

# **African and Non-African Time: To Contrast or not to Contrast?**

*The Geo-political Convenience of Conceptual Dichotomization*<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This essay offers a critique of the controversial proposal that peculiarities in African thought concerning time have a negative impact upon African economic development. The proposal under scrutiny takes the form of two corollaries whose notoriety dates back to John S. Mbiti's (1969) infamous claim that African cultures lack an indigenous concept of the distant future. It is shown that these joint hypotheses appear to be either self-refuting or false. In consequence, the proposal that a cross-cultural scrutiny of time will reveal defective concepts is reconsidered. It is proposed that deficiencies in the perception of time that bear a negative impact upon African economics are instead the cache of foreign experts who fail to appreciate conventional uses of time in Africa as rational strategies for risk avoidance, damage control, for resisting hegemonic authority, quelling foreign expropriation of African resources, and for maximizing efficiency given scarce capital and inadequate infrastructure. What begins as a deflationary dismissal of a long-standing debate over African indigenous thoughts about time concludes with a promising speculation about African idiosyncratic practices of time-management that are instrumental in negotiating the vicissitudes of spiralling underdevelopment.

## **Key Words**

African concepts of time, cultural relativism, economic development, John S. Mbiti, post-colonial hermeneutics, time management

## **Introduction**

In the mid 1990s, two consecutive intercultural symposia were organised<sup>2</sup> to pursue a heated controversy about culture-specific metaphysics that has persisted for nearly half a century, ever since remarkable claims about a uniquely African concept of time were first published

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<sup>2</sup> Contrasts were drawn in the first symposium between the notions of time within as well as outside the Western philosophical tradition since Aristotle, St. Augustine, as proposed by Hegel, secularized by Marx, critiqued later by Heidegger, and later still by Derrida and Lyotard (Kimmerle 1996, 11-24; Tiemersma 1996, 16). Proceedings of both conferences were published by Rodopi (1996, 1998).

by John S. Mbiti (1969) in *African Religions and Philosophy*. (A brief review of Mbiti's posits will shortly be sketched in section 1). The first of these symposia, "Time and Temporality in Intercultural Perspective", presented scholarship elaborating this hypothesis: (i) there exist culture-specific differences in beliefs about time, particularly regarding the future as a distinct dimension. (In the course of this critique I will refer to this as the *culture-specificity hypothesis*.) At the second symposium, "The Concept of Time and Perception of Development in sub-Saharan Africa", the main hypothesis under consideration was this: (ii) radically distinct, culture-specific beliefs about time contribute causally to the different paces of economic development experienced in Africa and in G-8 countries.<sup>3</sup> (Hereafter I refer to this claim simply as *the causal hypothesis*.) The purpose of this paper is to spell out why these two hypotheses are jointly unsustainable, especially when they are proposed in the context of an intercultural forum.

Organisers of these symposia were keenly sensitive to the impact of physical setting, social environment and political history upon intercultural inquiry, so the venue of the second symposium was shifted from Western Europe to Dakar in Senegal.<sup>4</sup> It was hoped that the *gestalt* of underdevelopment experienced and processed in a cosmopolitan centre of West Africa's multiple language communities and social milieus would reinforce reflections on the symposium's theme.<sup>5</sup>

In this critique I will draw upon staple criticisms of radical relativist theses of all kinds (Davidson 1975, Lauer 2007a, 2009, Williams 1972, 35); and I will apply general results harvested from the philosophy of intentional action (Davidson 1963). In Section 1, I will present Mbiti's notorious postulates about a stark contrast between African and Western concepts of time, and samples of the sorts of questions that his work still inspires decades later, questions that presuppose the same hypotheses (i) and (ii) stated above. Section 2 will explore the cogency of (ii) - *the causal hypothesis* - by considering whether it is warranted to

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of systematic analysis, it is necessary to bracket all but a few of the question begging ambiguities presumed by hypotheses (i) and (ii) under consideration; so I artificially restrict the denotation of 'Western' by using this cluster term 'G-8' to refer to Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

<sup>4</sup> The second conference was sponsored by the Goethe Institute and Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Dakar Senegal, May 22-25, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Heinz Kimmerle, conference organiser, in private conversation June 1995, University of Ghana, Legon.

pick out metaphysical beliefs as essential to the things people do intentionally. According to a strict reading of this causal hypothesis, the regressive and stagnant economic conditions prevailing in Africa cannot be improved without some change occurring in African propositional attitudes towards time. In order to assess this hypothesis, it is necessary to consider the pitfalls of presuming to know which particular thoughts may have contributed to improving or undermining economic conditions by causing a particular action on a given occasion (Lauer 1992; 2009). Section 3 will address problems with (i) - *the culture-specificity hypothesis* - which asserts that a person's beliefs about time will be determined by the linguistic and cultural influences the individual is exposed to while growing up. Like relativist theses generally, this claim is vulnerable to the threat of triviality or incoherence depending upon how it is interpreted (Williams 1972, 31-36), and these errors of interpretation require sorting out before the overall cogency of these corollaries can be assessed. The results of sections 2 and 3 demonstrate that it is philosophically idle to isolate out of the mix of thoughts that result in an economic success or failure, just those propositional beliefs about a phenomenon called 'time'. It will be shown in section 4 that the beliefs about time that are most relevant to African development economics are best understood as referring elliptically to particular social relations, contingent circumstances and historical norms that actually do motivate people's reactions to their changing material condition and their efforts to reform or allay it. Therefore, section 4 will reassess cross-cultural misconceptions about time in relation to perceptions of development; but now the onus will be upon shortfalls in perceiving and appreciating from a distance how time *management* functions in Africa as a range of strategies for coping with economic underdevelopment.

The analysis will have revealed that it is not the concept of time as a metaphysical entity, force, or phenomenon variously interpreted which is pertinent to development economics. Rather, time is pertinent to development as a social dimension, as a tool for reinforcing political relations, for apportioning social goods and for managing intractable difficulties in situations of extreme scarcity and inadequate infrastructure. In these ways time emerges as instrumental in Africans' mastery over economic disarray. This interpretation is not hard to appreciate. Yet rigorous debate over ascriptions of congenitally dysfunctional belief systems to African knowledge traditions has remained a philosophically durable exercise, an intellectual complement to the history of capital ventures and global alliances dubbed

‘international partnerships for development’.<sup>6</sup> So the question arises: why does the neo-colonial environment of globalisation encourage and perpetuate lively deliberation over such a logically flawed approach to understanding and correcting African ‘underdevelopment’? In response to this hermeneutic challenge, I will try to show in section 5 why an intercultural philosophical debate explicitly concerned with the content of beliefs about the phenomenology of time may be implicitly a conflict about control over its use.

### **§1. Exoticising African concepts of time**

John Mbiti’s widely read *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) is usually cited as the source of controversy over isolating traditional African descriptions of time from those featured in Western philosophical traditions.<sup>7</sup> In the seminal sections [g] and [h] of chapter 3 in his classic book (1969, 26-28), Mbiti posited that Africans think about time chiefly in “two dimensions” with reference to an inchoate limitless past and a sedentary, concrete present. He proposed that African expressions diverge radically from common ‘Western’ referrals to time which is in three dimensions: a traceable historic past nesting neatly into metric aggregates by year, decade, century, and millennia, then the instantaneous present, and finally a limitless, abstract and infinitely receding future. On Mbiti’s view, African notions of the future are limited to concrete repetitions or extensions of observable events, directly related to known cycles of nature and foreseeable outcomes of immediate human concerns and projects such as harvesting fruit trees, parenting, and kinship obligations.

Mbiti posited that Western notions of the distant future were “discovered by Africans” in modernity only through exposure to colonial missionaries’ linguistic habits and Christian eschatology. Mbiti was aware of the outraged reception of his claims (1969, 28); and he challenged his critics to provide counterexamples from non-Bantu African language

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<sup>6</sup> The final Millennium Development Goal number 8 prescribes such relationships to encourage African governments to create legislature and ‘enabling environments’ favouring foreign investment. In Ghana this takes the form of exclusive tax shelters for foreign entrepreneurs, coping with gross imbalances in terms of world trade, selling off natural resources, an absence of national unemployment statistics, disabling centralized trade union power, trivializing labour rights, legislating procurement regulations that favour foreign bidders, undermining competitiveness of small and *medium* size businesses, tolerating a bloated informalised commercial sector (Ninsin 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Wiredu (1996, 26), Hallen (2009, 26), Kimmerle (1997).

communities.<sup>8</sup> Mbiti was unabashed in urging that an understanding of all aspects of African life, from worship rituals to work habits and leisure, depended upon appreciating the African truncated sense of the future. He predicted that practices inherent to successful capital investment, long term economic planning, habits of saving and delaying rewards, maintenance culture, and expanding educational institutions all depend upon individuals grasping the 'Western' notion of the future as a remote linear sequence of equal components projecting ahead indefinitely and without limit. He anticipated that Africans' management of the transition and adaptation to a "new dimension of the future" would "not be smooth" and that the radical divergence between African and modern notions of the future "may well be at the root of, among other things, the political instability of our nations" (Mbiti 1969, 27).

Three decades after Mbiti's disconcerting interventions, the following discussion questions were designed to guide the Dakar 1996 symposium in order to test, to challenge, to question, to enhance and generally to bring Mbiti's views up to date, as articulated by the symposium's chief organiser, philosopher Heinz Kimmerle (1998, 22-24):

- Might Africans with their concrete sense of time be able to counter the negative influences of development planning generic to capitalist economies, in particular the infamous delusion that technological innovations have infinite power to fuel progress in a linear trajectory toward an unreachable horizon of limitless growth?
- Can the African conceptualisation of time as a concrete continuity between the past, present and foreseeable future correct against the historical mistakes of Western industrialists such as the notorious disregard for the delicate ecological balance of the environment?
- "How can African thought open itself more effectively for the Western concept of time?" (Kimmerle 1998, 24).
- Can Africans "learn to concentrate on regular work habits and exact ways of long term planning" which correlate historically with Western conceptions of time as an infinite "sequence of equal elements"? (Kimmerle 1998, 27)

A rich literature already exists which exposes in meticulous detail the Eurocentric bias that pervades such segments of the Western philosophical canon as this, where Africa is featured in modernity (Serequeberhan 1997). I will not recap those compelling insights here. Instead

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<sup>8</sup> Barry Hallen (2009, 26 n.5) has observed that Mbiti's evidence was supported with expressions collected from Kikamba and Gikuyu speakers.

the present essay will show that the framing of these questions is problematic insofar as they presuppose - no less than Mbiti's generic claims presupposed forty-five years ago - joint subscription to *the causal hypothesis* and *the culture-specificity hypothesis*. It is not hard to show that these underlying corollaries are irreparably misguided, as I will next attempt to do.

## **§2. Attributing causal power to beliefs about time**

I hope it is obvious why our analysis of the causal hypothesis requires focusing rather closely on the structure of intentions, that is, the clusters of thought presumed to be directly related to actions. This is simply because when we speak of the initiatives, projects, institutional arrangements and resource distribution that go into developing an economy and improving living standards, we are speaking of human intentional actions - usually interpersonal, orchestrated activities (Lauer 1997, 32). As to the actual make-up of an intention regarded as the reason for an action, there is no need here to review the literature concerned with whether beliefs (along with other propositional attitudes such as desire and/or duty) can count among the members of causal networks or sequences that constitute actions done intentionally (Davidson 1963). We can suppose, for the sake of argument, that our thoughts do contribute in some way or other to the causes of our actions. It does not matter to the argument here; what is presented in this section applies to the primary reason for an agent's behaviour, even if primary reasons are construed as non-causally related to the actions they explain.

There is still a more salient problem concerning the causal hypothesis under scrutiny, and that is the difficulty involved in identifying *which* beliefs are the necessary or sufficient antecedents for a given action on a particular occasion. For this causal hypothesis stipulates that it is our beliefs about *time*, in particular, that are responsible above all others for the actions that promote or impede implementation of sustainable development policies. But this is implausible. For clearly, on a given occasion when we are intending to do something which is likely to have economic consequences, or when we are actually engaged in any such activity, the contents of our thoughts do not readily imply any definite formulation about the structure or nature of time. If *asked* about what we believe time to be like, our individual reports will vary with each of our individual abilities to articulate or discern the sporadic flow of images and impressions that may sometimes accompany our reasoning about what to do. Such reports may reflect learned ways of expressing beliefs about time, or they may reflect the influence of learned myths or dogmas to which we have been exposed at any stage of our

educational, religious, social or family life. But whether reports about time's structure issue from the stream of immediate inner impressions itself or from learned phraseology, such reports are not a reliably definitive source of information about whether anyone's time-related thoughts are necessarily connected to other kinds of mental states and occurrences that are causally functional when he or she is making decisions and acting intentionally. The point here is not that some people may be incapable of formulating a clear image or statement about their experience of time or of their inner feelings and intuitions about its dimensions or qualities. The point is rather that even if Raj is skilled at articulating his beliefs about time, it does not follow that we have been provided evidence that such beliefs must have entered into the primary reason for his action. From such reports we may not correctly infer that Raj has provided us insight into the real reasons for his own time-related activities and intentions. Knowing how to read a road map does not make one a geologist.

Of course this intractable difficulty in determining which beliefs have led a person to pursue a particular line of action is insufficient in itself to defeat the causal hypothesis. The problem is that from the sort of evidence one can expect to be available, there is no reason to suppose that the thoughts driving our behaviour, or that portion of behaviour that affects the economy, need entail any beliefs about the phenomenon of time per se. To understand why we do the things we do in our everyday lives - if you like, 'in real time' - we must focus instead, or as well, on the social conventions and norms that characterise our *uses* of time within our social milieu. The allocation of disposable wealth, resources, opportunities and political influences determine the way time is spent in a given culture. All these are inseparable components of a coherent social structure, and these features of human interaction affect the pace of economic growth or stagnation, as the case may be. Beliefs which feature time as a referent of description need never enter in. They might be involved, but they need not be; and that is all that is wrong with the causal hypothesis, but it is enough to defeat it. There is at root the holism of belief to contend with here, since the fact that beliefs cannot be isolated neatly from one another defies the causal hypothesis from being testable. Even if our notions of time were always causally present in any action we take affecting the economy, we would never know it. One could just as well postulate that since our diverse beliefs about God are ever present, they are thereby causally responsible for the economy. This is why I suggested that the causal hypothesis is an idle one.



From what little is known about the way that social roles and structures are sustained, there is no reason to hold the view that beliefs about the phenomenology of time *as such* are essential components of such processes, even when social roles and institutional arrangements in a community are defined and reinforced through time-oriented behaviour. For example, when a West African characteristically comes to meet a social obligation an hour late, the significant thoughts and attitudes comprising his reason are likely to be about the people he is coming to meet and his purpose in meeting them. Non-discursive statements about such concerns can be made by executing persistently late arrivals. Nevertheless, it is not apparent why one should assume that a belief about time itself necessarily enters into the intention of someone engaged in making such demonstrations through their actions (*contra* Dayo Oluyemi-Kusa 1997, 166-167).<sup>9</sup> Statements can be made non-verbally through many such responses to time constraints. But none of those non-discursive demonstrations need to be reflecting beliefs about the phenomenon of time itself. What matters or occurs to the agent is likely to be the dynamics of the particular social situation, and customary beliefs about the significance of waiting for others or being waited for by others. Further, such beliefs are context-dependent upon a myriad of variables. Neither the structure of reasoning, nor the content of the thoughts involved in a late arrival are fixed *a priori*.

Further still, such beliefs may not be propositional: I need not be able to explicitly formulate any beliefs or opinions at all about the utility or the significance of my choice or about the consequences of arriving late. Customary signals using time-related behaviour may depend upon following social norms. Norm-following in turn is not clearly the direct effect of any fixed set of articulable beliefs. In any case, even when prior deliberation is involved, time-related decisions may entail no specifiable thoughts about time itself. In a situation where I can choose to sabotage or to conform to a new work policy by a persistently delayed arrival, my choice of response will be impelled by my relation to the one imposing the suggestion, my group's apparent consensus regarding what to do, the purpose of frustrating management, not about the nature of time as a phenomenon. Hypotheses connecting beliefs about time to the relevant aspects of the social world may feature in a third party's analysis of my

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<sup>9</sup> Dayo Oluyemi-Kusa (1997, 167) regards the Nigerian convention of late arrival as indicative of a "cyclic" conception of time. He associates "linear" time with Western conceptions of democracy, high literacy, conditions of political stability and the absence of military interruption of social institutions, and with a "viable industrial base".

behaviour, while overlooking the proximate and wholly contingent considerations that are directing my concerns as an agent, and constituting my real reason for coming late. In large measure these concerns may involve my relations with other people as much as they reflect desired outcomes and future consequences. Or they may not - there is no telling exactly. That is the burden placed on the causal hypothesis by the holism of beliefs typically comprising our intentions.

Further, in order for my concerns to exhibit rational agency, there is no requirement that I be motivated by beliefs explicitly applying a general principle or policy about time to a particular instance where my actions reveal I am conscious of time - as is the case when I persistently arrive late to work. People act rationally when they are just following the time-oriented conventions expected in a given situation, or when they make choices in accord with other people's interests and convictions, or when they do things in order to assert a certain kind of identity or allegiance or influence or control or resistance.

People acting rationally often just want to convey a certain image or to seek group approval or to maintain respect. Consider preferences among successful elites in Ghana, as described independently by Dowse (1973) and by Hagan (1992). The norm for maximizing security directs one to build many houses, expand farms, to accrue social capital: invest in several wives, foster many children and support many part-time labourers; retain funds to sponsor as many legal, social and religious functions as an unanticipated occasion may call upon one to sponsor for one's communit(ies). This risk-avoidance policy is certainly contrary to the financial-capitalist's strategy of maximizing profit potentials by streamlining expendable costs. On this image of a successful man there is no logical rationale for minimizing social obligations in order to sustain regular pulse-feeding of high risk investments invisibly hidden in stocks, bonds and futures, with expected delay of returns. The West African businessman's behaviour may suggest an absence of thoughts overly concerned about the distant future, but his intentional choices and behaviour cannot be disassociated from thoughts about the impression being made upon esteemed cohorts and kin.

Notice three important features of this last contrast. First, it captures two conceptions of success, not of time. Two 'big' men of different socio-economic cultures may be organizing their time and future plans explicitly. But they do not do so on the basis of different beliefs they could express about time or about the future; rather they base their decisions on different

images or models of success. The rationale underlying these different models might be available to each man for his independent scrutiny. One may come to realize that his inherited notion of a limitless future, his illusion of his own immortality and independence of others, falsely rationalizes his frugality and investment practices. But it does not follow from this realization that the man will thereby change his investment practices, nor does it follow that he would be rational in doing so. Barring extraordinarily compelling circumstances, a man's policy of resource and time management will change rather because he senses that the norms of success have changed - that a new image has emerged in the minds of his cohorts concerning what is proper for a successful man to do.

Secondly, the cultural norms that a man follows - unwittingly or self-consciously - do not absolutely determine as a matter of fixed consequence what he will choose to do, nor can they prescribe how a person will interpret a given immediate experience. Following a cultural norm does not entail any specifiable commitments of the individual in his fund of personal beliefs - beyond holding to a general policy of behaviour that fulfils to some degree the cultural image or model of how a 'big' and successful man behaves.

Thirdly and conversely, there is no definite, specifiable set of beliefs or convictions about relevant matters of fact or of metaphysics entailed by adhering in practice to conventional images of success or to any social norm. The recall of personal experiences and the application of deep convictions remain the individual's own affair no matter how much of a conformist he may be. Although following a norm entails acting in accord with a pattern prescribed as the normal way for a 'big' man to behave, there is nothing prescribed or compulsory about the fact that he holds to the norm. He could switch his style. In doing so he might be adopting a new policy of behaviour, perhaps following a different, contrary norm of another culture.

Pointing out that people are free to move in and out of different social traditions by their own whim of course does not imply that it is obvious how social norms function to produce behavioural effects. Nor does emphasis on norm following imply that people may not also - perhaps always - carry propositional beliefs and reasons of their own about what they are doing or prefer to be doing, and why - even while they are following social norms. Norm following is not presented here as an antithesis or contradiction to the claim that propositional beliefs - about time and many other things - may play a causal role in the things we do. The

point here is this: there is no evidence to suggest that the intentions leading to one form of behaviour rather than another must entail beliefs about the nature or structure of time itself, even when the behaviour explicitly involves the use of time. We can be trained to become sensitive to our impressions and thoughts about time. But even if we were all perfect at recounting our beliefs about the phenomena of time, there are many situations where an individual may be concerned or worried or anxiously thinking about something in the past, or future, or in the present about a project for which the time is 'running out', yet not be harbouring beliefs about the structure or flow or movement of time as such, explicitly or implicitly. Consider the fact that you can worry (or, alternatively, be utterly nonchalant) about when your contractor will complete a new office building under construction, or you can worry about when the next rain or funding allotment will come, with or without any accompanying beliefs or images depicting time in any way. One can sustain time-related anxieties (or, contrarily, attitudes of indifference) with or without holding beliefs about time itself, either as flowing irreversibly forward or as expanding toward a point of fruition when the expected outcome finally occurs. Upon reflection, your anxious thoughts (or their absence) in such cases could be reconstructed either as being about time; or they may boil down to more specifically defined worries about the leasing dates on a particular building, or the germination of a newly planted crop on a particular field, or the arrival of specific chemicals to continue a given experiment, or the work still required to complete a difficult paper against a publication deadline. Clearly the contents of our thoughts on any of these topics do not necessarily imply our believing any definite formulation about the structure of time *per se* - not even a formulation which could be predicted by knowing our cultural background. This last point leads to the analysis of corollary (i) - *the culture-specificity hypothesis* - in the next section.

To summarize the results of the discussion so far: conventions and norms in the use of time, along with the allocation of expendable wealth, social resources and opportunities, are inseparable components of our institutional structures and political relations. Among the other things we do with time, we use it to expand and traverse social spaces. It is important for my argument to stress that the way dimensions of time define and sustain social roles and status is not by means of our beliefs about empirical phenomena or metaphysical reality. It is rather the norms that people follow - their beliefs about what is the right or the normal or expected thing to do - which often determine people's receptivity, their adaptability, or their resistance to changes they encounter in their material conditions. Some of us may well hold

to beliefs about time which influence the way we use it. But we need not do so. The bad news for the causal hypothesis is that it seems impossible to systematically isolate any beliefs according to their stereotypical content, to determine which ones are causally responsible for time-related behaviour on a specific occasion. Yet for the causal hypothesis not to be idle, it requires that we have a capacity to identify beliefs about time as causally or inferentially connected to a person's actions. And from the considerations compassed so far, there appears to be no systematic warrant for identifying a particular type of belief, whose content describes or displays the nature or structure or passage of time itself, as responsible for making a significant impact on specific actions that determine the pace of African economic development.

### **§3. Vagaries of conceptual relativism**

According to *the culture-specificity hypothesis* concerning beliefs about time, people growing up in Africa and people raised in 'the West' carry divergent primary concepts of time. Viewed in this way, the culture-specificity hypothesis is the converse of the causal hypothesis just canvassed in section §2. There it was supposed that individuals' beliefs about time determine the material conditions in which those individuals reside, communicate, and conduct their economic affairs. Here, the culture-specificity corollary asserts that those very conditions in which people collectively reside, communicate, and raise their children, determine how they will think about time. It is the task of this section to show why these two posits cannot be sustained in tandem without appearing inconsistent, incoherent or trivial.

One question which arises when assessing these joint hypotheses is the following: which of an individual's beliefs is it warranted to regard as culturally idiosyncratic? Presumably if the causal hypothesis is compelling and non-trivial, it is because some of our beliefs, e.g. about global economic injustice, are veridical in some culturally neutral sense. That is to say, the graphic economic differentials perceived regionally are objective features of the world. Surely the strife and disarray labelled 'underdevelopment' in Africa, in contrast with affluent lifestyles enjoyed by many people in G-8 countries, are not culturally constructed figments of varying perceptual judgement; otherwise there would be nothing morally objectionable with encouraging an individual who experiences egregious economic stress simply to reconceptualise his glass as half full.

On the other hand, it is a commonplace that people's perceptions of 'underdevelopment' are not uniform: people's sense of being demoralised by poverty is affected by their aspirations and their expectations for economic reform. It is another commonplace that such aspirations are in turn affected by people's awareness of alternatives, through exposure to videos and newsfeeds of the easy affluence enjoyed in remote regions of the world (via telecommunication satellite, cinema, and now, the Internet). Likewise, people in affluent societies reflecting upon unfamiliar economic conditions abroad are influenced by stereotypical media images. Highly technological lifestyles are rife with a range of moral injunctions and concomitant beliefs about carbon footprints, fast food, and fast track living, all accompaniments of a general climate of large pockets of disposable income. Indeed everyone's judgments about their own and other peoples' material standards of living are shaped in part by upbringing, in part by exposure to a flurry of current opinion and a steady flow of conventional aphorisms provided by their own immediate cultural milieus. If descriptions of contrast as facile as these are all that the culture-specificity hypothesis amounts to, then the hypothesis is a truism (Williams 1972, 31-33). No one will disagree that trends in belief of all sorts within and between cultures and generations are detectable; even as one person grows older the phenomenon of time appears to change for that person. Differences in attitude, habit, and expressions used to describe time can be identified as 'typical in culture A' and 'unprecedented in culture B'. But so what? Spotting trends is a great distance from finding evidence that certain metaphysical beliefs borne of one culture are not available for reflection and revisable from within another.

On a somewhat stronger, non-trivial interpretation, the culture-specificity hypothesis seems to suggest that the rift between African and Western metaphysical beliefs poses some difficulty to be overcome for those whose cultural background poorly prepares them for an orientation to time that originates in cultures where the pressures of twenty-first century post-industrial economics are taken in stride. But on a careful reading, if the hypothesis suggests that there is some kind of problem for individuals who are culturally divided from the concepts needed to improve their economic condition, then the solution lies in the very expression of the problem. For in order to avoid incoherence, the culture-specificity hypothesis' truth presupposes that a background framework of shared concepts about time must be accessible from all the cultural vantage points within the scope of reference denoted by the hypothesis. The following paragraph explains why.

Suppose that my concept of time learned in my culture A cannot be recognized by anyone else whose different concept of time was inherited in another culture B. Suppose further that the culture-specificity of beliefs is interpreted to mean that no one can understand time as it is comprehended in cultures other than their own. Then neither of us could make sense of any elaboration of the culture-specific differences between  $time_A$  and  $time_B$  orientations, since according to this radical relativist interpretation neither of us can understand any view of time other than our own. In that case there is no telling whether the proposed contrast has been accurately portrayed or indeed whether it actually exists at all. What could decide whether my beliefs about  $time_A$  were different from someone's beliefs in culture B except our both witnessing a contrast emerging in the descriptions of time offered to depict both our views? How could anyone verify whether the rendering of our conceptual differences has been accurately portrayed? If we can understand the culture-specificity hypothesis on such a strict interpretation, then it cannot be true. If it were true, then we shouldn't be able to understand it. Hence the very articulation of cultural polarities presupposes a cross-cultural medium of description which undermines the claim that one pole of the contrast is inaccessible to adherents of the other (Davidson 1984, 184; Lauer 2007c).

This analysis highlights an important fact which is inherent in the very existence of cross-cultural contrasts, and one that we will elaborate in the next section; viz. that culture-participants are able to appreciate contrasts between alternative views of time and to form evaluative opinions about them. This defeats the proposal that adherents at one pole of a cultural dichotomy are somehow incapable of appropriating by their own accord the conceptual apparatus that is endemic to adherents at the other pole. The formulation of the culture-specificity hypothesis presupposes that individuals who comprehend it are neither prohibited nor indisposed by any *a priori* or logical force, nor by any inherent limitation peculiar to their cultural heritage, to think any number of ways about the future. To avoid self-refutation, the culture-specificity hypothesis implies that we need not be stuck or driven to hold our culturally inherited beliefs about time, insofar as we can create or become aware of existing alternatives. This is unobjectionable, unless one wants to presume that culturally determined beliefs about time in some way have inhibited Africans from accessing the conceptual tools required for economic development to take off. That cannot be the case, if the culture-specificity hypothesis is not going to collapse into self-refutation. This is why it seems that the two corollaries, the *causal hypothesis* and *culture-specificity of beliefs about*

*time* discussed in §2 and here in §3 cannot both be asserted consistently in any non-trivial way.

From the considerations canvassed in this section, we can conclude that:

- (a) Culture specificity of beliefs about time presupposes some culturally neutral standpoint from which the thesis can be understood.
- (b) There is no *a priori* basis for regarding one standpoint as an advanced vehicle for coping with modernity—that is, not unless individuals who are inviting new technology transfers and other precedents have the authority to draw relevant conclusions. In this respect, perhaps, the *evaluation* of contrasting beliefs about time must be culture-specific, rather than the beliefs themselves. We will dwell more on this point in the next and the last sections.
- (c) Individuals who are so inclined must be able in principle to identify the full range of contrasts between their respective views of time and development. Our analysis suggests there is no reason to doubt that people can come to self-realisation about their concepts of time on their own initiative: If one was brought up with time<sub>B</sub>, realising a new sense of time<sub>A</sub> need not be something imposed from outside. This runs contrary to Mbiti's suggestion that the evolution of modern temporality in Africa depended upon colonial missionaries and their Christian teachings (1969, 27) and his expectation that accommodation of one indigenous African time orientation to a different Western one "will not be smooth" (1969, 28). In fact there seems little reason to think we can predict how thinking about time will impact upon perceptions of development in future.

So far, it has emerged that depending upon how radically we interpret the cultural relativity of metaphysical beliefs in contrast with culturally neutral perceptual beliefs about economic development, either the culture-specificity hypothesis appears trivial, or it is self refuting, or its implications for the causes of underdevelopment are unremarkable. If the culture-specificity hypothesis is withdrawn altogether, then its corollary, the causal hypothesis, appears implausible by virtue of the many everyday considerations ready to hand that contradict it. We will review some of these next in section §4.

#### **§4. Reassessing cross-cultural interpretations of time**

In sections §2 and §3 we have considered two main hypotheses that jointly promote idiosyncrasies in African metaphysical thought as causally responsible for shortfalls in African economic practice. But on closer examination of these hypotheses, the obstacles to economic development purported to be characteristic of 'African' beliefs about time seem to be not so much about the beliefs themselves, as in the way they are assessed.



In general people seem far less rigid in their orientations to widely disparate influences of diverse cultural traditions than the theorists appealing to cultural determinism would have one believe. Individual experiences of time are evidently not simply an extension of a pre-formulated, densely knitted fabric of beliefs inherited genetically or linguistically that resists revision or expansion except through re-indoctrination. Cultural syntheses are in fact as commonplace as the phenomenon of borrowing vocabulary between languages. Perhaps time is no more a fixed cultural construction than is language. Syntactic features of a language can remain invariant with minor exceptions, while semantic content undergoes a continuous, fluid transformation. It is a philosopher's fiction that belief-systems are limited by distinct languages rendering different cultural outlooks incommensurable with one another the world over.

On the contrary, empirical evidence readily indicates that citizens of post- and neo-colonial West and East African cultures acquire a wide repertoire of complementary time orientations, each adaptable to suit different social contexts and demands, analogously to code-switching in language. For instance in cosmopolitan centres of Ghana and Nigeria, generations of individuals have been adapting to rival orientations towards work and worship, family structure and obligation, entertainment, legal and health care systems, land tenure and political protocols (Lauer 2007b). Functioning in more than one conceptual scheme has been a successful tactic of assimilation and eventual dismissal of a foreign military presence. There is nothing very extraordinary to Ghanaian or Nigerian cultures in this bifocal ability to succeed by absorption of apparently conflicting conceptual schemes—including contrary attitudes towards keeping appointments and being punctilious in the uses of time. This bifocal ability defeats any attempt to state in Ghana or Nigeria where 'traditional' thought leaves off and 'modernity' begins. Celebrated men of letters who have mastered a creative and inspiring composition of both include Anthony Kwame Appiah (1992), Odera Oruka (1990), Kwasi Wiredu (1980), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981) and a host of others.

These are all remarkable individuals; each is a model of legendary cosmopolitanism reflecting literary ingenuity and heroism. But in principle there seems no reason to suppose that, if given the opportunity, the majority of people show a reluctance to adapt to dramatic changes in their social and material circumstances, and are thereby reflecting a metaphysical rigidity or cognitive insularity peculiar to African cultures. It is mistaken to attribute

someone's resisting a change to some deep-seated conceptual orientation. A person's reluctance or readiness to embrace technological change will depend not upon her metaphysical beliefs but upon the favourableness and feasibility of the change, as well as the flexibility of her position in the prevailing social structure. For some people, some changes are just not as helpful as they might seem to others unfamiliar with their circumstances. A famous example is that of initiating a water pump smack in the centre of a village, thereby disrupting the opportunities for socially condoned courtship (Stamp 1989). For the young women whose job it is to collect water, the pump is no match for the advantage of making mandatory lengthy treks away from the village to fetch water daily. In general, it is unclear how the metaphysics of an intellectual heritage can determine whether or not an individual will be disposed to accept a technological change wholesale. Acceptance of a new practice or technology will depend upon the particular circumstances and consequences of the change in each specific case.

Concerning the future acceptance of a new phenomenology of time best suited for a new economic order: we may conclude that many aspects of temporal experience are likely to be accessible to most adults regardless of cultural background or national identity, once they set about considering these aspects of immediate experience to the exclusion of everything else. There is no basis for regarding any one of these perspectives as an advance over any other, unless the advantages of contrasting concepts of time are weighed up within a broader evaluation of industrialization and technology transfer, conducted from the point of view of the individuals newly inviting these innovations. It seems patently obvious that there is really no other way to analyse productively the human value of economic change.

In this section it has been established that, in principle, culture-participants regardless of origin are quite capable of adopting new skills to accommodate the pressures imposed by modern technology, or its absence, and rapidly changing economic conditions through the processes and international dynamics now called globalisation. In the next and final section (§5), I will review the obstructions to economic development that arise in part from non-Africans' failure to grasp post-colonial norms in the uses of time as maximally rational responses to local and global conditions. Conventions in the management of time in contemporary Africa are inseparable components of a social structure that is well suited and long established in dealing with severely debilitating material circumstances, hegemony, and outwardly directed economic planning.

## §5. The geo-political context of African philosophical activity

It is always suspect to advance the thesis that a given discourse is not really about what it seems to be about, or that a statement means something quite different from what it appears to mean. On the other hand, it is a truism that professional academics work at justifying the status quo, at least as often as they articulate motivations for advocating progressive social change (Gramsci 1977). Through an international collaboration of symposia, such as the kind described at the outset of this paper, philosophers may collectively refine an intercultural construct called an ‘African’ concept of time for the purpose of building a theory that conveniently diffuses, subdues and redirects the awkward responses of outrage and derision elicited by revelation of the facts about global development partnerships, policies and their debilitating effects. A further step towards redress might be taken by staging a new set of philosophical questions for a third intercultural symposium—not about African concepts of time, but about its management in the context of today’s international development politics. Among such questions might be:

- Who interprets the needs of a nation?
- Who is at liberty to dictate the pace and direction of economic development or to contest the local desirability or feasibility of a policy?
- Whose interpretation of phenomena counts as authoritative?
- Whose point of view sets the norm for what counts as rational and decisive?

Answers to the questions above are inseparable from concerns about how to reinforce the neo-colonial recuperation process. It is anachronistic to point out that under the current terms of international aid and trade, the immediate experience of the African most dramatically affected by development projects is not central - neither is the African’s health, nor his priorities, nor her educational advance, nor his comfort, her ambitions nor his talents. Again, it is anachronistic to comment that whatever way international development problems may be defined or understood theoretically, in practice their solutions surely involve restructuring the balance of power in relations that were initially established cross culturally at the initiative of non-Africans through military protocols. Under current conditions that sustain egregious cross-cultural economic disparity, philosophical investigation of the African’s experience of *time* might also be interpreted as an artifice for deflecting attention from the egregious need

to relocate the voice of authority and executive power over the determination of Africa's future economic reforms within the cultures of Africa themselves. Reflecting and deliberating on the a-historical implications of contrasting beliefs about time is a dim spotlight for illuminating the residual tensions and conflicted legacy inherent in today's politics of expertise and terms of technological transfer. The significance for Africans of controlling the seat of causal efficacy in African economies is not merely rhetorical.

If we want to make sense of positing a link between time as a cultural construction and its alleged effects upon development progress or regression, we need to acknowledge that explicit talk about time may be a vehicle of indirection or a neutral medium for amplifying and contesting the inherent tension in the international relations and policies generic to the so-called development process in its historical setting and current dynamic. Dysfunctions are standardly regarded as symptomatic of a fundamental resistance or cognitive incapacity, or as symptoms of a conceptual conflict between worldviews. Instead, apparent dysfunctions might be analysed for their covert practical utility. The patterns of delay, intractable setbacks and indecisions, the redistribution of capital wealth under the cloak of corruption and ignominy (Ekeh 2012 [1975]), the indeterminacy of accountability and theatrics of administrative ineptitude may all function collectively to defeat foreign investors' sustained control over the means of production and investment decisions affecting African social and political economics.

We have observed that cross-cultural misunderstanding does impede substantive progress in development plans across Africa. But it is less readily conceded that shortfalls in adaptation to technological change often reside with the misinterpretation by foreign experts, both of development problems and their solutions. An important result of this critique into cross cultural misunderstanding is to highlight the mundane fact that the effectiveness of a solution strategy to a development setback varies radically with the circumstances. Further, the comprehensive impact of an economic remedy is likely to be apparent only in its immediate surroundings, or only to those with knowledge of the political history peculiar to that region. More generally, the criteria for determining what counts as a maximally rational choice may be inaccessible across vast divides of cultural history and political economics (MacIntyre 1988). Consequently, some of the models proposed by development experts to achieve optimal efficiency are misapplied when relying univocally on concepts of time management that suit conditions in G-8 countries.

A familiar example of misapplication occurs in development economics when standard game theory models are adopted to capture the syntax of rational decision-making. Some philosophers over-generalise the parallel between having an intention and formulating an activity plan as a linear set of expectations (see e.g. Bratman 1981; Lauer 2013, 20). The rationality of engaging in extensive and detailed sequential plans is materially and circumstantially dependent, since it presupposes confidence that the desired results are likely to emerge. But this expectation is reasonable only if the agent has experienced a substantial degree of success in a relatively predictable, low risk environment. If facilities and financial resources are quite volatile, then a rational agent will abstain from forming long-term predictions, sacrifices, and investments involving protracted delay of returns. The obstacles to proceeding with a long-term project in an insecure and impoverished setting are not deep or conceptual; they are elementary and practical, problems to which any rational agent will respond by suppressing expectations and adopting provisional backup plans instead of long term goals.

Time management has always had a very forthright and practical utility for Africans both in village court proceedings and in central city boardrooms. In deliberations that enhance African economic development, time management will continue to function quite pronouncedly, either implicitly or explicitly, in the business of bracketing and sidelining hegemony, restaging the balance of power between international partners in capital ventures, repositioning the locus of authority over decision making, controlling the extraction of resources, and directing technology transfers that remain intrinsic to economic transformation in Africa.

## **Conclusion**

What began as a critique of a long-standing controversy about contemporary African thought concerning the nature of time has concluded in a reflection on contemporary African practices concerning the management of time. This critique has provided both empirical and logical evidence for suspecting that a politics of philosophical indirection drives the enduring debate about contrasting ‘African’ with ‘Western’ concepts of time which has persisted for nearly five decades, since notorious proposals of this kind were first published by John S. Mbiti in 1969.

Contemporary phenomenologists and social philosophers continue to explore the corollaries that African beliefs about time are culturally determined and that these beliefs are causally responsible for shortfalls in the way Africans go about enacting and executing economic policy. It was shown that these two hypotheses when taken literally are not sustainable: the causal hypothesis breaks down because it is not possible to isolate and identify which propositional beliefs are the ones responsible for affecting an agent's economic conditions. And although it is a truism that different ways of describing time vary across language communities, the stronger claim that such varied notions of time are radically incommensurable between cultures was shown to be self-refuting. Indeed if that claim were strictly true, we should not be able to understand it. On a less extreme reading, the proposal that Africans have difficulty grasping and evaluating alternative notions of time was shown to be unconvincing.

Yet such claims continue to circulate in philosophical forums. It was suggested in consequence that cross cultural shortfalls in understanding the antecedent conditions for successful development do exist, but they belong rather on the side of non-Africans who fail to conceptualise the practical and material demands that compel rational strategies of time management in favour of risk avoidance, among other benefits, in situations of uncertainty and scarcity. A variety of historically specific considerations account for anomalies of economic practice in a neo-colonial environment as well: suppression or diversion of plans may function to resist external seizure of resources, both human and natural, to redistribute available capital throughout the population, or to sustain a minimum of frustration and deprivation in situations of extreme scarcity and infrastructural inadequacy. These strategies remain camouflaged from foreign expertise because they are essentially adversarial to transnational business interests (Lauer 2007b). Yet it is uncontroversial to point out that a change in priorities driven by a shift in the source of authoritative policy analysis would serve as a first step for African national and regional economies to flourish.

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