

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

The Development of Philosophy in the Contemporary World: “Time and History in World Cultures”

“The Bantu Concept of Space-Time”

by

Alexis Kagame

Professor at the National University of Rwanda, Butare, Rwanda

translated by Jean-Paul Martinon

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It was in 1851 that Wilhelm Heinrich Immanuel Bleek presented, at the University of Bonn, a doctoral thesis on the class or affix-based languages of Central Africa. The phenomenon was already known in the seventeenth century thanks to the work of missionaries, mainly in Angola and Mozambique. In 1852, K.A. Barth, in an attempt to put forward a common denomination to all these languages, called them *Ba-Sprachen* owing to the fact that all these languages used the plural prefix *ba* to mark the plural (for example: *mu-ntu* – “man” becomes *ba-ntu* – “people”). However, it is G. Grey who was the first to note that all these languages were in fact based on the stem syllable *ntu*, which is at the root of the word for “man” (*mu-ntu*) and consequently called them Bantu languages. This denomination was therefore originally purely linguistic. It was only later that ethnologists extended it to populations who speak these class or affix-based languages.

1. The Metaphysical Concept of Space-Time

From an ontological perspective, Bantu culture orders everything under four categories:

1. Reasoned Being (man)
2. Unreasoned Being (thing)
3. Spacing-Temporizing Being (space-time)
4. Modal Being (contingency or determination)

These four categories cover all that exists insofar as they have a substance that can be recognized under either quantity/quality or within a relational structure (possession, position, etc).

The third category, which is the focus of this essay, can be understood in Bantu cultures with the expression “here-there,” whose signification is given here as spacing-temporizing. This Bantu “here-there” is expressed by what grammarians have rightly reserved for locative cases, which in Central East Africa, is expressed with the syllable *Ha*. *Ha* thus gives *a-ha-ntu*, which means space, place, or location. One immediately recognizes in this word the original root *-ntu*, which already served as the stem for man (*muntu*) and people (*bantu*). The root syllable *-ntu* means Being, a signification that acquires meaning only with the addition of the prefix *mu-* (man). Similarly, when it comes to the word *a-ha-ntu*, space and time is given by the simple addition of the syllables *a* and *han* to the root or stem *-ntu*. Hantu therefore expresses the Being-spaced-timed. As such, it expresses the unity of space and time.

This interpretation of space and time comes from a lengthy analysis of Bantu speech made by grammarians and linguists. The fact that space and time are brought together does not mean that the Bantu are unable to distinguish one from the other. On the contrary, they use this expression to either locate something or someone or to indicate a duration in time. This double use only translates the fact that in general men always use space to indicate time and vice-versa. However, it also indicates that the two cannot be understood independently from the other.

2. Metaphysical justification for the symbiosis of space and time into one category:

It is now necessary to push further our investigations and attempt to explain why the Bantu managed to unify space and time. In all certainty, the aim was to pin something down. However, this “something” cannot be found outside of the four categories of Being mentioned above. This means that space and time cannot be conceived outside of Being. However, this does not imply that the unification of space and time takes place at the level of Being; a level that effectively knows no space or time. Consequently, the Bantu brought space and time together not in order to pin down Being as such, but to pin down man in so far as they fit within the other three categories.

Of course, the category “Modal Being (contingency or determination)” is useless to determine space and time. This category comes into effect only once man has been located in space and time. The question really is whether there was a need to unify space and time? Is space not enough?

From the moment they come-into-being every existent enters a *before* and an *after*. This results in the fact that the existent—animated or not, endowed of an immanental movement or not, immobile while resting or fixed—fevers itself in an existential movement towards its own connatural consummation. This existential movement is meta-physic, that is, radically inaccessible to any kind of direct observation. One can only witness its aftermath; this is why we invisibly advance in age without awareness.

This untraceable passing from the “other-of-being” to “being” was more than implicitly observed by our culture. There is indeed a story that stages an encounter between Death and a man called Sacyegn. Sacyegn owed a debt to death and needed to sacrifice a small veal. One day, Death appeared and asked Sacyegn that his debt be paid with a small veal of indeterminate sex: neither male nor female. Not knowing what to do, Sacyegn’s son, Ngoma, whose name is often used in stories whereby there is a mystery or a riddle to be solved, suggested the following: “Tell him that you have found a veal like this, but that in order for Death to get hold of it, he will have to come between night and day, between the moment the stars shine in the skies and the moment they become invisible. Tell him to come at that time.”

The storytellers didn’t have to add an end to this story. It was clear that the aim was to contrast two impossibilities: on the one hand, a veal without sex, and on the other, a precise moment in time that can be declared as being neither day nor night. This is exactly what we find in conventional philosophy: between being and “the other-of-being,” there is no middle. Similarly, between the absence of stars and their presence in the sky, no passing moment can be identified.

One thing is worth highlighting here. When it comes to human beings, it is necessary to recall the fact that the creators of Bantu culture also conceived a Pre-Being. This Pre-Being does not belong to any of the four categories outlined above; it is neither man nor thing and it neither spaces nor temporizes and it also knows no modality of existence. The creators of Bantu culture therefore devised a Pre-Being that could never be an essence, not even that of not existing. It therefore can only be understood as The One Who Necessarily Is; or The One Who Never Needs to Start to Be, thus leaving the factuality of existence to human beings. So when it comes to the movement of beings, it is clear that this movement excludes this Pre-Being, who knows no before or after.

However, this existential movement typical to human beings is not unique. It comes alongside other movements, internal and invisible or external and visible; movements that even take place in inanimate objects. These movements—actions or passions—are to be classified under the fourth category. So how is one then to understand these movements? At the point at which they take place? This is not possible because such a point would also be the point for many other movements. If one were able to identify such a point, one would identify a point at which the said movement would no longer take place. It would no longer be a movement as such, but something fixed. The fact of being identifiable would prevent it from being. This has the following consequence: the point in question would become infinite; it would fill all space, thus ceasing to be part of our four categories. It is therefore impossible to understand these movements at the point at which they take place.

How is one then to make sense of movement? By focusing on the coming together of space and time. In doing so, the movement can never know a before or an after, a space at the front or at the back. The (differential) movement thus becomes unique with regards to other movements, even if it coincides with a similar movement. This explains why the Bantu do not differentiate between space and time.

One must not forget that this symbiosis of space and time runs parallel to the development of the Bantu language. And it must be distinguished from the scientific understanding of space and time as devised from Minkowski to Einstein. While they understand the coincidence space time as a chronotopic encounter of coordinates, we the Bantu understand it as an individualising encounter of coordinates.

3. To Exist:

Before going any further, we need to explain how Bantu culture understands existence.

All over the Bantu region, the verb “to be” can never translate the meaning of existence. The famous “I think, therefore I am” is incomprehensible because the verb “to be” is always followed by an attribute or a spatial complement: I am good, tall, here, there, etc. This means that the “therefore I am” would necessarily call for the question: “you are what? where?”

The verb “to be” is formed with one of two roots: *li* and *ba*. The first, expresses neither achievement nor future potential. It is tied to the present tense. The second, by contrast, can refer to all three times: past, present, and future.

These two roots are then complemented by an adverb indicating time: *ho = ilho*, *baho*. This adverb is made of two linguistic elements brought together:

-ha as in *a-ha-ntu*

-o an adverb that is used as a shortcut for *ha-o = ho* and that is usually translated into English as “there” or more specifically by “this-place-there.”

In this way, the verb “to be” is translated in Bantu with:

-liho = to be there (without the infinitive *ku – kuliho*)

-baho = to be there (with the infinitive *ku – kubaho*)

To say *liho* therefore means to say that someone is there, but with the implied meaning that he or she might not always be there. In this way, it will always refer to someone alive. One could not use it in the context of the dead because this would imply they are not dead yet.

When it comes to reference the fact of being (now today and in the future), it is necessary to use the expression *baho*. It is used when one needs to evade the question of whether the person is alive or not, with reference to the dead or the as-yet-to-be-born, for example.

4. The Existential Movement, Time and Duration

Earlier we said that the movement of being is a connatural condition of all existents who knows a before and an after. However, this is not limited to those who have come into being as if single entities; it is also applicable to the community or to the world they inhabit because the space that constitutes this community or this world also comes into being.

In this way, the existential movement, understood in itself represents the passing of the other-of-being to being (that is, of the other-being-x to this being-x) or within a specific Bantu context, the passing of the other-of-being-there-as-x to a being-there-as-x, the passing of a starless sky to a starry sky to take up the vocabulary of a well-known Bantu saying.

In this way, Being can be defined as the trajectory of individualizing coordinates thrown on its course from being other to being, from its coming-into-being to its connatural consummation. The latter should be understood as what befalls human beings, death, for example; i.e. what permits another existing. *Corruptio unius generation alterius*. The corruption of one is the generation of another.

One must differentiate here between the movement of Being and becoming. The former can never be understood as a duration, while the latter necessarily implies the recognition of a progressive evolution.

To conclude, one could then say that the concept of time in Bantu thought therefore cannot be understood independently of this existential movement, this trajectory of individualizing coordinates thrown on its course from being other to being. In this way:

- The Bantu clearly distinguish between space and time
- However their linguistic categories appear to unite them without distinction
- Further research shows that this unification corresponds to an existential movement that prevents all dissociation.