

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Autobiography in Kenyan History: A Critique

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2t5970jd>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 14(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Okoth, P. Godfrey

Publication Date

1985

DOI

10.5070/F7142017045

Copyright Information

Copyright 1985 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN KENYAN HISTORY: A CRITIQUE

by

P. Godfrey Okoth

When the Chair of the Department of History at Kenyatta University College wrote his "Autobiography in Kenyan History," Professor William R. Ochieng touched on a very critical issue in that country's post-colonial politics. Indeed, over the years, there have been a lot of lively debates among Kenyan intellectuals at the University of Nairobi and at Kenyatta University College concerning the role of certain individuals in the struggle for Kenya's independence. Suffice it to note that these debates have for the main been confined within Kenya's national boundaries. Perhaps it is time to internationalize the debate. Perhaps too, that is the reason why Dr. Ochieng has decided to submit his paper for publication in Ufahamu which because of its broad readership, will surely provide a forum in which the debate will continue.

The title of Ochieng's paper falls within the confines of Africanist history. It could be autobiography in the history of any part of the African continent, and the fundamental questions raised in his paper would likely remain the same as we shall shortly see. That it is "Autobiography in Kenyan History," suggests that Kenya is an appropriate laboratory for testing hypothetical questions pertaining to the discipline which is often neglected by researchers of African history.

The stories of individuals' lives as they constitute a society's history definitely deserve a lot of scrutiny because they can illuminate some of the factors that have affected historical events. In assessing the importance of an individual's role in society, Ochieng raises several important questions which must be addressed:

"Is there a doubt, or problem, in his [one's] past which he [one] must explain? Is he [one] simply digging a niche of permanence in history? Is he [one] a megalomaniac? Or is he [one] truly concerned that he [one] is a great man [person] and therefore worthy of emulation?"

Citing one source that describes history as "the biography of great men," he further poses these other important questions:

"What, however, is greatness? How are we to recognize it? Is a man [person] great simply because he [or she] thinks he [she] is? Is the sense of greatness a mere

immediate intuition? Or is it the conclusion of an argument?... Are autobiographers dreamers who failed to make possible their day dreams?... Should he [the historian] treat autobiographies as authentic sources of history?... Are autobiographers historians in their own right?"

It is these interesting questions that Ochieng tries to examine in respect to the role of individual authors both in the struggle for Kenya's political independence, and the current one against neo-colonialism in that country. All in all, he analyses the contribution of eight leading personalities based upon what they claim to have done. The personalities are: Harry Thuku, Bildad Kaggia, Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, James Beauttah, Gucu Gikoyo, Tom Mboya, Oginga Odinga, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

THE CRITIQUE PROPER

How does Ochieng go about his task? In the introduction of his paper he gives the impression that he was going to write about the validity of applying autobiography as an historical document, the methodological problems inherent in its application, etc., using Kenyan history as a case-study. After several pages of introductory material, he proceeds to devote full attention not on this subject, but rather on the specific role of autobiographers in Kenyan history.

The body of the paper focuses on the role of these individuals in the nationalist movement, and the relative merits of their version of nationalism *vis-a-vis* the others. Since this appears to be the real reason why he has written the paper, and not the academic question of autobiography, then perhaps much of the first three pages is either irrelevant, or requires precasting.

In trying to define what history should be, Ochieng subscribes to what might be termed "bourgeois history;" as is evidenced in the kind of sources he cites. Suffice it to point out that there are historians who write history from the point of view of those who come to lead the movements, those who wield power, etc., and there are those who write history from the point of view of those on whose backs the rulers rode, those who handled the spears, the matchets, and who today are the down-trodden, or dead. In other words, there is history of the ruling classes which Ochieng, as a liberal scholar subscribes to, and there is a people's history which Temu and Swai subscribe to.¹ We know that the modern history of Africa is the history of struggle, a history of resistance against the forces of oppression and exploitation. We also know that many of the authentic leaders of revolutionary

movements do not survive; they either die during the struggle for liberation, or are eliminated by opportunists during the period of consolidation.

Underneath the intellectual squabbles between the Ngugi Wa Thiong'o camp and the Ochieng camp in interpreting Kenyan history, is the deep ideological issue and commitment. Ngugi, Maina Wa Kinyatti, and other patriotic Kenyan intellectuals, are for a people's history of Kenya, while Ochieng seems to cherish a "philosopher-king" history of Kenya, where the so-called great men have silenced the voices of the popular masses of the people through repressive state machinery.

In his discussion of nationalism, Ochieng seems to merely articulate an elaborate apology in support of Tom Mboya, arguing that Mboya's "practical nationalism" more nearly approaches the necessary balance between idealism and pragmatism. Ochieng defines a nationalist as "a member of a political party or group advocating independence or a strong national government." This is a rather disturbing definition. The crucial question then is: does this therefore necessarily mean that if an individual advocates a strong, national government which does not represent the interests of the workers and peasants, and without advocating national independence, then the said individual is still a nationalist? I do not subscribe to this view. Indeed Mboya himself seems to fit in this category of political leaders, for he does not seem to have advocated anything other than a pro-western, neo-colonial capitalist path of development. Because the author is not systematic in his argument (typical of his style of writing),² the logic of it becomes quite muddled. Instead of beginning with the definition and using it as a tool for examining the nationalism of each individual, he strays off into emotional American jargon. For instance, we are told that Mboya was "cool" and "confident", "cosmopolitan, urbane, articulate and self-assured," etc. Do these "qualities" have anything to do with the advocacy of political, social or economic independence, or a strong national government for that matter? Similarly, TV appearances do not necessarily transform one into a nationalist, as Ochieng seems to believe.

Ochieng further suggests that since Mboya was chosen to be the chairman of the All-Africa People's Conference, that this therefore gave him some claim as the true nationalist. Nationalism is not a certificate one acquires in conferences whether in Accra or elsewhere. Continuing with his open support for Mboya, Ochieng claims that unlike the other autobiographers, Mboya had a positive vision of post-independence Kenya, and that this entitled him to a greater claim to Kenyan nationalism. But what was this vision? It was a neo-colonial Kenya, especially under U.S. patronage. The U.S. used Mboya, much as Mboya himself used his U.S.

connection to his own advantage. To further its imperialistic foreign policy objectives, the U.S. took advantage of such subjective conditions as those created by opportunists like Mboya who collaborated with international capitalism by promoting compradorial tendencies to the chagrin of militant nationalists (like Oginga Odinga, Bildad Kaggia, Dedan Kimathi, etc.) who represented the popular will of the people, and stood for genuine independence in Kenya. Mboya was the instrument of U.S. policy in Kenya during the decade preceding independence and immediately thereafter, which had far reaching consequences for the subsequent decades. This is evidenced by Kenya's current importance in U.S.-Africa policy, with the U.S. naval base in Mombasa in its favor, the atrocities of U.S. marines in Mombasa, the importation of toxic yellow corn from the U.S. by the neo-colonial regime in that so-called Nyayoland, and the spread of decadent American culture which has of late manifested itself in the spread in Kenya of the deadly American disease called AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

Still on the issue of a clear vision for a country, we must note that most national heroes have limited and perhaps often non-existent positive visions for the future of their particular countries. To broaden the argument, we can take examples from Latin America to reinforce the above statement: the cases of Sandino, Bolivar, Francisco Madera, Pancho Villa, and to a certain extent even Fidel Castro during the initial stages of the Cuban revolution. Furthermore, it would be laughable to argue the Ochieng style, that for instance, a self-made man, like Pinochet who does have a "positive" vision for Chile, is anything more than a self-serving, neo-colonial tyrant.

Not only is Ochieng's biased support of Mboya deplorable, but also his critiques of Thuku, Odinga, Ngugi, etc. In addition to his claim that these other autobiographers did not have any positive conception of a post-independence Kenya, Ochieng seems to suggest that their "distortions" of the truth in some way diminishes their nationalism. The only time he appears to be discussing the question of autobiography and the need to be critical, is when the author, either deliberately or for reasons best known to himself alone, discredits one or a number of Mboya's adversaries. His approach does not only fall short of serious scholarship, but it also adds virtually nothing to our understanding or interpretation of modern revolutionary nationalism. The kind of nationalism he articulates could best be described as bourgeois nationalism, and at worst, backward.

The author dismisses the militant camp of Mau Mau as comprising simple-minded men who did not understand the dynamics of the political arena. Although this notion is

attributed to another source as a kind of cover-up, Ochieng shares this belief himself. Does this mean that these men were not nationalists, simply because they were not "sophisticated" in politics, or because they did not speak English with a proper British accent, or because they were "uneducated"? In any case, none of these criticisms has anything to do with nationalism. Ochieng's notion of education seems to be the Eurocentric kind of education that was introduced in Africa by the colonial oppressors, the kind of education Walter Rodney calls: "Education for Underdevelopment."⁴ Ochieng seems to disregard the historical fact that African education, or indigenous education, thrived in African societies long before the arrival of the racist, irrelevant and exploitative western capitalist education.

The point being made here, is that western education is not the prerequisite for one to qualify as a nationalist, as Ochieng would like us to believe. To concretize this point, let us take an example from the Caribbean, again to broaden the argument. Marcus Garvey, born in Jamaica in 1887, left formal school at the 4th grade and began a printing apprenticeship, an occupation that he envisaged he would use in several forms -- as printer, editor, and publisher -- to support himself for most of the 53 years he lived. After only grade four, as Professor Robert Hill has observed:

"Marcus Garvey was the first twentieth-century leader who successfully spoke out for black pride... He symbolized the pride in black roots and black self-support. Forty years before the phrase was coined, Garvey personified the concept of 'black is beautiful' ... Because of his publishing skill, personal charisma, and impressive message, Marcus Garvey began to emerge as a black leader in Harlem. He published his newspaper, The Negro World, and began his movement for freedom for black Africa. It wasn't long before Garvey was viewed as the first central figure for black nationalism in the twentieth century."⁶

From the above quotation, it would therefore appear that there are more important factors that can explain a true nationalist. These are inter alia, personal charisma, personal enigma, popular appeal and mission, etc.

Ochieng's view of Mau Mau is regrettable. He claims that "the Mau Mau autobiographies are a poor guide as to what the Mau Mau movement was all about." He sees Mau Mau from only one angle -- the peasantry who together with the forest fighters, detainees and the autobiographers themselves, "were drawn from the uneducated country folk." He labels the freedom fighters as having fought "to restore their traditional, tribal way of life." It is shameful to see an

African professor of African history writing in 1985 using the very same racist anthropological terminologies "traditional", "tribal", which colonial anthropologists used to belittle Africans. It is clear from the foregoing that Ochieng's characterization of Mau Mau belongs to what Maina Wa Kinyatti has rightly called "The Imperialist and Christian School of Thought." Ochieng has been in the forefront in distorting the fundamental aims of Mau Mau, denying the movement its national character. He falls within the group of Kenyan intellectuals who regard Mau Mau as "a primitive Gikuyu movement, a Gikuyu chauvinist movement, Gikuyu nationalism as opposed to Kenyan nationalism."⁸

At this juncture, the present writer wishes to clarify two important issues: first, Mau Mau was not just a peasant revolt as Ochieng asserts. Second, Mau Mau was not only a national movement as Maina Wa Kinyatti has ably proven, it was also an international movement.

Professor B.A. Ogot (who has for a long time been Ochieng's own academic mentor) has convincingly argued that in fact, in Kenya there were several revolutions simultaneously occurring, and I concur with him. Ogot identifies four major revolutions thus:

"[First,] there was the rise of the petty bourgeois -- the products of 'the improvement associations' of the 1920s and 1930s -- who wanted more political power and more wealth, but in a colonial situation ... [Second,] there was also the emerging elite ... who wanted power in an independent Kenya... [Third,] there was the peasant's revolution represented by the forest fighters and [fourth, there was] the worker's revolution championed by the trade unionists."

Clearly Mau Mau was not just a peasant revolt as Ochieng would like us to believe. It was a radical anti-colonial movement.

The second point that needs elaboration here is that Mau Mau even transcended Kenya's national boundaries, and was not a mere Kikuyu affair as he regards it. We shall cite two cases as concrete evidence. First, the work of Walter Rodney has confirmed that Mau Mau was an anti-colonial phenomenon of international significance; that Mau Mau was a talking point among nationalists as far afield as Guyana; that Mau Mau was most intense in the East African countries immediately adjacent to Kenya.¹⁰ Rodney indicated that according to the available material, there is reason for developing research on Mau Mau in Tanganyika in three major ways: first, there was an overspill of Kenyan Mau Mau activities into contiguous areas of Tanganyika; second, the colonial regime employed

personnel from Tanganyika in the suppression of mau Mau; and third, the unfolding of events in Kenya affected British policy concerning Tanganyika.¹¹

The second point about the internationality of Mau Mau is based on the present writer's on-going research.¹² The evidence so far gathered clearly demonstrates that the crisis produced by Mau mau provided a diplomatic bell weather for the United States' subsequent relations not only with Kenya, but also with the other emerging independent African states. Mau Mau being a freedom movement, had an indelible impact on the U.S., to the extent of influencing its foreign policy toward all of Africa.

The U.S. policy toward Kenya during the decade preceding independence reflected the new racial consciousness within the U.S. itself, where the administration was faced with similar problems of addressing its own newly assertive black population. Mau Mau's impact on black American consciousness is also evidenced by the utilization of the name by at least one prominent black nationalist group in the 1960s, and by the proliferation of the personal names 'Jomo' and 'Kenyatta' among those who felt it necessary to change their 'slave-names'.¹³

In essence therefore, Mau Mau qualifies as a case-study in American perception of African nationalism for two important reasons: first, other contemporary nationalist movements in Africa like the Convention People's Party (CPP) in Ghana, the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in Nigeria, the Uganda National Congress (UNC) in Uganda, etc., went unnoticed in the U.S. because they were essentially constitutional expressions of African nationalism. In other words, they articulated African aspirations through the Western model based on political parties, election and Parliament. Mau Mau in contrast, departed from this Western model. Mau Mau was a radical and dramatic movement that advocated armed struggle as the means to attain freedom from colonialism. It is in this respect that it attracted particular attention on a global scale. It polarized American perceptions of Africa and the then prevailing conservative and racist perception of any black militancy was transformed with the unfolding of the movement and its repression in colonial Kenya. With this followed widespread reports in the U.S. to pressure American policy makers to take the position of encouraging self-determination for African colonies. However, this policy merely facilitated the replacement of Britain by the U.S. in Kenya and other former colonies in a neo-colonial capacity, the subject of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Second, because of its vigor and tenacity, Mau Mau similarly made Americans of liberal persuasion recognize it. In brief, Mau Mau galvanized American perception of Africa, hence its significance in U.S.-Africa relations during the decade preceding independence.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although Ochieng himself concedes in the second last sentence of his conclusion that it is "legitimate to hang a fellow on his own evidence," the purpose of this rebuttal has not been to do that to him or to anyone else discussed in his paper. Rather, the intent of this rebuttal has been to contribute to a lively intellectual debate through correct interpretation of historical events and/or issues, and not to pass biased judgments.

Ochieng began his paper well by raising pertinent questions regarding the role of autobiography in Kenyan history. Unfortunately his handling of the subject has been quite problematic in terms of interpretation, relevance, consistence, objectivity, facts, etc. The conclusion like the introduction, has almost nothing to do with the body of the paper.

The real question of autobiography was hardly addressed, except occasionally when he resorted to contradictions and outright emotional expressions especially concerning Mboya's opponents. For instance, he criticizes Odinga for being too honest, in fact too naive, and for not being a Machiavelli. He is so harsh on Thuku, and surprisingly (or maybe not surprisingly), he does not even mention Kenyatta's Suffering Without Bitterness. Is this part of Ochieng's tactic of vindicating certain political culprits so as to win favor with the present ruling clique which is in fact a "Kenyatta Succession"?

Suffice it to say that autobiography as a source of history has very limited value. This is for the simple reason that autobiography is self-serving. The autobiographer is almost always trying to justify his or her own role in a given period of history. Autobiography must therefore be used with great care in the reconstruction of any history -- not just African history.

Autobiographies hardly agree on any one single historical event. The case of world war two is very revealing. For instance, Winston Churchill of Britain, Charles de Gaulle of France and Dwight Eisenhower of the U.S., the three men who were on the same side during the war, have accounts that differ fundamentally on many of the key issues of the war. De

Gaulle for one denies virtually everything Churchill says about efforts by the allied forces to liberate France.

In Africa, there are two interesting cases: the autobiography of Nkrumah, Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah and that of Ras Makonnen, Pan-Africanism from Within. Both autobiographies deal with the pan-African movement, but they do not present identical views.

Most African autobiographies are ghost-written. In other words, they are not written by the Africans themselves. For instance, Thuku's autobiography was in fact written by Dr. King and he (Thuku) merely signed it. There are many other examples that can be cited. Whatever the example, this practice is a great disservice to African history, because it is often done by foreigners who do not have Africa's interest at heart; they simply use Africa to earn a living by producing sub-standard works.

In corollary to the above remarks, it can also be said that autobiography in Kenya is of very little value because almost all the autobiographies (perhaps with the exception of Thuku's), were written at the initial stage of independence politics. Those who did this wanted to become famous overnight. The same criticism applies to all other autobiographers in the continent. Nkrumah and Sekou Toure wrote their autobiographies as soon as they got into power, apparently as publicity to inform the whole world that they had removed imperialist influence in their countries. If Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, Kenyatta, Kariuki, etc., had lived for more years and written their autobiographies later after a considerable length of time in political, governmental, economic and other experiences, perhaps their autobiographies would have been a lot more valid tool for researchers.

Ochieng's notion of nationalism and his interpretation of Mau Mau have been dealt with to some extent in the body of this paper. However, suffice it to only stress that in the struggle for independence in Kenya, as in other African colonies, nobody had a clear vision for his/her country. This is for the simple reason that Africans were not allowed to participate in politics. How could the colonial regime that was determined to maintain the status quo simultaneously allow itself to be dislodged by forces that were fighting it? On the African continent nobody had a blue print of what was to be done once independence had come by; not even in the new radical independent countries of southern Africa. The primary task was to eliminate the colonial state before undertaking socialist reconstruction.

Mboya, whom Ochieng claims was the only man who had a clear vision of a Kenyan society after independence was

perhaps the most uninformed man on Kenyan politics. The only genuine credit Mboya may claim is that he was the only Jaluo "leader" who was acceptable to the ruling majority of the Kikuyu people, Using the model pertaining to the so-called western education, Mboya had very little formal education -- which western education we have dismissed as having anything to do with a true African nationalist. Mboya was handpicked by external forces to replace Kenyatta, and in the process of grooming him for that purpose, he was awarded a scholarship to study at Ruskin College. This college it must be clearly understood, does not award degrees; it has no examinations administered; it is a mere brainwashing center for academic failures who now took cover in trade unionism.¹⁴ The best the Mboyas did at Ruskin College was to attend elementary lectures and to visit labor union centers. Indeed the so-called diploma Mboya received was a mere certificate of attendance.¹⁵ He was too young, too inexperienced, too uneducated both in western education and in African (indigenous) education, a sell out, indeed a tragedy to Africa. As a puppet of U.S. imperialism, Mboya served well U.S. interests in the region and when he no longer served this purpose, he was conveniently disposed of by the CIA. He was not killed by the Kikuyu people as is sometimes mistakenly believed -- there was no evidence to this allegation. So much for a "heroic" character who in the eyes of Ochieng deserves praise.

FOOTNOTES

¹ A. Temu and B. Swai, Historians and Africanist History: A Critique (London: Zed Press, 1981).

² See for instance, his so-called "Undercivilization in Black Africa." Kenya Historical Review, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1974.

³ For details on this subject, see P.G. Okoth, "U.S. Foreign Polity Toward Kenya 1952-1960." Ufahamu, Vol. XIV, No. 1, 1984, pp. 33-55.

⁴ See W. Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, Revised paperback edition, 1981), pp. 238-261.

⁵ For details, see for instance, P.G. Okoth, "Some Aspects of Missionary Education in Uganda." Journal of Religion in Africa (forthcoming). J. Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya (London: Secker and Warburg, 1959), pp. 98-129.

⁶ Much of the new exploration of the Garvey movement is conducted at UCLA in the largest single project devoted to the life and work of Marcus Garvey.

⁷Maina Wa Kinyatti, "Mau Mau: The Peak of African Political Organization and Struggle for Liberation in Colonial Kenya." Ufahamu, Vol. XII, No. 3, 1983, p. 110.

⁸Ibid., p. 111.

⁹B.A. Ogot, "Kenya Under the British, 1895 to 1963." In B.A. Ogot (ed), Zamani: A Survey of East African History (Nairobi: East Africa Publishing House, New edition, 1974), pp. 288-289.

¹⁰W. Rodney, "A Note on Mau Mau in Tanganyika Territory." Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the Historical Association of Kenya, Highridge Teachers' College, August 24-26, 1973.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²The present writer's own on-going research centers around the determinants of U.S. foreign policy toward Kenya, a portion of which was published in Ufahamu, Vol. XIV, No. 1, 1984, pp. 33-35.

¹³Suffice it to note that this has been a reflection of their association of the name Jomo Kenyatta with Mau Mau -- whether this association was real or imagined is beside the point.

¹⁴Personal communication with Professor B.I. Obichere, professor of African History at UCLA, May 7, 1985, in his office. He was himself studying for his D.Phil. at Oxford University at more or less the same time Mboya was at Ruskin College.

¹⁵As in footnote 14 above.