical Association of Kenya, urged for the study of the history of the loyalists. He argued that any serious study of political revolution in Kenya during the colonial period would have to include a discussion of loyalism and its role in Kenyan politics. Ogot went on to demonstrate the complexity of the composition and the motivations of the loyalist crowd, if only to show that their actions could not be dismissed as mere acts of betrayal of the nationalist cause (Ogot 1972). This was a fair response to Ngugi's understanding of Kenya's history as being simply between the oppressed and the oppressor. From this binary perspective, Ngugi delineates two categories of forces at work in the process of national formation in Kenya. On one side, there are the dominant forces allied to neocolonialism and which, to Ngugi's reckoning, are conservative and retrogressive. Opposed to this are workers and peasants, who are revolutionary and progressive. This formation is then translated into a dialectic of class, with the two classes poised against one another: the capitalist exploiters versus the exploited workers. Ngugi profiles each of these in history, showing how each emerged in the decisive moment when the Kenyan people reacted to foreign invasion. In this context then, the Mau Mau were a culmination of all the previous struggles waged by the other resistance heroes.

Conclusion

Ogot's intentionally systematic and historiographical account of his life contrasts sharply with earlier autobiographies, whose narration of the past lacked the depth and analytical rigour evident in his approach and was prone to distortions and embellishments. This is not to argue that one type of autobiography (academic, in the case of Ogot's, and which becomes to the reader a source of intellectual history) is superior to another. Still, if one reads autobiographies because one wants to access the past through life-writing or personal stories, then, ultimately, questions of credibility and validity of evidence come to the fore. No one is asking that we treat autobiographies as sources of history. Some missionary life stories, for example, were meant as evangelistic pedagogies. Other texts, especially the autobiographies that chronicle individual participation in the war of independence and politics of decolonisation are credible sources of histories of liberation.

Notes

1. On his autobiography, Ogot says, 'This then is the life story of an African scholar who has been profoundly shaped by his experiences and who seeks to understand both the world and himself through this process of interaction'.
2. Although in the novel Ngugi uses only the surnames of the three historians, he is certainly referring to Bethwell Ogot, Godfrey Muriuki, Gideon Were and William Ochieng'. The last is Ngugi's fiercest critic, whom he accuses of historical distortion and artistic idealism in relation to his portrayal of Dedan Kimathi, the Mau Mau leader (see Ochieng', 1992). Apart from the satiric references to historians in this novel, Ngugi revisits the onslaught in his later novel, *Matigari* (1989), where he caricatures historians as parrots of the neocolonial regime.
3. For more on this change, and especially the academic contestations and debates surrounding it, see especially Amoko, 2010.
4. For more on this, see Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1983, 1993, 1989.

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