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An Assessment of John Mbiti's African Concept of Time and Its Implications for Christian Ministry

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Abstract: John Mbiti is a trailblazer in discussing the traditional African concept of time. In his work, he maintains that the African concept of time is key to understanding African ontology hence underscoring the value of a right understanding of African view of time. However, not all subsequent scholars are in agreement with Mbiti's assessment of the concept of time in Africa: as dependent on event; two-dimensional and as having no concept of the future. More often than not, previous studies on this issue have tended to focus more on critiquing Mbiti's analysis of time without applying African understanding of time in today's context. Consequently, this paper not only examines the ongoing discussion on traditional African view of time but also posits that the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ ought to be presented by taking cognizance of the African understanding of time. Thus, evangelism, Christian discipleship, Christian apologetics and planning should be done in such a way that they factor in African love for history, their value for the present and their less emphasis on things that are really in the distant future. This way, inculturation of the Christian faith is enhanced.

Keywords: Time, African, traditional religion, Christian ministry

1. Introduction

More often than not, Africans are accused by the West of not being time conscious. They support their assertion by stating that; Africans are often late for appointments, fail to meet deadlines and take a lot of time many a time talking to one another about nothing in particular instead of doing something constructive. The frequency of sayings in many parts of Africa such as: time wasted is never recovered; time is money and time waits for no man are meant to sensitize the African person on the value of time and hence implies that many of them are not conscious of time.

This view, however, is a misrepresentation of the traditional African concept of time; it rests on a wrong assumption that Africans look at time as the West do. Africans are conscious of time as seen in various situations. They have definite times when sacrifices are offered, initiation carried out, planning and harvesting done and so on.

Following Mbiti's writing on the concept of time in Africa (this was first expressed in his doctoral dissertation where he used the Akamba tribe to examine the New Testament eschatology from an African cultural perspective before appearing in his book African Religious and Philosophy), various scholarly materials on the subject have appeared which have raised different questions regarding Mbiti's analysis of the concept of time in Africa. Some of the questions asked include: Is the African concept of time the key to understanding African religion as Mbiti contends? Is time dependent or independent of events? Is the African view time two-dimensional, three-dimensional or what? Do Africans really have a future concept of time?

While there are no simple answers to these questions, the discussion among scholars reveals that Africans view of time undoubtedly affects their approach to life. Consequently, Christian ministry will do better to understand the concept of time in Africa for better contextualization of the gospel.

2. Mbiti's Concept of Time

Time has been understood in different ways in the West, Africa as well as in other parts of the world. One of the pioneering individuals in discussing the concept of time as understood by Africans and from the African perspective is the respected scholar, the late John S. Mbiti. Regarding his work on the subject, Moreau notes,

Mbiti's understanding of the African view of time was first expressed in his doctoral dissertation, in which he attempted to examine New Testament eschatology from an African cultural perspective. His dissertation was based on a study of his own tribe, the Akamba. It was grounded on an examination of two data bases: the verbal tense forms of the Kikamba language, and the body of myth within Akamba oral tradition. In his later works, these views were expanded and generalized in to include not only the Akamba but all of traditional Africa. This was based on an examination of the literature available on a number of tribes across sub-Saharan Africa (Moreau, 1998: 307).

What then does Mbiti say about the African concept of time?

2.1. Actual and Potential Time

In his book, *Africa Religions and Philosophy* (1969:16), Mbiti posits that it is imperative for one to understand the African concept of time in order to grasp African ontology. This is more so because Mbiti sees the African concept of time as the key to comprehend African religious and philosophical orientation. Thus, the beliefs, attitudes, practices and general way of people of Africa not only in the past but also in the current era can be understood through grasping the African concept of time. It is this belief that makes Mbiti discuss the concept of time before presenting the five categories which make up the African ontology namely God, spirit beings, man, animals and plants and finally, phenomena and objects without biological life.

According to Mbiti, time is a, 'composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur' (Mbiti, 1969:17). The definition reveals that Mbiti sees African concept of time as a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and barely no future. The events which have taken place and those which are taking place now belong to actual time. This is because the events have been experienced and so meaningful and real to those that have experienced them.

On the other hand, those events which have not occurred but are certain to occur, or what falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena such as seasons falls in the category of inevitable or potential time. Though not experienced, the events are bound to occur and so treated within the category of possibility. This potential time is seen by Mbiti as extending at most to a period of two years from the present. He states,

What would be 'future' is extremely brief. This has to be so because any meaningful event in the future must be so immediate and certain that people have almost experienced it. Therefore, if the event is remote, say beyond two years from now ... then it cannot be conceived, it cannot be spoken of ...' (Mbiti, 1969:22).

Mbiti too contends that Africans have no concept of the future. This is because 'events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized and cannot therefore constitute time Since what is in the future has not been experienced, it does not make sense, it cannot, therefore, constitute part of time, and people do not know how to think about it - unless of course it is something which falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena (Mbiti, 1969:17).

Having stated the phenomenon of time as two-dimensional, Mbiti goes on to defend it. This he does by appealing to the absence of concrete words or expressions to describe the idea of a distant future. To illustrate this, Mbiti uses the main verb tenses in the Kikamba and Kikuyu languages, both Bantu languages of Kenya east Africa. Mbiti categorically asserts that;

The three verb tenses which refer to the future.... cover the period of about six months or not beyond two years at most. Coming events have to fall within the range of these verb tenses, otherwise such events lie beyond the horizon of what constitutes actual time. At most we can say that this short future is only an extension of the present. People have little or no active interest in the events that lie in the future beyond, at most, two years from now; and the languages concerned lack words by which such events can be conceived or experienced (Mbiti 1969: 19).

Thus, for lack of verbs expressing the distance past, and the presence of verbs expressing the present and the past, Mbiti theorizes that Africans have no concept of the future.

Additionally, Mbiti sees the absence of myths in Africa describing the distance future as supporting the view that Africans have no concept of the future time. For him, 'there are no myths about the end of the world, since the time has no end' (Mbiti, 1969: 21). Nevertheless, he is quick to cite one case in which a myth exists that suggests the end of the world, that is, among the Sonjo of Tanzania. The presence of such a story however does not change his view. Human history is hence expected to continue undeterred by anything including a future end.

To further elaborate on the two-dimensional view of time, Mbiti uses the two Kiswahili words '**Sasa**' (meaning present) and '**Zamani**' (meaning past), to describe these dimensions. Sasa denotes immediacy, nearness and 'now-ness' and is the period of immediate concern for the people since that is 'where' or 'when' they exist. What would be future is extremely brief. This has to be so because any meaningful event in the future must be so immediate and certain that people have almost experienced it. Therefore, in the African thought, the '**Sasa**' swallows up what in Western or linear concept of time would be considered as the future. Events (which compose time) in the Sasa dimension must be either about to occur, or in the process of realization or recently experienced' (1969: 22). Since one's memory of the events experienced are vivid or the events are almost being experienced and one is conscious of his or her existent, Mbiti observes that **Sasa** is the most meaningful period for an individual. Mbiti calls the 'sasa' period the micro-time (little time).

The '**Zamani**', also called the macro-time (big time) on the other hand,

Overlaps with Sasa and the two are not separable. Sasa finds or disappears into Zamani. But before events become integrated into the Zamani, they have to become realized or actualized within the 'Sasa' dimension. When this has taken place, then the events 'move' backwards from the Sasa into the Zamani. So Zamani becomes the period beyond which nothing can go. Zamani is the graveyard of time, the period of termination, the dimension in which everything finds its halting point, (1969:23).

From this, one notes that time moves backward not forward as is the case in the West. Zamani is thus longer than Sasa and forms the history that is handed down from generation to generation. There is therefore no concept of the end of this fallen world and the ushering of a glorious age as taught by the Jews and the Christian faith. So, Mbiti adds that since history moves backward, 'African people have no 'belief in progress,' the idea that the development of human activities and achievements move from a lower to a higher degree. The people neither plan for the distant future nor build Castles in the air' (Mbiti, 1969: 23). This presents Africans as lacking a vision or foresight.

2.2. Time in Relation to Events

Mbiti informs us that since time is a composition of events, it is reckoned in terms of specific events. For Africans, the 'day, the month, the year, one's life time or human history, are all divided up or reckoned according to the specific events for it is these that make them meaningful,' (Mbiti, 1969:19). This is unlike in the West where time is reckoned in an abstract manner.

Mbiti clarifies the above assertion in this way. He notes that the day is reckoned according to its important events. Mbiti notes, for example, since cattle are a treasure and Jewell among the Ankore of Uganda, the day is divided in respect to the events pertaining to the cattle. Thus, 6 a.m. is milking time; 12 noon is time for cattle and people to take rest; 1 p.m. is the time for people to draw water; 2 p.m. is the time for cattle to drink; 3 p.m. is time for cattle to start grazing again after taking water; 5 p.m. is the time for cattle to return home; 6 p.m. is the time when the cattle enter their shades and 7 p.m. is milking time.

Similarly, in traditional Africa, instead of using numerical months such as 1, 2, 3 12, lunar months are used because of the events of the month's changes. Mbiti states,

In the life of the people, certain events are associated with particular months, so that the months are named according to either the most important events or the prevailing weather conditions. For example, there is the 'hot' month, the month of the first rains, the weeding month, the beans harvest month, the hunting month etc. It does not matter whether the 'hunting month' lasts 25 or 35 days: that event of hunting is what matters much more than the mathematical length of the month (Mbiti, 1969:20).

Mbiti further uses the Latuka people to show how events dictate the approximate reckoning of months, for instance, October is called 'the sun' because the sun is very hot then, while the August is called 'sweet grain' because at that time, people eat and harvest 'sweet grains.'

The year too is reckoned in terms of events; only this time, these events are of a wider scale than those that make either the day or the month. The activities in a season compose a year in an agricultural society. Mbiti states,

Near the equator, for example, people would recognize two rain seasons and two dry seasons. When the number of season-periods is completed, then, the year is also completed, since it is these four major seasons that make up an entire year. The actual number of days is irrelevant, since a year is not reckoned in terms of mathematical days but in terms of events. Therefore, one year might have 350 days while another year has 390 days. The years may, and often do, differ in their length according to the days, but not in their seasons and other regular events (Mbiti, 1969: 21).

There are seasons reserved as sacred and as such, of utmost importance to the entire community that anyone who even violates these seasons is regarded as a social misfit and deviant. Just like days and months are expected to continue without ceasing, so are years. Each year comes and goes, adding to the time dimension of the past. Time is thus not reckoned in a vacuum, but in relation to events.

2.3. Human Life In Relation to Time

From an individual level, the rhythm of life passes through the key life stages namely birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, death, entry into the community of the departed and finally entry into the community of the spirits. On the other hand, at the community or national level, 'there is the cycle of the seasons with their different activities like sowing, cultivating, harvesting and hunting. The key events or moments are given more attention than others, and may often be marked by religious rites and ceremonies' (Mbiti 1969:25). The unusual events in human life disrupt the ontological harmony and require religious intervention.

An individual slowly moves from the Sasa to the Zamani as he or she ages. After one dies, one is not immediately forgotten and so still belongs to the Sasa. Only when one is completely forgotten by the living does one become an ancestor and hence enters the Zamani. By passing from Sasa to Zamani, the dead becomes spirits which is now the final destiny of man. Immortality is thus a key belief in African traditional religion. There is in this an element of time consciousness in African traditional societies.

In conclusion, Moreau (1998:309) provides an apt illustration that summarizes Mbiti's concept of time. It is hence worth closing this section with it,

As we understand it, Mbiti's view of the African understanding of time may in one sense be likened to a man standing in a river and facing downstream. The current may be thought of as the flow of time, with the view of man in the river including primarily that which is peripherally around him and secondarily on that which has already gone past him (downstream). Sasa time is that which is directly around the water, Zamani that which has already passed him by. The future is only what can be seen in peripheral vision, and so the 'upstream' time holds little importance in the perceptions of the man in the water. It will pass when and how it passes, and then it will become of consequence to him. Only what is currently passing or has already passed is of significance, for it has become part of his concrete reality, and is therefore important The cycles of nature (seasons, years, months, hours of the day etc.) may be thought as debris floating along on a recurring basis; not always exactly the same, but always comfortingly familiar. Rather than the man moving into the future by going upstream, he lets the future come to him by remaining stationary. Since he knows it will reach him eventually, there is no need to focus on it, and he cannot speed its advance (which does not mean the African is fatalistic, only not overly mindful of the future).

3. Evaluation of Mbiti's Concept of Time

According to Wiredu (1991:90), Mbiti's discussion of the traditional African concept of time is philosophically the most fascinating chapter of a classic book on African religions and philosophy. It is perhaps this fact that has made many scholars, both Western and African, continue this ongoing debate started by Mbiti. In their contributions, some scholars have supported Mbiti's views on the traditional African concept of time while others have questioned these views and provided alternative views. Some of the key issues that have dominated this discussion are presented below.

3.1. Relationship between Time and Events

To begin with, Mbiti's definition of time as a composition of events hence revealing that time cannot be reckoned in a vacuum has received support as well as criticism from scholars. Citing Akiiki (1980:365-366), Bako notes that the Bantu seem to define time in terms of a succession of events, an idea which supports Mbiti's assertion (Bako, 2009:39). Time is not calculated mathematically but in terms of activities of day, month or year. Bako further notes that for the Ngambai, time is defined 'according to a series of events. The day events and activities that occur are used to determine time' (Bako, 2009:53). Chermorion, (2014:16), too sees the African concept of time as reckoned to events. Additionally, citing Izu, Nnajofofor, (2016:261) avers,

Izu further argues that before the arrival of mechanical clock, the Africans scheduled things with the cockrow, high moon and sundown. Sometimes things were scheduled with human activities like commencement or end of market sessions, the morning, the midday, or evening harvesting of palm wine. Though this type of scheduling of activities 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.

Accordingly, the reckoning of time in relation to events does not denote that Africans are not conscious of time as the above quote reveals. Africans are conscious of time and value it albeit in a different way. There are definite times of preparing the field, planting, weeding, harvesting or even performing some ritual ceremonies such as initiation among the communities that practice it, for instance the Meru of Kenya. Writers of fiction in Africa too have revealed through their work of art the fact that time is portrayed in relation to events. Babalola and Alokun (2013:143) say;

In Things Fall Apart, (Achebe, 1958:11-30), one observes a lot of references to time concept on African thought. In page 11 he wrote that during the planting season, Okonkwo worked daily on his farm from cock-crow until the chicken went to roost. In page 19, he wrote that 'the draught continued for eight market weeks ...' In page 22, he wrote that Ikemefuna was ill for three market weeks. Again, in page 23, he wrote that Ikemefuna came to Umuofia at the end of the carefree season, between harvest and planting. He also wrote in page 27 that, Yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king. For three or four moons, it demanded hard work and constant attention from cockcrow until the chicken went back to roost.

Writing within the Igbo setting in Nigeria, Achebe vividly captures the indisputable fact that Africans are conscious of time: there were different times set for specific events.

Similarly, Margaret A. Ogola in The River and The Source a book set within the Luo community of Kenya, makes reference to time in relation to events within the community in which it is set. Instead of telling us that Akoko, the main character and protagonist in the novel was born in 1901, when the Kenya-Uganda railway reached Kisumu, the narrator informs us that it was roughly thirty seasons before that great snaking metal road (referring to railway line, constructed by the Europeans) reached Kisuma that a girl child was born in the homestead of the great Chief, Odera Gogni (Ogola, 1994: 11). In the same page, we are also told the season of Akoko's birth in these words: 'This was the season when the leaves of the growing sorghum, now the height of a toddling child, trembled greenly in the wind and the weeders were busy hoeing and chanting in unison...' This time would be unmistakable to any native Luo in regard to the time of the year Akoko was born. Again, we are told that suitors from Sakwa drove Akoko's dowry to Odera Gogni's compound in the fourteenth day of the following moon (page 26). In page 28, the narrator tells us that after Akoko was married, people began to count the days and the moons and at the third moon, people started talking in low tones to show she was now pregnant. In page 30, the narrator too informs us that when Obura was about three-and-a-half seasons old, Akoko - Obura's mother - became expectant again.

From the above, Mbiti's assertion that time is reckoned in relation to events has a wide support. Viewing time in relation to events makes these happenings not only memorable but also meaningful. However, not all scholars subscribe to the view.

Although Bako (2009: 53) acknowledges that some of the Bantu Communities reckon time in terms of events, he nevertheless judiciously says, 'according to Mbiti, time for the African is composed of a series of events, so that time only really exists if something is happening' (Bako, 2009:13). By defining time as a composition of events, Bako infers that Mbiti views time as dependent on activities. This is further supported when Mbiti notes that, 'Since time is a composition of events, people cannot and do not reckon it in vacuum' (Mbiti, 1969: 19).

Kagame also disputes Mbiti's view when he notes,

In traditional Bantu culture... time is a colourless, neutral entity as long as it is not marked or stamped by some specific events: an action performed by the pre-existent (God), by man or animal, a natural phenomenon, As soon as the action or event impinges on time, the latter is marked, stamped, individualized, drawn out of its anonymity, and becomes the time of that event (Kagame, 1976:99).

By viewing time as a colourless or neutral entity, Kagame sees time as existing independent of events and as a real entity. Events mark or stamp time so that the time is associated with the occurrence of that particular event. Kagame illustrates his point by presenting what he sees as the Bantu's fourfold classification of being as follows;

- Being endowed with intelligence (man)
- Being which has no intelligence (things)
- Localizing being (place-time)
- Modal being (accidentality, modification of being) (Kagame, 1976:89-91).

In the above classification, time belongs to an independent category and so do events which appear in number four which to Kagame are incapable by nature of independent existence. Commenting on Kagame's assertion in his essay 'Kagame and Mbiti on the Traditional Bantu View of Time,' Kalumba says;

A combination of several claims from Kagame's essay suggests a coherent picture of the specific nature of the real, independently existing time, which he attributes to traditional Bantu. In one place, Kagame contends that traditional Bantu regard every existent as 'fraught with existential movement and proceeds upon its trajectory toward its connatural consummation' (92-93). Then he goes on to say that traditional Bantu view this movement as taking place in time (and space), regarded as the 'there where,' the 'localizers; and 'the individualizing coordinates' of all movements of existents' (91-94). Given this description of time (and space) and the aforementioned thesis that existents stamp time with their movements, Kagame must be attributing to traditional Bantu a 'plane view' of time. It is a view of time as a metaphysical background along which existents travel as they proceed upon their existential trajectories. Since this time plane is always in the background, it is not surprising that according to Kagame, it remains neutral and colourless for traditional Bantu until some event stamps or marks it and draws it out of its anonymity for them (Kalumba; 3).

In concluding this session, the writer's view here is that Kagame's view that time exists independent of events seems more representative of the Bantu language. There is a term used to refer to time independent of events. For example, among the Meru, time is called 'igita' or 'thaa', so, we say igita rîa kwanda (time of plant) and so on. This however should not be seen as an outright rejection of Mbiti's point that time is closely associated or linked with events for this is how events become meaningful and memorable. As Kagame notes, specific events mark or stamp time.

3.2. The Nature of Time

Mbiti's assertion that traditional African concept of time is two-dimensional has equally received different reactions from scholars. Marava (2015:92) cites Banana as supporting the two-dimensional view of time. As two-dimensional, time is cyclic (Chemorion, 2014: 16). This is because according to Banana as cited by Marava, '... time is conceived by Africans as moving backwards and not forward as in the Western conception. For instance, the 'departed' re-enter the realm of the living and continue to influence the lives of the living. Thus, for Africans, the present is in the future and vice versa ...' (Marava, 2015:92). This view too is supported by Parratt (1997) whom Bako refers to as having argued like Mbiti that Africans are backward-looking and their concept of time is not linear.

English (2006: 54), contends that Mbiti's view of time is three-dimensional not two as Mbiti states. This is because Mbiti's concept of time has a long past, a present (both of which have been experienced and hence belonging to actual time) and inevitable future which goes up to two years (which he calls the interest thesis). English sums it thus:

Rather, we seem left with a traditional African concept of time as three-dimensional roughly like the contemporary Western concept. The primary difference is that the contemporary Western future extends much further than does the traditional African future.

English seems to have missed Mbiti's bases of regarding the concept of time in traditional African society as two-dimensional for in Mbiti's view, what has been realized is actual time, that is actions in the past and the present hence he regards time as two-dimensional. Moreau also raises issues with Mbiti's view of traditional concept of time as two dimensional. He states,

From our understanding of his analysis, it should be seen that Africans have more of a linear concept of time (one-dimensional) than a two-dimensional one (which would have to be called a planar concept) The primary difference between the African and the Western conceptions appears to be not in number of dimensions but in the direction and focus of attention. Both may be viewed as punctilinear, since they both focus on one point in the time continuum and extend from that point (Moreau, 1998: 311).

By saying that the African concept of time should be viewed as one dimensional rather than two dimensional, Moreau sees time as perceived by Africans as a straight line hence linear. This is because he sees the traditional African concept of time as having a long past, present and a future. It does not seem to the writer that traditional African concept of time is one dimensional as this seems to suggest that at one point, there is the end of time which seems not to be a common view in traditional African societies. The context suggests that Mbiti uses the term two-dimensional, not in a mathematical way but loosely to refer to the two aspects of time - actual (past and present) and potential (near future) - within the African traditional ontology; it does not seem to suggest any ignorance of the meaning of the term as Moreau seems to imply. Mbiti states,

...according to traditional concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. The linear concept of time in Western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking (Mbiti, 1969:17).

From the foregone, it is crystal clear that Mbiti's view that time in African traditional society is two-dimensional is controversial and as Bako observes 'not representative of the whole of Africa (Bako, 2009:53). Perhaps as cited by Bako,

Bosman's idea that the image of a spiral is most appropriate to illustrate the basic element of African concepts of time. This is because the image incorporates both the linear and cyclical dimensions (Bako, 2009:53).

3.3. The Question of the Future

Kinara (2018:21238) seems to agree with Mbiti's concept of traditional African view of time in which the future was largely ignored. Kinara attributes this lack of concern for distance future in traditional African society to lack of competition in the society. However, it seems that a better reason is that as Mbiti tells us the future has not been realized and so not part of one's experience. Nevertheless, many critics of Mbiti's work have viewed Mbiti's view in this case as overgeneralization and inaccurate.

Moreau (1989:132) notes that there is evidence that Africans have a concept of the distant future. He says that Mbiti should not have confined himself to an analysis of verb tense category in his discussion on time for this limited his understanding. Moreau suggests that an analysis of other parts of speech such as nouns or adjectives would reveal the presence of a future concept in Africa. Indeed, in Africa, God is called The Everlasting one of the Forest, The Eternal One, and He of many Sons, names that bring out God as eternal hence supporting a presence of future time in Africa (Mbiti, 1970:27-28). Further, Moreau argues that the fact that there are proverbs in African communities that relate future consequences for present action reveals the African thought about the future. For instance, among the Meru there is a proverb that states; 'Mũceera na mũkũndũ, akũndũkaga taju' (equivalent to the English proverb, bad company ruins good morals). This proverb serves an advisory or cautionary function in telling people to watch the people they stay with for if they walk with bad people, their character will eventually be affected. Kato (1952:62) similarly cites another from the Jaba people that states; 'when you die your grave will burn with fire if you are naughty now'.

It is rightly observed that the practice of rites of passage such as initiation and marriage attest to an awareness of the future. Moreau, informed by Kato writes,

Almost without exception every traditional African male eagerly anticipated his initiation to manhood with a definite future outlook. There is of necessity definite 'financial' planning on the part of the boy's family in order to ensure that he will be able to afford the bride-price necessary for marriage and fulfill tribal responsibilities. The fact that children are such prized possessions because they secure the future continuation of the family line also indicates a future awareness. None of these would be stressed to the extent that they are if there were in reality no concept of the future. In a very real sense, the African must anticipate the future in order to become a meaningful part of the past (Moreau, 1998:313).

Thus, among the Meru of Kenya, initiation in traditional society prepares the initiates through the instructions given during seclusion for their responsibility as adults. Key among these responsibilities is fatherhood and passing on the cultural heritage to the subsequent generation. Through this, the continuity of family and community is ensured. In doing so, the concern for the future is therefore in mind.

Ngewa (2001:260) writes that '...during one's lifetime, the person determines what kind of journey he/she will experience in the hereafter by living the life on earth accordingly One's behavior while on earth plays an active role in one's reaping good or bad experiences in the next world. This is definitely the concept of reward for good work and punishment for bad work. This then in essence would suggest a concept of future time present in Africa.' In communities with such a belief then, there would be a tendency for the people to strive to live according to the communities' expectation to enjoy a smooth journey to the next world. The desire to live right in the eyes of the community has its motivation in the desire to become an ancestor in the next life for the ancestors have a special place in the society. Quenum too writes, 'Ancestors act as role models for their relatives since they have led a good moral life by keeping the customs and traditional laws of their communities ... the ancestors in their final invisible form of life help the members of their communities in their needs.' (Quenum in Eschatology in an African Christian Perspective, P.6).

The political organization in African communities additionally speak of the presence of a future time in traditional African societies. Citing Oguntomisin, Babalola and Alokun (2013:46) writes,

Old Oyo had a delicate constitution with inbuilt checks and balances which prevented the monarch (Alaafin of Oyo) from being either despotic or autocratic. The constitution made it mandatory for the Alaafin to consult the Oyomesi council of chiefs before taking decisions on the affairs of the state. The Alaafin could be forced to commit suicide if he misuses his power. Obviously, the checks and balances in Old Oyo Kingdom of the South West Nigeria is to ensure a good future of peaceful atmosphere for the Oyo Kingdom. Every necessary check had been put in place to check the excess of monarch, even in the distance future. With this instance cited, we would say that it is wrong to conclude that Africans cannot conceive time in the future as Mbiti had done.

Also, among the Meru traditional community, laws were made by the Njuri Ncheke while the *Kĩama* was responsible for the execution of the laws (M'Imanyara, 1992:83). These laws ensured future stability of the community. When conflict arose, the elders saw to it that justice was meted out (M'Imanyara, 1992:84). This too also shows that the future here was in focus in the minds of Africans.

Awareness and concern for the future is also attested by virtue of Africans having religious specialists as seers and prophets who are believed to have spoken about what would come in future. For instance, among the Kikuyu of Kenya, there was a seer by the name Mũgo wa Kĩbiro, who lived in the C19th and foretold the coming of people with clothes like butterflies as well as a cultural erosion of tribal ways. This was long before the white colonialists and missionaries came to the Kikuyu land (Kagwanja, 203:32; Thiong'o, 1965:2). Also, Koitalel arap Samoei of the Nandi spoke about a black snake passing through the land of the Nandi spitting fire before the railway line reached the Nandi land, Kihara, (2018:21239). In the same vein he writes,

Sabrina (2011) cites Oruka (1990) who drew examples as he talked about Elijah Masinde, a famous prophet of Kenya from Luhya community who died in 1978. Elijah Masinde had predicted that the European colonialist will disappear from Kenya relinquishing their power and that black culture and religion will once again be able to regain their strength in Kenya.

From the foregone therefore, Africans seem to have a concern about the future beyond two years.

3.4. The Question of African Concept of Time as Key to Understanding African Religion and Philosophy

Bako (2009:39) observes that if Mbiti has interpreted African concept of time correctly, then he may be justified in claiming to have found the key to the understanding of African religions and philosophy. However, as noted, several scholars have criticized his view on African concept of time as noted earlier hence also denying his thesis statement: that the key to understanding African religions and philosophy is understanding traditional African concept of time.

Moreau (1998:312) in respect to this states that others have done studies that reveal different conclusions in the area of understanding African religion. He says that Placide Temples followed by Janheinz John posited that the key to understanding the African mind is the vital force. Vital force is commonly called mystical power. Concerning this, Turaki notes 'at the root of Africa's traditional religious beliefs, feelings, practices and behavior is a belief in mystical and mysterious powers. This belief is pervasive in traditional African religious thought. Creation, nature and everything that exists is infused with this impersonal power, which has been given various names' (Turaki, 2006:24). Turaki here seems to imply that the secret to understanding African religion lies in their belief in the mystical power as this power seems to direct human lives. Human beings thus seek power in a bid to manipulate these mystical powers for their benefit and security. Steyne (1990:60) notes,

Life's essential quest is to secure power and use it. Not to have power or access to it produces great anxiety in the face of spirit caprice and rigors of life. A life without power is not worth living Powers offers man control of his uncertain world. The search for and acquisition of power supersedes any commitment to ethics or morality. Whatever is empowering is right.

Thus, people offer sacrifices to God, libations to the ancestors and carry charms and amulets as a means of obtaining power and security. African religion is indeed a religion of power.

Mbiti's thesis that the traditional concept of time as the key to understanding African religions and philosophy is under challenge here. However, it is worth noting that since Mbiti says that Africans conceive time in terms of events, which then must be experienced, something, which characterizes African traditional religion, Mbiti's thesis, cannot be simply dismissed. As regards this religion, Turaki says, 'African Traditional Religion is not a 'cognitively oriented system' with esoteric doctrines, and strict rules or regulations. Rather, it is very existential and experimental religion that is 'more felt than understood and is thus very powerful' (Turaki, 2006:19). This means that like time which must be experienced to make sense, so is the African traditional religion.

In concluding the analysis in this section then, the writer agrees with Moreau's observation regarding Mbiti's work expressed in these words,

In light of the above analysis, it must be seen that John Mbiti's understanding of the African concept of time cannot be seen as definitive. At the same time, we must also recognize that he has indeed given us some valuable insights in aiding our understanding of some of the traditional African orientation. As such, his contributions are not to be ignored or belittled, for they represent an insider's careful analysis and thought. In addition, they do reflect aspects of a true understanding of the African mindset. There is little room for doubt that generally the traditional African focuses on the past far more than is done in the West or that his sense of and concern with time differs from that of the average Westerner. While we doubt that a completely accurate generalization of all African tribal peoples can be made in regard to time, we do respect Mbiti's attempt to make their concept more readily understandable to us (Moreau, 1998:313).

With this council, we turn to the next section of the paper

4. Implications for Christian Ministry

Christian ministry is an incarnational ministry. This means the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus must take into account the culture in which the ministry is conducted to make it relevant to the people in that culture. As such, since African traditional concept of time 'may help to explain beliefs, attitudes, practices and general way of life of African people not only in the traditional set-up but also in the modern situation' (Mbiti, 1969:16), Christian ministry ought to consider what African concept of time means to Christian ministry. This is especially in respect to some of the following areas.

4.1. Evangelism

Evangelism in Africa has tendered to focus on the need for one to believe in Jesus Christ to escape hell fire. There has not been a serious attempt to present the saving message of Jesus Christ in such a way it has a bearing in the present life yet not losing the eternal value of that belief. This is very important because Mbiti informs us that for Africans, the *sasa* period is the most meaningful period of an individual and hence a period of immediate concern for the individual.

Therefore, evangelism should focus on how the gospel of Jesus Christ helps the individual in the here and now. Emphasis on the need for an individual to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ in order to belong to the family of God as taught in John 1:12-13 should dominate gospel proclamation. This is moreso because Africans have a relational approach to life. They can thus easily relate with such a presentation.

Further, in evangelism, there is need to bring out how the gospel addresses the fear of Africans in this life. Evangelism should show that belonging to the family of God brings one under the shepherdship of God where one enjoys security and protection (John 10:27-30, Psalm 23, Colossians 1:15). For this reason, charms and amulets lose meaning. The fear of death should be addressed through pointing out that the power of death has been defeated through the cross of Jesus; death thus becomes an entrance of being united with relatives who passed on having entered into the family of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15; Hebrews 2:14-15). By so doing, Christian ministry takes cognizance of the Sasa period in African ontology.

4.2. Discipleship

If evangelism should emphasize on the need for an individual to enter into a covenantal relationship with God through joining the family of God, discipleship programmes should be done in such a way that human relationships are encouraged and cultivated. The disciples of Jesus should be encouraged to treasure belonging to the community of God's people through cultivating, nurturing and maintaining friendship and helping one another as God's people, the very thing African Traditional Religion treasures. Relationships should be at the centre of disciple making. This will fight individualism which is slowly creeping in the African society and destroying the fibre of the community. Cultivating such relationships is in line with the African philosophy of African brotherhood.

Apart from experiencing growing relationships with the family of God, the community of believers, discipleship should encourage individual believers to experience or encounter God on a daily bases through prayer and the word as well as experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit for daily guidance. Such a communion when stressed not only promotes individual growth but also allows a believer to access power for daily living and also engage in spiritual warfare the very thing an African desire.

Since African culture has a less emphasis on the future, there is need for discipleship trainers to take time in teaching eschatological issues with this in mind. There needs to be a careful teaching on this issue especially given the obsession with which the independent churches in Africa have approached this subject. Chow notes that the fact that Africans have less concern about the future than the West may 'offer a partial explanation, for instance, of the rise of African Christian prophets who were very clear about the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God' (Chow, 2016:9). Similarly, Mbiti says that,

In church life this discovery seems to create a strong expectation of the millennium. This makes many Christians escape from facing the challenges of this life into the state of merely hoping and waiting for the life of paradise. This strong millennial expectation often leads to the creation of many small independent churches centred around individuals who symbolize, and more or less fulfil, this messianic expectation. (Mbiti, 1969:28).

One such figure is Mary Akatsa, the lady behind The New Jerusalem Church, Kigame (2018:320) informs us that in 1988, Mary Akatsa shocked the country when she said Christ had come a second time. Kigame goes on to cite the Daily Nation of June 27, 1988 as follows;

Ringed by her ardent followers, the 'prophetess' moved to the centre of the crowd in the afternoon and with a copy of the Bible in her left hand, raised her eyes and right hand to the sky and declared Jesus had come. She continued calling out the name of Jesus and soon the worshipers joined her in a loud chorus, their eyes transfixed on an object in the clouds. Apparently, the object disappeared as soon as the clouds cleared ...' (Kigame, 2018:320).

The Biblical doctrine of end-time should be presented in such a way that it is understood by the Africans to avoid escapism and thus live a productive life here and now. In fact, Moreau (1998:318) advises that 'an introduction to eschatological issues through 1 and 2 Thessalonians might help circumvent some of the apocalyptic abuses of the African church.' This is so because, in these letters, Paul corrects some misconceptions about end times which had led some believers in this church to be obsessed with end-time so that they neglected the here and now; some even did not bother to work, problems that are akin to the African situation. Moreover, there must be an emphasis on how the second coming of Jesus Christ ought to affect the present life of the believer. This needs to be presented, for instance, alongside the motif of the value of keeping family values as a reward to joining the ancestral world as depicted in African cosmology. These values to be observed are the family values of those that belong to the family of God. The values emphasize on stewardship and accountability (Matthew 5-7). A similar model is found in Jeremiah 35 where God uses the example of the Recabites to rebuke the tribe of Judah and Benjamin who had not obeyed his laws yet the Recabites had obeyed the command of their forefathers. This illustration uses family values to teach the tribe of Judah to observe the family values of the people of God. For the African church, values such as justice, fidelity, respect for human life, honesty and hard work should be encouraged.

4.3. Christian Apologetics

One area that the church needs to seriously engage in within the African Continent is Christian Apologetics. This is because of several factors namely, increase in moral relativism, rapid increase in occultism, heresy, challenge from other world religions and so on. This can be done in view of the African concept of history and pre-history. Africans treasure history and as such, transmit their community values from generation to generation. Commenting on this, Mbiti states;

Both history and prehistory are dominated by the myth. There are innumerable myths all over the continent of Africa explaining items like the creation of the universe, the first man, the apparent withdrawal of God from mankind, the origin of the tribe and its arrival in its present country, and so on. People constantly look towards the Zamani, for Zamani had foundations on which the Sasa rests and by which it is explainable or should be understood. Zamani is not extinct, but a period full of activities and happenings. It is by looking towards the

Zamani that people give or find explanation about the creation of the world, the coming of death, the evolution of their language and customs, the emergence of their wisdom and so on. The 'golden age' lies in the Zamani ... (Mbiti, 1969:24).

Since what happened in history informs the beliefs and practices of a people as seen above, the defense of the Christian faith should similarly emphasize God's revelation of himself to humanity through the Scriptures beginning with the creation, fall and God's unfolding plan of salvation. One could for example show Jesus Christ as a historical figure who fulfilled the salvation story that progressively unfolds in Scriptures. Using the biblical metanarrative is therefore a good way of defending the Christian faith in a way Africans can relate to.

Regarding history, McDowell (1999:120) asserts that, 'the historicity of Jesus isn't just a matter of curious interest for the Christian. The Christian faith is grounded in history.' He goes on to firstly cite secular authorities on Jesus' historicity including Cornelius Tacitus, Lucian of Samosata, Pliny the younger and Phlegon (McDowell, 1999:121-122). Likewise, he discusses some Jewish scholars who attested to the historicity of Jesus Christ. These include: the testimony of Josephus as well as the Talmud (McDowell, 1999:123-126). In the concluding section of the chapter on this issue, McDowell (1999:135-136) states,

Though the non-Christian sources do not provide as much detail about Jesus as the New Testament, they do provide corroboration for some of the basic facts of the biblical portrayal of Jesus. Robert Stein, a New Testament professor states; 'The non-Christian sources establish beyond reasonable doubt the following minimum: (1) Jesus was truly a historical person. This may seem silly to stress, but through the years some have denied that Jesus ever lived. The non-biblical sources put such nonsense to rest. (2) Jesus lived in Palestine in the first century of our era. (3) The Jewish leadership was involved in the death of Jesus, (4) Jesus was crucified by the Romans under the governorship of Pontius Pilate (5) Jesus ministry was associated with wonders.'

Presented well to the Africans in a form they can readily relate to, the Christian story meets the longing, hope and aspirations of many Africans for in their story, Africans long for harmony in community, victory over real and imagined enemies as well as prosperity – all of these are fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah's first coming as well as his second coming, when the redemption will be complete. To illustrate such a longing, Kigame (2018:289-290) cites Don Richardson who wrote of some specific communities in Africa who anticipated that a certain Messiah will come someday to forgive the wrongs of individual communities. The Rendille of Northern Kenya believe that such a Messiah will be characterized by: ability to fight; strong and brave enough to lead his people in the war against his enemies and will be sinless and the only one qualified to hold the head of the sacrificial sheep' for purposes of redemption. Kigame further writes, 'The Rendille have no idea where this Messiah will come from; not even the knowledge of whether he will be Rendille or not. It is also interesting that they refer to this coming of Messiah as god's 'first born son' (Kigame, 2018:290).

4.4. Planning

As already seen, some scholars disagree with Mbiti's assertion that Africans do not plan for distant future owing to the fact that they have little concern about it. This notwithstanding, church ministry requires planning. For this then, there should be planting for outreach, church planting and also church development. A ministry that sets goals such as, 'this year we will reach out to the neighboring community with the message of Jesus Christ and plant a church would be an ideal goal.' Additionally, Church ministry should plan for time to serve the community which has myriads of problems including poverty, injustice and diseases. Planning visitations to hospitals, prisons and the needy within the community are practical ways of demonstrating Jesus' providential care for his creation. These are goals which are congruent with the purpose of the church which is ministry to the church and the world where ministry to the world entails evangelism and service (Grudem, 1994:867-869).

Similarly, church ministry should focus on encouraging believers to personally use their time well through wise planning. Individuals should plan for their lives and those of their family not in a spirit of competition; conversely, planning should be done in light of God's purpose for one's life. Apart from this, Christians should see time as a gift from God since God is the giver of everything good as understood by the African Traditional Religion and the Christian faith. On account of this, Christians are God's stewards and so should use time for God's glory and honour. Planning thus, should be in concrete not abstract concepts.

5. Conclusion

Though not all scholars support Mbiti's analysis of African Traditional concept of time, there are nevertheless things that are generally accepted by scholars, who are willing to be objective. To begin with, Africans are conscious of time and value it. Secondly, the present holds a special place in the African heart and thus much focus should be put on it. The past gives the foundation for the present. Both of these pre-occupy the life of an African. Thirdly, time in African society is closely connected to events and is also relational in nature. Finally, history in Africa moves backward not forward. It is in taking cognizance of the African view on time that contextualization of the gospel of Jesus Christ can be enriched. Having said all this, scholars both in the West and Africa are indebted to Mbiti for starting a dialogue that is yet to continue especially in light of the changing trends in Africa.

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