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# A Critique of of John Mbiti's Understanding of the African Concept of Time

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John Mbiti has become well known over the last twenty years as one of the major black African theologians. His examination and understanding of his own tribe (the Akamba of Kenya) have been greatly utilized in his descriptive analyses of general African thought patterns and philosophical outlooks. His articulate and voluminous writings have made him as well known as any other African theologian alive today.

In many respects he is a pioneer, one of the first to attempt to systematize and analyze, from an insider's perspective, the African understanding of the world in which we live and how that understanding affects the Africans' view of Christianity. His works stand as both an encouragement and a challenge to all who are interested in the Church in Africa. He is an encouragement in paving the way for greater understanding of the African perspective on religion and the resulting insights in contextualization that come from his analyses. He is a challenge to all of us who have a desire to understand the African mindset with a view to developing a relevant theological approach for this continent. In this brief article, we will seek to analyze Mbiti's understanding of what he considers to be the key concept for understanding the religious and philosophical perspective of the African, the concept of time.<sup>1</sup> This evaluation will be divided into three major sections beginning with a look at Mbiti's understanding of the African View of Time. This will be followed with an evaluation of Mbiti's analysis and a discussion of the implications of his view for contextualization.

## **Mbiti's Understanding of the African View of Time**

As we present Mbiti's analysis, we must keep in mind that the sort of analysis (systematic, analytical, and categorical) to which Westerners would like to submit the concept being studied is unknown in traditional Africa. There are collections of oral myths, there are linguistic indicators available for our scrutiny, but there are not systematic treatises dealing with the philosophical or theological understandings or implications of the rather abstract term "time" available within traditional Africa. Indeed, their concrete orientation does not lead us to expect anything of that nature, and it does not appear likely that a fully traditional African would even desire such an analysis. In that sense, we must recognize the aspect of Mbiti's role, which is that of an African (albeit a

Western-trained one) presenting a Western analysis of an African concept.

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

In Mbiti's doctoral dissertation, he states that the foundation for seeing the Akamba's view of time is to recognize that time is conceived of as two-dimensional "with a long 'past,' and a dynamic 'present.' The 'future' as we know it in the linear conception of time is virtually non-existent in Akamba thinking."<sup>2</sup> He later generalized this to be true of the thinking of all of traditional Africa:

According to traditional concepts, time is a two dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. The linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically absent because 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 once an event has taken place, it is no longer in the future but in the present and the past. Actual time is therefore what is present and what is past. It moves 'backward' rather than 'forward': and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place.<sup>3</sup>

This understanding of time, for the African, undergirds his whole concept of himself, his tribe, and the universe in general, according to Mbiti. If this is true, then it is imperative that we firmly understand this concept of time, and, furthermore, that we be able to relate the Gospel with adequate terminology and sensitivity to be understood by those who operate in the frame work of such a view.

Mbiti's doctoral dissertation proposes Kikamba names for the two dimensions of time: *tene* and *mituki*. *Tene* covers the far or remote past, and *mituki* the immediate past to the near future (there being no concept of the remote future, according to Mbiti). In a later work, he adopted the Swahili terms *samani* and *sasa* as their respective equivalents. Mbiti maintains that such a categorization is justified by an analysis of verb tenses available in the languages of the tribes he has studied. To illustrate, he lists nine tenses commonly used (with *kikamba* and *Kikuyu*, both of Kenya, providing the examples) to illustrate the distinction between *samani* and *sasa*. He further

explains them as follows:

*Sasa* has the sense of immediacy, nearness, and 'now-ness'; and is the period of immediate concern for the people, since that is 'where' or 'when' they exist. . . . Events (which compose time) in the *sasa* dimension must be either about to occur, or in the process in realization, or recently experienced. *sasa* is the most meaningful period for the individual, because he has a personal recollection of the events of phenomena of this period, or he has a [personal recollection of the events of phenomena of this period, or he is about to experience them. . . . *sasa* is not mathematically or numerically constant. The older a person is, the longer is his *sasa* period. The community also has its own *sasa*, which is greater than that of the individual. But for both the community and the individual, the most vivid moment is the *now* period. . . . *Sasa* is in itself a complete or full time dimension, with its short future, a dynamic present, and an experienced past. We might call it the Micro-Time (Little Time). The Micro-Time is meaningful to the individual or the community only through their participating in it or experiencing it.

*Zamani* is not limited to what in English is called the past. It also has its own 'past,' 'present' and 'future,' but on a wider scale. We might call it the Macro-Time (Big Time). *Zamani* overlaps with *sasa* and the two are not separable. *sasa* feeds or disappears into *zamani*. But before events become incorporated into *zamani*, they have to become realized or actualized within the *sasa* dimension. When this has taken place, then the events 'move' backwards from which nothing can go. *Zamani* is the graveyard of time, the period of termination, the dimension in which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after nor before. <sup>4</sup>

He further buttresses his understandings by an analysis of time reckoning among the tribes he has studied. He relates:

When Africans reckon time, it is for a concrete and specific purpose, in connection with events but not just for the sake of mathematics. Since time is a composition of events, people cannot and do not reckon it in vacuum. Numerical calendars, with one or two possible exceptions, do not exist in African traditional societies as far as I know. <sup>5</sup>

That the traditional African expresses time in concrete terms comes as a surprise. The modern technical definition of a second as "9,192,631,770 periods of the unperturbed microwave transmission between the two hyperfine levels of the ground state of Cs <sup>133</sup>" <sup>6</sup> shows the Western reliance on abstract

conceptualizations, and is far too removed from perceptual reality to be of use to the traditional African. His world is oriented to observable events, and even the concept of "definition" as we know it may be foreign to his framework.

As we understand it, Mbiti's view of the African understanding of time may in one sense be likened to a man standing in a river and facing downstream. The current may be thought of as the flow of time, with the view of the man in the river including primarily that which is peripherally around him and secondarily on that which has already gone past him (downstream). *Sasa* time is that which directly around the wader, *zamani* that which has already passed him by. The future is only what can be seen in peripheral vision, and so the 'upstream' time holds little importance in the perceptions of the man in the water. It will pass when and how it passes, and then it will become of consequence to him. Only what is currently passing or has already passed is of significance, for it has become part of his concrete reality and is therefore important. As Mbiti relates, "History moves 'backward' from the now moment to that period beyond which nothing can go,"<sup>7</sup> "that period" being the horizon in the distance. The cycles of nature (seasons, years, hours of the day, etc.) may be thought of as debris floating along on a recurring basis; not always exactly the same, but always comfortingly familiar. Rather than the man moving into the future by going upstream, he lets the future come to him by remaining stationary. Since he knows it will reach him eventually, there is no need to focus on it, and he cannot speed its advance (which does not mean the African is fatalistic, only not overtly mindful of the future).

Within this same illustrative framework, the Western concept may be seen as a man *swimming* upstream. Time is not viewed as in control of the swimmer, for he advances himself against it. In fact, it is more static than dynamic, and the focus is more on what dangers and events lie ahead than on what has been already passed. The Westerner moves *through* time (note that the Western science fiction concept of a time-traveller is based on a more static view of time through which the traveller can move, and which has no equivalent that we are aware of in African traditional thought) while time moves by the African.

It is obvious that if Mbiti's view is correct, then there will be some significant issues of contextualization that must be carefully evaluated if we desire to present the Gospel in the African context in a relevant fashion. The most obvious of these concerns would be that of eschatology; would a distant future home in heaven or a distant future judgment of life's actions hold the traditional African's attention in the same way that it does in the West? Would a grand expose' on the second advent of our Lord and the millennial kingdom motivate him in the same way that it does one in the West? In order to properly consider these and related questions, we must evaluate Mbiti's understanding of the traditional African mindset. Our evaluation will be presented categorically with four areas of concern taken under consideration.

#### Evaluation of Mbiti's Views

##### Mbiti's Personal Training

It is highly evident from both Mbiti's presentations and his educational background (he took his Ph.D. in New Testament at Cambridge) that he thoroughly understands Western analytical thought processes. His whole conception of African thought is presented in Western categories which follow analytical reasoning. His research in the literature on African traditional religions is massive, but the vast majority of that research was Western produced. At the same time Mbiti is African born and raised. Thus, his cultural roots are African while his academic training is Western, and he is as qualified as anyone to attempt to synthesize from his own understanding a Western analysis of African thought. Unfortunately, the training that qualifies him to deal with Western analysis simultaneously tends to remove him from the traditional patterns. The tension he himself faces in trying to interface between the two systems is evident. For instance, while repeatedly reminding us that Africans are holistic and tend not to categorize, he proceeds to categorize in order to lay out the thought in Western patterns. Therein is both a strength and a weakness. The strength is that Mbiti's analysis does enable Westerners to get a glimpse at the inside of an African thought pattern. The weakness is that the African thought pattern being so analyzed is wrenched out of its natural setting and is submitted to a dissection and disassembling into categories foreign to it and for which it was not intended, so that it can be understood by people utilizing a different thought process than it represents. In addition to this, the understanding as presented is a *Western* perception of *African* thought, and not an African perception of itself. Is it possible to submit the African concept of time to such categorical analysis? Is it possible for a Western analysis of African thought to catch the heart of that thought, or only the Western view of it?

We do not desire to go the route of some who might contend that any Western analysis of a non-Western thought pattern must by nature be superficial (or any other form of a non-absolute perspective), but we do desire to raise the question of appropriateness of the analytical technique in being fully and properly able to grasp the concept being analyzed. Further research must be done before a decision can be made as to the appropriateness of Mbiti's analysis here, but the question of that appropriateness must be raised.

#### **Terminology and Categorization**

In regard to terminology, Mbiti has labelled the African concept of time as "two dimensional." We question his understanding of the term and implications of it. From our understanding of his analysis, it should be seen that Africans have more of a linear concept of time (one-dimensional) than a two-dimensional one (which would have to be called a planar concept). The primary difference between the African and the Western conceptions appears to be not in the number of dimensions but in the direction and focus of the attention. Both may be viewed as punctilinear, since they both focus on one point in the time continuum and extend from that point. For the African, that focal point is the present, and the direction of the extension is the past. For the Westerner, the focus may be seen as some point in the future, with the extensions going both to the present moment (though not necessarily beyond it into the past) and towards a more distant future. From

our understanding, they are not to be viewed as exact mirror images (as Mbiti presents them) though they do resemble each other. The primary differences are that their focus is in opposite directions and that they start at different points.

In regard to categorization, Mbiti's terms *sasa* and *zamani* appear to be more of a strained attempt to develop a case for "two dimensional" time than a true understanding of the categories. As we view them, they are more artificially impressed categories which help show the feasibility of an analytical system than categories that a traditional African would give. Such a splitting of time into two dimensions (really two directions within one dimension) runs counter to the unity of all things in traditional African thought, and is thus open to criticism. These categories are comfortable to Westerners, but are they agreeable to a traditional African? In addition, to break time into these two categories does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of having a concept of the future. As a general rule, we would express a reticence to accept the artificially neat categories of concepts that were not developed with such categorization in mind, and thus are reluctant to concur with Mbiti's analysis. We agree that these categories do give insight into the traditional African conceptualization of time, but to define the categories as precisely as Mbiti does is to overstate the case for their existence in the traditional mind.

#### Generalizations

Mbiti's presentation may hold very closely to the Akamba concept of time, but it seems somehow overly convenient for him that this system is to be seen as true for all of Africa. With some 1,000 languages spoken on the continent, the full analysis that would enable us to draw a continental conclusion can hardly be considered finished. Realistically speaking, the scope of Mbiti's research, while prodigious for an individual, does not serve to enable him to speak in the definitive way he has a tendency to do. We are willing to accept his concepts for the Akamba and the Kikuyu, but not as willing to consider that these tribes in Kenya form the definitive base for all African tribal thought. Byang Kato takes Mbiti to task in this regard, and utilizes the testimony of scholars from other tribes in Africa (two of whom have worked closely with Mbiti in Uganda) to deny Mbiti's assumptions that the Akamba concepts are universal.<sup>8</sup> In that sense, we consider Mbiti to have generalized far beyond what the scope of his research would allow. (We must confess, however, that he has done far more research in this than we have, so our conclusions might be more readily questioned than his.) Research of a comparable base has been done by other scholars, with different conclusions on the key concepts being reached. Placide Temples, followed by Janheinz Jahn, for example, posited NTU, or 'vital force,' as the key to understanding the African mind so there obviously remains much research to be done.

#### Analytical Methodology

##### Linguistic Analysis

Linguistically Mbiti has confined himself to only one category, that of verb tense analysis (and this primarily in Kikamba and Kikuyu). We question whether or not it might be appropriate to examine other available evidence that might indicate an awareness of the future. For instance, an analysis of nouns or adjectives which indicate a future conception would be helpful (Mbiti makes it sound as if there are none). Are there words for ideas such as "future," "eternal," "tomorrow," "next year," etc? It should be noted here that in his book, *Concepts of God in Africa* he lists names for God that display His eternity; "The Everlasting one of the Forest," "The Eternal One," "He of Many Suns, the Eternal One."<sup>10</sup> In spite of the fact that he demonstrates that the tribal African has a concept of an eternal God, he denies that they have a concept of the future, an obvious contradiction.

In terms of a more general linguistic analysis, are there proverbs that relate future consequences for present actions? Kato cites one of the Jaba, "When you die your grave will burn with fire if you are naughty now."<sup>11</sup> Such examples demonstrate that Mbiti has too narrowly restricted his linguistic analysis, and that his arguments must be thoroughly reworked and more carefully undergirded if they are to be seen as acceptable.

### Myth Analysis

We question Mbiti's assertion that because myths concerning the end of the world are not generally found in traditional African lore that there is no solid conception of the future. The absence of such myths might be seen as necessary for the absence of a conception of the future, but cannot be seen as sufficient for such conclusions. In addition, Mbiti presumptuously covers a vast amount of territory in relating "there are innumerable myths about *zamani*, but no myths about any end of the world[emphasis mine]."<sup>12</sup> Has he had access to all African myths? He does cite one possible example of a myth of the end of the world (from the Sonjo do not let it guide their lives.<sup>13</sup> Must they let the future guide them before we can say that they have a definite concept of it? In addition, the concept under consideration is not *only* the end of the world, but it is time as it relates to the future in general. This is in our opinion the weakest area of Mbiti's analysis. While we agree that there is a vast preponderance of myth relating to the past, and that this does help demonstrate a general orientation in that direction, we would not agree that this eliminates the possibility of the African having a solid concept of the future at all. Indeed, even one myth of the future would be enough to show that a conception of it does exist (for example, the Sonjo myth Mbiti mentions).

### Planning: The African Anticipation of the Future

Byang Kato points out very appropriately in his analysis of Mbiti's position the fact that the African lives a life which demonstrates an awareness of the future.<sup>14</sup> Almost without exception every traditional African male eagerly anticipated his initiation to manhood with a definite future outlook. There is of necessity definite "financial" planning on the part of the boy's family in order to insure that he will be able to afford the bride-price necessary for



marriage and full tribal responsibilities. The fact that children are such prized possessions because they secure the future continuation of the family line also indicates a future awareness. None of these would be stressed to the extent that they are if there were in reality no concept of the future. In a very real sense, the African must anticipate the future in order to become a meaningful part of the past.

It should also be noted that one very prominent factor in the vast majority of the African independent churches today is a heavy apocalyptic emphasis. Such an emphasis, while looking to an immediate future return of Christ, would strongly suggest a definite future orientation. More research should be done in this area, as the independent churches by nature provide us with the best case studies for understanding African perceptions of Christianity.

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

In summary, we have recognized as fact that the traditional African has an understanding of time that differs from ours in the West. We may further conclude that his focus is basically in the opposite direction of ours (though it should not be conceived of as a mirror image of ours.) To say that his concept of time is that of history flowing backwards and to say that this is true of all of traditional Africa is to overgeneralize the case. To say that time is *the* key for understanding the traditional African is to overstate it. We disagree that the African has at best a vague and ill-defined focus on the future. We do not maintain that the African concept of the future is as sharply defined as the Western one, but hold it to be more sharply focused than Mbiti suggests. It is important for us to recognize the differences in perspective in order that we may more properly contextualize the Gospel for the traditional African, a question to which we now turn our attention.

#### **Implications for Contextualization**

At the outset of any discussion of contextualization in relation to Africa, it must be recognized that more and more of Africa is undergoing a process of Westernization (usually under the name of "development" or "modernization"). Each year there are fewer and fewer of what we might call purely traditional (or tribal) Africans. The impact of the West, whether in education, industrialization or urbanization has been so great that it is very difficult to assess in a general sense across the continent. Some tribes have been radically altered, a few remain virtually unaffected. Due to the difficulty of

objective continental assessment of the changes, the following remarks will be limited to the contextualization issues for the purely tribal mindset (in the most general sense). We recognize that such a mindset may very well be no more than a fictional entity, but feel that this analysis will still be useful in that it can provide a foundation for similar discussions in the more complex urbanized or educated African scene. Any discussion that attempts to meet the needs of the modern African can neither neglect the complexities that modernization has introduced today nor ignore the reality of the fact that the traditional mindset forms the base for much of modern African thought and society. The traditional provides the foundation for modern issues.

In addition, we must realize that in our discussion of these issues there are two levels to be considered. The deeper level is the dynamic of the Holy Spirit, who is able to work even through our worst cultural blunders. While we desire to be as relevant and theologically precise as possible, we acknowledge that only the Spirit can draw people to true conversion to Christ. He can use our worst mistakes as easily as our best methods, and we cannot lose sight of His presence and ministry in both believers and to unbelievers in any discussion of our method.

Even though the Spirit can use the worst methods, typically He does give us responsibility and accountability for going past these to better and more relevant approaches. He has chosen to bless proper methodology (and heart) more often in the past than shoddiness, but good methods are not to be mistaken for the most important ingredient to success in ministry. It is the development of these methods with which the following discussion is concerned, but we desire to constantly remember that the presence of the Spirit is essential to success in contextualization, and that proper sociological/anthropological considerations in-and-of themselves do not guarantee genuine results.

Also, having noted Mbiti's difficulties with overgeneralizations, we find ourselves compelled to generalize for the sake of brevity in dealing with the issues involved. We hope that the generalizations presented will be recognized as fairly representative of the traditional African, but that they will not be understood to apply equally across the board in each and every African tribal context.

#### **Some Issues in Evangelism**

Traditional Western techniques of evangelism presuppose a strong concern for the future in their emphasis on our eternal destiny. Whether the motivation is to avoid Hell or to get to Heaven, the focus is on some time unknown to the respondent (his judgment before God). The stress is on a future punishment of reward given for present acts. How would this come across to the traditional African?

First, the African looks to the past in order to discern his way into the future. The Gospel, in his mindset, must link past to the future (or future to the past) to have full relevancy. A message that does not give the traditional African a linkage to his past as a key to future success (at the judgment) is likely to be misunderstood or ignored. In addition, it may be requiring of him a type of wrenching from his accustomed mindset that the Gospel itself does not

demand. We acknowledge that the Gospel itself is the same in all cultures, and will always demand a certain amount of wrenching, but reiterate that the particular packaging and baggage into which we put it must be as relevant to the culture into which it is being placed as possible. To have the best possibility for effective use by the Spirit our presentation must show the traditional African how it offers him a more solid link with his past, and how it will enable him in his eternal life in the future to most effectively participate in the lives of his descendents (by properly teaching them so that they will join him in their eternal home when their time comes.) For example, the concept of God's "plan for our life" as related in the *Four Spiritual Laws* tract produced by Life Ministry may not have meaning to the traditional African if related in the purely futuristic concept of the West. The African would have to see how such a plan encompasses past, present, and future, lest he take on a veneer of Christianity and use it to cover a heart shrouded in syncretistic thinking (seen in many independent churches).

Second, the traditional African is generally not looking for an escape from the problems or circumstances surrounding him. (But note the opposite for many modern Africans.) He is more often vitally linked and fulfilled in his circumstances and tribal customs than the Westerner in his situation and the idea of a future escape may even be seen as a refusal to accept full responsibility in the here and now (as well as with past traditions.) In that sense, the Gospel should not be offered as a carrot on a stick that entices him to escape present circumstances and relationships, but rather as God's plan that will enable him to most fully participate in his heritage and cultural responsibilities, and thereby maintain his links with the past.

Third, to the traditional African the idea of a future Heaven or Hell based on a present decision to accept Christ may not be as motivating as it is in the West. We should not neglect the truths of Heaven and Hell, but neither should we use them in the same way that we do in the west. As one alternative, we might more strongly stress the relational aspects of being a child of the tribe of God (one of which is an eternal destiny with Him) or the consequences of being excluded from that tribe (eternal destiny separated from Him). This would be more readily grasped by a mindset that is focused on relationships and which is not as concerned with future consequences as present (or past) realities. The exact methodology of evangelism would depend on the particular tribal setting, but this general concept could be seen as a starting point in discerning the most appropriate method.

Fourth, the African concept of history and tradition would tend to make the traditional African more able to grasp the concepts of the Jewish traditions (in the Old Testament) and to see how readily Jesus fit into those patterns. In that regard, it may be more advisable to start the study of the New Testament in the book of Hebrews so that the African can see how Jesus was the fulfillment of the traditions of His own tribe (the Jews). John, so popular in the West as a beginning book in the New Testament, might be more confusing to the traditional African because of its more typically Greek philosophical thought patterns. This is not to imply that we should not use the book of John, but rather that we might be better advised to start with a book that ties into the tradition of the Bible to which the African can relate. Matthew, to cite another example, might be a better Gospel account with which to begin than

the other Synoptics or John.

In Summary, our evangelism should be less future oriented, less escapist, and more relationship and tradition centered. This may not be an easy task, but the work will possibly be rewarded by people coming to Christ with a clearer and more relevant understanding of the Gospel. That is what contextualization is all about.

#### Some Issues in Church Management

Modern church growth management in the West maintains that proper planning and future focus are integral to continued growth. The planning and organizational approaches that have been developed to date are almost entirely future directed and heavily change oriented, both of which run counter to the traditional mindset. (Obviously the urban, educated mindset of many parts of Africa today would be more comfortable with these emphases). It might be feasible in utilizing church growth and management in traditional settings to focus in on ways to get the community as a whole involved regardless of the time constraints. Goals such as a "10% increase per year" would not have as much meaning as a goal to "reach our tribe (or clan or family) for Christ before the next generation" might. This is one area which needs far more thought, especially with the continued importation of "baptized" American business management techniques in the African scene. American techniques may be useful for African business ventures, but are they right for even the modern African church, let alone the traditional?

#### Some Issues in Eschatology

One of Mbiti's most critical complaints of the African Inland Mission in Kenya was their literalistic view of eschatology.<sup>15</sup> He finds them all too wanting, yet he himself so symbolizes the teachings of the New Testament as to remove any possibility of literal fulfillment (or even of correspondence to reality).<sup>16</sup> In spite of our disagreements with such a truncated eschatology, we do agree that the considerations of teaching eschatological issues in a culture with far less future emphasis than ours must be addressed.

At the outset, we must understand that a biblical truth is valid and true no matter what a culture may hold in regard to it. As such, it must be taught. Contextualization comes not in changing the truth itself, but in the manner and approach we have in conveying that truth to the receptor culture. As biblical truth, eschatology must be taught, even if it means introducing a radical change or shift in the culture as a result. We do no favor to anyone by withholding truth from them, but we also do no favor to them if we package biblical truth in cultural baggage not necessary to that truth which may distort it in the receptor's mind. The balance here is to find a culturally sensitive approach which will allow traditional Africans to come to grips with eschatological issues in their own fashion.

We agree with Mbiti in general that the African focus on the future is of a far shorter outlook that we have in the West. Actual planning for events beyond the next generation is often not done. The result of this perspective is to foreshorten future events and thus put them into the

prospect of the immediate future. The apocalyptic flavor of the independent churches mentioned previously shows how such a foreshortening can affect African Theology. In some respects the African independent church often faces the same problems as the Thessalonian church, in which people allowed their anticipation of Christ's return to overshadow the necessity of daily living a life pleasing to Him. Paul specifically addresses some of the associated issues in his letters to the Thessalonian church, and thus an introduction to eschatological issues through 1 and 2 Thessalonians might help to circumvent some of the apocalyptic abuses of the African church. In addition, there might be special emphasis given to the implications of Christ's return in regard to community and ancestral issues. For instance, how does His return affect the traditional African's view of looking to the ancestors for guidance and advice as intermediaries in the spirit realm? The traditional African in particular would need help in getting the biblical perspective on how the reality of possibly being part of the terminal generation before Christ's return should affect his life, his worship, his relationships, and his livelihood. He needs to understand exactly what Christ will hold him accountable for at His advent, and how that should affect his day to-day living. He must also be guided from developing an overly literal outlook on eschatological passages (his concrete orientation leading him naturally in that direction) as well as an overly symbolic one (from his traditional religion, which is full of symbol). It is obvious that we need balance as much as he does, and the first step is to establish a proper biblical perspective in *our own* thought process before we attempt to pass it on to others. Obviously much more could be written on this (Mbiti's whole dissertation addresses this one concern), but space demands that we only mention some of the issues and suggest a few ways to develop solutions for them.

#### Conclusion

Unfortunately, space considerations do not allow a full consideration of all of the relevant concerns of contextualizing biblical truth in light of the African concept of time. This article is intended only as a basic introduction to the major issues and questions involved, and leaves the bulk of work on the actual process of contextualization yet to be done. The traditional African concept of time will possibly have effects on our methodology in teaching, in evangelism, in church growth and in practical living, and this analysis has yet to take into account the fact of over 100 years of interaction between Africa and the West. It should be obvious that the task is incredibly complex, and remind us ever anew of the need for the guidance and wisdom of the Spirit in directing our steps. Perhaps the danger of doing nothing for fear of making a mistake is the greatest of all dangers, and we must avoid the 'paralysis of analysis' inherent in overexamination of issues. While we do desire to be as usable as possible in our initial contact, we must remember that doing something and learning from the inevitable mistakes made is far better than trying to analyze too much and doing nothing as a result. Our hope is that this study will provide a foundation upon which to act and more quickly learn how to properly evaluate the African concept of time and its implications for contextualization of the Gospel in the African context.

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Notes

- <sup>1</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*(Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969), pp. 15–28.
- <sup>2</sup> John Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concept*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 24.
- <sup>3</sup> Mbiti, *Religion*, p. 17.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- <sup>6</sup> Charles W. Misner, Kip S. Thorne, and John Archibald Wheeler, *Gravitation* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1970), p. 28.
- <sup>7</sup> Mbiti, *Eschatology*, p. 28.
- <sup>8</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*(Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), pp. 61–62.
- <sup>9</sup> As pointed out by David J. Hesselgrave in *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 150. Janheinz Jahn's original proposal can be found in chapter 4 of *Muntu: An outline of the New African Cultures*, trans. Majorie Greene (New York: Grove, 1961).
- <sup>10</sup> John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*(New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), pp. 27–28.
- <sup>11</sup> Kato, p. 62.
- <sup>12</sup> Mbiti, *Religions*, p. 24.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24, n.1.
- <sup>14</sup> Kato, pp. 60–61.
- <sup>15</sup> Mbiti, *Eschatology*, pp. 51–61.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32–50.