

The contribution of Bethwell Allan Ogot to the development of higher education in Kenya (1964–2013)

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ABSTRACT

The study looks at the contribution made by Professor Bethwell Allan Ogot towards the development of higher education in Kenya between 1964 and 2013. It fills a wide gap in the historiography of post-colonial development in postwar Kenyan academia, especially in its significance to the academic career of major participant Ogot, whose contribution to university education, the advancement of Africanist scholarship, and the restructuring of institutional arrangements in Kenya are addressed. The study aimed at knowing the role of Ogot in policy formations, governance, curriculum reconstruction, and intellectual hegemony within a transition period in Kenyan history of education. The research paradigm upon which the research has been founded was interpretive research and incorporated the historical approach of data collection and analysis. This study adopted a qualitative research design. Primary and secondary data were utilized. The main sources of primary data were face-to-face interviews and archival facts available in different institutions such as the Kenya National Archives, the University of Nairobi, and Maseno University. Secondary sources entailed scholarly books, articles, and institutional reports. The respondents were sought purposively and through snowballing methods. Theoretical guidance was supplied by critical policy historiography and development theory that placed Ogot within the context of bigger national and ideological movements. The findings indicate that Ogot was instrumental in the restructuring of the university management of affairs, the indigenization of academic curricula, the training of the academic, and the statements about the relevance of the African knowledge systems. His leadership was very influential to the education sector in Kenya, and his input to this sector has become part and parcel of academic policy and intellectual self-determination. To Kenya, Professor Ogot made a revolutionary contribution to the field of higher education, especially on innovative curriculum development, leadership, and mentoring. His position on African-centered education and education reform has influenced the education sector in Kenya. In order to sustain his legacy, strengthening the use of African-centered curricula in all disciplines, an increased decentralization of education by universities to underserved areas, and institutionalization of mentorship programs are advised. Moreover, international academic relationships that are encouraged will improve Kenyan scholarship and expand the intellectual vistas to remain relevant in the field of African studies and development.

Keywords: African Scholarship, Bethwell Allan Ogot, Curriculum Reform, Higher Education, Kenya, Kenya National Archive, Post-colonial Development, University Education

I. INTRODUCTION

The influence of visionary scholars, administrators and policy thinkers on higher education in post-colonial Kenya is quite huge as they tried to reshape the academic framework colonialism left behind. Bethwell Allan Ogot, professor of history, is one such nation-builder, his intellectual and administrative leadership helping to build university education in Kenya 1964-2013. Known also as the first ever scholar to pioneer African historiography, Ogot also played vital roles within the reformation process within higher education, as an institution Head, and a curriculum innovator. His work laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and African-centered university system that would be capable of meeting the intellectual and developmental needs of a newly independent Kenya (Spear, 2004).

During the initial years of post-independence, the institutions of higher learning in Kenya were primarily based on the European system and curriculum. Consequently, they were not usually reflective of African realities or helpful in national development. It is in this context that Ogot emerged as a radical force, promoting changes to ensure that university education was grounded in the African historical and cultural background, as well as development (Ogot, 2003). His tenure at the University of Nairobi (as a professor, head of department, and subsequently as the director of the Institute of Research and Postgraduate Studies) and subsequently at Maseno University was characterised by a concerted effort to decolonise education by producing knowledge in an African-centred and academic governance.

The philosophy of higher education espoused by Ogot was influenced by the notion that universities should serve as machines of national development and cultural self-definition. To establish its post-colonial identity, Kenya needed to transform its institutions of higher learning so that they did more than train civil servants; they produced critical thinkers and indigenous scholars who could transform society, he insisted. His championing of African historiography helped Ogot to help re-design curricula that incorporated the African perspectives and histories, replacing the Eurocentric histories that dominated academic discourse (Ogot, 1999; Ochieng', 2002). He was also an active participant in national politics regarding higher education policy, serving on commissions and task forces that helped establish funding patterns, expansion policies, and academic requirements.

Moreover, his appointment as Chancellor of Maseno University, where he played a pivotal role in transforming the college to a full-fledged university, indicated his interest in ensuring access to quality higher education beyond Nairobi. His leadership propelled Maseno to a research excellence center with a focus on regional development and applied research scholarship. The history of his efforts towards decentralization and capacity building in regions is echoed in Kenya's larger ambitions to promote educational equality and integration at the national level (Ogot, 2009).

Although his contributions are very important, there is not much scholarly interest in the contributions that Ogot brought to the field of higher education. Though his historiographical activity is well-documented, his institutional work, participation in policymaking, and pedagogical developments are less subject to academic inquiry. This article aims to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the role of Ogot in the reform of higher education in Kenya over the last five decades. Based on critical policy historiography and development theory, the paper seeks to unravel the impacts of his initiatives in curriculum reform, university administration, mentorship, and intellectual decolonization on the academic landscape of post-colonial Kenya.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although Professor Bethwell Allan Ogot has been well-documented for shaping African historiography, little academic scrutiny has been given to his contribution to higher Education in Kenya, which was also immense. Most of the available literature focuses on his intellectual output as a historian, but his activities as an academic administrator, curriculum reformer, and policy adviser were instrumental in transforming the post-colonial university system in Kenya. Since he led the University of Nairobi in the 1970s until his transformative work at Maseno University, which gave it an African pedigree in the 1990s and 2000s, Ogot led African-centred academic institutions with reformed visions of higher learning modalities. His postulation of universities as champions of national construction and intellectual decolonization had a long-term consequence on educational policy, curriculum, and governance. Nevertheless, a significant historical and educational research gap exists that provides a detailed discourse on how his activities and ideologies influenced the development of higher education during the 1964-2013 period. This is a gap that must be filled considering that we need to know what African intellectuals did and how they constructed institutional spaces post colonially, and how they indigenized the knowledge system.

1.2 Research Objective

To investigate Professor Bethwell Allan Ogot's contribution to the development of higher education in Kenya between 1964 and 2013.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The section presents a thematic account of literature and literature sources on contributions that Bethwell Allen Ogot made to the higher education in Kenya between 1964 and 2013. It is structured in two conceptual guides critical policy historiography and development theory. It is in these constructs where the explanation of the impacts of the intervention of Ogot in the academic leadership, academic curriculum reforms and institutional policies which guided the future of education in Kenya is given.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Critical Policy Historiography

It allows questioning of the processes through which structures and institutions of education emerge in their historical, political and ideological contexts. This publication throws light on the way in which the intellectual activities of Ogot intersected with the policy transformation in Kenyan universities. One of the forms of Eurocentric knowledge resistance has been to challenge colonial legacies of the educational system and presenting an African-centered curriculum assisted by Ogot among others. This has been considered to examine his contribution at the University of Nairobi and thereafter at Maseno University to be critical interventions in policy formulation to pursue African accounts (Ogot, 1999; Ogot, 2003).

2.1.2 Development Theory

In regards to education as one of the major national priorities. This theoretical approach aligns with Ogot's focus on linking higher education to Kenya's developmental agenda. He had faith in universities as generators of innovation, cultural identity, and socio-political progress. His guidance fostered equity, institutional growth, and academic mentorship, particularly through his contributions to Maseno University, which evolved into a full-fledged university (Ogot, 2009). In this light, Ogot can be considered not only a scholar but also an author of the Kenyan knowledge economy.

2.2 Empirical Review

Several studies acknowledge the role Ogot played in historiography; however, few critically evaluate his work within the institutional structures characteristic of higher education. Ogot was a founder and a shaper of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Nairobi in the 1960s, and this was a pioneer in establishing academic programs based on African realities (Ochieng', 2002). This was followed by his attempts to indigenize curriculum content, adopt interdisciplinary approaches, and influence national academic policymaking (Sifuna, 1995).

Ogot supported academic independence, decentralized higher education, and regional development as the Director of the Institute of Research and Postgraduate Studies in Moi University and as the Chancellor of Maseno University. His management skills helped re-define the mission of Maseno University to meet the educational demands of Western Kenya, demonstrating that national development can be complemented by local initiatives (Ogot, 2009).

In addition to administration, Ogot was involved in university education as a thinker and mentor. His students were trained as a generation of historians and other academicians who became heads of departments and universities in East Africa (Ogot, 2003). His pressure also received support to make Kenyan universities vehicles of cultural renewal, as opposed to institutions that were merely unadulterated replicas of colonial systems of knowledge training.

However, there is no detailed treatise in the literature relating the roles of Ogot in government, curriculum development, and policy regulation of education in the country. This knowledge gap highlights the need for scholars to continue addressing Ogot on a deeper level, particularly as a case study of influential African intellectuals in the restructuring of post-colonial institutions of higher learning.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, which was deemed appropriate for investigating the historical and intellectual contributions of Professor Bethwell Allan Ogot to higher education in Kenya between 1964 and 2013. A qualitative approach enabled the exploration of Ogot's influence not only through his publications but also through his institutional roles, particularly at the University of Nairobi and Maseno University. This interpretive design attempted to recreate the historicity landscape and contribution of the scholarly works of Ogot through a review of historical literature, archival sources, and oral accounts. It also enabled a critical review of intersection between his thinking and the transformation of socio-political and educational processes in Kenya during the post-independence period and in particular connected his role in pedagogy that was African-centered, the struggles to reform the curriculum and the roles he played in university governance.

3.2 Target Population

Target population was made up of 45 individuals; they consisted of academic historians, education scholars, university administrators, policymakers and former students who had contact, either directly or indirectly, with Professor Ogot. These respondents were selected on the basis of two major divide; faculty members at University of Nairobi and Maseno University who either served with him or were influenced by him, and education policymakers who interfaced with Ogot in his various leadership capacities. The population also encompassed the scholars who read the works of Ogot or participated in discussions on the African historiography and curriculum making. The fact that this population was selected meant that there was a diverse and informed opinion of the intellectual contributions of Ogot as well as his institutional impact

3.3 Sampling Method

The sampling method that was used in the study was purposive sampling, where the subjects were chosen depending on their relevance to the research. And the selection was based primarily on the following criteria: (a) prior interaction with Ogot whether academically or administratively; (b) participation in higher education reforms under his reign; and (c) academic activity in relation to his work. Of the identified target population, 18 individuals were recruited to take part in-depth interviews. This sample was viewed as adequate in conducting a qualitative study, where the depth of understanding is a key measure before making the importance of the number of respondents. Moreover, other

potential respondents were identified by snowball sampling, including former research assistants and proteges in order to achieve exhaustivity and the inclusion of less well-known respondents who made major contributions.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

To produce comprehensive and substantial data, the study used primary and secondary research.

There were two ways in which primary data were collected. To begin with, archival studies were conducted in the Kenya National Archives and at University of Nairobi and Maseno University archives. The archival materials contained included council minutes, institutional reports, official correspondence, and unpublished manuscripts, and these insights into the work of Ogot as a leader in curriculum reforms and in building of institutions. Second, 18 participants were chosen and each of them was interviewed semi-structurally. Verbatim copying and recording of such interviews were done with participants consent, and they ensured the aspects of leadership style identification, mentorship and influence on higher education by Ogot, were described in details in such interviews.

Secondary sources were collected in primary texts by Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo* (1967), *Kenya: Politics and Nationalism* (1972) and *Building on the Indigenous: Selected Essays* (1999) and critical articles by Ochieng (2002) among others, Sifuna (1990) and Spear (2004). These references set the thoughts of Ogot in a wider scope of relations to Africanization and reform of higher education in the country of Kenya, which was struggling through with past colonization.

3.5 Data Analysis

The research used the thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006), and it was conducted through a series of six major steps, which are familiarization of the data, coding, generation of themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes, and the report generation. The interview transcripts and archival notes were explored of the frequent concepts under the leadership and intellectual contributions of Ogot. Codes were organized into broader themes such as “decolonization of higher education,” “curriculum innovation,” “institutional leadership,” and “Pan-African academic networks.” These themes were interpreted using the dual theoretical frameworks of critical policy historiography and development theory, which provided insight into how Ogot’s initiatives aligned with Kenya’s post-independence educational and national development goals.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical research standards. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection, and participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the objectives and scope of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and identities were concealed in the final report unless explicit permission for disclosure was granted. Access to archival documents was granted through official authorization, and rigorous internal and external criticism of sources was conducted to ensure authenticity and reliability. The research process maintained scholarly integrity, transparency, and respect for all participants and historical materials.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The role of Professor Bethwell Allan Ogot towards the development of higher education in Kenya in the period between 1964 and 2013 is extensive and has multi-faceted dimensions, as it involves different disciplines, such as curriculum reformation, institution management, and role modeling in scholarship. Influence may be observed in response to post-colonial situation in the learning institutions of Kenya, through his scholarly work and his direct participation in the education policy reform. In this area, we will look at how Ogot impacted higher education in Kenya in the following three aspects, where more emphasis will be given to the areas where he contributed immensely to Kenya, and that is in curriculum revision as well as university governance.

4.1 Curriculum Innovation and African-Centered Pedagogy

One of the most important contributions of Ogot to higher education was probably his advocacy for African-centered curricula. Post-independence Kenya adopted a colonial-type education system in which African history and local knowledge were systematically excluded. During colonization, Ogot, a fervent adherent of the primacy of African thought in historical scholarship, sought to decolonize the curriculum to reflect African traditional thought. His work in the University of Nairobi, and most importantly in the Department of History, is believed to have formed an important turning point in de-colonizing education. One of the former students in an interview said:

“The introduction of the African historical narratives within the curriculum by professor Ogot was revolutionary. He reminded us about the necessity of getting to know our history which should be understood not through the Eurocentric lens. It altered my perception towards my culture and heritage.”
- Former History Student, University of Nairobi.

The introduction of African historical accounts in the curriculum in this case was based upon the vision that universities were supposed to play the role of national development, given the vision of Kenya as an independent and self-governing country (Sifuna, 1990; Ogot, 1999; Adar, 1994). The fact that he encouraged an indigenous system of knowledge, an African outlook on the study of history was also crucial when it comes to his general idea of reforming higher education. Being a professor and the head of the department, Ogot also made the Department of History less exclusive, adhering to the example of African-based history. This change assisted in giving the Kenyan students education that was not only applicable in their lives but also one that related them to their cultures.

“The classes in African centered history taught by Ogot were eye-opener. He advised us to ask questions about the western lens that we had been educated to believe. He also played a big part in developing a curriculum that properly consisted of African experiences and knowledge.” — , Former History Student, University of Nairobi.

4.2 Institutional Leadership and University Governance

Leadership in institutions is another important line along which professor Ogot helped to develop higher education in Kenya. Being a top-notch professor, he contributed hugely in establishing governance systems in academic institutions, especially University of Nairobi and Maseno University. Ogot was instrumental in guiding the Institute of African Studies at the University of Nairobi and shaping the intellectual landscape of the university. His leadership focused on how universities need to address the nation's broader developmental needs, as well as the need to shed the colonial heritage of education that primarily focused on Western-style education (Spear, 2004; Sifuna, 1995; Adar, 1994).

“Ogot’s leadership wasn’t just academic. He saw the bigger picture, that education should be tied to Kenya’s development. At Maseno, he worked tirelessly to decentralize university education, ensuring that even people from remote areas could access quality higher education.” — Former Maseno University Faculty Member.

Besides his work at the University of Nairobi, Ogot was also the Chancellor at Maseno University, marking a landmark experience in the history of higher education in Kenya. His belief in decentralizing university education extended to the transformation of Maseno College into a fully accredited university. His vision to provide more students in the Western and Nyanza regions of Kenya with access to higher education was pivotal in supplementing communities that had previously lacked quality education (Ogot, 2009; Ngethe, et al., 2000).

4.3 Academic Mentorship and Knowledge Production

Professor Ogot’s role in academic mentorship and knowledge production was equally important in shaping the future of higher education in Kenya. Throughout his career, he mentored numerous students, many of whom went on to become renowned historians, educators, and policymakers. His mentorship not only imparted academic skills but also instilled a dedication to African-centered scholarship. As one of his former mentees put it:

“He didn’t just teach history; he made you think critically about the role of history in shaping society. His mentorship pushed us to become better scholars and leaders. It’s no surprise many of us are now influencing education in Africa.” —Former Student and Policy Advisor.

His academic work, such as *The History of the Southern Luo* (1967) and *Kenya: Politics and Nationalism* (1972), positioned him as a key figure in the development of African historiography. The communalism that characterized intellectual activities in Kenya was part of his mission to institutionalize African historiography at the university level (Ogot & Ochieng', 1995; Sifuna, 1995). He also played a significant role in national policy dialogue on education, contributing to higher education policies that aimed to increase access, especially in rural areas (Amutabi, 2002; Ogot, 1999).

The influence of his work was not only among his students. It was his policies which informed the actual policies which informed the landscape in education in Kenya. His legacy to our education in Kenya remains in the work he did on the commissions such as the Kamunge Report.” —Former Education Policy Maker.

4.4 The Broader Impact of Ogot’s Contributions on African Historiography and Education

The influence of the work of Professor Ogot as a researcher in the African historiography and the university learning sector reaches much further than Kenya. His scholarly contributions served a major part in breaking the colonial discourse and in demanding the right of repossessing African history by providing a native point of view. It is possible to observe the weight of his influence in the fact that African history is nowadays researched by modern African historians as not only a historical event but as a factor of national identity construction and participation in social advancement (Falola, 2003; Zeleza, 1993).

“These achievements have influenced an entirely new generation of African historians inspired by the work

of Professor Ogot who has succeeded in convincing a new generation of historians in Africa that history must be used to understand the past as well as use it to build the future. His educational works in reforms have an echo in Africa.” — Historian and Educator.

He made a center-stage contribution in the movement towards supporting a curriculum that would include African history, culture, and intellectual traditions and he argued vehemently that there was need to re-examine the relevance of universities in African society (Sifuna & Sawamura, 2010; Ntarangwi, 2003). Ogot’s contributions to the Africanization of knowledge and his guidance in the reformation of educational policy helped demonstrate the potential power of universities in modernizing the entire country (Spear, 2004; Gichaga, 1992).

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The contributions made by Professor Bethwell Allan Ogot to higher education in Kenya from 1964 to 2013 were progressive. His contributions to curriculum innovation, leadership, mentorship, and educational policy reform have been very instrumental to the educational environment in Kenya. Ogot promoted African-centered curricula, which enabled it to bring about a change in the way such education was taught by introducing its ways of knowing, knowledge systems, and perspectives on Africa through its history. This played a crucial role in decolonizing education to meet Kenya's political and national developmental interests after gaining independence. Ogot, as the leader of the two main universities in Kenya (the University of Nairobi and Maseno University), displayed his vision of the education system powerfully responding to the needs of the country. Outside the academic sphere, Ogot had a profound influence on numerous scholars, helping to create a generation dedicated to African studies. He assisted in developing national policy concerning education, which involved overhauling the educational system to ensure fair access to education in Kenya. This, in turn, shaped the equity of the population through the educational system in Kenya, particularly at the university level, to serve Kenya well. The legacy of Ogot extends to the development of an inclusive and purposeful education system, as well as the establishment of African historiography as an accepted academic discipline. His legacy remains profound in higher education as well as African historiography, acting as a catalyst for generations of scholars who have built a post-colonial intellectual self within Kenya.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several major suggestions are presented that would help carry forward the legacy of Professor Ogot in shaping higher education in Kenya. First, the African-centered curriculum in colleges across the country needs to be strengthened. Although considerable attention has been paid to this, especially in the context of historical change, a greater effort is supposed to be focused on further enhancing the penetration of indigenous knowledge into other areas, including science, literature, and social studies. This would enable education systems to remain a reflector and an enabler of the needs of African societies within the global context. The study on indigenous knowledge systems may be further conducted to provide more information on how African intellectual traditions can be incorporated into modern educational styles.

Second, universities should continue to decentralize education to reach underserved areas. Access to higher education in rural and peripheral regions is crucial for national development, as exemplified by Ogot at Maseno University. Such decentralization is likely to decrease educational inequalities and provide all Kenyans (irrespective of their geographical location) with an opportunity to receive tertiary education. Colleges and universities outside Nairobi ought to be better equipped in terms of financial support and infrastructures so that they can in turn provide quality education as well as nurture local talent.

Third, the Kenyan universities ought to institutionalize the academic mentorship programs. The Ogot mentoring has been one of the most enduring legacies left behind by Ogot in that they have indeed not only influenced careers of people but have also been a major contributor to the intellectual landscape of the country. Colleges should create platforms to have the elder scholars to tutor students particularly those with an interest in African historiography and education. Such mentorship may be what it takes to continue the legacy of Intellectual tradition, and academic rigor which Ogot started to train people that come after him to be ready and robust enough to meet contemporary challenges.

Besides, one should examine what the effects of the Ogot education reforms here in East Africa should be upon other East African regions too. His work on African-centered historiography and his reconstruction of the Kenyan system of higher education has not been carefully examined in terms of a region. A comparative study of other East African nations might also give us distinctive implications on how the role of Ogot can be extended to other nations and how similar intellectual reforms might be implemented in other nations in East Africa.

Additionally, Kenyan universities need to establish additional alliances with African academicians and other universities in the continent and globally. This is one way in which this practice can be applied as to the relevance of intellectual cooperation in the building of African scholarship and this is what Ogot in fact did. It can be suggested that

it is time to strengthen the collaboration with other universities both within Africa and internationally to ensure that the Kenyan scholarship receives more prominence, so that the Kenyan universities remain relevant in the international scholarly research on the problems of African history, culture, and development. The international cooperation also allows students and faculty to become familiar with other cultures via learning hence broadening their intellectual horizons.

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