

Nationalist Historiography in Kenya: A Look at the Changing Dispositions of B.A. Ogot's Works Since 1963.

Mildred A.J. Ndeda.

ndeda@avu.org

After independence, the post colonial state embarked on political, social and economic development programmes with the different countries opting for ideological approaches to the problem of development. This strongly influenced the development of African historiography since 1960. The different analytic paradigms adopted in the humanities and social sciences by academics in their respective countries, were therefore expressions of the dominant political ideology of the moment. Moreover, they largely reflected the national aspirations of peoples.

The Nationalist conception of the African past was born in circumstances characterised by the struggle for Africa's independence and the maintenance of the colonial order. In East Africa the struggle emerged in Makerere's deport of history, where the African component of the syllabus was too weak, but the colonialists were not ready to reverse this. One of the early historians, B.A. Ogot claims that he migrated to Nairobi due to this resistance.

The nationalist ideological triumph over colonialism in the late 1950 and 1960s are impetus to the development of a forceful nationalist historiography in the period. It was within this nationalist rebellions that Ogot opened the way for rigorous teaching of Africanist history together with its research.

Thus the historical knowledge produced in the decade of the 1960's was conceived basically as a liberating social force as well as a means of strengthening self government. Indeed this explains why Africanist nationalist historians sought in the African past, "Africa Activity", "African adaptation", "African choice" and "African initiative". There was the need to rediscover the African cultural heroes. Political independence of African countries for that matter, created propitious conditions for the production of nationalist history teaching and research acquired a particularly prominent place in the East African universities.

The prevailing nationhood and the enthusiasm to rewrite African History were playing an important national function. Studies in African history in the 1960s were meant to repair the damage caused by years of colonial subjugation. African leaders in power, were portrayed as heroes and architects of a grand plan for Africa. These efforts were used to demonstrate continuity in national history, knitting it with the pre-colonial African past. In essence, the nationalist interpretation of African history, provided African nationalists and the newly independent states with a legitimising ideology. The ideology sought to consolidate the just won independence and inspire the collective response to the need to build the nascent African nations.

Looking back at the 3 decades of production of historical knowledge in East Africa with nostalgia – B.A. Ogot narrates his experience thus:

“We demonstrated that African societies had well organized states engaged in long distance trade with properly organized markets. They proved that Africans had religion, philosophies, military organizations, legal systems, medicines and technologies ... Africa had a rich and significant history.

African history was interpreted in aggressive nationalist terms characterised by refutations of racist prejudices which had hitherto highlighted African passivity. The post independence discourses gave prominence to the African militiamen.

In this paper we would like to analyse the post independence production of history, a look at the works of one such nationalist scholar whose life has spanned the entire period will be most appropriate. I will look at all his works and analyse his past and current dispositions by looking at all scholarly books and articles he has produced overtime. His latest book will be quite significant in aiding the analysis establishing whether he has maintained the academic disposition that went through stiff opposition in the 1970s or like J.M.Lonsdale he has constantly updated his disposition.

It has been stated that his approach to historical studies was largely liberal emphasizing the need for facts to speak, the need to produce objective history based on authentic African historical sources. Thus the empiricist approach dominated his discourse and at Nairobi. What is his current discourse?