



## ‘African Time’ is un-African

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**Abstract.** The idea of African time has become very ubiquitous among Africans to the extent that Africans themselves have come to accept it as a way of life. This phenomenon has become so destructive to Africans in their various life’s activities; ranging from work places, social gatherings, religious activities to even keeping appointments with government functionaries. Time wasting and mismanagement has therefore been viewed as an African phenomenon that acts as a serious impediment to Africa’s development. Adopting the philosophical methods of analysis and hermeneutics, this work argued that the concept of African time does not have African origin and that such an idea is a foreign imposition on Africans and it is a furtherance of colonialism in Africa and on Africans. This is because Africans in traditional metaphysical worldview are very religious and would always keep to time since they are conscious of the consequences of late coming in their appointments with the supra-sensible beings in African ontology. We therefore concluded that we must reinvent Africa’s originality on punctuality while conscientiously dropping the colonially imposed African time. That way, Africans would reenact their real identity and tackle any development challenges associated with time wasting.

**Keywords:** African time, worldview, African ontology, punctuality, African identity

### 1. Introduction

This study is as a result of the practical motivation from various views on the attitude of Africans towards time. Often times, we hear people even in official places assign responsibilities to people giving specific timeline with the caution: ‘no African time’. Again, people come for a meeting behind schedule

and they are derided as typical Africans. Sometimes, organizers of an event know that the kick-off time for such event is, say 2pm but they intentionally place 12noon on their notice of invitation with the mindset that invitees are likely to honour the invitation behind schedule because of the phenomenon called ‘African time’.

The idea of African time therefore signifies that Africans are not conscious of time. In simple terms, Africans have no sense of punctuality and are likely not expected to keep to time in any engagement. Incredibly, most Africans themselves accept this description as their own identity and joyfully address themselves as such, to the point that they come late to an event and happily remind you that they are Africans and such action (of lateness) must be permitted or overlooked. The situation gets more disturbing when someone in an office being punished for lateness goes about complaining to others of injustice being done to him simply for coming to perform his official function five or ten minutes behind time. Most worrisome is the fact that colleagues of such an offender condemn a boss who simply performed his duties rightly by querying the offender. They (the offender’s colleagues) label such a boss wicked and un-African, even though they are aware the boss is a Nigerian, as the case may be.

In view of this scenario, Africans have been accused of being their own problems of development as part of their development quagmire can be attributed to their non-commitment to times. This is why Nyasani advised Africans, saying “...no human progress can be achieved if the progress by which it is attained disregards the flow of time as its most important and indispensable regulator” (2010, p. 259). However, we vehemently reject unpunctuality as an African phenomenon and hold that Africanizing late coming

is another form of mental colonisation of Africans by both the West and their African prodigies. This colonisation has been heightened by the idea of westernisation and so-called advancement which have come to destroy the exactitude of time which the traditional African was known for. We are therefore set to achieve the following aims in this work: upturn the view that there exists a brand of time called 'African time', show that the idea of lateness comes with Western concept of time and has been a Western inherited phenomenon by Africans, prove that Africans are endemically punctual in all their activities as lack of it portends so much danger in all aspects of their lives, and finally resurrect the sense of punctuality originally definitive of Africans.

## 2. Time: Its Evolution among Africans

Time has evolved from the pre-colonial time to the present times in different African cultures. In the pre-literate times, there was no clock time; so there was no exactitude in time calculation. In other words, there was no 24-hourly calibration of time; rather there were different ways of measuring time. Among these different ways were the use of shadows, cock crows, movements of celestial bodies like the sun and the moon, and peculiar sounds from certain birds or animals. In line with these, we had periods such as early morning, morning, mid-day, afternoon, early evening, evening, night, mid-night and late night. Among the Ukwuani people of Delta State in Southern Nigeria, early morning is called *okpa odu* (the first session of cock crow), morning is *utu*, mid-day is *okeme efifie*, afternoon is *efifie*, early evening can be described as *ichi ekpul'eka*, evening is *enyashi*, night is *ngede*, mid-night is *odingede nebe*, late night is *odingede*. Since in traditional Africa, "actual time is a process measured in terms of events, happenings and occurrences" (Mbiti, 1969, pp. 25-26), there are specific events or occurrences associated with each of these periods of the day or night.

In traditional Africa, there was also time as calendar but not the Gregorian calendar; it could be better described as season and there are events that marked such description. The components of season begin from day to year, which make up the calendar year and specifically progresses among the Ukwuani people and other Western Igbo people of Nigeria as follows:

*Ubochi* or *Mbochi* Day, not in terms of evening to morning but from morning through evening to another morning.

*Izu* Four market days: Nkwo, Eke, Olie and Afor, counting of which can begin from any of the days. Four days therefore make one week (*ofu izu*).

*onwa* Month: This is counted as *Izu esa* (seven weeks), that is 28 days. It is counted with the complete circle of moon which also takes about 28 days; 14 days of shining from evening to about 12 midnight and another 14 days from midnight to early hours of the morning.

*Asya* Year: This is not counted in days and weeks. On monthly basis, it is counted with respect to some annual crops planted, bird migration which is also based on rainy and dry seasons, harvest period, annual festivals, among others.

Although there is no conscious counting of the number of days that makes a year as it is done in the Gregorian calendar, it is counted as 364 days; the equivalence of the Gregorian calendar days. Similar calendar has been explained by Nwala (2010, p. 154) to be the held among the Igbo people of Nigeria in his book *Igbo Philosophy*.

Another method of determining time is through the menstrual cycle (*oge nso*) of women which takes place every 28 days (*izu esa*). Thirteen of such cycles amount to one year. *Oge nso* is translated as period of taboo in the sense that a woman menstruating is forbidden from cooking for the husband, sleeping in the same room with him and hanging under-wears outside or along the routes taken by men. This time determinant helped traditional Africans in child spacing because twenty-six (26) of such cycles equate two (2) years. Couples could, within the period of the thirteen (13) to twenty-six (26) cycles, determine whether the woman should get pregnant in order to allow for healthy child spacing.

The lunar movement of the moon in traditional Africa is very fundamental in determining time since a complete cycle takes twenty-eight (28) days. This aspect of time determinant assisted traditional Africa in environmental preservation as they practiced shifting cultivation through land fallowing. This activity which took place every five (5) years for each cultivated farmland is not according to the Gregorian calendar but in terms of the completion of five cycles of a yearly thirteen cycle lunar movements. However, the complete lunar cycles for such period also coincide with the Gregorian calendar for the same period. After each harvest season from cultivated farmlands which are usually communally owned, elders of the families began to drop palm kernels (*mkpulu aku*) at designated places (one for

each complete cycle of the moon) and when the palm kernels got to sixty-five (65), then approval would be given for such farmlands to be cultivated again.

All the accounts of time measurement and determinants explained so far were very visible and operational in the pre-literate Africa and were attached to events or phenomena, as the case may be. But the advent of colonialism came with more time accuracy and precision determined by the western clock time and the Gregorian calendar which runs from January as the first month of the year to December as the last month. The literate orientation which came with colonialism and post-colonialism among Africans gave birth to the evolution of time in Africa. One traditional African mode of measuring time that was affected by the western mode was the use of shadows. As the western clock time came into existence, time was no longer determined by what Mbiti calls *highsun* or *highmoon*. Rather the now

literate African with the idea of clock time would draw a circle on the ground and calibrate it just like the western clock and tried to find the radius of the circle where he placed a long stick. The direction of the shadow then gave him an idea of what time of the day it was. This was an improvement on the initial traditional situation in which the length of the shadow of any object, including that of human beings, could be used to estimate time; but the problems of accuracy and precision were still not addressed.

The evolution of time in Africa is also reflected in Mbiti's explanation of reckoning of day with significant events among the Ankore people of Uganda as well as the Latuka people's understanding of lunar months also with significant events (1969, pp. 25-26). Both of which are schematically explained below:

Time	Description of Events	Local Name
6am	Milking time	<i>Akasheshe</i>
12noon	Rest time for both cattle and people after milking of the cattle as the day would be sunny and hot	<i>bari omubirago</i>
1pm	Time for drawing water from the wells or rivers prior to leading the cattle to drink water in order to avoid polluting the water or becoming obstacles to those going to draw water	<i>baaza ahamaziba</i>
2pm	Drinking time for cattle	<i>amasyo niganywa</i>
3pm	Grazing time for cattle after leaving drinking water	<i>amasyo nigakuka</i>
5pm	Time for cattle to return home after grazing	<i>ente nitaha</i>
6pm	Time for cattle to enter their kraals or sleeping places	<i>ente zaatahas</i>
7pm	Milking time before the cattle sleep	<i>Akasheshe</i>

**Table I:** Description of Day by the Ankore People of Uganda

Month	Description of Events	Name of the Period
October	The sun is very hot at this time	The Sun
December	People become very thirsty because water is scarce	Give your uncle water
February	People begin to prepare their field for planting because the rains are set to return	Let them dig
May	Grain begins to bear	Grain in the ear
June	Children begin to eat the new grain and as such get their mouths dirty	Dirty mouth
July	The rain stops, grounds get dry and grass withers	Dry grass
August	People eat and harvest sweet grain	Sweet grain
September	The sausage tree begins to bear fruit which looks like huge sausage	Sausage tree

**Table II:** Lakuta People's Description of Lunar Month

The tables above are clear indications that time had evolved in Africa with the emergence of clock time and the Gregorian calendar as against Mbiti's thought that the African traditional views of time were being presented. The different events described above among the various peoples did not begin with the advent of the western time; they had begun before then and were carried out with time references different from Mbiti's presentation above. However, with western time and calendar, there was precision in carrying out the events.

In all, there was a shift (not complete abandonment) from the inexact and imprecise account of time among Africans to western concept of time introduced by the colonialists. Africans began to calculate time more in terms of clock time and Gregorian calendars of days, weeks, months and years. For instance, the observation of weeks on the basis of market days was lost to that of the colonialists' seven (7) days time calculation which for the Ukwuani and Igbo peoples of Southern

Nigeria turned to be *Izu Uka* (transliterated as weekly church). Church meeting is weekly on Sundays and so calculation and observation of week begins from Sunday till Saturday and another week begins again on Sunday. *Ofu Izu uka* becomes translated as one week, beginning from Sunday till Saturday. Although, we know that weekly calculation can begin from any day of the week but the observation of the week beginning from Sunday was a colonial legacy bequeathed to Africans by Christian missionaries. This shift was also captured by Babalola and Ayodeji (2013) thus:

Emphasis shifted from mere relation of time to events, natural phenomena, and weather. The people begin to see the need for calculating time in the modern way. Somehow, some have derogatorily observed this period as one of the evils in the principle of assimilation which was introduced by the colonialists, especially the French. This was because the principle of assimilation emphasized the submersion of the people's cultural values, ideas, philosophies etc. into the cultural beliefs and ways of life of the colonialists. That notwithstanding, the important thing...is that, the period marks the onset of a vivid process of change among the people, when it comes to the issue of time concept.

Not that the consideration of time in the context of events, weather and natural phenomenon was jettisoned entirely. But the enlightened and the educated among the people see in western education, a better way of time consideration. This was as a result of the fact that the new system was more exact and precise. At this period, both African concept of time and (the western, the linear concept of time) were used by the Africans (p. 145).

In summary, the quest for exactness, accuracy and precision has been seen to be the foundation for embracing the western concept of time. There is also the significant attendant reason of addressing the problem of development of the African continent the moment Africans deal with their 'African time' attitude which signifies non-commitment to duties and responsibilities. How most Africans come to accept the "African time" toga remains puzzling and that constitutes the basis of this research. Therefore, in our next section, we shall reflect on how our identity, as Africans, has become associated with unpunctuality.

### 3. Is the African Identity Synonymous with Non-punctuality?

Several pictures have been painted of Africans with respect to their attitude of late coming to events or handling responsibilities. Such accounts have become so penetrating in the psyche of Africans that the notion of 'African time' is not just an abstract expression but also a surprisingly accepted phenomenon that is practically affecting every aspect of their life. Victor Dlamini expressed great dissatisfaction on how much rooted such concept of time is in the lifestyle of Africans thus:

*...the concept of African Time continues to provide a convenient excuse for the tardiness of those who are lazy or just plain rude. Of course, those who invoke African Time are not stupid, they know that by saying that it is part of African culture to disregard punctuality, very few will have the nerve to challenge them* (2010, n.d).

We have so conformed to this concept that a meeting that is supposed to be 10:00am for instance would be advertised for 8:00am because of the notion that people will keep to their 'African Time' attitude and surprisingly, the one who thought and fixed the meeting that way is not disappointed as people would come in accordance to his projections. In political rallies, voters wait endlessly for aspirants to come and present manifestoes to the people; an event scheduled to take place at, say 12noon, never happens until 2:00am the next day when almost everyone had left the venue of the event. The few persons who must have stayed back for the possible spoil that would be shared are simply hailed for being die-hard Party loyalists and within ten (10) minutes, an ordinarily serious event as such had ended. The cause is simply the bug of 'African Time' that had bitten the African mind.

Most amazing are the attitudes of practitioners of Christianity and Islam respectively; worshippers and their heads alike. It is a commonplace seeing worshippers casually strolling into church services more than an hour behind schedule with no sign of remorse. Unbelievably, the Pastor stays back in his office while service has commenced and by the time he projects that church officials must have all taken their seats, he would majestically walk into the service with a loud and standing ovation from the worshippers. It is the same story for most other western religions. All of these are clear indications of the acceptability of 'African Time'.

Scholars of African origin not only accepted this denigrating description of Africans but have

advertently come to defend it. Kanu briefly put his defence of the propriety of such appellation thus: “in African time, it is the activity at hand that determines the length of time required to compete it. Thus, activity controlled time and not time to control activity” (2019, p. 5). Kanu’s view here shows that Africans do not regulate their activities to happen within certain time frame. They cannot determine when a particular activity should end so that they can meet up with other activities that are proximately taking place within the same time range. There are therefore justifiable reasons for Africans in their not keeping to time for appointment or events at all times. Osita Nnaji for was very explicit in his defence of the ‘African Time’ toga as he made this aim unambiguous in his work. In his words,

This section...tries to justify Africa’s seeming lax attitude to time and bring to bear reasons why Africans take this posture, contrary to the tag already hung on the Africans that there is nothing African about time and that laxity in time management is one of the highest contributors to productivity loses in the work place and personal life as plans are not well executed per time (2016, p. 268).

Nnaji for is averse to the claim that Africans have no sense of time and opposes the view that there is no such thing called ‘African Time’. He thinks that the ‘African time’ description of Africans constitutes African identity, so anyone erasing that description is a surreptitious destroyer of our identity as Africans. A specific defence of the African tardy attitude to time is the fact that as Africans, we are more interested in maintaining human relationships than struggling to keep to time. According to him, Another justification for African understanding of time which is nevertheless portrayed as not being time conscious is Africa’s relational approach to life. Here tasks are subjugated to the relational aspect of life and are completed in order to help the family, clan, the village and the tribe (2016, p. 268).

In the African spirit therefore, it is more of our identity for our hospitality to make us engage in activities that constitute providing solutions to people’s problems than being punctual in an event when someone is suffering or facing challenges. This is only an extroverted discussion of what Kanu had pointed out about activity controlling time for Africans, hence our laxity in time consciousness.

Another renowned scholar, Chris Anyokwu, acquiesced to the ‘African time’ description of Africans and attempted a justification of their (Africans’) slapdash behaviours towards time in a

rhetorical manner. He began his acceptance of the toga by asking:

Has it ever occurred to you that the so-called “African Time” syndrome was developed by the absence of modern conveniences? Imagine, for a second, the usually difficult terrains and topographies of many African communities. Imagine these “s–tholes” made worse by lack of basic necessities and infrastructure such as good roads, rails, waterways, potable water, electricity supply, primary held-care delivery system and recreational facilities (Anyokwu, 2021, n.p).

In spite of this explanation of why Africans do not keep to time, he condemns the retrogressive implications of the phenomenon on the development of Africa as a continent. He charged Africans to recoil from continuing on the path of unpunctuality to appointments and events in order to make room for all round development of the person and society.

In this work, we are not opposed to the fact that Africans have their peculiar way of reacting to time but what we disagree with is the acceptance of the claim that Africans have a slipshod attitude to time, no matter the justificatory attempts made by these claimants. The idea of ‘African Time’ is only one of the perspectives of psyche colonialism from the West. The lax approach to time has been singled out as exclusively an African property and quality which has unquestionably been accepted and practiced by Africans. Kanu recapped a story of a Ghanaian king coming late to an event this way:

...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 the north London at the climax of a Ghanaian trade exhibition, Ghana Expo 2003. The journalists had been informed Otumfuo Osei Tutu II from the Ashanti would arrive at the exhibition at 11:00. The time was changed to 14:00, 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’ (2019, p. 3).

A similar situation was also recorded of a former president of Ecuador, Lucio Gutierrez, who was widely known to be a perpetual late comer to every event. His situation was so bad that such attitude to time became a national issue as it permeated the country’s civil service and the economic sector as well. Gbenga Adebambo captured it expressly thus: “Ecuador, a South American country famed for its lack of punctuality has added up the numbers. In this

country, over half of all public events start late” (2018, n.p).

It is obvious how colonialism assesses same actions on the basis of race and makes a people lose their identity and the confidence they ordinarily had of themselves. If lack of punctuality is coming from an African or Africa, then it is ‘African Time’ but it came from an Ecuadorian and Ecuador, it was not ‘American Time’. A German would also come for an appointment behind schedule but that action is not attributed to the operation of ‘European Time’. The action of unpunctuality summarily still comes from various peoples of the world in different continents, yet citizens of those continents are not characteristically unpunctual because of their identity. Such discrimination is found in Heimbürger’s seminal work titled *Time- A Multidimensional Concept* acknowledges when he asserts that “...in Brazil, it is perfectly acceptable to be three hours late...” (2014, p. 166), yet there is no such description as ‘Brazilian Time’. The sentiment of this judgment on Africans characteristically (as well) smacks of the Westernisation and Eurocentricism of colonisation. Lee also holds this view when he posits that:

...the roots of African time are intertwined with Nigeria’s century-long colonial rule under the British crown, that it’s the result of a deeper lack of understanding between the oppressor and the oppressed. Alas, merely mentioning “African time” can land the speaker in a postcolonial quagmire. “I personally find the concept of ‘African time’ rather derogatory,” wrote Marloes Janson, an anthropologist at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, in an email. “It assumes that African people are lazy and unable to keep time” (2016, n.p).

That people in Africa come behind schedule to events does not mean that ‘African Time’ identifies them just like we have pointed out that similar action did not define the American identity of Ecuadorians who were perpetually tardy. We therefore logically and existentially hold that Africans are people who are punctual in their activities. This is because an African does not see time as a mere phenomenon of temporality but also that which plays a key role in determining how the different component of beings in African ontology relate with one another. In such ontology, we have three different categories which include spirit and forces, human beings and things (Ogbenika, 2011). An African rather than being “a terrible time keeper” is a fascinating time keeper because he knows that failure to be punctual to activities would create a disharmony between him and the vital forces in the other components of the

ontological hierarchy. Africans’ punctuality predates the western clock time because when given an assignment to perform certain sacrifices at a designated location at midnight, for instance, he goes to wait for midnight to meet him there. Again, once it is planting season, no one reminds him of his responsibilities. As he saw the different kinds of migrations taking place among animals, he would apply some ‘traditional astrological skills’ and brace up for planting without wasting time. Victor Dlamini talks about Africans’ punctuality thus:

Like many things attributed to some ancient, but still prevalent social norm, African Time does not stand up to scrutiny. If you go to even the simplest village you immediately realise just how much the village folk respect time. If there is a gathering, the ordinary folk will all be there on time. What’s more, even the unemployed villager will be up at the crack of dawn to make the most of his day. So African Time is nothing but a myth (2010, n.p).

Therefore ‘African Time’ is a colonial garb deliberately worn on Africa which refused to abate; instead Africans have accepted it as if it is royal apparel. This situation depicts real suffering from ‘mental slavery’, which makes mental decolonization an inevitable venture. Those traditional Africans who are erroneously tagged as unrepentant practitioners of ‘African Time’ because of not giving room to foreign accretions are ironically those who maintain the attitude of punctuality. The so-called enlightened Africans are on the contrary those that have been negatively influenced by the western clock time and who do not really care being behind schedule. All they needed to do was simply to say something like ‘my apologies for coming behind schedule’ or ‘I got some logistic challenges on the way’ and it ends there. At worst, following the western public system, a superior person issues a query if such action happens within the public service sector and may even be withdrawn after response. But the African knows that being unpunctual to certain traditional events or activities comes with a heavy price which the western-styled apologies or queries cannot adequately address. So, he most often keeps to time in every activity. This why Pantaleon Iroegbu said that:

As an African value, time is irreplaceable. To tamper with time is therefore to tamper with life. It obstructs that unfolding of being that defines time. Such a tampering with time has calamitous consequences. It annihilates the essence of existence. It also thwarts the face of being. It renders the being into less-than-being. It finally disfigures the human person (2004, p. 202).

We therefore reiterate the position that ‘African Time’ is not an African phenomenon and we must recover our identity by “...avoiding or reversing through a critical conceptual self-awareness the unexamined assimilation in our thought...of the conceptual frameworks embedded in the foreign...traditions that have had an impact on African life and thought” (Wiredu, 1995, p. 22).

#### 4. Conclusion

All through the work, it would be discovered that the very usual discussions of ‘African time’ on the space approach where the debate of whether time in Africa is two-dimensional or three-dimensional, or again whether time is linear or cyclic did not constitute our focus. But we examined how Africans manage their time, even in the face of modernization and westernization whether their perspective of time is linear or cyclic, or even both. The basic goal of an African, who has not allowed colonial influences and deliberately designed western education curriculum to determine his sense of time, is to manage time so effectively in order not to cause a disharmonious relationship among beings in African ontology. Hence, unpunctuality is not contemplated by Africans because it is culturally un-African.

In essence, we examined the issue of punctuality which entails the moralization of time; a concept that constitutes a basic problem of Africa’s development. Therefore, “we show that the notion of ‘time’ in general lends itself much more to moralisation than the notion of ‘space’ – though both are otherwise considered similarly fundamental to human life” (Widlok et al 2021, p. 388). We did not deny the tardiness exhibited by Africans in different areas of life but what we hold as a position is that such tardy attitude is not an African identity but was rather a colonial inheritance that has come to affect the African psyche and from which we must recover by reasserting Africans’ originality in punctuality. Such a recovery and reassertion can help deal with any development problem Africa faces as a continent on the basis of time wastage.

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