

My Interactions with Bethwell A. Ogot at Maseno University

When I learned of Prof. B. A. Ogot's demise on 30 January 2025, I was flabbergasted—not because I considered him to be immortal but because of the immense loss to his family in particular, and to the academe, even as he was 95. I was indeed dumbfounded. Just about two months before his demise, I, together with Prof. I. Simala, Rev. Fr. Dr. Kizito, fellow historians and other colleagues at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST), had decided to visit the doyen of Kenyan history at his beautiful Yala residence. But God had His own plan for him. To reach 95 years, it means God loved Prof. Ogot and Prof. Ogot loved God. Nowadays it is not easy to reach even 70 years.

Prof. Ogot will be remembered as a phenomenon in historical studies. He was a consummate historian, a scholar with monumental credentials. He was a generous and humorous human being. Prof. Ogot was always at liberty to share knowledge about virtually everything his fertile intellectual mind would yield. He was inspiring and he was a great mentor.

It was an exceedingly wonderful time I had with Prof. Ogot at Maseno University, both intellectually and socially. He and the late Prof. William Robert Ochieng', his former doctoral student, were instrumental in recruiting me at Maseno University in 1995 where I provided my intellectual labour for eleven years, that is, up to 2006 when I relocated to MMUST. During this hectic period, the three of us and other social science-minded colleagues used to engage in vigorous discourses regarding the nature, methodology, epistemology, ontology, etc., of the discipline of history in particular, in relation to other social science disciplines, and their relevance to society and at the basic, national, regional, African continental and glo-

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bal levels. These discourses were always intense, and we could either agree or disagree without any acrimony; they were always punctuated by smiles, laughter and the sharing of pleasantries at a meal.

Prof. Ogot was exceedingly knowledgeable, intellectually stimulating and entertaining and was susceptible to details based on empirical evidence. We nicknamed him 'the mobile archives'.

Prof. Ogot was a pioneer historian not just in Kenya but across Africa. He was a vanguard in championing Afrocentricism (as opposed to Eurocentricism) in historical scholarship, a promoter of oral sources in extending the frontiers of knowledge pertaining to historical research and African historiography. This is evidenced in his seminal book, *History of the Southern Luo*, published in 1967, where he ably demonstrated that it was possible beyond reasonable doubt to construct and reconstruct African history by using oral sources, hitherto an unfamiliar territory in Eurocentric circles.

Prof. Ogot was intellectually provocative. He prodded me on three fronts. First, he challenged me to edit a book with him on a theme of my choice. I took up the gauntlet with intense excitement. With the unwavering support of Prof. Ochieng', the pioneer principal of the then Maseno University College, and the fellow historians in the Department of History and Archaeology, we organised an international interdisciplinary conference at Maseno in 1999 under the auspices of the Historical Association of Kenya, under the theme, 'Conflict in Contemporary Africa'. The proceedings of the conference were edited by myself and Prof. Ogot and published as a book by the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation in 2000. At the end of it all, Prof. Ogot exclaim-

med, 'Wod Twon', meaning 'son of a bull' in Dholuo, or 'this is great'. 'Wod Twon' is what he would fondly call me and I loved it.

The second challenge was for me to give an inaugural lecture after I was promoted to the rank of professor in 1996. He told me, 'Wod Twon, I challenge you to give the first inaugural lecture at this University College'. I accepted and told him I would do so, once Maseno became a fully fledged university. Meanwhile, I went ahead and crafted the lecture and requested his opinion on it. He observed, 'Wod Twon, this is an inaugural lecture material. Congratulations'. Following the granting of the Charter to Maseno University College, which transformed into Maseno University in 2001, I delivered the pioneer inaugural lecture on Wednesday, 17 September 2003 in the Millennium Hall. The title of the inaugural lecture was 'The Dishonest Broker in Africa: A diplomatic historian's tour of US–African relations since 1945'.

Prof. Ogot was there in the packed hall. Once more, he congratulated me and we proceeded to the reception at the Senior Staff Club at Siriba Campus. To reaffirm his generosity, Prof. Ogot partially funded the reception, the larger portion having been funded by the university.

The third challenge was for me to write a history of Jopadhola, my nationality. Those who have read Prof. Ogot's *History of the Southern Luo* will agree that it is largely the Luo of South Nyanza and Jopadhola of Eastern Uganda who constitute the Southern Luo. They were and remain cousins whose migration and settlement Prof. Ogot traced. I did not disappoint. I and my former student, Dr. Yokana Ogola, a PhD holder at Kenyatta University, teamed up, embarked on research and wrote the book, *History of Jopadhola from Early Times to the Present*, published in Kampala in August 2024 and launched by the Vice President of the Republic of Uganda, Major (Rtd) Jessica Alupo on 7 August 2024, during the colourful Silver Jubilee of the coronation of His Royal Highness Kwar Adhola (Ker of Padhola), Moses Stephen Owor at Achilet, in Tororo, Eastern Uganda.

I alerted Prof. Ogot about the book, and he was elated about it. I had promised to give him a *gratis* copy which I will honour when I attend his burial, to be added to his immaculately kept personal library at his home in Yala.

Prof. Ogot was a committed scholar. Imagine—at the age of 95, and as an emeritus professor, he was still intellectually versatile. During the Fourth Piny Luo festival, which took place at Got Ramogi between 29 December 2024 and 2 January 2025, Prof. Ogot was due to deliver a paper, but it was not possible at the last minute.

I could say much more about my interactions with Prof. Ogot at Maseno University. Although he did not formally teach me in the context of a classroom or lecture hall situation, he taught me a lot via his numerous books, journal articles, monographs, public lectures, conference proceedings, and so on. I cannot forget the many meals and drinks he bought for me each time we met at the Senior Staff Club at Siriba and on the Main Campus. Any attempt I made to reciprocate, he always declined, arguing that I was his brother across the border and, therefore, his guest. Truly, Prof. Ogot was my elder brother in both the academic and social sense.

Finally, Prof. Ogot was an illustrious son of Kenya, a vicarious son of Africa and a global citizen par excellence. May the Angels of the Lord receive Prof. Bethwell Allan Ogot's soul with great abundance and grace and may they sing for his soul his favourite church song, 'Kutendereza Yesu'...

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