

# JUSTIFICATION OF THE CONCEPT OF TIME IN AFRICA

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## Abstract

The metaphorical concept of African time is one in which tardiness, lousiness and a total disregard for schedules and program is made out to characterize all Africans. Tardiness is a universal phenomenon; it should not be made to hang around African's neck like a milestone meant to draw a criminal. This preposterous tag is seen as a harbinger of the continuous cycles of poverty, bad governance, monumental backwardness and a seemingly perpetual over-dependence on other peoples of the world for minimal survival. This, however, cannot be read to mean that Africans lack the notion of time or that of future time. The best we can say is that they lack "time-discipline." With hermeneutic method, this paper seeks to give some justifications to this notion of African of time or Africans posture to time and observes that Africans relational attitude, her polychromous nature, even lack of some basic amenities, etc. are some of the justifications to these and concludes that there needs to be a balancing (prioritizing) of time vs. events considerations and that most people are usually somewhere in between the two extremes. It is usually necessary to adapt to the time and event orientation of a culture group.

## Introduction

There is an epidemic for which Africans do not have a vaccine yet. Till date, no known researcher has tried to find a cure, but the outbreak is rampant and unavoidable. No one has reported any death from it, but thousands of people report headaches, delays, missed opportunities and schedule changes daily. This case is African time.<sup>1</sup> Africans have the tendency to relax, indifferent attitude towards time and starting events or arriving at events at their scheduled times. There is this acceptance that nothing will start at the absolute time indicated on the schedule. Ironically, Africans love watches. They are always walking through traffic selling sleek knock-off watches, but apparently the time pieces don't serve such practical purpose. Not

every institution or person runs on this leisurely clock, but it is clearly visible every day and sometimes inevitable because of society. Swahili speakers have a saying “pole pole”<sup>2</sup>, which translates to, “slowly slowly”. And often that’s how things move in Africa. It’s not uncommon for things to happen or finish hours after they were scheduled, and this causes plans to often change. They can really enjoy everything they do and take the time to do it properly. Stress is not a really a factor for them. This general laxity of Africans about time, especially future time, pervades African people and nation’s collective attitude to work. It manifests in politics and economy, as in other aspects of national life in almost all countries on the continent. The general observation is that most African nations lack the foresight to institute enduring economic programs; hence the continuous cycles of poverty, bad government, monumental backwardness and seemingly perpetual over-dependences on other peoples of the world for minimal survival.<sup>3</sup>

The above notified problems might not be unconnected with the linguistic and attitudinal theory regarding infinite future events. Thus African languages not only lack precise expressions for the immediate future. In other words, Africans have no active interest in events that lies in the future beyond the immediate now. This is because what binds the past and the future together neither changes nor remain the same.<sup>4</sup> This distorted believe and question of the African sense of time has arisen because of some dangerous conclusions of some writers on Africa have drawn. Strange enough some of them are Africans. The burden of this paper is to articulate the *raison d’être* for this posture and habit by the Africans. Are there justifications to these lax attitudes to time or was it transported to them by their ancestors? Before this, a brief voyage will be made to ascertain different conceptions of time in African worldview. Also do Africans actually have an idea of time at all, if they do have, do they have that of the future? This will enable us to have background knowledge to justify Africans conception of time or why Africans handle time the way they do it?

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### **Time**

Time is an observed phenomenon, by means of which human beings sense and record changes in the environment and the universe. A

literal definition is elusive. Time has been called an illusion, a dimension, a smooth-flowing continuum, and an expression of separation among events that occur in the same physical location. Time is a practical convenience in modern life. Numerous standards have been set up, allowing people to coordinate events and, in general, keep their lives running smoothly. The earth has been divided into so-called zones that reflect the fact that high noon occurs at different times at different places on the planet. All of these time zones are referenced to the time at the longitude of Greenwich, England. A universal standard, coinciding almost exactly with the time at Greenwich, is known as Coordinated Universal Time (UTC). Einstein once said “the faster you travel (progress) the slower time flows. His theory shows that “the property of space and time also depends on the presence of masses of matter. For Marx, Space and time are forms of existence of matter. He said while space is three dimensional, time is not. Time has only one dimension because “it is reversible”. It moves only forward and it is impossible to reverse its movement, to bring past back.<sup>5</sup> Classical mechanics of Newton separated space and time from matter and held them to be absolutely uniform and immutable. For Newton:

The vulgar conceive these qualities under no other notions but from the relations they bear to sensible objects, and thence arise certain prejudices, for the removing of which, it will be convenient to distinguish them into absolute and relative time and apparent, mathematical time of self and from its own nature flows equally without regard to anything external and by another name called Duration.<sup>6</sup>

According to Shakespeare, time travels in diverse paces with diverse persons. I will tell you who time ambles with, who time trots withal, who time gallops withal, and who time stands still.<sup>7</sup> According to Seneca “There are some hours which are taken from us, some which are stolen from us, and some which slip from us.<sup>8</sup> For Evangs, “in times of intense activity. in times of waiting, in sleeps or in love, we are aware of great variations in the conscious experience of time.<sup>9</sup> Time as a duration could be lost and could be recouped in the existential infinity of conceptual space. The above ideas tell us that

time is a universal concept which exists in the mind. It is an abstract concept. Our knowledge of time is derived from events, experiences and activities around us. Time as a metaphysical construct is derived from human rational power of transcendence. Like distance, time separates events and objects, and so it is considered as one of the four dimensions of reality. In fact, modern science perceives space and time as one and the same thing. For philosophers, the first African thinker to delineate the paradox of time is St. Augustine. He says:

If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it to no one that asketh, I know not; yet I say boldly that I know, that if nothing passed away, time past were not; and if nothing were coming, a time to come were not; and if nothing were, time present were not. Those two times then, past and to come, how are they, seeing the past now is not, and that to come is not yet? But the present, should it always be present, and never pass into time past, verily time should not be time.<sup>10</sup>

The above assertion underscores the enigma/ elusiveness of time. Micheal Dodds captures this difficulty when he states: “we talk of time as present, past and future. But if the past is already gone and the future has not yet arrived, what reality is there behind our talk? Does time exist apart from us or only in our minds? In other words, our cognitive disposition enables us to measure the consciousness of time as a stream of experiences, for our experiences take place within time. Indeed, some philosophical traditions conflate the notion of time with that of motion. Philip Wiener says, “The consciousness of time is inseparable from that of change”.<sup>11</sup> Plato illustrates our consciousness of time when he posits that time is derivation of nature, a moving image of eternity. Aristotle relational view of time derives Plato’s illustration to the extent that time is inseparable from motion. Thus “in introducing the concept of not yet existing possibility and in insisting on the contingency of the future, Aristotle came very close to the idea of an open future, which is the central theme of modern process philosophy? Aristotle concept of not -yet

and the contingency of the future reiterate the enigma surrounding different modes of time. Strauss argued that the notion of time's measurement (dating an event) is one of the escape routes for "conquering" time. Our civilization has conquered the elusive nature of time by dating events. But the measurement of time initially took numerical succession as its basis to conquer time. This was done by counting days, weeks, months and years. Then, awareness of "simultaneity" was considered in the form of sundials, constant movement of the pendulum that uniformly ticked off time's duration and "atomic clocks", that depends on the irreversibility of radioactive decay, in that order. Strauss concludes that the implicit presupposition in the instances of time measurement is that the future passes through the present into the past.<sup>12</sup>

### **African Conception of Time**

In Mbiti's doctoral dissertation, he uses the concept of time as a paradigm case study of African philosophy. In other words, the concept of time is his unique way of discussing African philosophy. For Mbiti the foundation for seeing the Kamba's view of time is to recognize that time is conceived of as two-dimensional "with a long 'past' and a dynamic 'present'". The future as we know it in the linear conception of time is virtually non-existent in Akamba thinking. He later generalized this to be true of the thinking". He later generalized this to be true of the thinking of all traditional Africa.<sup>13</sup>

According to traditional concepts, the time is a two dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. The linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite past, is practically absent because events which he in it have not taken place, they have not been realized and cannot, therefore, constitute time. If however future events are certain to occur, or if they fall within the inevitable rhythm 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 past. It moves “backward” rather than “forward,” and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place.<sup>14</sup>

This understanding of time, for the African undergirds his whole concept of himself, his tribe and the universe in general according to Mbiti. If this is true, then it is imperative that we firmly understand this concept of time, and furthermore that we are able to relate the Gospel with adequate terminology and sensitivity to be understood by those who operate in the frame work of such a view. Mbiti’s doctoral dissertation proposes Kikamba names for the two dimensions of time: Tene and Mituki. Tene covers the far or remote past and Mituki the immediate past to the near future (there being no concept of the remote future, according to Mbiti). In a later work, he adopted the Swahili terms Zamani and Sasa as their respective equivalents. Mbiti maintains that such a categorization is justified by an analysis of verb tenses available in the language of the tribes he has studied. To illustrate, he list nine tenses commonly used (with Kikamba and Kikuyu, both of Kenya, providing the example) to illustrate the distinction between Zamani and Sasa. He further holds that Sasa has the sense of immediacy, nearness, and now-ness, and is the period of immediate concern for the people of immediate concern for the people, since that is “where” or “when” they exist...events ( which compose time)

In the Sasa dimension must be either about to occur or in the process in realization, or recently experienced. Sasa is the most meaningful period for the individual, because he has a personal recollection of the events of phenomena of this period, or he has a (personal recollection of the events of phenomena of this period, or he is about to experience them....) Sasa is not mathematically or numerically constant. The older a person is, the longer is his Sasa period. The community also has its own Sasa, which is greater than that of individual, the most vivid moment is the now...Sasa is in itself a complete or full time dimension, with

its short future, a dynamic present and an experienced past. We might call it the micro time (little time). The Micro-Time is meaningful to the individual or the community only through their participating or experiencing it.<sup>15</sup>

Zamani is not limited to what English is called in the past. It has its own “past”, “present” and “future” but on a wider scale. We might call it the Macro-time (Big-Time). Zamani overlaps with Sasa and the two are not separable. Sasa feeds or disappears into Zamani. But before events become incorporated into Zamani, they have to become realized or actualized within the Sasa dimension. When this has taken place, then the events “move backwards” from which nothing can go. Zamani is the graveyard of time, the period of termination, the dimension. In which everything becomes absorbed into a neither reality that is neither after nor before.<sup>16</sup>

In evaluating Mbiti’s concept of time, Moreau likened an African as a man standing in a river and facing downstream. The current may be thought of as the flow of time, with the view of the man in the river including primarily that which is peripherally around him and secondarily on that which has already gone past them him (downstream). Sasa time is that which directly around the water, Zamani that which has already passed by him. The future is only what can be seen in peripheral vision, and so the “upstream” tin holds little importance in the perceptions of the man in the water. It will pass when and how it passes, and then it will become of consequence to him. Only what is currently passing or has already passed is of significance, for it has become part of his concrete readily and therefore important. History moves “backward” from now moment to that period beyond which nothing can go, “that period” being the horizon in the distance. The cycles of nature (seasons, years, hours of the day, etc) may be thought of as debris floating along on a recurring basis, not always the same, but always comforting familiar. Rather than the man moving into the future by going upstream, he lets the future come to him by remaining stationary. Since he knows it will reach him eventually, there is no need to focus on it, and he cannot speed its advance (which does not mean the African is fatalistic only not overtly mindful of the future).

Within this same illustrative framework, the western concept may be seen as a man swimming upstream. Time is not viewed as in control of the swimmer, for he advances himself against it. In fact, it is more static than dynamic, and the focus is more of what dangers and events lie ahead and event lie ahead than on what has been already passed. The westerner moves through time.

### **African Time as a Socialized Activity**

Oliver Onwubiko was critical of Mbiti's view by noting that the linear concept of time is not western but Judeo-Christian. Cyclic notion of time was part of the pre-Christian western culture. And when Mbiti talks of time as being of no academic importance among African people, he is thinking of time in terms of "education" which he, in this content, must be considering as purely western academics. Onwubiko conceives Time within African thought as socialized activity. According to him "time apart from being reckoned by such events as the first and second cock-crow, sunrise, overhead sun, or length of shadows, is also reckoned by meal-times, wine -tapping times, time of return from the farm and so on".<sup>17</sup> He observes that events mentioned are not arbitrary. For instance, the use of meal periods does not imply that all eat their meals at exactly the same time but that one has a reasonably accurate idea of what is meant. He quoted Obiechina's distinction between the "clock time" and socialized time, bringing out clearly the concept of time and the different elements with which it is reckoned in traditional African culture. Socialized time here is the use of time which does not sacrifice social duties and human relations on the altar of the clock time-time punctuality.<sup>18</sup>

### **African Time as Cosmological Framework**

Mmaduachi Dukor in his contribution of African time observes that the African conception of time is informed by African cosmological framework or worldview, which like the Ptolemy wheel within wheel model of the universe, is geocentric.<sup>19</sup> According to Dukor, African conception of time is conceived as cyclical and the space is organized in three compartments- the heaven above, the earth below it and the underworld beneath the earth; all conceived and contiguous and continuous in a cyclical continuum. He collaborated with Animalu that African cycle is cyclic and

irreversible and is measured by a biological clock impressed upon it from within by what Achebe calls “its baggage of irreducible inheritance gene” and symbolized by Wole Soyinka’s “creation Snake Pawn Tail in Mouth”. He concluded with the cyclic and the irreversible nature of African time partly explains why it does not have the precision and accuracy of the linear “European time” which is measured by a mechanical device.<sup>20</sup>

### **African Time as a Preposterous Concept**

Kanuin J.S Mbiti’s *African Concept of Time and the Problem of Development* collaborates with Izu in contention with Mbiti by saying that the concept of African time as a metaphor is a preposterous concept. Quoting Izu, he avers

It is both an insulting misnomer and a counter value. The metaphorical concept of African time is one in which tardiness, lousiness and a total disregard for schedules and program is made out to characterize all Africans. Tardiness is a universal phenomenon; it should not be made to hang around African’s neck like a milestone meant to drawn a criminal. Traditional Africa as well as conventional African places a high premium on scheduled activity, punctuality and precision in the performance of activities.<sup>21</sup>

Izu further argued that before the arrival of mechanical clock, the African scheduled things with the cockcrow, high moon and sundown. Sometimes things were schedule with human activities like commencement or end of market session, the morning, the midday, or evening harvesting of palm wine. Though this type of scheduling of activities lack the mathematical precision of the mechanical clock, everyone understood what was meant and compiled. Those who failed to adhere to the schedule were negatively sanctioned through fines and other types of penalty. Babalola and Alokun concurred with Izu that in pre-colonial era, there are a lot of references to concept of time in African thought. Referring to Achebe’s things fall apart, in page 11, he wrote that during the planting season, Okonkwo worked daily on his cock crow until chicken went to roost. In page 19, he

wrote that “the drought continues for eight market week....”. In page 22, he wrote that Ikemefuna was ill for three market weeks. Again in page 23, he wrote that Ikemefuna came to Umuofia at the end of the care free season, between harvest and planting. He 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. Babalola et al noted that Achebe’s (who is an Igbo man from South East Nigeria) observation is that time is tied to events. The same applies to the Yoruba of South West Nigeria. Time is tied to events. For example, 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.<sup>22</sup>

### **African and the Idea of Future Time**

Mbiti is widely and heavily criticized on his conception of “African time”, particularly for its broad strokes of Africans lacking an idea of future times but in reply to many of his critics, he claimed that he state clearly that there is indeed a future dimension of time but people do not project their day to day thinking into a distant mathematical future. He held that “any meaningful event in the future must be so immediate and certain that people have almost experienced it. Therefore, if the event is remote, say beyond two years from now....then it cannot be conceived, it cannot be spoken of. He adds that:

In traditional African thought there is no concept of history moving “forward” toward a future climax, or towards the end of the world. Since the future does not exist beyond a few months, the future cannot be expected to usher in a golden age....the notion of a messianic hope, or a final destruction of the world, has no place in traditional concept of history. So Africans have no “belief in progress”, the idea that the development of human activities and achievements move from a low to a higher degree. The people neither plan for a distant future nor “build castles in the air”<sup>23</sup>

Wiredu observes with dismay that Africans do not build castles in the air is to pay them a compliment that some, though perhaps not all, Africans surely deserve. But to suggest that Africans do not traditionally plan for a distant future is to debit them with incapacity that some of them at least do not deserve. He queried how great empire-builders of African history have accomplished such objectives in total innocence of long-term planning?<sup>24</sup>

Kwame Gyekye is of the opinion that there exists an annual traditional calendar (AkuSikan calendar) of the Akan in Ghana. The Akan traditional year is organized according to days, weeks and months. Gyekye's thesis disputes Mbiti's ontological thesis and its complement. He argues for the thesis that the notion of infinite future is objective metaphysical reality in an African conception. Gyekye's thesis relies on an assumption that time as a concept is associated with the phenomena of change, process and events. He explains that the phenomena of change and events occur only within time. The absence of these phenomena or any one of them has no effect on the reality of time however. Neither change nor process nor events can therefore constitute African awareness of time. Time is not a composition of events in African conception. Rather, it is objective metaphysical reality within which events, process and change take place. Thus, "Time is distinct from and independent of the events that occur within it."<sup>25</sup>

Gyekye advances that through the principle which confers upon the humans their destiny, time is independent of events. The destined identity, time is an influence on personality.<sup>26</sup> On the basis of the basis of this theory, Gyekye argues that "personal characteristics of people reveal their consciousness of time as an element in an individual destiny. Gyekye justifies this claim with some everyday expression that result from change and motion. For instance, in Akan language, "Time flies" and "Time changes"<sup>27</sup> point to the abstract dimension of time, while "no one reigns forever on the throne of time" points to time as a concrete reality. Gyekye employs these to support his thesis of a three dimensional view, as well as the existence of infinite future. In his "Two –versus Three dimensional conception of time in Africa, Oppong observes that that the objective existence for the Africans to talk about some events as before, now or after. According to him, Gyekye supports this claim with an example from the use of language. Akan language has

definite verb tenses for different dimensions of time. Akans have precise vocabulary items such as before, now or after. Akan date events as earlier than (ansa) now or presently (sersei) and after or later than (akyi). By inference from akans' precise verbs tenses modes, Gyekye concludes that three dimensional view of time is an existential reality in the African conceptual scheme.

The notion of infinite being exists in African cosmology. But the existence of an infinite being involves the concept of an infinite future. The infinite being necessarily abides in an infinitely distant future. It logically follows that the notion of infinite future is not foreign but integral to the African conceptual scheme. Gykye supports this argument with evidence from the use of everyday language. The everyday expressions he offers shows that the infinite future is an abiding reality in African thought system. For instance definite expressions for "future tense" exist in some African languages. Daakye, meaning "future or in the future" and Dabi meaning "someday, an unspecified day, a day as yet unknown, some time to come are the equivalent expressions for the English tense "future" in the Akan language. The inner meaning of Da bi attests to "an indefinite time. Gyekye assumes the notion of time as that which exists as an objective, continuous reality. The linguistic analysis of beresantene substantiates the affinity with the western idea that time moves in linear fashion.

### **Onwubiko on Infinite Future Time**

Onwubiko reacted against the belief that Africans do not conceive of infinite future time as not tenable as regards what some African people believe and express in their languages. The Igbo for instance have the saying which clearly shows the concept of indefinite future time. They say: "MGBARAKA MGBA AFO GBUO MMADU, MGBELA MGBE ONA AWULA ANORO N'UZO CHERE YA". This according to him means "IF ONE YEAR ESCAPEE KILLS A HUMAN BEING AND RUNS INSIDE THE BUSH WHENEVER STAYS ON THE ROAD TO WAIT FOR IT. The idea of "MBELAMGBE ONA AWULA"- "WHENEVER" implies a concept of a distant future. This idea according to Onwubiko of a distant future must not be confused with this saying of the tortoise- the tortoise -MBE- is invested with all wise saying in Igbo language- that those anxious to attain old age go ahead, all that he

want is to survive each night. This, in Igbo runs thus: *mbe si ya na obola chi, ndi nkakarawa*. These sayings bring along with the idea of immediate futurity and must be understood from the background of another saying that IZU AGWU AGWU –weeks reoccur. The whole idea is that days make up weeks to survive a week means first to survive a day.

### **Oke's Idea of Future**

Oke` in his analysis of Mbiti's claim that African's are notoriously religious, living as it were in a religious universe, observes that it may plausibly suppose that Africans are some sort of Berkeleyan 'deity-phenomenalist'. He sees the ambivalence of Mbiti's thesis that African lack the concept of future time this way;

Mbiti's African can postulate God as the guarantor of the future existence of the external world. This will lead to saying that the future exists for god, but not for human beings. Such a position can be used to explain most Africans' peculiar carefree attitude to time, to work, and to development.<sup>30</sup>

He contends that the above position appears to lead those who hold it into a self-contradiction. Some for them, the very idea of God involves infinitude, to deny the future will result in logical absurdity. The effect of this is that even if Africans have, directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, the concept of infinitude, they do not take it seriously;

...the general observation is that most African nations lack the foresight to institute enduring economic programs; hence the continuous cycles of poverty, bad governance, monumental backwardness and a seemingly perpetual over-dependence on other peoples of the world for minimal survival. This, however, cannot be read to mean that Africans lack the idea of infinitude. The best we can say is that they lack "time-discipline",<sup>31</sup>

Oke observes that the idea that Africans lack the idea future time sharply contradicted by the observable lives of many Africans in the

home, in politics, and in business, both in traditional and in contemporary times. Many of them procreate profusely, acquire property voraciously, engage in cash crop plantations laboriously, have inheritance procedure, embezzle public life excessively, engage in several forward-looking practices in business, play hard rough “sit-tight” politics, struggle for education and strive to be in good health, traditionally and contemporarily. This seriously portrays their futuristic tendencies in acquiring for their immediate and future generations, both born and unborn. This shows that Africans do not exhibit that epicurean tendencies of let’s eat today, tomorrow, we shall die.

### **Mohatlane Sesotho Drama**

Mohatlane in his attempt to apply Mbiti’s assumptions related it to a Sesotho drama text, “Khaketla’s Moshoeshe le Baruti” (Moshesh and the missionaries) which is a historical drama text. We are all aware that drama is assumed to reflect on reality. His idea is therefore to show how Mbiti’s temporal categories apply to this drama text. This particular text is a drama, so one may be wondering its practicability to real life situation of an African man, because of this, Mohatlane surmised, “although drama is a mirroring of life, it does not give us the whole picture but a compendium of life. In **Act 2: Scene 3**, there is an indicative of the fact that characters here are conscious of the future and their operations within their relationship are also future oriented. Page 27: Rampai: *Ha le esokgolwehoreketsebaditaolae! Feelaa retholeng, le tlampotsa*. Rampai: (Are you not yet convinced that I know the knuckle bones! However, you will learn more from me.) The author presents here a fore-shadowing of the forth-coming event. This is indicative of the fact that characters are conscious of the future as suggested by the event that is due to take place. Seeing that the outcome was such that Rampai managed to convince his men that he was a skilled and talented power doctor, it was quite relevant for him to mention that *le tlampotsa* (you will ask me) because such a remark (time speculation) builds on suspense on the part of the characters and generates more interest on the part of the readers or the audience. We realize a shift of focus in as far as time is concerned.<sup>33</sup>

In his letter to Kolbe, Lemue specifies categorically when (day) he would come and the time (hour). This particular remark is significant to show that not all characters in a text can be categorized as modernists or traditionalists. Seeing that the text involves the two groups' of characters, it appears that the mode of experience of time among the characters in the two groups cannot be the same. We should not lose sight of the fact that with the modernist characters, the future is implied. The specificity of time suggests a linear pattern of time. **Act 3: Scene 4** Page 47: Lemue: *Monghadi! Ketlatlabateng moo ho wenakaveke e tlang, kaLabobedi ... o ntebellekaLabobedi, mahareng a horayabotshelela le yabosupa, mantsiboya.* Lemue: (I will arrive next week on Tuesday ... please expect me on Tuesday between six o'clock and seven o'clock in the afternoon.). Moshesh, the king of the Basotho, also identified himself as future-orientated as he planned or the improvement or future changes in his society. His plans for his nation were actually intended for the future and not necessarily for the here-and-now. This particular idea can be conceived in the following remark: **Act 1: Scene 5**, Page 19: Mosheshoe: *Na ekaba le keke la yafihlisamolaetsawaka ho bona horebanthomelle e mong, kapaba bang ba bona, ho tlaruta le ho hlalefisasetjhabasaka; haholo ho re tlisetsakgotso, hobanekeyonaeo re e lebellang haholo?*<sup>34</sup>

Moshesh: Could you be so kind as to convey my message to them that they should send me one or more missionaries to come and educate my people; more especially to bring about peace as it is this that we are opting or 'crying' for.

The Basotho people as other social groups also experience time according to their social needs and therefore time in Basotho culture should be understood within the context of their social experience within the areas in which they find themselves. The perception that Africans (being represented here in the people of Basotho) are not sensitive to time especially future time is a fallacy that cannot be verified. There is a paradigm shift in the manner in which the traditional Basotho experienced time and how the modern Basotho people experience time and this has affected the experience of time among the Basotho. Beyaraza expressed same chagrin to learn of Africa's long past, a present and virtually no future. For him the linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future is practically foreign to African thinking.

How he wondered could such great societies as the Ashanti, the Zulu, the Kitara, and the Mwenewutapi- to mention just a few, could have developed into such powerful centers of civilization with no concept of progress, planning, or future<sup>36</sup>

From the ongoing expositions, it is evident to note that it is an insult and absurd to refer Africans as those with no idea of future time. Even Mbiti later acknowledged that there is indeed a future dimension of time, but people do not project their day to day thinking into a distant mathematical future. Our idea of shifting cultivation, idea of market days and plethora examples have future time frame attached to it.

### **Justification of the Concept of Time in Africa**

It is not uncommon to hear people talking of “African time” to mean that Africans have no sense of punctuality. They have this tendency to be relaxed and exhibit indifferent attitude towards time and not start meetings at their scheduled time. There is this general acceptance that nothing will start at the absolute time indicated on the schedule. Scholars opinion on this weighty allegation varies from the fact that it not any way true but rather a colonial tag to denigrate Africans, others believe that it has a cultural undertone while others are of the opinion that it is Africa’s inability to acquaint themselves with the western clock time calculation. This section of the paper tries to justify Africa’s seeming lax attitude to time and bring to bear reasons why Africans take this posture, contrary to the tag already hung on the Africans that there is nothing African about time and that laxity in time management is one of the highest contributors to productivity loses in the work place and personal life as plans are not well executed per time. Onwubiko reacted angrily to the above allegation of African lax posture to time and blamed such to the half de-Africanized Africans who are finding it difficult to adjust to the “clock time” category. The traditional African is a master of time and not otherwise. This is why time is a socialized that is, time is programmed into socio-cultural norms of human behavior and interpersonal relationship. The reason why it seems that punctuality is not a virtue to an African man can be justified this way;

He takes time over his snuff and his palm wine and  
if you attempted to hurry him from either, he would

excuse himself by reminding you of the proverb;  
where the runner reaches there the walker will reach  
eventually.<sup>36</sup>

Equally, Africans do have and conceive of time in the punctual sense, that is, a particular time things must happen have effect, or must be done. This can easily be discovered in African religious concepts. There are specific times things must happen; even specific time people must die. According to Onwubiko, it is this sense we read, Elechi Amadi's saying: The spirit of death was known to take away people's soul shortly after midnight that was when Ekwueme died.<sup>37</sup>

### **Time as a Relationship**

Another justification for African understanding of time which is nevertheless portrayed as not being time conscious is Africa's relational approach to life. Here tasks are subjugated to the relational aspect of life and are completed in order to help the family, clan, the village and the tribe. Africans are some of the most hospitable people you will ever meet. This was aptly captured by Blanc in his concise but catchy essay, "keeping Time in Africa..."

Come to the door of a house in Africa (Uganda) and you will most likely hear "you are most welcome:...they will take you into their homes and make you feel as one of the family. You will be given something to eat and or drink, even if it is the last that is there. They will put aside all pressing things before them and just focus on you. The relationship that is more important and the tasks at hand become secondary since in o become Africa the relationship works out to become part of the task solution.<sup>38</sup>

According to Blanc, if you walk around Africa, you will see people sitting, chatting, waiting. You come by a few hours later and they have not moved and savor the time before him. There is not the anxiousness to do this or that, to meet this deadline or that one. The

justification of this is that “It is not the clock that rules the day...but the relationship. It is being a human being instead of human doing”Jobs are important and people do come to work on time, but even at work there is an interaction and relational approach to the tasks at hand.Controversially, Blanc contends that one of other reason why time is invested to cement relationships in Africa is as a result of shortness of life span. Though there are many reasons to counter this view because in pristine times Africans live longer than we see around even longer than (blanc) his natives. But look at his reason:

AIDS have taken another ten years or more off the average life span of Africans. So when your life is short and you know that most of the people around you are dying young, your approach to life becomes different. You value relationships that will nurture you when you when you hit rough waves in your life journey....Africans love to celebrate everything. They enjoy each other as they celebrate life and at times death.<sup>39</sup>

So because of the shortness of time, the clock reminds one of the shortness, probably one of the reasons why Africans will ignore the clock. They realize that enduring things in life have to do with family, friends, relationships and not a day ruled by the clock and when someone says “they are on the way” they might never come or when will we get there? –soon- hours later you are still as we say “on the way”.

### **Time in African Sense as Polychronous**

Time in the African culture is polychromous in the sense that a person can do three or more things within a given period simultaneously but clock time thinks of them being done successively. For instance, a woman in a typical Igbo village could be doing her cooking, at the same time cracking her palm kernel, she may still within this period attend to her baby and would be prepared to attend to anything that may come up. In a natural image, some authors have depicted this polychromous concept and use of time in Africa with the image of an African woman who could be pregnant, while at the same time carrying a load on her head.<sup>40</sup> Combining

responsibilities is an aspect of our culture that is directly influenced by our communalism and sense of time. Even though, there are all sorts of disincentives and punishments for being late, and the paradox is we are late even those punishments and consequences exist. Multitasking makes it harder to be aware of what one is doing. Therefore time was for man to control and not to control man.

### **Life as Passage through Time**

Menkiti recognize that time movement was generally from the present to the past, so that the more of a past one has, the more standing to the past one has, the more standing as a person one also has. So “I am looking forward to my own past would be a remark well placed within the thought system. Ontological progression, in taking place in time demands that time be considered relevant to the in-gathering of excellences of the person as one ages. Hence the Igbo proverb “what an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see standing up”. A statement like this according to Menkiti signifies that passage through time helps create not only a qualitative difference between young and old, but also an ontologically significant one. The Africans believes that life is a continuous passage through time, this ontological passage justify their concept of time. This ontological movement is marked by various ceremonies and in the process begins the first phase of that various naming ceremonies, and in the process begins:

then the born child is brought through the various naming ceremonies, and, in the process, begins the first phase of that special journey toward incorporated personhood via the community. Later, there will be puberty and the ceremonies, which mark it as an entry into young adulthood. And through the years of adulthood, there will be other acknowledgements, through ceremony, of other important transitions such as marriage, the producing of children, the taking of titles, etc. Finally, there will arrive old age and elderhood, and, after elderhood, ancestorhood.<sup>41</sup>

African conception more or less is ontological so to say, it is a movement of individual human child into personhood and beyond as essentially a journey from an “it” to an “it”. Because of this, they believe that life is a continuous process and so, life should not be hurried. They believe that whatever is left undone now will definitely be done later, if not now in the afterlife, as an ancestor. This according to Menkiti:

...ancestors are themselves still continuing persons, still very much a part of the living community. Here, the person that the child became, at some stage in the described journey, does not abruptly go out of existence at the stage of physical death. The sense appears to be that the person once again becomes an “it,” going out of the world the same way the journey first began. Thus, the movement from an “it” to an “it.” The moral magic of personhood happens in between, and, after the magic, it is silence at the end-point that we call the stage of the nameless dead. There is no heaven or hell, no final judgment warranting an ascension into the ranks, above, of the saved; nor descent into the ranks below, of the damned.<sup>42</sup>

So the idea of the consequences of our action awaiting for us either in heaven or in hell is out of the matter. Whatever we left undone in this present life is to be continued in the world of nameless dead, so there is no point rushing to get things done when we have opportunity to accomplish them much more in time to come. Africans keep time in their own way, they have a saying, “Africans do not wait for time, rather time waits for Africans. Our ancestors did not have watches, they waited for the sun, the moon and the stars to tell them time. I can be late but everyone knows that I will always get there, so why should stress myself over time?”

### **Time as what is Important at that Time**

Life and things happens at much slower pace in Africa in than Europe. People prioritize their time based on what they perceived to be most important at that time. Africans spend most of their

morning gardening or farming, they show up to the meeting when they have finished their works in the field or take time to finish their meals regardless of their commitment at that time.

Sarah in her article “On African Time” narrated her experience to buttress the above claim thus:

Bishop Asili hospital grounds are surrounded by a fence. There is only one gate at the entrance to the hospital for people to enter and exit. A guard is on duty 24hrs a day. One day I left the hospital compound to go on a long walk. I happened to return when the guard was enjoying his launch break less than 20 feet from the gate. The gate was locked and there was a group on both sides of the gate waiting to either enter or exit the compound. In the United States, the guard would be expected to interrupt his or her lunch to unlock the gate and proceed with his duties monitoring who enters and leaves the hospital, shoving a bite of food in his mouth whenever he got the channel. The guard continued to eat his launch, while everyone patiently waited for him to finish.<sup>43</sup>

This is goes to justify the claim that “Train” which refers to a situation is unknown is Africa, that you finish what you are supposed to do, and ready to do the next thing, but this requires something that will only occur at a given point in dead mechanical clock time. So; you finished some job and you can go now, but have to wait for the train.<sup>44</sup>

### **Lack of Basic Amenities**

There are some peculiar problems of Africa which results due to the level of development. Our lack of development has made Africans to justify their attitude to time. This is because people are helpless in certain situations where they have no control of.

So I can be late but everyone knows I will always get there. Why should I stress myself over time? I have no control over transport because I do not have

a car. I do not know when the food is going to be ready because I do not know when electricity will come. I do not know when the “kombi” will arrive.<sup>45</sup>

The chaotic route of mini-buses (danfos) and motorbikes (okada) that constitute public transportation does not operate on a schedule. You cannot go to <http://www.danfo.com> and see a to-the minute schedule of when a certain danfo will be arriving at a given bus stop. You go to the bus stop or the side of the road and wait till you see one of those dilapidated white busses zip by. Unexpected stand still traffic jams caused by trucks that break down in the middle of the road are frequent. Estimated time of arrival (ETA) does not work in Africa because anything could happen on the way and we don't have the luxury of continual traffic updates to keep us privy to road blocks. Then there is the problem of constantly losing electricity that puts damage a damper on plans overall.

### **Evaluation**

We have seen so far the conceptions of time by African and noted that we have perceiving time which is quite different from the western time categories. Africans keep time in their own way, Africans have our way saying, “African do not wait for time, rather time waits for Africans. However, They are fully conscious of the fact that time elapses even though they are not so consistent to work according to time constraints or a specific schedule. Africans have an idea of the future even though they do not put more emphasis on the future. In other words, the Africans lack ‘time discipline’ but it does not necessarily mean that they do not have a sense of the future and especially the lapse of time. This poem by Visser will go a long way to explain Africa and her conception of time.

I ‘m living my days in African time  
I ‘m walking the ways of season and rhyme  
I ‘m weaving the maze of culture and crime  
I ‘m soaking the rays of scattered sunshine

You think that I ‘m slow  
You think that I ‘m lazy  
You think I don ‘t know

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You think that I'm crazy

But I'm beating my drum to Africa time  
I 'm hearing the hum of friends on the line  
I 'm counting the sum of blessing I find  
I 'm tracing the crumbs of love left behind

You think that I 'm late  
You think that I'm aimless  
You think I don't rate  
You think that I'm nameless

But I'm setting my pace to African time  
My life's not a race for the clock or bell chime  
I'm moving with grace on a mission sublime  
I'm claiming back space for African time<sup>46</sup>

Many people that come to Africa find their concept of time, slow and frustrating. They came to do something...a few months or even years later, they get frustrated. Never completing what they come to do. They never learned how things happen in Africa...relationally. Africa is first and foremost relational in its approach to life. Tasks are subjugated to the relational aspect of life and are completed in order to help the family, the clan, the village, and the tribe.

But I'm beating my drum to Africa time  
I 'm hearing the hum of friends on the line  
I 'm counting the sum of blessing I find  
I 'm tracing the crumbs of love left behind

Walk, drive around Africa and you will see people sitting, chatting, waiting. You come by a few hours later and they have not moved. Are they not bored? No, the African enjoys and savors the time before him. There is not the anxiousness to do this or that, to meet this deadline or that one.

But I'm setting my pace to African time  
My life's not a race for the clock or bell chime  
I'm moving with grace on a mission sublime

I'm claiming back space for African time

This is my justification and this is African conception of time. The rushed and paced lifestyle of the west is unhealthy because of the dictate of the clock or bell chime. But Africans will always enjoy their leisurely meals with lots of conversation in grace on mission sublime and not hurriedly because of scheduled appointments.

### **Conclusion**

Each culture has a particular orientation towards time orientations and a corresponding set of priorities for various events within its cultural life. The passage of time is "relative" to our perceptions of events. Individuals within a culture, an organization or group or a family may differ in their orientation and preferences from the rest—such individual often get frustrated and are considered as unreasonable, lazy, or contrary by the rest when they give voice their frustrations, or fail to meet expectations. There needs to be a balancing (prioritizing) of time vs events considerations most people are usually somewhere in between the two extremes. It is usually necessary to adapt to the time and event orientation of a culture group. The concept of African time has become a key topic of self-criticism in modern Africa. While this paper has defended and justified Africa's posture to time, the absence of precision which is at the base of the African Time is still glaring. We have noted above that:

The general observation is that most African nations lack the foresight to institute enduring economic pro-grams; hence the continuous cycles of poverty, bad governance, monumental backwardness and a seemingly perpetual over-dependence on other peoples of the world for minimal survival. This, however, cannot be read to mean that Africans lack the idea of infinitude. The best we can say is that they lack 'time-discipline'.<sup>47</sup>

So this lack of time discipline is really a serious bug in our system. It has become both African's and foreigner's joke. Basically, it means that you come to a program or meeting after the scheduled time for

commencement. It is not considered a big deal to be late although there are many Africans who advocate that people should keep to time better.

President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe once excused his tardiness thus. "I want to thank you all for coming. I was disjointed, we came back at midnight so I had two hours of sleep and naturally, I have the habit that if I have something worries me, my mind sleeps on it and I constantly jump out of sleep."<sup>48</sup>

He apologized in march for being late to attend the Kutama centenary celebration in Zvimba in his home country. According to one Ghanaian writer,

One of the main reason for the continuing underdevelopment of our country is our nonchalant attitude to time and the need for punctuality in all aspect of life. The problem of punctuality has become so endemic that lateness to any function is accepted and explained off as "African time".<sup>49</sup>

Onwubiko lamented that the concept of African time has given rise to the "fire brigade" approach which most African adopt and utilize when carrying out their legitimate duties. We must reverse this negative interpretation which we give to the concept of African time. this African time or fire-brigade approach has made us to suffer many devastations in the field of politics and sports in this country. He observed that it "fire brigade approach that made our national football team to miss in the qualification playoffs to many global tournaments. It was also the fire brigade approach that made Nigerian students perform abysmally poorly in all the externally conducted examinations. African time neatly marred most electoral events in the political calendar set by the independent National Electoral Commission under the erstwhile Chairman, Attahiru Jega."<sup>50</sup>

Chilanga blamed Malawi's failure to complete the MDG's target to the old business of not acting according to time. In his words:

Some years ago, former president Bingu WaMutharika, was very optimistic that Malawi would achieve all the MDGs. Bingu, boldly told fellow Heads of states and government at a three-day summit on the UN in New York in 2010 that his country is making continuous progress in achieving the goals by 2015. Returning to the same New York, four years after, his brother, current President Peter Mutharika, in his address told a different story that his country was on track to achieve only four of the eight MDGs and thus would proceed to that post-2015 era with unfinished business.<sup>51</sup>

In October 2007, an Ivorian campaign against African time, backed by President Gbagbo received international media attention when an event called "punctuality night" was held in Abidjan to recognize business people and government workers for regularly being on time. The slogan of the campaign is "African time is killing Africa- Lets fight it"

Reuters reported that "organizers hope to heighten awareness of how missed appointments, meetings or even late buses cut productivity in a region where languid tardiness is the norm". it was remarked that this year's winner, Narcisse Aka – who received a \$60,000 villa in recognition of his punctuality- "is so unusually good at being punctual that his colleagues call him "Mr white man's time".<sup>52</sup>

I believe that this novel way of combating tardiness should be extended to the rest of West African and even Africa since it has been noticed as one of the brake to africa's economic development

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