

“There is no hurry in Botswana”: Scholarship and stereotypes on “African time” syndrome in Botswana, 1895-2011*

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Punctuality increases productivity. Any wonder then why things don't quite work the way they should in Nigeria? “African time” is not just restricted to our social life; it has eaten deep into the fabric of our economic activities and every other aspect of our existence. Nanna Selkur (27 July 2011)

Why should people who have been told by their colonizers that they have no history learn to keep time? Making history and keeping time go together. Joel Omoding (29 October 2011)

Abstract

The lack of a strict and disciplined adherence to keeping time or punctuality has been an issue of major concern to many authorities in the African public and private sectors. Botswana is no exception, as this article will demonstrate. So pervasive is lack of punctuality among Africans in sub-Saharan Africa that a stereotypical notion of “African time” gained currency a long time ago and is still prevalent to this day. Undoubtedly, this attitude towards time negatively affects the productivity and economic performance of numerous African countries, such as Botswana, in their seemingly futile endeavour to become competitive globally and attract the much sought after foreign direct investment (FDI). In this article we try to make sense of African time from the scholarship on the African traditional socio-economic and environmental factors relating to time, as well as the popular stereotypical views of African time. This article shows that African time among the Batswana is something that frustrated the Victorian missionaries in the late nineteenth century. We also discuss how African time has translated into expression of political power by tribal and national political leaders. The problem of African time continues to be prevalent in the twenty-first century Botswana where a poor work ethic is also believed to be a major impediment to doing business in the country.

Keywords: Time; African Time; Tswana-time; Foreign Direct Investment; Productivity; Political Power; Precision Instruments; Punctuality; Global Competitiveness.

* This article is dedicated to Dr Bruce S Bennett for his service as Head of the History Department at the University of Botswana from 2011 to 2014.

Introduction

The debate on the question of African time and its impact on the national economies of African countries is dominated by apologists of the African time phenomenon on the one hand, and on the other, by Africans and non-Africans who rubbish the practice as suicidal in the competitive global economy. Whereas some of the supporters of African time provide philosophical explanations that take into account African culture and traditional religion, a significant number seem to be responding out of pride and even egotism.

However, the article does not necessarily provide the answer to the question of the pervasiveness of the African time syndrome among sophisticated, urbanised, westernised and Christianised Africans, whether on the continent or in the Diaspora. This is a subject of further inquiry. The article attempts to make sense of the debate that so far seems to be mostly confined to the internet bloggers and without a thorough academic grounding, particularly one that takes history, heritage and globalization into account. However, as shown below there is appreciable scholarship on the phenomenon of ‘Time’ from as far back as the pre-colonial period among Africans. This differs from the stereotypes of African time which we are concerned with here.

The historical aspect assesses African time in relation to similar phenomenon in the development of industrial and capitalist European nations. There is a section on the concerns raised by Victorian missionaries and colonial government officials against African time or “Tswana-time” from the late nineteenth century Botswana right up to the time of the country’s independence in 1966. The discussion is then broadened to focus on stereotype of African time and its social and economic impact in Africa and the diaspora. This is followed by a section demonstrating that while the discourse of African time and general inefficiency in the public service became endemic in Botswana since the early 1980s, the early years of independence were different.

The African time syndrome has been quite common in Botswana despite the fact that the country has been hailed as an “African success story” and “African Miracle” in terms of economic development since independence from British colonial rule in 1966.² The syndrome of African time is closely linked to the

2 I Samatar, *African miracle: State and class leadership and colonial legacy in Botswana development* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1999); JC Leith, *Why Botswana prospered?* (Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 2005); D Acemoglu, S Johnson and JA Robinson, “An African success story: Botswana”, CEPR Discussion Article 3219 (available at http://articles.ssrn.com/sol3/articles.cfm?abstract_id=304100, as accessed on 10 February 2011).

prevalent poor work ethic which is believed to be holding the country back in terms of doing business.³

Scholars on time and African concept of time

As indicated above there is established corpus of literature on the subject or concept of time among Africans. In terms of historical study Joseph Adjaye’s collection of essays entitled *Time in the Black Experience* appears to be one of the leading contributions in the field.⁴ It is a collection of some 10 essays by experts from various disciplines. The essays focus on some societies in southern⁵, east,⁶ west,⁷ and central Africa⁸ as well as the Diaspora.⁹ Adjaye provides a helpful review of the literature on the subject, so much that we feel there is no need for us to repeat it here. This includes the pioneering effort of Kenyan, Reverend John Mbiti in the form of his 1969 book *African Religions and Philosophy*.¹⁰ However, Mbiti briefly discusses the theme of time in the context of traditional religion among Africans because he sees their lives as revolving around cosmology whether it is a matter of birth, marriage, death, and even agricultural production. This is not dissimilar to Professor James Amanze’s study of African traditional religions and culture in Botswana.¹¹

3 CJ Makgala, “The discourses of poor work ethic in Botswana, 1930-2010”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 39(1), 2013, pp. 45-57. We acknowledge that using the quantitative approach may have bolstered our study in assessing how African time negatively impacted on the Botswana’s economy over the years. Unfortunately, we could not get the data because it seems no such a study has been undertaken. Perhaps, it can be considered for future work.

4 JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience* (Westport, CT, London, Greenwood Press, 1994).

5 K Atkins, “‘Kaffir Time’: Preindustrial temporal concepts of labor discipline in nineteenth-century Natal”, JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, pp. 121-140.

6 A Mazrui and L Mphande, “Time and labor in colonial Africa: The case of Kenya and Malawi”, JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, pp. 97-120.

7 JK Adjaye, “Time, identity, and historical consciousness in Akan”, JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, pp. 55-78; K Koné, “Time and culture among the Bamana/Mandinka and Dogon of Mali”, JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, pp. 79-96.

8 KK Bunseki Fu-Kiau, “Ntangu-Tandu-Kolo: The Bantu-Kongo concept of time”, JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, pp. 17-34.

9 KM Bilby, “Time and history among a marooned people: The Aluku”, JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, pp.141-160; JK Adjaye, “Jamaican Maroons: Time and historical identity”, JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, pp. 161-182; M Sobel, “Early American attitudes towards time and work”, JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, pp. 183-198; JE Holloway, “Time in the African diaspora: The Gullah experience”, JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, pp. 199-212.

10 JS Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy* (Oxford, Heinemann, 1969), p. 16.

11 JN Amanze, *African traditional religions and culture in Botswana* (Gaborone, Pula Press, 2002). Other helpful sources are I Schapera, *A handbook of Tswana law and custom* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1938); I Schapera, *Married life in an African tribe* (London, Faber and Faber, 1940); I Schapera, *Migrant labour and tribal life* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1947); G Sitiloane, *The image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam, AA Belkema, 1976).

According to Mbiti “The concept of time may help to explain beliefs, attitudes, practices and general way of life of African peoples not only in the traditional set up but also in the modern situation (whether of political, economic, educational or Church life)”.¹² Although Mbiti’s contribution has its critics¹³ it is also influential in some of the contributions in Adjaye’s compilation.

Adjaye is of the view that, “During the colonial period (about 1885-1960), uncritical and distorted observations by missionaries, travellers, and colonial administrators reinforced the Western vision of Africans as inferior people, and pseudo-justification for the inferiority of black and darker [people] was found in the Hamitic myth”.¹⁴ We are told that these views influenced Europeans’ views on the Africans’ “unimpressive” response to mechanical time and dismissal of Africans as having had no history worthy of documentation. Adjaye support this by citing the English historian Hugh Trevor-Roper’s infamous 1963 statement in which he referred to African past as nothing more than the “unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe”.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Adjaye also notes some pioneering colonial period anthropologists such as Edward Evans-Pritchard’s 1939 path-breaking study entitled “Nuer Time Reckoning” which focuses on the Nuer people of southern Sudan. According to Adjaye, “above all, he [Evans-Pritchard] demonstrates that time in Africa and other pre-capitalist societies –and, for that matter, everywhere – is a product of culture and the environment rather than intellectual capacity”.¹⁶

Mbiti also provides ways through which time is reckoned among the African communities. His assessment is not different to that obtaining among the Batswana, as we demonstrate in a later section. Mbiti says that when it comes to time reckoning and chronology:¹⁷

Instead of numerical calendars, there are what one would call phenomenon calendars, in which the events or phenomena which constitute time are reckoned or considered in their relation with one another and as they take

12 J Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy...*, p. 16.

13 AS Moreau, “A critique of John Mbiti’s understanding of the African concept of time” (available at http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ajet/05-2_036.pdf, as accessed on 10 August 2015); SF Babalola and OA Alokun, “African concept of time, a socio-cultural reality in the process of change”, *Journal of Education and Practice*, 4(7), 2013, pp. 143-147; E Beyaraza, *The African concept of time: A critical study of various theories* (Kampala, Makerere University Press, 2000).

14 JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, p. 2.

15 H Trevor-Roper’s Broadcast lecture reprinted from *The Listener*, London, 28 November 1963, p. 871.

16 JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, p. 4.

17 J Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy...*, p. 19.

place, i.e. as they constitute time. For example, an expectant mother counts the lunar months of her pregnancy; a traveller counts the number of days it takes him to walk (in former years) from one part of the country to another. The day, the month, the year, one's life time or human history, are all divided up or reckoned according to their specific events, for it is these that make them meaningful.

For example, the rising of the sun is an event which is recognized by the whole community. It does not matter, therefore, whether the sun rises at 5 a.m. or 7 a.m., so long as it rises. When a person says that he will meet another at sunrise, it does not matter whether the meeting place takes [sic] at 5 a.m. or 7 a.m., so long as it is during the general period of sunrise. Likewise, it does not matter whether people go to bed at 9 a.m. or 12 midnight; the important thing is the event of going to bed, and it is immaterial whether in one night this takes place at 10 p.m., while in another it is at midnight. For the people concerned, time is meaningful at the point of the event and not at the mathematical moment.

Mbiti furthermore observes that: "In western or technological society, time is a commodity which must be utilized, sold and bought; but in traditional African life, time has to be created or produced. Man is not slave of time; instead, he 'makes' as much time as he wants". He also cautions against what he views as the ignorance of European and American visitors in African societies who usually complain about Africans always being late for appointments or work, or for sitting down idle. Denbow and Thebe observe that Batswana are informal about time.¹⁸ For example, people can be fashionably late for a wedding by coming an hour or more late. However, as this article shows, this attitude has had negative and unwanted impact on productivity in many African economies.

Keletso Atkins, in her fascinating study on the cultural origins of an African work ethic in the British colony of Natal (South Africa) in the second half of the nineteenth century, demonstrates how the Zulu's idea of month-end through observing the moon was roughly at variance with the European commercial and capitalist observance of the calendar for month-end. "The moon is dead! Give us our money!" the Zulus would say to their European employers.¹⁹ The use of the lunar reckonings by the Zulu was condescendingly referred to as "Kafir month" as well as "Kafir time" by Europeans.²⁰

18 J Denbow and PC Thebe, *Culture and customs of Botswana* (Westport, CT, London, Greenwood Press), pp. 174-179.

19 KE Atakins, *The moon is dead! Give us our money! The cultural origins of an African work ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900* (Portsmouth, NH and London, Heinemann and James Currey, 1993).

20 KE Atkins, *The moon is dead!...*, p. 81.

According to Mbiti, the basic, African notion of time is central to what “underlies and influences the life and attitudes of African people in the villages and, to a great extent, those who work or live in the cities as well”.²¹ Perhaps, one may add that many of these Africans in the cities or urban areas of countries such as Kenya and Botswana, among many others, were expected to retire and go back to their villages of origin or to be buried there if they died in the urban areas. While Mbiti was writing in the late 1960s, when many or most Africans in the cities or urban areas had strong rural backgrounds and ties with their traditional religious beliefs, the same cannot be said about Christianised and westernised Africans in the cities in the new millennium. Starting around the late 1980s and early 1990s, a significant number of urban dwellers in Africa no longer have intentions of retiring to their villages or to be buried there when they die. They choose to remain in the urban areas where they can also be buried following death.²² Some of these people have significant investments in the urban areas and their connections with their rural roots have weakened considerably over the years. The British journalist Michela Wrong notes the case of John Githongo in Kenya:²³

In the process of opening up to the world, certain cultural baggage had to be jettisoned. In Kikuyu tradition, circumcision looms large. The Githongo boys certainly went under the knife, but for them a rite once staged on the banks of a river, with only cold water to numb the pain, was performed in hospital. Ask John and his contemporaries about traditional Kikuyu concepts such as *wiathi* – becoming master of one’s destiny – and like many urban Kikuyu their age, they will hesitate, shrug and look awkward. They prefer a Robert Ludlum thriller to the latest academic work on Mau Mau, and while they might visit ‘shags’ – slang for upcountry ‘shamba’ – at intervals and hold their grandparents in tender affection, that doesn’t mean they know a great deal about their roots.

She further notes that “A sociologist might look at the Githongo family and note a series of dislocations, physical and ideological, each serving to weaken the link between modern family and upcountry *shamba*”. The point we are trying to make here is that, while urban Africans have largely severed ties with their traditional religious and cultural practices which have a bearing on their attitude to time as explained by Mbiti above, these urbanites still largely conform to the syndrome of African time in official government, private

21 J Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy...*, pp. 19-20.

22 For a discussion of this point on Kenya see M Wrong, *It’s our turn to eat: The story of a Kenyan whistle blower* (London, Fourth Estate, 2009), pp. 146-147; and on Botswana see D Magang, *The magic of perseverance: The autobiography of David Magang* (Cape Town, Centre for Advanced Studies of African Societies, 2008), p. 366.

23 M Wrong, *It’s our turn to eat...*, p. 130.

business and personal interactions. Can lack of adherence to punctuality on the part of the new generation in the city with little or no regard for their traditional religion and culture, be attributed to their traditional religion nonetheless? It should be pointed out that some of these young people such as university students come from entrepreneurial backgrounds and also have entrepreneurial ambitions, and are well aware of the western and capitalist dictum, “Time is money”.

By contrast, it has been observed that Africans working in Europe and North America are punctual for work even if it means having to travel or drive in uncomfortable snowy conditions. Perhaps, the answer lies in the maxim “when in Rome do as the Romans do”, or else one could get sacked from his or her employment. However, such workers or professionals upon return to Africa do what most Africans do. According to Agyenim Boaten, a Ghanaian living in the United States, “Africans in the diaspora learn to keep time. We show up at work or appointments on time, because there is a price to pay for tardiness. Africans have a saying, ‘Africans do not wait for time, rather, time waits for Africans’. Time is money, and we are paying a heavy price for our tardiness”.²⁴ The Zimbabwean Professor CJM Zvobgo (a Sabbaticant in the History Department at the University of Botswana in the 1990s) ‘was of the view that, even when Africans have lived abroad and learned and practised the ways of the Westerners, when they return home, even as they are coming down the aeroplane, their Africanness descends on them like a swarm of bees. Whereas, when they were abroad, they used to assist the wife/partner in doing domestic chores, such as cooking, washing dishes, and changing the baby’s nappies, they react with umbrage to the wife/partner asking them to do any of the above. “What will my people think of me? That you gave me *korobela* and I succumbed to the extent of doing women’s work?”²⁵

Interestingly, the Englishman and historian Neil Parsons (former Professor of History at the University of Botswana), making reference to EP Thompson’s influential piece “Time, Work Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism”,²⁶ observes that even in Europe during the Industrial Revolution punctuality and discipline were a serious challenge for a very long time:²⁷

24 BBC News, “Can Africa keep time?” (available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3211923.stm>, as accessed on 11 November 2011).

25 Email: A Pongweni (University of Botswana/CJ Makgala and PC Thebe (Researchers), 2 December 2011.

26 EP Thompson, “Time, work discipline, and industrial capitalism”, *Past and Present*, 38, pp. 56-97.

27 Email: N Parsons (London/CJ Makgala and PC Thebe (Researchers), 9 May 2012. For a thorough treatment of the subject see D Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 230-231; EP Thompson, “Time, work discipline...”, *Past and Present*, 38.

The new industrial-capitalism not only emerged technologically with more and more complex clockwork (at Greenwich Observatory etc) from the 17th century onwards but also struggled in the early 19th century to impose notions of workplace discipline and time-keeping on factory workers (with hooters, bells, and particularly through the organization of old sports into new games governed by the clock and the whistle – which is why virtually every modern sport was invented or really reinvented in England in the 19th century), and how time was standardized and made precise first within England by the needs of the railways (telegraphs transmitting time checks along the railway lines to stations and railway timetables based on London time; previously every town had midday time when the sun was directly overhead, so Oxford midday and time was a few minutes later than London) and then within the world by undersea electronic telegraphs transmitting Greenwich Observatory time with exact hour time-zones on either side.

Another historian Bruce Bennett, who comes from New Zealand and has spent about 20 years teaching at the University of Botswana, emphasises Parsons' point by arguing that as far as the notion of African Time is concerned:²⁸

What people are noticing [regarding African time] is the result of an agrarian lifestyle in the very near past, and that similar patterns can be observed among Europeans before industrialization. I.e. Europeans found it hard to adapt to factory time when they had been used to time based on nature (in farming) or on events (e.g. the apprentice starts work when the master has finished breakfast and goes into the workshop). My point on religious time (...pre-industrial urbanization) was that Europeans had some cultural items which may have given some (even if limited) preparation for the transitions to industrial time. The conclusion of all this is, simply that it is not surprising or particularly 'African' for a society changing from agrarian to industrial life to experience time issues.

It is further observed that sociologists and anthropologists have often studied and conceptualised social attitudes toward time.²⁹ Following Emile Durkheim, time has often been taken as a social construct rather than a natural condition as Jack Goody illustrates: "Although all societies have some system of time reckoning, some idea of sequence and duration, the mode of reckoning clearly varies with the economy, ecology, and technical equipment; with the

28 Email: B Bennett (University of Botswana/CJ Makgala and PC Thebe (Researchers), 14 March 2012.

29 B Adam, *Time in social theory* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1990); ND Munn, "The cultural anthropology of time: A critical essay", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21 (1992), pp. 931-923; DO Hughes and TR Trautmann (eds.), *Time: Histories and ethnologies* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1995).

ritual system; and with the political organization”.³⁰ According to Goody, the main elements of time occur in all human societies, but with different emphasis, sequence and duration, cyclical and linear patterns, and systems of time reckoning.³¹ Georges Gurvitch in a famous study about different social times and time scales, identifies eight types of social time:³²

- Enduring Time: time of slowed down long duration;
- Deceptive Time;
- Erratic Time: time of irregular pulsation between the appearance and disappearance of rhythms;
- Cyclical Time;
- Retarded Time;
- Alternating Time: time alternating between delay and advance;
- Time in advance of itself or time pushing forward;
- Explosive Time.

Gurvitch correctly indicates that “ecological time” is a form of social time which corresponds to the external environment. Maurice Bloch argues, however, that while “ritual time” is ideologically motivated and indeed socially constructed it is “mundane time” based on cognitive universals and the observation of natural processes, thus not depending on social contexts.³³ His publication caused some controversy among anthropologists and sociologists who partly rejected his data and argument.³⁴

Johannes Fabian brings the idea of trivializing time and the past into focus. He mentions that “coevalness is anthropologist’s problem with Time”.³⁵ The whole theme is concerned with critically assessing the concept of time by anthropologists and archaeologists (and possible manipulation). He further argues that in writing about the “other” some anthropologists have created cultural constructions of time which “freezes” certain societies as “anthropological relics”, “primitive”, “savage”, and so forth.

30 J Goody, “Time: Social organization”, *International encyclopaedia of social sciences*, 16, 1991, p. 31; Also see C Holtorf, “Time perceptions” (available at <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/citd/holtorf/6.10.html>, as accessed on 23 December 2011).

31 J Goody, “Time: Social organization”, *International encyclopaedia of social sciences*, 16, 1991, p. 31.

32 G Gurvitch, *The spectrum of social time* (Dordrecht, Reidel, 1964), pp. 31-33.

33 M Bloch, “The past and the present in the present”, *Man*, 12, 1977, pp. 278-292; A Gell, *The anthropology of time: Cultural construction of temporal maps and images*, 9 (Oxford and Providence, Berg, 1992).

34 LEA Howe, “The social determination of knowledge: Maurice Bloch and Balinese Time”, *Man*, 16, 1981, pp. 220-234.

35 J Fabian, *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1983).

This structuralism has created stereotypes of looking at history of San-speaking peoples and other African communities in sub-Saharan Africa. As Mbiti tries to demonstrate, the African concept of time is part of a larger social relations and it is not simple. It has not developed in a linear way out of a single factor but we should consider alternatives in which human society has changed over time. It is argued that the structuralisms' problem of using "our" time to address "their" time is problematic and not simple.

Concerns about "Tswana-time" in colonial Botswana, 1895-1966

According to John and Jean Comaroff, "In 1818 the directors of the London Missionary Society (LMS) sent a mechanical clock to grace the church at its first mission among the Tswana in South Africa. No ordinary clock – its hours were struck by strutting British soldiers carved of wood – it became the measure of a historical process in the making. Clearly meant to proclaim the value of time in Christian, civilized communities, the contraption had an altogether unexpected impact. For the Africans insisted that the 'carved ones' were emissaries of a distant king who, with missionary connivance, would place them in a 'house of bondage'".³⁶ In other words, the Batswana rejected the clock as they perceived it as an instrument for loss of their traditional way of life owing to European missionary activity among them. Indeed this would pave the way for capitalist and colonial exploitation and dispossession of the Batswana and other African groups.

African Time or "Chuana-time" ("Tswana-time") as European missionaries called it, has very deep roots in Botswana, as indicated below by missionaries Hepburn and Willoughby of the LMS, as they proselytized among the Bangwato of Khama III in the 1890s:³⁷

Worshippers kept turning up late, Like Hepburn, Willoughby had to deal with what he referred to as 'Chuana-time', a phenomenon to which Willoughby would never fully reconcile. Hepburn's longing for a bell remained unfulfilled, whereas Willoughby's annoyance with the late comers produced better results. Khama presented him with a two and a half hundred weight bell intended to 'sound far', calling the faithful to worship – on time. A tower, paid for by

36 J Comaroff and J Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution, 1: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1991), p. xi.

37 J Rutherford, *Little giant of Bechuanaland: A biography of William Charles Willoughby missionary and scholar* (Gaborone, Botswana Society, Mmegi Publishing House and Botswana National Archives and Records Services, 2009), pp. 26-27.

Khama and some local Tswana and Europeans, was added to the Church, making it more ‘ornamental’. A nice appearance, as Willoughby admits, was not the intention, but the bell in its new tower failed to overcome the problem. Phalapye houses were scattered over a wide area. Even before Hepburn left, Phalapye’s population had reached 30 000 spread over twenty miles. Thus, the bell could only be heard across the town on wet days. Eventually, the bell was transferred to a small European church built near the populace. This proved more successful, but because it was so far from the Mission House, the deacons made responsible for ringing the bell were not always themselves free of the infection of ‘Chuana-time’.

It is interesting to note that during the visit to Britain in 1895 by three Batswana Chiefs, Khama III, Sebele I of the Bakwena and Bathoen I (Bangwaketse), meant to campaign against their territory falling into the hands of the unscrupulous British South Africa Company which belonged to the imperialist Cecil Rhodes,³⁸ they had agreed to their people paying tax for financing the administration of the Protectorate. They did this on the condition that Europeans would not collect the tax because they were impatient owing to their lack of understanding of the Batswana’s way of life and approach to time. The Chiefs stated that “We are willing to pay a tax. But if you send white men to collect these taxes from our people it will cause us pain. You can tell us how much we must collect from each man; and we will collect it from our sub-Chiefs and Headmen and from the little Chiefs of the smaller tribes which live in our country, who will collect it from their people and give it to us that we may give it to you. Our people will understand this. ‘But there will be trouble with a white man because he is always in a hurry’”.³⁹ (emphasis added). As we show below later in the post-independence period an adage “There is no hurry in Botswana” would become popular.

The requirements by Western institutions, such as the church and school, regarding punctuality and organisation or diligence, were not catered for by the traditional mode of living among the Batswana. Table 1 below provides information on how Batswana observed and treated time as they understood it from their daily activities instead of relying on a precision instrument in the form of mechanical clocks and watches used by missionaries:

38 N Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe and the great white queen: Victorian Britain through African eyes* (Chicago, Chicago University Press); P Maylam, *Rhodes, the Tswana, and the British: Colonialism, collaboration, and conflict in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1885-1899* (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1980).

39 A Pim, *Financial and economic position of the Bechuanaland Protectorate: Command 4368* (London, His Majesty Stationary Office, 1933), p. 37.

Table 1: Batswana’s concept of time relating to daily activities
(the list is not exhaustive and names differ from one tribal group to another)

No.	Setswana Concepts	English Translation
1	<i>Makuku a naka tsa kgomo</i>	Very early in the morning or before dawn
2	<i>Masa-a-sa</i>	Dawn break
3	<i>Dikoko di fologa</i>	At dawn when chickens descend from the trees
4	<i>Dikgomo di bolola</i>	Morning time when cattle are released from the kraal
5	<i>Mabolotso a dipudi</i>	Late morning when goats are released from the kraal
6	<i>Motsbegare wa setlhoboloko</i>	Mid-day
7	<i>Tadi e amusa</i>	Mid-day
8	<i>Tshokologo</i>	Late afternoon
9	<i>Maitsiboa</i>	Evening
10	<i>Bosigogare</i>	Midnight

The Batswana operated on the basis of the above notions of time and it served them well in their local environment and context. According to Rutherford, “It was all a far cry from the relatively carefree experience of the herdboys, whose clock was the sun, or the more leisurely round of home activities to which they were accustomed. In the ethos of African village life, or at ‘the lands’ or cattle-posts, such English boarding school requirements as adherence to timetables, rigid discipline, regular mealtimes, scrupulous attention to cleanliness, and similar practices, had little or no place. These new ways had to be mastered. It was a painful process and it is hardly surprising that there was some resistance”.⁴⁰ This was not different to the development in Europe during the industrialisation process as noted by Parsons and Bennett above. Even in work places of colonial Kenya and Malawi various forms of resistance were experienced.⁴¹

The way of life of the Batswana could not be compromised even when it came to church attendance. For instance, “no Motswana man would have gone to church leaving livestock in a kraal”, observes Professor Bojosi Othogile.⁴² This point seems to buttress one made by anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff, who argue that “Although they were eminently effective in transforming local lives, the evangelists failed precisely where they most

40 J Rutherford, *Little giant of Bechuanaland...*, p. 103. This resistance was experienced in work places of colonial Kenya and Malawi.

41 A Mazrui and L Mphande, “Time and labor in colonial Africa”, JK Adjaye (ed.), *Time in black experience...*, pp. 97-120.

42 Email: B Othogile (University of Botswana/CJ Makgala and PC Thebe (Researchers), 15 November 2011.

hoped to succeed, namely, in implanting an orthodox Protestant peasantry on African soil”.⁴³

In 1946 the issue of lack of punctuality was raised quite strongly by Resident Commissioner Aubrey Forsyth-Thompson during a session of the African Advisory Council, with the Batswana Chiefs in attendance. Forsyth-Thompson lamented that government officials were particularly frustrated by the lack of a sense of time on the part of the Batswana, even educated ones. According to him, that was “what accounts for the shortness of temper in a man [European] whose tradition is based on co-ordinated effort and punctuality”.⁴⁴ This does not seem to have changed the Batswana’s attitude towards time, which seems to have worsened later in the post-colony despite alarm clocks, wrist watches and, nowadays mobile phones being so common as we demonstrate below.

Political power and stereotypes of African time

Here we widen the debate to cover other parts of Africa and the diaspora. Stereotypical views by both Africans and non-Africans largely tend to be complaints about what is viewed as indiscipline when it comes to punctuality. On African time Neil Parsons comments:⁴⁵

I remember Radio Zambia’s time-checks being completely arbitrary, banging a gong and saying it was 8... o’clock precisely when the newsreader was ready and not what a precise clock said.

But I have always divided peasant time in Africa from royal time. Peasant time is measured by looking at the sun and guessing time. (Societies that live primarily out of doors don’t really need watches.) Royal time is to show power over and to humiliate the peasants. King Sobhuza [II of Swaziland] always arrived four or five hours later while we sat and broiled in the sun. Some politicians do the same just to make us feel small and powerless.

In post-independence Africa the political order has been seen as consisting of personal rule⁴⁶ by corrupt “Big men” brutally ruling helpless “little people”.⁴⁷

43 J Comaroff and J Comaroff, *Ethnography and the historical imagination* (Boulder, San Francisco and London, Westview Press, 1992), p. 36.

44 Bechuanaland Protectorate, *Minutes of the African Advisory Council* (Mafikeng, Government Printer, 1946).

45 Email: N Parsons (London)/CJ Makgala and PC Thebe (Researchers), 9 May 2012.

46 RH Jackson and CG Rosberg, *Personal rule in black Africa: Prince, autocrat, prophet, tyrant* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).

47 A Russell, *Big men little people: Encounters in Africa* (London, Pan, 2000).

As Parsons observes regarding what he calls “royal time” some politicians deliberately disrespect punctuality as a way of demonstrating their power. An interesting example was the inauguration of Kenya’s newly elected President Mwai Kibaki after defeating the long-serving Big man, Daniel Arap Moi in the 2002 elections as journalist Michela Wrong narrates the story:⁴⁸

The mood in the open-air stadium in Uhuru Park [in Nairobi] on 30 December 2002... was on the brink of turning ugly. Mostly male, mostly young, the audience was getting bored with waiting.

For much of the morning the mood had been cheerful. The thousands of Kenyans who had begun streaming into the amphitheatre at 7 a.m. for the presidential inauguration –first change of leadership via the ballot box since independence –had every reason to pat themselves on the back. With the simplest of acts, they had pulled off what felt like a miracle. They had queued patiently for hours in the sun, cast their ballots and in the process turned their backs on the retiring Daniel Arap Moi, twenty-four years at the helm, the president credited with reducing East Africa’s most prosperous economy to... homeland of bribe....

As the timetable slipped by two, then three, four, five hours, the amphitheatre steadily filled.... The ceremony was now running six hours late.

This scenario contrasts sharply to that of the iconic Nelson Mandela’s strict adherence to punctuality as reported by British journalist Alec Russell who had an appointment with him at his presidential office in South Africa: “I had just come back from central Africa, where presidents close down their capitals for the slightest errand and keep you waiting as a mark of their power. With Mandela, however, it was a point of honour to make the opposite true. Indeed his office had called me in the middle of the morning to inform me he would be half an hour early. Mercifully for the stress levels of the hotel staff, he changed his mind at the last minute and made a detour via a relation before arriving bang on the time”.⁴⁹

African time has caused a great deal of disquiet and self-criticism among some Africans, who feel that this kind of attitude towards time has led to missed economic opportunities and lack of development in their countries. For instance, one concerned Ghanaian observes that “One of the main reasons for the continuing underdevelopment of our country is our nonchalant attitude to time and the need for punctuality in all aspects of life. The problem of punctuality has become so endemic that lateness to any function is accepted

⁴⁸ M Wrong, *It’s our turn to eat...*, pp. 1-3.

⁴⁹ A Russel, *Big men little people...*, p. 244.

and explained off as 'African time'".

An interesting incident regarding "African royal time" took place in October 2003 in London during the visit of King Otumfuo Osei Tutu II of the Ashanti in Ghana. He arrived two hours late at an important event in London, as explained below:⁵⁰

Last week for instance, international journalists in the UK were kept waiting by the king of Ghana's largest ethnic group, who was visiting Alexandra Palace in north London at the climax of a Ghanaian trade exhibition, Ghana Expo 2003. The journalists had been informed that Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, from the Ashanti, would arrive at the exhibition at 1100. The time was changed to 1400, but the king did not show up until two hours later, when the journalists had already packed and left. The incident only helped reinforce the belief held by many people in the developed world that Africans are terrible time-keepers.

Cases of a government minister keeping members of the public waiting, a friend turning up late for a date, a judge holding up court proceedings, or a public service vehicle leaving and arriving late, have become the norm rather than the exception.

The BBC's Africa Live programme responded to this story by asking its listeners the question, "Is poor time-keeping Africa's worst enemy?" which elicited quite interesting responses for and against African time from Africans and non-Africans the world over. Blake Evans-Pritchard, a British reporter who had covered the event, wrote, "I was a journalist at the Ghana Expo and, though I tried to be kind to the organisers in my article, I believe that the time-keeping of Africans is a very real problem for them, economically speaking. Here was a wonderful opportunity for Ghanaians to showcase their country, and prove that the business potential there was great, and what did they do - kept the press and the businessmen waiting in the cold, whilst their king made his leisurely way there. This was a real shame".

As for Elias Mutungi, from Uganda and based in the United States, "In Africa time is taken for granted as if it is a renewable resource, and we 'mismanage' time as we do to other resources.... Unless there is a strong drive for time management, everything in Africa will always be behind schedule". A certain Mike in Kenya took a view not dissimilar to that of his compatriot, John Mbiti, above, "Africans do not keep time because of our cultural background that is quite different to the European one. We do not have fixed working

50 BBC Africa Live Programme, "Can Africa keep time?" (available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3211923.stm>, as accessed on 11 November 2011).

hours like 8am to 5pm. And an African would feel important if you would still be there waiting for him two hours after the agreed time”. “Why should people who have been told by their colonizers that they have no history learn to keep time? Making history and keeping time go together”, wrote Joel Omoding of Kenya, tongue in cheek and echoing Hugh Trevor-Roper’s 1963 declaration.

Whereas Africans in the diaspora are viewed as largely punctual at work, they are also accused of being tardy when it comes to organising their own events, as a certain Dr Bedford Nwabueze Umez claims:⁵¹

‘African time’ has become so annoying and embarrassing to the point that some Nigerians (in Houston) now provide two invitation cards, either formally or informally: one for Nigerians/Africans and the other for Americans. The one for Nigerians/Africans would indicate that the event would start about two hours before the actual time, while the one for Americans would indicate the exact time the event is supposed to start. Why? According to one Nigerian, “They want to make some provision for ‘African time,’ and avoid annoying and embarrassing Americans.” Probably, in their minds, it is OK to annoy and embarrass their fellow Nigerians/Africans who are punctual.

So serious has been the concern about African time that some African governments have taken measures to combat the syndrome. For instance, in October 2007, authorities in the Ivory Coast, supported by President Laurent Gbagbo launched an internationally publicised campaign in an event called ‘Punctuality Night’ held in the capital, Abidjan. The idea was to give recognition to public service employees and private sector workers who were regularly on time at their workplaces. This initiative adopted the slogan, “‘African time’ is Killing Africa -Let’s Fight It”. According to Reuters, “The organizers hoped to heighten awareness of how missed appointments, meetings, or even late buses, cut productivity in a region where languid tardiness is the norm”.⁵² The winner of the prize on offer at the Punctuality Night was a certain Narcisse Aka, a legal adviser who got a \$60,000 villa presented to him by President Gbagbo. Aka was reported to be “so unusually good at being punctual that his colleagues call him ‘Mr White Man’s Time’”.

Efforts to improve productivity in the African civil service through efforts such as the one mentioned above in the Ivory Coast just like in Botswana as

51 BN Umez, “‘African time’ or selective punctuality?” (available at <http://www.africanexecutive.com/modules/magazine/articles.php?article=5202>, as accessed 11 November 2011).

52 Wikipedia, “African time” (available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_time, as accessed on 11 November 2011).

stated below have borne miniscule positive results if any at all.

Concerns about African time in post-colonial Botswana, 1966-2011

As hinted above the African time syndrome has been a problem even in the post-colony and the new millennium dispensation, despite some professionals not having an agrarian and rural background. According to the former vice chancellor of the University of Botswana, Professor Bojosi Otlhogile, “It is a perennial problem. I spent the bulk of my time fighting it even amongst non-Batswana”.⁵³ However, in the early years of independence, when the country’s civil service was smaller and easy to monitor and control, there were individual Batswana, such as Gobe Matenge, whose dedication to punctuality could not be compromised. Matenge was an old hand who had joined the public service during the colonial period in the 1950s and went on to become a permanent secretary in the post-colonial government, retiring in the early 1980s. A reviewer of Matenge’s biography writes that:⁵⁴

Matenge kicks butt. He is a hard-nosed, no nonsense authoritative taskmaster who gets things done. When he assigns someone a task, he expects it to be carried out timeously. He follows up and will not relent until it is done. His obsession for time keeping is the stuff of legend.... For instance, Matenge would start a meeting with or without a quorum, something he still does to date. He works on the basis of deadlines and, for Matenge, deadlines are there to be honoured. (Un)fortunately he carries this discipline over into retirement, something that riles his friends. They think he is too rigid. This sense of discipline, rigour and commitment is what made him make things happen even before the phrase ‘service delivery’ became a fad in Botswana.

It is interesting to note that the public service of Matenge’s time was generally believed to be the most efficient in the whole of the African continent. The biographers of Botswana’s first president, Sir Seretse Khama, tell us that the civil service “was, at least until 1980, unrivalled, in southern Africa and the continent as a whole, for integrity and efficiency”.⁵⁵ Bruce Bennett ties the Gobe Matenge exemplary discipline to the observation raised earlier on African Time:⁵⁶

53 Email: B Otlhogile (University of Botswana/CJ Makgala and PC Thebe (Researchers), 15 November 2011.

54 T Mbuya, review of Oagile Key Dingake, *Unearthing the hidden treasure: The untold story of Gobe Matenge* (Gaborone, Medi Publishing, 2011), *Sunday Standard*, 13-19 November 2011, p. 32.

55 N Parsons, T Tlou and W Henderson, *Seretse Khama, 1921-1980* (Gaborone, Macmillian, 1995), p. 272.

56 Email: B Bennett (University of Botswana/CJ Makgala and PC Thebe (Researchers), 14 March 2012.

A lot of discussion of 'Africa time' has been in terms of blaming Africans. 'Why do they do this? Do they have an 'excuse'? But as some historian said... "possibility must be judged empirically". i.e. if we want to know what was de facto possible in a historical situation, we must look at what actually happened. If you are in a particular society, it is difficult to go against its rules. And the time practice is part of the rules in the sense that it is the way things are done. You can of course turn up on time yourself but you will just have to wait; if you try to make other people come faster than is normal you are committing an unfriendly act. A few, like Gobe Matenge, may do so; having the willpower and the status to do so. It is also relevant whether punctuality is even ideal. In the civil service Mr Matenge had the advantage that he was following an admitted principle, but in many other areas of life the ideal has much less support.

However, the period starting in the early 1990s saw the politicisation of the civil service taking root as the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (in power since 1966) "was in a position to reward party activists and supporters by appointing them to positions in the diplomatic and civil service, and the councils, land boards, and tribal administration", write Mpho Molomo and Brian Mokopakgosi.⁵⁷ Elite corruption in the civil service also ensued in this environment.⁵⁸ It should be pointed out that political appointments did not always take qualifications and merit into account, and this compromised productivity.⁵⁹ The widespread problem of lack of productivity and inefficiency in the public service and the private sector led to the government of Botswana establishing the Botswana National Productivity Centre in 1995 in a bid to confront the problem, and to make the country competitive in the global economy by attracting the much sought after foreign direct investment (FDI). Unfortunately, the results have been lukewarm.⁶⁰ Poor work ethic and lax attitude towards punctuality in Botswana is often couched in the infamous and nonchalant phrase "There is no hurry in Botswana".⁶¹ Other factors that contribute to unimpressive FDI in Botswana are the country's small internal market of just two million people, difficult and convoluted regime of issuing

57 B Mokopakgosi and M Molomo, "Democracy in the face of weak opposition in Botswana", *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies*, 14(1), 2000, p. 7.

58 CJ Makgala, *Elite conflict in Botswana: A history* (Pretoria, Africa Institute of South Africa, 2006), pp. 85-97; K Good, "Corruption and mismanagement in Botswana: A best case study?" *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32 (3), 1994, pp. 449-521; Z Maundeni (ed.), *Transparency, accountability and corruption in Botswana* (Made Plain Communications, Cape Town, 2008).

59 CJ Makgala and Z Maundeni, *History of the Botswana Public Employees Union, 1885-2009* (Cape Town, Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society, 2010), pp. 172-176.

60 CJ Makgala, "The discourses of poor work ethic in Botswana: A historical perspective, 1930-2010", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 39(1), pp. 45-57.

61 D Magang, *Delusions of grandeur: Paradoxies and ambivalences in Botswana's macroeconomic firmament*, 1 (Gaborone, Print Media Consult, 2015), pp. 340-344.

resident and work permits to expatriates.⁶²

In October 2011, the private *Sunday Standard* newsarticle a gossip columnist expressed the view that the African Union should devise a clock for African time taking into account late coming to work, prolonged time for lunch and less time in the actual execution of the work at hand. While this was influenced by the stereotypes of African time, it seems the author had been affected and annoyed by it:⁶³

At the continental level, the African Union should invest in a time piece suited to Africans’ attitude towards time. The clock/watch should have its own unique mechanism. At 6.00 a.m. it should stop for two hours to allow African workers to get as much sleep as possible and report for work at 10.00 a.m. Central European time; at 1015 the hands should start moving so fast the time piece turns into a fan and before you know it, its 1300 – lunch time; the hands then move so slowly that what in Europe would be 20 minutes becomes five seconds; at 1330, the hands get stuck for an hour; from 14.00 the hands become fan blades again and voila! It’s time to call it a day. For ease of doing business, all African countries will synchronise their time so that lunch break in Lagos takes as much time as in Gaborone – three hours. No longer being colonised by Europe, Africa should assert its independence in every sphere. Time has come for us to free ourselves from the oppression of the white man’s time and fully embrace our own African Time.

Conclusion

The article has attempted to demonstrate various ideas on the practice of Time and concepts of time in Africa. The authors have shown how this phenomenon developed in various eastern, western and southern African societies and communities from pre-colonial through the colonial order to the post-independence dispensation. Arguments by observers on the cultural, socio-economic, religious, political and historical explanations were adduced in order to explain the phenomenon which is said to be a symbol or expression of power and control by numerous African leaders in the post-colony.

Narrowing down the discussion to Botswana indicates similar practices to what obtains elsewhere in the sub-Saharan Africa. The impact of this scenario is said to have reduced productivity in the economic development of afflicted communities and societies. The study notes that Botswana is no exception

62 D Magang, *Delusions of grandeur...*, pp. 323, 360-386.

63 *Sunday Standard*, “African time clock”, 16-22 October 2011.

in this regard as the population's poor work ethic is a major factor in the country's low volume of the FDI. So common and accepted is the African time syndrome among the Batswana that a saying that "There is no hurry in Botswana" has long taken root. In a bid to address this concern several initiatives have been undertaken with the Botswana National Productivity Centre established as a long term response to the issue but with little effect. It would be interesting to examine whether African time has any impact on the country's respected military and other disciplined forces. Perhaps, useful lessons could be learned from how the disciplined forces combat African time syndrome. This suggestion does not ignore the fact that many African countries experienced military coups, and had military governments which did not improve punctuality and productivity to any significant degree.

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