

A CRITIQUE OF AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF TIME IN JOHN MBITI

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Abstract

One of the fundamental problems that is faced by man's existence is the facticity of time. Time remains an essential aspect of man's existence. The meaningfulness and the meaninglessness of human existence is fundamentally inspired by time because human existence is limited by time. This paper critically examines the African ontology of John Mbiti's concept of time. His philosophical inquiry of African concept of time was not holistic. The concept of time is a universal phenomenon and it goes beyond the Western and African perspective of time. Every human person lives within the non-tangibility, immateriality and non-spatial framework of time. Time remains one of the fundamental factors or cardinal elements of every human existence. It has been popularly asserted by some Nigerian musicians that "time is money". The concept of time in Mbiti's African philosophy has been criticized by some critics and scholars. Many critics argued that Mbiti's concept of time is based on his Christian perspective. Some of Mbiti's critics also argued that Mbiti's concept of time in African philosophy is visual or not in-depth and that his conceptual analysis of time is idiosyncratic and does not truly represent the whole peoples of Africa. This paper adopts the analytical framework in discussing the ontology of time in Mbiti's African philosophy. Time, just like most philosophical concepts have a definitional difficulty. The very fact that the concept of time is definitional difficulty is more of a challenge than a discouragement to further discuss this concept. Time has been defined in different ways by many people. There is no universally acceptable definition of time. The findings of this paper are that (1) the concept of time has an ontological and metaphysical status; (2) the concept of time has eschatological significance; (3) time is a universal phenomenon and it cuts across all race and cultures; and (4) the concept of time is universalistic and relativistic, objective and subjective. This paper concludes that human value is fundamentally inspired by time. Time reminds human existence the need to live consciously in terms of their deliberate choices and actions.

Keywords: African, Ontology, Sasa, Time, Zamani

Introduction

Reverend John Samuel Mbiti (1931-2019) was a Kenyan born Christian philosopher and writer. He was an ordained Anglican Priest, and is considered “the Father of Modern African theology”. Born on the 30th November, 1931 in Eastern Kenya, Mbiti was raised in a strong Christian environment by Samuel Mutuvi Ngaangi and Valesi Mbandi Kiimba, his parents. His Christian upbringing encouraged his educational journey through Alliance High School in Nairobi and University College of Makerere where he graduated in 1953. His academic journey was furthered in the US and he received his Bachelor of Arts in 1956, following his Bachelor of theology in 1957 from Barrington College in Rhode Island. He earned his Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) in theology at the University of Cambridge where he had graduated in 1963.¹

Furthermore, he was ordained an Anglican Priest of the Church of England after graduating from Cambridge University.² He served as a parish Priest till he returned to Makerere where he taught Religion and theology between 1964 and 1974. Mbiti’s research interests included theology in Africa and Asia, and Ecumenism. This led him to his first work, a seminal book, “African Religions and Philosophy” (1969). In this book, he challenged the Christian assumption that traditional African religious ideas were demonic and anti- Christian.³ His treatment of traditional religions came from his massive field work. He clearly stated that his interpretation of traditional religions was from a Christian perspective, and this earned him several criticisms with the likes of Okot p’Bitek, and Tsenay Serequeberhan.

Worthy of note is that between 1974 and 1980 Mbiti became the director of the World Council of Churches Bosvey Ecumenical institute. He held a series of conferences, the first being

in June 1976, the second in July 1977, and the third which was not specifically dated. The goal of these conferences was to bring together African, Asian, and other theologians for encounter and dialogue. The first conference saw an attendance of more than 80 participants. The second had an attendance of more than 100 people from 35 different countries discussing on “Confessing Christ in Different Cultures”. As at the third conference, the discourse was on “Indigenous Theology and the Universal Church”.

Furthermore, in 1996, Mbiti retired as a Parish minister, and also retired as a University Lecturer in 2005. During his retirement, Mbiti translated the entire New testament of the Bible from its original Greek and Hebrew manuscript into his mother tongue, Kikamba which is spoken by Kamba people of Kenya and Tanzania. Mbiti, during his lifetime, received numerous prestigious distinctions and honorary doctorates, one of which was the Archbishop’s award for peace given by the Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

Nevertheless, the works written by Mbiti includes *Akamba stories* (1966), *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970), *Love and Marriage in Africa* (1973), *Introduction to African Religion* (1975), *African Proverbs* (1997), and *The Prayers of African Religion* (1975). Mbiti is credited to have contributed largely to African philosophy providing several ideas relevant for social work, spirituality, child development, marriage, justice and so on. He is popular for the quote “where an African is, Religion is”, and “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am (Ubuntu).⁴

Moreover, one of the fundamental problems that is faced by man’s existence is the facticity of time. Time remains an essential aspect of man’s existence. The meaningfulness and the meaninglessness of human existence is fundamental inspired by time because human

existence is limited by time. This paper critically examines the African ontology of John Mbiti's concept of time. His philosophical inquiry of African concept of time was not holistic. The concept of time is a universal phenomenon and it goes beyond the Western and African perspective of time. Every human person lives within the non-tangibility, immateriality and non-spatial framework of time. Time remains one of the fundamental factors or cardinal elements of every human existence. It has been popularly asserted by some Nigerian musicians that "time is money". The concept of time in Mbiti's African philosophy has been criticized by some critics and scholars. Many critics argued that Mbiti's concept of time is based on his Christian perspective. Some of Mbiti's critics also argued that Mbiti's concept of time in African philosophy is visual or not in-depth and that his conceptual analysis of time is idiosyncratic and does not truly represent the whole peoples of Africa. Time, just like most philosophical concepts have a definitional difficulty. The very fact that the concept of time is definitional difficulty is more of a challenge than a discouragement to further discuss this concept. Time has been defined in different ways by many people. There is no universally acceptable definition of time. The findings of this paper are that (1) the concept of time has an ontological and metaphysical status; (2) the concept of time has eschatological significance; (3) time is a universal phenomenon and it cuts across all race and cultures; and (4) the concept of time is universalistic and relativistic, objective and subjective. This paper concludes that human value is fundamentally inspired by time. Time reminds human existence the need to live consciously in terms of their deliberate choices and actions.

Furthermore, this paper is divided in four sections. Section one is the introductory remarks. Section two focuses on the ontology of time in John Mbiti's African philosophy. Section three hinges on the evaluation of the ontology of time in Mbiti's African philosophy. Section four is anchored on the concluding considerations.

The Ontology of Time in John Mbiti's African Philosophy

Time, just like most philosophical concepts have a definitional deficiency. The very fact that the concept of time is definitional deficient is more of a challenge than a discouragement to further discuss this concept. Time has been defined and described as many by many people. Ireogbu defines time thus: "Time is backdrop reality that calculates the unfolding of being, and is made present by human mind in the human experience of reality-in-community"⁵. By this, he asserts that time is real based on the events that occur in it. All that a man does is composed in time.

The Kenyan philosopher, John Mbiti, one of those who has described the concept of time sees it as a cyclical phenomenon rather than a linear progression of events. This conception of time he calls the African conception of time. He argues that the African conception of time is rooted in the idea that the present is influenced by both the past and the future. The African time, for him, is characterized by a strong sense of community and a focus on the present moment. Time is not rigidly measured in minutes and seconds but is seen as a more fluid and flexible concept. The emphasis is on the quality of the present experience rather than strict adherence to schedule and deadlines.

In the African society, time is often viewed as a holistic entity interconnected with other aspects of life, such as nature, spirituality, and social relationships. Events are experienced collectively,

and the rhythm of life is influenced by natural cycles, seasons, and the movements of celestial bodies.

In his explication of the African concept of time, he asserts that there is no view of extended future for the African. What we have is an indefinite past, and present. If there must be a concept of the future at all, it will span between now and two years. He uses such concepts as potential time, actual time, and no- time to drive home his point. He also formulates the concept of the “Sasa” and “Zamani” to explain what he terms as the African conception of time.

In his book “African Religions and Philosophy” (1969) John Mbiti attempts to interpret the African philosophical conception and religion. He seeks to explain the “African ontology” which for him is religious. To further explain this ontology, Mbiti posits that the African concept of time needs to be properly understood to aid our understanding of the African ontology.

Mbiti proposes the “African concept of time as key to our understanding of the basic religious and philosophical concepts. The concept of time may help to explain beliefs, attitudes, practices, and general way of life of African people’s not only in traditional set up, but also in the modern situation (whether of political, economic, educational, or Church life).⁶ This claim by implication shows that the Africans have a conception of time distinct from that of the West, and even of the East.

Worthy of note is that Mbiti proposes that time for the African is event-bound, both events that have occurred, the ones occurring immediately. Any event that has not taken place is not categorized in time. What Mbiti calls “no- time”. What has not taken place or what has no likelihood of an immediate occurrence is called “no- time.”⁷ However, the direct implication of this is that the African conception of time for Mbiti becomes two- dimensional. It has an infinite

past, and a present, with the absence of the future. It is due to this two-dimensional time conception that Mbiti proposes the Potential time, and the Actual time.

Worthy of note is that Mbiti rejects the existence of an infinite future. The future is absent as the events in it have not taken place, and as such, we cannot speak of it. As he earlier asserted, since events in the future have not taken place, it has no place in time. However, if there is a certainty of events to occur in the future, or they fall within the inevitable rhythm of nature, they at best constitute what he calls “potential time”. So, the events that have a likelihood of occurrence with certainty fall within the realm of potential time.

Nonetheless, there is also what Mbiti calls “Actual time”. Actual time is known to refer to real or current time being experienced or measured. It is the objective measurement of the passage of time, typically based on a standard system such as the Gregorian calendar or a clock. It is with the actual time we schedule events, coordinate activities, and keep track of the chronological order of events. Actual time for Mbiti is therefore what is present, and what is past.⁸ However, this is because once an event occurs, it no longer belongs to the realm of the future, but the present, and within a little period, it becomes past.

In addition, the African concept of time posited by Mbiti was built around his research on the Kikamba and Giyuku languages. For him, African reckon time for a concrete and specific purpose, and not just for the sake of mathematics or in a vacuum. The African time is either time- for, or time- to, or time- of; whether designated, opportunistic, or emergency. Mbiti cites the example of the rising of the sun. When the Sun rises, it is noticed by the whole community. No one is bothered if it rose by 5am or 7am, as long as it rose. Similarly, when a person says he will meet another at sunrise, it does not matter whether the meeting takes place at 5am or 7am, so long as it is during the period of sunrise. The Africans, by implication, have phenomenon

calendar rather than numerical calendar. This is why when the African asserts that he will offer a sacrifice to God when the sun sets, it doesn't matter whether the sun sets at 12 or 10 minutes after 12. What is of paramount importance is that the sacrifice was offered at Sunset.⁹ This is why Mbiti is convinced that the African man is not a slave of time, rather, he controls and manipulates time. The day, month, year of one's life time or human history are all divided up or reckoned according to their specific events, for it is these that make them meaningful.⁹

Moreover, in technological or Western society, time is considered a commodity that should be used, sold, and bought. This is not the case in traditional African life. In traditional African life, time is not sold or bought, it is created or produced. This might serve as a puzzle to the Westerners, this is why foreigners are quick to assert, when they see an African man evidently doing nothing, that he is lazy, or idle. There is also the common cry of "African time" to denote lateness of the Africans to events, or gatherings. These remarks are only born out of ignorance of the African concept of time. Unlike the Westerners, Africans produce, or are in the process of creating time. For instance, on Tuesday 28 October, 2003, 16:03 GMT, BBC news reported that international journalists in the UK were kept waiting by the King of Ghana's largest ethnic group who was visiting Alexandra Palace in North London at the climax of a Ghanaian trade exhibition, Ghana Expo 2003.¹⁰ However, the journalists had been informed that Otumfuo Osei Tutu II from the Ashanti would arrive at the exhibition at 11:00. The time was changed to 14:00, but the King did not show up until two hours later when the journalists had already packed and left.

Furthermore, the incident made the Whites remark that Africans are terrible time keepers.¹¹ Following Mbiti's exposition of the African concept of time, the foreigners made such remark due to no understanding of the African concept of time. What matters to the African is

not specifically when a thing happens, but the event itself. What mattered to the King was not the time he came, but the event of his coming. This is the African concept of time, and it is for this reason that numerical reckoning of time will fail or be impossible in the traditional African setting. Time is reckoned in traditional Africa based on significant events, such as events of birth of a prominent King, death of a prominent King, farming activities, trading activities, and so on. For example, among the Ankore of Uganda, a cattle rearing is at the heart of the people. Hence, time is reckoned in accordance to cattle. 6am becomes the time for milking the Cow, 12 noon for Cattle to rest, 1pm to draw water, 3pm for Cattle to drink water, 3pm for Cattle to start grazing, 5pm for Cattle to return home, 6pm for Cattle to enter their sleeping places, 7pm for milking again.¹²

Worthy of note is that months in the traditional African society are reckoned based on changes of the moon, not numerically. Months are named based on the most prevailing events, or weather conditions. For example, there is the hit month, the month of the first rains, weeding months, and so on. Among the Latuka people, months are reckoned based on the events of the moon and weather. Their months include:

October called “The Sun” because of the heat, December is called “Give your Uncle water” because of water scarcity, February is called “Let them dig” because it is time to cultivate the fields, May is called “Grain in the air” because grains at this time, June is “Dirty mouth” because Children begin to chew the grains, July is “drying grass” because rain stops, August is “Sweet grains” because people harvest and eat sweet grains, September is called “Sausage tree” because at this time, they bear fruit.¹³

Furthermore, the year, in accordance with the days and months is also composed of events, but more events than the day and the month. Where the community is agricultural, the year is composed of two major seasons – dry and rainy. When the season concludes, the year ends. The year runs as long as the seasons persist. Therefore, one-year might have 350 days

while another year has 390 days.¹⁴ There is no definite number of days in a year in the traditional African setting and this again explains why there can be no numerical measurement of time in Africa.

Nevertheless, time as a concept is what man deals with every day. Time can be characterized into the progression of past, present, and future. Every man is believed to have a past which is the before- period, a present which is the now- period, and future which is the to-come period. These progressions of time characterized into past, present, and future has been revealed by studies by study not to be conceptualized in the same way by everyone.

Moreover, philosophers differ on their conception of the past, present, and future. For some philosophers like Georg Wilhelm Hegel, the past has been set in stone. That is, the past is rigid and cannot be changed. However, the content of the past remains unchanging like an already written book. Friedrich Nietzsche differs on this view. The past is conceived for him to be flexible. That is, events of the last change depending on how we remember it based on our current situation and perspective or circumstance.

Worthy of note is that with the time dimension of the present is where things get tricky. Some modern philosophers think that events of the present are happening all at once, but our brains process it as though it were continuous. For some, the present is an important moment for making decisions that will shape the future. By implication, the future becomes a product of the present. For Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher, the temporality of time is conceptualized into the German terms “Facticity”, “existentiality” and “fallenness”.

Nevertheless, facticity is the part of a man’s life where he has little or no power of choice over his life, environment and so on. It is called “thrownness”. Martin Heidegger explains that we are all thrown into the world within a family that was not our choice, given a gender we didn’t opt

for, raised in culture we didn't choose, and so on. We just find ourselves in it. Even the tasks we concern ourselves with are not our choice as they are decided by the particular facticity we find ourselves. However, this period of facticity where we have neither prior knowledge or individual opinion of the world we find ourselves represent our past for Heidegger.

Nonetheless, the second term is 'existentiality'. Existentiality features the possibilities a man has at his disposal. Here, the reality of man as a being is realized. It is this feature of possibility that distinguishes man from all other beings. As a being of possibilities, man is open to his deliberate choices and actions or decisions. He decides from here on what goes on in his life and he can choose to make meaning of his existence. The existential stage is unique as one is free in it as against the period of 'facticity'. Existentiality represents the present period of the life of a man.

In addition, the third and final stage of time progression for Martin Heidegger is "fallenness". At the stage of "fallenness", man loses himself into the world. In the search for fulfillment and something to meet the expectation of others, man falls into certain tasks by default. At this point, man begins to live an inauthentic life. Man becomes what Heidegger calls "the- they", or "they- self". The period of fallenness is characteristic of the future. So, for Heidegger, man is both a being of the past, and present, tending towards the future. Although man has no control of his existence in the last, he regains control in the present, but loses himself again in the future. Thus becomes Heidegger's understanding of the progression and the conception of time.

Moreover, the conception of time for Mbiti differs from that of Heidegger's conception of time. Mbiti recognizes the period of infinite past, and present, but not future. For him, the Africans have no conception of the future. The African concept of time for him is silent and

indifferent. This means the future is virtually non-existent as actual time¹⁵. However, the past, for Mbiti is a time progression of events gotten from the present. When an event is no longer in the present, it becomes past. The past is therefore a make-up of all previously experienced events. He asserts that the existence of a long and infinite past. The present is caught up in the actual time. It is a make-up of events that are happening now or being experienced immediately.

Broadly speaking, to speak of the present, for Mbiti, is to speak of that which is being immediately experienced here and now. For the future, Mbiti opines that there can be no talk or projection of an event that has not taken place, and the future is known to contain events that are yet to occur. As such, there is no African conception of the future. At best, there is the progression of the present up to two years which one can categorize as the future. This shows the existence of a rather brief future. This is so because any meaningful event in the future must be so immediate and certain that people have almost experienced it.¹⁶ Once the event exceeds the two years' time frame, it cannot be spoken of and categorized as time.

It is worthy of note that Mbiti asserts that by the very fact that African languages, especially in the Kikamba culture which he had done his research, lacks a word for the infinite future, there is no African conception of the finite. A closer look at Heidegger and Mbiti's concept of time portrays very interesting facts. Where Heidegger sees the past as that part of man's life that he cannot control, Mbiti sees the past as a "lived- experience" emanating from the present. So while a man has no control over his past for Heidegger, man is very well in charge of events that constitute past for Mbiti. However, their conception of the future is quite similar in that, while Mbiti conceives of the future as no more than two years on, Heidegger's conception of the future is as well temporal. It is not infinite as some would conceive.

Evaluation

Based on his research and massive field work in the Kikamba or Giyuku culture, Mbiti posits two verbs which for him are a better fit than the English words past, present, and future, for the purpose of avoiding thoughts association. He proposes the two words “Sasa” and “Zamani”. The Sasa covers the “now period.”¹⁷ Be that as it may, this means that all that has to do with being present or now is categorized as Sasa. The Sasa is the immediate concern of man as it concerns itself with “immediacy”, “nearness”, and “nowness” which is “where” or “when” they exist.¹⁸ All events that fall within the Sasa period must be events occurring about to occur, in the process of occurrence, or recently experienced. What in the Western concept is called future is swallowed up and categorized under the Sasa. As is known of the African conception of time, the Sasa is not mathematically or numerically constant. The Sasa periods of people differ from each other. One’s Sasa continues as long as one lives. Hence, the older person has a longer Sasa than the younger person. The Sasa of the community is also known to be greater than that of the individual.

Furthermore, the conceptual clarification of Sasa is the time region in which people are conscious of their existence and within which they project themselves both in the short future and mainly into the past.¹⁹ In itself, the Sasa is a complete time dimension as it has its present, experienced past which is a fall out of the present, and a short future. The Sasa can be called the “Micro-time”. The Micro-time is a time useful to an individual only to the degree of their experiencing and participating in it.

Nevertheless, the Zamani on its part is the counterpart of the Sasa. The Zamani could be conceptualized as the past. It is however not just limited to what in English is called past. It is also a make- up of its own past, present, and future.²⁰ The Zamani binds all things together and

gives a sense of foundation to the Sasa. The Zamani has been described by Mbiti as the graveyard of time and the period beyond which nothing can go. As such, Zamani becomes the limit of time. The Zamani is interestingly inseparable from the Sasa. Although, the Zamani represents the past, we cannot speak of the Zamani without recourse to the Sasa. This is because the events categorized as Zamani are from the Sasa.

In addition, once an event is no longer in its present state, or in the state of occurrence, it becomes past, that is, Zamani. By this, Zamani contains events actualized and experienced in the Sasa. This shows that time goes backwards, from the Sasa (now- period) to the Zamani (realm of the past). The Zamani becomes the final storehouse of all phenomena and events, the ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after nor before.²¹ However, the Zamani is also known as the macro-time.

Moreover, a person's Zamani starts when he becomes forgotten after death. When a man dies, he still remains in the realm of the Sasa for as long as he is remembered by his family. When the dead is still remembered by name, personality, and so on, by his family relatives, and friends, he still exists in the realm of now-ness, Sasa. This dead is said to be in the state of personal immortality. However, when he ceases to be remembered, especially by the person with the longest Sasa due to his own death, he is excommunicated from the Sasa period into the Zamani. He, at this point, ceases to exist among the living. He now dwells among the spirits. If he were still remembered by friends, or relatives, Mbiti would call him the "living dead". Thus living dead is a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him in his life.²² Be that as it may, once he ceases to exist, he joins the realm of collective immortality. Whereas one's life is categorized under the Sasa period, and even in death, if he is still remembered, he is categorized under the Sasa period, one's death is categorized under the

Zamani, especially is dead both physically, and in the memory of his friends and relatives. At such a point, if the dead appears, he becomes an object of fear and dread. This is because he is no longer remembered, and has slipped off to the realm of “distant past”. The Sasa and Zamani both correlate and serve as a basis for each other in the African understanding of time as posited by John Mbiti.

Concluding Considerations

One of the fundamental problems that is faced by man’s existence is the facticity of time. Time remains an essential aspect of man’s existence. The meaningfulness and the meaninglessness of human existence is fundamental inspired by time because human existence is limited by time. This paper critically examines the African ontology of John Mbiti’s concept of time. His philosophical inquiry of African concept of time was not holistic. The concept of time is a universal phenomenon and it goes beyond the Western and African perspective of time. Every human person lives within the non-tangibility, immateriality and non-spatial framework of time. Time remains one of the fundamental factors or cardinal elements of every human existence. It has been popularly asserted by some Nigerian musicians that “time is money”. The concept of time in Mbiti’s African philosophy has been criticized by some critics and scholars. Many critics argued that Mbiti’s concept of time is based on his Christian perspective. Some of Mbiti’s critics also argued that Mbiti’s concept of time in African philosophy is visual or not in-depth and that his conceptual analysis of time is idiosyncratic and does not truly represent the whole peoples of Africa. Time, just like most philosophical concepts have a definitional difficulty. The very fact that the concept of time is definitional difficulty is more of a challenge than a discouragement to further discuss this concept. Time has been defined in different ways by many people. There is no universally acceptable definition of time. The findings of this paper

are that (1) the concept of time has an ontological and metaphysical status; (2) the concept of time has eschatological significance; (3) time is a universal phenomenon and it cuts across all race and cultures; and (4) the concept of time is universalistic and relativistic, objective and subjective. This paper concludes that human value is fundamentally inspired by time. Time reminds human existence the need to live consciously in terms of their deliberate choices and actions.

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Endnotes

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