

Africa In the Age of Disruption

Part 1 of 3: What Time Is It?

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There is a three-hour difference between Nairobi and Cambridge. Sometimes it is two hours, but that's only because these Northerners are convinced that they can sully the seasons to save time by setting their clocks back and forth. Regardless, my body refuses to comply. Every day, as the English time insists that it is afternoon, my belly bothers me, claiming that it is time for supper. Normally, my eyelids close at nine, which is midnight in Kenya, and it is also not unusual for me to stir again at 3 am. Trust me, no amount of discipline can override the fact that my cells were calibrated under a different sun. I have tried.

I have spent half a decade at the Sanger Institute studying time. Not the kind you find on wristwatches. It's the kind encoded in the genomes of lifeforms across millions of years. My petri-dish has been the mosquito, the ancient assassin that transmits malaria, which has been co-evolving with us for longer than we have been building anything that resembles a civilisation. When I compare the genome of one mosquito with another, I am often reading a record written in blood, that stretches back ten to one hundred million

years. I am reading the ledger of a war, fought across millions of years. I am reading African time. Not the parody that Africans and Europeans alike invoke when a meeting starts late, but the real thing: deep time, so deep that it makes the Industrial Revolution look like it happened five minutes ago.

And yet, when I leave the Lawniczak lab and open my laptop to the other life – the one where I must, within four months, submit a thesis, attend a viva, and then answer the question that everyone from my supervisor to my cab driver has been asking, "So, what next?" – I am returned to a different clock entirely. Institutional time. Career time. British time. The time of application deadlines, visa expiry dates, and five-year plans. This time does not care about my place in the vast timespan of the universe. It wants to know where I will be in September.

But I do not know where I will be in September. This, I must confess.

Consider the clocks that have been hung on Africa's wall by people who have never lived there. The Development Clock, which measures the continent in terms of what it has not yet become. Sub-Saharan Africa is "developing." It is "emerging." It is "catching up." All these are temporal metaphors, every single one of them. They assume a single line along which all nations travel, with Western Europe and North America at the front, and everyone else arranged behind them in varying degrees of inadequacy. To be "developing" is to be not-yet-developed. To be "emerging" is to have been, until recently, submerged. The language, a verdict delivered before the trial.

Then there is the Demographic Clock. Africa's median age is 19.3 years. Europe's is 43. By 2050, one in four human

beings on earth will be African: 2.5 billion people, most of them young, most of them urban, most of them connected to the internet in ways that would have bewildered the men who gathered in Berlin in 1884 to divide the continent among themselves with a pencil and a bottle of port. The Demographic Clock says: the future is African, whether the present acknowledges it or not. But this clock, too, can be weaponised. The same numbers that promise dynamism are cited, in certain European countries, as a threat. To them, a young Africa is a migration crisis in waiting. The clock ticks, and depending on where you stand, it counts down to either renaissance or catastrophe.

There is also the Carbon Clock. Africa, the entire continent of fifty-four nations and 1.4 billion people, accounts for 3.9 per cent of global carbon emissions. The nations that industrialised first, that burned through their fossil fuels with an enthusiasm they now describe as regrettable as they dance every time they look at their bank accounts, have used up most of the planet's atmospheric budget and are now asking Africa to please industrialise cleanly. To leapfrog, in development-ese. Leapfrog as though Africa is a frog, and industrialisation is a lily pad, and the whole thing is just a game, rather than the most consequential economic transformation in the history of the species. The Carbon Clock says: you are too late to do what we did, so you must do something else. Then they present this as an opportunity. Yet it is, in fact, the closing of a door.


And then there is the clock I carry in my body. The one that dreams in Sheng but writes in English. The one that says supper when Cambridge says lunch. The one that remembers the particular weight of Kenya's rain, not the sad drizzle of the Fens but the annihilating downpour that

pummels and pierces the skin, the one that arrives without apology and departs without explanation, soaking you all the way through as if you wore nothing and had flung yourself into a flooded stream. Ah, I miss that weather. It is, in some ways, a kind of time, and a kind of pulse, by which a place announces itself.

I think about John Mbiti the Kenyan philosopher, very often. In 1969, long before I was born, he proposed that traditional African concepts of time operated on two axes: *Sasa* and *Zamani*. *Sasa* is the lived present, stretching backwards to include the recent past and forward to include the near, foreseeable future. *Zamani*, on the other hand, is the deep past, the reservoir into which events eventually sink when no one remembers them. In Mbiti's framework, the future exists only as a category. Time is not an arrow flying towards some destination. It is a pool that deepens. Just like me, Mbiti was educated at Alliance High School, and refined at the University of Cambridge, and had Kamba blood coursing through his veins, but this is not why I agree with him.

Western scholars dismissed Mbiti's ideas as primitivism. How can a people without a long future have ambition? How can they plan? How can they develop? But to me, these questions reveal more about the questioners than the questioned. Because the honest answer is that the long future, the fifty-year plan, the millennial projection, and the eschatological conviction that history is heading somewhere has not served its inventors particularly well. The Easterlin Paradox tells us that Americans, who tripled their real income between 1950 and the early 2000s, reported no increase in happiness. None. The money line went up, but happiness stayed flat, or dipped. The most

future-oriented civilisation in human history had built itself a future but then could not feel it.

Mbiti's coordinates were not primitive. They were honest. *Sasa* says: attend to what is here. *Zamani* says: respect what has passed. Neither says: mortgage the present for a destination you cannot see. And if that sounds like a philosophy of stagnation, I would ask you to visit Nairobi – not Westlands or Upper Hill, but Umoja, Ngara, or Rongai, those deranged, magnificent, infuriating parts of the city – and tell me that its people lack urgency. Of course they have urgency, and some to spare. What they lack is the particular Western delusion that urgency must be pointed at a single, linear, universally  agreed-upon destination called Progress.

In Kakamega, my birthplace, time was agrarian. People did not say "six in the morning." They said *saa kumi na mbili alfajiri* – the twelfth hour of dawn, because the Swahili clock begins at six, which is when the day actually starts if you live near the equator and the sun has the decency to be reliable. The Swahili clock is calibrated to the equatorial light in a way that the Greenwich clock, imposed by an empire that experiences sunrise anywhere between 4 a.m. and 8 a.m. depending on the season, simply is not. Which clock is more rational? The one that measures the sun as it always is, or the one that requires you to adjust your clock to account for the fact that the sun of the Northerners cannot make up its mind?

When the men of the fourteen nations, not one of them African, gathered in Berlin in November 1884, they gathered to not only divide African territory but also to impose temporal order. The borders they drew were both lines on a map and also lines on a timeline. Before 1870, Europeans

controlled roughly ten per cent of Africa. By 1914, they controlled ninety per cent. In forty-four years, an entire continent was reorganised according to European administrative time: tax seasons, census cycles, railway timetables, fiscal years. In British Rhodesia, the adoption of standard time on 1 August 1899 was driven by a single, blunt necessity: the railway system could not function without it. The seasonal rhythms of pastoral and agricultural societies – the cattle calendar of the Maasai, the planting cycles of the Luhya, the dry-season gatherings of the Turkana – were overwritten not because they were inferior but because they were incompatible with extraction. You cannot tax a people efficiently if they do not agree on what month it is. You cannot conscript labour if the labourer's time belongs to the harvest. Colonial time was given to us as a gift of modernity, but beneath the surface, it was a tool of control.

And the tool outlasted the toolmaker. When the colonial flags came down, the clocks stayed up. The independent African states inherited the fiscal year, the five-year development plan, and the World Bank structural adjustment timeline. Thirty-six African countries received ten or more adjustment loans between 1980 and 1998, yet the median growth in income per person over those two decades was zero. *Uhuru*, "Independence", did not return African time. It replaced one set of external deadlines with another. And the language followed: "post-colonial," "newly independent," "developing": an Africa condemned to be always defined by distance from a European event. Our liberation dated from someone else's calendar.

Sixty years later, the clock still runs on imported batteries. The African Union's Agenda 2063, a hundred-year vision from the founding of the OAU, is admirable in its

ambition but also revealing in its structure. It is a plan. A long plan. A plan that assumes the future is a destination and that the right sequence of interventions will get us there. I do not mock it. Institutional planning is necessary. But I notice that the framework borrows the very temporal logic that has been used against the continent. It says: we will catch up, but on our own terms. The terms may be ours, but the catching up never was.

Four months. I have four months to submit a thesis on the structure of the DNA of mosquitoes. After that, the question. The question that has been banging itself against my skull for two years now, louder and louder as my time gets shorter in this part of the world where the sun cannot commit.

So, what next?

There are postdoctoral positions. There are fellowships. There are institutions that would have me, and I would be comfortable, and I would publish papers that a few dozen people would read, and I would grow old in a country where my race precedes my virtuosity in every room, in every conversation, and in every agonising interaction at the Wolfson bar. Yeah, I could build a life here. People do. Many of my friends have. They do not look unhappy. They are actually making bank in London. But they are not home, and they know it, and to me, the knowing sits in the body like a fever that never quite breaks.

I could go back to Kenya. But back to what? My mother's house, which we built with our own hands, is still standing. The rain still arrives whenever it wants and without apology. And I love it all with the ferocity of nostalgia. But love does not pay rent. Love does not fix the road from Kinyui to Tala. Love does not answer

questions. Our youth unemployment hovers around 40 per cent for those under 35, which I am, and many of my kin have been assaulted by its arithmetic. Not because they are lazy but because the economy was never designed to absorb them. Our politics are also a recurring nightmare of kleptocracy dressed up as democracy. Every year, our infrastructure groans under the neglect of wanton corruption, especially now as the biannual floods besiege our towns.

Or, perhaps, I could do something else entirely. Perhaps I could refuse the question. I could point out that "what next?" assumes a sequence, and sequences assume a direction, and directions assume a destination, and I am not convinced, no longer convinced, that the destination exists. Perhaps what comes next is not forward, but deeper. Perhaps the answer to "what time is it?" is not a number on a clock but the quality of our attention: where are you, and who are you with, and what in this moment demands your touch?

The oldest *Homo sapiens* fossils were found in Morocco. Jebel Irhoud, 2017: 315,000 years old. Before that discovery, the textbooks that I had read said 200,000, and they said mankind originated from East Africa. This revision did not simply add a hundred thousand years to the story. It changed the entire narrative. Human origins were not a single point on a map. They were a process, distributed across the entire continent. And the oldest stone tools on earth, no less than 3.3 million years old, from Lomekwi on the shores of Lake Turkana, in Kenya. They predate the genus *Homo* itself. The first technology was African, and yet it was invented by beings who were not yet us.

Three hundred and fifteen thousand years. I hold that number in my mind when someone tells me that Africa needs to catch up. Catch up to what? To whom? On which clock? The continent where time began is being told it is running out of time, by people whose own civilisations are, in geological terms, a few seconds old. The absurdity is so vast it has become invisible, like the assumption that clocks run in one direction, like the belief that the arrow of history has a point, and the point is not Africa.

I am still sitting in a room in Cambridge, four months from the end of something and the beginning of something else, and I do not know what the something else is, and I am learning, slowly, stubbornly, against every instinct that this institution has trained into me, that not knowing is not failure. Not knowing is okay. It is a different relationship to time. It is *Sasa* without the tyranny of the projected future. It is the body's clock, which says: you are here, you are alive, the rain will come whether you plan for it or not.

So, what time is it?

That depends on where you are standing. And I am standing, as I have always stood, in more than one place at once.