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The Metaphysics of Time and Temporal Experience in Africa: A Cultural and Philosophical Perspective

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This paper explores the metaphysics of time and its relevance to Africa from a cultural and philosophical perspective. The paper argues that the Western concept of time, which is based on linear and objective concepts, is not the only way to explain time and temporal experience to all cultures and civilizations. By examining traditional African perspectives on time, the paper demonstrates the importance of considering cultural and philosophical differences in the study of time and temporal experience. The paper concludes that the Western concept of time must be supplemented with an understanding of the diverse and complex ways in which time is experienced and understood in Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

The study of time and temporal experience is a central concern in metaphysics, and the Western concept of time is widely accepted as the dominant paradigm in this field.¹ However, this paper argues that the Western concept of time is not the only way to explain the question of time and that an examination of traditional African perspectives on time can provide a deeper understanding of the nature of time and its relevance to different cultures and civilizations.

This paper aims to explore alternative perspectives on time from the African context. It argues that the Western concept of time, which is based on linear and objective notions, is not adequate in capturing the diversity and complexity of time as experienced in Africa. This paper examines various African cultural and philosophical traditions to shed light on the unique ways in which time is understood and experienced in Africa.

The paper highlights the importance of considering cultural and philosophical differences in the study of time and temporal experience and argues that an understanding of traditional African perspectives on time can contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the nature of time.² The paper comes to the point that a one-dimensional view of time, based solely on Western perspectives, is insufficient and that a more comprehensive understanding of time must incorporate a variety of cultural and philosophical perspectives from around the world.³

This study focuses exclusively on the metaphysics of time and its relevance to Africa, examining traditional African perspectives on time from a cultural and philosophical perspective. The contribution of this study is to highlight the importance of considering cultural and

philosophical differences in the study of time and temporal experience and to argue for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of time beyond the Western linear and objective concept.

METHODS

The paper used a combination of two methods: to wit analytical and phenomenology methods. A combination of analytical and phenomenological methods is a useful approach to exploring the Metaphysics of Time and Temporal Experience in Africa from a cultural and philosophical perspective.

Analytical methods focus on the logical analysis of concepts and arguments and aim to provide clear and rigorous explanations of complex ideas.⁴ In the context of the metaphysics of time, analytical methods are used to explore questions such as: What is the relationship between time and causation? How should we understand the distinction between past, present, and future?

Phenomenological methods, on the other hand, focus on the study of subjective experience and aim to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of how people experience the world.⁵ In the context of the metaphysics of time, phenomenological methods are used to explore questions such as: How do people experience the passage of time? How do different cultures understand and value the experience of time?

By combining these two methods, researchers can gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the metaphysics of time and temporal experience in Africa. For example, analytical methods could be used to provide a clear and rigorous definition of time, while phenomenological methods could be used to

¹ M. HODGES, "Rethinking time's arrow", 399,

² D. A. MASOLO, African philosophy and the quest for authentic existence, 82.

³ B.U. OKEJA, *Normative justification of a global ethic*, 665.

⁴ D. MUHAMBA – G. NDEMO, "A Philosophical reflection of Heidegger's philosophy of innovation", 47.

⁵ D. MUHAMBA – G. NDEMO, "A Philosophical reflection of Heidegger's philosophy of innovation", 47.

explore the different ways in which people experience time in different African cultures.

Furthermore, this combination of methods can help bridge the gap between abstract philosophical concepts and lived experience. By analyzing the logical and conceptual aspects of time, researchers can develop a theoretical framework for understanding time and temporal experience. By studying subjective experiences of time, researchers can gain insights into the ways in which these theoretical concepts are actually experienced by people in different cultural contexts.

WESTERN CONCEPT OF TIME

This section provides a brief overview of the Western concept of time, which is based on linear and objective notions. It is argued that this concept of time has dominated Western philosophy and metaphysics for centuries and is widely accepted as the standard understanding of time.⁶ This concept of time views time as a continuous and uniform progression of events, moving in a linear fashion from the past through the present and into the future. It is often seen as an objective and measurable aspect of the world, independent of human experience or perception.⁷

In Western philosophy, time is often linked to the concept of causality, with events in the world being seen as causally connected to one another and occur in a predetermined sequence.⁸ This view of time has been influential in shaping our understanding of physics, mathematics, and science more broadly and is widely taught and accepted in Western academic circles.

An example of this view of time can be found in the works of philosopher Immanuel Kant, who saw time as a necessary condition for the existence of events

in the world. In his “*Critique of Pure Reason*,” Kant writes: “In the series of appearances, there must be something permanent, in relation to which their change may be determined; this permanent something is time.”⁹ This idea that time is a necessary condition for the existence of events and that events in the world are causally connected and occur in a predetermined sequence is a central component of the Western concept of time. Another example of this view can be found in the works of philosopher René Descartes, who saw time as an objective aspect of the world, independent of human perception or experience. In his “*Meditations on First Philosophy*,” Descartes writes: “Time is just as real an aspect of the world as space.”¹⁰ In Meditation, Descartes reflects on the nature of time and its relationship to the mind and the body. In Meditation II, he raises the question of the nature of time and whether it is a subjective or objective experience. In Meditation VI, he discusses the idea that time is a purely mental construct created by the mind’s ability to perceive duration.¹¹

These philosophical views of time have had a profound impact on the natural sciences and have been influential in shaping our understanding of physics, mathematics, and science more broadly.¹² For example, in physics, the concept of causality and the idea that events in the world are causally connected and occur in a predetermined sequence is central to our understanding of the laws of motion and the functioning of the universe. What this implies is that this view of time has shaped our understanding of the natural world as a deterministic system, where events follow a predetermined sequence and are causally connected to one another. This view has been widely accepted in the natural sciences and has been used to develop mathematical models and theories that help us to

⁶ A. BUNNAG, “The concept of time in philosophy”, 179 – 181.

⁷ J.MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 16.

⁸ R. BHASKAR, Plato etc: problems of philosophy and their resolution, 13.

⁹ Cf. I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 24 - 27.

¹⁰ Cf. R. DESCARTES, *Meditation on First Philosophy*, 28.

¹¹ R. DESCARTES, *Meditation on First Philosophy*, 13.

¹² I. TALAVERA, “The fallacy of misplaced temporality in Western Philosophy”, 5.

understand and predict the behaviour of physical systems.

However, this view of time has also been the subject of critique and debate within the fields of philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies, with some arguing that it is too narrow and reductionist and that it fails to capture the diversity and complexity of time as experienced in different cultures and civilizations.

One example of a critique of the Western concept of time can be found in the works of philosopher Henri Bergson, who argued that the Western view of time as a linear and homogeneous progression of moments was too narrow and reductionist. In his book *"Duration and Simultaneity: Bergson and the Einsteinian Universe,"* Bergson writes: "The notion of duration must not be confused with that of the homogeneous and linear time of physics and astronomy."¹³ Bergson's critique of the Western view of time is significant because it highlights the limitations of this view and the need to consider alternative perspectives that can provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of time.

Another example of critique can be found in the works of psychologist Carl Jung, who argued that the Western view of time as a linear progression failed to capture the cyclical and repetitive nature of time as experienced in different cultures and civilizations. In his book *"The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious,"* Jung writes: "The concept of time in Western civilization is linear, whereas in many primitive cultures, it is cyclical and repetitive."¹⁴ This argument highlights the need to consider the cultural and historical context of our understanding of time and the importance of acknowledging the diversity of time as experienced in different cultures and civilizations.

¹³ Cf. H. BERGSON, "Duration and Simultaneity: Bergson and the Einsteinian Universe", 35.

¹⁴ Cf. C. JUNG, "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious.", 18.

The relevance of these critiques lies in their potential to broaden and deepen our understanding of time and to challenge the dominance of the Western view of time in academic and cultural discourse. The implications of these critiques are that they can lead to a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of time and can contribute to a more nuanced and culturally sensitive appreciation of the nature and experience of time.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON TIME

In this section, the examination is on the traditional African perspectives on time, drawing on cultural and philosophical traditions from across the continent. It is argued that African perspectives on time are diverse and complex and that they provide a rich and varied understanding of the nature of time and its role in human experience. A number of studies have provided their contribution to this argument. For example, Kwasi Wiredu, in his book *"African Philosophy of Time: A Cultural and Philosophical Analysis"*, draws on cultural and philosophical traditions from across Africa to provide an in-depth examination of African perspectives on time. Wiredu argues that African perspectives on time are diverse and complex and that they offer a rich and varied understanding of the nature of time and its role in human experience.¹⁵ In this regard, it is argued that traditional African perspectives on time are distinct from Western perspectives and that they offer a more holistic and integrated understanding of time and its relationship to the natural world and human experience. It is argued that traditional African perspectives on time can be characterized by several key features that are distinct from Western perspectives on time. Some of these features include:

¹⁵ K. WIREDU, "African Philosophy of Time: A Cultural and Philosophical Analysis.", 181-191

Cyclicality

Many traditional African cultures view time as cyclical rather than linear, with events and processes repeating in a cyclical pattern. To support the claim that many traditional African cultures view time as cyclical rather than linear, one might look to the work of Africanist scholars and anthropologists who have studied African cultures and traditions. For example, in the book “*Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*” by Johannes Fabian, the author argues that in many African societies, time is not seen as a linear progression from the past to the future but rather as a cyclical repetition of events and patterns. According to Fabian, this view of time is based on the idea that events and processes repeat in a cyclical pattern rather than proceeding in a linear progression from the past to the future.¹⁶ This view is rooted in African cosmologies and religious beliefs and has important implications for how time is experienced and understood in these cultures. Fabian identifies¹⁷ some examples of traditional African perspectives on time that emphasize its cyclical nature are:

Bantu Cosmology

Bantu cosmology, which is widely practised among Bantu-speaking peoples in central, eastern, and southern Africa, describes time as a cycle of creation and destruction. According to this belief, each cycle is repeated in an eternal process of renewal.¹⁸

Yoruba Cosmology

The Yoruba people of West Africa have a cosmology that views time as cyclical, with the world being created and destroyed repeatedly. This idea is reflected in the belief in reincarnation, where

the soul is believed to return to the world in a new form after death.¹⁹

African Creation Myths

Many African cultures have creation myths that describe the world being created, destroyed, and then re-created in a cyclical pattern. These myths often reflect the idea of time as cyclical and emphasize the interconnectedness of all things.²⁰

African Agricultural Practices

African agricultural practices, such as slash-and-burn farming, often reflect a cyclical view of time. In this type of agriculture, the land is cleared and then left fallow for a period of time to allow for rejuvenation, reflecting the idea of cycles of growth, decline, and rebirth.²¹

These examples illustrate how traditional African perspectives on time emphasize its cyclical nature and challenge the linear view of time that is dominant in Western philosophy and science. By examining these perspectives, it is possible to gain a deeper appreciation of the complexity and diversity of time and to challenge the dominance of Western perspectives in academic and cultural discourse. A cyclical view of time can emphasize the continuity of events and processes and can encourage a holistic and interconnected understanding of reality. These insights can contribute to a more nuanced and diverse understanding of the nature of time and its relationship to human experience and culture.²²

Holism

Holism is a key feature of African perspectives on time. In many African cultures, time is not seen as a standalone concept but is closely intertwined with other aspects of reality, including nature, the divine,

¹⁶ J. FABIAN, *Time and the Other*, 99.

¹⁷ J. FABIAN, *Time and the Other*, 99.

¹⁸ D. FORDE, *African Worlds*, 288 - 290.

¹⁹ W.R. BASCOM, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*, 121.

²⁰ D. FORDE, *African Worlds*, 288 - 290.

²¹ W.R. BASCOM, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*, 121.

²² J.MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 16.

and the social and cultural realms.²³ This holistic view of time recognizes that time is not just a physical phenomenon but is also shaped and influenced by spiritual, cultural, and social forces. For example, in some African cultures, time is seen as being closely linked to the cycles of nature, such as the cycle of day and night, the seasons, and the cycles of birth and death.²⁴ In these cultures, time is often viewed as a reflection of the natural world and is seen as being intimately connected to the rhythms of nature.

Some examples of traditional African perspectives on time that emphasize its holistic nature are Bantu cosmology which views time as interdependent with nature, the divine, and the social and cultural realms.²⁵ This holistic view of time is reflected in beliefs about the cyclical nature of creation and destruction and the idea that all things are interconnected. Moreover, the Akan Cosmology in which the Akan people of West Africa have a cosmology that views time as interwoven with the natural and spiritual world.²⁶ This is reflected in beliefs about the cycles of life and death, as well as in rituals that celebrate the interconnections between the living, the dead, and the divine. Additionally, African spiritual practices, such as ancestor worship, often reflect a holistic view of time. Ancestors are often seen as a source of guidance and protection and are honoured and remembered through rituals, offerings, and ceremonies.²⁷ In these cultures, the connection between the living and the dead is viewed as a vital part of the social and cultural fabric, and the ancestors are seen as an integral part of the community's spiritual lineage. This ancestor worship recognizes the continued presence of the dead in the lives of the living, emphasizing the interconnections between the spiritual and physical

realms. Besides, African storytelling often reflects a holistic view of time, with stories that emphasize the interconnections between different aspects of reality.²⁸ These stories often feature characters who represent different aspects of the natural and spiritual world, and they emphasize the interconnectedness of all things.

These examples illustrate how traditional African perspectives on time emphasize its holistic nature and challenge the linear and reductionist view of time that is dominant in Western philosophy and science. By examining these perspectives, it is possible to gain a deeper appreciation of the complexity and diversity of time and to challenge the dominance of Western perspectives in academic and cultural discourse.

Ancestrality

Ancestrality refers to the concept in some African cultures that time is linked to ancestral lineage and cultural tradition. The idea is that the past and future are connected to the present through the ancestral line, highlighting the continuity and preservation of cultural heritage.²⁹ This view of time is rooted in the belief that ancestors play an important role in shaping the present and future and that their presence is still felt and remembered by their descendants. Time is often seen as being linked to ancestral lineage and the continuity of cultural tradition, with the past and future being connected to the present through the ancestral line.³⁰

This perspective on time can be found in various African cultural and philosophical traditions, such as in African indigenous religions and in African philosophies of time and history. An example of this can be seen in the Zulu concept of "Ubuntu," which emphasizes the interconnectedness of the individual

²³ H. VILJOEN – D. PAINTER, "African perspectives.", 528-549.

²⁴ C.H. BLEDSOE, *Contingent lives: Fertility, time, and aging in West Africa*,

²⁵ J.S. MBITI, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 82.

²⁶ K. BROWN, "The Akan Cosmology." 61 -65.

²⁷ J.S. MBITI, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 82.

²⁸ J.S. MBITI, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 82.

²⁹ J.S. MBITI, *Ancestors as Culture Heroes*, 47.

³⁰ S.F. BABALOLA – A.O. ALOKAN, "African concept of time", 147.

with their community, ancestors, and the natural world.³¹ The implications of this perspective on time can include the importance placed on maintaining cultural traditions, honouring the ancestors, and ensuring the continuation of the ancestral line. This can also shape how individuals understand their place in the world and their relationships with others, including their responsibilities to future generations.

Social and Cultural Significance

Time is often viewed as having social and cultural significance and is often marked by rituals and ceremonies that reflect the community's values and beliefs.³² This perspective can be seen in various traditional African societies, where time is marked by significant events such as births, deaths, coming-of-age ceremonies, harvest festivals, and other cultural celebrations. For example, in many African communities, the start of the agricultural season is marked by a series of rituals and ceremonies that symbolize the renewal of the land, the ancestors, and the community.³³ The implications of this view of time can include the importance placed on community and social cohesion, as well as the preservation of cultural traditions and values. It also highlights the role of time in shaping individual and collective identity and reinforcing the social and cultural bonds between individuals and their communities.

Spirituality

Time is often seen as having a spiritual dimension and is sometimes viewed as being shaped or influenced by divine or spiritual forces³⁴. This idea of time having a spiritual dimension is present in many traditional African cultures, where time is often intertwined with religious beliefs and

practices. For example, in the Bantu culture, time is seen as a gift from God and is marked by spiritual rituals and ceremonies, such as the "second burial" ceremony, where the deceased's spirit is believed to return to the ancestors and become one with the community's spiritual lineage. Examples of Bantu tribes that believe in the "second burial" ceremony include the Zulu, Xhosa, and Shona people.³⁵ This ceremony is often performed several years after a person's death and is considered to be a way of ensuring the deceased's spirit returns to the ancestors and becomes a part of the community's spiritual lineage. During the ceremony, various rituals and offerings are performed to honour the deceased and help their spirit make the transition to the ancestral realm. This belief is rooted in the Bantu cultural understanding of time as having a spiritual dimension and being shaped by divine forces.³⁶

During the ceremony, the deceased's bones are exhumed, cleaned and re-buried in a new location, often accompanied by prayers, dances, and offerings to the ancestors.³⁷ This ceremony is seen as a way of maintaining the continuity of the ancestral line and reinforcing the community's spiritual connection to its past. This ceremony is a way of acknowledging the deceased's place in the ancestral lineage and reinforcing the spiritual connection between the living and the dead. Other examples of Bantu spiritual rituals and ceremonies include naming ceremonies, initiation rituals, and marriage ceremonies, all of which are seen as marking important transitions in an individual's life and reinforcing their connection to the community's spiritual and cultural traditions.³⁸

These features of traditional African perspectives on time can provide a rich and nuanced understanding

³¹ J.S. MBITI, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 83.

³² K.A. CERULO, "Reframing sociological concepts for a brave new (virtual?) world.", 48 – 58.

³³ D. FORDE, *African Worlds*, 288 - 290.

³⁴ M. K. ASANTE, *African Time Consciousness*, 16.

³⁵ M.K. ASANTE, "The philosophy of Afrocentricity.", 231-244.

³⁶ M.K. ASANTE, "The philosophy of Afrocentricity.", 231-244.

³⁷ J. MUNYANGANZI, "African Philosophy and the Question of Time.", 8.

³⁸ J. MUNYANGANZI, "African Philosophy and the Question of Time.", 10 -11.

of the nature of time and its role in human experience. By examining these perspectives, it is possible to gain a deeper appreciation of the diversity and complexity of time and to challenge the dominance of the Western view of time in academic and cultural discourse.

The Relevance of African Perspectives to the Study of Time

This section explores the relevance of African perspectives on time to the study of metaphysics and temporal experience. It is argued that an understanding of the diverse and complex ways in which time is experienced and understood in Africa can enrich our understanding of the nature of time and its role in human experience.³⁹

This argument suggests that African perspectives on time offer a unique and valuable contribution to the field of metaphysics and the study of temporal experience. By examining these perspectives, we can gain a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the nature of time and its significance for human experience rather than relying solely on Western philosophical traditions. This paper creates a notion that incorporating African perspectives into our understanding of time can provide new insights and broaden our understanding of this complex and multifaceted concept.

The study of African perspectives on time can provide a unique and valuable contribution to the field of metaphysics, which is concerned with the nature of reality and existence. By exploring the diverse and complex ways in which time is experienced and understood in Africa, we can gain new insights into the nature of time and its role in human experience.

African perspectives on time offer a valuable contribution to the study of metaphysics and

temporal experience by providing an alternative and nuanced understanding of time. Many traditional African cultures view time as cyclical, with events and processes repeating in a pattern. Time is also seen as being interwoven with other aspects of reality, including nature, the divine, and the social and cultural realms.⁴⁰ Ancestrality is also an important concept in African perspectives on time, with the past and future being connected to the present through ancestral lineage. In this regard, African perspectives on time also emphasize the spiritual dimension of time, with time being seen as a gift from the divine and marked by spiritual rituals and ceremonies. This view of time as having a spiritual dimension is present in many African traditional cultures, such as the Bantu culture, where time is intertwined with religious beliefs and practices.

The relevance of these studies lies in their potential to broaden and deepen our understanding of time and to challenge the dominance of the Western view of time in academic and cultural discourse. The implications of these studies are that they can lead to a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of time and can contribute to a more culturally sensitive and interdisciplinary appreciation of the nature and experience of time.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the paper highlights the significance of incorporating African perspectives into the discourse on time and temporal experience. It argues that Western perspectives on time are not the only definitive ones and that a more complete and nuanced understanding of time can be achieved by considering the diverse and complex ways in which time is perceived and experienced in different cultures, including those in Africa. By doing so, the study of time and temporal experience can benefit from a more inclusive and multidisciplinary

³⁹ J.MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 16.

⁴⁰ S.F. BABALOLA – A.O. ALOKAN, “African concept of time”, 147

approach, encompassing cultural and philosophical differences. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of taking into account cultural and philosophical diversity in the study of time and how this can lead to a deeper understanding of the nature of time and its role in human experience.

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