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Building on the Indigenous: Selected Essays 1981-1998

Author: Bethwell A Ogot

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Reviewer: Kennedy M. Moindi*

Prof Bethwell A. Ogot is one of the leading pioneer scholars in African history, and has organized numerous seminars and workshops on the same. He headed the Historical Association of Kenya, and was at one time president of the UNESCO funded 'General History of Africa', a project formulated to reconstruct the history of Africa. Through the use of oral traditions, Ogot and his contemporaries such as Jan Vansina, J Anene and S A Diop demonstrated that the history of the continent was as rich and invigorating as the history of the rest of the world. Consequently they contested the Eurocentric hegemony of African history.

Ogot's early research among the Kenyan Luo, that culminated in the monumental *History of the Southern Luo*, inspired many younger scholars like W R Ochieng' and H Mwanzi (his former students) to reconstruct the histories of various ethnic communities in Kenya. In 1989, his immense contribution to the development of Kenyan history stimulated a group of Kenya historians, most of who were his former students and colleagues, to dedicate their book, *A Modern History of Kenya*, to their mentor.

To date, Ogot has written individually or co-authored several publications and articles. His recent works include *Kenya: The Making of a Nation* (2000), *Decolonization and Independent Kenya* (1994) which he co-authored with W R Ochieng', and *Conflicts in contemporary Africa* (1999) which is Ogot's personal reflection on some of the problems and challenges the nations of modern Africa are facing. However, his writings go beyond history and touch on African religion, philosophy, politics, anthropology, education and literature.

The book under review, *Building on the Indigenous: Selected Essays 1981-1998*, is a collection of articles and lectures covering this period. It touches on various themes ranging from history, politics, education, among others. The book is a sequel to the first volume *Reintroducing Man into the African World: Selected Essays 1960-1980*, also a collection of selected essays on various themes. As Ogot acknowledges in this volume, most of the essays in the first volume center on the theme of African renaissance that dominated the period. During these years, African scholarship was centred on "decolonisation, the demythologizing and demystification of African history".

African scholars wanted to understand themselves and find their place in the new world of freedom and independence. Indeed, this was not unusual as Africa was emerging from a long period of domination by the West that had begun with the era of slavery, finally culminating in colonization and accompanying exploitation.

Given such a situation, Africans were exploited and dehumanized.

Therefore, the desire to restore the African dignity within the human race dominated scholarship in the immediate post-colonial period. Much of the scholarship of this period was "nationalistic in spirit and pan-Africanist in scope".

Building on the Indigenous focuses on Africa's new place in the world. In these essays, Ogot ponders on the many challenges facing the continent today, and especially Kenya since independence. He strives to contextualise the African crisis by pointing out that she is threatened by fragmentation based on ethnic identities. Apparently, African independent regimes have cemented divisions left behind by the former colonial masters resulting in more disunity and rivalry between communities more than ever before. Instead of the cultural diversity of the new states acting as a driving force toward national unity, they are potential causes of disintegration. Equally, African states face the challenge of globalization that Ogot views as a new form of colonization by the West. The death of scholarship and the increased marginalisation of the continent in the global scene have become apparent. In these essays therefore, Ogot strives to grapple with the challenges of nationhood in modern Africa and offers direction for the future. Although the essays do not follow any thematic order, they are chronologically arranged to cover this period. First, as a historian, Ogot analyses the concept of theory and practice in history and the Social Sciences in the African context. On the writing of Kenyan history, he points out in Chapter One that in the recent past, it has been dominated by the Marxist-Leninist ideology. This has often restricted our understanding of historical issues as the theory tends to emphasize class struggle as the core of history without focusing on other salient issues like culture. Ogot argues that in order for Kenyan history to be relevant, it must be factual and develop its own ideologies but not adapt western theoretical approaches like Marxism. He goes on to say in Chapter 11 that because of too much reliance on western theories, the development of human and social sciences has stagnated in Africa today. What is now required is the "indigenisation and creativity on the part of the social sciences, not imitation and emulation of Western approaches". Research in African history must continue despite the widely held pessimistic views by western historiographers like Fukuyama, that history has come to an 'end' with the triumph of capitalism over communism since the end of the Cold War (Chapter Six).

Indeed, as Ogot points out, there are many themes in Kenyan and African history that require immediate research. For example, whereas a lot of research has been done on the Mau Mau, there are other dimensions of the revolt that have been overlooked both by historians, and social scientists. Drawing upon media reports of the Mau Mau era, Ogot calls for more research on the military aspect of the revolt and its impact on the family institution and social structure of the affected Africans, especially the prisoners under rehabilitation.

To forge ahead in research and development, Kenya like other independent African states, needs the formulation of new policies in the development of education. Ogot posits that Kenya should identify new priorities particularly with regard to investment in education. In this, it should focus on the quality and not quantity of education (Chapter Three). Further, in Chapter 18 Ogot wonders whether education especially at the higher levels should take an utilitarian approach as the World Bank suggests. He shows that African universities "need to define a role and unique purpose of their own". He suggests that African universities should not adopt recommendations by the World Bank that are irrelevant to the African situation. However, Ogot restricts his analysis to university education, mentioning nothing about lower and middle level education.

The development of research in African history requires scholars who are more realistic and sympathetic to the continent's experience, such as Cohen and Atieno-Ahdiambo. In their book *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape* (1993), they infuse a multi-disciplinary approach to come up with an interesting and realistic discourse. Different approaches, such as the use of oral traditions, should be extensively utilized in the study of African pre-colonial history. A good example is the article on the Great Lakes Region (Chapter Seven), which was first published in UNESCO's *General History of Africa Vol. IV*, and which is a masterpiece on the early history of the region under survey. Similarly, Ogot's study of the pre-colonial history of the Luo in Chapter 14 has been reconstructed through oral traditions and the infusion of other disciplines like Anthropology and Ethnography. Quite clearly, he strongly disagrees with scholarship that lacks objectivity and authenticity. This is clear from his review of Roland Oliver's book *Reflections on an African Experience* (1993) and Yoweri Museveni's *Sowing the Mustard Seed*. He accuses both authors of not telling the whole truth, especially Museveni whom he christens 'the Ugandan Narkissos' for dwelling on self glorification in his biography instead of telling the true story of his country in the post-colonial period. Maybe Museveni can be forgiven for his lack of objectivity for his book is aimed at political expediency but not Roland Oliver who is regarded as an eminent African historian.

Another major theme which Ogot handles in his essays is Africa's place in

the new world order. Historically, the continent and the rest of the Third World have been the focus of a struggle for domination by the West. Today, there is the threat of neo-colonialism and globalization which will further marginalize Africa and enhance its exploitation. In this regard, Ogot posits that African states should now consider building new alliances in the form of regional and continental economic, trade, cultural and political integration in order to survive attempts at domination by the North (chapters two and eight).

Ogot also strongly feels that African nations should explore 'cultural nationalism'. This clearly is the main thrust of his argument. In fact, the title of the book is derived from one of the articles on this theme. His argument is that at independence many African nations blindly copied the Western ideals and ideologies, which emphasized economic development, Western democracy, among others. Yet, 40 years down the line, these countries are still suffering as their economies and political systems have taken a downturn as witnessed in high inflation, growing national debts, corruption, political upheavals, etc. It is now time for African states to reassess their positions and incorporate the cultural dimension into their development agenda. This will involve popularization and development of a national culture through the nurturing of national policies on languages, education among other relevant areas.

Otherwise, as the post colonial experiences show (Chapter 19), ethnicity and ethnocentrism will continue to plague African countries as they strive towards multi-partism as in the case of Kenya. By using the example of the Kenyan Luo (chapter 19), Ogot shows how the politics of ethnicity and tribalism have for a long time alienated the tribe from government during the eras of Kenyatta and Moi. However, the situation has taken a different turn since 1998 when Raila Odinga decided to cooperate with Moi in order to bring the Luo closer to the center of governance. Nevertheless, in this last chapter Ogot appears blindly sympathetic to the Luo cause as he favours the cooperation. He fails to give tangible directions to the rest of Kenya. For example, should it now be the turn for the Kikuyu to be marginalized or replaced by the Luo? Furthermore, despite the strong support he gives to "cultural nationalism" as a panacea to African problems, he does not offer a clear cut theoretical approach removed from western dominance that can be relevant to the continent. Hence, the book in this regard suffers from lack of a proper theoretical basis.

Nevertheless, this latest piece by Ogot is a clear illustration of the long prolific career of the Professor of history which spans more than 40 years. The topics handled are articulated quite objectively without bias, as Ogot does not mince his words where the truth must be told as the reviews of books by Oliver and Museveni reveal. Ogot has also widely drawn examples

from different parts of Africa and the rest of the world, which makes the essays not only relevant to Kenyan scholars but also to scholars from different parts of the world in various fields such as Politics, Anthropology, Literature, Sociology, Population, Environment, etc. The language used is easy to follow, yet quite intellectual and stimulating, which makes the book an easy reader to both the lay and serious scholars. However, one serious setback in the book may be blamed on the publisher: Chapters one to five are mixed up with some pages missing altogether. This inevitably affects smooth reading. We hope that these anomalies will be corrected in future editions.

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