

The Kenyan Writer, Grace Ogot

Beware And Be Warned

Helen Fallon

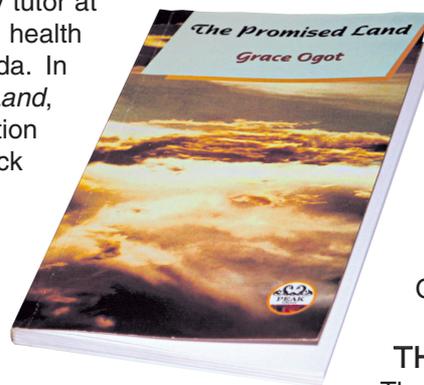
Grace Ogot was born Emily Akinyi in 1930 in the Nyanza district of Kenya. Her father, an Anglican, taught at a local missionary school. He often read stories from the bible to the young Emily, while her grandmother, who retained the faith of her ancestors, told her stories and legends of the Luo people. Both influenced her writing.

After training as a nurse in Uganda and England, Grace worked for a time as a midwifery tutor at a mission hospital and in the student health office at Makerere University in Uganda. In 1966 she published *The Promised Land*, making her one of Kenya's first generation of published writers and the first black female Kenyan novelist.

ADVICE IGNORED

The Promised Land is a cautionary folk-tale which explores the decline of traditional African social values and customs in postcolonial times (Kenya was a British colony until 1963). Newly-married Ochola hears how good life is for his fellow countrymen who have emigrated to neighbouring Tanganyika (now Tanzania).

He decides to leave his ancestral home, which he sees as a "tired land which had nourished maize and millet crops since time immemorial. The exhausted soil had no rest from the wretched little hoes that scratched its surface only to make it easier for the floods to sweep up the good soil."



His family and his wife Nyapol are dismayed at his decision. Nyapol feels they have sufficient for their needs and that leaving their families for a new country is wrong.

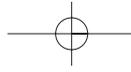
The elders echo her feelings. "But what drives you away from here? You've enough land at the moment and when your father sleeps, being his first son, you'll inherit all of his as well. It is better for a man to live with his relatives."

Not persuaded, Ochola sells his land and crops and purchases two tickets for the steamer which takes them across Lake Victoria to Tanganyika. Ochola and Nyapol are welcomed by other Luo people who help them set up home and soon they have the wealth that Ochola had yearned for and dreamt about.

THINGS FALL APART

Then Ochola encounters a hostile neighbour. "You're another Luo, aren't you? And you've come to settle like the rest of them? But who put it into your head that this is a no man's land, for all Luo people to come and settle as they please. You come like masters to rob us of our land." The neighbour, a medicine-man, sets a spell on Ochola who is stricken by an inexplicable illness. Warts appear all over his body, turning him into a "half-man, half animal".

Other traditional medicine-men are called in to cure the illness but to no avail. Ochola's and Nyapol's home is suddenly filled with a strange quietness. "Not



a peaceful quietness, a kind of terror: a panic that grips a drowning man whose salvation is snatched away by a powerful wave. No one wanted to talk; even the children were quiet and did not cry. At sunset when Nyapol took food to her husband, he avoided her eyes to hide his grief.”

In desperation, Ochola’s brother, who has come from Kenya in response to word of his brother’s illness, obeys the message sent by their father. “If the local medicine fails to cure Ochola, take him to the white man’s hospital. Perhaps the white man, with his wisdom, can help where our people have failed.”

Doctor Thomson, a missionary, admits Ochola to the isolation ward, but despite his western education, his medical journals and books on tropical diseases, he can find nothing to explain Ochola’s terrible illness.

A local nurse, Elizabeth, tells Doctor Thomson that Ochola has been bewitched and will not be cured with Western medicine. “They say this man is a Luo who migrated here. He became rich in a very short time and became famous. His neighbours resented this, and one of them bewitched him to prove that Tanganyika medicine is stronger than Luo’s... Let him go back to his own people. They may be able to help him.”

PARADISE LOST

Eventually the doctor, unable to cure Ochola, allows him to leave the hospital. Manugu, a local medicine man, cures Ochola but warns him that he must leave Tanganyika and return home immediately before another calamity befalls him.

Initially Ochola is reluctant to leave behind the farm and the wealth he has accumulated and to return empty-handed to his people. “Let me at least prepare a feast for all my Luo friends so that they may eat and enjoy all these riches before I go. Don’t make me throw away all I have worked for.” But Manugu persuades him he must leave that very night.

Ochola returns penniless to the land of his birth and to his own people.



Grace Ogot has had a busy life. As well as being a prolific writer, she has been a nurse, a member of the Kenyan parliament, a government minister and a representative to the United Nations. *The Promised Land*, published in 1966, was her first novel.

(Photo: Courtesy MSU)

In 1968 Ogot published a collection of short stories, *Land Without Thunder*. In an interview, she indicated how she perceives the role of tradition in modern African culture. “Western education should only add new ideas to the old, blending with what makes a man what he is. A person’s background is extremely important.”

She has written stories in Luo. “It is our duty to adult literate Kenyans to have works of literature in their mother tongue, not just books on how to plant onions.”

Ogot married a fellow Luo and is the mother of four children. She was a founding member and the first president of the Writers’ Association of Kenya and has served as a member of parliament and as an Assistant Minister in the Ministry of Culture and Social Services. ■

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She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone.
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