

# Kagame and Mbiti on the Traditional Bantu View of Time

## Kibujjo M. Kalumba

### Introduction

In his classical essay "Empirical Apperception of Time and the Conception of History in Bantu Thought," Alexis Kagame relies on an extensive sample of Bantu languages to advance several important theses about the traditional Bantu view of time.<sup>1</sup> In one of these claims Kagame goes contrary to most leading African philosophers and endorses what John Mbiti regards as the traditional African view of time.<sup>2</sup> Mbiti contends that, unlike the Western view of time, which is three-dimensional, comprising an indefinite past, a present, and an infinite future, the traditional African concept of time is two-dimensional, comprising the two tense-dimensions of *Zamani* and *Sasa*.<sup>3</sup> After reconstructing Mbiti's argument for the two-dimensional view of time, I examine the Bantu view of time entailed by Kagame's exposition. Besides being three-dimensional, this view's ontological outlook is incompatible with that of Mbiti's view. I, hence, contend that Kagame cannot consistently endorse Mbiti's two-dimensional view. I conclude by observing that the three-dimensional view of time embedded in Kagame's essay is well-entrenched in my native Luganda, one of the Bantu languages included in his research. Why then did Kagame deviate from this view to end up endorsing Mbiti's two-dimensional view? I propose an explanation for this puzzling deviation.

### Mbiti's Argument for the Two-dimensional View of Actual Time

1. For traditional Africans, time is nothing but a composition of events. (I call this the ontological thesis.)
2. For traditional Africans events (singly or collectively) must be experienced to be actual.
3. Therefore (from 1 and 2), for traditional Africans, time must be experienced to be actual.
4. Distant future events cannot be experienced.
5. Therefore (from 2 and 4), for traditional Africans, distant future events are not actual.
6. Therefore (from 1 and 5), for traditional Africans, distant future events do not constitute actual time.
7. Therefore (from 1, 2 and 6), for traditional Africans, *actual* time is exhausted by the two tense-dimensions that involve experienced events: the *Zamani* and the *Sasa*. (I call this the two-dimensional view of actual time.)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Liboire Kagabo (2004) gives a neat overview of Kagame's life and thought.

<sup>2</sup> Those who have challenged Mbiti's view include, among others, John Ayaode (1979), D.A. Masolo (1994), and Kwame Gyekye (1995). It must be noted that Mbiti takes his conclusions on time to be valid for all traditional Africa, a claim that has earned him the charge of hasty generalization from his critics. In contrast, Kagame is more cautious. His study concentrates on Bantu Africa, although he is convinced that "its conclusions are also valid, at least to a large extent, with regard to Sudanic culture." (1976:89)

<sup>3</sup> These two terms will be explicated in the next section.

<sup>4</sup> Mbiti (17) distinguishes between actual time from 'potential' time, a distinction that will be explicated later.

According to Mbiti (21-22), the *Zamani* extends from the 'now-point' into the Western indefinite past. The *Sasa* consists of the recently experienced Western past, the now-point, and the Western future of at most two years from the now-point, regarded as its extension.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Traditional Bantu View of Time Entailed by Kagame's Exposition**

A major difference between Mbiti and Kagame regarding the traditional Bantu view of time is implied by the following passage from Kagame's essay:

In traditional Bantu culture...time is a colourless, neutral, entity as long as it is not marked or stamped by some specific event: an action performed by the pre-existent [God], by man or animal, a natural phenomenon... As soon as the action or event impinges on time, the latter is marked, stamped, individualized, drawn out of its anonymity, and becomes the time of that event (1976: 99).

It is clear from this passage that, contrary to Mbiti's ontological thesis which identifies time with events, Kagame attributes to traditional Bantu a conception of time as a *real* entity that exists *prior to and independently of* the events that are associated with it. Otherwise, these events could not be said to 'mark' it, 'stamp' it, or 'impinge' on it. True, according to Kagame, traditional Bantu see time as 'colourless,' 'neutral,' and 'anonymous,' and so on, until it is stamped by some event, but this claim does nothing to diminish time's real, independent status.<sup>6</sup> That Kagame thinks traditional Bantu see time as existing independently of events is further supported by what he claims to be the Bantu's fourfold classification of being. The Bantu, according to Kagame, regard every being as falling within one of the following categories:

1. Being endowed with intelligence (man).
2. Being without intelligence (things).
3. Localizing being (place-time).
4. Modal being (accidentality, or modification of being) (1976: 89-91).

According to this classification, time and space constitute an ontological category that is independent from that of events, which as modifications or accidents of being must belong to the fourth category. It is indeed informative that while Kagame (91) explicitly describes the beings of the fourth category as those "which by nature, are

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<sup>5</sup> This argument is an almost verbatim repetition of my earlier reconstruction of Mbiti's argument for the two-dimensional view of actual time. I refer the reader to Kalumba (2005: 12) for farther details on this reconstruction.

<sup>6</sup> This is what Parker English and I failed to see several years ago. In English and Kalumba (1996: 81), we correctly observed that Kagame's primary claim is that, for traditional Bantu, time is 'colourless' unless it is marked or stamped by some event. Unfortunately, we proceeded to confuse this claim with the unwarranted claim that 'time is not real for traditional Africans until it has been stamped by a socially significant event.' Combining this latter claim with the obvious fact that future time is not yet stamped by any event, we concluded, falsely, that Kagame believes that, for traditional Bantu, future time is 'not conceived as being real in the way the present and past are.' In making this conclusion, we felt encouraged by Kagame himself, who, as we shall see below, purports to agree with Mbiti on how traditional Africans perceive the future.

incapable of independent existence..." he does not extend the idea of dependent existence to 'localizing being.'<sup>7</sup>

A combination of several claims from Kagame's essay suggests a coherent picture of the specific nature of the real, independently existing time which he attributes to traditional Bantu. In one place Kagame contends that traditional Bantu regard every existent as "fraught with existential movement and proceeds upon its trajectory toward its connatural consummation" (92-93). Then he goes on to say that traditional Bantu view this movement as taking place in time (and space), regarded as the 'there where', the 'localizers,' and "the individualizing coordinates" of all movements...of existents" (91-94).<sup>8</sup> Given this description of time (and space) and the aforementioned thesis that existents stamp time with their movements, Kagame must be attributing to traditional Bantu a 'plane view' of time. It is a view of time as a metaphysical background along which existents travel as they proceed upon their existential trajectories. Since this time plane is always in the background, it is not surprising that, according to Kagame, it remains neutral and colorless for traditional Bantu until some event stamps or marks it and draws it out of its anonymity for them.

Whereas, as we have seen, Mbiti's 'event view' of time is two-dimensional, Kagame's plane view is clearly three-dimensional. Apart from the present dimension, it has an indefinite past dimension as well as an indefinite future dimension. The past dimension of the time plane must stretch at least beyond the period of the Bantu's early ancestral "innovators" who initiated the constitutive elements of their cultures, thus marking time by their inventions.

We must keep in mind the principle referred to above of the 'stamping' of time. The initiators left a deep mark on time during their existence on earth: in other words, they launched a series of entities (their 'inventions') on their existential trajectory, and their descendants, from generation to generation, repeat the stamping of time on a large scale (1976: 110).

The future dimension of the time plane must also stretch indefinitely in the opposite direction, since, according to Kagame (102), the Bantu believe that their social groups, such as large families and tribal nations, will certainly mark it with their activities for generations to come.

Despite this three-dimensional view of actual time that is clearly embedded in his essay, Kagame proceeds to endorse Mbiti's two-dimensional view of actual time as follows:

On the metaphysical plane, 'future time' ...is merely a projection of our minds. In order to appreciate the extreme limit of such anticipation, a distinction must be made between the individual and the social or political group. John S. Mbiti, in *African Religions and Philosophy* (p.17) writes:

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<sup>7</sup> Kagabo (2004: 235-237) believes that Kagame's fourfold classification of being "is the most fundamental and original part of his account of Bantu philosophy. "He adds that Kagame is "right to stress that, for Bantu, 'any conceivable entity comes down to one of those four, and there is no entity that remains outside those four categories.'"

<sup>8</sup> Kagame contends that traditional Bantu merge space and time into one single ontological category of individualizing being, a claim I will attempt to elaborate on below.

The future is virtually 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*.<sup>9</sup>

I therefore agree with this excellent writer's opinion, although our starting points are different. The 'future' cannot be marked by actual events and therefore cannot be regarded as knowable time. A man who projects his mind into the future is not even sure of being there on the morrow. As a Rwandese proverb has it: *iby'ejo bibara ab'ejo*: 'the things of tomorrow occupy the conversations of the people of tomorrow'. In other words, 'if I am there tomorrow, I shall see about it' (1976:101).

Kagame no doubt endorses Mbiti's two-dimensional view of actual time in this passage. This is true because the original intent of the direct quotation from Mbiti's book, which Kagame must be aware of, is to show that actual time is two-dimensional, since the future is virtually non-actual. Here is how Mbiti's begins the paragraph that includes the part that Kagame reproduces.

The most significant consequence of this is that, 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 foreign to African thinking. The future is virtually absent because events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized and cannot, therefore, constitute time (1990: 16-17).

Kagame's endorsement of Mbiti's two-dimensional view of actual time is definitely puzzling, and in what follows I propose an explanation for it.

The first step of the explanation consists in realizing that Kagame uses two different senses of the expression 'the past' or its synonym 'past time' in his essay. In the first or primary sense, 'the past' refers to the dimension of the time plane that chronologically comes prior to the present dimension. Kagame describes 'the past' in the secondary sense as "the sum total of the activities by means of which the ancestors stamped their own time and which they have transmitted to their descendants..." (1976: 101). Given these two senses of 'the past,' it is plausible to maintain that Kagame uses the expression 'the future' or its synonym 'future time' with two different senses as well. The first or primary sense of 'the future' is that of the indefinite third dimension of the time plane I mentioned above. 'The future' in the secondary sense must mean the sum total of the activities by means of which individuals will stamp time in days yet to come, and which they will transmit to their descendants. Which one of the two senses of 'the future' Kagame does employ in the passage that endorses Mbiti's two-dimensional view of actual time? The answer, I believe, is that he employs both senses, thereby equivocating on the expression 'future time'. Let me elaborate.

In the first line of the passage, Kagame must be using 'future time' in the secondary sense of those activities individuals anticipate to perform in coming days.

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that by saying, in the quoted passage, that coming events *lie in* the future, Mbiti seems to distinguish the future dimension of time from the events that will take place in it. This, of course, goes contrary to his ontological thesis.

Since this future is neither actual nor certain, or as he calls it, 'a projection of our minds,' Kagame can plausibly use it to endorse Mbiti's two-dimensional view of actual time. Kagame's problem is that he confuses the two senses of 'the future' and proceeds to use 'the future' in the primary sense to endorse Mbiti's two-dimensional view of actual time. That he makes this switch to the primary sense is evinced by what he says immediately after the direct quotation from Mbiti's book. In this portion of his passage, Kagame states his agreement with Mbiti, and immediately links the agreement to the 'future' that "cannot be marked by actual events." Since this future is distinct from events, it must be the future referenced by the primary sense. And it is clear that Kagame cannot consistently employ this future to endorse Mbiti's two-dimensional view of actual time, since this very future constitutes Kagame's third dimension of actual time. It is not surprising that, in this portion of the passage, his attempt to justify the agreement with Mbiti involves confusion as well as incoherence. Let me elaborate.

In the text that immediately follows the direct quotation from Mbiti's books, Kagame ends up confusing ontology with epistemology. This is true because the conclusion he needs to endorse Mbiti's view is that future time cannot be regarded as *actual* time, a statement about the ontological status of future time. What he ends up arguing, however, is that future time "cannot be marked by actual events and *therefore* cannot be regarded as *knowable* time," an epistemological inference about future time. Moreover, the claim that unmarked time is unknowable time is incompatible with Kagame's principle of stamping time. The principle does not state that unmarked time is *unknown*; it states, instead, that unmarked time is colorless, neutral and anonymous. Incoherence is interwoven with confusion. Unfortunately, these are not the only problems entailed by the quoted passage. Here is another one.

In the second sentence of the passage of the endorsement, Kagame introduces a distinction between the individual and the social or political group which he revisits a few paragraphs later (1976: 101-102). In these paragraphs Kagame uses the distinction to argue that an individual's future activities (his or her future time in the secondary sense) cannot be anticipated with certainty, since the individual "who projects his mind into the future is not even certain of being there in the morrow." In contrast, he argues that the future activities of social or political groups (their future in the secondary sense) can be anticipated with certainty, since such groups are certain to continue in existence for several generations to come. What Kagame seems to conclude from the contrast is that whereas the future (in the secondary sense) of social or political groups is indefinite and actual, the future (in the secondary sense) of individuals is not actual.<sup>10</sup> What Kagame fails to realize in

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<sup>10</sup> This is my interpretation of the three rather confusing paragraphs that immediately follow the passage in which Kagame endorses Mbiti's view. To get some idea of the involved confusion, the future of social groups which is described as 'infinite' in the second of these paragraphs, is described as 'indefinite' in the third paragraph. Moreover, even though the context of these paragraphs is that of justifying Kagame's endorsement Mbiti's view that the future in the secondary sense is non-actual, the last sentence of the third paragraph is devoted to the future in the primary sense of time that "is anticipated as certain to be marked by the activities of the group" (1976: 102).

making this inference is that no degree of certainty of anticipation is capable of making actual any future activities. Activities can only be made actual by their realization in the present. It is indeed surprising that Kagame fails to realize this fact, given that in the passage of the endorsement he reproduces the very text in which Mbiti distinguishes between actual time and potential time. Given what he says both in this text and in his argument, as reconstructed above, Mbiti limits the extent of real or actual activities (the activities that constitute actual time) to those that fall within the range of two years from the now-point. Any activity beyond two years from now, certain to occur, or otherwise, is simply not actual, and therefore is not part of actual time, although it might be part of potential time. So to be consistent with Mbiti's view Kagame needs to describe the future activities of social groups (their future time in the secondary sense), not as actual or real activities but as potential activities.

## Conclusion

Is Kagame's three-dimensional, plane view of actual time found in all Bantu cultures? I am not qualified to answer this question. All I can say with competence is that the view is embedded in my native Luganda, the only Bantu language I speak fluently. The Baganda (native speakers of Luganda) do have a locative, three-dimensional view of actual time that is distinct from the events that take place within it. The *locative* nature of this view is reflected in the fact that we use the same concords (*mu* or *in*, *ku* or *at*, *wo* or *there where*) to refer to time as we use to refer to space and place. This I believe is what Kagame (92) means when he says that traditional Bantu merge time and place in the same third ontological category that, as we have seen above, he calls localizing being. And frankly I cannot think of a basic feature of Kagame's plane view that is not reflected in the Baganda's view. In addition to the plane view with its primary senses of 'the past' and 'the future,' the Baganda also have expressions that are translatable as 'the past' and 'the future' in the secondary sense described above. For example, the expression '*eby'edda*' can be translated as 'the past' in the sense of 'the things (actions, events, phenomena, and so on) of long ago.' Likewise, the expression '*ebiri mu maaso*' can be translated as 'the future' in the sense of 'the things (actions, events, phenomena, and so on) that lie ahead.' Hence, as far as Luganda is concerned, the two senses of 'the future' used by Kagame are both legitimate. Kagame's main problem is that, in the context of endorsing Mbiti's two-dimensional view of actual time, he confuses the primary sense with the secondary sense, and, amidst the confusion, reads the properties of the latter into the former. My hope is that this exposition of Kagame's analytical flaws will alert aspiring African philosophers to the importance of critical, analytical rigor as the only way to reduce similar problems in their own works.

## References

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