




# Time to get a watch: Grounding John Mbiti's *Sasa* and *Zamani* in Four-Dimensionalism

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## ABSTRACT

John Mbiti's viewpoint on the concept of African time includes two assertions that have sparked considerable debate. Firstly, he posits that time possesses an inherent two-dimensionality, consisting exclusively of the past and the present. Secondly, he argues that African time lacks a sense of the future. Most scholars, however, criticise his assertions. For instance, he is criticised, especially for his separation of time into two separate dimensions. According to their argument, the separation of time violates African cosmology, which holds that all aspects of the African worldview are interconnected. Notwithstanding, this study employed a desktop methodology and an analytical conceptual framework to ground Mbiti's concept of time within the context of four-dimensionalism, while also engaging with his critics throughout the study. In the study, the researcher argued that four-dimensionalism uses better conceptual frameworks to explain and reinvigorate Mbiti's concept of time. The study concludes that grounding Mbiti's concept of time within a four-dimensional framework offers a more nuanced understanding of African time, which may enrich African religious experiences. The significance of this study, therefore, lies in the reconfiguration and revitalisation of Mbiti's notion of time in response to his critics. The study enhances the discourse in African religious studies and philosophical enquiries into the nature of time.

**Keywords:** African religion, cyclical time, four-dimensionalism, linear time, two-dimensional time.

## INTRODUCTION

This study examines John Mbiti's perspective on time within the framework of four-dimensionalism. The concepts of entity persistence across space-time and the nature of the past, present, and future are crucial in the African understanding of religious experiences. This observation, in the opinion of the researcher, renders the study relevant.

Mbiti has articulated a comprehensive examination of the concept of time within the African context.<sup>1</sup> This account rests upon two metaphysical assertions. Firstly, Mbiti avows that African time encompasses two dimensions: the present and the past. Secondly, African time is devoid of a future dimension. The contentious aspect, as will be demonstrated subsequently, pertains to the assertion that time lacks a future dimension. This aspect has caused Mbiti to face criticism from academic circles.

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<sup>1</sup> John Mbiti, "Eschatology," in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 159–84; John S Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1990).

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Joseph Ekong, for example, criticises Mbiti, highlighting Mbiti's oversight of the inherent hope embodied by Africans. Ekong posits that the hope exhibited by Africans reflects their ability to foresee what lies ahead.<sup>2</sup> For Gyekye Kwame, Mbiti is guilty of making sweeping generalisations about Africans' perception of time. Kwame asserts, for instance, that the Akan of Ghana understand time as a three-dimensional construct, incorporating the past, present, and future, thereby differing from Mbiti's avowals.<sup>3</sup>

This paper argues that contemporary conceptual frameworks of four-dimensionalism validate Mbiti's notion of time. The researcher will demonstrate that these frameworks neutralise, if not dismantle, the majority of objections directed at Mbiti. The four-dimensional "growing block" framework, for instance, elucidates Mbiti's two-dimensional concept of time, emphasising the interconnection between the past and the present.<sup>4</sup> This negates the existence of the future in a manner analogous to Mbiti's perspective. Furthermore, the researcher utilises four-dimensionalism to offer a conceptual rejuvenation of Mbiti's understanding of time, which has become somewhat antiquated. The rejuvenation is hoped to enrich the religious experiences in Africa, which are intrinsically linked to the concept of time.

This study defines four-dimensionalism as a "space-time" manifold, often described as a "block universe" in the literature.<sup>5</sup> The researcher views the universe as a "four-dimensional block," wherein time serves as one of the four dimensions.<sup>6</sup> As far as the researcher is aware, no academic has utilised the framework of four-dimensionalism to either endorse or contest Mbiti's notion of time.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to tackle the research problem presented, the researcher undertook an extensive literature review utilising a desktop methodology to elucidate Mbiti's understanding of African time alongside four-dimensional theories of time. The desktop method offered a structured framework for the systematic gathering and examination of data. The data, primarily derived from literature, was collected predominantly through Google Scholar, books, and various online research databases, including ResearchGate and Academia. An analytical conceptual lens was employed to interpret and elucidate the literature. This lens facilitated the analysis and interpretation of essential concepts such as "sasa," "zamani," "eternalism," and "presentism," among others, to effectively tackle the research problem at hand.

Beyond the introductory remarks, the researcher has divided the study into five essential segments. The first segment articulates the methodological framework employed to guide the research endeavour. The second and third sections address Mbiti's concept of time and the notion of four-dimensionalism, respectively. These sections serve an expository purpose, intended to establish a foundation for a comprehensive exploration of Mbiti's concept of time in the fourth section. The fifth section reconceptualises prospective African religious experiences via a framework of four-dimensionalism. Thereafter, a conclusion will be drawn.

## Mbiti's Concept of Time

Mbiti's concept of time was triggered by the Western Christian eschatological ideas that were dominant during his time.<sup>7</sup> The underlying premise of these ideas was that time is both linear and three-

<sup>2</sup> Joseph T. Ekong, "Rethinking John S. Mbiti's Metaphysical Trajectory of Time in Africa," *European Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 6, no. 1 (August 30, 2022): 43–56, <https://doi.org/10.47672/ejpcr.1170>.

<sup>3</sup> Kwame Gyekye, "On Mbiti's View of Time for Traditional Africans," *Parker, E. & Kalumba, KM African Philosophy*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996, 93–98.

<sup>4</sup> Ryan T Mullins, "Doing Hard Time: Is God the Prisoner of the Oldest Dimension?," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 2 (2014): 160–85; Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan Mullins, "The Divine Timemaker," *Philosophia Christi*, 2020; Sampsa Korpela, "God, Time, and the Implicate Order Theory," *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 5, no. 1 (April 21, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v5i1.55183>.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Hollingsworth, "Eschatology, the Elimination of Evil, and the Ontology of Time," *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 8, no. 1 (June 27, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v8i1.74563>.

<sup>7</sup> Mogomotsi Jaba, "A Comparative Analysis of the Phenomenology of Time in the Works of John McTaggart and John Mbiti," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, March 22, 2024, 34–44, <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.20241031>.

dimensional, consisting of the past, the present, and the future. According to this understanding, the future culminates in the advent of paradise/salvation. Mbiti's understanding of time, therefore, begins with a dismissal of linear time. According to him, the African religious perspective lacks any concepts of eschatology. In this regard, it can be asserted that Mbiti's notion of time emerges from a religious framework.

In view of the above, Mbiti proposes a two-dimensional concept of time. He does this by citing the verb tense of the Swahili words for time, *sasa* and *zamani*,<sup>8</sup> persuading Thomas Widlok, Joachim Knab, and Christa Van der Wulp to conclude that Mbiti's concept of time is rooted in language.<sup>9</sup> Mbiti characterises *sasa* as micro time, highlighting that *sasa* "has the sense of immediacy, nearness, and 'now-ness.'"<sup>10</sup> In reference to *zamani*, Mbiti describes it as a temporal duration that encompasses the past. He describes *zamani* as macro time, characterising it as "the point beyond which nothing can go."<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, the term *sasa* can be interpreted as referring to the present in English, whereas *zamani* signifies the past.

According to the analysis provided above, Mbiti identifies two important conclusions. Firstly, African time transitions backwards from *sasa* to *zamani*. Secondly, he claims that African languages lack "vocabulary which can directly express concepts of a distant future."<sup>12</sup> This leads him to argue the provocative idea that African time lacks a future orientation. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that Mbiti designates the future as potential time. "This means that the future is virtually non-existent as actual time, apart from the relatively short projection of the present up to two years."<sup>13</sup> Given this context, the events that can be considered as definitive occurrences in reality are solely those that have occurred and those that are currently unfolding. Consequently, future events have yet to take place, which supports Mbiti's claim about the absence of the future.

Mbiti receives endorsement from several prominent African religion scholars. For instance, John Parrat supports Mbiti's assertion that Westerners imposed a linear conception of time on Africans during the era of imperial Christian missionaries.<sup>14</sup> Alexis Kagame, another proponent of Mbiti, posits that the future is a construct of the imagination within Bantu consciousness, implying its fundamental non-existence.<sup>15</sup> Simon Beck and Oritsegbubemi Oyowe, in part, concur with Mbiti, asserting that most sub-Saharan African languages do not possess a "formal mood" to indicate the future.<sup>16</sup> In short, these scholars agree that Mbiti's concept of time effectively captures the African perception of time, especially in contrast to that of Westerners.

Notwithstanding the endorsement of Mbiti by some of the notable scholars, his conceptualisation of time has encountered considerable criticism from various scholars. The dominant criticism is expressed by Kwame. This criticism contends that Mbiti's time is marked by a degree of generalisation. According to Kwame, several African languages exhibit the concept of the future in their temporal comprehension of time. Kwame, for instance, discusses the Akan word *daakye*, which he claims signifies an indefinite future that stretches beyond a two-year period.<sup>17</sup> Dismas Masolo corroborates Kwame by referencing the Luo expression: *Aming'a piny nene ochiego apindi e thim*. According to Masolo, this expression implies that the earth, much like time, survives indefinitely into the endless future.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, these scholars argue that not all African tribes share a perception of time that excludes a future dimension.

<sup>8</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Widlok, Joachim Knab, and Christa van der Wulp, "African Time: Making the Future Legible," *African Studies* 80, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2021): 397–414, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2021.1942786>.

<sup>10</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Mbiti, "Eschatology," 190.

<sup>13</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> John Parrat, "Time in Traditional African Thought," *Religion* 7, no. 2 (1977): 117–26.

<sup>15</sup> Alexis Kagame, "The Empirical Apperception of Time and the Conception of History in Bantu Thought," in *African Philosophy: A Classical Approach*, ed. Parker English and Kibujjo Kalumba (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 82–90.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Beck and Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe, "Thought Experiments and Personal Identity in Africa," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 7, no. 4 (October 4, 2021): 439–52, <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2020.25>.

<sup>17</sup> Gyekye, "On Mbiti's View of Time," 96.

<sup>18</sup> Dismas Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

Scott Moreau provides the last criticism. He criticises Mbiti's division of time into two dimensions. Moreau claims that the separation of time defies African religious beliefs, which hold that all components of reality are essentially interconnected.<sup>19</sup> This suggests that time should be viewed as a single, unified entity. Beck and Oyowe add to Moreau, criticising Mbiti's reliance on the words *sasa* and *zamani* to gain a metaphysical understanding of time. They argue that the significance of words can vary considerably depending on the context in which they are employed. Beck and Oyowe further contend that the words *sasa* and *zamani* have their origins in the Arabic language.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that Mbiti's conception of time might have emerged from sources beyond the confines of the African religious framework.

The criticisms mentioned above are acknowledged. However, these criticisms, along with similar ones, seem to overlook the core of Mbiti's argument to some extent. For example, Mbiti refutes the existence of the future by emphasising that the past has been lived and the present is actively experienced, while the future remains unexperienced. The future, in this context, is non-existent. Moreover, Mbiti's critics fail to acknowledge his assertion that the future embodies a domain of potential time.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that Mbiti does not contend that Africans lack the capacity to envision the future. He is merely rejecting the causal existence of the future. This study now transitions into the examination of four-dimensionalism.

### Four-Dimensionalism

This section progresses in a manner akin to the preceding one. To comprehend four-dimensionalism, however, it is crucial to first achieve a clear understanding of three-dimensionalism.

In quotidian existence, humans frequently engage with three dimensions: height, breadth, and depth to delineate the spatial positioning of objects. These three dimensions together form what is commonly known as three-dimensional space.<sup>22</sup> Humans traverse space in three dimensions by moving forward or backwards, shifting side to side, and rising or falling. In addition to the three dimensions, one must consider the fourth dimension, which is time. When time is incorporated into three-dimensional space, it collectively constitutes space-time, commonly referred to as four-dimensionalism.<sup>23</sup> According to Natesan, the "fourth dimension is an underlying nature of space-time, blending the three real dimensions."<sup>24</sup> In this sense, time constitutes a fundamental aspect of reality.

It is essential to clarify from the beginning that four-dimensionalism includes at least two distinct variants: Eternalism and Presentism. Both are indispensable for grasping the nuances of four-dimensionalism. Eternalism asserts that every moment in time exists concurrently. Ryan Mullins clarifies that, according to this interpretation, "there is no real passage of time."<sup>25</sup> This viewpoint suggests that entities neither come into being nor go out of existence. They coexist in a state of perpetual existence.

Two types of Eternalism exist: the "moving-spotlight" and the "growing block." The "moving-spotlight" framework posits that every moment in time holds an equivalent degree of reality. However, the present moment stands as the only privileged instant, for it is the temporal realm in which humans exist in an objective manner. Certain eternalists, nonetheless, challenge the idea that the present possesses a unique significance, contending:

Since all moments of time equally exist, one cannot look at any particular moment of time and deem it the privileged objective present. The indexical "now", therefore, does not pick out any metaphysically privileged moment in the world; rather, it only picks out the moment of the term's utterance.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup> A Scott Moreau, "A Critique of John Mbiti's Understanding of the African Concept of Time," *East African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 5, no. 2 (1986): 36–48.

<sup>20</sup> Beck and Oyowe, "Thought Experiments," 446–447.

<sup>21</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Prabhakaran Natesan, "Fourth Dimension of Space-Time - Study of Gravitation; Part-1," *International Journal of Advanced Research in Physical Science* 10, no. 1 (2023): 3–14.

<sup>23</sup> Siddharth Rana, "TIME 'AND' DIMENSION (S)–Visualizing the 4th and 4+ Dimensions," 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Natesan, "Fourth Dimension of Space-time," 3.

<sup>25</sup> Mullins, "Doing Hard Time," 119.

<sup>26</sup> Hollingsworth, "Eschatology, the Elimination of Evil, and the Ontology of Time."

The “growing block” framework, on the other hand, claims that only the past and the present exist.<sup>27</sup> This framework states that as time passes, new events develop.

Presentism rivals Eternalism. It asserts that only the present moment holds existence. Presentists maintain that the passage of time is a fundamental reality.<sup>28</sup> Theodore Sider critiques Eternalism, contending that human psychology is inherently inclined to perceive the past as irrevocably lost while viewing the future as a realm still in the process of formation.<sup>29</sup> Having established a comprehension of the two varieties of four-dimensionalism, the researcher proceeds to investigate the manner in which objects persist within the fabric of space-time.

Objects are characterised as either perduring or enduring throughout the continuum of space-time. Perdurantism maintains that objects possess an intrinsic four-dimensional nature.<sup>30</sup> Envision a scenario where the researcher’s head is gently reclined upon the pillow, for instance. Even though the researcher’s entire head rests upon the pillow, various regions of the researcher’s head inhabit distinct areas of the pillow’s surface. However, the researcher’s entire head cannot occupy a singular, distinct area of the pillow at once. But each individual component of the researcher’s head, situated in distinct spaces, collectively constitutes the entirety of the researcher’s head. In this sense, the researcher’s head is spread over the space/pillow through its different sections.

Taking the preceding analogy to the next level, suppose the researcher played football yesterday, preached at church today, and intends to write a paper tomorrow. This conveys that one part of the researcher’s being played football yesterday, another preached today, and another hopes to write a paper tomorrow. Drawing on the insights of Sider and Matthew Davidson, the analogy indicates that the researcher’s temporal parts are spread over time and do not exist as a unified whole concurrently.<sup>31</sup> In view of this, Simon Keller and Michael Nelson state that “[a]n object perdures through some interval of time by having a different temporal part at every instant in that interval.”<sup>32</sup> However, while each of the researcher’s temporal parts is akin to itself, it is not identical to any prior or subsequent temporal parts. In this arrangement, certain parts of the researcher exist in the past, while others exist in the present and future. This is the manner in which the researcher is spread over time. In perdurantism, therefore, change is articulated through temporal parts that exhibit varying characteristics at different points in time.

Endurantism, on the other hand, perceives objects as three-dimensional entities. In this form, objects are wholly present at every point during their existence. Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues explains that when change transpires, the entity undergoing change cannot retain its original identity.<sup>33</sup> Within this framework, objects do not possess temporal parts spread over space-time. They endure as a whole over space-time.

In summation, four-dimensionalism serves as a comprehensive framework that integrates the three dimensions of space with time as the fourth dimension. Encompassed within this framework are various conceptual models that endeavour to elucidate it. Nonetheless, while four-dimensionalism provides a nuanced account of time and the continuity of objects within it, the theory, akin to all temporal theories, remains susceptible to criticism. For example, Shubham Srivastava criticises four-dimensionalism, claiming that human brains are only wired to grasp three dimensions of space. According to Srivastava, the “human mind is incapable of imagining something [time] it has never seen before.”<sup>34</sup> Srivastava’s assertion agrees with John McTaggart and Augustine of Hippo in denying the

<sup>27</sup> Mullins, “Doing Hard Time,” 119.

<sup>28</sup> Dean W. Zimmerman, “The A-Theory of Time, the B-Theory of Time, and ‘Taking Tense Seriously,’” *Dialectica* 59, no. 4 (2005): 401–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-8361.2005.01041.x>.

<sup>29</sup> Theodore Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan J Loose, “No Hope in the Dark: Problems for Four-Dimensionalism,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 3 (September 19, 2019): 31–47, <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v11i3.2958>.

<sup>31</sup> Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*; Matthew Davidson, “Four Dimensionalism,” *Philosophical Books* 45, no. 1 (January 16, 2004): 17–33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0149.2004.00321.x>.

<sup>32</sup> S. Keller and M. Nelson, “Presentists Should Believe in Time-Travel,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 3 (September 8, 2001): 333–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713931204>.

<sup>33</sup> Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues, “Mutability and Relationality: Towards an African Four-Dimensionalist Pan-Psychism,” *Religions* 12, no. 12 (December 10, 2021): 1094, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121094>.

<sup>34</sup> Shubham Srivastava, “Why Time Isn’t the Fourth Dimension?,” *International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering Technology and Science* 4, no. 8 (2022): 338–41.

existence of time.<sup>35</sup> Korpela critiques four-dimensionalism, contending that if all entities are distributed four-dimensionally over space-time, then all existence is predetermined.<sup>36</sup> In this predetermined framework, humans would lack genuine potential for alternative choices. In the end, in spite of this, the objective of this study is to employ four-dimensional frameworks to enhance comprehension of time in Africa. To that the researcher now turns.

### Mbiti's Concept of Time in Four-Dimensionalism

Four-dimensionalism presents a convincing way to reconcile Mbiti's understanding of time with his critics and revitalise his outdated time theory. This section explores this aspect.

As alluded, Mbiti's concept of time is two-dimensional, encompassing both *zamani* and *sasa* events. *Zamani* emerges as a preferred objective feature of time. According to Mbiti, *zamani* alludes to the time of the ancestors, whom he calls "the living dead."<sup>37</sup> His interpretation of *zamani* implies that, despite the ancestors being spirits of deceased Africans, their ontological significance lives on among the living. In this sense, the past is felt in the present, at least through the influence of the ancestors. This ontological imperative aligns with the "growing block" framework, which posits that the past and present constitute objective aspects of reality.<sup>38</sup> Consistent with Mbiti, the "growing block" framework rejects the existence of the future.

The insight from the "growing block" framework is pertinent, particularly seeing that Johan Cilliers accuses Mbiti of engaging in "reversed teleology."<sup>39</sup> When viewed through the perspective of the "growing block" framework, however, Cilliers' criticism is mitigated by acknowledging the existence of both the past and the present. This lends credence to Mbiti's assertion that *zamani* plays an important role in the lives of Africans. *Zamani*, the period of ancestors, is where Africans receive their life's orders. It is where Africans find their grounding. This is another reason why Mbiti articulates that Africans navigate the future with their gaze directed towards the past, suggesting that the flow of time is perceived as moving from the present to the past.<sup>40</sup> The difference, though, lies in the fact that within the "growing block" framework, time progresses in a forward direction.

It is essential at this point to emphasise that Mbiti approaches the relationship between *zamani* and *sasa* with considerable seriousness.<sup>41</sup> In the researcher's analysis of Mbiti's work, it becomes evident that *zamani* and *sasa* are fundamentally intertwined. In this sense, the researcher argues that Mbiti's account of time is fundamentally one-dimensional rather than two-dimensional. The two dimensions that Mbiti discusses might be more accurately characterised as psychological rather than ontological. This, for the researcher, is based on the inseparability of *sasa* and *zamani* events. Indeed, a close examination of Mbiti indicates that there exists no metaphysical distinction between these events. Mbiti himself articulates that "Zamani overlaps with Sasa and the two are not separable,"<sup>42</sup> suggesting a profound interconnectedness akin to two facets of a singular entity. Should the researcher's interpretation of Mbiti be correct, then Moreau's<sup>43</sup> criticism that Mbiti fragments African time collapses.

In contrast to eternalists,<sup>44</sup> Mbiti recognises the progression of time as the "moving spotlight" framework does. The spotlight framework asserts that all times exist, but the spotlight illuminates only those events that are currently present.<sup>45</sup> Although Mbiti believes that the future does not exist, the moving of the spotlight is critical to the researcher's argument, which is that all events in the present and past exist equally, forming a single entity. The only difference lies in the fact that, unlike the

<sup>35</sup> John Ellis McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," *Epistemology & Philosophy of Science* 56, no. 2 (2019): 211–28; St. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine by St. Augustine. Translated by Edward Pusey* (Oak Harbour: Logos Research System, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Korpela, "God, Time, and the Implicate Order Theory."

<sup>37</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 83, 85.

<sup>38</sup> Hollingsworth, "Eschatology," 167.

<sup>39</sup> Johan Cilliers, "The Kairos of Karos: Revisiting Notions of Temporality in Africa," *STJ | Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4, no. 1 (June 30, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n1.a06>.

<sup>40</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Moreau, "A Critique of John Mbiti," 40–41.

<sup>44</sup> Hollingsworth, "Eschatology," 167.

<sup>45</sup> Natalja Deng, "Fine's McTaggart, Temporal Passage, and the A Versus B-debate," *Ratio* 26, no. 1 (March 16, 2013): 19–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9329.2012.00526.x>.

“moving spotlight” framework, Mbiti’s viewpoint suggests that the spotlight moves in reverse, transitioning from the present to the past. Consequently, for Mbiti, time flows.

Mbiti, moreover, believes that time is linked not only to events but also to all aspects of the spirit and physical worlds.<sup>46</sup> This explains why he bases his understanding of time on ancestral spirits. Given this arrangement, while he does not engage with the concepts of endurantism and perdurantism, the researcher would classify him as an endurantist. This is due to the fact that within the framework of African religious thought, the context in which Mbiti articulates his concept of time, ancestors are characterised in temporal dimensions. This means that despite residing in the *zamani* period, ancestors are also impacted by *sasa* events. Cilliers corroborates this, stating that “the ancestors are not absent in the present, but rather contemporary.”<sup>47</sup> This implies that ancestors acquire varying insights into the nature of space-time reality at distinct intervals, particularly as perceived through the lens of the African worldview. In this sense, ancestors endure through space-time since they are actively engaged in the lives of the living.

Equally significant is the observation that Mbiti’s concept of time is centred around events, leading to a cyclical time.<sup>48</sup> The Batswana of Botswana and the Ankole of Uganda provide a compelling endorsement of Mbiti’s cyclic time. Their endorsement is reflected in their use of events and, at times, animal behaviour as a means to reckon time. For instance, the hour of 06:00 AM in the Western context is regarded by the Batswana as the designated time for milking cattle (*nako ya go gama dikgomo*). Among the Ankole, the hour of 12:00 PM is recognised as a time for repose for both livestock and people (*bari omubirago*). The cyclical nature of time is illustrated by the repetition of these occurrences.<sup>49</sup> In this context, Mbiti’s concept of time can be understood as cyclical.

Cilliers goes further to note that “Perhaps the image of a spiral depicts best what Africans understand as time—a spiral that includes both linear and cyclical dimensions, as it reflects the rhythms of life.”<sup>50</sup> Ekong aligns with Cilliers, positing that time “is spherically organized, and adds dimension to the line as it proceeds, giving past and future dimensions.”<sup>51</sup> These scholars synthesise Mbiti’s notion of cyclical time with that of four-dimensional linear time. The researcher doubts Mbiti would embrace such a mixing, though, given that his theory of time is really a critique of linear time.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, incorporating the linear part of time into Mbiti’s cyclical time implies that time moves forward, a premise he disputes. Nonetheless, the researcher believes that Mbiti’s time may benefit from being modified to include the linear aspect. The researcher believes this for two reasons.

Firstly, Mbiti avers that although the future signifies potential time, Africans do indeed conceptualise it.<sup>53</sup> He states that Africans cultivate fruit-bearing plants requiring five years to mature and that they anticipate their children will marry in the future. Secondly, Africans regard their ancient genealogical records with great seriousness.<sup>54</sup> Tracing their pedigree throughout history, however, necessitates a linear chronological framework. If Africans are able to conceptualise a linear history, they can likewise envision a linear future.

In the view of the researcher, the incorporation of Mbiti’s cyclical time alongside four-dimensional linear time would not diminish the integrity of Mbiti’s conceptualisation of time. In fact, Parker English sees Mbiti’s concept of time as three-dimensional, nearly equivalent to Western time.<sup>55</sup> The fundamental distinction is that the Western future extends far longer than Mbiti’s definition of future, which stretches only two years from now. This addresses Kwame’s criticism that the Akan understanding of time is three-dimensional.<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, Mbiti would be exonerated from generalisation by incorporating linear time.

<sup>46</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 75.

<sup>47</sup> Cilliers, “The Kairos of Karos,” 115.

<sup>48</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Kibujjo M Kalumba, “A New Analysis of Mbiti’s ‘The Concept of Time,’” *Philosophia Africana* 8, no. 1 (2005).

<sup>50</sup> Cilliers, “The Kairos of Karos,” 113.

<sup>51</sup> Ekong, “Rethinking John S. Mbiti,” 47-48.

<sup>52</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 17.

<sup>53</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> Mbiti, “Eschatology,” 162.

<sup>55</sup> Parker English, “Kalumba, Mbiti, and a Traditional African Concept of Time.,” *Philosophia Africana* 9, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>56</sup> Gyekye, “On Mbiti’s View of Time,” 94-95.

In summary, critics of Mbiti's perspective on time diminish in significance when one interprets his views through the framework of four-dimensionalism. The following section reimagines the future of African religious experiences through the lens of four-dimensionalism. It addresses the questions "so what" and "where to" from here.

### Four-Dimensionalism and the Future of African Religious Experiences

Four-dimensionalism profoundly affects African religion. This section discusses numerous implications.

The concept of four-dimensionalism invites deep religious exploration regarding the nature of time and reality, fostering reflection on the significance of ancestors within the African continent. The researcher posits that the future of ancestor veneration, for instance, is intricately linked to the fifth industrial revolution, which is already influencing African religious experiences. This revolution is aided by scientific advances in four-dimensionalism, as attested to by Steven Hales and Timothy Johnson.<sup>57</sup> The fifth industrial revolution, which is driven in large part by space-time coordinates, promotes human-technology partnership. Using space-time technology, the researcher refers to any technology that is based on the interconnectedness of space and time, such as the internet and the global positioning system (GPS).

As a precursor to the fifth Industrial Revolution, the fourth Industrial Revolution has adeptly integrated cyber and physical technologies, enabling Africans to intertwine their spiritual beliefs with virtual reality.<sup>58</sup> Mbiti's event-oriented concept of time remains impervious to the influence of these space-time technologies. For example, a quick look at TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram reveals an increasing trend among Africans to hold virtual memorials.<sup>59</sup> These social platforms allow Africans to pay tribute to their ancestors from a distance.<sup>60</sup> Digital watches offer several functionalities, such as GPS tracking. The GPS enables individuals to ascertain the real-time positions of their loved ones. Peter Phillips agrees that these space-time technologies augment individuals' religious interactions with each other,<sup>61</sup> as well as with ancestors and God.

Finally, Sepota examines the concept of divination in the context of African religion.<sup>62</sup> Although divination may comprehend the past, it primarily emphasises forecasting the future. This African ritual could be improved by utilising artificial intelligence (AI) to predict the future with significant accuracy. This results from machine learning algorithms allowing AIs to analyse data from past and current events to predict future outcomes. Mbiti's concept of time, interestingly, is intricately linked to past and present events. Integrating Mbiti's *sasa* and *zamani* events with AI space-time technologies allows for the analysis of past and present events, enabling AIs to forecast a more promising future for Africans.

### CONCLUSION

This study sought to reinforce Mbiti's concept of time by explaining it through the lens of four-dimensionalism. The study concludes that Mbiti's account of time ought not to be overlooked, challenging those who criticise it. The study further modifies Mbiti's perspective on time by integrating the linear time framework characteristic of four-dimensionalism. The modification not only revitalises his time but also offers a significant opportunity to deepen the understanding of African religious experiences, particularly in relation to ancestor veneration. Finally, situating Mbiti within the framework of four-dimensionalism establishes a basis for a religious future that respects the intricate interconnections among religious experiences and the fifth industrial revolution.

<sup>57</sup> Steven D. Hales and Timothy A. Johnson, "Endurantism, Perdurantism and Special Relativity," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53, no. 213 (October 2003): 524–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.00329>.

<sup>58</sup> Peter M. Phillips, "Digital Theology And A Potential Theological Approach To A Metaphysics Of Information," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 58, no. 3 (September 2, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12883>.

<sup>59</sup> Justine Renuf F. Galang and Willard Enrique R. Macaraan, "Digital Apostleship: Evangelization in the New Agora," *Religions* 12, no. 2 (January 29, 2021): 92, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020092>.

<sup>60</sup> Agana-Nsiire Agana, "Rethinking African Theology in Light of Emerging Digital Culture," *Studies in World Christianity* 28, no. 1 (March 2022): 87–109, <https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2022.0372>.

<sup>61</sup> Phillips, "Digital Theology," 773.

<sup>62</sup> Moloko Sepota, "The Destruction of African Culture by Christianity," *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* 9, no. 2 (1998): 23–27.

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