Politics lost in translation: the African concept of time as a method to understand African conflicts

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore John Mbiti's concept of African time in line with the studies on the crisis of the post-independence African state. Then, how this concept offers new analytical spaces for understanding the modern nation-states inconveniences in African contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper analyses the Mbitian African concept of time in light of the works on post-independence African state and communalism.

Findings – By using the Mbitian concept of time politically after explaining African communalism and African concepts of personhood and destiny, the paper reached a conclusion. This conclusion claims that due to the highly existential nature of the African concept of destiny and the past-oriented feature of the African concept of time, Africans cannot be restrained by any supernatural claim or any futuristic promises that are irrelevant to their context and cut from the communal values of ancestral past. Africans do not think supernaturally or bet for the future. However, those futuristic and supernatural claims that cannot restrain the African subjectivity – ironically – characterize the modern nation state with its "progress orientation" and "social-contract" metaphysics. Unfortunately, this radical difference in perceptions between the past-oriented African temporality and the future-oriented modern state temporality rendered the post-independence. African state dysfunctional and unable to operate as a medium for authority. This, consequently, opened the door for informal conflict and strife.

Originality/value – The paper is novel with regard to offering a new theory on the conceptual problems of the nation state in African contexts.

Keywords Africa, Politics, Time, Metaphysics, Conflicts, Temporality, Sasa, Zamani, Personhood, Communalism, Destiny, Ori

Paper type Research paper

Analogy seeking turns into a substitute for theory formation. The Africanist is akin to those learning a foreign language who must translate every new word back into their mother

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tongue, in the process missing precisely what is new in a new experience. From such a standpoint, the most intense controversies dwell on what is indeed the most appropriate translation (Mamdani, 1996, p. 12).

1. Politics, authority and conflict in Africa

Politics as a term is widely known to be derived from *polis*, which is the ancient Greek word for "the city-state". Therefore, politics is what related in general to the affairs of the state (Strauss, 1957, p. 351). This definition of politics is viable and reasonable. However, for the purposes of clarity and relevance to the development of my argument, I prefer to explain politics according to the Arabic etymology. One additional reason for choosing Arabic than English is that Arabic language is among the widely spread "traditional" languages in the continent. It was not hugely affected by the negative influence of colonialism like the other different African traditional languages. This makes it one good reservoir for experience of its speakers and among them the Africans whether Arabs, Muslims or those who interacted with them in the continent.

Politics in Arabic is *siyasa*, derived from the root *Sasa*, which means "to lead someone/ some people". Therefore, politics implies a relation of leadership in which someone is leading others. This is called in our contemporary political theory "authority".

Authority, basically, is a relation made up of two parts, namely, command and obedience; someone orders and another obeys. Then, for the one who obeys to obey he must believe that in his obedience lies his good/interest or, in worst cases, lies his safety. People obey their rulers because in their obedience they expect some good, some interest and some protection from threats or from the wrath of their ruler.

The subjects' belief in the importance of their obedience is simply called legitimacy. The obeyed ruler is "largely" a legitimate one, if those who obey him accept and consistently believe in the importance of their obedience to him regardless of the debates on the proper sources of legitimacy.

The moment a subject no longer believes that he should obey conflict emerges. Conflict emerges for different reasons and takes different forms. However, simply when someone believes that he should rule and the subject of his rule does not share with him this same belief, both would disagree and engage in conflict. That conflict might vary in degrees from mere withdrawal and disenchantment to protest, resistance and open war.

Disobedience or lack of cooperation on the part of the subjects might be caused by disagreement on the rules of the game, the absence of a suitable return for obedience, the failure to achieve the goal of the authority relationship or simply the disagreement on the definitions of these goals, which is difference in perceptions.

In Africa, many studies were dedicated to explain the reasons for the crises of the African post-independence modern state and the roots of its conflicts, offering a wide spectrum of opinions and justifications that are really helpful. To schematically sum them up would be injustice to them, but for the purposes of brevity, one can number important insights into these questions. Crawford Young, for instance, argued that religion, race and ethnicity fragment the African society and weak governance exacerbates these splits (Young, 1999, p. 25). Mahmood Mamdani, in his brilliant *magnum opus citizen and subject*, argued that the crisis of the post-independence state lies in its inheritance of the colonial institutional legacy. Mamdani claims that late colonialism instituted a bifurcated state in Africa. This state rules the urban and the rural differently. In the city – where white settlers once lived – law reigns and individuals are treated as citizens, while in rural areas –where natives should be confined – customary authorities reign and rule by custom and force. Native individuals in rural areas are considered "subjects". This disconnection between the urban and the rural continued after independence with a minimal change which is the deracialization of authority. However, the inability to unite rulership under

the rule of law led to the failure of democratization and paved the way for marginalization and conflict (Mamdani, 1996, p. 25). Not only that but also the studies seeking solutions for such a dilemma – according to Mamdani – was suffering a paralysis in perspective caused by their studying the history of Africa by analogy (Mamdani, 1996, p. 3). For Mamadani, history by analogy characterizes their ways of judging the African situation not according to the specific experience of Africa but according to the outcomes and processes that occurred elsewhere, primarily in the west (Mamdani, 1996, p. 24). The story of Africa for Mamdani is a story of a deformed inheritance and a paralyzed perspective.

In the same vein, Thandika Mkandawire treats the intertwinement of choosing a wrong perspective in studying Africa with the consequences of aborting the developmental potentialities of the African state. What he terms as the impossibility narratives originating in the IFI and BWIs [1] played a major role in continually incapacitating the African state. In the impossibility narrative, states are denied any capacity to pursue national projects but, at the same time, they are argued to assume roles beyond their capacity, character or political will (Mkandawire, 2001, p. 289). Impossibility narratives are based on inaccurate reading of African histories and realities. They drove the African state to continually fragment its control, destroy its capacities and hurt the morale of its human resources. This led to a state continually reducing itself to the extent of being unable to practice its core functions. It led also to brain drain due to the low morale of citizens and the wrong prescriptions that lowered the state support of its standing capacities. Capacity building prescriptions led to ignoring the retooling of the already existent developmental capacities and instead made states start all over again, weak and unprepared. For Mkandawire, the way out might be in a more accurate reading of African states based on their character and experiences and in a better utilization of its capacities. Heeding the inspiration of the successful models in development should be based also on an accurate unbiased reading of their histories (Mkandawire, 2001, pp. 309-310).

Unlike Mamdani who focussed on the native question, Issa G. Shivji (2003, 2011) traces the problems of nations in Africa in the misreading of the nationalist question. Post independence national bourgeoisies, foreign intervention and global paradigmatic shifts distorted the true meaning of nationalism as a liberation project. African nationalism is based on Panfricanism (anti-imperialism), independence (freedom) and equality. After independence, this meaning of nationalism was distorted gradually to become authoritarian nation building, statist independence and abstract liberal individualism.

> National Question was distorted, truncated, and caricatured during the period of meta nationalism, it completely disappears and is delegitimized in the current globalisation phase of imperialism. The National Question is reduced to a race question or ethnic question or cultural question (Shivji, 2003, p. 8).

Jean-Francois Bayart places the helm on moral problems in the African contexts or "political sins" practiced by African political actors in their context. That context in which

> the social struggles which make up the quest for hegemony and the production of the state bear the hallmarks of the rush for spoils in which all actors – rich and poor – participate in the world of networks (Bayart, 1993, p. 235).

Conversely, Walter Rodney attributes the failure of the African development to the long gradual processes of colonialism that enriched and developed the west at the expense of impoverishing and under developing Africa (Rodney, 1972). Not very different from them is the argument of Bertrand Badie in which he claims that the state structure operating in Africa was imported and in this process of importation, imposition and operation it lost its meaning (Badie, 2000), and the argument of Basil Davidson who saw in this imported nation state imposed on Africans a curse that plagued their situation (Davidson, 1992).

In total, three interesting insights should be mentioned also to give some comprehensiveness to the task at hand. They are the work(s) of Patrick Chabal (2009; Chabal and Daloz, 1999), who believes the current disorder of Africa is cultural, instrumental and works, the work of Gabriel Apata (2018), who claims that corruption in Africa was first invented by the West and then imitated by Africans, and the work of Valentin Y. Mudimbe (1998), who believes that the very entity "Africa" is a western invention that keeps imprisoning African imagination and knowledge.

What negatively characterize all the above interpretations is that they tend to perceive Africa/Africans as always "an object" for some other "actors" and "processes" or what the Beninian philosopher Paulin Hountondji describes as studying Africa as "an objective genitive" (Hountondji, 2009, p. 2),or as creating a "conceptual distance" and a "perceptual space" between the observer and the observed in Vernon Dixon's terminology (Dixon, 1970, pp. 131-138; Caroll, 2008, p. 11). These actors and processes might be colonialism, capitalism, globalization, traditions or mere foreign actors. However, none among the abovementioned dealt with African politics from the viewpoints of Africans, i.e. from the world view of Africans. That is, not to study Africans as objects in processes but as an active subjectivity in the world. This subjectivity operates in a set of arrangements and contexts, adapts with some, transforms some and gets transformed by others. This requires studying the African state within the context in which African world view/subjectivity engages with politics.

To explore such a different endeavour, one can resort to a standing tradition that might help understand what can be described as African(s) worldview(s) and subjectivities. Many works tried to explore the topic of Africans' world views in different contexts and relate it to diverse fields of social inquiry. Starting with the milestone work of the Franciscan missionary Placide Tempels, he studied the philosophy and world view of the Bantu and implied on the margins of the consequent correspondence resulting from his work that there are some African commonalities with regard to world view (Tempels, 1959, p. 12). Proceeding in this vein was Kagame (1955, p. 4) in which a study of the concept of being among Rwandese Bantu was undertaken. In addition, there were also the attempts of Kwasi Wiredu at understanding the concept of truth in Akan language (Wiredu, 1985), and the work of John Mbiti on the African concept of time, which was part of his study on African religions and philosophy. His work was mainly inspired by his focus on eastern Bantu (Mbiti, 1969a, 1969b, p. 10). Also the recent work of Ramy Magdy endeavoured to explore the concept of justice among the Berbers, Oromos, Hausa and Zulus while putting an African world view as his background (Magdy, 2017, p. 6). These were works analysing the concepts and constructs generally shared among African communities.

On the other hand, there was another trend trying to explore the worldviews and subjectivities of Africans by engaging with African sages and traditional doctors as representatives and eloquent sources of their communities' worldviews. One can attribute the start to the controversial work of Marcel Gruaille entitled "Conversations with Ogotemmêli" in which he conversed with a Dogan sage (Griaulle, 1965, p. 16), then Henry Odera Oruka offered a better and systemized work on sage philosophy (Oruka, 1991), in addition to Hallen and Sodipo's work on the world views of Yoruba traditional doctors (Hallen and Sodipo, 1997, p. 10).

If the first bulk of studies handling the crises of the African state missed looking to Africa as a subjectivity/world view and confined Africa to an object enslaved to structures and processes, the second bulk of studies, albeit dealt with African world views extensively, yet they did not try to use their findings to give a political reading of African post-independence politics. Most of the worldviews studies were restricted to social or philosophical aims, and although Magdy (2017, p. 6) was dedicated to the study of justice and the political structures of demographically large ethnicities, he was confined to mere description of these structures and their development from the pre-colonial past, and did not try to merge the inherited world view with the current political situation. This makes our current preoccupation in this paper a needed building block by trying

to study the current political situation through examining its underlying contending world views. The paper tries to bridge theoretically the two methods of looking unto Africa, and seeks practically to dig beneath the going political machinations of authority and resistance in the post-independence African modern state.

To do this using the Mbitian concept of African time, the paper will first introduce the Mbitian horizon of analysis by introducing communalism upon which the Mbitian concept is based, and then pre-empt any suspicion of supernaturalism that might rise from studying such an abstract concept by outlining the existential nature upon which the African concepts of personhood and destiny are based.

2. Introducing the Mbitian horizon of analysis

Although the work of John Mbiti starts from an Anglican Christian background, it tries at best to establish the legitimacy of African traditional ideas, and at worst to refute the claims demonizing the traditional African worldviews. The *magnum opus* of Mbiti is his famous book *African Religions and Philosophy* (Mbiti, 1969a, 1969b), whose title reflects the diversity of African religions and the unity of their philosophy. The core issue that interests our current enterprise is Mbiti's study of the African concept of time in his books *African Religions and Philosophy*, *Christian Eschatology* and in some of his poetry. However, the Mbitian horizon of analysis requires two elementary steps before going into the depth of the Mbitian argument: first, to explain the communalist vision of African society upon which Mbiti's arguments are grounded and second, to pre-empt any suspicions of African supernaturalism that might rise from studying such an abstract concept by outlining the existential nature upon which the African concepts of personhood and destiny are based.

2.1 Communalism

Communalism is the orientation Africans take in their relations with each other. It can be explained as;

> The individual owes his existence to other people, he is simply part of the whole, whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual, the individual can only say "I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am", this is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man (Mbiti, 1969a, 1969b, p. 108).

The Nigerian Menkiti illustrates also:

> The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept the fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained in direct proportion as one participates in the communal life through the discharge of the various obligation defined by one's situations. It is carrying out of the obligations that transforms one from It-status of early childhood marked by an absence of moral function into the person-status of later years marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense – an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one (Menkiti, 1984, p. 76).

Communalism puts the interest of the stability and the welfare of community as the ultimate end and the highest good for politics. The protection of the communal values as inherited from generation to generation is a must. The memory of the ancestors, their wisdom and heritage, and the very value of the perfect past have to be protected if the community wishes to survive and stay together. This is justified by the belief in the priority of some sort of communal life, which is better than any other. Politics in communalism should be dedicated to the survival and welfare of community and the protection of inherited values of that best way of life. The very agency of individual has more value if it is for the group and less if it is for himself. Any violation to these

principles must be deterred and resisted because it is considered a threat to the collective existence.

2.2 Personhood and destiny

Various studies were dedicated to elaborate the conception of personality from the view point of some or other African ethnicity or Africanist thinker (Adeofy, 2004, p. 5; Masolo, 2004, p. 84; Menkiti, 2000, p. 324; Kaphagawani, 2000, p. 332; Gbadegesin, 2004, p. 51). One study among them is Segun Gbadegesin's study of the concepts of personality and destiny in Yoruba. Thought, where he argues that, in Africa (according to his tradition), a person is made up of four elements, namely, *Ara* (body), *Emi* (soul-life force), *Ori* (destiny) and *Okan* (heart or consciousness). Wiredu as well, in his study of the concept of person in the Akan, found that a person is made up of *Nipadua* (body), *Okra* (spirit), *Nikarabea* (destiny) and *Susun* (soul-life force) (Kaphagawani, 2000, p. 332). In Islam also, which is a widely spread religion in the continent, a person is made up of *Jasad* (body), *Rawh* (spirit-divine life force), *Nafs* (self and will), *Aql* (mind consciousness) and *Qadar* (destiny or fate). So, among the diverse abovementioned African perceptions of personality and many else, one can clearly notice that there is some agreement on the variety of personality elements so it is not dualist or monist, and these common elements can be summarized schematically, but not unjustly, to be body, soul, mind and destiny.

It is often believed that Africans indulge in a heavily supernatural perception of life and are unable to suit the requirements of modernity, that's why they failed to modernize, kept their ethnic identifications and clashed with each other accordingly. This is a very simplistic political approach to the African metaphysical concept of personality. To refute this claim in general and with regard to abstract African concepts like the Mbitian concept of time in particular, resorting to the different studies on the African concept of personhood is a must. One exemplar among them is the treatment of African concept of personality undertaken by Segun Gbadegesin in Yoruba thought. However, it is worth mentioning that such a way of presenting "African" ideas by combining Yoruban lines of thoughts of Gbadegesin with Eastern Bantu thoughts of Mbiti with Akan Thoughts of Wiredu might look as a strange mélange. This is true if one start off from a relativist point of view with regard to studying the conceptual networks in Africa. Yet, what this study takes as a base is the "universalist" or "generalist" African view of philosophy that perceives the different African communities to be part of some general tradition of philosophy and that, beneath the variations of their systems of thought, there are major commonalities. The trend establishes its legitimacy on the commonality of history, tradition, religious shifts, nations' interactions and colonial experience of Africans. One can find a wider space for exploring the different trends of African philosophy in the relatively extended works of Richard Bell and Ramy Magdy (Bell, 2004; Magdy, 2017).

In Yoruba, a person has a body, a soul, a consciousness and a destiny (Ori). This concept of destiny was exposed to mistranslation and misunderstanding that led, among many other factors, to the claim that Africans are too superstitious. To rightly understand the concept of destiny one has to revisit Segun Gbadegesin's work on the *Odu Corpus* in Yoruba philosophy and religion. In *Ogegbund*, the story of how Ori is chosen in *Orun* (Heaven) is told, and its irrevocability once chosen. It is the story of three friends, namely, *Oriseeku*, the son of *Ogun*, *Orileemere* the son of *Ija* and *Afuwape* the son of *Orunmila*. *Obatala* finished molding their physical bodies and they were ready to go to the house of *Ajala*, the heavenly potter of Ori (destiny), to choose their Ori (Gbadegesin, 2004, p. 52).

The three friends were warned by their friends to go directly to the house of *Ajala* and not to break their journey for any reason. While two friends took this advice seriously and went straight to the house of Ajala, the third, Afuwape, decided to see first his father before going to choose his Ori. Oriseeku and Orileemere got to the house of Ajala and picked the Ori of their choice and

proceeded straight to earth. Afuwape got to his father and met with a group of divination priests divining for him. These diviners advised Afuwape to perform some sacrifices so that he would choose a good Ori. He did and then went to Ajala. Though he met on his way some obstacles, he overcame them all, apparently due to the sacrifice he performed earlier. He chose a good Ori with the help of *Ajala*, and he was able to succeed in his life. His two friends did not make a good choice: they were never successful and their choice was a burden in their lives (Gbadegesin, 2004, p. 52).

Gbadegesin, though brilliantly outlining his theory of personality and destiny, misinterpreted its origin and consequently misapprehended the concept of destiny (Ori). Gbadegesin, in his various definitions of Ori, maintained that Ori is either a predestined fate or the potentiality of personal fate that one has to actualize to feel happy. If it is a predetermined fate, this entails that African metaphysics is highly deterministic and fatalist. Then, if it is just a potentiality for life, an interpretation Gbadegisn seems to prefer, this entails also that the African has to follow some track for his life, which he had no hand in setting.

Actually, both interpretations missed the very spirit of the Ori tale. Ori as a concept is not simply fate or potential fate. It is "responsibility for one's choice". Ori metaphorically is an empty container given to each man so that with it he can bear the consequences of his actions. To elaborate, the concept of Ori has four dimensions as mentioned in the tale, which show the priority of responsibility in man's life. These dimensions are "freedom, openness, morality and communalism". To prove this, Afuwape was "free" to disobey the advice he was given. This reflects the freedom of human beings in seeking and in making their own fate. Moreover, destiny (Ori) itself does not imply a predetermined plan because Ajala is just a "potter", not a maker of Ori. The metaphor of the pot indicates an empty container because pots are empty containers, they do not contain any content whatsoever and potters sell empty pots. However, those who buy pots fill them. This reflects the openness of the concept of destiny and implies the freedom and responsibility of human will (who owns the pot) not a predestined rigid plan for life (Gbadegesin, 2004, pp. 52-55).

Destiny also has a moral character. Religion as morality plays an important role in the life of the African; a proper reading of religion in African metaphysics cannot separate it from communalism. The moment one disrupts the relation between religious duties and their role in maintaining the unity of community, religion becomes mere superstitions. Religion, its metaphors and its duties are all directed towards the maintenance of unity. Notice that making sacrifice enabled Afuwape to overcome obstacles and make a good choice. However, this success brought about by sacrifice does not in any way imply a belief in supernaturalism but the priority of communalism. This is shown in the tale that communalism is an important dimension in the concept of destiny because Afuwape went to his father house, which was a step for good destiny. He did not for instance do some magic on his own, he went for his father (communalism) who were hosting some diviners (religion) (Gbadegesin, 2004, p. 52). This signifies the importance of family values, which are the core element in African community and the condition for a happy life, which was eventually the reward for Afuwape. Destiny also is not fate because Ori is alterable by sacrifice and divination; this is proven from the tale that Afuwape altered a potential destiny by his own will when he rejected to follow blindly like his friends. This, in some manner, supports my argument that Ori, which is the concept of destiny, does not indicate determinism or fatalism but existentialism, that is, responsibility of oneself for his choices and his ability to make his own fate. (Gbadegesin, 2004, pp. 55-57).

All the above refutes the argument that the African concept of destiny implies a predetermined fate or a life potentiality because it is more of a reflection of the freedom of choice

and the responsibility for the consequences. This confounds the claims that African metaphysics is supernatural and superstitious. It is in fact more encouraging the freedom and responsibility for one's choices before his community. One need not to mention also the notions of responsibility in both Islamic and Christian theology, which are the prevalent religions in the continent as well.

Also, Menkiti's concept of extended materialism and p'Bitek's assertion that Africans do not think metaphysically are important evidence as well, in which they indicate that Africans are empiricists. However, the terms they use are largely taken from the spiritual world, which consequently makes non-African misunderstand them and accuse Africans of supernaturalism. For example, it does not differ whether boiling water would kill microbes or "evil spirits" as long as the African thinks that boiling water is important to avoid disease and protect health (Menkiti, 2004, p. 110).

All this refutes the claims that argued, as we before mentioned, that African traditions reflect African supernaturalism, African belief in superstition or African fatalism. Notions of responsibility, practicality and empiricism are very clear and deep in the African metaphysics. The failure to translate and interpret the metaphysical African concepts led – among other factors – to these accusations and to a misunderstanding of African political metaphysics. This misunderstanding of how metaphysic plays a role in the orientation of Africans towards politics is the core of the coming section. It is argued here that the misapprehension of the African metaphysical concept of time during the institution of the imported modern state transformed this modern state to a dysfunctional medium of authority. This study of the disjuncture between the African temporality and the modern state temporality opens a novel venue to understand some of the causes of the state crises and conflicts in Africa.

2.3 African concept of time

To understand how Africans – according to Mbiti – perceive their being in the world and how they make sense of it, it is important to explain his ideas on the African concept of time.

The African concept of time is not just an elucidation of how Africans perceive time as an occurring phenomenon or how one should value or order his tasks temporally. The concept of time as illustrated by Mbiti reflects Africans' orientation towards the world, their preferences and potentialities.

Mbiti argued that Africans perceive time in a radically different manner if compared with the western perception (Mbiti, 1969a, 1969b, p. 19). The western modern man calculates time, as if it is a given limit he moves within. Time for the western is the amount left or to come within certain fixed range. It is three dimensional, namely, the past "what had happened", the present "the fleeting moment" and the future "what is still to come, what is expected and – more importantly – what is planned". This open orientation towards future and ordering (and reordering) of priorities according to mere futuristic claims are what makes the western modern concept of time different from its African counterpart.

However, what is the African concept of time? Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophy* claims that African time is two dimensional, and he uses two Swahili words to describe these dimensions, namely, *Sasa* and *Zamani*. It is often terribly mistranslated that Sasa, in English, stands for the present of fleeting moments and Zamani for the past of already finished events. This is the worst injustice one could make to Mbiti's work [2].

Sasa, as Mbiti states,"is not just a point of NOW in time, it is the period in which people exist, and within which they project themselves into the past and into the future, the sasa is a time period with a future, a present and a past" (Mbiti, 1971, p. 160; Burleson, 1986, p. 135); while Zamani is "the storehouse of all phenomenon and events, a vast ocean of time where everything gets absorbed into an aspect of reality, which is neither after nor before" (Burleson, 1986, p. 136; Mbiti, 1971, p. 161).

Before starting to explain Mbiti's concept of time, one has to bear in mind Mbiti's famous remark": history moves backward" (Mbiti, 1969a, 1969b). Sasa, for Mbiti, is not simply the present, but it is history, or in Mircea Eliade [3] terms, "profane time". It is the time which man fell into after Adam left Eden and lost perfection. Therefore, Sasa is the time period within, which man suffers the pains of his imperfection. It is the time which knows neither end nor radical alteration. It is the ageless mundane rhythm of birth, life death, birth, life, death, ad infinitum (Burleson, 1986, pp. 135-136). It is the human history with its terrors of weariness, movement and fatigue (Burleson, 1986, p. 138). It is a time period in which man suffers the loss of perfection, suffers pain, error and hunger. It is the profane time.

Mbiti, in one of his poems, describes this profane time of Sasa as the period of pain and imperfection, the period with no end or rest, the period when Death reigns.

Zamani, in contrast, is the sacred time. It is the ideal golden age of the past, when man enjoyed perfection in his initial status in Eden. It is the ideal perfection that man longs for, the days of the ancestors, the time when time stops with its pains. It is the enjoyment of eternity, of perfection and stability. Zamani is not to be categorized with reference to time, it is perhaps best called "timelessness". It is the actuality of the ideal. It is neither after nor before, so it is not easily past or future because it is not found in the movement of time (Burleson, 1986, p. 136). It is the timeless perfection of eternity.

However, what is the relation between Sasa and Zamani? As Mbiti stated, history for the African moves backward from Sasa to Zamani. He looks to restore the ideal of the sacred time of Zamani and is able to return periodically to it through rituals and abolish Sasa history (Burleson, 1986, p. 138). He longs to return to Zamani because, in this return, he is able to find equilibrium and rest. In it, he transcends time, lives eternity and enjoys a sense of perfection and relief. That's why Mbiti stated that for the African − and in Mircea Eliade's for the general non modern "archaic man"− history moves backward in a feeling of nostalgia to the status of initial perfection of man in some immemorial past or in eternity. For the African, to enjoy this timelessness, he has to restore the values or at least the feelings of that ideal past through rituals or practices cherishing the values of that past. These practices include cherishing the ideal values of the community as well.

However, why the African Zamani is equivalent mostly with the past, however, it is not necessarily so? Mbiti stresses the vital role played by African religion in the morality and memory of the Africans. Africans, through rituals and songs, restore the memories of ancestors and the perfection of their past. The very values of the past are restored in rituals with their eternity, transcendence of history and happiness, same as transfiguration in Christianity restores the presence of the Christ. Yet, it has to be born in mind that the orientation towards the past does not mean merely being attached to what happened in the past history. The past of Mbiti's Zamani is not the normal past he rejects attaching Zamani to. The past that the African longs for is the ideal of perfection, "an Eden eternity"; it is just a matter of detail that the period of perfection that man enjoyed is narrated in the "past tense" within the African heritage. If that ideal of eternity and rest from history will happen in the future, the African according to Mbiti will long for it. Because, for the African, it is not just a matter of conservatism and philistinism of some past but a need to rest from history imperfections and a need to improve one's being by looking up to some perfect ideal. It does not matter whether this ideal was narrated as if it was in the past or future. However, the cultural and religious oral traditions of African and the preeminence of the storytelling style might be the reason why Zamani is usually narrated in the past tense. Zamani is an ideal described in the past tense, not a past event.

Therefore, it is important to understand the African concept of time within African communalism, not modern thinking. The African longs for and is oriented towards the past, not as a simple crude nostalgia, but because the past symbolizes the perfection and the values of the

ideal ancestry and offers the relief from history imperfections. By persistently following and restoring the values of ancestry, that is communalism, Africans seek shelter from the vagaries of the profane time to find security and peace of mind. That is, why it is very different to be modern, that is, to restrain yourself to seek an unknown futuristic goal called progress, which is, in a Mbitian sense, more or less a part of Sasa history, so its imperfections give no relief from history. In addition, modernity, by its nature, does not offer any shelter of moral or eternal perfection because the very concept of progress is open, progressive, restless, having no start, no end and no clear imaginary, same as the profane time Sasa, which the African tries to escape from, has no features of relief.

In brief, the African is oriented and longs for an ideal, that is, perfect and "already there", where he finds his serenity and peace. Africans can never bear a world open towards an unknown restless future, promising a continuously changing vague progress. This yearning towards the ideal was described in Mbiti's poetry as a yearning to "a timeless connection". Also this ideal – where an initial past is imagined – is perfect "closer to a paradise before youth", where tomorrow and yesterday is blended, when one is simply "beyond now" (Mbiti, 1969a, p. 42; Mbiti, 1969a, p. 14).

In conclusion to this section, African metaphysics with regard to moral and social preferences is practical, existential, aware of choice and responsibility, finds its frame of reference in communalism, where it finds its meaning and values. Time for it moves backward in a constant longing, protecting and restoring of the past ideal values of the community.

3. African temporality, modern state temporality and conflict

To understand how African temporality interacts with the modern state in a context plagued with conflicts, one has to understand a set of things: the notion and temporality of the modern state, how it was – as a state – imposed on the African context and how the African temporality welcomes or repels its western modern counterpart.

The modern nation state theory, as was elaborated originally in the work of Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan* (Hobbes, 1651) and Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* (Spinoza, 2007), emerged from some conception of "state of nature", in which human beings were discrete individuals having different interests and their natural rights gave them the ability over whatever they want. Because of this situation, they later clashed with each other in some war of all against all. Rationally enough, they decided to get out of this dangerous situation by erecting some absolute authority through a social contract to guard them against one another and to prevent the reemergence of war. They abandoned their natural rights and liberties for the sake of protecting their lives. This notion of the modern state took other forms in the works of Locke (2016) and Rousseau (2015). However, what they agree upon is that originally human beings were individuals, each having his own interests, and that individuals erected authority because otherwise they might engage in a deadly struggle.

The very unit of agency in the modern state is the individual. The virtue of the state is its sovereignty, that is its ability to impose law and order, and the promise of this modern state is progress: that is, the freedom from any irrational authority over man because man, through his rational choice *par excellence* of making the contract to end conflict, announced the rule of reason to seek security, well-being and progress and this is not an imposition of any external will but that of man himself. The very deterrence inherent in the mechanism of the modern state is its threatening prospect of a bleak future of chaos in case citizens chose disobedience. This future prospect deters the state present subjects and maintains their obedience. Therefore, in the modern state there is an individual, deterred by a future threat, purchasing the future progress by selling his present freedom to the authority. For a deeper understanding of this modern temporality, one can resort to the works of David Carvounas and Andrew Russ (Carvounas, 2002; Russ, 2012).

However, if this is the pure theory of the modern state as emerged in the west, how was this structure of power and temporality enmeshed into African realities and how this enmeshment altered some of its features and kept others? If one revisits the contributions of the Africanist thinkers studying the crises of the African state, one can find some minimal traces of a kind of disparity between the modern state and the African subjectivity. Although these Africanist critics did not expand specifically on the issue of disparate temporalities, one can still link their ideas to our current enterprise.

In one of his remarks on the birth of the native question, Mamdani mentioned how Jan Smuts, the philosopher statesman and founder of institutional segregation in South Africa, later on apartheid, imagined the African race to be childish (Mamdani, 1996, p. 4). The metaphor of the child has signification of an immense importance to the argument of this paper. Not only apartheid colonizers, the exemplar model of colonialism for Mamdani, believed that African institutions are primitive but also the western institutions are ahead of black time because they are mature. This signifies how the modern mentality believes in some trajectory of human progress culminating in the western way of life. However, the dilemma is that colonials did not believe that Africans can progress in time and maturity to be able to adopt western standards, still they imposed their state on them. Regardless of the racist significations in Smut's idea, seemingly it was clear for colonizers that Africans and westerners represent two different temporalities, namely, western colonizers perceived African temporality as fixed "Peter Pan childhood" while their institutions represent a progressive temporality (Mamdani, 1996, p. 4).

This confirms the argument that I will develop later from the Mbitian framework about the disparity of African and modern temporality and that the African temporality because it was past-oriented (i.e. Zamani oriented), appeared to be fixed/childish for modern westerners who think from a future oriented frame of reference. Then, aside from the racist Smut's remarks, colonial authorities perceived the unsuitability of their institutions to Africans, still they forced them. This enforcement was grotesque to the extent that colonials understood that their state is superior, oriented towards future progress, but they denied Africans any ability to fit into it. The question is why then to impose such a state? The answer is to serve white colonizers regardless of the extent of damage and coercion practiced against African bodies and traditions.

One can find the same minimal trace of this clash of temporalities in Mkandawire's study of the developmental state in which he focussed on the impossibility narratives imposed on Africa by external political, financial and monetary institutions (Mkandawire, 2001). These narratives imagine a certain trajectory of progress but deny African states any ability to catch it. Even the theories that apparently favoured African claims such as dependency theory, claimed that although capitalist development has a certain trajectory, periphery countries cannot be part of it (Mkandawire, 2001, p. 297). Then, same as Mamdani's colonizers understood the temporal disparities between the African and the modern, yet they still imposed their state with a seal of denial of any African ability to access that state. Mkandawire's foreign institutions argued that African economies are outside the normal development of capitalism, yet they still forced their neo-liberal agendas on African states with a seal of denial of any African ability of development. The first seal of denial bore the name of racial childhood and the second seal of denial bore the name of impossibility narratives. In Mamdani, the imposition of modern state led to a regime of forceful coercive confinement against Africans who are seen to be unfit for urbanity. The second imposition of neoliberal agendas on African states for Mkandawire meant stripping the African state of its capacities in an endless manner under the claims of liberating economy. It is like imprisoning someone in a cell with no reason, no hope of release and denying him the status of a

prisoner. The imposition of western institutions on Africa was like an arbitrary extra-legal arrest against morality, reason, right and with no clear route to exit.

In the same vein and to enrich the discussion on disparate political temporalities before going into the Mbitian framework, one can finally consider Issa Shivji's work on African nationalism as a story of how African nationalism was hijacked outside of its political temporality to be situated later in a totally irrelevant western temporality. The national question that originally stresses Panfricanism, independence (freedom) and equality was hijacked by external forces through the means of a compradorised national bourgeoisie, globalization, NGOs and neoliberal shifts (Shivji, 2003, p. 8). This hijacking of African nationalism transformed its Panfricanist anti-imperialist feature into quasi-western approach of statist unity, an approach stressing sovereignty not unity against imperialism (Shivji, 2011). The freedom and equality elements were transformed into a form of liberal economic freedom and abstract individualism. The former gave another blow that sidelined the African state more from the struggle against imperialism, and the later transformed equality into a liberal equality of abstract individuals, and these individuals were stripped of any social or nationalist causes. They became, through imported civil society NGOs, a force against the African state and the nationalist claim (Shivji, 2003, pp. 9-10). This process was like taking the national cause from its temporal trajectory that seeks to eliminate imperialism. Instead, nationalism was trapped into an alien temporality that requires from nationalism to abandon its elements to imitate a western, minimal, individual, liberal state. To sum up, while Mamdani and Mkandawire perceived the process of imposing the western over the African as a process of forcing a certain temporality while suppressing other, Shivji can be said to perceive the process as of uprooting and hijacking nations from their temporal trajectory and set them in an alien, and even in an enemy temporal trajectory.

Back to our main interest of using the Mbitian African concept of time to understand the African modern state conflicts, the African perception of authority radically differs from its western/modern counterpart. Authority of the African king comes from ancestral arrangements, from an established order secured by the lived history of the group, not by some imaginary of discrete individuals once lived a state of nature. Should the elders or kingmakers find a serious violation on the part of the king of the sort that they consider an unacceptable threat to the values and survival of community, they are not likely to be restrained by any supernatural conviction, any other worldly consideration or "any futuristic abstract threat of war of all against all" [4] with regard to their effort to remove the king (Menkiti, 2004, p. 131).In other words, the African seeks the interest of his community. If the authority in power, under any claim or promise, violated or transgressed on it, he will resist it, unafraid of any prospect of chaos or conflict. He just does not care about abstract futurism, he cares primarily about his community, its present and its protection against the vagaries of the Sasa pains and imperfections. Yet, one has to bear in mind that what an African considers as a community might be larger or narrower than his fellow African counterparts. This depends on the extent of penetration undertaken by the state and society.

With the advent and the spread of colonialism in the continent, the modern state was established. Then, after independence, the structure of the modern state remained. With a series of ideological changes after the end of the cold war, most of the continent adopted representative democracy. Representative democracy assumes that self-interested individuals will align in parties making the democratic process, bu because the Africans are initially not individuals but "group members" of some ethnicity or some group seeking its interest, the democracy-of-an-assumed-rational-individual-citizens became a democracy of self-interested ethnic/group competitions.

Also, as the modern state is structurally oriented towards the future, while the African is conceptually oriented towards the past (Zamani), the modern state mechanism could not convince African elites to abide because seeking merely the future gives no relief. So, most African elites used the modern state according to what they got used to in their life, that is, to secure themselves from Sasa and/or to protect their ethnicity/close group from poverty, hunger and pain by restoring the values of the past, which is ethnic/group loyalty. So, the state became a tool to secure the ethnicity or the group from the vagaries and pain of the present.

Then, as the other ethnicities/competing groups who are disadvantaged by this ruling group find this against the interest of their community or, even in a typical secular view, against their self-interest, they will find themselves undeterred by any future prospect of chaos and will openly resist the authority that exposes them to Sasa. This is not to support the studies that accuse the African mentality to be behind the failure of democracy, but rather the manner in which democracy is designed to divide and align people into self-interested political parties opened the way for Africans to divide and align but according to their own conditions, conditions of ethnic/group loyalties. The problem is the unsuitability of structure to culture, not of culture to structure because at the end of the day the structure is the dress not the tailor.

This is the story of conflict in the continent, as the rise of the modern state. Each partner cannot accept the future orientation of some promise of vague progress offered by the modern state to suspend his deep rooted loyalty to the past and instead he starts to invoke the Zamani of his group or, in worst case, of the Zamani his own interest, which might expose his counterparts to disadvantage (and to Sasa). This, in turn, would make them feel an aggression on their collective Zamani and on their interests. Consequently, they would not be deterred by any fear of future anarchy and will resist openly. Resistance might take the form of violent conflict, corruption, withdrawal or rebellion because the notions of a redemptive future or a punishing mechanism in the future do not suit the African concept of time that cherishes the values of the Zamani and believes in the arbitrariness of Sasa and its lack of any mechanisms (Sasa is history with its entire phases, namely, past, present and future). Future is part of an arbitrary vicious sphere of time (Sasa history), which cannot be counted upon or cared for. You just violate Zamani and you will get a punch!

Then, is it merely a conflict of ethnic Zamani(s) that instigates ethnicities/groups against each other, corrupts the state and sparks conflict in Africa? No. It is not that simple. The problem lies also in the framework of identity offered by the modern nation state. The nation state does not embrace a conceptual framework that would enable all the ethnicities/groups to perceive the state to be their larger community, so that they can together seek one Zamani, that is, of the state and fight one Sasa.

On the contrary, the problem with the modern state framework of identity lies in its notion of citizenship(individuals are equal against the law).This conception of citizenship innate in the modern nation state boils down to be crude individualism, ignoring the group loyalty of individuals, which is an essential part of the African personhood (Shivji (2003) remarks earlier). As long as this notion of citizenship is intact, group/ethnic loyalties will easily substitute it because Africans are basically not individuals but group members. Then, as long as the state did not raise the level of its notion of citizenship from individuals against the law to accept Africans' being group members, the problem will continue. Also, if the state did not raise the level of identity of the Africans from the ethnic community to the level of some national community that the African protects its Zamani from its Sasa, Africans would find no obstacle at all against invoking their ethnic loyalties, protecting their ethnic group from Sasa at the expense of other groups. Then in doing so, they are essentially unafraid of any redemptive future of chaos and unrestrained by any futurist promise of progress. What promises could lie in a future within Sasa, in a world of insecurities!

The state should feel for the African as his community, protecting him from the pains of Sasa and restoring the perfection of the Zamani. This has to be originated from the lower level of the group; this has also to be lived in the history of this or that ethnicity to be accepted as an arrangement for authority. The state authority should be originated from ethnic/group arrangements and consensuses not from a top down decision of the colonial governor or the post-independence leader. Name it a new social contract or consociational democracy or whatever, yet the state should be originated from some ethnic/group arrangement. Then after this ethnic/group origination of authority is made, this has to be done on a collective scale. The whole process has to be directed to fight the national Sasa, that is, to eradicate poverty, hunger and disease for all, not just for some group, but in respect to all group interests and never to trespass them.

To achieve this, the state and Africans need to achieve three things. Firstly, they need to re-orient the state mechanisms towards the national Zamani ideal agreed upon in the ethnic origination of power, that is, to save Africans from the pains of the Sasa by restoring well-being for all. Secondly, they need to respect the cultural loyalties of the different groups in the state and not to erode them for a certain hegemonic culture because culture contains the value of the sacred Zamani and violating Zamani instigates conflict. Thirdly, they need to raise the level of identity from the typical western individualist citizenship to a level where the state becomes the all gathering community. This can be done in the group/ethnic common origination of authority through democracy, negotiation, consensus or any means that fits. Otherwise, ethnic loyalties will replace citizenship and the state would be a tool for opportunism and conflict.

4. Conclusions
The conflict in Africa is caused, among many things, by the discrepancy between the African political temporality and western modern state temporality. The modern nation state, by its futuristic, individualistic orientation, failed to suit the African communalist Zamanic (past) orientation. This made Africans use the structure of the modern state to serve ethnic/group interests at the expense of other groups' interests, paving the way for a situation of open and continuous resistance to authority. This resistance is undeterred by any future prospect of chaos as a redemptive punishment to resistance. As Africans are Zamani (past) oriented, they will not restrain their behaviours for any futuristic promises cut from their Zamanic communalist vision. The future cannot, by itself, deter Africans if their present suffers pains, imperfections and disadvantage.

Notes

1. International Financial Instituions (IFI), Breton wood institutions (BWIs).

2. Among the best works elucidating Mbiti's concepts is Blake Wiley Burleson PhD thesis (Burleson, 1986), in which, by his thorough study of Mbiti's theology, philosophy and poetry, he explained with solid justifications the true meaning of the contested concept of time.

3. Mircea Eliade, A Romanian historian and philosopher (1907-1986).

4. My addition to the original quotation.

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