



Full Length Research

African Time Use and Time Management

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This study reviews the most common criticism of Africans about their lack of punctuality. The problem of punctuality has become so endemic that lateness is accepted and explained loosely as "African time." This article offers some insights into African the concept of time, some notions about African time, whether Africans are the only ones who are always late to a scheduled meeting, or whether African lateness is a fact or stereotyping, or just lack of time consciousness. Is the problem of tardiness due to African culture? What accounts for African lack of punctuality? The paper concludes that the world is changing at a fast pace, and making 'African time' a way of life is counterproductive.

Key words: Africans, criticism, punctuality, African time.

INTRODUCTION

In a most famous BBC comment the national broadcaster of the United Kingdom speaks of Africa's drama of acute and chronic tardiness: "When God made man, He gave white man the watch, but he gave black man time!" The most common criticism of Africans is their lack of punctuality. On both public and private occasions there is always the certainty that a scheduled programme or meeting will never take place on time.

At one point or another, we may be late for work or a function. However, recurring lateness can be a cause for concern and an indication of problems yet to emerge or come to the surface. Lateness might seem an issue, but it is always important to think about its potential effects. This can be really damaging to your business and competitiveness within the organization. For example, a company's customers or clients may switch over to the company's rivals or competitors if deliveries are not made on time stipulated, or if employees keep coming to work late while their clients wait for them for hours. For an entire continent to be engulfed in chronic lateness could be demoralizing to business, operations and development.

The problem of punctuality has become so endemic that lateness to any function is accepted and explained loosely as "African time." Educated elites and privileged class also suffer from this deficiency. It is even suggested that people who are highly educated and privileged are the most likely to turn up

late for meetings. It would seem the higher one's mobility up on the social ladder, the less punctual one becomes since the "big man" is expected to be late always to meetings and functions (Ghanaian Chronicle).

Joy FM, a popular and privately owned Ghanaian radio station in Accra reported on its website, myjoyonline.com on May 17, 2010, that the Paramount Chief of Anfoega traditional area in the Volta Region, castigated the Minister of Education and other government officials for turning up late at a prize and speech event at the Anfoega Senior High School. The event which was scheduled for 9:30 am was delayed and started at 1:30 pm. The Volta Regional Minister and the Director of Education arrived at 12:11 pm. The traditional ruler reprimanded government officials and politicians in general for being in the habit of arriving late at functions, and "distorting the programme and wasting everybody's time." (<http://news.myjoyonline.com/news/201005/46266.asp> Accessed: 17 May 2010).

BBC: African Royalty and African Time

The BBC reported that international journalists in the United Kingdom were kept waiting for five hours by a renowned African royalty who was visiting the Alexandra Palace in

London at the climax of Ghana Expo 2003. The BBC reported that the journalists had been informed that the African King would arrive at 11:00 GMT. The BBC added that the time was changed to 1400 GMT, but the King did not show up until two hours later when the journalists had already packed and left. It is the belief of many that an incident such as this has only 'helped to reinforce the belief held by many people in the developed world that Africans are terrible time-keepers (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3211923.stm>)

Lack of Punctuality in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire

Lack of punctuality has become such a drain on the Francophone West African country of the Côte d'Ivoire's economic development that the country has come up with innovative ways to combat tardiness. In 2010, the country launched a programme called '*win a house if you demonstrate you can turn up on time.*' Supported by former President Gbagbo, "Punctuality Night" kicked off at eight o'clock prompt on a Saturday night, rewarding business-people, civil and public servants for exceptional timekeeping. Pitched with the slogan "African time is killing Africa, let's fight it," the organizers hoped to increase awareness of missed appointments and meetings or even lateness with bus schedules to increase productivity, "in a region where languid tardiness had been the norm" (Source: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/10/08/us-ivorycoast-punctuality-id USL762200020071008>).

THE PHILOSOPHY OF TIME

Time has been a discursive subject which has excited philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato; scientists (Newton and Einstein), theologians (St. Augustine); anthropologists, historians (McCaskie, 1980); and linguists. Some African scholars and political leaders have made some profound statements and published articles and books on the African concept of time. Notably, Adejumo, (1997), Kagame (1976), McCaskie (1980), Mbiti (1990), and Ademola (1997).

African Concept of Time

Time is a philosophical and mathematical issue. It is a cultural issue, too. We can better understand the concept of time when we consider the culture of the people. Culture and development are intertwined. Economic and development implications of time are recognized. Western time value of money is associated with sayings such as: "Time and tide wait for no man;" "Time is money;" "A stitch in time saves nine." Variants of these sayings also exist in African thought in proverbs: For example, "If you kill time, you will bury opportunities;" "Time lost is lost forever;" "If you waste time, surely time will waste you."

Culture is not static. However, this is not to doubt that in society there are beliefs, mind-sets, behaviour patterns that are taken over from the past, and may no longer be acceptable as the norm. Africans find themselves in multi-sectorial spaces

and have to negotiate between the formal and informal.

Some Notions on African Time

Mbiti (1990) argues that the African concept of time has far-reaching implications. It may explain beliefs, attitudes, practices, and the general way of life of African people not only in the traditional set up but also in the modern situation in politics, economics, education, or church life. According to Mbiti (1990), Africans create time, which is in abundant supply; what, to Westerners is a waste of time or 'idleness, is time for production.' Mbiti (1990) argues that time for Africans comprises events; it cannot be reckoned in a vacuum, and, therefore, calendars were non-existent. Further, he argues that Africans lack a concept of the future. The internal logic of Mbiti (1990)'s statement is that Africans do not and cannot plan. Many scholars, Africans and non-Africans, have criticized Mbiti (1990)'s arguments. They suggest that such views influence how Africans are perceived and how their actions and behaviour patterns are interpreted.

A Diplomat's View of African Time Management

The Resident Representative of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), has suggested that Ghanaians must not accept the perception that lateness is part of the African culture. He said holding such a perception would lead to the entrenchment of the practice of lateness. He explained that such a belief would impact negatively on Ghana, and by implication, Africa's development. He said lateness as a habit, practiced overtime would develop into a tradition which would become a cultural norm. The Resident Representative of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung challenged Ghanaians to distinguish between negative traditional practices and positive cultural norms (<http://myjoyonline.com/news/200805/16540.asp> 22 May 2008).

Are Africans the only ones who are always late to a scheduled meeting?

Some reactions by the public indicate that the African king mentioned came to a scheduled meeting five hours late, but it is also true that former Presidents Clinton and Boris Yeltsin appeared an hour late and a day late respectively to scheduled appointments. (BBC Comment: Mr. Mike Ikem [German-Igbo], Germany).

"Unpunctuality can sometimes be attributed to the "I don't care" attitude while in other cases, it can be due to factors beyond an individual's control and can result in lateness. Unreliable public service vehicles, traffic jams and poor roads are just but some of the factors that could lead to one arriving late for an appointment." BBC Comment: Mary Wanjiku, Kenyan in Germany. President Putin of Russia's punctuality has also been in question. Others have noted 14 minutes' lateness for Queen Elizabeth II in 2003; 40 minutes lateness for former Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany in 2012; 3 hours

lateness for talks on Syria with former US Secretary of State John Kerry; It has been noted that John Kerry was 50 minutes late for a meeting with Pope Francis; it has been mentioned that he also kept parents of children killed in a plane crash waiting for two hours at a cemetery in 2002. But some people have explained that this is due to John Kerry's meticulousness: "Before important meetings he often double-checks sources of information, delves into things, as a result he gets behind schedule."

Is African lateness fact or stereotyping?

Negative stereotyping of Africans are well documented, and projected in books, films, & the media (BBC). In America and elsewhere in the Caucasian world, there is mention of coloured people's time, safari time, etc. The concept of what is referred to as 'African Time' or in Ghana as 'Ghanaian Time' is based on a perception that African attitude to time is different from that of Europeans or Western culture.

The concept of 'African Time' is premised on the argument that punctuality is of no consequence to Africans. People do things when they individually feel like it without reference to when & how long it should or ought to take. Others argue that Africans are said to see time as a resource in abundance, and with no economic value. In Ghana, Pentecostal or Charismatic churches often spend long hours on end in church service, because they claim they are led by 'the spirit' in their church service. Perhaps until the spirit is over church service, and programmes referred to in Ghana as "All Night Church Service" will continue till the next day.

Ghanaians have expressed strong views on punctuality. Most Ghanaians think that "One of the main reasons for continuing under- development of the country is the citizens' nonchalant attitude to time. The problem of punctuality has become so endemic that lateness to any function is accepted and explained off as "African time."

Business and Lack of Time Consciousness

Lateness to official functions or the workplace has several consequences:

- a) When an event begins late, it in turn closes late. Time wasted is reduced productivity.
- b) Programmes may be rushed through, and programmes may lose their essence and value.
- c) Participants who believe that a programme may always start late, may be tempted to arrive at various times: early comers spend long time waiting and waste time for the event to start.
- d) Organizers suffer reputational damage, which is difficult to repair. Productivity is also lost.
- e) Lateness has a demoralizing effect on workers if lateness is not punished.

Should African culture be blamed?

Some African researchers have found that in some African

cultures occasions exist for lateness. For example, among the Kakwa community of Uganda, the notion of one must expect lateness as punctuality is ridiculed. The Kakwa example shows that 'among the Kakwa in Northern Uganda one has to be late for a feast to show that you are a dignified person. Being punctual for a feast is associated with impatience. It is criminal to arrive early for funerals. If you are, you will be accused of having done-in the deceased.'

There is a statement of warning that: When in Kakwaland you do not dare arrive early for a feast or a funeral! The point is if Africans do not have any sense of punctuality, how come that many Africa cultures have several sayings and proverbs extolling the virtues of punctuality? How do we also explain African chiefs' rebuke of ministers of state and government officials who turn up late for official functions. There are also situations where officiating reverend ministers have rebuked organizers of wedding ceremonies and funerals which did not heed to time and have threatened to abandon such late ceremonies if such misconduct was repeated. Certainly, unpunctuality is not alien to Africa; it is a misconduct and indiscipline which must be checked with education and punishment.

Where the Problem Lies

Achebe (1960)'s little but profound book, titled *The Trouble With Nigeria*, diagnoses the ills of Nigeria and by extension Africa and prescribes the antidote. The trouble with Africa is ingrained indiscipline. It is a problem of leadership by example. Chinua Achebe writes on the theme of "Leadership, Nigerian-Style:

"In spite of conventional opinion Nigeria has been less fortunate in its leadership. A basic element of this misfortune is the seminal absence of intellectual rigour in the political thought of our founding fathers – a tendency to pious materialistic wooliness and self-centered pedestrianism."

A perceptive student of Nigerian politics, James Booth, has drawn attention to the poverty of thought exhibited in the biographies of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Chief Obafemi Awolowo in contrast to the expression of ideology to be found even in the more informal works of celebrated national politicians such as Tom Mboya of Uganda, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, and Dr Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.

In a solemn vow made by Dr Azikiwe in 1937 he pledged:

"...that henceforth I shall utilize my earned income to secure my enjoyment of a high standard of living and also to give a helping hand to the needy."

Obafemi Awolowo was even more forthright about his ambition:

"I was going to make myself formidable intellectually, morally

invulnerable, to make all the money that is possible for a man with my brains and brawn to make in Nigeria."

Achebe (1960) notes that: *"Thoughts such as these are more likely to produce aggressive millionaires than selfless leaders of their people. An absence of objectivity and intellectual rigour at the critical moment of a nation's formation is more than an academic matter. It inclines the fledgling state to disorderly growth and mental deficiency."*

Many people believe that indiscipline or chaos of African modernity and development is a question of leadership. Chinua Achebe again writes on the theme *Where the Problem Lies*:

"The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water, air, or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. On the morning after Murtala Muhammed seized power in July public servants in Lagos were found "on seats" at seven-thirty in the morning. Even the "go-slow" traffic that had defied every solution and defeated every regime vanished overnight from the streets. Why? The new ruler's reputation for ruthlessness was sufficient to transform in the course of only one night the style and habits of Nigeria's unruly capital. That the character of one man could establish that quantum change in a people's social behaviour was nothing less than miraculous. But it shows that social miracles can happen."

"We know, alas, that that transformation was short-lived; it had begun to fade even before the tragic assignation of Murtala Muhammed. In the final analysis a leader's no-nonsense reputation might induce a favourable climate but in order to effect lasting change it must be followed up with a radical programme of social and economic re-organization or at least a well-conceived and consistent agenda of reform which Nigeria stood and stands in dire need of."

"I am not here recommending ruthlessness as a necessary qualification for Nigerian leadership. Quite on the contrary. What I *am* saying is that Nigeria is not beyond change. I am saying that Nigeria can change today if she discovers leaders who have the will, the ability and the vision. Such people are rare in any time or place. But it is the duty of enlightened citizens to lead the way in their discovery and to create an atmosphere conducive to their emergence. If this conscious effort is not made, good leaders, like good money, will be driven out by bad."

"Whenever two Nigerians meet, their conversation will sooner or later slide into a litany of our national deficiencies. *The trouble with Nigeria* has become the subject of our small

talk in much the same way as the weather is for the English. But there is a great danger in consigning a life-and-death issue to the daily routine of small talk. No one can do much about the weather: we must accept it and live with it or under it. But national bad habits are a different matter; we resign ourselves to them at our peril."-Chinua Achebe (1960)

Chinua Achebe's statement summarises and encapsulates the problem of Africa. Such a statement is in total harmony with the solution of Africa's national deficiencies.

Conclusion

The world is changing at a fast pace. Making time the African way is counterproductive. The concept of African time must not be characterized by relativity and lack of precision. Modern technology drives and enables change in the world. Speed of action will define Africa's competitiveness and relevance in the modern world. Africa must not continue do business as usual but move with change and get rid of all societal and national deficiencies. Leadership will be at the heart of Africa's change management process. Certainly, lateness and lack of time consciousness and time management have nothing to do with the African concept of time; what is clearly at issue is indiscipline.

Conflict of interest

The author has none to declare

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