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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** To reawaken the consciousness of all Africans to the implications of the metaphysical trajectory of time in Africa, which John S. Mbiti presents, in relation to personal and collective human development in Africa.

**Methodology:** This work is expository, critical, and evaluative in its methodology.

**Findings:** In Western thought, there is mathematical and linear time, as dominant ideas. Dominant because some philosophers, in particular Bergson, have their notion of time as mainly inclined to be lived, organic. It is linear time in the sense that, it is an imagined line through which the distant past, present and infinite future is figured. Linear time as such does not exist, but it is a metaphysical notion existing in our minds. Linear time is unidirectional and mathematical. In Africa, African Philosophy is still fledgling. That is, it is not fully developed and documented. Consequently, even the field of "time" lacks a robust written commentary.

**Unique Contribution to theory, practice and policy (recommendation):** Within the traditional African milieu, according to Mbiti, time is a two dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. This is contrary to the linear time concept in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and future. This work is expository, analytical and critical in its methodology. The first part of the discussion is concerned with the nature of time (and its constituent elements) as a metaphysical concept. The second part focuses on the ordering of time as found among the Africans. Finally, the third part discusses some of the different activities (in customs and traditions), which point to the future. These include the meaning of life, rites of passage, painting and divination, etc. In the conclusion, a fundamental question is raised regarding, whether or not, the present organization of time, in Africa, as presented by John S. Mbiti, be perpetuated or changed, taking into account the pros and cons it bears.

**Keywords:** *Africa, metaphysics, trajectory, time, Mbiti, rethinking, linear and cyclic time, eternity.*

## 1.0 Introduction

In his work *African Religions and Philosophy*, (1976) Mbiti begins with an analysis of the African concept of time, believing that it is the key to understanding the African ontology, their beliefs, practices, attitudes and the general way. What is time? The question concerns the nature or “what-ness” of time. Since the question of time is linked with the universe, the question extends to: is the universe eternal? Has the universe a beginning? Taking the former as true, entails that time is eternal as well. It has neither beginning nor end. But going with the latter, time has a beginning. Numerous physicists and thinkers have given various theories in an effort to understand and explain the reality of time.<sup>1</sup> For instance, there is Albert Einstein and his theory of time, space and motion, (theory of relativity). Time is one of the metaphysical realities, and hence it is not a very easy concept to define. We are always in time, which has a fleeting property. It is from this direction perhaps, that St. Augustine, when he was asked whether he knew the meaning of time said, “ if you mean to ask me what time is I know very well, but once you ask me to define it, I find I can not.” It is difficult to define what time is, for by nature it is not static: it is changing.

Apart from St. Augustine,<sup>2</sup> various minds of multifaceted cultural backgrounds have been caught up by this notion of time from time immemorial. Among others, to mention a few, like Parmenides, Zeno, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Leibniz, Newton, Bergson, Mbiti, B. Akiiki, etc. Time as reality therefore, has been assessed from different perspectives. In Western thought, there is mathematical and linear time as dominant ideas. Dominant because some philosophers, in particular Bergson, have their notion of time as mainly inclined to be lived, organic. It is linear time in the sense that, it is an imagined line through which the distant past, present and infinite future is figured. Linear time as such does not exist, but it is a metaphysical notion existing in our minds. Linear time is unidirectional and mathematical. In Africa, African Philosophy is still fledgling. That is, it is not fully developed and documented. Consequently, even the field of “time” lacks a robust written commentary.

It is within this context that the thinker, John Mbiti, writing about the concept of time from an African perspective, calls for more research. His treatment of the concept of time is a pioneer attempt, in his book *African Religions and Philosophy*. He believes that the discussion of the African notion of time, is likely to provide a means of understanding basic religious and philosophical concepts regarding the African person. For him, the question of time, is of little or no academic concern to Africans, in their traditional life. In the traditional understanding, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. The linear conception of time in Western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking. If however, future events are certain to occur, or if they fall within the inevitable realm of nature, they at best constitute only potential time, not actual time. What is taking place now, no doubt unfolds the future, but once an event has taken place, it is no longer in the future, but in the present and the past. Actual time is therefore what is present and what is

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<sup>1</sup> KARP IVAN, *African Systems of Thought, in: Africa*, ed. By Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O’Meara, (London, Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 211 – 212.

<sup>2</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, (New York: Double Day and Co. Inc.), 1960, p. 429.

past. It moves backwards rather than forward; and peoples set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place.<sup>3</sup> A misunderstanding of the African concept of time has led to the misinterpretation of Africans. According to Mbiti:

When foreigners, especially from Europe and America see people sitting down somewhere without, evidently doing anything, they often remark, “These Africans waste their time by just sitting down idle!” Another common cry is, “Oh, Africans are always late!” It is easy to jump to such judgments based on ignorance of what time means to African peoples. Those who are seen sitting down, are actually not wasting time, but either waiting for time or in the process of producing time.<sup>4</sup>

Akiiki, writing about the same subject, calls for further research regarding African customs and traditions. The intention is to deepen more and delineate the intrinsic value of the concept of time, from an African point of view. In African thought, it is observable that that time is phenomenological, existential, organic, cyclic and sacred.<sup>5</sup> Essentially it is empirical and delineative, having events as reference points. It is easily understood through the interactions of different phenomena in the Universe. Time is sacred and profane, aiming to give meaning to events. It is cyclical, that is spherically organized, and adds dimension to the line as it proceeds, giving past and future dimensions, the two thinkers cited, but also linked to the economic challenges in Africa. Why is it that Africa’s economy is lagging behind? Admittedly, the way time is thought and organized in Africa could, to some extent, explain this better.

### **1.1 Time: Its Meaning and Nature**

The question of time has been a strange, amazing and bewildering reality to human beings from past generations to the present. It is a reality that creates a wonder, due to its nature; that is, at each moment, a new “now,” a new event comes and joins the past dimension, and thus, at every moment in time one experiences a new time reality, completely different from the proceeding one. The “series of nows” passes and disappears into the realm of the past. Time is a reality that human beings find themselves in. In Africa, time is phenomenological. Phenomenon here is understood as the presence of something, which is being, and hence can be perceived or felt. A phenomenon therefore has a real existence in the universe. Time is closely linked to event. Time is phenomenal: it is an intangible reality, yet it is phenomenal, that is, exists or manifests. It is counted materially as connected to phenomena. What does it mean and in what sense? Everything it presents to us is a phenomenon, thus time is related to phenomena.

Any creature in the universe is a phenomenon. A person, however, is a phenomenon in a unique way, inasmuch as not only is he or she a conscious phenomenon, capable of knowing the self, but also because he or she is an active being differentiated from a non-

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<sup>3</sup> JOHN S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1976), pp. 16-17

<sup>4</sup> JOHN S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 19

<sup>5</sup> BYARUHANGA AKIIKI, *The Philosophy and Theology of Time in Africa: the Bantu Case*, in *Afer No.* 100, Vol. 22, No. 6, 1980, pp. 357 – 269.

living being. Two types of persons ought to be differentiated, the active (as explained above) and passive person, in the case of the living dead. Phenomena exist in time and space. This asserts that they undergo changes, there by giving birth to events. Events therefore, exist in phenomena. For example, a strong wind which sweeps roofs of a house in a village, is an event giving birth to a phenomenon. And the time of a phenomenon will cease to be when a phenomenon is completely destroyed, in such a way that there are no more events taking place. For instance, a chair, its time will cease to be when it is totally destroyed; because no further events are taking place, in relation to it.

Similarly, a cow will cease to be. It has to be borne in mind that, for the existence of time, what is significant are events which are in phenomena, for example, a tree falls naturally in the forest and no one notices; that is an event, although there is no one to experience it.<sup>6</sup> This demonstrates that time's existence is independent of a conscious phenomenon, a human being. To be real or meaningful however, it is a prerequisite that it has to be experienced by a human being. So one makes sense of time due to its fleeting nature, thus making it valuable. In this case, time becomes real and lived. Time comprises the distant past, the present as well as the distant future. The present is of great importance because it is here; we find ourselves to be present; we find ourselves to be more concerned with the "now" and, therefore, with the need to make sense of time, of living. Also, it is in this time that we find ourselves present.<sup>7</sup> Following in this vein, the present is referred to as the most real, because it is here. The now period is characterized by doing now events. As one who is heading to the field will say, "I am going to the field"; even if the act of heading to the field will last for a whole day. In short, one can say the "now time" commences as the event starts, and culminates, as the act ends. The now slowly escapes to the past, as the event finishes.

Purposes and hopes takes an individual to the future. For Africans, the future is real and people do budget, plan for what to do in the future, despite the fact that some of the events are inglorious to them. They are not sure as they are sure about the past and the present, since the two have been known and experienced. The future is likely to be there so long as there will be the universe and phenomena. Time flows, never is it repeatable. It is uninterrupted. Once it has passed, it cannot be recovered. It can be compared with a stream of water, which passes once in each point. In this way, it is irreducible or irreversible and no one is capable to interrupt its flow. It is in this sense that the Africans prefer to live and utilize it effectively, to plan inasmuch as it cannot be repeated, and knowing that time is irrevocable, they prefer everything to take its course as planned, that is "they are doubtlessly well aware that a proper understanding of time is a prerequisite to its judicious use". In Africa, time is also understood as life, in such a way that giving me time asserts that one is giving or sharing one's experiences, sharing the portion of self or selves with another's self or selves, e.g., joy, sorrow etc. A human being is given value, thereby differentiating humans from non-human beings. For instance, to pass somebody without any greeting, degrade that person to an object. It (time which is life) stresses the aspect of

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<sup>6</sup>FREDRICK OCHIENG-ODHIAMBO, *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, (Nairobi, Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, 1995), p. 110.

<sup>7</sup>IKENGA – METUH EMEFIE, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, (ONITSHA, Imico Publishers, 1992), p. 277

human dignity, regardless of the status or position one holds in society. The issue is to be rather than to have. In this way, one becomes a master of time and not mastered by time. Human time is more stressed, which in turn creates love and friendship. Africans have the idea that if one gives some of one's time to a person, then one has invariably given a part of one's self or life.<sup>8</sup>

## 1.2 The Metaphysical Trajectory of Time (Events and Time)

Metaphysics is the science of reality (being, what is, or what exists). The relationship between time and reality, and how time and reality are related to human temporal experience, and furthermore, how human temporal experience is related to temporal abstractions, physical or scientific, is pivotal here. The concept of time involves both "being" and "becoming." It cannot be reduced to a definition that sees in time the characteristics of only one of the concepts. The basis for this claim is that one deals with reality, which can be characterized as both changing, as flux, but also as "permanence." We deal with these factors in our everyday life; we deal with the reality of time, a reality that is contradictory from a logical point of view, in an unproblematic and simple way, every day of our lives. It is simple in the sense that we do not pay any attention to the logical contradictions, by the way we normally go about in the concrete world, by solving concrete and practical problems. It is, on the other hand, not as simple as experienced reality since the experience of time involves us on a personal level and makes us very aware of our own mortality.<sup>9</sup>

Everyone, regardless of his/her metaphysical position must presuppose some sense of "reality." Since we all share the notion of something that is real, and since we have differences in our metaphysical views, we have irreconcilable and ultimate differences in our ideas about what reality is. We can see the divergence in the different views about time. Time and reality are inextricably (in every sense of the word) linked together. If one eliminates time from reality, then one cannot imagine what reality would be like. If one removes reality from time, one would be left with appearances or mere beliefs or fantasies about reality. Also, what we sense and experience would become mere appearances, rather than real properties of reality. The serious consequence of denying the reality of time, of time experience, is that our way of experiencing things is denied any ultimate significance. Human experience is temporally structured. Thus, the objectification of time, that is, the idealization of certain aspects as well as the elimination of others (of what we construe as time) cannot give us a theory of what real time is really about.<sup>10</sup>

To be acquainted well with the whole notion of time in the African sense, we have to enter more deeply into the roots. To start with, we have to study more about the concept of event. What is an event? It is any happening, which is in a phenomenon and therefore existing in time and space. Time is related to event but is not identified with event. It does not require an experimental subject for its existence. To value it, however, it has to be

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<sup>8</sup> FREDRICK OCHIENG-ODHIAMBO, *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, p. 111

<sup>9</sup> JAN KYRRE BERG FRIIS, "Metaphysics and Time," *Forum Philosophicum*, 13 (2008): 277-279, available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236591103>

<sup>10</sup> JAN KYRRE BERGG FRIIS, "Metaphysics and Time," *Forum Philosophicum*, 13 (2008): 280-281, available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236591103>

experienced. A concept of ordinary time gets quality according to what the community experiences. Different times mean different experiences and it is here that the quality of time is inferred. Time is there so long as there is the universe in which phenomena exist.<sup>11</sup> Without phenomenon, time is inconceivable. It follows that time is comprised of events that happened, those, which are currently happening and the fertilized (which have been thought, but not realized) and unfertilized events (neither thought nor realized). The latter two, in strict sense, set up the future. In Africa, time is both profane and sacred. They exist in both past and future as the present is experienced. Time is cyclic or spiral; and as it rolls on, gives out the future. There is no linear future inasmuch as the conception is not linear but spiraling. And in this way, the past, present and future cannot be distinct, for sacred time is *eternal*. Cyclic time can be delineated as follows: The *Universe*, nature (the totality of all which exists):

- a) The *Past*: Repository of events, which are in memory.
- b) The *Present*: Events which constitute real time (now or continuing events)
- c) The *Future*: Pregnant and unfertilized events

The quality of time (goodness of events) depends on the degree to which the events were valued, that is, whether events are done rightly with recognized respect or otherwise. It is from this ground that when people are referring to good or indifferent time, they refer to the value of goodness of events, how they were valued. Such being the case, events are referred to as organizing time. This is cyclic or sacred time. Rushing through events leads to incompleteness of events in African culture. With organized time, we stop at the end of the discussion, or of the feat, when the matter is completed. We are not being governed by time, we are not time-obsessed. When the discussion of a problem is begun and ended in a concentric African way, it is definitely not finished and settled for good. As a consequence, it can be noticed that time conceptualization in this sense is not systematic, it varies. While in some instances, let us say, the same event can be longer; in other cases, it can be shorter. It is therefore unconditioned. The future is there, but one is not sure if it will be as it was in the past and present. Africans take for granted the presence of the future, for the universe will be saturated with events, though they are not sure what kind of events there will be. Among Africans, time not only extends to the past and present but to the future as well, and the future extends beyond the end of life, to an after life. The African concept of time is cyclical or spherical. As the sphere rolls, it actualizes potential events anticipated before.

### **1.3 The Concept of the Future among Africans: Meaning of life, initiation rites, sacrifice and prayer, marriage and arts<sup>12</sup>**

The concept of the future is expressed in language, and in other human manifestations. The whole notion of human activities in manifested in daily life, as far as Africans are

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<sup>11</sup> ANI MARIMBA, *Yurugu: an African Centred Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behaviour* (Asmara, African World Press Inc., 1996), p. 136.

<sup>12</sup> P.R. MC NAUGHTON, & PELRINE D, *African Art, in Africa*, ed. By Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara, (London, Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 82

concerned. Life is a reality, a reality with a dualistic mode, the visible and invisible. The visible includes the period during which an individual is physically seen, that is from the point one is born till his or her death. Death is a transformation point, through which one enters into another mode of existence, the invisible realm. Life is transmitted from one generation to another filial generation. This implies that the past generations are in contact with the current generations, which are in turn in contact with the future generation. This means that life is embodied in other generation to come.<sup>13</sup> Life is indestructible; it extends to the living-dead. That is why the dead are considered to be still part of our families and can interfere with family affairs. The ancestors who died long ago are not just something that once happened in history. On the contrary, they are still an essential part of our present time, even if their bodies have decomposed and turned into soil. Ancestors are influencing the members of the current society. This explains the reality why, as Africans, there is a strong notion of interconnectedness with the metaphysical life, through cultivating and nourishing of the relationship with the Supreme Being and spirits. The idea behind this is to foster and strengthen the relationship with them, which could in turn guarantee the happiness and goodness of the future life (life after death).

The invisible mode of existence is infinite time and space, and initiation rites have teachings which are expected to enhance an individual's knowledge of how to encounter the future life.<sup>14</sup> The society portrays and mediates on the future time and therefore prepares an individual on how to deal with it. Hence initiation rites introduce an individual to the long process of life, for example: being courageous, being a responsible member of the society, etc. Sacrifice and prayer are connected with life. Fundamentally, both are concerned with human life. These are means of seeking sustenance in life. These manifest the perpetual desire for living; each individual wants his or her time to be extended forever. Traditional Africans, also express their concept of the future in marital celebrations. In this case, two families (with no blood relationship) would have a contract through which their children would come to marry each other.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, a girl has to keep her virginity, inasmuch as the absence of that would lessen her value or dignity. From this standpoint, mothers teach their daughters to abide by the ethics of the society. In turn, this creates respect for parents as well. Also, in daily life, artistic activities occur. In traditional Africa, individuals were known for making paintings and engraving on hard materials, for instance, in caves and on stones.<sup>16</sup> The oldest paintings so far known are in the Sahara Desert and in Southern Africa. The former have existed since the middle of the sixth century BC. Paintings are artistic expressions that reveal certain principles and values of given historical period. These were not done suddenly. Instead, knowing the fleeting nature of time, people planned for future generations; so we can know how people were living, not only ways of living but also something of their technology as well as the spiritual ceremonies practiced in their time.

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<sup>13</sup>MARIMBA ANI, *Yurugu: an African Centred Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behaviour*, p. 137

<sup>14</sup> PAUL DAVIES, *God and the new Physics*, (New York, Penguin Books Ltd.), 1986, p. 255.

<sup>15</sup> JESSE KANYUA NDWIGA, *African Christian Theology; An Introduction*, (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1994), p. 152.

<sup>16</sup> MUGAMBI JESSE KANYUA NDWIGA, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction*, (Nairobi. East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1994), p. 153



#### **1.4 Anticipations, Legacy, Education, Food Storing and Perennial Farming<sup>17</sup>**

People live with a well-defined programme, planning on how to utilize time. Anticipations are part and parcel of life, and hence they are manifested in different ways. Within these anticipations, we find the concept of the future. For instance, in traditional Africa, parents were chose future spouses for their children. *Legacy* is a product of one's experience in life. An elder delivers a legacy to his or her children or close relatives on how to tackle various problems that will confront them in life, inasmuch as he or she knows that the future will contain events which will not be substantially different from the events he or she has experienced. Such experience can be in terms of material or spiritual matters. Good handling of such a legacy will help the individual to achieve success in life. The philosophy behind such a legacy is that people envisage the future, and the education provided by parents, family, and the society at large, serves to a great extent in enabling people to move on with their lives. For instance, a boy, who is close to his father, is likely to be shown various techniques on how, for example, to build a house, what kinds of trees are more suitable for constructing a house.<sup>18</sup> A girl likewise is taught numerous things, for instance, if she is close to her mother. She is taught how to prepare food, how to take care of children, etc. This experiences are expected to help her in the future, as a mother, on how she is to perform various domestic chores. *Food storing and perennial farming* are pursued in different ways in Africa; being unsure of the days ahead, food storage was intended to forestall unexpected famine. Closely related to this is perennial farming, in which people plant long-term, enduring crops, for instance, fruit trees.<sup>19</sup>

#### **1.5 Man's Destiny, Divination and the Continuity of the Universe**

It is an established fact that man as a thinking being questions various issues about his nature and the nature of nature. For instance, he asks about his or her ultimate origin and purpose: to where and why he or she is proceeding, and what his or her ultimate goal (destiny) is. In this way, he or she enters into the future realm mentally. This is the same idea concerning death. For sure, humans are not immortal. There is a day when each person will cease to be. From experience, one knows that when people are old, they reach a time when they perish. So one has in mind that awareness that one day in the future, death will certainly have its way. The *divination system*, a power gained through the ancestors, a common practice in Africa, has behind it a concept of the future, since a clairvoyant is able to tell the future. Apart from the fact that a diviner is mostly occupied in solving problems appertaining to his clients, he or she is as well able to foresee the future. Thus, a diviner is able to tell about the future and even events that will occur in the future. Admittedly, something of the future cannot be spoken of, if one does not have a concept of the future. To talk of the future asserts that one is aware of the concept of future. Consider a client who is consulting a clairvoyant. His goal is to discover the future events, which he or she will realize later. In the same vein, there is continuity of the universe. Although the universe may be one, it has a double mode: the physical and the metaphysical. There will

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<sup>17</sup> The typical African person enjoys *agricultural pursuits*, and usually sees it as a God-given enterprise.

<sup>18</sup> LAUGHTON WILLIAM HENRY, *Teaching about our People*, (London, Cambridge University Press), 1965, p. 196.

<sup>19</sup> FREDRICK OCHIENG ODHIAMBO, *African Philosophy: An introduction*, (Nairobi: Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, 1995), p. 110

be various things (phenomena), which will be changing, and there will be events. This shows that duration is not limited, it is continuous, and since duration is continuous, this implies that there is a future dimension to it.<sup>20</sup>

### 1.6 Appraisal

The African concept of 'time' has been the focus of a good deal of debate over the course of the continent's recent history. The Ugandan philosopher Ernest Beyaraza believes it has been buried in the historical distortions of racism, colonialism, and 'development' for too long. His book, *The African Concept of Time*, is an attempt to contribute to the ongoing process of mental decolonization, which cripples both the colonized and the colonizer in our development as human beings.<sup>21</sup> How is it that a powerful and prominent thinker within the Western tradition, such as Hegel could have declared with total conviction that Africa "is not a historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit." How did the dominance of such an ignorance contribute to Placide Temples' *Bantu Philosophy*, and John S. Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*?

Interestingly, Beyaraza tackles the question using a good deal of Western Philosophy.<sup>22</sup> In the opening chapter of his work, he provides a brief account of the history of Western Philosophy from the Pre-Socratics, through Hegel's and Marx's dialectic, to 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers like Gilbert Ryle and his "Ghost in the machine." Not only does the chapter provide a good background for students of philosophy, it can also be read as an autobiographical account of Beyaraza's own preparation. The British and analytic influence on the development of academic philosophy in institutions like Makerere University was quite substantial. Critically reviewing this tradition, in relation to questions concerning the relevance of philosophy in Africa, Beyaraza makes it clear that, "there is need of a Philosophy as a means of clarification," in an "age of uncertainty and change."<sup>23</sup> Having clarified the role of philosophy, in relation to uncertainty, change, and ultimately questions concerning the nature of human development, he then goes on to address the question of 'time' in a similar fashion. Recognizing that, "the most available sources", concerning 'time,' "have been from Western Philosophy," he begins with Aristotle's deduction of 'time' from 'motion'.

Things such as human beings and societies change. There is an observable continuity to such a change, which gives rise to the conception of the 'motion' of a thing, and motion is measured via the concepts of 'time' and 'space'. 'Time', according to Beyaraza's account of Aristotle, is deduced from 'motion,' and therefore is "not a substance, but an attribute of substance". From there we are off-and-running through 'time' in Plotinus, Augustine, Descartes, Newton, Clarke, Leibniz, Kant, McTaggart, Alexander, Whitehead, Waismann, and finally Wittgenstein, who, according to Beyaraza, suggests that the question itself is a bit queer, and probably one best clarified rather than answered. The problem of 'time', he says, in apparent agreement with Wittgenstein, may be based on a "disorder of thinking",

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>21</sup> ERNEST BEYARAZA, *The African concept of time : A Comparative Study of Various Theories*, (Kampala, Uganda : Makerere University Press, 2000), p. 36

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.polylog.org/lit/2/rvw3-en.htm>

<sup>23</sup> ERNEST BEYARAZA, *The African concept of time : A Comparative Study of Various Theories*, p. 78

and “the best way to solve it is to bring about a clear awareness of its causes,” Before going on to an account of the historical emergence of questions specifically addressing the African concept of ‘time’ through an examination of the thinking of such individuals as Hegel, Evans-Pritchard, Achebe, and Kagame, Beyaraza provides an overview of the Arab, Hebrew, Chinese, and Indian conceptions. He draws an interesting conception between the Greek thought that seems to emphasize entropy and the Hebrew thought that focuses on creation and fecundity.

Thus, what happens through time is conceived of quite differently. At any rate, through the course of his reflections he is convinced, and provides his readers with reasons for agreeing, that time is a real continuum and not just a subjective category of the mind. Its foundation is in the reality of events. The question then becomes whether or not the African concept of time is based on this reality.<sup>24</sup> Time flows from the past through the present, and into the future and is, thus linear. Therefore, if Mbiti were correct about the African concept of time then one of the great causes of the Continent’s underdevelopment would be Africans’ inability to conceive of time correctly and to plan for a progressive future. Starting with Hegel and Regius, who laboured under the “myth of White superiority,” Beyaraza moves through a number of anthropological and sociological perspectives on the concept of ‘time’ in various African societies. He uses Ivor Wilks’s critical review of Hegel and Regius to introduce the notion that those living in the present have a strong sense of identity, based on their existence, as the essential link between their ancestors and the generations to come in the distant future.

Thus, far from having no conception of the distant future, and therefore little ability to plan and progress, the very structure of African identity seems to imply a strong sense of the future. This ability to identify with new generations could perhaps be contrasted with the individualism and materialism of the West. Certainly, if Wilks’s analysis is on the right track, then Mbiti’s view that African life is ordered by a movement from the present into the past must be mistaken. However, one might want to add that we might, from this African perspective on the nature of human development and time, get a glimpse of how the being of an individual, which in turn is based in the being of the community, moves from present to past. We are the ancestors of the Future! Evans-Pritchard found through his anthropological work that the Nuer had a “shallow” concept of time. Beyaraza examines these findings and suggests that while the distinction between “ecological” and “Structural” conceptions of time might be well founded, he argues that these conceptions are not necessarily “cyclical” as Evans-Pritchard asserted, and therefore the Nuer conception is not “shallow.” Rather, Beyaraza finds strong indications of a linear and progressive foundation to time in the Nuer society. He then goes on to critically examine the Bohannan’s account of ‘time’ in relation the economy of the Tiv, and John Taylor’s investigations regarding the nature of the soul among the Baganda, Twi, Yoruba, Zulu, and other groups.<sup>25</sup> He concludes by examining the writing and philosophical implications of Achebe, Amadi, Parrinder, and finally Kagame. In each case he builds his case for a linear African conception of time.

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<sup>24</sup>O’BRIEN WELMTER, “Make the Best of the Present Time,” *Afer*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 1992, pp. 183 – 187.

<sup>25</sup> JOHN AYOADE, *Time in Yoruba Thought, in African Philosophy: An Introduction*, ed. By Richard Wright, (New York, London: University of America, Inc., 1984), p. 66.

Time is a continuum, and it is Africans' understanding of this that enables them to conceive of distant future events and live with the hope of having these event fulfilled.<sup>26</sup> So, one is left wondering, how is it that Mbiti got it so wrong? John Mbiti, like Placide Tempels before him, was primarily concerned with religion in Africa. Tempels' book was concerned with understanding why the missionaries of Christianity were finding it so hard to successfully convert Africans at anything but a fairly superficial level. The problem, according to Tempels, was their (African) profound and complex sense of being. Unless the Christian missionaries could understand and bring into critical examination African Ontology, they were bound to be frustrated in their desire to truly convert the primitives of Africa, into the one true religion – Christianity. Mbiti, too, was motivated to contribute to the development of Christianity in Africa.<sup>27</sup>

However, as an African, he believes that the trouble was the distorted eschatological emphasis that had developed in Western Christianity under the influence of Hellenistic civilization.<sup>28</sup> There seems to be a deep ambivalence in Mbiti's desire to both critically examine what to him is the excessively future-oriented conception of the final judgment and apocalyptic nature of Western Christianity, while at the same time welcoming the introduction of the dimension of the future into the African conception of time, as a necessary condition for modern development.<sup>29</sup> According to Beyaraza, clearly Mbiti's disdain for a conception of time oriented towards the past that he believes is dominant in African thought, emerges as the central thrust of his work.<sup>30</sup> Thus, for Beyaraza, Mbiti has a dangerous ending, reinforcing the mentality with which the continent and humanity in general are still struggling. Beyaraza exits the library, and ventures into the villages of his own people – the Bakiga. Not surprisingly, he finds ample evidence in the social organization, religion, cosmology, and language of his people that suggest a profound sense of the future.<sup>31</sup> In fact, it would seem that their conception of the future is unlimited.

There is not, according to Beyaraza's research, the kind of apocalyptic end of time anticipated in Bakiga worldview. Though Beyaraza does not focus on this implication of his research, it raises the question as to whether Mbiti was partly correct in his criticism of the Western eschatological obsession with some kind of apocalyptic and final judgment. If Mbiti and Beyaraza are right, that in general Africans do not have such an orientation, then the current growth of fundamentalist and apocalyptic forms of Christianity in Africa, and indeed throughout the world, could be assessed as a neo-colonial phenomenon that undermines the ability of people to understand and mobilize themselves in relation to a progressive and positive vision of their future. At any rate, more work needs to be done, but certainly Beyaraza and Mbiti have made important contributions to our understanding of 'time,' not only in Africa, but in relation to human development as a whole.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> O'BRIEN WELMTER, "Make the Best of the Present Time, p. 95

<sup>27</sup> JOHNSON CLARENCE SHOLE, "An Analysis of John Mbiti's Treatment of Events in African Ontologies, in Quest Philosophical Discussion," Vol. 9, No. 2, Vol. 10, No. 1: 33-49

<sup>28</sup> GEOFFREY PARRINDER, *Africa's Three Religions* (London, Sheldon Press, 1976), p. 253.

<sup>29</sup> BERTRAND RUSSELL, *A History of Western Philosophy*, (London, Unwin Paper Backs, 1985), p. 97

<sup>30</sup> MBITI JOHN, *Introduction to African Religion*, (Nairobi, Heinemann Education Books Inc., 1981), p. 211.

<sup>31</sup> ERNEST BEYARAYAZA, *The African concept of time : A Comparative Study of Various Theories*, p. 119

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.polylog.org/lit/2/rvw3-en.htm>

## 1.7 Conclusion

So far, it has been an engaging discussion on the notion of time in Africa, as construed by some African scholars, especially John S. Mbiti. It seems obvious that Mbiti conceives the African notion of time as cyclic, spherical (repetitive). Events of previous times are expected to repeat their cycle in the future. But, the time lived is not repetitive. Time has events as reference points. Always, there is time as long as there are universe and events in phenomena. Since time is spherical and repetitive, it rolls on, it adds to the future dimension. Therefore the future is real. It covers the potential events, the unrealized events. In these examples, one sees that it is not necessary for the future to be restricted. There is a future, which is cyclic as opposed to a mathematical future, which is systematic and divided into equal moments. The African concept of time has its bases on events.<sup>33</sup> The quality of time depends on how events are valued. In this way sense, one can say that time is more of a qualitative concept, rather than quantitative. Talking in terms of measuring time, some Africans are victims of inexactness, non-punctuality as well as a lack of preciseness. This is because time (according to events) varies; it can be short or long. It is not systematic. An important question arises: should the current *status quo* of organizing time be perpetuated or reformed, having in mind that people have entered into the third millennium of science and technology?<sup>34</sup>

It may seem that the African concept of time is human, more inclined to being, rather than having. But the question is, does it serve people? The Western notion of time, for instance, is linear and mathematical. It has been broken down into simpler moments or units: seconds, minutes, hours, etc. In measuring time it is more precise. It is this mathematical time, which has, played a great role in Western industrial world development. The concept of the future among Africans can explain various things, especially the economic situation that African countries find themselves in.<sup>35</sup> Statistics show that, economically, African countries are lagging behind. One might be tempted to suggest that this is due to the absence of a consciousness of the future among Africans. But as indicated above, the African consciousness of *future time* is clearly manifested in various ways, such as African customs and traditions. The reason for this could be found if one close look at the way time is organized in Africa. One might say then that the tendency of not being very much concerned about the future, with the mathematical exactitude of the Westerners, may constitute an infinitesimal aspect of the African socio-economic quagmire, but this in itself, does not suffices as a good reason for the African situation of under-development. Perhaps, there is an urgent need to introduce the mathematical concept of time, to integrate it with the organic time so that we can have time which is both human and rational and which serves people, for the sake of true development.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> BYARUHANGA AKIHIKI, *The Philosophy and Theology of Time Africa: the Bantu Case*, in *Afer* No. 100, Vol. 22, No. 6, 1980, pp. 357 – 269.

<sup>34</sup> LAUGHTON WILLIAM HENRY, *Teaching about our People*, (London, Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> PEEK M. PHILIP, *The Study of Divination: Past and Present*, in *African Divination System, Ways of Knowing*, ed. (Bloomington, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 1 - 5

<sup>36</sup> JOHNSON CLARENCE SHOLE, "An Analysis of John Mbiti's Treatment of Events in African Ontologies," in *Quest Philosophical Discussion*," Vol. 9, No. 2, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 139 – 142.

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