

# African Concept of Time, a Socio-Cultural Reality in the Process of Change

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## Abstract

This paper is a defence for African thought system. We quite agree with Professor Olusegun Oladipo that African philosophers are in the best position to carry out coherent reflections on Africans philosophical issues and ideas. It is unfortunate and disgusting that many people across the world today still think like E. Ludwig, that “Africans are incapable of any philosophical conception”. Some, who are more liberal, opines that, Africans are capable of reasoning intelligently, but at the lowest ebb of thought. This is sad, evidences abound that Africans compete favourably with counterparts across the globe; in world universities like Harvard, Cambridge and Oxford etc. This work has therefore reflected on African thought system on time conception. It captured the pre-scientific period, the colonial period and the post colonial period. It has effectively justified that not only that Africans, even from pre scientific time, have their conceived ideas about time, but that their time conception is highly philosophical and thought provoking. It stretches beyond the physical world of reality even to the time eternity.

**Keywords:** Socio- Cultural Reality, Events

## 1. Introduction

Every race across the globe has her past which constitute part of the identity to such a race. Time concept in Africa, in the distant past and in the present dispensation is intrinsically part of the identity of Africans. A reconstruction of African time concept in the distant past is no doubt a worthy endeavour for the purpose of historical reference, curiosity of how Africans lived their lives in the past and also to constitute knowledge of the philosophical ideas of the people about reality as a whole.

This particular enquiry is masterminded by the beliefs of many people, especially in the advance countries that Africans do not value time, neither are they time conscious. To what extent are these submissions correct? A search into the past, pre-colonial time in Africa will go a long way to help to verify the facts about these statements. This particular work is, therefore, set to unveil the perception of Africans about the concept of time as a socio- cultural reality.

What is time to an African? Does the Africans place any value on time? Is time, in any way, seen by Africans as a retrospective tool, to reflect on the past in order to improve on the present and plan for the future? What is the general thought pattern of Africans about time concept? All these enquiries constitute the task for this particular work.

Africans perceive the time concept as a social cultural reality in the realm of the people’s philosophical scholarship. Obviously, the Africans have their own system of thoughts. They are conscious of their environment, the nature around them and reality as a whole, including the awareness of the Divine. Their knowledge of the created order constitutes their compendium of philosophy. Time consciousness is definitely part of this wealth of knowledge. Oladipo is absolutely correct when he says African philosophers should be pre occupied with reflections on African cultural realities and traditions (Oladipo 1992:15). This research work is, therefore, a contribution to reflections on African cultural realities and tradition.

## 2. African Concept of Time in the Pre- Colonial Era

In *Things Fall Apart*, (Achebe, 1958: 11-30), one observes a lot of references to time concept on African thought. In page 11, he wrote that during the planting season, Okonkwo worked daily on his farm from *Cock crow until chicken went to roost*. In page 19, he wrote that “the drought continues for *eight market weeks*...” In page 22, he wrote that Ikemefuna was ill for *three market weeks*. Again, in page 23, he wrote that Ikemefuna came to Umofia at the end of the *care free season, between harvest and planting*. He also wrote in page 27 that, “yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king. For three or four moons, it demanded hard work and constant attention from cockcrow till the chicken went back to roost”.

Chinua Achebe, an Igbo man, from South East Nigeria, wrote from the perspective of his Igbo people. His use of reference to time was unique. His vivid use of language with references to time was unique. He portrayed the people's consciousness of time. For examples references to moon, harvest, planting seasons and so on. An observation one could see in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is that in *Africa, time is tied to events*. The same applies to the Yoruba of South west Nigeria. Time is tied to events. For examples, the statement that the burial ceremony will take place immediately after *yam planting season* or that the marriage ceremony has been fixed for shortly before *Egungun festival*. Everybody knows when the yam planting season is and also, when the Egun festival comes up.

John Mbiti, a Professor of African Philosophy and Religion has discussed African concept of time in the context of the religious thought system of Africans. In this perspective, he wrote that African concept of time is the key to our understanding of the basic religious and philosophical concepts of the people. He wrote that the concept of time may help to explain beliefs, attitudes, practices, and general way of life of African people, not only in the traditional set up, but also in the modern situation (whether political, economical, educational or church life). He opined that the world of scholarship should bear with the fact that in this area of research, there is no enough literature to depend upon. (Mbiti, John, 1969: 16)

Time to Mbiti, in African concept, is of little or no academic concern, especially in their traditional life. It is obvious that Mbiti's work also captured African life in the pre- colonial era. In his words, to Africans, time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur. He wrote that what has not taken place or what has no likelihood of an immediate occurrence falls in the category of "No time". What is certain to occur, or what falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena is in the category of inevitable or potential time.

In the traditional African setting, 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. Based on his research in some tribes in East Africa, Mbiti concluded that African has no time consideration in the perspective of the future. This is because the events in the future have not taken place. Again, because the tribes, (Akamba and Gikuyu of Kenya) two of the tribes among whom Mbiti conducted his research have no adequate verb tenses to demonstrate reference to the future.

Before discussion is concluded on this aspect, it is expedient for us to see how Mbiti has portrayed the concept of time among some tribes in the East Africa, during the pre- colonial era. In his writing, among the Ankore of Uganda, the day in the traditional set up is reckoned according to its significant events. To these people, cattle is the ultimate thing when quantifying wealth. Therefore the day is reckoned in reference to events pertaining to cattle:

6 am – Milking time

12 noon- Time for cattle and people to rest

2pm – The time for cattle to drink water

5pm – The time when cattle return home

Time, to this people, makes meaning when attached to these events, for example, the statement that "I will go out as early as milking time". Another example is that, "the elders of the village will meet at the time when cattle return home. Mbiti also made reference to the Latuka tribe of Sudan to show how events govern the approximate reckoning of months:

1. October is called sun, because the sun is very hot at that time.
2. December is called give your uncle water, because water is very scarce at this period.
3. February is called let them dig because it is this time that people begins to prepare their field for planting.
4. June is called "Dirty Mouth, because children can now begins to eat the new grain, and in so doing get their mouths dirty.

Every month of the year is named by the people in the like manner. It makes it convenient for them to reckon time in relation to events that way. For example, my daughter's wedding will take place during the "dirty mouth" period. We would not have done sufficient justice to Mbiti's work if we fail to see how he has discussed future time dimensions and their relationship to African ontology.

Mbiti portrayed that beyond a few months from the present, African concept of time is silent and indifferent. To him, it means that the future is virtually non-existence as actual time. In Mbiti's discussion on time, in a way of avoiding the thought associations of the English words, past, present and future, Mbiti made use of two Swahili words "Sisa" and "Zamani". In the verb tenses as used by Mbiti, Sisa covers the now period". Sisa has the sense of immediacy, nearness and "newness". It is the period of immediate concern for the people since that is "where" or when they exist. To them, what will constitute future should be extremely brief. This is so because any meaningful event in the future must be so immediate and certain that people have almost experienced it.

On the other hand, if the event is remote, say beyond two years from now then, it cannot be conceived by the people. It cannot be spoken of and the language themselves have no verb tenses to convert that distant future dimension of time. Sisa is the most meaningful period for the individual because he has a personal recollection of the events or phenomena of the period, or he is about to experience them. Sisa is in itself a complete or full time dimension, with its own short future, a dynamic present and an experienced past. This could be called the micro time.

Zamani, in Mbiti's conception, is not limited to what in English is called the past. In African ontology, it has its own "past" "present" and "future", but on a wider scale. We can, for the sake of convenience, call it the macro time. In African ontological or divine set up. Sisa disappears into Zamani. Before events become incorporated into the Zamani however, they have to become realized or actualized within the Sisa dimension. When this has taken place, then the events move backwards from Sisa into the Zamani. So, in African thought, Zamani becomes the period beyond which nothing can go. Zamani is the "graveyard of time", the period of termination, the dimension in which everything finds its halting point. In the words of Mbiti, it is the final store house for all phenomena and events, the ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed into reality.

From the previous discussion, it becomes obvious that time in the African concept, at the pre colonial era is tied to or related to the events of the time. The linear time was alien to the people. They see time in the perspective of actuality, dominated by events. Time to them has to be experienced. It makes meaning to them when it is related to whether, seasons, natural phenomena around them. Time then was not mathematical or numerical. It is simply time as experienced by the people in relation to events around them.

### **3. Post Colonial Era: African Time and the Linear Time, A Process of Change**

The Christian missionaries that emerged as an after effect of colonization were the harbingers of western civilization, and they did so through the schools and churches they opened. (Samuel C Agubosi 2002: 115). The activities of missionaries across Africa marked the onset of literacy education among the people. The uneducated populace began to acquire basic training in rudiments of education, i.e. reading, writing, numerical prowess and basic arithmetic. These literacy activities were tremendously in favour of time concept among Africans. With development in the act of reading and writing, time concept began to experience the process of change.

Emphasis shifted from mere relation of time to events, natural phenomena, and whether. The people begin to see the need for calculating time in the modern way. Somehow, some have derogatorily observed this period as one of the evils in the principle of assimilation which was introduced by the colonialists, especially the French. This was because the principle of assimilation emphasized the submersion of the people's cultural values, ideas, philosophies etc. into the cultural beliefs and ways of life of the colonialists. That notwithstanding, the important thing to this research work is that, the period marks the onset of a vivid process of change among the people, when it comes to the issue of time concept.

Not that the consideration of time in the context of events, weather and natural phenomenon was jettisoned entirely. But the enlightened and the educated among the people see in western education, a better way of time consideration. This was as a result of the fact that the new system was more exact and precise. At this period, both African concept of time and (the western, the linear concept of time) were used by the Africans. On this, M. P. More (1986: 5-6) wrote that at the period, philosophical discussions on time have been concerned with the distinction between two different notions of temporality, a distinction between subjective time on the one hand and objective time on the other, lived or experienced time from abstract or mathematical time.

The distinction is hereby made between what is normally referred to as western or modern notions of time as against the traditional notion of time. In western or technological societies there is a linear conception of time. Time is something that moves or travels along a straight line. The notion, according M.P More, is a movement from the past to the present and then to the future. The past is significant only in so far as it is a means of enabling man to restructure his present and have, his future under his control. Gradually, the linear consideration of time was gaining more attention by the natives. The shift was therefore on the use of calendar and other advance means of calculation time.

### **4. A Critical Appraisal of African Concept of Time**

To say that there exists a race anywhere in the world without her own philosophy or thought system about time is a statement in the extreme of absurdity. It will be therefore incorrect to affirm that Africans do not have vivid ideas about time concept. The examples, as related in this work, of the Igbo, Yoruba, Kikamba and the Gikuyu tribes of Africa shows that the people are not without formidable thought system about time. At the pre literate period, the people were not empowered with the educational skills of reading and writing. There was no written record of any sort. Their knowledge was been transmitted orally from generation to generation. Despite of this impediment, the people still calculate time in their own way.

In spite of the earlier discussion, the kind of thought system about time which we could observe among the people is fascinating. They consider time as a socio-cultural phenomenon which must be lived and experienced. Time to them, is a phenomenon which stretched beyond the physical realm, into the ontological dimension. It is both secular and sacred. It is interesting; the manner that time is tied to events of the day, i.e. with the cattle rearing, with weather, with seasons and vegetation. In a way, it shows that the people, in spite of their handicap in literacy prowess, they were very philosophical in their thought orientation. Having said that, it is also necessary to comment that their conception of time was not a developed one when compared with some other people in other part of the world.

Another level of discussion about African concept of time is on how time conscious the Africans are. In another way, to what extent do Africans value time? At this level of discussion, it is believed that Africans have idea of time, but that they are always not time conscious or that they do not value time, or still, that time does not matter to them. This misconception, no doubt, was as a result of the economic setting among the indigenous Africans. Let us take for example, the Igbo people of Nigeria, as portrayed by Professor Chinua Achebe in his "Things Fall Apart". It is believed that the people always sit down, doing nothing, waiting for time: the planting time, the harvesting time, the festival time and so on. Before planting commences, it looked as if the people were idle, doing nothing, waiting for the planting time to come. At the period, they sit down to discuss their personal matters and the affairs of the community. This situation has been observed by many people who do not understand the socio-economic set up of the people, as idleness and lack of time consciousness.

John Mbiti's writing is timely here. He wrote that when foreigners, especially from Europe and America came to Africa and see people sitting down some where without, evidently, doing anything, they often remark, "These Africans waste their time by just sitting down idle". It is easy to jump to such conclusion, but such judgments are based on ignorance of what time means to African people. Those who are seen sitting down, are actually not wasting time, but rather they are getting ready for time (Mbiti 1969:19). Like in any other place in the world, the economic circumstance of the day would dictate the pace of activities.

This aspect of our discussion could further be buttressed with some everyday statements about time among the Yoruba of South West Nigeria. They often say that, "*Akoko ko duro de enikan*", meaning time does not wait for anybody. This statement emphasized the fact that the people are time conscious. They value time. Time is important to them. Another statement is "*Igba lonigba nka*", meaning that there is always the time of relevance for any issue, persons, etc. Among the Igbo people of South East Nigeria, it is common to hear such statement as "*time na money*", which means time is money. This is to say that, not only that the people value time, time means much to their existence.

It is very expedient to take a critical look at Mbiti's submission, in his African religion and philosophy. In this work, as regards African concept of time, Mbiti wrote that to Africans, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future". The implication of Mbiti's statement is that the Africans are incapable of conceiving time in the perspective of the future. If they have idea of future time at all, it is a limited future, between six months to two years. Anything beyond that, the Africans are incapable of conceiving.

The future, to any race, is obviously important. That is why the experience of the past are always documented, as a means of restructuring the present and to have a firm control on the future. The future is often rigorously planned for in order to enhance progress and stability in the economic and social life of the people. Since according to Professor Mbiti, the future is virtually non existence, at least, beyond two years, it, by implication, follow that the whole races of African people have no belief in progress. To what extent is this correct?

To answer the question raised above, it is most appropriate to have a look at "power-politics in old Oyo Empire 1754- 1796 (Oguntomisin, 2002: 125). "Old Oyo had a delicate constitution which in built checks and balances which prevented the monarch (Alaafin of Oyo) from being either despotic or autocratic. The constitution made it mandatory for the Alaafin to consult the Oyomesi council of chiefs before taking decisions on the affairs of the state". The Alaafin could be forced to commit suicide if he misuses his power. Obviously, the check and balances in Old Oyo Kingdom of the South West Nigeria is to ensure a good future of peaceful atmosphere for the Oyo kingdom. Every necessary check had been put in place to check the excesses of the monarch, even in the distance future. With this instance sited, we would see that it is wrong to conclude that Africans cannot conceive time in the perspective of the future as Mbiti had done.

J.A.A. Ayoade is also relevant in this discussion (1977:17) he wrote that the Yoruba total perspective of time – future even extends beyond the end of this life to an afterlife". Kwass Wiredu, also, in his opinion, believed that Mbiti could only be spared if he was only referring to a pre-scientific traditional Africans that were characterized by constructing explanation of natural phenomena in terms of the activities of gods and spirits (1980: 39).

## 5. Conclusion

As far as our investigation in this work is concerned, we have been able to come out with some definite conclusions. First, it is totally incorrect to assume that Africans, even at the pre – scientific period, have no indigenous philosophical thought as far as time concept is. Time concept is a socio- cultural philosophical conception which is often a part of the identify of any society of people. Second, like any other tribes of the world, Africans are also time conscious. Although, the pace of socio- economic activities might be slow. That is not enough reason to affirm that they are not time conscious.

Thirdly, like any other tribes of the world, Africans ideas of time are highly philosophical. Time to them is beyond the natural socio- cultural phenomena. It is also understood in its ontological conception. Mbiti has effectively used the Swahili word, Zamani to describe the stretches of time into timeless eternity. The Yoruba people also see time beyond what is experienced physically. It stretches to the period of the life after death, the realm of the ancestors.

In spite of the above, it is important to point out the fact that the phenomenon of time, in respect of the Africans has, since the colonial era, been in the process of change. During the colonial period, Africans experienced a great deal of Western civilization, part of which education was very essential. This has obviously affected their orientation, culturally socially and also, their philosophical dispositions to reality as a whole. As a result, their concept of time began to experience change. First, a dual conception of time, then, indigenous time and the linear time concepts used simultaneously.

Later, especially after the colonial period, emphasis' was more on the linear time conception, but the Africans have not completely jettisoned their own time conception. They use the linear time in day to day transactions and their own indigenous time, they use as occasion demands. Nevertheless, their indigenous time continue to live in their minds, in their folklores, in their literature, in moon- light stories. It is still part of them as an in active time conception. At times, you hear the old folks say, “The marriage of Ayoka has been fixed for shortly after the Egungun festival”. In moon light stories reference to time is also often tied to events.

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