

FROM AN AFRICAN ONTOLOGY TO AN AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY

A critique of J.S. Mbiti on the time conception of Africans

by Moses Òkè

ABSTRACT. The ontological thesis that this paper focuses on is the claim of Mbiti that Africans lack the concept of future time. The ontological core of the traditional view of time reported by Mbiti is that 'to constitute time is to be lived through'. With reference to perception, since existence in space presupposes existence in time, it should follow from the premise that 'time is essentially experienced time only' that 'to exist is to exist in time alone'. Assuming that Mbiti's claim about Africans' conception of time is true, Africans should be incapable of conceiving a "perception-transcending" or "knowledge-transcending" world. In which case, they should be incapable of a scientific epistemology. Given that it is living humans that have experiences and reckon with time, this position, in the context of Mbiti's thesis that Africans lack the concept of future time, is ambivalent and needs to be further explicated. The paper has undertaken an explication of the epistemological consequences of such position. Although the general laxity of Africans about time, especially future time, pervades their collective attitude to work, the best we can say is that they lack 'time-discipline', not that they do not have the concept of future time. A philosophically significant concern with the African concept of time, therefore, no matter what it is, should be highly critical of received notions and should point out the consequences of holding an unprogressive outdated idea of time or time-related patterns of behavior. In this regard, Mbiti ought to have pointed out the grave dangers inherent in a 'futureless' conception of time such as he attributed to Africans. This would have helped the people to adopt a better conception of time that could lead to improvement in their lives, and that could better guarantee their survival and independence as a race.

KEY WORDS: Africans, discipline, epistemology, experience, future, knowledge, Mbiti, ontology, perception, time, transcendence

Introduction

John Mbiti is famous for his work *African Religions and Philosophy*,¹ in

¹ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, New York: Double Day and Co. Inc., 1970, especially pp. 19-36.

which he attributes a conception of time to Africans. A crucial part of Mbiti's objectives was to

“discuss the African concept of time as the key to our understanding of the basic religious and philosophical concepts”²

of Africans. He believed that a study of the concept of time might enhance our understanding of the thoughts, practices, values and designs for living of African peoples.³ In short, Mbiti was of the opinion that from the ontology that Africans have, we can articulate the “philosophical systems of different African peoples.” That is, we can from such ontology arrive at

“the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African people think, act or speak in different situations of life.”⁴

Given the foregoing, Mbiti appears to have envisaged the possibility of the movement from ontology to epistemology that this paper sets out to do, although he did not make it. The possibility of such a movement had also been suggested to the effect that a critical African perspective on empirical knowledge could be constructed from Mbiti's account of an African conception of time.⁵

Mbiti's treatment of time as “an ontological phenomenon” that “pertains to the question of existence or being,”⁶ provides the basis for the analysis that this paper attempts. The analytical movement from ontology to epistemology consists in examining the conception of empirical knowledge that may be implicit in an idea of time. Given⁷ that concepts always occur in clusters, the movement presupposes that there are theoretical and practical

² Ibid; 20-21.

³ Ibid; 21.

⁴ Ibid; 2.

⁵ M. Akin. Makinde, “Of Chance Philosophy and Obsolete Philosophy: Some Anti-Scientific Features of African (Traditional) Thought”, in *Second Order (new series): An African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1988): 8-15.

⁶ J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*: 15.

⁷ M. Òkè, *The Nature of Political Concepts and Ideologies*, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2001: 12.

links between the ontological issues of time and existence and the epistemological issues of experience and our knowledge of the external world.⁸ The discussion in this paper will therefore involve an explication of the interconnections between the ideas of time, existence, experience and knowledge of the external world, and life that can be constructed out of Mbiti's reported African concept of time.

Critique of Mbiti

The ontological thesis that this paper focuses on is the claim of Mbiti that Africans lack the concept of future time.⁹ This concept of time that Mbiti attributes to Africans has already received attention of scholars on several grounds different from the present one.¹⁰ As already indicated above, the

⁸ For related discussions, see M. Òkè, "Towards an African (Yoruba) Theory of Empirical Knowledge: A Critique of Hallen and Sodipo" in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, XXXV (2), 1995: 205-216; and Barry Hallen, "Moral Epistemology – When Propositions Come Out of Mouths: Reply to Òkè", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, XXXVIII (2), 1998: 187-204.

⁹ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, pp. 21-23. He says here, for example, that what is not now occurring or certain to occur immediately belongs to the category of "No-time" such that "time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present, and virtually no future." (21)

¹⁰ Cases in point are:

- (a) D.A. Masolo, in *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, and Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 1994: 103-104, gathers some of these criticisms as follows:
- Mbiti did not provide the philosophical analysis of the ontology that he described,
 - Mbiti's work on 'African philosophy' is obscure; he does not say what he means by African Philosophy,
 - Mbiti merely parades "African traditional beliefs (...mythology) as 'philosophy'", and
 - Mbiti did not separate 'African philosophy' from African religious concepts.

concept of time is closely related to the concepts of perception and the external world. It is this connection that we shall now proceed to explicate.

The ontological core of the traditional view of time reported by Mbiti is that

“to constitute time is to be lived through.”

As such,

“time is either present time or used time.”

With reference to perception, since existence in space presupposes existence in time, it should follow from the premise that

“time is essentially experienced time only” that “to exist is to exist in time alone.”

This consequence may be seen as identical with the Berkeleyan ‘*esse est percipi*’ thesis (‘to be is to be experienced’). The direct implication of this for perceptual knowledge will be that ‘to be known is to be perceived either in the present or in the past’. Thus, if Africans lack the concept of future time, they should logically be incapable of conceiving objects either to exist

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- (b) Segun Gbadegesin, in his *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*, New York: Peter Lang, 1991, p. 22, says Mbiti’s thesis is merely “a report of a communal world-view without an attempt to evaluate” it.
- (c) Makinde, in his “Of Chance Philosophy and Obsolete Philosophy...” (above), describes Mbiti’s discussion of the African concept of time as a specimen of ‘chance and obsolete philosophy’, because it is uncritical and so unsuitable for improving the lot of Africa and Africans in the face of contemporary realities; to be considered philosophical, Mbiti’s account, assuming it is correct, needs to include a critical analysis that can lead to a corrective synthesis on the nature of time.
- (d) Based on linguistic considerations in his Akan culture, Gyekye finds Mbiti’s account both false and fallacious. False, because it is not the case that Akans lacked the concept of future time; and fallacious because Mbiti too hastily generalized from what he observed (assuming that it is true) of a very small part of Africa to the whole of Africa. See: Kwame Gyekye, “*African Religions and Philosophy* by J.S. Mbiti, “ a review article in *Second Order*, vol. IV, no 1, Jan. 1975: 86-94. See also, Alexis Kagame, “The Empirical Apperception of Time and the Conception of History in Bantu Thought”, in *Culture and Time*, The UNESCO Press, 1976, pp. 101-102.

unexperienced or to possess unsensed qualities. It should follow, therefore, that for Mbiti's Africans who lack the idea of future time, a past experience could not be projected into the future, which is no time. Hence, if an object or event does not co-exist with present experience, then it does not exist and probably it never existed. The truth of the foregoing consequences would imply that Africans are some kind of ontological immaterialists and epistemological idealists. In which case, they will be neither metaphysical realists nor epistemological realists.

Given the truth of Mbiti's claim about Africans' concept of time, Africans should be incapable of conceiving a "perception-transcending" or "knowledge-transcending" world.¹¹ This is because a conception of time that excludes the future cannot be compatible with a conception of a world that is self-subsistent or a world of things, processes and events having "an enduring identity of its own."¹² By extension, such a conception of time will be incapable of sustaining a conceptual scheme, or be compatible with such a scheme, in which direct objective knowledge of

the external world is granted possible. In order for such knowledge to be possible, the object of knowledge, i.e. the world, must be physically or materially real, meaning that it must be

"a permanent possibility of sensations—actual or possible."¹³

In order to be such a world, it must, in addition "admit universality of access" and exhibit "autonomy or independence."¹⁴ These features will ensure that the world transcends any set of occurrent finite perceptions. Such a world can however not exist and knowledge of such a world cannot be claimed by anyone whose conception of time is limited to only the present

¹¹ Nicholas Rescher, *Epistemology: An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003, p. 348.

¹² Rescher, p. 348.

¹³ J. S. Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, London: Longmans, Green, 1865: XII, 234-243. See also Moses Òkè, "A Critical Study of the Viability of Phenomenalism as an Alternative Theory of Perception", Doctoral Thesis, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 1990.

¹⁴ Rescher, *Epistemology*, p. 348

and the past. Yet, within the wider context of what Africans say, do and believe, epistemological idealism cannot be truly ascribed to them. Perhaps, then, with respect to the conceptualization and the knowledge of reality, Africans may tentatively be best regarded as phenomenologists.

According to Rescher,

“Authentic reality is human reality – reality as we experience it.”¹⁵

Africans, in Mbiti’s account, espouse an ontological order in which apart from God, the distantly and the recently dead persons, non-human living things, and non-living things, there are also living human beings. As Masolo rightly sees it, it is the mode or level of existence of living humans that is “directly related to the concept of time.”¹⁶ It is these living humans that have experiences and reckon with time. In these, Africans, through their cultural practices,¹⁷ express unanimity with the rest of humanity that reality extends beyond their present and past experiences. Even if it is true that they do not have a linguistic expression for futurity or infinitude in any of their languages, in as much as they do not claim that, or live as if, the world must terminate with their occurrent experiences, it should not be supposed that they do not subscribe to the infinite continuity of the external world in which they live.

Among such cultural practices are the following; community organization, co-operative labor, education, government, language, science and technology, law, medicine, family and religion.

Discussion

From Mbiti’s claim that Africans are notoriously religious, living as it were in a religious universe,¹⁸ we may plausibly suppose that Africans are some sort of Berkeleyan ‘deity-phenomenologists’. In that case, matter will come to be defined for them in a special way (modifying J. S. Mill), as the permanent

¹⁵ Rescher, p. 362.

¹⁶ D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, p. 110.

¹⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, pp. 37-46.

possibility of sensations, actual in human minds and possible in God's mind.

So defined, Mbiti's Africans can postulate God as the guarantor of the future existence of the external world. This will lead to saying that the future exists for god, but not for human beings. Such a position can be used to explain some of the ways in which many Africans do things in private, as well as in public life. Also, saying that future time exists only for God can be used to explain most Africans' peculiar carefree attitude to time, to work, and to development. This position, in the context of Mbiti's thesis that Africans lack the concept of future time, is however ambivalent and so needs to be further explicated.

In the first place, this position appears to lead those who hold it into a self-contradiction. Since for them, the very idea of God involves infinitude, to deny the future will result in a logical absurdity. This is a point raised against Mbiti by Masolo and Gyekye.¹⁸

Although it may be true that the Akans, the Yorùbá,¹⁹ and other African peoples have the concept of infinitude in their languages and engage in practices that imply it, it should be noted that the charge of self-contradiction may not hold against Mbiti concerning the Africans who are said to lack the concept of future time.

According to Mbiti, for example,

“Africans are notoriously religious...”, and “...for Africans, the whole of existence is a religious phenomenon, man is a deeply religious being in a religious universe”(African Religions and Philosophy: 1, 19).

This is an amalgam of Berkeley's and Mill's definitions of matter.

The physical world or real being within which people live and which they know is the only one they can experience as human beings, but God is not a part of this physical reality. Hence, any reference to God in their ontology is, epistemologically, a gratuitous ratiocinative postulate. Although this may have initial validity in its psychological utility, it does not appear that it can be validated, retrospectively, in terms of any pragmatic utility or inven-

¹⁸ Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, p. 111, and Gyekye, “*African Religions and Philosophy* by J. S. Mbiti”, pp. 86-94.

¹⁹ John A. A. Ayoade, “Time in Yoruba Thought”, in Richard Wright, ed; *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, New York: University Press of America, 1984, pp. 93-112.

tive versatility. The net effect of this is that even if Africans have, directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, the concept of infinitude, they do not take it seriously.

The general laxity of Africans about time,²⁰ especially future time, pervades African peoples' and nations' collective attitude to work. It manifests in their politics and economy, as well as in other aspects of national life in almost all the countries on the continent. The general observation is that most African nations lack the foresight to institute enduring economic programs; hence the continuous cycles of poverty, bad governance, monumental backwardness and a seemingly perpetual over-dependence on other peoples of the world for minimal survival. This, however, cannot be read to mean that Africans lack the idea of infinitude. The best we can say is that they lack 'time-discipline'.

On the other hand, since as noted earlier, what we are concerned with is reality as human beings experience it, to say that future reality exists for God alone will not be self-contradictory for people who deny the reality and knowledge of the future for themselves. Since they do not have that phenomenon in their experience, which is the only way by which they can be acquainted with reality, their lack of a concept for the future will not necessarily lead to any logical or practical absurdity, although it might adversely influence their systems of valuation and responses to events and situations in the world.

Since for these people, only God exists infinitely, and can know beyond the present, they may, for instance, be comfortable with a short-term ambition or expectation in life. They may not be motivated to strive for progressive social and societal development which is a distant futuristic phenomenon. They may also lack material accumulative tendencies, since, ideally, one only accumulates for future utility. This is, however, very sharply contradicted by the observable lives of many Africans in the home, in politics, and in business, both in traditional and in contemporary times. Many of them procreate profusely, acquire property voraciously, engage in cash crop plantations laboriously, have inheritance procedures, embezzle in

²⁰ See, for example, Ademola Adejumo, "The Concept of 'African Time': Its Manifestation in the Traditional Art of the Yoruba of Nigeria", *The Nigerian Field*, 62 (1997): 41-50.

public life excessively, engage in several forward-looking sharp practices in business, play hard rough ‘sit-tight’ politics, struggle for education and strive to be in good health, traditionally and contemporarily.

However, for Africans, based on Mbiti’s thesis, whether the world will extend beyond the present or not is beyond human knowledge or justifiable imagination. It is possible, however, that God (or some other spiritual being) knows that it will. For human beings, it is merely an ontological article of faith; it is not a claim based on anyone’s personal experience. For these Africans, then, anything can happen beyond the present and anything that will so happen is known (or knowable) only to God on whom alone it depends.

Ultimately, therefore, from Mbiti’s thesis, we may conclude that Africans have a religious epistemology, as opposed to a scientific epistemology.²¹ This emergent religious epistemology is empiricist in methodology, but problematically realistic in ontology. The Africans may thus be said to be committed to the existence of

“a mind-dependent physical reality to which our enquiries address themselves....”²²

As such, they can confidently say that ‘the world is out there now’; but they cannot, and need not, say or think that it will continue to be there, as far as any human being knows or can know. Perhaps, this explains why the people

“have little or no active interest in events that lie in the future beyond, at most, two years from now.”²³

They may thus be said to distinguish between ‘divine knowledge’ and ‘mun-

²¹ Rescher, *Epistemology: An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, p. 360.

²² From Mbiti’s claim that

“Africans have their own ontology, but it is a religious ontology...”, (p. 20),

we may rightly infer that if Africans have their own science, it is a religious science; if they have their own epistemology, it is a religious epistemology; etc., where by ‘religious’ is meant ‘spiritual’, ‘ancient’, ‘God-centered’, ‘transcendental’, ‘dogmatic’, ‘mystical’, and ‘mystifying’, especially in the light of his claims on pages 37-49.

²³ Rescher, *Epistemology*, pp. 318-319.

dane knowledge':²⁴ only God knows infinitude; humans, if they know anything at all, know, and can know, only the past and the present.

The ensuing religious epistemology, which may be used to explain the behavior of many Africans in many aspects of life, does not countenance the progressive nature of knowledge. It is antithetical to progress and innovation. It is limited to the

“presently purported truth; truth as we ourselves see it, here and now.”

It does not aspire to “futures truth”, not to talk of “completed truth” and “perfected truth.”²⁵

Conclusion

Had Mbiti addressed himself to the existential implications of a lack of the concept of the indefinite future in a given culture, he would have become aware of the need to introduce it into that culture as part of the task of a worthwhile philosophy conceived as ‘the constructive critique of cultures’. He would thus have gone beyond just describing traditional African cultures (correctly or incorrectly) to making attempts to change them for the better, by infusing them with the crucial concepts that they might lack or appear to lack. On the other hand, if they had the concept of futurity, no matter how they designate it,²⁶ but are unserious about it, it is still the task of philosophers to introduce to them a new orientation and attitude to time, in view of the debilitating effects that a poor time orientation might have on their life.

Finally, had Mbiti addressed himself to the epistemological implications of the ontology that he attributed to Africans, he would have also seen the need to be philosophically critical, rather being patronizing, of traditional

²⁴ Rescher, pp. 320-321.

²⁵ Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 82.

²⁶ H.A. Oluwasanmi [then Vice-Chancellor, University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Ile-Ife, Nigeria], “Philosophy and University Goals”, Foreword to the maiden edition of *Second Order*, vol.1, no.1, Jan. 1972: 4.

ideas and patterns of behavior. Such critical approach would have enabled him to

“point out the contradictions involved in old faiths, beliefs and concepts and draw attention to the need to seek some kind of new basis.”²⁷

In this regard, it is important to note, with Mbiti, that:

“Not all philosophies are useful or worthwhile. Some have no root in the life of the community.... On the other hand, merely to perpetuate traditional African thought-forms in a situation to which they are no longer relevant would be an equally lifeless and uncreative activity.”²⁸

This comment is especially pertinent for Mbiti, whose objective was to use his thesis on the African concept of time to

“explain belief, attitude, practices and general ways of life of African peoples, not only of the traditional set-up, but also of the modern situation (whether in political, economic, educational or church life).”²⁹

It is as a consequence of this concept of time that, according to Mbiti:

“In traditional African thought, there is no concept of history moving ‘forward’ towards a future climax.... So African peoples have no ‘belief in progress,’ the idea that the development of human activities and achievements moves from a low to a higher degree. The people neither plan for the future nor ‘build castles in the air.’”³⁰

With due respect for Mbiti, his concern with the African concept of time would have been more philosophically significant if he had been critically analytical of it as to have pointed out that if Africans lacked either the concept of the indefinite future or a progressive commitment to it,

²⁷ Professor Galloway, “The Useless Disciplines”, A Lecture given before the Philosophical Society, University College, Ibadan, Nigeria, on January 11, 1956, p. 7, quoted in H. A. Oluwasanmi, *op. cit.* p. 6.

²⁸ Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 83.

²⁹ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 21.

³⁰ J.S. Mbiti, pp. 29-30.

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“they would have to acquire it or else hold themselves ready for eventual recolonization,”³¹

or, indeed, eventual inevitable early extinction.

³¹ My emphasis.