

# J. S. Mbiti's African Concept of Time and the Problem of Development

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**Abstract**---This piece studied the African concept of time by J. S. Mbiti and the meaning of development. It argued that the African concept of time by J. S. Mbiti does not place the African at an advantageous position for development. The concept of 'African time' is one in which tardiness, lousiness and a total disregard for schedules and programs is made out to characterize all Africans. This piece further argued that the African idea of time as backward very much explains why Africans are more concerned with how Europe underdeveloped Africa than with how they are themselves destroying the future of Africa through corruption, violence, sectionalism, poor leadership, etc. It submits that every concept of development, while not taking the past for granted must focus on the future and the quality use of time.

**Keywords**---Time, African, J. S. Mbiti, Ontology, Problem, Underdevelopment, Development, Concept

## I. INTRODUCTION

WALTER Rodney whom Harding (2009) described as "the revolutionary scholar and the scholar revolutionary, the man of great integrity and hope" (p. xi), in 1972 published the work known as *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. In this wonderful piece he discussed the meaning of development in chapter one, which he distinguished from underdevelopment. With this clarification of concepts, he was preparing the background for his study. In chapter two, he discussed how Africa developed until the 15<sup>th</sup> century before the advent of the Europeans. In chapter three, he argued that Africa contributed to European capitalist development during the pre-colonial period. In chapter four, he maintained that as Africa contributed to European capitalist development, Europe underdeveloped Africa through the slave trade, stagnation of Africa's technological development, distortion of the economy and the coming of imperialism and colonialism. He discussed in chapter five, the contribution of Africa to the capitalist development of Europe during the colonial period. In chapter six, he argued that colonialism was a system for underdeveloping Africa. A cursory glance at his piece reveals that he was one among many Africans who were interested in the liberation of their people.

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This notwithstanding, as Africans discuss how Europe underdeveloped Africa, it could also be a worthwhile discussion to focus on how Africans underdeveloped and are underdeveloping Africa. Major issues to be considered could be how Africans are underdeveloping Africa through corruption, ill-focused leadership, war, religious crisis etc. While these are fundamental factors in the issue of Africa's development, this piece focuses on the issue of time-consciousness. Nyasami (2010) wrote that "No meaningful progress can be achieved in the absence of a well-co-ordinated programme that is managed within the specifications of time and space" (p. 259). This piece would study the African concept of time as discussed by J. S. Mbiti and further discuss the connection between "African time" and the issue of Africa's underdevelopment.

## II. PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON TIME

St Augustine was one of the earliest thinkers who articulated the problem of time. According to Pantaleon (2004), more than those before him, he acutely stated the paradoxes involved with the explanation of time. For Augustine (1963), it is an elusive concept. He writes, "If anybody asks me, I know it. But if I wish to explain to him who asks, I no longer knew it" (p. 264). Augustine (cited by Omoregbe 1991) avers that neither the past, present or future exists, for the past is nothing but the human mind as it remembers, the present is nothing but the human mind as it considers and the future, the human mind in expectation. From this perspective, Augustine maintains that there is a relationship between time and event. Thus, he moves beyond the understanding of particular time to an enquiry into the substance of time, what time is in itself. Before Augustine, Aristotle (1941) had defined time as *numerous motus secundum prius et posterius*: time is the measure of motion according before and after. Thus, motion is central to Aristotle's concept of time. For if nothing moves, changes or circulates, there would be no time. And time here has got to do with the reckoning of the transition of realities. Time for Aristotle is thus, movement, number and continuum.

According to Plato (1993), time is the moving image of eternity. This implies that time has nothing to do with the realities of this universe except at the level of image, copy and representation. Thus, for Plato, for one to define time, one must get to eternity. Here, Plato avoids defining time, and takes it to the realm of eternity, as is his usual fashion, which is problematic. In reacting to Plato, Plotinus (1962), argues that the soul generates time in nature, the moving stars in their regular motion, measure and unveil the quantity of time. Albert the great rejects the concepts of time by Plato and

Plotinus, arguing that it exists outside the mind, whether we know it or not. For Thomas Aquinas, time is an existence in nature like space and motion, discovered through the process of counting and numbering. Thus meaning that time requires the mind. But again time is independent of the mind, for whether there is mind or not there will always be time. In Heidegger, being becomes time, because we experience time where there is motion of being, and only where there is motion of being that we can talk of time. With these understandings of time, from the Ancient Era through the Medieval and Contemporary Epochs, one can also begin to wonder how the African conceives of time.

### III. THE MEANING OF DEVELOPMENT

Eliot (1971), observes that there is no agreement as to what development is. It was coined by developed nations to describe the power and powerless nations. According to Onwuliri (2008), there are various aspects to what constitutes development, however common to all these is a positive change in human wellbeing. The individual and his quality of life must be the centre of the conception of national development. It is in this regard that Schumacher (1975), avers that development should not start with goods, but with the people, their education, organization and discipline. It is not all about money, profit and the number of industries. Levi and Havinden (1982) understand it as a long-term improvement in the standard of living, as felt and judged to be by most of the people in the country. Schumacher (1975) names education, organization and discipline as the three ingredients of development. This perspective sees development as an overall social process including economics, social, political, cultural and moral dimensions of life.

Kanu (2014a & 2014b) has observed that in the past, discussions and commentaries on development easily tended to be developed by economists who saw it primarily from the perspective of economic growth. In that context, so long as the monetary value of goods and services (Gross Domestic Product) increased yearly, there was development. According to Nwajiuba (1999), this perspective is false as there could be an economic growth, but not development, that is, if the majority of the people did not benefit from it. Onwuliri (2008), thus opines that development thus goes beyond the narrow lines of economic and material advancement. It is all encompassing. Development is a multidimensional process involving the totality of man in his political, economic, psychological, social relations, among others. As Andre (1970) rightly observed, it is erroneous to see underdevelopment as an original state which must be characterized by indices of traditionalism and that therefore development consists in abandoning these characteristics and adopting those of the western world. Development is not a completed affair, it is an ongoing process.

### IV. J. S. MBITI'S AFRICAN CONCEPT OF TIME

In his work *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti (1969), begins with an analysis of the African concept of time, believing that it is the key to understanding the African ontology, their beliefs, practices, attitudes and the general way

of life of the African. His idea of the African concept of time is built around his research on the Kikamba and Gikuyu languages, in which he analysis three verbs that speaks of the future, which covers only a period of six months and not beyond two years at most. This would imply that coming events that fall outside the range of this time frame would lie outside the interest of the African. First, how does Mbiti define the African time? He defines the African concept of time as "a composition of events which have occurred, those that are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur" (p. 17). Thus, he categorized time into potential time and actual time. And any time that cuts out of this two times is no-time, that is, that which has not taken place, or has no likelihood of taking place in the immediate future.

According to Mbiti, potential time is that which has the likelihood of immediate occurrence or which lies within the category of natural phenomenon. The actual time is what is present and what is past, revealing the African time as that which moves backward rather than forward. This would mean that Africans set their minds on things that have passed rather than on the future. Thus the African understands time as consisting of a long past and a present with virtually no future. This contrasts with the Western concept of time which is linear, consisting of an indefinite past, the present and infinite future. For the African, the future is absent since it has not been realized.

The African concept of time is also concrete and substantive. It is epochal, as it is wrapped around events and activities. According to Mbiti (1969), Africans 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. Numerical calendars stretching into the future and in a vacuum are not African. He argues that what exists for the African are Phenomenon calendars, in which events which constitute time are reckoned. For instance, an expectant mother counts the lunar months of her pregnancy. The significant thing here is the pregnancy and not the months, and the months make meaning only because of the pregnancy. Thus time is meaningful at the point of the event and not at the mathematical time. For instance, if I say that I would offer 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 here is that the sacrifice was offered at sunset. The sacrifice is more important than the mathematical time when it happened. It is in this regard that Mbiti says that in Africa, man is not a slave to time but makes as much time as he wants. Time draws meaning from the event happening and not the event from the time. In Africa, human beings control and manipulate 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. The journalists had been informed that Otumfuo Osei Tutu II from the Ashanti would arrive at the exhibition at 1100. The time was changed to 1400, but the king did not show up until two hours later when the journalists had already packed and left. The incident made the whites to remark that 'Africans are

terrible time-keepers'. Following Mbiti's concept of time, the idea that Africans are terrible time keepers is rather based on the misunderstanding of the African concept of time by the whites. What is more important to the African is not the time when the event would take place but the event itself. The most important thing to Otumfuo Osei Tutu II is that he was there for the event. He must have been scandalised at their slavery to time.

Time is always a time for doing something or something happening. For instance, as Mbiti (1969) indicated, 6.am is time for milking cow, 12 noon for cattle to rest; 1.pm to draw water; 2.pm for cattle to drink water; 3.pm for cattle to start grazing; 5.pm for cattle to return home; 6.pm for cattle to enter their sleeping places; 7.pm for milking again. Even the months are categorized from significant events: October is called *The Sun* because of 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 bear at this time; June is called *Dirty mouth* because children begin to chew the grains; July is *Drying grass* because rains stop; August is *Sweet grains* because people harvest and eat sweet grains; September is *Sausage tree* because at this time they bear fruit. Maurier (1985) had expressed the same view about the African concept of time when he said that for the pasturing populations of Africa, time is concretized in the various seasons, the main of which are the rainy and dry seasons.

A misunderstanding of the African concept of time has led to the misinterpretation of the African. Mbiti (1969) writes:

When foreigners, especially from Europe and America see people sitting down somewhere without, evidently doing anything, they often remark, 'These Africans waste their time by just sitting down idle!' Another common cry is, 'Oh, Africans are always late!' It is easy to jump to such judgements based on ignorance of what time means to African peoples. Those who are seen sitting down, are actually not wasting time, but either waiting for time or in the process of producing time. (p. 19).

The time that covers the now period, with a sense of immediacy,nowness and nearness, Mbiti calls *Sasa*. As a word, time covers a future that is extremely brief. If the future is beyond two years, it cannot be conceived and spoken of since it has no place in Swahili language. The *Sasa* period covers that which is about to occur or the almost realizable or recently experienced. Since it has got to do with the already experienced, it means that everyone has his own *Sasa* and the older a person gets the more profound his *Sasa*. The connection between the past and the present in Mbiti reflects the importance of the nexus between the past and present in Heidegger (1983). In the Heideggerian expression, if the present suffers *vergagenheitsvergessenheit* (the forgetfulness of the past), there would be the death of *sein* (being), for its life is inseparable from its past and the forgetfulness of the past leads to the decay of the present. This notwithstanding, when it comes to offering sacrifices in Africa, the eldest person with the longest *Sasa* period offers sacrifice on behalf of the community since he remembers the ancestors to whom the sacrifice is offered more than others. *Sasa* is not just limited to individuals; the community also has her own *Sasa*,

which supersedes that of the individual. There is also the *Zamani*, which Mbiti refers to as the Macro-Time. He avers,

*Zamani* is the graveyard of time, the period of termination, the dimension in which everything finds its halting point. It is the final store house of all phenomenon and events, the ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after nor before. (p. 23).

From the foregoing, if *Zamani* is the grave yard of time, it then means that with the *Zamani*, the *Sasa* ends, and events move backwards from the *Sasa* into the *Zamani*. It is death that moves a person from *Sasa* to *Zamani*. This does not mean that with death a person leaves the *Sasa* completely, he is still remembered by his friends and relations, and sometimes when he appears he is identified. This explains why Africa has no futuristic theology or ideology that flows into an eternal future, as in the case of Teilhard the Chardin's philosophy or that of Christianity that talks about a future when and where there will be judgment, heaven and hell. And a cursory glance at African myths reveals this. The myths of African peoples say nothing about the future but much about the past.

#### V. 'AFRICAN TIME' AND AFRICA'S UNDERDEVELOPMENT

Generally, many African scholars have argued that the African concept of time by J. S. Mbiti does not place the African at an advantageous position. In the contention of Izu (2010), even the concept of 'African Time' as a metaphor is a preposterous concept. He avers that,

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 programs is made out to characterize all Africans. Tardiness is a universal phenomenon, it should not be made to hang around Africa's neck like a millstone meant to draw a criminal. Traditional Africa as well as conventional Africa, places a high premium on scheduled activity, punctuality and precision in the performance of activities. (p. 19).

To substantiate his point Izu further argues that,

Before the arrival of the mechanical clock, the African scheduled things with the cockcrow, high noon and sundown. Sometimes things were scheduled 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 lacked the mathematical precision of the mechanical clock, everyone understood what was meant and complied. Those who failed to adhere to the schedule were negatively sanctioned through fines and other types of penalty. (p. 19).

While it is agreed that Izu's opinion in defense of the African is a fact, the absence of precision which is at the base of the African Time is still glaring.

A cursory glance at Mbiti's African idea of time as backward very much explains why Africans are more concerned with how Europe underdeveloped Africa than with how they are themselves destroying the future of Africa through corruption. We are often more concerned with a history that has passed than with a future that is full of opportunities. If the greatest emphasis of the African is on the past rather than the future, and if on the future at all, on the immediate future, it means that the vision that Africans have

for themselves cannot but be limited. And obviously, where there is no vision, there is no development.

While we may disagree with Mbiti on some fronts, it cannot be denied that one of the main reasons for the continuing underdevelopment of Africa is our nonchalant attitude to time. According to the Ghanaian Chronicle (2004), the problem of punctuality has become so endemic that lateness to any function is accepted and explained off as 'African time'. The situation has become so bad that in October 2007, Wikipedia (2013) reported how an Ivorian campaign against African time, backed by President Laurent 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 was "'African time' is killing Africa – let's fight it." With this, the organizers hoped 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 the 2007 winner, a legal adviser by name Narcisse Aka, who received a \$60,000 villa in recognition of his punctuality was so good with time that his colleagues call him 'Mr White Man's Time'.

In many government owned ministries, many Africans who should be working in their offices during working hours are seen sitting under the tree discussing. It is in this regard that Victor (2013) observed that "African time lingers around like an awful smell that will just not go away. Everywhere you go you see examples of tardiness that can be linked back to the myth of African Time. What is particularly distressing is that the African Time bug has arrived at many schools. As you drive past a school you see a group of children casually walking over well past the official starting time. The tragic thing about those who arrive late is that they are invariably the first to leave school for their homes. Worst still, many senior officials in both politics and business seem to delight in arriving late, as if this confirmed their status. Politicians habitually fail to be on time for virtually every programme—especially given that so many of them whizz past the traffic at the flick of their blue lights and their loud sirens" (p. 5). The direct consequence of this attitude towards time is Africa's underdevelopment. If Africa must be like other civilizations that have taken advantage of temporal conditions to build artifacts that have stood the test of time and the vicissitudes of human history, she must change her mentality towards time. Africa's development is tied to her management of time.

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