

Bethwell A. Ogot, Seen from Britain

Kenyans mourn the late Bethwell Ogot as one of their founding intellectual fathers. They are right to do so and they are not alone. He is remembered with equal respect in the wider world. In 2001, the American African Studies Association (ASA) honoured him as a Distinguished Africanist; they continue to award an annual Ogot Prize, founded in 2012, for the best new book in East African studies. In public, the British have so far been more restrained. More privately, I know I speak for many in recording our admiration, our affection and our debt to Bethwell Ogot.

I have more than once published my thanks for the extraordinary friendliness and collegial generosity of our Kenyan colleagues. You all have comparatively few resources, enormous teaching loads and little sabbatical time. We, on the other hand, have our libraries, our greater bandwidth, research grants and sabbatical terms. We are able to research and then publish our findings on Kenyan history more easily than you. And yet you still welcome us; I have never once met envious resentment. I have always felt among friends. Kenyans have nurtured a wonderfully open academic culture; your collegial cooperation warms the heart.

Such welcoming cultures are not accidental; they are created by people of weight and influence. Bethwell Ogot was such a man. Ogot's intellectually hospitality was rooted in his trust in the disciplinary power of historical method. This, in his view, required of all serious historians, no matter what their origin, the same rational distrust of all evidence. Neither the nationality nor the gender of the historian mattered. It was enough that she or he stuck to the discipline, tempered by the sympathy of which, again, all people are capable. None of us, he believed, could claim any superior understanding of a particular people or situation in the past; all pasts are strange to all who come after. None could re-enter even their ancestors' world; the context would be foreign however familiar it seemed.

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Time changes all contexts; no context is ever repeated. Nor are there timeless characteristics. Indeed, the most alien pasts may be those that are supposedly our own; they have more expectations of familiarity to betray.

All in all, therefore, anybody, so Ogot assured us, may study any past. Africans can as well study European history as Europeans study African history, gays may study straights, straights gays; women may characterise kings, men understand queens. Rigorous historical method, the constant awareness that one may have failed to grasp inner meanings, together with human sympathy, should get the better of ignorance, preconception and prejudice. Nobody, finally, can claim to own any part of the past, let alone fence out competitors (Ogot 2010: 20–21).

I have been re-reading Ogot with this, our expatriate debt to him, in mind. I am struck (once again) by three great qualities that, to me, underwrite his intellectual generosity to those who share his sense of discipline. Others will cherish other qualities. For me what stand out are: first, his own sense of indebtedness to others, irrespective of passing opinions and ideologies; second, his firm yet liberating sense that humanity's history is, at bottom, the story of our reactions to changing contexts—reactions that are shaped at least as deeply by our inclusive relationships with others as by the allegedly exclusive cultures taught us by our ancestors. Finally, I am struck by Ogot's morally stern insistence that scholars should question conventional truths, especially those to do with partisan national histories, rather than polish or worship them.

As a member of an imperial nation (and, in the late 1950s, a former practising imperialist when serving as a conscript junior officer in the King's African Rifles), I warm to Ogot's awareness of imperialism's inescapable contradictions. There was always an inherent racism that, for instance, deliberately tried to

humiliate the research student Ogot and his new wife Grace, when they were looking for a flat in London (Ogot 2003a: 106). On the other hand, Ogot repeatedly records the unselfish, tutorial rather than paternalist, devotion with which individual Britons tried to open up future opportunities for their African students.

He first became aware of this responsible aspect of the imperial relationship as a boy, when seeing the work of Olive Owen among Luo women. She is still remembered as *mikayi*, the wife of Archdeacon Owen, who was himself nicknamed the ‘Archdemon of Kavirondo’ by white settlers angered by his championing of African interests (Ogot 2003b: 18). Ogot was most conspicuously grateful to Carey Francis, legendary headmaster of the Alliance High School in the 1940s and 50s. Francis was both big and humble enough to admit in front of the school that his own, now outdated, mathematical method was inferior to the newer method taught by his junior, the recently recruited African maths master (Ogot 2003b: 60–65, 70–73, 93, 86).

In his autobiography, Ogot is similarly appreciative of others who were driven by their proper concern for the uncertain future awaiting an African student or junior colleague. He remembers, in particular, Professor Roland Oliver at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and Professor Kenneth Ingham at Makerere (Ogot 2003b: 49, 86–87, 95–96, 99–106, 131).

Ogot’s ability to appreciate the liberal humanity of individual Britons, despite his often-insulting encounters with other Europeans more anxious to assert their insecure sense of racial superiority, stemmed from his own humane intelligence. He had a wonderful capacity to appreciate the equal value of both the local and the global, both inherited and acquired knowledges and culture, both oral and literate wisdoms. He saw the need to steer between the twin arrogances of Eurocentrism and Négritude (Ogot 2003b: 538–539). He constantly strove to create a teaching curriculum that imparted respect for both African and global history. Neither, he felt, could be fully understood without the other.

This certainty, that history, properly pluralised, was essential to encourage cultural self-confidence in a rapidly changing world, inspired Ogot’s astonishing, exhausting record of public service, both national and international. He founded and chaired departments, institutes, publishing houses, historical associations and learned journals; he steered

and edited internationally funded collective works, and so on; the list is endless. My Kenyan colleagues will be able to say more about them than I can ever know. So many different interests in Kenya, Africa and the world apparently asked for his fair-minded, rigorous, principled chairmanship.

My reading of his autobiography, *My Footprints in the Sands of Time* (Ogot 2003b) leads me to believe that Ogot’s concern for a creative balance between ancestral wisdoms and those of strangers followed from his youthful enthusiasm for English literature and European history more generally, and his reciprocal determination to see that, while they enlightened him, they would never dominate his thoughts. In 1946 he entered Maseno School at the impressionable age of 17. It was there that he ‘discovered the beauty and wealth of English literature’. He ‘voraciously read’ nineteenth-century novelists and poets; Shakespeare ‘really captured [his] soul’ and entered his ‘everyday vocabulary’. As an aside, and remembering Ogot’s insistence on the historic importance of the centuries of human interconnection across our world, I wonder if he was thinking as much of contemporary Kenya as of eighteenth-century Ireland when, on writing in his seventies about his youthful enthusiasms, he quoted Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village*, with the couplet: ‘Ill fares the land, to hast’ning ills a prey, Where wealth accumulates and men decay’. And what a memory, to be able to quote that schoolboy discovery and many others! Or perhaps, what a wonderful personal library to have built up, whose shelves he could plunder? (Ogot 2003b: 38–40).

Still more importantly, Ogot the teenage scholar was not only bewitched by the literature but remained critically alert enough to realise that his beloved poets and novelists, not least Dickens, portrayed an England that was nothing like as idyllic as the England taught by his history teachers. Ogot already had this historian’s ability to discern underlying, perhaps darker, truths beneath the often-glittering surface of publicly available evidence. The schoolboy questioned the self-interest of his sources long before receiving any professional training in the historical method on which he later placed such importance.

The evidence to which the young man applied his critical mind at Maseno was imperially British. When going on to Makerere and St Andrew’s University in Scotland, Ogot continued to cherish ‘a rich and varied Western intellectual menu, especially the philosophical and historical debates. I soaked myself in Western philosophy from Socratic dialogues to Logical Posi-

tivism' (Ogot 2003b: 539). Upon receiving a Litt.D., *honoris causa*, from Kenyatta University in 1995, he called for the university to be full of the 'intellectual ferment' that in the Poland of the sixteenth century had inspired Nicolaus Copernicus to insist on a heliocentric universe, a blasphemy that scandalised the German Martin Luther. Two centuries earlier, as Ogot went on to say, Dante had published his great *Divine Comedy*, not in Latin, then the language of Western civilisation, but in his native Italian, dismissed at the time by his critics as 'the vulgar tongue, in which even housewives hold converse'. Ogot saw a message there for today: Kenya needed its own 'latter-day' Dantes. His distinguished audience was left to understand that the poets of today should not be too proud to write in one or another of their own many vernaculars. Their voices were needed to guide their compatriots through 'the present spiritual wastelands inhabited by hollow men and women'—an echo of the twentieth-century Anglo-American poet T. S. Eliot, which, again, he clearly expected his audience to spot and reflect upon.

Ogot continued in this globally ecumenical vein to exhort Kenya's scholars to share the spirit of adventure shown by the seventeenth-century English scientist Isaac Newton, who had imagined himself as a boy playing with pebbles on the seashore 'while the great ocean of truth lay undiscovered before me'. Ogot thought there was still time, if only Africa's intellectual communities would form 'a grand alliance' with the world, for an African Renaissance (Ogot 2003b: 478–479).

After this recital of Ogot's wide-ranging, passionate erudition it is not frivolous so much as revealing to say that when I stayed with him at his home in Yala in March 2004, the last time I saw him, we watched the cycle race, the Tour de France, while sitting together in front of his wide-screen television. Was he also a Gor Mahia football fan? There seemed to be nothing in the world in which he did not take interest. That is the point. Only a broad perspective could make it thinkable for African history to be world history and world history African. Ogot was entirely consistent. When, in 1957, at the age of 28, he received a colonial government bursary for the fourth year at St Andrews, which enabled him to take a BA Honours degree, he was 'determined, in the words of the University motto, "Ever to be the best", and not to put to shame the lineage of which I came' (Ogot 2003b: 85). The two ambitions, widely global and intimately local, reinforced each other; they did not clash.

After years spent poring over printed texts in university libraries, Ogot went on to justify the use of oral tradition in his SOAS doctoral research into the precolonial history of the Kenya Luo. Like virtually all other Kenyans, for centuries they had lived nowhere near Kenya. He asked why anyone should think oral history strange or second-rate: after all, the historians of early medieval England also had to rely on the oral traditions set down in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles (Ogot 1966: 140–148; 1967: 17–18). The methods of African history were not suspiciously untried but reassuringly proven by age—if, again, African history was also world history. In Ogot's view, the world was full of equivalents, some clearly significant, some not so obviously so. The Anglo-Saxons were almost certainly of less importance to early medieval Europe than the Luo peoples were to the changing history of precolonial East Africa. But this did not diminish the Saxons' significance for African historical method.

Ogot was similarly insistent that only widespread, all-inclusive history was good enough for teaching the history of their migrant nation to Kenya's young. Some of its stories, as with all new nations, and some not so new, have been thought to be more significant, more heroic, more exemplary, more demanding of respect than others. Some of the most important pages in the autobiography in which Ogot traced his footsteps in the sands of time tell how he and his equally iconoclastic colleagues struggled to create a confidently inclusive history to teach young Kenya. It had to be one that not only did the obvious, in stressing African as much as European achievement, precolonial as much as colonial history; less obviously but every bit as importantly it also had to be about every Kenyan, not just the most powerful or articulate (Ogot 2003: 145–159). If some Kenyans, less wealthy, less well educated, more politically marginal than others, likely to be pastoralists rather than farmers, were forgotten by this new history, would they still be Kenyans? Would they still want to be?

In more recent years Ogot became ever more insistent that what he called 'the national project' simply had to treat all Kenyans as equals, all as culturally interesting and political creative as each other (Ogot 2012). This insistence was most provocative of constructive debate when, at Atieno Odhiambo's and my invitation, Bethwell contributed his thoughts on what constituted Kenya's nationalism and nationhood to our collection in 2003 on *Mau Mau and Nationhood* (Ogot 2003). Ogot was clear that those who took to the forests of

Nyandarua and Mount Kenya were never the only heroes of freedom; nor was their memory alone sufficient to build what would always be a multicultural nation of immigrants. The 'national project' had to be capacious, with plenty of respectful room for all of Kenya's many culturally creative nationalisms, all of them seeking some mastery of global, no less than colonial, modernity. Among these political artists were South Asian Kenyan trade unionists, journalists and lawyers, products of global history, just as most of Kenya's migrants had colonised their trails across wide swathes of African history, eastwards around the continent's equatorial forests and southwards up the River Nile.

To insist on the teaching of African and world history in the school and university curriculum, as well as that of Kenya's many-stranded national story, marks Ogot as not so much a nationalist, his natural inclination, but as a citizen, a more demanding consciousness. As an enquiring man of the world, his familiarity with its many histories of struggles for freedom made him more than a nationalist—he was a convinced, sternly critical patriot, demanding that Kenya prove itself worthy of its international sovereignty.

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