

THE DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR, PROF. OGOT, IS INTERVIEWED BY PETER MWAURA



A historian who secured respect for African history

Prof. Bethwell Ogot, sketched by
Mr. F. Msangi, Lecturer in the Fine
Arts Department.

Every so often Bethwell A. Ogot and his author wife, Grace, go into hiding in lonely cottages along the Coast or up-country, away from telephones and distraction. In the quiet seclusion of this Never-Never Land the 41-year-old professor, one of the busiest academics on the campus, catches up with his reading while his wife writes.

The work-weary professor finds this vanishing trick refreshing and productive. As an educator, philosopher, author, editor, administrator, professor of history, director of the Institute of African Studies and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (not to mention many other extra-mural positions) he has too many irons in the fire.

An affable, ebullient personage, Ogot is at once the most hard to catch and the most approachable. Students find him folksy, free-and-easy. There are no

formalities for getting into Room A 209 on the second floor of the Administration Block; and the somewhat forbidding atmosphere of the spacious office lined with Africana and plush long tables, disappears the moment the bespectacled, slightly bald professor looks up.

Educated at Ambira School, Maseno Secondary School, Makerere University College (1950-53), Scotland's St. Andrews University (1955-59), and University of London (1960-61), Prof. Ogot has had a varied career as an academic. In St. Andrews he studied history and philosophy, and later mathematics (he taught mathematics at Alliance High School for some years and often today amuses himself by studying mathematical problems).

Before going to the School of Oriental and African Languages, London University, in 1960, he was a

Tutorial Fellow in Makerere; later he returned to Makerere in 1962 as lecturer in history until 1964. He came to Nairobi University College in 1964 as Senior lecturer and chairman of the History Department. In 1968-69 he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts.

The son of a chief in the Gem Location, Central Nyanza, Prof. Ogot has barnstormed into stardom in academic circles and public life. He has been a member of more than 20 learned societies and other professional bodies, and has represented the university in several international conferences related to university policies, finance and co-operation. He is founder and chairman of the East African Publishing House. Author of several books and articles, his name is a household word among the literary circles.

One of his most enterprising books is "A History of the Southern Luo Peoples, 1500-1900, Vol. 1," which was a pioneer, Ph.D.-winning historical work based almost entirely on oral tradition. His other famous book is "A Place to Feel at Home," which he wrote with F. B. Welbourn. Last year it was given prominence when the general manager of the National Housing Corporation, Mr. S.G. Ayany, successfully sued Prof. Ogot in a libel case arising from the publication of the book. Prof. Ogot also planned, edited and wrote the linking passages in "Tom Mboya — Challenge of Nationhood".

At the moment he is in the process of writing "A History of Nairobi, The African Voice in Kenya" (with J. Lonsdale), a series of six books of texts on proto-nationalist movements in East and Central Africa (with Prof. T. O. Ranger), as well as editing a collection of essays on "War and Society in Africa."

He also edits the 'East Africa Journal,' a pragmatic, hard-hitting quality magazine that is the only one of its kind in East Africa (a recent number carried an article by a Mr. Gary Wasserman which described the University of Nairobi as "a lightning rod for criticism or analysis of the political system").

Prof. Ogot is pre-eminent as an educator. Teaching is his first love. A few years ago he became our education system's most outspoken (and cheered)

critic. He criticised everything from the low salaries paid to teachers, textbooks which "created a feeling of inferiority and a sense of helplessness among pupils" to horse-riding in the former Duke of York School, now Lenana School ("I'm not opposed to horse-riding, but when we deny education to children should we buy horses for a few schoolboys?").

He called for a rejection of the Western policy of gradualism, the British-inherited system of educating a "class of gentlemen" and advocated radical reforms and a more revolutionary attitude to the whole problem.

Prof. Ogot still feels "the whole system of education needs a major review". He is now less inclined to engage in public controversy; he likes to work quietly on certain problems rather than engage in polemics.

As Deputy Vice-Chancellor — since November 26 last year — Prof. Ogot has now to assist or deputise for the Vice-Chancellor on all academic matters. In a way his new position merely institutionalises many of the functions in which he was already heavily involved. Apart from being concerned with research, degree matters, academic conferences, staff development, admissions, examinations and chairing the Deans Committee and "the very important" Students Welfare Committee, he is also in charge of academic staff housing ("a very ugly thing") and is the chairman of the disciplinary committee for the majority middle grade non-union staff.

Best known as an African historian, Prof. Ogot was appointed the first Kenyan to the Chair of History in July 1967. He pioneered and championed the movement of the early 60s that changed the traditional view of writing and teaching African history from the standpoint of Europe and Europeans. He made African history, seen from the African perspective, a respectable discipline that is now part of the curriculum of many universities in and outside Africa.

His colleagues in the History Department consider him the best historian in this part of the world. He has generated interest in research and his work has

been an inspiration to many. He is founder member and present president of the Historical Association of Kenya and an honorary fellow of the Ghana Historical Society and the British Institute of History and Archaeology in East Africa. He was also recently appointed by UNESCO to the International Scientific Committee that is to plan and produce a 10-volume General History of Africa.

As a lecturer he is unforgettable. He speaks in measured, almost staccato tones and delivers his lectures in a chatty, hearty, often diverting manner. His penchant to cut through problems, his clarity of mind, make him stand out. No student of history can say Prof. Ogot likes his lectures cold, pure, and very dead. He conforms to the Emersonian saying that the man who can make hard things easy is the educator.

Neither does Prof. Ogot regard his teacher's chair a throne. He believes "we are all students, lecturers are only older students". The best way of being a good teacher, he says, is getting to know the students as human beings and understanding their problems. He rues the fact that the way of life in this university makes it difficult for students and staff to meet socially and informally.

He considers most of the university students "mature people". Many are married. One or two of them are older than he is. One student taught him as a small boy many years ago and entered the university as a mature age student. Prof. Ogot believes if we decide to treat students as grown-ups then we should "go the whole hog". If they make mistakes, it is their mistakes. If they choose the wrong leaders, they alone are responsible. But they are not only worthy of consultation but should be consulted on all issues affecting their welfare.

Students have never before been so well represented in the decision-making bodies of this university. His only criticism is that the students — consider for example the crisis early this year — do not make full use of the existing machinery for consultation before heading pell-mell for their red gowns.

He hopes to extend the concept of student welfare to academic affairs. For instance, he feels there is no reason why a way should not be devised for disciplining members of staff who do not turn up for lectures or come late or ill prepared (lectures are compulsory for students). In the past it used to be assumed that anybody with a degree could teach. But Prof. Ogot believes students are the best judges in this matter.

He deprecates the distance and aloofness that exists between the academics and non-academics, a dichotomy he regards as unhealthy and diabetic. The academics do not have a monopoly of knowledge and Prof. Ogot would like to see senior government officials involved in university seminars, research and discussion groups, and university theorists doing a stint with government ministries, say for a year or so, without necessarily resigning from their jobs.

Aware of the importance of better public relations, Prof. Ogot feels the university should have more Open House days which, if properly planned and organised, could have a great impact in enlightening the public on the activities of the university.

Prof. Ogot wakes up at 6 o'clock every morning and his light green Mercedes is usually to be seen in a deserted parking lot outside the Administration Block up to 6 o'clock in the evening. At home he rejoins his wife, a former nurse and social worker who runs a children's boutique in Lozi Lane, Kimathi Street. He plays with his four children in the evening ("that's the only time I have got") and then he stays up until 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning working.

At first he used to get around socially quite a lot. But because of the pressure of work, he has cut down on parties. But the dashing Professor still enjoys going to nightclubs. During these jiving sessions he fights shy of those nocturnal hypochondriacs and other lacklustre grizzlers who discourse on the state of the world.

A vigorous, goodly figure, Prof. Ogot is surely, in the popular parlance, "what is happening".