

# 8



## African Philosophy of History



## 8.1 Ali A. Mazrui

### 8.1.1 A Triple Heritage

Can African survive the ravages of Westernization? European colonial rule in Africa was more effective in destroying indigenous African structures than in destroying African culture. The tension between new imported structure and old resilient cultures is part of the post colonial war of culture in African continent.

The imported economic and political institutions from the West were due to culture gap btw new structures and ancient values, between alien institutions and ancestral traditions. African can never go back completely to its pre colonial starting point but there is a case for restarting the journey of modernization under indigenous forces question can affair survives the ravage of westernization?

Since the world is becoming a village, Africa cannot just look inwards to its own past. It has to be sensitive to the wider world of the human race as a whole. Africans triple heritage indigenous, Islamic and western forces. Islam and western have been Africa's response to looking outwards to the wider world. Is the seed of Africa decaying to germinate out of the two processes?

Where is Africa? Europe developed the concept of the world in the wake of its voyages of discovery in the 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> centuries, but f even imposed its form of that concept on the outlook of peoples in other continents, including Africa. Why should Europe be above Africa? This is Ethnocentrism.

Africa has been a continent of abundant life by speedy death. Africa has been the first habitat of man but the last to become truly habitable. Africa is referred

as a cradle of civilization but a war cemetery of cultures. African geography is the mother of Africa's history to a large extent for better or for worse.

In Africa, the most endured cultures are precisely those of pastoralist and nomads threatened both by ecology and modernity. Drought is more devastating when it hits pastoralists than when it disrupts cultivators. When rain come it cannot replace dead animals but plants can quickly begin to flow again.

The impact of the west upon Africa has been towards Africanizing the identity of the people of the African continents while the impact of the west upon the African Diaspora has been towards dies Africanizing the identity of the expected sons and daughters of the ancestral continent. The Africanisation of Africans was accomplished through cartography, European racism, and racial classification, impact of colonisation and imperialism and fragmentation of Africa.

Indigenous religions, Islam and Christianity compete with each other for converts. All over Africa, the processes of both syntheses and dissonance continue. Africa has helped built Western industrial civilization while the West has hampered the evolution of Africa's own industrial culture through Africa to West – slave trade plantations, factories, African labour, and minerals. Africans and Arabs need to develop the birth a more effective alliance to deal with industrial states. Third World countries need to exploit its own areas of a producer power, consumer power, debtor power and emerging skill power.

Artificiality and shallowness which Western colonisation created in Africa and the political decay is a consequence of colonialism created in Africa colonial institution without cultural roofs in Africa. In midst of death and devastation enough babies survive to outnumber the dead. Africa may be sick,

but she seems to be still capable of giving birth Africa may be sick, but she seems to be still capable of giving birth.

## 8.2 John Samuel Mbiti

### 8.2.1 African Ontology of History

Mbiti believed that religion and philosophy, in traditional Africa are interrelated, that if one wants to understand the philosophy of traditional Africans; he/she must study their religion as well. He wrote a book titled *African Religious and Philosophy* (1969-1990). He portrays African philosophy as a product of African religions. According to him Africans are notoriously religion, which means Africans carry their religion whenever they go. He arrives at this position by arguing that according to the African, to be human is to belong to the whole community which involves in participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of community.

The African cannot detach himself/herself from the religion of his/her group. Africans do not exist without religion. For Africans, religion is an enological phenomenon. It pertains to the question of existence or being means that man lives in a religious universe everything has a religious connotation. African ontology is divided into 5 categories:

1. God as the ultimate explanation of the geneses and sustenance of both man and all things.
2. Spirits consist of extra human beings and the spirits of men who died a long time ago.
3. Man including human beings who are alive and those about to be born.
4. Animal and plants, or the remainder of biological life.

5. Phenomena and objects without biological life.

He expressed anthropology centrally as:

1. God is the originator and sustainer of man.
2. The spirits explain the destiny of man.
3. Man is the centre of this ontology.
4. The animals, plants and natural phenomena and objects constitute the environment, in which man lives, provide a means of existence (man est. a mystical relationship with them).
5. In addition to the five categories, there seems to be a force, the spirits have access to some of it. A few human beings (medicine men, witches priests, rainmakers) have the knowledge and access to top manipulate and use it some for the food and others for the ill of their communities.

### 8.2.2 African Concept of Time

According to Mbiti, the concept is central and crucial in understanding Africans religions and philosophy. He believed that:

- The traditional concept of time is intimately bound up with the entire life of the people, and our understanding of it may help pave way for understanding the thinking, attitude and actions of the people. It is against this background that I shall attempt to introduce and examine their religious system and philosophy.
- His conception of time is the most important and interesting part of his work. For the traditional Africa's... time is simply a composition of

events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur. What has not taken place or has no likelihood of an immediate occurrence falls in the category of “no time”, what is certain to occur, or what falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena, is the category of inevitable or potential time.

- According to Mbiti, the traditional African concept of time is a two dimensional phenomena with a long past (zamani), a present (sasa) 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.
- The future is virtually absent cause events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized and cannot, therefore constitute time.
- If, however, future events are certain to occur, or if they fall within the inevitable rhythm of nature, they at best constitute only potential time, not actual time.
- What is taking place now no doubt unfolds the future but in the present and the past.
- Actual time is therefore what is present and what is past.
- It moves “backwards” rather than “forward” and Africans set their not on future things but clearly on what has taken place.
- To the African therefore the important element in the concept of time is the past (tene).

- Tene period is technically of Mituki, but in the “backward” direction. Both of these overlap and when something disappears from Mituki period it enters the tene dimension of time before anything has been absorbed into the tene period, it must go through Mituki dimension. Tene becomes the final storehouse, the point beyond which phenomena cannot go the ultimate destiny of all things maybe caught up in the rhythm of motion.
- According to Mbiti history in Africa is a movement in a backward direction, a movement from Mituki dimension, from the now period to the tene period.
- This time orientation, governed as it is by the two dimensions of the present and the past, dominates African understanding of the individual, the community and the universe which constitutes the 5 ontological categories.
- Time has to be experienced in order to make sense or to become real.
- A person experienced in order to make sense or to become real.
- A person experiences time partly in his own individual life and partly through the society which goes back many generations before his own birth.

Since what is in the future has not been experienced, it does not make sense, it cannot know how to think about it, unless of course it is something which falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena.

According to Mbiti Africa’s people understanding of time and history are biased on analysis of myths and language. Myths there are not myths about future, as far as I have been able to gather from all available sources that record

African myths and stories. This is because the future dimension of time has not been formulated and assimilated into the mythology of African thinking and concept of the universe.

On language, Mbiti reckons that African verb tenses which refer to the future cover up to 6 months or 2 years at most... there are no concrete words or expressions to convey the idea of distant future ... people have little or no active beyond, at most 2years from now and the languages concerned lack words by which such events can be conceived or expressed.

African conception of time, the teachings of the church do not make sense and are meaningless if not absurd, to the African mental disposition. African people have no belief in progress, the idea that the development of human activities and achievements move from low to higher degree. The people neither plans for the distant future not “build castles in the air”. The centre of gravity for human thought and activities is the zamani period, towards which the sasa moves. Pole set their eyes on the zamani, since for them there is no “world to come” such as is found in Christianity.

How true is the conception/to what extent is it meaningful.

1. Through there may be some elements of truth in Mbitis African conception of time, it should nevertheless not be taken to be the gospel truth.
2. Whereas it may be true that some African languages do not have one word for the future, this does not necessarily mean that they do not have a clear conception of the future.
3. The future was not of much concern to Africans not to have a word for it.

4. There are several individuals who led their lives as if there is no future but this does not mean that such individuals do not have a future dimension of time.

## 8.3 Criticism

Some have accused Mbiti of generalizing the concept of time for the various traditional African communities as a whole. He largely researched among the Akamba and kikuyu poles of Kenya, yet he boldly went ahead and made a sweeping claim covering Africa in it's entirety. Mbiti's African conception of time can only be undertook is implying that the future was not much of a pre occupation for the African and no more.

It should be noted according to Mbiti, African philosophy is to be analyzed and understood by observing the Africans in their chores, by shaving in their everyday experiences and by studying their languages. Implicit in Mbiti's works is that African philosophy is unusual. When the concept "philosophy" is attributed to the African, there is a shift in its meaning, a meaning not ordinary attributed to western philosophy.

## 8.4 Placide Temples

### 8.4.1 Bantu Philosophy

Father Placide Temples was a Belgian catholic priest who did missionary work from the 1930s through the 1960s among Cuba people, a Bantu group with Democratic Republic Congo, formerly Zaire. According to him Africans have a philosophy unlike the majority of his contemporary Europeans expatriates in Africa who denied African abstract thought.

His book *Bantu Philosophy* marks the starting point of the debate about the nature of African philosophy. Temple's book is a pioneer work in the study of African philosophy. He contends that to any ontology and logic to the African is unrealistic and untenable position.

He believes that empirical evidence points to the existence of metaphysics and ontology in Bantu culture. This philosophy evolved as African Christians returned to the trade. Ways of behavior whenever they encountered problems in the church without any problem why their forefathers and ancestors had them with practical solutions of the great problems of humanity, the problems of life and death, of salvation or destruction.

The aim of writing the book was to equip colonials of food will with a useful instrument to carry out their colonial and Christian "civilizing mission" more efficiently. He called for a process of understanding the African and self adaptation on the part of the colonizer and missionary. In understanding Africans, it was important that one understood their way of life, and their philosophy otherwise the mission would suffer rejection from Africans.

Africans day to day lives were governed by beliefs and customs. African live revolve around Bantu behavior; Bantu ontology, Bantu wisdom, Bantu psychology, Bantu ethics and restoration of life are all centered upon vital force. The Bantu actions are all explainable in terms of force. The purpose is all explainable in terms of force. The purpose of their actions and practices is to acquire life, strength or vital force, to live strongly, to make life stronger and to assure that force shall remain in ones posterity. Temples infer that Bantu knowledge in both scientific and philosophical forms is not supernatural but natural, since it is within the natural capacities of either the ancestors or living humans.