

## Concepts of Time in Ethiopian Culture A Cyclical-Linear Perspective

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**ABSTRACT :** It is generally accepted that early civilizations--especially those steeped in religion--viewed time as a cyclical event. John S. Mbiti in his book, *African Religions and philosophy* (1969) felt that Africans understood or perceived time as a solely cyclical event. Revolving around the harvest and recurring religious events, early populations, he posited, would never achieve modern-society status, forever stuck in a revolving door of time. Also the Ethiopian researcher Mesay Kebede (2013) accepted this idea. Considering its 4<sup>th</sup> century adoption of Christianity. Ethiopia is no exception. Yet, due to the introduction of Western values during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the perception of time as not only a cyclical, but also as a linear event, began seeping into the consciousness of the society. Yet, in Ethiopia, evidence for both cyclical and linear time concepts were clear, despite its agrarian roots and history steeped in religion.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The perception and the cognition of time in cultural and historical contexts is both vague and imprecise. Still, whether consciously or unconsciously time has, and continues to have, a profoundly fundamental influence on lifestyles and worldviews.

Time concepts differ significantly between cultures and societies and its influence has evolved in tandem with societal evolution. Woven into language and culture and exerting influence on most daily activities in the modern world time, broadly speaking, is not a concept which can be easily ignored or made irrelevant, at least not without inviting contextual peril.

Previous characterizations of time in Ethiopia have been, at best, citing the lack of exposure to more progressive societies whose concept of time are predominantly goal oriented, or linear, as a reason for its "stagnation." But the advent of Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century brought with it the concept of time linearity. The birth and death of Christ and the upcoming resurrection suggested a continual timeline toward a paradisaical end. Coupled with the introduction of Western values during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the perception of time as not only a cyclical but also as a linear event began seeping into the consciousness of the society. Ethiopia can be easily characterized as a country whose time perspectives span both the cyclical and linear.

### Time Perception and Orientation

Humans' perception of time is variously influenced by the society and the period in which they live (Hall, 1959; Hall & Hall, 1990). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, accepted classifications of time include Natural or Geological/Evolutionary Time, Event Time, Mechanical Time, Consciousness or Inner Time, Personal Time, Psychological Time, and Social Time.

### Social Time

Social time can be understood by examining how time influences the daily lives of humans within a particular society. Two subsets of Social Time have been classified as Cyclical time and Linear time, both influenced by time consciousness and the influence of time on daily activities.

### Cyclical Time

*Cyclical time, "...is predominant in the archaic societies where the mythological, religious and magical beliefs play such an important part....The past, present and future are mutually projected into one another..."*(Gurvitch, 1964, p 32).

This concept considers events to be repeating in perpetual patterns or events. Seasons or experiences unwind only to be rewound and lived again. Days are independent, rather than cumulative. Events tacitly "prophesize" or pre-load future events.

**Linear Time**

“A linearly directed conception of time developed first in Judaism and Christianity with the idea of a history of salvation as a process directed into the future (Fuchs, 2018, p 48). Time as a temporal entity--with past, present, and future properties--is known as linear time. Consider an arrow, set free in zero gravity, on an infinite forward trajectory. The “coming of a Messiah,” in the Judeo-Christian religion and the idea of reincarnation in Hinduism and Buddhism, aptly characterize time on linear projection. The present simultaneously and forever morphing into both the past and future.

**II. TIME ORIENTATION**

“Time orientation is an unconscious yet fundamental cognitive process that provides a framework for organizing personal experiences in temporal categories of past, present and future, reflecting the relative emphasis given to these categories (Lee et al, 2017, p 2).”

Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity notwithstanding, societies can be categorized either as past-oriented, present-oriented, or future-oriented.

**Past-Oriented Societies**

Past-oriented societies tend to be ancient, tenaciously preserving time-worn traditions and customs. These societies practice traditions which typically frame and self-validate their culture. Foreign influences which do not dovetail these traditions gain little traction. Bound to the past, much effort is spent in maintaining customs and passing them to their progeny. Ancient cultural values are “bred” into the society’s DNA. Interestingly, although science has long presented evidence of our species’ evolutionary development, with timelines that spans billions of years, it has generally failed to disabuse most of the planet’s population of ancient customs based upon the supernatural or myth.

**Present-Oriented Societies**

“People living in present-oriented cultures usually have short-term perspectives. Time efficiency is regarded as important and people are constantly reminded not to waste it (Fraisie, 2003, p 375).” Present-oriented societies are generally less concerned with maintaining an age-old customs or traditions. The, “here and now,” frame daily existence. Sacrificing today for a “better” tomorrow is a subordinate concern. Traditions and customs are performed but their roots are shallow and susceptible to peer conformity, influence or, arguably, the political mood of a nation.

**Future-Oriented Societies**

A drive to succeed is central to individuals in future-oriented societies. Individuals in these societies tend to be goal oriented. Hard work and continuing achievement, both financial and personal, are hallmarks. This forward momentum is often fueled by peer pressure and societal expectations. Scenarios of ever-moving goal posts of achievement and efficiencies are common. Traditions, while still practiced, are variously tainted by consumerism or diluted by the need to “progress.”

**III. ETHIOPIAN TIME**

Historically, Ethiopia’s religious beliefs, traditions, and nationalism form the backbone of its identity, the country’s multilingual and ethnically diverse population, notwithstanding. The early adoption of Christianity with a claim as the sole possessor of the original Ark of the Covenant, as well as its being one of only two African countries to rebuff European colonizers, bolster its national pride.

With regard to its predominant ethnic groups, a long history of traditional beliefs and practices might suggest circular time characterized Ethiopian life. This “annualized” or short-term view of African time is echoed by a number of commentators; (Widlok and et al, 2021, Masolo, 1994, Gyekye, 1996. Most notably Mbiti (1969) made the argument for bundling all countries into one convenient cauldron of time homogeneity.

“...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 infinite past, present, and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking” (Mbiti, 1969, p 17). Mbiti’s characterization of “Africans” is confusing and self-serving. The African continent boasts upwards of 2000 languages and 3000 different ethnic groups. In Ethiopia alone, 84 languages are spoken amongst approximately 80 different ethnic groups. Making the audacious claim that Africans have no word to indicate “future” (page 17), Mbiti cites two Kenyan languages, or about 0.1% of all languages spoken on the continent. And how is it that Mbiti ignores Ethiopia’s predominant orthodox Christian belief system with the timelessness of resurrection paradise? Does this not clearly suggest that life is on a forward trajectory? And what of Lalibela, a monument carved out of a single piece of stone. Is this not an icon or, at least, an attempt at timelessness?

The rise of Haile Selassie catalyzed new perspectives with his attempts at modernization, social reform, and a requisite work ethic necessary to create efficient export capabilities. The evolution toward “modernity” crept into the consciousness of Ethiopia and cracking the door of linear time.

Messay (2013) rightly contends that as progressive world views were being introduced into the Ethiopian society, a linear time concept, however slowly, began seeping into the consciousness of the people. Despite the circularity of Ethiopians’ traditional and religious beliefs, there is also evidence of time linearity.

#### IV. ETHIOPIAN LINEARITY

##### Bahire Hasab

Many ethnic groups of Ethiopia developed their own calendars. These include Gambela, Gumuz, Haddiya, Wolaita, and Sidam. Each of these is based upon recurring natural events (Abreham, 2012, p 81-85).

Yet, Bahire Hasab is the Ethiopian traditional calendar which references the present and the future and uses the beginning of creation as a reference point for time. As such, everything was created in the “beginning” by God and, at some point, everything will end (Getachewe, 2000).

Describing or referencing two points in time suggest linearity. The Bahire Hasab begins its calculation of time by saying: "With God's help, we present the world's creation's head of thought to the end of the world" (Yared, 2013, p 20).

##### Gada

A governmental system in the Oromo region of Ethiopia is known as Gada. In this system, political and administrative promotions to higher levels of power or esteem take place every eight years, until someone either dies or reaches the age of 97. Group members partake in culture and the traditional duties, at least for males, that is. Such a recognizes linearity framed by an inner cyclicity.

*On the whole, anthropology has tended to underestimate the intellectual accomplishments of nonliterate societies. This is partly a function of the linear model of the universe that is pervasive in Western thought. I believe that Borna culture amply demonstrates the error of this premise* “(Asmarom, 1973, p 180).

#### V. CONCLUSION

While Ethiopian society is quite sentimental about their past history, they’ve become increasingly dissatisfied with economic conditions. Gradually exposed to typical media depictions of western “modern” lifestyles, the populous has become more focused on the “greener grass” side of the world beyond. For better or worse, a drive to obtain material wealth and status results in forward thinking, goal-oriented perspectives.

Historically, Ethiopia is not unique in its perspective on the fluid concepts of time interpretation. Personal perspectives and societal time concepts can change. As people's perspectives shift due to a shifting world, so does the concept of social time. Ethiopian time concepts are evolving due to globalization but religion and tradition remain steadfast constants. Orientation to the past remains embedded in the souls of the faithful.

Ethiopian history is replete with examples of both linear and cyclical time frameworks. As such, Ethiopia should be characterized as variously perceiving time in the hybrid, cyclical-linear concept. For better or worse, repetition promotes familiarity. But change is and, will always be, inexorably propelled by the nature of a developing and modernizing world.

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