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Article

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AFRICAN AND WESTERN CONCEPTS OF TIME

Sylvester M. Eka¹

Emmanuel Donatus Asanga²

Department of History and International Studies, University of Uyo, Nigeria^{1 & 2}

Corresponding Email: sylvestereka@uniuyo.edu.ng¹

Abstract

Time, though by some philosophers is not real has been discovered to be a fundamental reality. One of the major reasons for Africa's underdevelopment has been the nonchalant attitude to time. Usually, Africans think of time in connection with astronomical events which results in the natural division of time into day and night. Africans reckon Time in the Relative (Natural) manner while the Europeans consider theirs to be Absolute (Artificial). The Relative Time is flexible while the Absolute Time is straight-forward, but full of lapses in view of the major but silent errors inherent in the present Western calendar in use. Hence, the reaction of St. Augustine of Hippo which represents the first ever attempt to correct the European idea of time as being Absolute. Oral traditional method was used to collect data which was corroborated with other sources for final conclusion. That paved way for inter-disciplinary approach to historical reconstruction. The paper argues that African historians should tilt towards Relative Time because it is error free and makes provision for inter-disciplinary approach to historical reconstruction.

Keywords: Time, Comparative Study, African Concept, Western Concept.

Introduction

One of the main reasons for the continued underdevelopment of Africa is the nonchalant attitude to time and the need for punctuality in all aspects of life. The problem of punctuality has become so endemic that lateness to any function is accepted and explained off for African time. It was Plato who first made a systematic attempt to describe time philosophically. His definition of time is bound up with and springs from his entire metaphysics, which is idealism.¹ Time in this platonic idealism is then defined as "the moving of eternity". This means that time has nothing to do with the realities of this universe except at the level of image, copy, representation. To define time as time, one must get to eternity. Eternity is totally outside the universe. It is totally

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another world.² Time is a backdrop reality that calculates the unfolding of being, and is made present by the human mind in the human experience of reality-in-community. "Time is a backdrop reality". By this, I mean that time is fundamental reality. It is not just an empty imagination or creation of the human mind, nor is it a non-reality as some philosophers have argued. For McTaggart, time is not a reality. There is nothing like time because we cannot hold it or sit on it as we sit on space. That time is a reality cannot be demonstrated in various ways. For instance, the Time now or present time is the time of my reading this text, or of my listing or discussing with somebody. That I am reading is real. The reality of my reading proves the reality of time because every event is an event in time. Thus, the moment of my reading, an event per se, is reality-in-time. To deny the fact of my reaching in time, let us say 5pm, is to deny the reality of my act of reading at all. It would be self-contradictory to say that I am reading and at the same time say that I am not reading at anytime. For to do anything at all is to do it in time.³ Clear is one thing: time is reality.⁴ At this point, this paper intends to consider the African concept of time (Relative Time) as well as that of the western world (Absolute Time). It will attempt to analyze and appraise the above African and European concepts of time, and then try to philosophize on time using St. Augustine's approach.

Concept of Time: Relative and Absolute Time

Europeans are of the opinion that the Africans had no concept of time and so could not date their events. When time is considered, it should be noted that it is always in connection with astronomical events. It is this movement that results in the natural division of time into day and night.⁵ Time in Africa is a perceived cultural tendency. This is sometimes used in a pejorative sense, about tardiness in appointments, meeting and events. This also includes the more leisurely relaxed and less rigorously - scheduled lifestyle found in African countries, as opposed to the more clock-bound pace of daily life in western countries.⁶ However, cultural materials or art facts of the kind that we have been dealing with, do not give any time sequence. They give one the impression of timelessness and unchangeability. Where a sense of time is given, this, more often than not, presents a relative time.⁷ Moreso, traditional people, especially Africans in the villages, have not been interested in the exact measurement of time. If anything, their concept of time is cyclical, as opposed to linear. Within this concept, the past, present and future are lumped together.⁸ Relative time as perceived by Africans can be seen in the following ways: As people who are close to nature, Africans know time through the behavior of animals. For instance, the cock crowing at dawn suggests the morning. Time could also be known through the movement of rivers, floods and rainfall.⁹ In terms of human activities and chronology, Africans used social events, such events include planting and harvesting seasons, festival periods like coronation of chiefs, birth, death and burial of prominent persons etc, war times, famine and epidemic periods. I re-call an old illiterate man who tried to re-call the time of his birth saying, "I was born when Ibesikpo fought war with the Europeans. That was why my father named me Udo Ekong." Putting it succinctly, Africans used social events to reckon time. Apart from the above various ways, Africans do have some other simple Ways of reckoning with time. For instance, an old woman walking a long distance to her farm could know the time to return from the farm using the sundial method i.e, the position of the sun in the sky. From the shadow of an object cast on the ground which could be long or short, the old woman will use that to determine the time of the day.¹⁰

On the other hand, Africans who live by the creeks or riverside, know the time of the day through the water tides. This could be seen as the volume of water increases in the morning while in the afternoon it decreases only to increase again in the evening.¹¹ Africans also know

time using the homing birds (birds that have a place to live amongst men). This could be seen as they live their resting places only to return in the evening. Some other people Use what is called the water glass. Here, water was put in a container with a small hole at the bottom. Inside the base of the container was put some white sand from the river to cover the hole at the base. On top of the white sand was placed some gravel before the container was filled with water. The water was expected to drip from the hole at the base. If the container was filled in the morning, water was expected to finish dripping from the container at 6.00 pm. Therefore, from the level of water in the container, one could know the time of the day. Some special flowers can be used to determine time in Africa. This can be seen as some flowers open their leaves in the morning and close again in the evening.¹²

In a nutshell, time in Africa can be measured by two realities using human activities and environment. The human reality comprises moments of birth, naming, puberty and adulthood. This, Iroegbu call egocentric time. In another dimension, time can be measured environmentally, in respect of the economy involving ecology, rituals, socio-political and techno-developmental life.¹³ On the other hand, the Europeans use Astro-physics to determine absolute time. The instrument used in this absolute method is called chronometer. By using chronometer, time was reduced to seconds, minutes and hours which invariably was transmitted to govern day and night.¹⁴ Some scholars, especially in contemporary philosophy of science, understand absolute time differently. They define it as the general or common time that is the same for all everywhere, to be absolute means to be the same for all. For example, eight o'clock is eight o'clock for all human beings or even for all the inhabitants of a particular time zone or region. Based on scientific discoveries, Europeans reject the concept of absolute time so defined. It is preposterous and unreal. They prefer to follow the insights of the modern theory of relativity. There, the observation and measurement of time is purely relative. It is therefore to a greater extent depending on where one is at the point of measurement or calculation.¹⁵

It should be noted that most things about relative time are natural things, while that of absolute time are mostly arbitrary and artificial things. There exists no human society that did not have their own way of reckoning time be it absolute or relative.¹⁶ Moreso, when we think about absolute chronology with regards to western calendar and dating, it should be noted that, the very first society that brought about calendar dating was Egypt. It was the priests in ancient Egypt that kept these records. At the pyramids, dead bodies were preserved and food stuff were also stored. The priests developed a kind of diary which was used for recording items stored in the pyramids, the time of their removal and next visit of the owners. The ancient Egyptians developed the calendar, which spread to other civilizations. It was copied by the Greeks and perfected by the Romans. It reached Roman Empire when Julius Caesar was the Roman Emperor and dictator. He was the man who set the bases of the present day calendar in 45BC. The calendar was called the Julian calendar. The Julian calendar specified that each year was allotted 365 days while every fourth year was given 366 days. Eight days was allotted to a week. There were lots of errors in that calendar. So when Julius Caesar died and was succeeded by Augustus Caesar, more researches were done to correct the errors in the previous calendar while also synchronizing the seasons of the year with the rotation of the earth. The month of July was named after Julius Caesar while the month of August was named after Augustus Caesar.¹⁷

Pope Gregory XIII was the one who brought about more innovation to the Julian calendar. For this reason, the present calendar is called Gregorian calendar. As knowledge of astronomy improved, people discovered that in every 400 years, 3 days stood out undated in the Julian calendar. Immediately, Pope Gregory discovered this, he brought the scientists together to work on it but he did not live to see the result. Even after the adjustment has been

made, it is still obvious that in every 3,323 years, one day still stand out undated.¹⁸ Apart from the fact that astro-physics is artificial, it only helps one reckon time accordingly in the part of the world the person is. Astro-physics does not allow Europeans to reckon time uniformly because of the movement of the earth. According to Isaac Newton, absolute time exists independently of any perceiver and progresses at a consistent pace throughout the universe. Unlike relative time, Newton believed absolute time was imperceptible and could only be understood mathematically.¹⁹ According to Newton, humans are only capable of perceiving relative time, which is a measurement of perceivable objects in motion like the earth. From these movements, they would witness the passage of time.²⁰

Appraisal of the African and Western Concepts of Time

The history of the philosophy of time shows the constant expression of the difficulty inherent in the definition of time. Aristotle found it hard to define time.²¹ St. Augustine called it a human perplexity,²² while George Berkeley could only see the intelligibility of time when it is associated with human activities.²³ On its own, time is unintelligible. Isaac Newton was able to classify various types of time such as relative, apparent, common and absolute. Yet this great physicist was unable to give any precise definition of time. Exploring the Yoruba situation could help to explain more of the African concept of time. What is the nature of time in Yoruba perspective? Ayoade has answered this by pointing out that in western thought, there are some definitions or better description of time. In African thought, on the contrary, there are no individual definitions. This is because the African system of thought is totally communal in origin.²⁴ It would be needful to inquire from Ayoade, on how the Yoruba understand time? What is the nature of time for them? This fundamental question is left unanswered by Ayoade.²⁵ J. S. Mbiti at least gave a description of time as a setting for his discussion and analysis of the various components and roles of time in East African culture. Here, Ayoade could have done better. Perhaps he could reply that since time in general is hard to define, his people could not come out with any definition. Neither could he, being part of his people.²⁶ For them the concept was implicit in their life and it was futile to seek any definition. Rather since everybody knew what time was, both implicitly and in practice, it was better to go straight to consider how time was measured.²⁷

Time is the most influential factor in this world as it is abstract. Everything in this world is commanded and decided by time. It is time which gives everybody the opportunity to make use of it. Those who make best use of time and avail those opportunities grow and rise in life. "A stitch in time save nine" is a popular maxim.²⁸ It highlights the importance of time in life. It means an act done in time saves one from inconveniences and troubles.²⁹ Europeans have a theoretical, mechanical and utilitarian concept and deployment of space and time. They conceptualize time and space such that these are items for scramble. Indeed, they have Scrambled not only in their own nations, but more horribly in other continents. This is the push behind colonialism, imperialism and to a certain extent, Muslim and Christian evangelization as done in African, Asia and Latin America. These phrases which are on daily use in the western world indicate the reality:

- i. Time is money
- ii. Punctuality is the soul of business
- iii. Hit or miss at your time. For opportunity comes but once.³⁰

On the contrary, Africans have a more relative, natural, humane and existential perception of time. They have close ties to the land as life means and ancestral contact locus. They eat not because it is time to eat but because they are hungry. One's past and one's future re-existential

linked at times to be curious level of predestination and mediocrity. Traditional Africans are more tied to the myths of nature surrounding the sun, moon and stars, rising in the morning with a fairly, regular harmonious fashion and setting in the evening.³¹ For Mbiti, time is not a theme of its own, rather he sees it only as a tool and a means. He calls it a key to the understanding of the main themes of African thought and life. With their conception of time clarified one can then understand the religious and philosophical concepts like God, nature, ethnicity, good and evil etc.³² In reference to the western conception and the African conception of time, Mbiti maintains the following: The western concept of time is linear (straight forward). It consists of three phases which are past, present and future. To Africans, time conception is dyadic i.e. two - dimensional, past and present. In African time perception, there is no future per se (what an insult!!!) because the concept of a future in Africa is on a short term basis (about two or three years).³⁴ Hence, the western conception of time is foreign to the Africans. The major reason Mbiti gives is that "the future is virtually absent from the African minds because events which have not taken place or occurred, cannot be a part of time."³⁵

Movement of Time in the Western and African Context

Mbiti says, in the western concept of time, there is movement from the past to the future. This in fact explains the linear nature of time in the west. Hence, there is a progressive mental movement of 'an awareness of the past, a sense of present experience and 'a purposeful vision of the future' in the western mindset. In the African concept, time moves from present (Sasa) to past (Zamani). Sasa implies "the period of immediate concern for the people', Hence, Sasa (present) stretches into the short future. It swallows up what westerners call future. Mbiti calls Sasa (present) and Zamani (past). In other words, the past and present overlap as the present gets swallowed up in the past (the graveyard of time). The present exists to serve the past which stands as a period of myth, and which gives sense of direction and purpose to the present. This explains why, within the African mindset, there is the dire need for present generation to become like antiquity (olden days) in all ramifications. In the west, there is the outlook to brighter future and a change of lifestyle and mentality.

Time in Western and African Context

Mbiti maintains that time availability is more crucial in the west, as they are more like slaves to time. This follows as, the westerners perceive time as a commodity which must be utilized, sold and bought. This explains the reasons for the pragmatic and technological environment. The fear of wasting time is of high ranking in the west.³⁶ However, in traditional African societies, time has to be created or can be produced, as there are no strict laid down result of how a man's life should proceed. For example, one finds men of 40 years or thereabout still living comfortably within the communal setting of his household. He is not even thinking of having an independent life, raising his own kids the personal way or even building his own empire. In African mindset, man is not a slave to time, as he does things at his own pace.³⁷ Man can make as much time as he wants, or as Mbiti puts it African people do not waste time, but rather wait for time or produce time.³⁸

St. Augustine's Appraisal of Time

Saint Augustine of Hippo (324 - 430 AD) is well respected as a Christian (catholic) philosopher. He was well educated, wrote many books with the most popular being "The City of God", His philosophy of time was contained in his book titled "The Confession".³⁹ In his philosophy of time, He contended that "it is very difficult to pin down time' to know the exact time because time itself is ever changing. Time occupies no space and cannot be 'penned down". On the other

hand, St. Augustine argued that if one thinks about the future, one can only think about it as the future does not exist. Similarly, thinking about the past, one can only think about it as the past is no longer in existence. It can only be remembered. 'The past exist only in the mind of men'. Time therefore is a thing that can be synthesised by the mind.⁴⁰ St. Augustine's analysis of time can be categorized into two broad stages. In the first stage, his focus was on the realities of past time, present time and future time. These components are called 'Time Triad'. He plausibly argued that the time triads are realities in the mind: the present is a fleeting attention; our acquaintance with the past is through present recollection of it: and our acquaintance with the future is through expectation.⁴¹

In the second stage, St. Augustine's focus was on the nature of time and how it is measured. He wrote: "I want to know the essence and nature of time, whereby we measure the movement of bodies and say, for instance, that one movement lasts twice as long as another".⁴² He rejected the assertion that time is the motion of celestial bodies. He believed that time will still exist even if celestial bodies were not in motion and that the movements of celestial bodies are makers of time.⁴³ His perplexity notwithstanding, Augustine was certain of one thing: that if nothing passed, there would be no past time, and if nothing were now, there would be no present time.⁴⁴ By this Augustine seems to argue for the necessary relationship of time to events and things.⁴⁵ St. Augustine suggested that maybe time is measured in the mind. It is not an event itself that is measured but instead the impression that it leaves on the mind. The mind expects the future which becomes the present which the mind attends to and then becomes the past which the mind remembers.⁴⁶ When it comes to the measurement of time, Augustine argues that some sort of extension is demanded. There must be extensions or spaces of time. Following Aristotle, he turns to the heavenly bodies in their circular movements. Day for instance is measured by the Sun's position above the earth (distinguishing day from night). Augustine, like other members of his epoch, believed that the sun and other planets rotated around the earth, and that the earth was standing still.⁴⁷

St. Augustine concluded that the only means by which human beings can know time fully is through God who is ever present and ever stable. Time is "distentio amini". He finally submitted that the human mind can understand the present, the future and past but cannot understand eternity. This he said can only be understood by God.⁴⁸ This therefore, translates to the fact that time is flexible and that the African concept of time should be upheld. Considering the lapses found in the western or absolute chronology of time, time should therefore be reckoned according to the individual community's standpoint and should also be respected. In a nutshell, Augustine concluded that, both the relative and absolute chronologies are very useful to the historian for the reconstruction of history. In a way, this can help the historian not to be fixed but rather flexible with his sources of information and presentation of facts for the reconstruction of history. It also goes a long way to debunk European views and perspectives about African history. Therefore, African historians should be flexible while writing and should be opened to consult other related disciplines in what is generally regarded as the inter-disciplinary approach to historical reconstruction.

Conclusion

The African concept of time which over the years have been used wrongly to judge the Africans as having had no idea of time can no longer hold. A consideration of the Africans Use Relative time which is more natural while the Europeans used Absolute time which is artificial, exposes the flexibility of the Relative method which is quite good for the African historians. This work has conceptualized time as a backdrop reality that calculates the unfolding of human beings.

This definition is meant to show more clearly the deeper reality that time represents. Time is not just a measure of motion as Aristotle defined it. The measure of motion is only one of its tributary functions.⁴⁹ Looking at it in a much more serious manner, time can be said to be deeply involved in the unfolding of reality. In fact, time is at the source and centre of reality and reveals reality so.⁵⁰ St. Augustine of Hippo defending the African concept of time (Relative Time) submitted that time is "distentio amini". That is to say that the past, present and future can only be known through eternity, God. Hence, he enjoined Africans to be proud of their relative time. To the historians, they should look at time flexibly.

Endnotes

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¹¹Ibid

¹²Ibid

¹³Francis Etim: Metaphysics of African Medicine. (Akwa Ibom State: Minders international Publishers, 2005), p.185.

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²¹Pantaleon Osondu Iroegbu: Kpim of Time... P. 133.

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²³Ibid

²⁴Ibid

²⁵Ibid, p 134

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²⁷Ibid

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⁴⁰Ibid

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⁴⁴Pantaleon Osondu Iroegbu: Kpim of Time...p.23.

⁴⁵Ibid

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⁵⁰Pantaleon Osondu Iroegbu; Kpim of Time...p.230.