

A COMPARISON OF THE WESTERN AND AFRICAN CONCEPTS OF TIME

From a web page by Bert Hamminga

To Westerners, time is a set of stripes drawn on the tarmac that is on the road on which they drive at exactly constant speed, so they think they know exactly when they will cross these stripes. Westerners feel sure the road is straight, regular, and goes on forever. Unlike the Africans, their journey stops when they die, but dying soon is not a real possibility to most of them. European cultural superstition is that time runs regularly, and the future points in time come near in the same regular speed as past points in time withdraw. For westerners, the focus is on the now – and forwards towards what is anticipated to come – the future. For Africans, time flows from the present back into the past

Africans have no such unshakeable belief in the future. Constant speed over regular tarmac might be possible, but the car might as well break down, floods could take the road, and a relative might be met. Africans do not speculate about the future there are too many uncertainties. The chance of it being what we expect is considered low. Africans traditionally rely on emotional marks of time, like when you were born, when you married, when you had your first child, when there was a war. But as far as the future is concerned these marks are still to be made, and the African typically considers his or her influence on that as small. Africans have no concept of historical progress: in every life of every person the same happens. The past is a chain of events, places that are marked in memory.

For the Westerner, there is past, present and future. For the African, Zamani is the ordered sequence of the events that took place in the life of the world. Sasa is what is now, what are the needs now, and what to do now. Time and reality end now, the future is unreal. There is no future yet. It still is to be made by the interaction of all forces in the world. Once made, it belongs to zamani.

For Westerners, a mechanical and numerical process requiring a calibrated and uniform standard of measurement. Years and months are based on natural phenomena – but these weren't precise. There was a progression from Sundials and hourglasses to digital clocks and milliseconds. But Because "Time is money" – business demands time must flow at a constant speed for everyone. Trains have to run on time and all of life is ordered around schedules and time. In reality, we experience a sense that time moves for us personally at different speeds, depending upon our activity and emotional state.

Africans don't care about preciseness or uniformity. Does the rain come always at the same time? Of course not. Does it come at the same time for all tribes? Certainly not. Why be more precise than the rain? African time is connected to nature, just as Western time, but the natural processes and events chosen to relate to are the ones emotionally relevant to African life. But not as a historical process. The African interpretation of time starts thus: events occur in some order: there is "before" and there is "after". In African languages, there is a number of tenses that indicate roughly "how much" before, and how much after. Time is the oral narrative of the past.

Boredom, hurry and stress are good things to start from in explaining African time to Westerners. We have to compare the Western linear dead physical time line (with "past", "future" and a perfectly regularly moving "now") with the African "living time." (Sasa) "Count down" and "train" highlight that the Westerner has to "fit" his activities in a dead mathematical time framework, and if he does not succeed, he will end up with shortage or surplus of "time". "Ambush" and "Rain" both involve a waiting upon nature. The African "non-clock" types of waiting or hurrying do not involve internal conflicts causing stress.

Waiting:

A "Count down" is not so well known in Africa, but very familiar in the West. Suppose some race will so start. Everybody is nervous. The bodies of participants are ready to do what is supposed to be done, but the clock requires a delay. The adrenaline has been released, it tells the body to go, but the mind watches the clock and says: no! That is a clear situation of stress. There are many more examples of "countdown."

"Ambush" This type of waiting is traditionally well known in Africa. It falls under "living time". That means that not a mechanical clock, but live events like birds, and the behavior of the prey "measure" time. What your watch says is irrelevant. And it is classified as having a "tension", because it requires full concentration, at least readiness to full concentration at any moment.

"Train" refers to the situation, virtually unknown in Africa, that you finished what you were supposed to do, and ready to do the next thing, but this requires something that will only occur at a given point in dead mechanical clock time. So: you finished some job and you can go now, but have to wait for the train. You get bored. Boredom is an internal conflict of activity-wish coming up in a situation where no possibility for activity is seen.

"Rain" African countries have two rain-times a year and many crops grow, and produce seed only in rain time. So when the rains start, they start digging. So, they wait for rain. Obviously, clocks are irrelevant here. Rain is no train. Rain just comes when it comes and you do not have to "catch" it.. Rain is a gift from the living forces of nature. Further the spirits that send it might be offended by preparations in advance.

Hurrying:

"Deadline" A dead mechanical date-time is agreed and set. The process is partitioned and scheduled. Sub-deadlines are determined. Of course problems occur. Parts of the process get behind schedule. Stress is all over. Without a clear deadline, in the West things usually do not get more relaxed. So without a deadline, the mode of operation becomes "Race", dead time saving directed activity. This Western addiction to dead mechanical time has, in the rise of industrial market society, been sunk so deeply in Western culture that even leisure is filled with dead time competitive games.

The basic African type of hurry is "Catch" (since that is what you can do with prey, booty and thieves). The main vital feature is again that in "catch" your watch (dead time) is fully irrelevant. "Catch" is a living time process. The process lives its own time. You are fully concentrated on the action, not aware of dead time. It ends once you catch, fail to catch, escape, or fail to escape. You should not try to subdue nature. You wait till nature gives you. And this "waiting"-attitude is, in Africa, generally rewarded by nature. In fact, having to work is considered a sign of disfavor with the powers and spirits.

For a more detailed explanation see: <http://mindphiles.com/floor/teaching/timeafr/timeafr.com>

CLOCKWATCHING TENSIONS

- How much tension or anger builds in you when other people “take their own sweet time” or are late, or if events don’t conform to pre-arranged schedules or conceptions?
- How do you handle problems or crises that arise? Especially with time conflicts!
- How important is completing a particular task over the press of other things? Are we more concerned about getting things done or doing things right?
- Are we orientated towards doing one thing at a time, or multi-tasking?

<u>TIME ORIENTATION</u>	<u>EVENT ORIENTATION</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Concern for punctuality and amount of time expended 2. Careful allocation of time to achieve the maximum within set limits 3. Tightly scheduled, goal-directed activities 4. Rewards offered as incentives for efficient use of time 5. Emphasis on dates and history <p style="text-align: center;">Illustration: American Culture</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Concern for details of the event, regardless of time required 2. Exhaustive consideration of a problem until resolved 3. A "let come what may" outlook not tied to any precise schedule 4. Stress on completing the event as a reward in itself 5. Emphasis on present experience rather than the past or future <p style="text-align: center;">Illustration: Uganda Culture</p>

- Each culture has a particular orientation towards time and a corresponding set of priorities for various events within its cultural life. The passage of time is “relative” to our perceptions of events. Examples: [Baseball vs. Football] [Work/School vs Leisure/Vacation]
- Individuals within a culture, an organization or group or a family may differ in their orientation and preferences from the rest – such individuals often get frustrated and are considered as unreasonable, lazy, or contrary by the rest when they give voice their frustrations, or fail to meet expectations.
- There needs to be a balancing (prioritizing) of “time” vs “event” considerations. Most people are usually somewhere in between the two extremes.
- It is usually necessary to adapt to the time and event orientation of a culture or group.
- Jewish Culture in Jesus’ Day was event orientated. No concept of “hours and minutes” Time reckoned from the sun –four quarters each to the day and to the night. Little concern for punctuality or scheduling. Flexible towards events and opportunities.

Jesus sets us an example of satisfying the time and event priorities (needs) of others before considering his own. Examples: John 1:39; 3:2; 4:4-42; 11:6; Matt 14:13-25. Our way with time is not God’s way. In fact no culture has God’s priorities – for Him the emphasis on time and event exists in complete harmony.

“Time is a gift from God and His priorities can always be fulfilled in the amount of time we have been given. God is lavish with His gifts – there is always enough time to do what Jesus calls us to do.”