
How Has the Traditional Anthropocentric Traits of Africans Influence Their Time Expressions?

Osita Nnajofofor*

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v24i1.3>

Abstract

This paper aims to establish some salient anthropocentric traits that influence African existential expression of time. This paper arose due to the preposterous claim that Africans are lousy, indifferent and terrible timekeepers. Many scholars have linked this indifference to Mbiti's claim that Africans have a limited idea of the future. I argued in this paper that in traditional African society, Africans were good managers of time because they manipulated time to their advantage. I however observed that this uneasiness in time management arrived with the missionaries and the colonialists. Hence, Africa's inability to conceive their indigenous time and the contemporary Western time at the same time gave rise to this crisis of time conception in Africa. Despite this crisis, I maintain that time is like a language spoken differently and understood differently in each tradition. I conclude that to understand African time conception, one has to understand their pre-colonial anthropocentric traits which inform their existential expression.

Keywords: Time, African Time, Mbiti, Anthropocentrism, Traditional, Pre-colonial

Introduction

The history of philosophy has been dominated by two rival philosophies on time, according to Mckenzie, “Parmenides argued for the exclusion of time because time as temporal flux is not essential to the ultimate nature of things. The other camp was led by Heraclitus who held firmly that the world and everything in it is simply a totality of events rather than things and because of these things are in a constant state of flux” (1973:77). Since then discussions on time have occupied a central place in almost all philosophical discussions. These discussions are not limited to Western philosophy only but to other traditions like African philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Indian philosophy, American philosophy etc.

This centrality of time informs Heidegger’s belief that “all ontology is rooted in the phenomenon of time correctly viewed and correctly explained” (1977: 61). Bergson likewise corroborates the above and opines that “philosophical questions are difficult because we do not think about real-time” (1970: 534).

In Africa also, the concept of time is an essential feature of the identity of Africans. A diligent study of time in Africa’s past is a commendable venture because of the historical reference and the curious adventure of the way they lived in the past. This collaborates with Babalola’s submission that “time also constitutes knowledge of the philosophical ideas of the people about their whole reality” (2013:143). Mbiti had earlier maintained the centrality of time in African ontology when he observes that “in African worldview, time is the key to understanding the African ontology, their beliefs, practices,

attitudes and general way of life” (1970: 36) he intended that with this ontology, we can articulate and enhance the philosophical systems of different African people.

In the seminal sections [g] and [h] of chapter 3 in his classic book “African Religions and Philosophy” Mbiti’s account of time emphasizes strongly on the subjectivity of time because, for him, time is not considered real until it has been experienced. The ontological core of the traditional view of time reports that “to constitute time is to be lived through.” As such, “time is either present time or used time. Time is composed of events, so a day, month, year or whatever, is simply the sum of its events” (1970: 29). He equally observes that the two memorable periods of African time includes *Sasa* and *Zamani*. *Sasa* is Micro-Time and is the period of conscious existence. As soon as events occur they move 'backwards' towards *Zamani*. After death, one begins the journey backwards towards *Zamani*. At this stage, he is a living dead and is in a state of "personal immortality" (Mbiti, 1970:29).

Scholars like (Masolo 1994, Iroegbu 1994, Oke 2005, Izu 2011, and Onwubiko 1988) were critical of Mbiti’s account of time in Africa and categorized it as fallacious because Mbiti generalized what he observed from a portion of Africa and foisted it on the generality of Africa. These scholars also used definitive verb tenses to counter Mbiti’s submission that Africans lack an idea of future time.

I drew inspiration from the works of scholars like Mbiti 1969, Booth 1975, Dalfovo 2007, Onunwa 2011, Chimakonam 2012, Kanu 2013, and Chimakonam 2015b, to maintain that African ontology is extremely anthropocentric because everything is seen in terms of its relation to human being. It is therefore my aim in this paper to use some of the traditional/pre-colonial

anthropocentric traits of Africans to establish some of their existential expressions of time which unfortunately is always mistaken for indifference to time. I argue against the hegemony of time by the West where the metaphorical use of the concept “African time” is made to characterize all Africans. I contend that time in Africa is like a language which is spoken differently by different cultures but when a particular culture (especially the West) fails to understand them (Africans), they will derogatorily classify Africans as undeveloped. This single story is the classification of the West on Africans toward their time expression and understanding. I established that this misunderstanding is rife because of the inability of the global north to come to terms with the realities in Africa thereby failing to understand the anthropocentric traits that pervade their time expressions.

In section one, I attempted a look at the concept of “anthropocentricism” and some salient opinions of some scholars and the degree it is central to African realities. In section two, I show some anthropocentric nature of time in Africa and how ineffective it has been for Africans in combining their traditional and Western time realities at the same time.

Finally, in section three, since time is a silent language which is spoken differently and understood differently, I attempt to establish some silent traditional and pristine anthropocentric traits that inform African existential expression of time. These traditional traits have unintentionally influenced Africa’s day-to-day lifestyle even in the contemporary time but unfortunately, it has created a negative perception of Africans by those who do not

understand the existential nature of Africans from the time. This is why I try to show in this paper that these traditional anthropocentric traits inform Africa's time conception and understanding. I adopt them because it was obtainable in the traditional African society though these traits may be hard to find in our contemporary times because of obvious colonial influences.

Anthropocentrism in the African Worldview

Anthropocentrism in my understanding is simply a theory that places the human being at the centre of the cosmos, giving them preferences and considerations above all creations. Anthropocentrism places man in a significant position for essential responsibilities. In this central position, man undergoes a lot of pressure that requires a lot of his creativity to surmount and prevail in life's circumstances and problems. Kanu (2013:550) collaborates with the above by opining that African worldview is largely anthropocentric because man occupies a central place in the universe". He quipped also that African people see everything in their relationship with man and that "it is as if God exists for the sake of man" (Kanu 2013:550). Sharing the same sentiment, Metuh observes that "everything in African worldview seems to get its bearing and significance from the position, meaning and end of man" (1991: 109). The centrality of man is demonstrated by his ability to make the world liveable and lovable. According to Onunwa:

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 man that makes the world *liveable* and loveable (Onunwa, 2011:252).

From the above scholarly submissions, we can safely surmise that man is seen as the alpha and omega of the universe in African space because he leverages everything to his advantage. Even though a man in an African worldview occupies an enviable position in the universe yet they do not live in isolation. It then means that “the existence of *mmadu*’s life is nothing unless he/she exists among other *ndi- mmadu*, and he finds this meaning to his life in the context of his interaction not only with other humans but with other realities as well” (Chimakonam & Ogbonnaya 2015, 280).

From this submission, a human being needs each other to actualize their true self and also it is through mutual complementarity that we achieve our destiny. An individual destiny is never realized in isolation. The *akara-chi* which is imprinted on the palm of an individual by one’s *chi* aids in guiding an African to his/her destiny. It is through a relationship with other forces of nature that an African speedily enhances his/her destiny. Aside from the physical reality in the African worldview, the spiritual aspect of human beings needs the interaction of the spiritual forces to enhance one’s destiny too. This is so because *chi* is the gateway and the primary means of communicating the relationship between God and humans in Igbo-African ontology (Chimakonam, 2012:51). Some of the modes of interacting with these spiritual forces are libation and divination. Libations are prayers said in the morning during ceremonies, meetings and gatherings. While divination is an

inquiry into one's *chi* to ascertain the source of problems and danger confronting an individual and the process of how to solve them. Other modes that human beings interact with spiritual forces in Igbo- the African worldview include *ibochi* or libation, *ichuaja* (sacrifice), *Iju- ase* or consultation, *egede* or invocation, *ikenga* or commune, *Ofo* - ritual, *ikpakpala* and *Ose*. These processes show the interrelations between man and other forces of nature but human being remains the chief driver of them all because he manipulates these forces to their advantage.

The Genesis of the Crisis

Earlier in this paper I have established that African ontology is extremely anthropocentric in the sense that everything in the universe is seen in terms of its relation to man including time and its management. This indicates that human being is central in the management of time because he/she is saddled with the responsibility of managing and giving interpretations to time according to his/her perceptions. Booth shares this anthropocentric sentiment when he writes

In traditional Africa, time does not exist apart from human activities; time is created by human beings. 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 are counted by some African groups in terms of successive "age sets" and are given the names of these sets (Booth, 1975: 81).

From Booth's point of view, time is scheduled to suit human beings' activities so that he/she can manipulate them to their advantage. What I mean here is that it is time that requires the attention of humans for it to be understood and managed well.

This kind of knowledge extends to the net of relations that constitutes the connective tissue of the community. This is according to Dalfovo “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 sense that it is promoted not by relations with changing events but also by relations with human beings” (2007: 206).

If Africans were in full management of their time and resources during the traditional era, what suddenly occurred and why are they now dubbed as tardy and terrible timekeepers? What is the genesis of their march from hero to villain?

Izu was indifferent to this submission and maintain that it is one of the gimmicks of the West to criminalize Africans. In Izu’s words:

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 are 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 (2010:19).

Africans in the traditional setting were not tardy and lousy as assumed but place a high premium on scheduled activities where punctuality and precisions were the guiding standards. If traditional African places a high premium on scheduled activities,

how come they are accused of disregarding schedules and programs in these contemporary times? This question was attempted by Dalfovo when he remarked that “the impact of modern time is the cause of the uneasiness felt by Africans in their present management of time (2007:206). This is because the arrival of mechanical clocks and other modern gadgets during the colonial era must have contributed to this damage. To concretize this claim, Babalola and Alokun add that “with development in act of reading and writing, time conception began to experience the process of change” (2013:143).

This process of change generated the uneasiness of migrating from cosmological mammalian means of measuring time to mechanical and electronic methods of observing time. This transition requires the total abandonment of their time schedules and programs to embrace the unfamiliar Western time category which was to a large extent alien to African peculiarities.

The metaphysical genesis of the misunderstanding of time by the European West on the Africans was aptly captured by Hall that “Time is a language and since people from different cultures speak it differently, the result is often a lot of misunderstanding” (1958: 168).

We can safely conclude that this cultural misunderstanding is the reason for this “crisis of conception” of time in Africa. Time is like a silent language spoken differently and understood differently; the natural outcome, therefore, is a misunderstanding. In this section, I attempt to establish some silent traditional anthropocentric traits that inform African existential understanding of time.

Anthropocentric Traits that Influences Time Expressions in Africa:

The Communalist Traits

The humanistic attitude in interpersonal relationships is what Africans call communalism. The need for communalism in traditional African settings was necessary because of the difficulties to survive alone and equally the demand for transition into full personhood. “Not only was it an imperative on account of the harshness of weather and nature, the threat of savage beasts and invading tribes, not only because of the need to work out together the necessities of life; food, drink, etc. but equally communalism is a fact that flows from man’s nature as *animal communalis*” (Iroegbu, 1994: 84).

In African cosmology, the reality of the individual is fully realized in a community or group. The community makes an individual and without the community, an individual is nothing and valueless. The saying that “a person is a person through other persons” is imperative in the African worldview and integrating into this community takes a lot of time. There is no shortcut to this integration

The foregoing shows that Africans look up to the community to actualize their welfare and liberty. It results that Africans have the responsibility of determining how their individual and collective decisions benefit or mar the community’s interest. This is because the triumph and failure of one’s actions tend to go beyond the individual to affect others in society. Africans are not individualistic in their undertakings this is because an individual’s decisions are not unilateral, it involves a lot of consultations.

Menkiti captures the above allusion thus: “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” (Menkiti, 2004: 326). A decision on the welfare of an African is a time-consuming project because the task of transforming the individual into a true person is a collective responsibility of the community. Marriage is one project that transforms an individual into a true person and it is a time-intensive project that involves the decision of the whole community. Iroegbu summarizes these processes thus:

Marriage, like all good and serious things takes time. It is so time-consuming and elaborate that when fully accomplished, it stays and endures. A 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: 84).

Marriage processes are time-consuming because of the processes involved by both parties. Each party plays her role because marriage is an avenue through which individual shares in the group life of the African community. African communalism agrees that any project that marginalizes the community is heading towards doom. Such adventure will fail because true liberty is not liberty against the community; it is liberty in the community that transcends all forms of liberty in Africa. So, when the West accuses Africans of lack of urgency to time, they are not acquainted with the ontological belief systems of the Africans. Africans long for an enduring legacy in most of their engagements as such that is witnessed in African marriage processes. Though

in contemporary times, the influence of Western cultures has whittled down these communal traits the manifestations cannot be denied. The saying, “You can take the man out of the country but you cannot take the country out of the man” is still rife in Africa. These communal traits still influence their dispositions over time even in the contemporary period. Africans will prefer rather be late to an event with their kindred all represented than to be early to an important event all alone. The “Igwebuiké” (Unity in strength) ideology still holds sway in the consciousness of African people, which is why they can sacrifice their time at the altar of communal relationships.

Hospitality traits

Africans are one of the most hospitable and receptive people in the world. This is because whenever a family is privileged to have a visitor, he or she is inadvertently taken as a member of that family.

When the visitor prolongs his or her visit, he or she is given land to till for shelter and long-term sustenance. It is a bad omen for an African to eat without inviting his visitor to join to share a meal with him. This is why when meals are served; everyone present is invited to partake in the meal even when the meal is obviously in short supply. The pleasantries and fellowships involved while attending to visitors in Africa are terribly time gulping and intensive. This is unlike in the western space where special appointments are scheduled for visitors. The spontaneity and “emotionalization” of visits are rampant in Africa. This is because; no special appointment is required from an African to visit a relation or neighbour and no rendezvous is required for him

to join a meal he is privileged to meet. He joins the meal uninvited because it is at mealtime that general happenings in the community are discussed. Meal times are treasured moments where friends and families share their problems and achievements bearing in mind that each person present has something to contribute to the welfare of others. Africans treasure most of this paraphernalia of hospitality because they use such opportunities to care for their own. It is on this platform that future engagements are sacrificed on the altar of the meal table. After all, what is the end of hurrying to keep up a schedule when your brother is in need? The mantra “onye aghana nwanne ya” (be your brother’s keeper) is a saying that is dear to Africans because of their attachment to their brothers and their welfare. This is the reason why for Africans; hospitality is life. By implication, refusing an African a deserved hospitality in the place of one’s private schedule is a bad practice. Since hospitality is life, no sane African will abandon such favor for an uncertain appointment.

Greetings & Pleasantry Traits

An Africa functions first of all on a relational basis: to feel the warmth of family, clans, village and community. In Africa, keeping and cherishing relationships is a way of acknowledging the worth of each human person as an end and not a means. Greetings are relational traits that are so much cherished among Africans that gulp time in an extensive way. Greetings and pleasantries are part of the character test among Africans. People of the same category greet each other and it is a norm that a young African should greet his neighbour every morning, the aim is to make sure that they survived the previous night. The time-consuming part of this ritual is the greeting process which involves going around the neighbourhood every morning to

inquire about the welfare of neighbours. This form of greeting and pleasantries is called *iju oha* (pleasantries/Arumaruuka) in traditional Igbo parlance. This act is not restricted to any set of people in the society, even children are not exempted and a child who refuses to greet his elder is seen as an ill-mannered fellow.

An African will put aside all his pressing engagements and planned schedules to focus on his neighbour without minding the outcome of those fixed appointments and the reactions of his appointees. His temporal focus does not mean he will not attend to them eventually but his preoccupation is his belief that *mmadu bu chi onye* (human is another's god). *Mmaduka* is another name that denotes the supremacy of man over things, time inclusive. An African is not in a hurry to pursue his targeted schedule even when it is at his own expense. They hold this view because of the belief that *mmadu* is an end and not a means. So, time for him is a means while the human is an end, who above other things, should be treated right. An African cherishes respect through greetings and pleasantries more than tasks and appointments. They prefer humanity to prosperity. They treasure building relationships (gotten through pleasantries and greetings) more than any other thing because they believe that one's relationships will attend to them when one is challenged. It is on this wise that Africans have been accused of being fond of celebrations; ie, they love to celebrate almost everything. They enjoy each other and celebrate the relationships which they share. They celebrate themselves both in life and death. The above is a testament to the fact that the African worldview is anthropocentric including time.

Conclusion

An African worldview is said to be deeply religious but human beings play a central role in this reality. The centrality of this role involves using things at their disposal to satisfy their end. Time is one of the central commodities that Africans have managed to serve their purpose and not humans serving the purpose of time as we can notice in the Western world. Africans are not poor managers of time as some have accused them of doing rather to understand African time expression is to understand their existential anthropocentric traits. In this paper, I have established that time is like a silent language which is understood differently and spoken differently in different traditions. I have also attempted to establish that these traits can be located in their communal trait, their hospitality trait and their greeting and pleasantry trait.

***Osita Nnajiolor, PhD.**

Philosophy Department

Nnamdi Azikiwe University,

Awka

og.nnajiolor@unizik.edu.ng

References

- Achebe, C. 1984. *Things Fall Apart* Academy Press, Lagos.
- Babalola, S F. & Alokun A.O. 2013. "African Concept of Time, A Socio-Cultural Reality in The Process of Change" (Journal of Education and Practice), pp 143-147, Vol 4, No 7.
- Bergson, H. 1970. *Oeu vres* , Presses Universitaires: Paris.
- Blanc, J. 2013. "Keeping Time in Africa- the Concept of Time", out-of- africa.com/keeping- time-in-Africa), Web
- Booth, N, S. 1975. 'Time and Change in African Traditional Thought" (Journal of Religion in Africa), pp. 81-91, Vol 7.
- Chimakonam, J O. 2012. "God and Man in Igbo Traditional Religion" (Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy, Ezenweke Elizabeth Ed.), pp 41-60, Augustinian Publications: Jos.
- _____ & OGBONNAYA, L. U, 2015. "A Conceptual and Contextual 7. Meaning of "Mmadu" in the Igbo Reality Scheme: Further Contribution to Uram Igbo Studies"(Ultimate Reality and Meaning), pp 268-285, Vol 34.
- Dalfovo, A, T. 2007. "Perception of Time Among the Lugbara", (Anthropos Institut. 102, H.1), pp-205 213. www.jstor.org/stable/40466799, Retrieved.Web
- Fayemi, K, A. 2016. "Time in Yoruba Culture" [Al-Hikmat,] Volume 36, pp. 27-41

- Hall, E. T. 1959. *Silent Language*, Doubleday, New York.
- Heidegger, M. 1977. *Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell Ed], San Francisco Malden, MA.
- Iroegbu, P. 1994. *Enwisdomization & African Philosophy*, International Universities Press Ltd. Owerri.
- IZU, M, O. 2010, "The problematic of African time" [Uche: Journal of the Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria], pp 19-38, V. 16.) Nsukka.
- Kanu, I. A. 2013. "The Dimensions of African Cosmology" (Filosophia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion), pp.533-555, vol 2 No 2
- Maquet, J. 1972. *African, The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, (Oxford University Press, Joan R, Rayfield New York), paperback
- Mbiti, J. 1970. *African Religion and Philosophy*, (Anchor Books: New York).
- Mckenzie, E. 1973 "Time in Europe and African Philosophy" [A Companion Caribbean Quarterly], pp. 77-85, Vol 19, No.3. www.jstor.org/stable/23050215
- Menkiti, I. 2004 "On the Normative Conception of a Person," (A Companion to African Philosophy, KWASI Wiredu, Ed.), pp.324-331. Blackwell Publishers: or Harper, Collins.
- Onunwa, U. 2005. "African Spirituality: An Anthology of Igbo Religious Myths". Sulfulk: Arima.