



Communication of Time in Africa

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(Received: February-2021; Accepted: June-2021; Available Online: June -2021)



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ABSTRACT

I showed in this paper that time is communicated in traditional Africa Sub-Saharan Africa through proverbs, songs, riddles, fables, poems, etc. but in contemporary African society, a lot of transformation has occurred with the introduction of modern apparatus like watches, clocks and other social media outlets. The introduction of these contemporary devices led to the total abandonment of traditional African unique ways of communicating time. The mindless abandonment has created a lot of generational vacuum in the mind of many contemporary African children who are ignorant of this method. If not addressed, this ignorance will lead to the total extinction of African cherished values. I conclude this paper by maintaining that although African traditional communication of time should be maintained, it is germane to complement it with contemporary time devices. I used the analytic method of philosophy to arrive at the conclusion.

Keywords: Time; African Time; Mbiti; Reality; Communication.

INTRODUCTION

Africa has a unique way by which they communicate, contemplate, perceive, and conceive their reality. It is through the lens of this reality that Africans communicate their values and attitudes. Through this mode also, they undertake to search out the meaning of their lives and the foundation of their existence. The above strengthened Kanu understanding that “it is this reality that holds together the African value system, philosophy of life, social conduct, morality, folklores, myths, rites, rituals, norms, rules, ideas, cognitive mappings, and theologies” (2015 p. 534). To underscore the importance of African reality to scholarship, Okolo believes that it should be the major focus of African philosophy. A deeper understanding of African reality will open a more salient epistemological and metaphysical foundation of the traditional African society. It also justifies his definition of African philosophy as a “path to a systematic and coherent discovery and disclosure of

African in his world of reality; it concerns itself with the history, tradition, custom, etc., and the significance these have for him” (1987, p. 10).

This quest for discovery and disclosure of African reality has led African philosophers of different epochs to systematically seek the best approach to present Africa to the world by themselves. This is because when you don't tell your story, anyone can tell the same story the way it suits him or her. This has been the story of Africa in the hands of anthropologists and western historians whose main interests were to promote Eurocentric visions and idiosyncrasies. Blinded by these visions, they went ahead to make some armchair predictions and inaccurate claims about African realities. The consequences of these visions on Africans have been a disaster both to the intellectual and psychological image of Africans. Consequently, the unique identity of the African became European, so also was their thought system and even their perception of reality was terribly structured by the colonial shadow which stood towering behind them” (Chimakonam 2017, p. 9). To undo this collateral damage will require not just re-orientation but radical mental decolonization of the African mind by radical and passionate African philosophers. I am particular about philosophers because that is the challenge which African philosophy has promised to undertake. This promise is “to discover or rediscover the lost African identity in order to initiate a non-colonial or original history for Africa in the global matrix, and thereby begin a course of viable economic, political and social progress that is entirely African” (Chimakonam 2017, p. 8). Burdened by the above, the then African philosophers set out to correct this battered image of Africa and strived to create a true identity for Africa. John Mbiti belongs to these foremost African philosophers that pioneered discourse on African reality intending to create an original and unbiased worldview for Africa. Mbiti wrote on several topics on African reality and gave his honest stance even though his ideas are not without controversies.

For the sake of this paper, I will concentrate on Mbiti's unique idea of the African concept of time in African cosmology. Time is so relevant to African reality that made Mbiti submit that “in African worldview, time is the key in understanding the African ontology, their beliefs, practices, attitudes and general way of life” (1970, p. 36). This show that time is the lens by which other realities are ascertained and apprehended. Time is a currency which all other realities are bought and a debt which we all owe and should pay. As part of this debt paying, this paper tends to look at time from the angle by which it is communicated in Africa which special interest in Sub Saharan African. It is not the task of this paper to go into the controversies surrounding the existence of time in Africa. That controversy, I believe died a natural death because you cannot deny the existence of what is a gateway in the apprehension of people's way of life.

In the next section, I tend to look at what makes up African reality or the composition of African reality. In the following section, I will establish that time in Africa is anthropocentric because it is manipulated by man to serve man's purpose and wellbeing. In the section following, I intend to go back to the traditional concept of time and do an appraisal of time and how it is communicated in Africa.

CONCEPTION OF REALITY IN AFRICA

Africa is a vast continent with many regions and cultural ontologies. This vastness makes it very hard for a uniform conception of reality in whole regions of Africa. Some empirical researchers have opined that it is for the interest of Africa to have unanimous agreement among every individual African. Mamadu (2011) echoes the same sentiment when he observes that it is difficult to study each and everyone's conception of reality, the much we

can do is to assume that a group of people sharing the same cultural affinity could perceive reality in the same way. To go by the above submissions will fall into the criticism of Hountondji (1970), who accused works of ethnographers as community thought or “collectivist-understanding” that lacks individuality and rigor. However, *we shall not throw away the crying baby with the bathing water* (African proverbs meaning - Do not discard something valuable in your eagerness to get rid of some useless thing associated with it). Thus, I will proceed in this section to take a look at the conception of reality in African cosmology.

Africans conception of reality is chiefly in dual form, namely the visible and the invisible (Oladipo 1988; Mawere 2011). The visible reality is the physical realm of existence comprising a man and other sensible realities. The second reality is the invisible realities that are made up of other metaphysical entities comprising God, ancestors and other spiritual beings. The visible reality is where man, animals, natural resources, some devils and some physical observable entities reside. African worldview holds the belief that this visible reality was created and sustained by God but He gave man the mandate to manage and harness these visible realities. In fact, man is at the center, reaching out to the highest of beings and lowest of beings (Chemhuru 2016). In his quest to reach out to the highest being, he makes laws to direct him. These laws are steps toward achieving order in the universe and shifting toward God who approves these laws. Man sustains himself from the resources of the universe by reaching out to the lowest of beings. He feeds on the animals as meat and the plants as vegetables and fruits. He further uses the trees, water and soil to provide shelter for himself (Okoye 2009). Still, on the centrality of man in African reality, they believe that everything is meant for man and everything is done to serve his purpose and profit. Onunwa (1994) summarized it thus

Man is located at the centre. While not the lord of the universe in Igbo cosmology, man believes himself to be at the centre of the universe where the pressure and influences of all other beings converge and operate. Man is then important. The Igbo world could be said to be anthropocentric and not theocentric. In the Igbo worldview, it is the man that makes the world *liveable* and loveable (p. 252).

This anthropocentric trait helps man to manipulate his environment in other to suit his purpose and those of his household. It also makes him an irreducible reality where divinity enters into human affairs to serve his interest. It is on this premise that man depends on God for protection and sustenance by trusting Him to send rain during the rainy season, to water his crops and increasing the maturing of his farm produce and other trees in the forest.

The invisible realities cover the spiritual world which comprises God, the small gods, spirits, witches, mind, the living dead (i.e those who have died but are still living in our memory live) resides here. God is the sustainer and controller of the universe. African God is not a withdrawn God; he has full control of the universe. He is both transcendent and immanent. God controls the world and sends rain, blessings, wind and pestilence when men desecrate the land. On the mysterious residence of God, Okoye (2009) observes that since no one knows where to locate the abode of God, little is said about it for fear of error. To me, this shows how reverential Africans can be in their devotion to God. They neither speak ill nor claim to be the custodian of wisdom; rather they depend on God for guidance and leading. This is why they call him *amaamaamasi* (a deity you cannot comprehend his ways and actions). The small gods are the servants of the big God which the Igbos calls *chi-ukwu* (chukwu). Spirits are superhuman beings and the spirits of men

who died long ago. Divinities on the other hand are functionaries and messengers in God's government and heads of different departments in God's monarchical arrangements.

Divinities are responsible to God for whatever act they perform in their relationship with human beings. Their function is to ensure that God is not bordered by petty problems from the earth; they are not ends in themselves but means to an end, and everything they do is dependent upon God's approval; this does not in any way change the fact that they are a powerful set of spiritual beings (2013, p. 540).

The goal of every African man and woman remains to live a good life while on earth in order to join their ancestors. The qualifications to join the cult of ancestorship remains: living a good life, dying at old age, and receiving a good burial (commensurate to one's status). With the above qualifications, one is qualified to reincarnate but those who live bad lives and died in circumstances like accidents or unripe age are sent to an intermediate place that lies between the spirit land and the land of the living where they are kept as wandering and restless spirit. In the Igbo worldview, they are referred to as *Akaogheli* (bad spirits) (Kanu 2013). African scholars believe in the interconnectedness between the visible and invisible world. In this interconnectedness, there is no remarkable distinction between visible and invisible things realities. It can be said that African reality is purely an interactive universe. In this interaction, man communes with God, divinities, ancestors, spirits and vice versa. Ekwealor (1990, p. 30) avers that "It is important to note that although the Igbo universe is divided into these three broad structures, there is the possibility of certain elements to move from one structure to another to commune with other elements". The spiritual world controls the physical while the physical submits itself for such control by man's activities toward his creature. Okere's position on this stand captures our mind when he wrote: "The visible and the invisible are perceived as one, interrelated, interacting systems where agency and causality form a gigantic network or reciprocities, which translate into several acts of what we call religion, worship, respect, sacrifice, divination, the communion which mark the relations between spirits and ancestors on the one hand, and men, on the other hand" (Okere 2005, p. 3). Gleaning from Okere's point, it is trite to establish that no reality is so sacrosanct or withdrawn to exist in isolation. It is only within the means of Interactive-complementary reflection that reality is meaningfully expressed, ascertained, and grasped. I can summarize this section with Mbiti's view that the spiritual universe is in unity with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times, to draw the distinction or separate them. Having established the interactive nature of realities in Africa and the central role of man in African reality, here, everything turns towards man and man turns everything to himself for his own benefit. In this light, this paper establishes that reality is anthropocentric because man controls and draws all things to his advantage. This is why even time in Africa is conceived to serve man's advantage. Time is not meant to hunt or hurt man rather time is designed to suit his purpose. In the following section, I will be considering the anthropocentric nature of time in Africa to lay credence to the above submissions.

ANTHROPOCENTRIC NATURE OF TIME IN AFRICA

In relation to time, man is central in its management and his temporal expressions are channeled around his perception. The anthropocentric trait of Africans entails that he is saddled with the responsibility of managing and giving interpretations to time according to man's perceptions. Booth (1975) shares this anthropocentric sentiment thus:

In traditional Africa, time does not exist apart from human activities; time is created by a human being. Thus, it is frequently measured in terms of social and economic activities such as the market cycles of four or five days. Each of these days is named for the location of the market that is held on that day. Longer periods of time are counted by some African groups in terms of successive "age-sets" and are given the names of these sets (p. 81).

From Booth's point of view, time is simply a creation of man. That means that he schedules time to suit his activities and to manipulate them to his advantage. Time measurement is tied to human events and these events have anthropocentric undertones. Time requires the attention of human beings and its knowledge enhances human communication. This knowledge extends to the net of relations that constitutes the connective tissue of the community.

The traditional management of time pivots on the person not as an isolated individual but as a social being. The management of time is traditionally socio-centric in the senses that it is promoted not by relations with changing events but also by relations with human beings (Dalfov 2007, p. 206).

Time is socialized in African reality, this entails that time is measured on the strength of man's relationship with others for the benefit of society. Time is not counted as productive when it is only beneficial to an individual but rather for the benefit to the community. The full potential of an individual in the African tradition is fully realized in a community or group. This is because community makes an individual and without a community the individual is valueless. The saying in Africa that 'a person is a person through other persons' is imperative in African tradition (Kanu 2020). To integrate into one's community does take a lot of time, just as a child of eighteen (18) years old cannot turn out to be a mathematical giant overnight. The unavoidable role of community to an individual was couched by Menkiti (2004) in this line;

In a stated journey of the individual towards personhood, let it, therefore, be noted that the community plays a vital role both as a catalyst and as a prescriber of norms. The idea is that to transform what was initially biological given into full personhood, the community, of necessity has to step in, and since the individual, he or she cannot carry through the transformation unassisted. But then what are the implications of this idea of a biologically given organism having first to go through a process of social and ritual transformation to attain the full complement of excellences seen as a definitive person (p. 326).

From the foregoing, it goes to show that an African looks at the community for existence and sustenance. Human beings need the community for actualization, approval and authentication. An African has the responsibility to know how his single decision will benefit or ruin the community. The triumph and failure of one's actions have multiplier effects of going beyond the individual and affecting others in society. It explains why an average African to a large extent is not self-willed or individualistic in his undertaking. To undertake any project, consultations are made from family members to the wider society. It is to this end that Menkiti (2004, p. 326) observes: "the project of being or becoming persons, it is believed, is a truly serious project that stretches beyond the raw capacities of the isolated individual, and it is a project which is laden with the possibility of triumph and failure". Marriage is one of the socio-centric tasks that transform an individual into a true person because of the series of approval by the community before it is authenticated. This exercise is never done in isolation and it is a time-intensive one. Iroegbu narrates how

rigorous and intensity of marriage thus:

It is properly speaking a covenant between two (extended) families, kindred, and villages. Marriage, like all good and serious things, takes time. It is so time-consuming and elaborate that when fully accomplished, it stays and endures. The relationship is stable. Arising problems are effectively treated in that elaborate context of family-kindred-village relationship. All are involved for all are concerned and all do care (1994, p. 84).

Marriage processes in Africa are time-consuming unlike in the Western tradition where the art of waiting is not that a treasured commodity. Processes involved before marriage involve thorough inquiries by both families involved. The focuses of these inquiries are to ascertain the compatibility of those involved. Ilogua (1974) adds to the multitude of these processes thus:

Marriage for the African is a drama where no spectator is admitted because of the rigors and time processes involved. Each party plays her own role because marriage is an avenue through which individual shares in the group life of the African community....This involves a familiarization process that goes between the families of the boy and the girl. His major characters including the bride's wealth which is presented by the families of the boy to that of the girl and various gifts from the girl's extended family to the girl on the day she goes finally to settle down in a new home with the husband. Such gifts could be in form of land, livestock, and /or in the olden days, slaves to work for the new bride. Some call this dowry, bridewealth, pride price, or bride gift (p. 65).

The African communalism agrees that any project that marginalizes the community is heading to doom. Such an adventure will result in failure because true liberty in Africa is a liberty that is not against the community. It is liberty that transcends all manner of individual liberty for the benefit of the community. This lays credence to my earlier point that traditional management of time pivots on the person not as an isolated individual but as a social being. An African long for an enduring legacy in her undertakings and marriage is not an exception.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMMUNICATION OF TIME IN AFRICA

Time in the African tradition is usually communicated through diverse channels like proverbs, folklore, poetry, town criers, riddles, songs, fables, etc. to denote the reality of time in African. Yoruba tradition is replete with expressions to denote the reality of time, structures and dimensions in their worldview. For instance, expressions like *Àkókò* mean a time-around 'T', where 'T' represents an event of things. Time here is not a specific time but an approximate time. *Ìgbà* means a period or an era while *ask* simply means a definite season. Each of these conceptual categories is seemed the same with time, and could be sometimes overlapping; the scope of each differs according to the contexts in usage (Dalfovo 2007). In most African traditions, proverbs are used to communicate time and their analysis shows that most of them are framed within the future orientation of life. These proverbs encourage diligence in the present and the danger of not envisaging future problems for those who disregard the present.

In Lugbara culture, for example, Dalfovo remarks that proverbs like *gapikurinyaku*, (one who does not dig does not eat) *ebuakuabiri ma ayikoni* (the absence of the hoe is the happiness of hunger) *anyafaa I cent ku-* (millet does not sow itself). These proverbs according to him stress, transmit and convey the need to cultivate

one's field in the present so as to guarantee one's sustenance in the future. Other proverbs like *alindandariabeose* which means 'that looking for problems is a big stick' namely, the one who creates a problem ends up being beaten. This proverb communicates to hearers the consequences of misbehavior and the need to pattern our lives towards imbibing good behavior.

In Yoruba tradition, proverbs are also used to communicate time within society.

1. *Ti won ban pa oni, kiolatele won ki o lo wo bi won o ti sin*

(When today is being dispatched, tomorrow should be in attendance to see where the corpse is laid)

This particular proverb indicates the circularity dimension of time among the traditional Yoruba. The understanding is that the future will continue to repeat the present and that the knowledge of the present is important for the knowledge of the future. The network of present and the future shows that the Yoruba do not necessarily have a nostalgic attachment to the past, it stresses that today's experiences are lessons and a direction for the future. In Yoruba tradition also, poetry is used to transmit time for lucid and clear understanding. Below is traditional poetry found in Yoruba funeral songs from Abeokuta in Western Nigeria.

Three Friends Yoruba Traditional Poetry

I had three friends. One asked me to sleep on the mat.

One asked me to sleep on the ground.

One asked me to sleep on his breast.

I decided to sleep on his breast.

I saw myself carried on a river.

I saw the king of the river and the king of the sun.

There in that country I saw palm trees

So weighed down with fruit

That the trees bent under the fruit

And the fruit killed them.

When we make our grand finale

Will there be souls in this side of eternity

Who will wish us fulfillment

and watch the holy prostration

and bend and anoint the sinning heads?

Cannot we join the ceremony of our death

and partake of the rituals?

Cannot we carry the remainder of our circumcision

away with us beyond?

The wind blows on the graves

sweeping the sparky debris away

cannot we find where they buried our birth chord? (Beier 1966)

Ulli Beier presents a gentle and lovely parable of death and renewal. In it is portrayed an old man and the river of time. But the young have become the big palm-fruit, bright and golden, which bow down the parent tree with their weight and growth, and at last, kills it.

In Lugbara tradition, riddles are used for educational and recreational purposes to indicate future times. In the illustration below, these riddles intend to shape the conduct of those that are addressed in the future (time) especially boys and girls. A riddle may ask; do you know the name of the fat rat in the house finishing our groundnut? The answer is the name of the boy that has stolen some edibles. Another may likely ask for the name of a cat unable to catch rats or of a dog unable to chase anything? The answer is the name of that lazy boy. Aside from riddles, stories and fables are also used to communicate future ideas in Lugbara tradition.

The story by Dalfovo (2007) depicts rabbit *otoa* or *Anira* as a protagonist, mischievous and resourceful character. *Otoa* is always noted for engaging in some hard undertaking which always has success at the beginning. If the action of *Otoa* is good, the initial success continues until the end of the story. But if *Otoa*'s resourcefulness becomes insidious or malicious, his negative behavior is discovered and has to pay for it by having usually to run away humiliated. The moral of the fable is always teleological. It takes into cognizance the result of the actions and the bad action will lead to a serious problem for its performer. This shows that people's action extends into the future. The conveyance of time, especially the future time underlie most of the songs in Lugbara. According to Dalfovo (2007) these songs emerge from performances during funerals and anniversaries. He uses *ongo* to express the words 'song' and 'dance.'

Songs are an overt reminder of one's death in the future, a future that is obviously expected to be very distant. The future and the past meet in a song where the composer lost his mother and addressed his bereaved wife, telling her that he cannot believe his mother's death. He narrates through the song that her mother must have visited *Aliba*, her clan of origin. The song celebrates both the past death of the composer's mother and the future death of the composer himself. It says: *oku la! Mindreni 'dii enjo li. A' di ni ma owuuedoriya?* "woman! Tears lie. Mother is at Aliba. Who will start lamenting for me? Tears lie" (Dalfovo 2007, p. 213). In Igbo tradition, the voice of a town crier is used to communicating exact periods, times and seasons of an event. The voice of the town crier is most often used as a reminder of previously scheduled events. He announces important meetings, ceremonies, messages and imminent troubles. He is traditionally called *OnyeOgeneor okuekwe* (gong beater). The town criers goes from village to village and town to town beating the ogene and delivering the required messages at the same time. The sound of ogene in the early hours of the morning usually signifies urgency and members of the public are advised to take it seriously. Umeogu (2013) clarifies the role of time criers thus they are officially the legal and the traditional announcers of information or any other issues of importance to the community as a whole. They are more or less be likened to the broadcasters of their time with their gong and voice as their broadcasting station. To show the seriousness of time management in African tradition, heavy sanctions are attached to anyone who did not harken to the summons of the town crier. This goes to show why strict time specifications of the announced event are repeated over and over to ensure compliance. To this effect, timekeepers are mandated to keep later comers out of the meeting as deterrent measures for future offenders. The reality of time is ubiquitous in Africa that is why they are communicated. It is of interest to note that there are serious transitions from the traditional way of conceiving time to the modern way of conceiving time. The modern way provided ease and convenience which was lacking in traditional patterns. Naturally, people embrace a superior way of doing things which offers them efficiency and ease of communication. With these developments, there was a gradual shift from the relation of time to events, natural phenomena and whether. Fayemi captures this

change thus

“The people begin to see the need for calculating time in a modern way through resort to watches and clocks in their various dimensions. As a consequence of literacy, “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” (Fayemi 2016, p. 40).

Proverbs, folklores, poetry, town criers, riddles, songs, fables which were communicated during moonlight tales at a choice village square are now transmitted through televisions, radio, internet, cell phones, etc. Also, clocks and watches are portent modern ways of communicating time in Africa. People wear watches wherever they go and this has enhanced their time consciousness and efficiency. A little burden is needed again in resorting to the position of the moon or sunset or dawn of the day. Reliance on animals like cocks and birds and bird have given way to the ease of the device called an alarm clock. For precision and accuracy which most time is lacking in natural animals, the alarm clock is set to bridge this gap. The sound from the clock has the effect of altering one’s current endeavor and shift to other pressing needs seeking attention. It is pertinent to note that there are certain aspects of time considerations that are yet to change even with the flooding effect of western civilization. The traditional way of greetings in the Context of events, weather and natural phenomenon are yet to be abandoned completely in contemporary African societies. Contemporary African societies still exchange greetings and pleasantries based on their celestial-cosmic measurement of time.

Proverbs, folklores, poetry, town criers, riddles, songs, fables are now chronicled in a written form and are taught in schools and homes in other preserve African heritages. At this juncture, it is sad to submit that Africans have embraced western civilization at the expense of allowing African culture to go extinct. This development is however no thanks to the missionaries who regarded Africans as cultureless, historyless, toddling species of humans at the lowest rung of the evolutionary ladder. The anthropologist labeled Africa derogatorily as backward, barbaric, pre-logical, primitive, savage, etc. In Okere’s term, our religion was dubbed as superstition, our arts medicine as charlatanism, magic and quackery; our languages were qualified as incoherent dialects, our music was termed rudimentary, our arts primitive, our crafts, non-existent (Okere 2005). This weightier branding by the European on Africa is unacceptable especially the labeling crafts that are existent to African reality and declaring them non-existent. As far as time and its communication are concerned in African reality, there is a need to preserve our time communication in the mind of Africans by first preserving them in black and white. Another conscious and deliberate means of preserving these crafts in the minds of children and youths is by making its teaching compulsory in our primary, secondary and general studies in the universities.

Also, since most contemporary Africans are embracing holistically the modern method of time communication, there is serious need to upgrade our traditional craft to suit the yearning and demands of contemporary Africans. There is need for conversation with other cultures to strengthen Africa perceived deficiencies in the area of time communication. After all cultures are in debt, they are both borrowers and lenders. Instead of doing away with the already existing wrist watch, wall clock and other calibrated devises, Africans can interpret their time and communicate it in their own language and weather conditions. This will subject the western calendar to adjust to African weather conditions. This way, Africa’s traditional conception will be maintained; also the ease and precision of

the modern time will also be complemented to it.

CONCLUSION

Culture is a characteristic that distinguishes people from others. Most often these cultures are not static because of the influence of a superior culture. I have considered in this paper the mode of time communication in sub-Saharan African which is done through proverbs, songs, riddles, fables, poems, etc. The wave of civilization has made most of these means of communication outdated and antiquated. However, most of these means are the defining mark of traditional Africa, and doing away with them is simply doing away with traditional African uniqueness. This paper concludes on the need to converse with other cultures and borrow some progressive cultures to cover for African deficiencies. Africans can adopt contemporary time gadgets but can use African traditional languages to communicate them to others.

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