

**Book Review** A critical look at 'History of Nairobi 1899-2022'

# Book traces origins of Nairobi, former 'green city in the sun'

**Bethwell Ogot and Madara Ogot release their latest tale of a local city**

BY TOM ODHIAMBO

In many parts of the world, a city worth its name would have a holder or carrier or archivist of its memory. Such an individual keeps and (re-)tells the story. Nairobi doesn't seem to entertain such dreams. Once known as the 'green city in the sun', for the greenery that defined its swampy life, today Nairobi wallows in dirt, all green spaces having ceded ground to an inchoate jungle of concrete. Office blocks, apartments, kiosks and all manner of constructions compete to erase jacarandas, loquats, flame trees and acacias, among others.

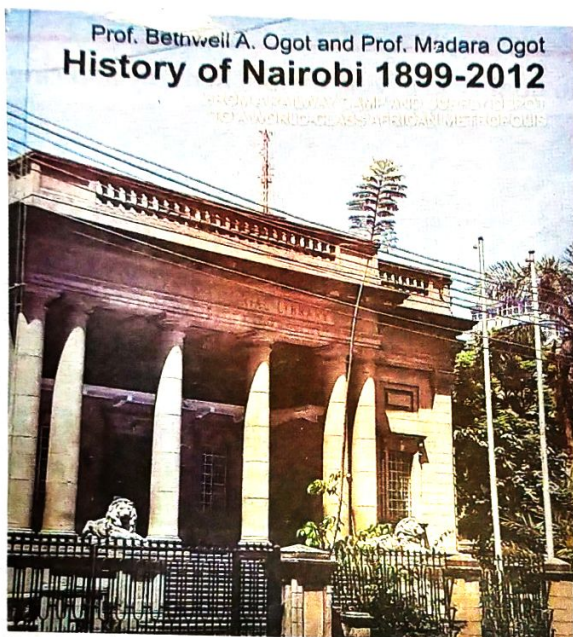
Nairobi was once a swamp. It was actually an accidental town. The British railway builders sought to establish a camp as they to lay the railway to Uganda. More than 300 miles from Mombasa, they found Nairobi acceptable. But the railway depot had a good climate and there was ample supply of fresh produce from the local communities that traded across one of the rivers crisscrossing the place – the Kikuyu and Maasai. And so the future city began humbly as a mere stopover.

This camp, today an African metropolis, is what Bethwell Ogot and Madara Ogot celebrate in their voluminous new book, *History of Nairobi 1899-2022: From a Railway Camp and supply Depot to a World-class African Metropolis* (Anyanje Press, 2020).

*History of Nairobi 1899-2022* comes after the one on Kisumu, in the 'History of Kenyan Cities and Towns Series' that the two authors are writing. But this 857-pages volume is the most detailed study or historical account of any Kenyan town. For a country with old, pre-colonial towns such as Mombasa, Lamu and Malindi, and several urban centres established at the beginning and during colonial rule, it is more than surprising that many of these towns and centres do not have proper records of their existence. *History of Nairobi 1899-2022* breaks new grounds on archiving the life and times of our urban centres.

But how does one write a book on Nairobi without attempting to record every facet of its life or without leaving out many interesting aspects of its identity? Does one simply do the chronological take, from the beginning to now (when the book is printed) or does the writer record events, people, places, the environment etc, hoping that the story of the city will somehow form itself? The authors of *History of Nairobi 1899-2022* use multiple methods to write about Nairobi. Which is why they have six major sections.

Even then, keener observers of Nairobi will realise that what is recorded in these pages is simply an invitation to others – writers, archivists, cartogra-



phers, town planners, readers etc – to investigate and write more about this former green city in the sun. Also, these divisions mean one can choose which parts to read, without necessarily having to follow the text chronologically.

The first section looks at the establishment of Nairobi as a railway camp that later became a frontier town, between 1899 and 1920. Here one gets to know how the town was actually established – what were the first buildings; how was the town demarcated; the divisions of settlement areas; the town's business; who settled here from the beginning; its progression into a municipality; who it served (settlers, workers, visitors such as hunting safaris etc).

Part two of the book deals with its proper colonial history, between 1920 and 1945.

## Railway

It details its politics and governance. Remember the building of the railway was being done by a private company – Imperial British East Africa Company. So, how did this commercial venture trigger colonial incursion into what would later become the Kenya colony? The details in this chapter reveal how the relationship between what were deemed private British business interests and the Empire builders created a colony out of the region.

But to run a colony one needed money. To make money and generate revenues for the government, one needed labour and resources to exploit. Africans and Asians provided the labour as well as market for the goods and services. Thus, this section also discusses the economics, politics, the rise of trade unions, city planning, cultural life and such other activities that relate to urbanisation.

challenge the status quo – Pinto and Mboya – symbolising a rise of political disorder. Nairobi remains the national capital city and the heart of economic progress. But socio-economic and political divides emerge.

This is why the authors describe the years between 1973 and 1992 as times of 'political decay and state in crisis'. Again, the Ogots see Nairobi through the lens of its politics, governance, manufacturing, general economy, its emergence as an 'international centre', hosting global organisations and events, home to an international airport when JKIA was inaugurated in 1978, among other factors. This is the Nairobi in which the University of Nairobi was inaugurated on December 30, 1970. But one notes that Nairobi was decaying with garbage all over the city, chaos in the transport sector, lack of housing and rise of unplanned neighbourhoods etc. This is the Nairobi of the gated communities sharing boundaries with slums.

'Multiparty Democracy and a City on the Mend' is how the Ogots describe the years between 1992 and 2012. Again, the authors continue to suggest that the life of the city could not be separated from the nation's politics. Indeed, the call for multiparty politics and return of democracy were largely made in Nairobi, which is where the battle for the soul of the country have generally been fought. These battles eventually lead to the opening up of the political landscape. Multiparty elections happen in 1992. Ten years later President Moi retires and the opposition, led by Mwai Kibaki, takes over government.

The Nairobi of the post-2000s is a city that continues to host global organisations; sees a rise in foreign investments; is globally connected and thus becomes collateral victim of global terrorism pitting Euro-Americans against extremists, mostly from the Middle East and Asia. This is a Nairobi that is struggling to renew itself despite the growth in informal settlements, rise in population and unemployment. The authors end with a note detailing the end of the City Council of Nairobi and the rise of Nairobi County.

The Nairobi of today is caught between politicians and bureaucrats. One can only wait to see what kind of Nairobi will emerge in the end – an industrialising, clean, working Nairobi wished for by Nairobi Metropolitan Services team, or the 'life-as-usual' Nairobi County government-led one, with the congested termini, dirty markets, unplanned buildings etc. One wishes that leaders of NMS and the county government could get a copy of *History of Nairobi 1899-2022: From a Railway Camp and supply Depot to a World-class African Metropolis*, to help them think through how to actually keep and grow the city into a real 'world-class African metropolis'.

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## Self-publishing not for the faint-hearted

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dia and elsewhere, there are all sorts of prescriptions about what the seemingly recalcitrant public should read.

Poignantly, interspersed with these appeals to the public to purchase the self-published works, there is always the perennial whining about Kenyans being guilty of not buying and reading books for pleasure.

There is agreement, of course, that this same purportedly non-reading public buys educational books – particularly set books and prescribed texts – that form the backbone of the local publishing industry. The trouble, it is alleged, is that people stop reading as soon as they leave school.

This is hardly true, considering the fact that local and international newspapers and magazines still have fairly decent circulation figures, even in the age of the Internet. And that each copy sold, we're authoritatively told, is read by numerous people before finally ending up with the meat wrappers.

Then there is the fact that there is hardly any home in Kenya without a bible, a Quran, and a wide range of other religious literature that is dutifully and regularly read throughout the week.

Also, there is the irrefutable fact that second-hand booksellers in the country have for ages done brisk business peddling pocket-friendly copies of paperback versions of works by the world's most popular authors.

Which Kenyan teenager, for instance, has not gone through several Mills and Boon titles in their short lifetimes? And how many Kenyans of a certain educational level have not at one point or the other enjoyed the titillating works of such best-selling authors as John Grisham, Wilbur Smith, Dan Brown, John Le Carré, Danielle Steele, Frederick Forsyth and others?

And all for a little pocket change, courtesy of the street-corner second-hand book dealers. And that is beside the fact that some of the top-selling authors in Kenya, among them David Maituli and John Kiriamiti, have in the past hit the book market with a bang. And mind you, their extremely popular titles were not and could never have become set books; not with their subject matters, which were certainly not written for the prudish.

Take-home message here? Kenyans will not read anything, but will certainly buy reasonably priced quality publications that appeal to them, notably through light and entertaining contents that are pleasurable to read. Ask any roadside second-hand book seller in your locality.

As for the so-called literary writings so lauded by Academia and beloved of our starry-eyed, Western-influenced authors, it appears that Kenyan readers are happy to have done away with their heavy-going contents as soon as they left school.

After all, who wants to be bombarded with all sorts of subjective and suffocating rhetoric every time they open a book? And pray, who needs the sort of controversies drummed up by donor-funded Western outfits that tend to style themselves as the world's moral, political and cultural police?

Finally, who really needs all sorts of slogans and clichés in every page of a purportedly fictional work that they bought to read for pleasure?

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